

Preface

Demography has become ubiquitous in Europe these days. Journalists and politicians who did not even know the term a few years ago now write and speak about demography on a daily basis. Even some colleagues from other scientific disciplines who used to look upon demographers as a rather exotic species with very narrow research interests now want to jump on the bandwagon. And as with every hot topic one can also find people who virtually overnight mutated into self-proclaimed experts on population issues. This recent upsurge in interest in demography has even reached the highest political levels.

While the demographic changes that now capture the attention of so many people tend to be very gradual and have been foreseen by demographers at least two decades ago, the dynamics of public interest in the matter seems to follow different laws. Is it just a flash in the pan that will disappear as quickly as it started? Given that we only begin to experience the consequences of population ageing with much more change expected in the future it seems plausible to assume that the current wave of public interest is just the delayed catching up with an important topic which is likely to preoccupy Europe for many years to come.

The European Commission recently reacted to this trend by publishing its first comprehensive communication (White Paper) on demographic change following a Green Paper last year. Although rather vague in tone and desperately trying to avoid language that could appear politically incorrect, it does present a fairly complete account of the forces shaping demographic changes in Europe and the challenges as well as opportunities that arise from these changes. In the context of low fertility this communication highlights the tendency toward postponement of childbearing. However, there is a clear need to better understand the forces leading to postponement, its implications for future fertility levels and the role of public policies in influencing these trends. Only serious scientific analysis in this field can prepare the grounds for solid, evidence based policies in the future.

It was precisely these questions that were the topic of the annual conference of the Vienna Institute of Demography which took place in December 2005 and was co-organised by Università Bocconi and the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis in collaboration with the Working Group on the Second Demographic Transition of the European Association for Population Studies. The three scientific organisers of the meeting, Francesco C. Billari, Aart C. Liefbroer and Dimiter Philipov were also invited to serve as guest editors of this issue of the Vienna Yearbook of Population Research which publishes the key papers presented at the meeting and includes many of the leading scientists in this important field.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the guest editors for the great service they provided to the Vienna Yearbook and to the research community at large. I also want to thank Tomáš Sobotka who in his capacity as managing editor made sure that the strict refereeing process was carried out most efficiently and this volume could come out only 12 months after the meeting took place.

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