

The Demographic Challenges of Poland and the EU on the Eve of the European Year of Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity

Every second five people are born onto the world and two people die. Statistically, the global population increases at a rate of three people a second. Although, with the world's population hitting the seven billion mark in November 2011, it is overpopulation that is the global problem, Europe grapples with an opposite one. Birth ratio has long fallen here to a negative level. Europe's population is some 591 million today, a figure that is expected to shrink by 49 million by 2050, a deduction equalling more or less the population of Spain. Unfortunately, Poland is among those EU countries that are most threatened by a demographic crisis. Where Europe's birth rate per woman is 1.5, the figure for Poland is just 1.3. Unless Poland's birth rate can be boosted, the country's population is set to drop from today's 38.4 million to less than 31 million in forty years' time.

The progress of medicine means that life expectancy increases, which is a nice fact. But it also means that society ages more quickly. Whereas we live an average of 76 years today, this is expected to increase to 82 years by 2050, meaning the percentage of people over 65 years old in Europe will increase from today's 16 percent to 28 percent. Automatically, the proportion of young people will be falling; in Poland, for instance, the number of people less than 18 years old is expected to drop from today's 7.5 million to just 5.3 million by 2030. In return, the number of people 60 years of age and older will grow from today's 7 million to 10 million, reducing the ratio of productive-age and non-productive age population from 4:1 to just 2:1. There are, therefore, serious doubts as to whether there will be enough employees to earn our pensions. There are more demographic challenges: an ageing society means a sharp rise in spending on their medical treatment and care. While medicine can extend human life and improve its comfort, it still cannot cure chronic diseases.

No one can escape old age and neither states nor their political elites can avoid facing demographical issues. Fortunately, the European Commission is aware of the challenges ahead and, in its 'Europe 2020' growth strategy endorsed in March 2010, has identified accelerated ageing as one of the three key structural issues facing the European Union. EU institutions are currently working on a package of reforms aimed at addressing them.

Conversation with Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, Minister of Labour and Social Policy

With Solidarity Through Life

'Our goal is to build a culture of a society open towards all age groups, hence the stress on the postulate of intergenerational solidarity'.

Was the Polish government concerned with ageing issues when it was taking over the EU presidency earlier this year? I didn't hear anything about it.

That's probably because the media's attention is attracted by other matters, perhaps more interesting, but less important for the citizens. Being aware, of course, of the great significance of demographic challenges for Poland and Europe, we put them appropriately high on our agenda. These efforts were reflected in the EU Council's decisions, which, during its 3 October summit, appealed to the member states and the European Commission to undertake specific preventive measures.

What exactly?

More and more young people perceive starting a family and having children as an alternative to professional advancement. This is the case not only in Poland but elsewhere in Europe as well and the upcoming crisis can make matters even worse. We still haven't created solutions – but we know that families need to be supported. People should be able to keep a balance between their private and professional lives. We've been trying to make this easier for them in Poland, which is why the government and parliament have removed a number of obstacles that effectively prevented setting up and running crèches. The Council sees a role here not only for governments, but also for companies, which have to understand that making sure that the workplace is family-friendly helps productivity.

Towards the end of the Polish presidency, the Council appealed to the Commission to create better conditions for the so called 'silver economy'. In Poland in particular business underestimates the significance of seniors as consumers and employees. Do you know that Poles aged 60 and over spend some PLN 150 billion annually, more than a fifth of the country's overall consumer spending? They contribute significantly to economic growth and job creation and will be doing more and more so, due to their specific needs, for instance in the area of health and care services.

Concerning the labour market, EU governments, including the Polish one, are planning to extend the retirement age. People of age don't have the strength to keep working, are these changes necessary?

It's a fact that indebted countries are unable to provide for such a quickly growing number of pensioners and the current crisis has forced them to finally introduce the necessary reforms. Let's remember that no one is going to force people who have health problems to work. They will still be able to retire on a disability pension at any age. The EU, however, rightly assumes that longer life expectancy doesn't have to mean a long and unproductive old age. The healthcare system has to function so as to make old age a period of self-sufficiency for as long as possible and to ensure that it is lived in a relatively good condition. This postulate was included in the Council's conclusions passed during our presidency. During the last month of our presidency, the Council endorsed a series of important conclusions about the labour market and seniors in its context. The point is not only for governments to promote the potential of seniors as employees but also to combat their discrimination in the labour market.

Why activate seniors professionally when young people can't find work? Isn't it better for seniors to vacate jobs for young people?

Firstly, there are professions that don't seem attractive to young people. Secondly, research shows that the economy grows more quickly when people retire later. In Western Europe, people remain professionally active for much longer than in Poland and this is what we want to change.

The cult of young age surrounds us everywhere, in advertising, in the movies. Old age has never been and will probably never be trendy. Yet the European Parliament and the EU Council have announced next year as the European Year for Active Ageing and Intergenerational Activity. What are the purposes of this initiative?

We are going against the grain of pop culture. Two years ago, we had the Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, now a year devoted to promoting voluntary work. The ideas promoted by the EU complement each other. Our goal is to build a culture of a society open towards all age groups, hence the stress on the postulate of intergenerational solidarity.

Which is what?

The point is to prevent seniors from becoming locked in their own community, to cause young people to contribute to and become involved in their activation. Such intergenerational relations should be based on mutual exchange and tolerance. Young people can not only care for their elders but also draw on their knowledge and experience. Seniors, in turn, can learn a lot from young people, such as how to use the computer.

The problem is that most seniors say they don't need the computer or mobile phone at all.

That's why young people have to make them aware how wrong they are. Technology keeps developing rapidly and unless seniors become familiar with it, life will be harder for them. They risk falling victim to digital exclusion, which means they will have to pay extra for services provided the traditional way. This is something we want to prevent.

But how to do it? Regulatory changes won't change customs and habits, will they?

That's why volunteering and non-governmental organisations, without which good practices can't be promoted, play such an important role. Without them, it's impossible to change stereotypes about seniors and to highlight their latent potential. In Poland, we have particularly strong family ties, but also a big deficit of social capital. This means that people usually take care of their parents. The government and NGOs should help them in that far more than they have done so far.

How do we celebrate the European Year 2012 in Poland?

The decision to establish it was made very late and there was really little time for preparations. Due to the modest budget we have, we count on local initiatives. A chronology of the events will be published on the Ministry's website and regularly updated. Moreover, there is a European website for the year, which informs about initiatives organised by the EU and the respective member states. The fact that events of the EU Year of Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity will be held in so many countries at the same time offers hope that, working together, we'll succeed in changing seniors' life for the better.

Thank you very much for this conversation.