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DEMOCRACY

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG  
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Feminism and Gender Democracy

E-PAPER

# Discourses on demography in the EU institutions



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# Abstract

The EU has faced substantial demographic challenges in recent times, and will continue to do so in the coming decades. This e-paper analyses why and how demographic discourses were hijacked by illiberal, right-wing and conservative forces. It explores who are the main actors in the field of demography in the EU institutions by looking at Twitter posts and documents produced by European commissioners, members and political groups of the European Parliament from 2015 to summer 2021. This e-paper adds to current understandings of Twitter engagement of actors of the European Union by presenting the first quantitative analysis of historical Twitter data in the field of demographic discourses. What issues they discuss, and which explanatory frameworks are used, is analysed with the method of critical discourse analysis.

The key findings of the Twitter analysis show that EU institutions are aware that demographic change is primarily driven by ageing population, migration and decreasing birth-rates. While there is consensus across EU actors that the ageing population is a major demographic challenge, other factors remain insufficiently targeted. This e-paper finds that the decline of birth rates has been addressed by the European Commission in a way that leaves it as an open frame, which is filled by the right-wing groups. With respect to demographic discourses on migration, the EU Commission seems to have promoted an interpretative template that also allows for arguments on anti-migration discourses.

Keywords: demography, European Union, illiberal politics, ageing population, low fertility, migration, Twitter analysis, critical discourse analysis.

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# Foreword

The [European Feminist Platform](#) was created in 2019 by Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung and Gunda-Werner-Institut. Its point of departure was the interest to learn more about the struggles and perspectives of our fellow feminists in different EU Member States. Together we aim to connect scholars, activists and policy makers to collect, display and contextualise knowledge and best feminist practices. Our mission is to shape a feminist future by strengthening European exchange.

Three main topics have emerged in our debates so far: reproductive justice, the impacts of the pandemic and demography. The struggles for legal and safe abortion are prerequisites for self-determined lives everywhere. Currently, they are highly contested in many EU Member States, mainly because of increasing pressure by the far right. Feminist struggles for sexual self-determination are high on the agenda of feminist actors throughout Europe. At the same time, the pandemic has highlighted the sad fact that low remunerated or unpaid care work, the majority of which is performed by women, generates and consolidates relations of inequality in the EU. All members of the European Feminist Platform have observed a lack of political response to these developments and trends.

Additionally, the EU has faced substantial demographic challenges in recent times and will continue to do so in the coming decades. These are related to low birth rates accelerating population ageing and leading to a shrinking of the labour force. In some regions, depopulation is a further significant dynamic, contributing to challenges of sustainable societal development. Accordingly, policies and discourses that deal with demography have played an increasingly important role in the EU for several years now. Since 2019, and for the first time ever, there is a European Commissioner for Democracy and Demography.

The aim of this e-paper is to analyse how the subject of demography is debated within EU institutions. What questions are discussed and how are they framed? Which statistics, data and experts are the actors referring to? How do the actors use the data and discourses? What are the policy implications? With this e-paper, we hope to contribute to a feminist investigation of the challenges our societies are confronted with because of demographic changes. We are convinced that democratic and feminist responses to demographic challenges are extremely important if we do not want to leave the discourse to far-right actors spreading racist narratives and disinformation.

We would like to thank the team of authors for their efforts and invaluable work, as well as all members of the European Feminist Platform for contributing to our intense discussions, which are the basis for this e-paper.

February 2022

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# 1. What demography is and what it has to do with feminist science

The science of demography, also known as population studies, has always had contrasting aspects. From one side it aimed to improve the well-being of society, while on the other side it was instrumentalised for state purposes. The beginnings of this scientific field in the 19th century are linked to improving the quality of life for most of society. Its aim was to count and document social differences on a scientific basis, so that legislators and politicians could make informed and socially just decisions to make the world a better place. Without a robust and evidence-based assessment of social situations, there is no effective policy. Data collected by demographers has a huge importance for policymakers. Among other things, demographic data highlights the micro and macro social inequalities that are also the focus of feminist research.

According to a 19th century understanding, demographers observe society from the outside, writing down and documenting what they perceive (Williams, 2010). Contrary to this epistemology inherited from natural science, feminist science argues that there are no universal laws in society. Feminist science also denies the existence of objective data, since all data has intersectional implications for different social groups. With the transformation of feminist science from a science that descriptively documents social inequalities to a science that analyses power relations and discourses in the 1970s, the scientific paths of demography and feminism have diverged. Demography works almost exclusively with quantitative data and refines the accuracy of it, while feminist science always considers reflexivity and power relations. While demography uses the same methods to study ever wider areas of our lives, feminist science utilises ever newer methods to study narrower areas. This divergence nearly pushed demography into obscurity, from which it was only saved by the illiberal turn in politics and science (Pető, 2021). Recently, demography has become the most important scientific discipline utilised by illiberal governments because of four reasons.

First, while critical social science has moved towards a poststructuralist epistemology and methodology, which has started to analyse and critically question how facts and truths are being produced in different historical contexts, the recording and forecasting of demographic events (births, marriages, abortions, migration, deaths) has remained based on positivist analysis. That is precisely the reason why Kimberley Crenshaw (1989) developed her concept and methodology of intersectionality for criticising how prison statistics are kept: demonstrating how other social inequalities disappear in the two variable tables of race and gender; and, during this unidimensional analysis, how the chance of good policy and social justice for invisible groups are lost.

Second, demography has remained a discipline with a primary, and nearly exclusive, focus on descriptive analysis. Instead of relying on home-grown explanations, demography usually borrows theories from other disciplines, making its subject matter truly interdisciplinary (Pavlik, 2000; Stycos, 1987).

Third, at the same time, demography is representative of the modernist ideology, which assumes objectivity when presenting the existing situation and its potential impact on the future, and has, therefore, easily fallen victim to illiberal science policy. This policy uses a double strategy, emptying the previous institutional structure of academic work while also establishing its own network of institutions at the same time. Illiberal policy includes not just the funding of new institutions but also the taking of resources from other institutions with similar profiles to eliminate critical research. Research institutes of demography have not escaped these tendencies: if their publications did not sufficiently suit the objectives of illiberal politics, they started to found new parallel institutions with the same profile to compete for the same funding (Pető, 2021).

Fourth, by measuring social differences with respect to men and women, demography provides important information to policy-makers. Ironically, by consciously avoiding the concept of gender, it has unwittingly become an important ally of illiberal political forces. This has created a body of knowledge based on data that appears objective, and which is held in high regard. For example, declines in birth rates are easy to communicate by using academic authority, regardless of the different social factors involved in different contexts. This made demography and demographic knowledge a good ally for the organisers of the global anti-gender movement, as seen in the activity of the *World Congress of Families* (Pető & Kováts, 2017). Another reason why demography has become an ally of illiberal forces is because demography is one of the few sciences that makes scientific statements about men and women. Finally, it is possible to apply global Eurocentric standards and assessments to the populations of other continents and thereby maintain the dominance of such norms (de Sousa Santos, 2007; Quijano, 2007; Spivak, 2003).

The issues outlined above not only illustrate the need for a critical examination of demographic research itself, but also of the policies derived from it. Such a critical engagement with the topic cannot proceed without a gender perspective since gender concepts are deeply inscribed in both areas. We therefore want to look at important players of current demographic policies from a feminist perspective and find out more about EU policy-making decisions, central discourses, arguments and actors in this context. Not only do we want to illuminate and criticise the previous politics and debates from a feminist point of view, but also to strengthen feminist demographic research.

## 1.1 Research questions

To understand the development of demographic discourses among different EU actors, we formulated three research questions to assess the field with respect to the EU institutional context, and to trace its temporal dynamic and discursive formations. Our questions are: i) Who are the main actors in the field of demography in the EU institutions? ii) What issues do they discuss and what are their sources? iii) How are these debates framed and which discursive and explanatory strategies are used? To make sense of these questions, insights into demographic developments and EU policy responses are necessary.

In what follows, the e-paper first gives an overview of the demographic trends and challenges in the European Union. Next, the Twitter-specific methods of data collection and analysis is introduced. Thereafter, we turn to the main statistical findings and discuss its content in relation to relevant scholarship. The e-paper concludes with policy recommendations of counterstrategies for political actors.

## 1.2 Recent demographic trends

Demographic developments in Europe since the late 1960s have been qualitatively different from trends of earlier periods, especially what is known as “the Golden Age of the Family” (Skolnick, 1978). The feature that has attracted most attention from demographers, policy-makers and, increasingly, the general public, is persistent low fertility, namely less than 2.1 births per woman on average. Throughout human history, this is the first time that fertility levels have proved insufficient for population replacement in a large number of advanced societies over a period of decades. Fertility first declined in the German-speaking countries, Western Europe and Scandinavia in the early 1970s, followed by Southern Europe, Anglo-Saxon countries and Central-Eastern Europe in the 1980s. For the European Union as a whole, fertility declined to less than two children per woman by the mid-1970s, reaching its lowest level at 1.45 in the mid- to late 1990s. A slight increase in the first decade of the 2000s resulted in fertility rates stabilising at around 1.6 in the 2010s (European Union, 2017).

Accompanied by continuously increasing life expectancies, long-term below-replacement fertility has resulted in population ageing with a non-negligible and ever-growing proportion of the population at and above age 65, which is the usual age of retirement. The year 2004 was the first year when there were as many elderly people as children below age 15 in the population of the European Union, taking together the recent EU-27 and the UK (ibid). The disadvantageous changes of the age structure can also be seen in the median age increasing from 38.3 years at the turn of the century to 42.8 years by 2017 (European Union, 2019). The old-age dependency ratio has been constantly increasing too, indicating substantial challenges for the future as the number of working-age persons per every elderly person is projected to decline from about four in the early 2000s to less than two by 2050 (ibid). Substantial regional variations in fertility trends within and across countries, and subsequent changes in the populations’ age structure, put additional pressure on pension systems and the provision of health care and elderly care. Migration into the EU has also greatly increased over the past decades, becoming the main, or even only, source to counterbalance the decline and/or ageing of the working age population, which is considered essential to retain economic competitiveness. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on demographic developments, it has not changed their course substantially during 2020 and 2021. Notwithstanding an unprecedented reduction in life expectancies in modern times, and a temporary halt in international migration due to travel bans (Chamie, 2021), low fertility, ageing population and migration have remained key demographic and policy concerns for the EU.



Indeed, the level of awareness about the severe economic and societal consequences of recent demographic developments has greatly increased among governments in Europe and elsewhere in the world in the past decades. The United Nations (1983) began addressing these issues in between the late 1970s and the early 1980s. In the European Union, explicit articulation of the ageing challenge came later, between the late 1990s and the early 2000s. The *Green Paper*<sup>[1]</sup> (European Commission, 2005) on “confronting demographic change” and the European Commission’s (2006) communication on “the demographic future of Europe” were among the key early documents shaping a strategy for how the EU can meet the substantial changes in the population age structure towards a greater predominance of the elderly. From 2004 until 2013, a *European Demography Forum* was established to take stock of the latest demographic developments and review policy responses on the demographic changes every two years. Related to these forums, a biennial *European Demography Report* (European Commission, 2007, 2008, 2011) was published, but discontinued. From 2017, the European Parliamentary Research Service has provided an annual overview of the demographic trends in the EU. The economic implications of societal ageing have been reviewed every three years since 2009 in the *Ageing Reports* by the European Commission, to identify policy challenges and relevant options for coordination of economic policies (European Commission, 2009). The von der Leyen Commission pays special attention to demography and its societal implications as the newly established post of European Commissioner for Democracy and Demography, currently held by European Commission Vice-President Dubravka Šuica, indicates (European Union, 2021). In June 2020, the European Commission (2020) published a *Report on the Impact of Demographic Change* highlighting the main drivers of the demographic developments and their implications for the EU. And last, but not least, a new interactive knowledge management tool, the *Atlas of Demography* has been launched (European Commission, 2021). Based on official statistics and projections from Eurostat, the aim of the Atlas is to enhance the understanding of demographic change and policy responses at the local, regional and national level.

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1 Twitter research regarding political leaders

The benefits of Twitter as a social network tool have gained traction among politicians (Grant et al., 2010). Extensively used during elections, social media platforms have become a tool of “personalized campaigning” – a window through which citizens can directly interact with politicians (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Metz et al., 2020; Nuernbergk & Conrad, 2016). Even if many politicians have used this digital way of communicating to give abstract politics a human face, research has shown that most politicians do not exploit the full potentiality of social media (Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018). Twitter is a microblogging platform that advances rapid attention shifting by posting short content with textual and visual messages (Dang-Xuan et al., 2013, p. 219). In this manner, Twitter has been essential in the dissemination of ideas of countering the public sphere (Mercier, 2015),

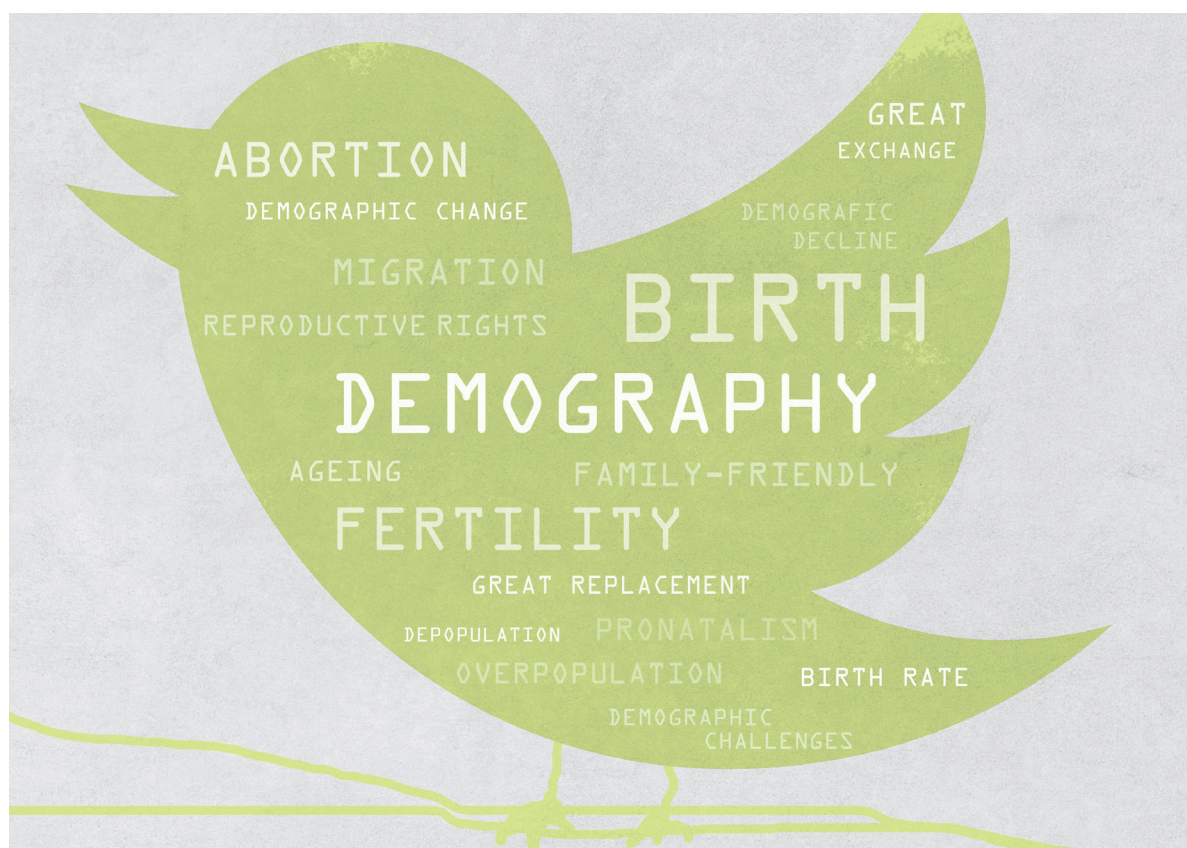
populist purposes (Engesser et al., 2017) and Donald J. Trump's "politics of debasement" (Ott, 2017). In the European Union, Eurosceptic and far-right parties have increased their social media networks in order to gain followers and supporters (Frame et al., 2016, pp. 9-10). A recent study by the European Council shows that use of Twitter increased at the EU level, but also pointed out that most studies focus on the individual level or electoral campaigns (Drachenberg & Phillips, 2021, p. 1). There is still a research gap on longitudinal and overarching studies on EU institutions.

## 2.2 Data collection

In order to retrieve historical Twitter data, it was necessary to apply for a Twitter developer account to access the API V.2 search token. To retrieve this kind of data, a specific programme was written with Python software. After the collection of Twitter data, it was converted into Excel sheets and uploaded to NVivo 12. In order to analyse the collected material, we used the qualitative research software CAQDAS, which is especially useful for social media analysis, insofar as it creates a pool of multi-material data. With this programme it is possible to combine the coding of tweets, text extracts and images. NVivo's capacity to store and integrate audio-visual data into the data analysis was especially useful for our project as demographic information is usually mediated through statistics, graphs, infographics and illustrations.

As a first step, we identified discourses and discourse positions of the relevant actors within the institutions of the European Union in the period between 1 January 2015 and 31 August 2021. These consist of (1) official documents and statements of groups and politicians, as well as the European institutions; (2) official documents and statements of the European Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography Dubravka Šuica; and (3) political statements posted on Twitter by groups, European institutions and members of the Intergroup on Demographic Challenges, Family-Work Balance and Youth Transitions.

The material chosen had to fulfil two requirements: it had to contain statements or comments that were relevant to the topic of demography in the context of EU institutions, and the speakers had to be Members of the European Parliament. In the next step, following Jäger, (2012), the material was classified into subtopics such as "decreasing birth rates", "exchange of populations" or "Great Replacement", ageing population, migration and mobility, mass immigration, abortion, pronatalism, and gender concepts. This made possible the identification of central messages and of points where different strands of discourse intertwine. Taking this as a starting point, we mapped out which statements of demography, reproduction, population and, going hand in hand, gender policy could be considered representative and which discourses and discourse positions they could be attributed to. Taking the classification by Jäger as a basis, we were able to take three aspects into account: the internal function within the discourse, the discourse's context and its homogeneity.



The analysis centred on two main types of materials: reports and tweets about demographic topics from selected actors of EU institutions. This included 15 accounts of EU institutions, such as those pertaining to the EU Commission, EU Parliament, EU Council and related press or agency Twitter accounts, as well as political figures of these institutions like the EU Commissioner on Democracy and Demography Dubravka Šuica; also included were the 24 Members of the Intergroup on Demographic Challenges, Family-Work Balance and Youth Transitions, who have a Twitter account. Further, all the official Twitter accounts of the seven political groups of the European Parliament were analysed, namely the Group of the Europeans people's party (EPP), ECR Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D), European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), The Left Group in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL), Identity and Democracy Group (ID), and Renew Europe Group (Renew). Finally, the analysis included the 476 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who have a Twitter account (68 percent from a total 705 MEPs), which also included MEPs without affiliation to a group of the European Parliament. The Twitter accounts were taken from the official website of the European Parliament (2021). The accounts of political groups and politicians constitute data that is publicly available, which does not have ethical research complications as the persons and accounts investigated are persons of general interest. In total, 523 Twitter accounts, 3041 tweets and 17 documents were analysed.

**Table 1. Analysed Twitter accounts**

Group	EU Commission, EU Council, European Parliament	Related institutional accounts	Political Groups of the EU Parliament	Members of the European Parliament	EP Intergroup on Demographic Challenges
Twitter Accounts	3	8	7	476	24

The time frame of the analysis from January 2015 to August 2021 was chosen to grasp the long-term development of demographic accounts. Public interest in demographic issues was boosted by the large influx of asylum seekers in Europe in 2015 and 2016. The period of our investigation covers parts of different presidencies of the European Commission, beginning with Jean-Claude Juncker and ending with Ursula von der Leyen.

## 2.3 Difficulties and challenges of comparison

The use of Twitter by EU institutions and MEPs varied to some degree. First, the activities of the Twitter accounts were in no manner comparable, meaning that some Twitter accounts were formally active but had not created tweets since 2009. Besides these differences in frequency, the quality and character of tweets also created a difficult basis for comparison. While many tweets from the EU institutions included the promotion of official EU events, other tweets ranged from commenting on current affairs and action days or party-related contents to tweets that reflected personal concerns, such as religious beliefs, family matters, disputes and other sorts of personal opinions. Other challenges for the Twitter analysis were the diverse languages, as well as the translation of the root word *demogra\** to all European languages; Twitter content that used code words for relating to the same topic was omitted in the analysis.

## 2.4 Data analysis

The coding and tweet search process followed the circular research paradigm: after the first data retrieval, a priori coding and analysis were started. Thereupon, the tweet search was refined, and with each search the codes were reviewed and modified. The processes of refining and condensing the data selection was crucial to understanding how the specific discourses were embedded in broader political strategies and discursive frameworks.

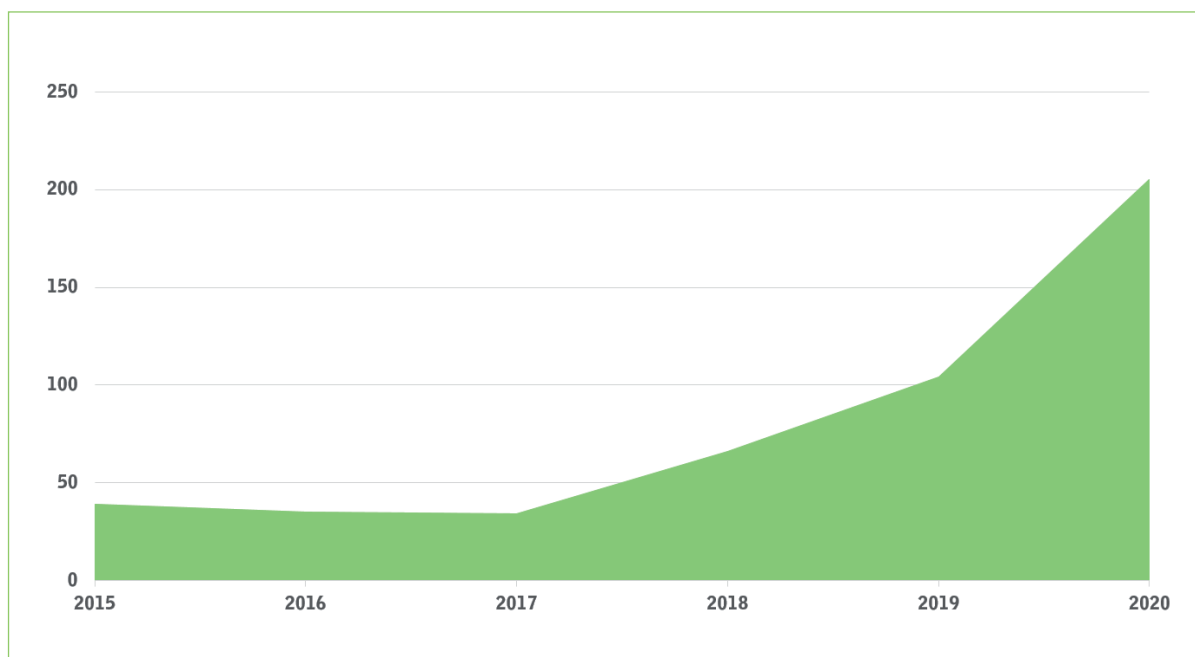
The analysis of this paper is based on Critical Discourse Analysis developed by Siegfried Jäger (2012) and the Viennese approach to Critical Discourse Analysis elaborated by Ruth Wodak (1999) and Martin Reisigl (2007; Reisigl & Wodak, 2000). Inspired by Michel Foucault's discourse theory, Jäger questions the generation, dissemination, function and effect of valid knowledge that are imparted by means of discourses, understood as a social practice, which are at the centre of his approach. In this understanding, discourses themselves are factors of power as they influence social interactions and thus contribute to the structuring of relationships of power and dominance.

Following on from Reisigl (2007), the macroanalysis focused mainly on “determining the contours of discourse and its segmentation into phases”, on “clarifying the discourse’s relationship with the areas of social action where it is situated”, on “clarifying the discourse’s relationship with other discourses” and on “determining patterns of linguistic action and of functional segments of text”. The microanalysis concentrated on the lines of argument and on the question of “which arguments were used in order to justify or challenge the theses introduced into the discourse (which contain e.g. predictions)” (Reisigl, 2007). Rhetorical means like reinforcements or diminishments were also taken into consideration, as was the speakers’ perspectivation.

### 3. Statistical findings

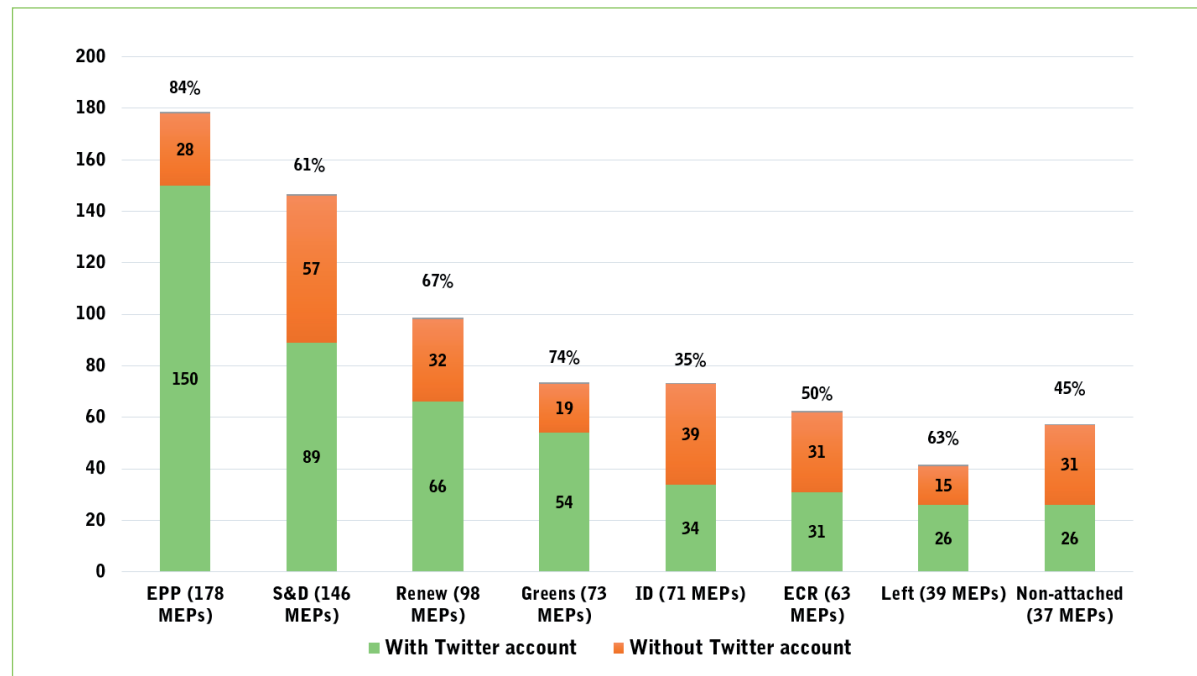
The statistical findings indicate that EU institutions have increased their focus on demographic change in the last decades. Two flashpoints have been influencing these processes: first, the increase of asylum applications in 2015 fuelled conflicts about demographic trends in the EU, and second, the new EU Commission of Ursula von der Leyen made demographic change a tenet of her agenda (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Temporal development of all tweets on demographic issues from 2015 to 2020**



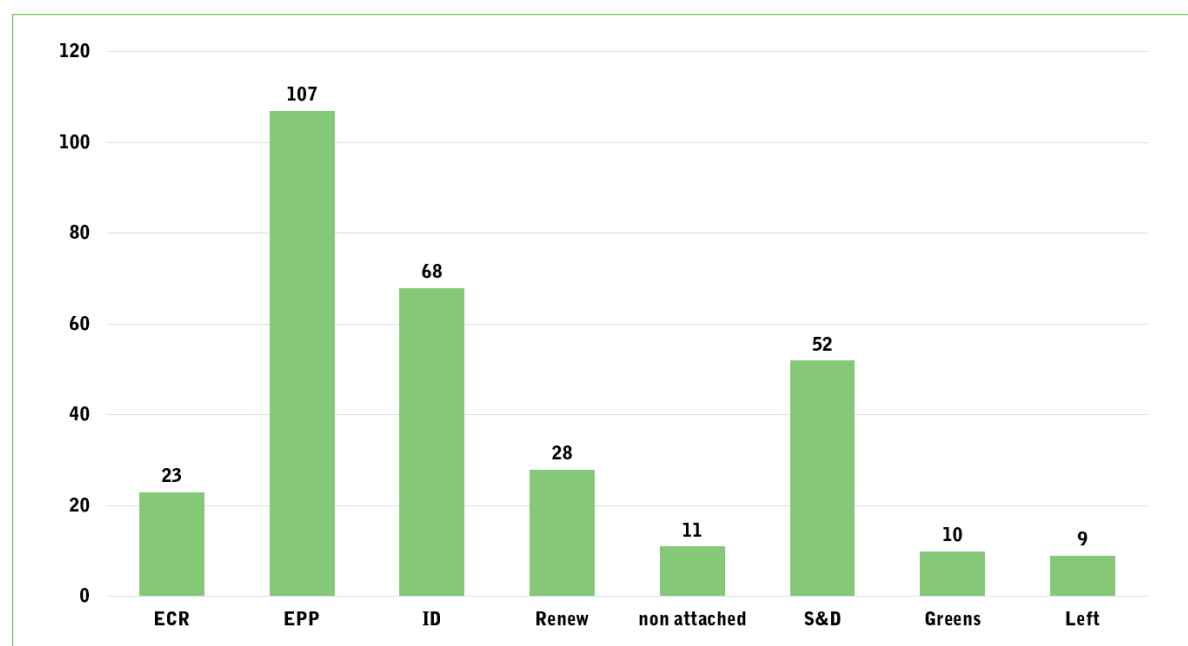
Another result shows that current Members of the European Parliament frequently use social media. About 68 percent have an active Twitter account, which is a total of 476 from 705 MEPs. The use of Twitter also varies in frequency and style among the political groups (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. MEPs with active Twitter accounts by political group in 2021**



Our results affirm previous findings (Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018), which state that besides the increase of frequency of Twitter use among EU politicians, the full potential of the social media platform Twitter has still to be exploited by EU actors. This observation is even more serious when it comes to the topic of demographic change itself. EU actors almost do not address demographic issues in their tweets. The analysis of all tweets between 2015 and 2021, in all languages spoken by Members of the European Parliament, has shown that the word root *demogra*\* appears in just 311 tweets in six years (Figure 3). This figure also indicates that political groups from the conservative and ultraconservative political spectrum more commonly mention demographic issues.

**Figure 3. Total tweets containing the word root *demogra\** (311) by MEPs per political group from 2015 to 2021**



## 4. Content findings

The findings likewise show that not just the frequency of tweeting about demographic issues varies by political group, but also the way of framing it. A common ground between the different actors is the general concern about the shrinking working-age population in the EU. The data analysis illustrates that in general three drivers of such demographic change are identified: (2.1) the ageing population, (2.2) migration and mobility, and (2.3) decrease fertility rates. In relation to these aspects of demographic change, three different positions were traced in the analysed data (Table 2). The first position is that of the European Commission, which is an influential agent in framing topics and establishing narratives that enter the public domain. The second position consists of ultraconservative and right-wing discourses, which traditionally include demographic concerns and are present in the political actors: EPP, ECR, ID, Renew. The third position is that of liberal and progressive discourses, which in contrast to the other two positions, mostly react to right-wing discourses, rather than presenting an identifiable agenda to tackle demographic change. These discourses are present in texts of the political actors: S&D, Greens, GUE/NGL, Renew. The political group Renew Europe shares both liberal positions in reproductive rights and right-wing positions when relating to “demographic suicide” (see Fig. 7).

**Table 2. Overview of the three main positions towards core demographic concerns**

	<b>Ageing population</b>	<b>Migration</b>	<b>Low birth rates</b>
EU Commission	Indirectly addressed	Addressed in detail	Addressed in detail
Right and conservative (EPP, ECR, ID, Renew)	Indirectly addressed	Addressed in detail	Addressed in detail
Liberal and progressive (S&D, Greens/ EFA, GUE/NGL, Renew)	Indirectly addressed	Indirectly addressed	Indirectly addressed
Our overall assessment	There is a consensus that the issue of ageing population needs to be addressed by the EU.	How and to what extent migration is a problem that needs to be addressed by the EU is disputed.	How and to what extent low birth rates are a problem and needs to be addressed by the EU is disputed.

The statistical findings reveal how the actors make different use of the same statistical data. Besides using the same datasets and sources, mainly Eurostat, the data is moulded to fit political purposes. An interesting example is the research which the European Commission’s Directorate-General of Economic and Financial Affairs (ECFIN) conducted for the *The Ageing Report 2018*, which counters the established narrative of the EU Commission. It states that birth rates in the European Union are rising in recent years: “The total fertility rate is assumed to rise in almost all Member States between 2016 and 2070, increasing from 1.58 to 1.81 for the EU as whole”.<sup>[2]</sup> Moreover, ECFIN also disagrees with the prognosis that migration to and in Europe will rise in the future: “Annual net migration inflows to the EU are projected to decrease from about 1.5 million people in 2016 to 0.8 million people by 2070, representing a decreased contribution from 0.3% to 0.15% of the total population”.<sup>[3]</sup> Looking more closely at the use of statistical data, it becomes clear that one way to change its interpretation is to look at data on a long-term basis. For instance, the EU Commission always refers to the post-war 1960s, which was the end of the “golden age” of the nuclear family (Skolnick, 1978) – as a reference, whereas ECFIN concentrates on the trends of the last decades.

## 5. Discussion of the findings

Regarding the increased reference to population policy (in Germany after reunification), Susanne Schultz (2016) also notices an “increased significance of discourses of demographic crises.” Diana Hummel and Eva Barlösius coined the term “demographization” for the tendency to “discuss social problems and conflicts as originating from demographic developments” (Barlösius, 2007, p. 27; Hummel, 2006 quoted after Schultz, 2016). The usefulness of this “current revival of demography” (Schultz, 2016) was also recognised by right-wing extremist actors of the European Parliament. As demography is socially disputed, our



findings show how the EU institutions address the matter in vague terms. For instance, the EU Commission under von der Leyen employs descriptions as “open signifiers” such as “democracy and demography” and “European way of life”. Later on, examples will illustrate how this “empty shell rhetoric on demography” opens an interpretative space that right-wing politicians use for their nativist pronatalist critique of current demographic developments, which aims to strengthen birth rates of the “autochthonous” population. Consequently, right-wing discourses predominate the area of demographic discourses.

Right-wing extremist policies often refer to agendas of population policy. These societal discourses on demography have been shaped by the extreme right during the past decades on the basis of a theory regarding the so-called “Great Replacement”, which addresses a decreasing birth rate of the autochthonous population and the imagined unceasing growth of the migrant population. Their leading role was made possible by the fact that “no other political camp dealt with questions of demographic developments and with ways of promoting a higher birth rate so early and so intensively” (Butterwegge, 2002, p. 167).

Against the backdrop of these fear-mongering “scenarios of doom, degeneration and decay which have occupied the extreme right since forever” (Botsch & Kopke, 2018, p. 64), far-right activists have tried to amalgamate different enemies and threats – from Islam, feminism, equal opportunities, gender theories and LGBTIQ+ rights to the EU and left-wing policy in general – within the narrative framework of the “exchange of populations” and to reinterpret them as demographically caused to suit their intentions. In addition to this, a more biologicistic narrative presents the autochthonous “people” as a unique species that needs to be preserved, or as an organism that needs to be kept clean and that cannot take too many foreign influences, and that is put in mortal danger by amalgamation (Botsch & Kopke, 2018; Butterwegge, 2002). This transfer of evolutionary mechanisms from animal and plant kingdoms to human society becomes visible in the talk of “demographic winter” or “demographic tsunami” and can be seen as a proof of a naturalisation process of the social. Taking this thought further, it not only affects the idea of how persons of different origins could live together but it also influences the envisaged gender relations. In this sense, Botsch & Kopke (2018, p. 64f) argue that: “When [...] biological metaphors, which are used to describe political, sociological and cultural phenomena, develop a life of their own, this goes hand in hand with a naturalization of traditional constructs of sex and gender and with a binary attribution of male and female roles and characteristics”.

Discourses of demographic policy are thus used by the extreme right to meet two objectives: the popularisation of their political agenda, and the normalisation of right-wing extremist ways of thinking. In addition, the demographic and family policy of the extreme right is closely linked to its core ideology, which is based on the idea of homogeneous communities, themselves based on traditional gender identities and relationships, on the one hand, and on the idea of an autochthonous (white) Europe, on the other. Three issues play an important role in right-wing extremist discourses with regard to the demographic change, which they conjure up as a “demographic apocalypse”: firstly, the decreasing birth rate of the autochthonous population; secondly, the “exchange of populations” due to immigration,

multiculturalism and “Islamisation”; and thirdly, the ageing of the population (Botsch & Kopke, 2018; Butterwegge & Wiegel, 2018; Ebner & Davey, 2019; Schultz, 2016).

## 5.1 The ageing population

The tendencies described above are also reflected in the material examined. A further result of our investigation illustrates how the different actors rhetorically frame demographic change in Europe. The concern about the ageing population and its upcoming challenges for European societies is the sole demographic concern that seemed to be shared across the groups without question (Table 2). The EU Commission under Jean-Claude Juncker has already shown concern about the increase of the population’s life-expectancy and how it might become a burden to the shrinking working population. A central parameter to this argument has been old-age dependency ratio (see Figure 4). The concern regarding the ageing population is mainly addressed through the “active ageing” paradigm, in which retirees are encouraged to participate more actively in society through life-long learning, volunteering or postponement of retirement.

**Figure 4. Screenshots of the Ageing Report by ECFIN<sup>[4]</sup> and tweet on the old-age dependency ratio, by Dubravka Šuica<sup>[5]</sup>**

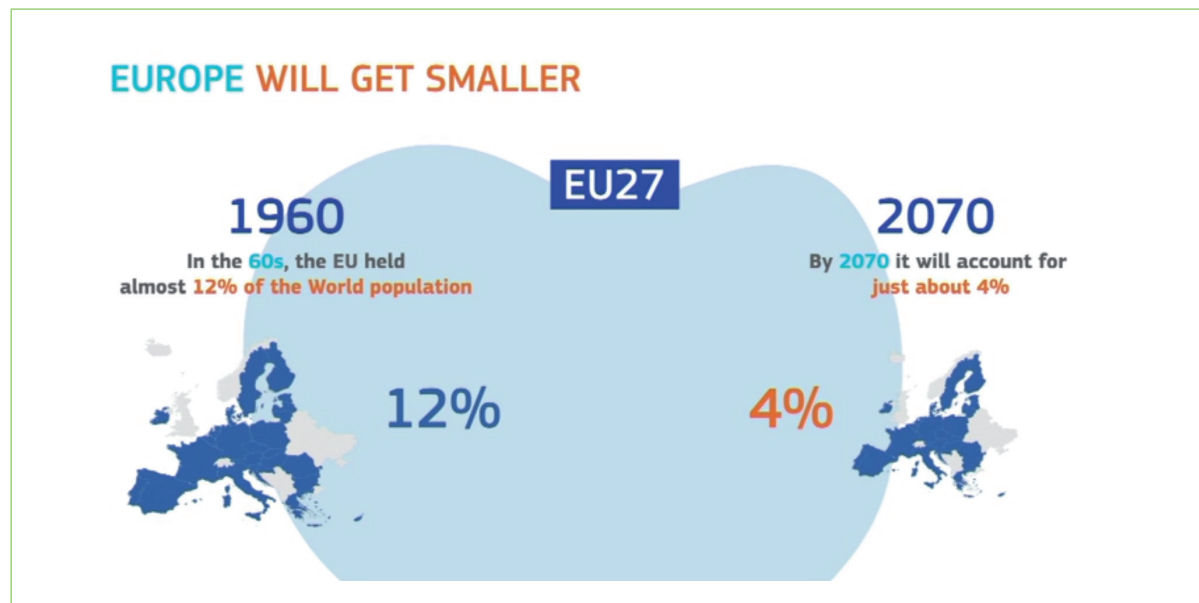


## 5.2 Migration and mobility

The new European Commission under Ursula von der Leyen did not just extend the attention to demographic change in scope, by creating a new EU Commissioner position, it also intensified the focus on other dimensions. For instance, the new Vice-President for Promoting our European Way of Life, Margaritis Schinas, has been given the mission to “address and allay legitimate fears and concerns about the impact of irregular migration on our economy and society”.<sup>[6]</sup> Accordingly, the European Commission builds on the UN

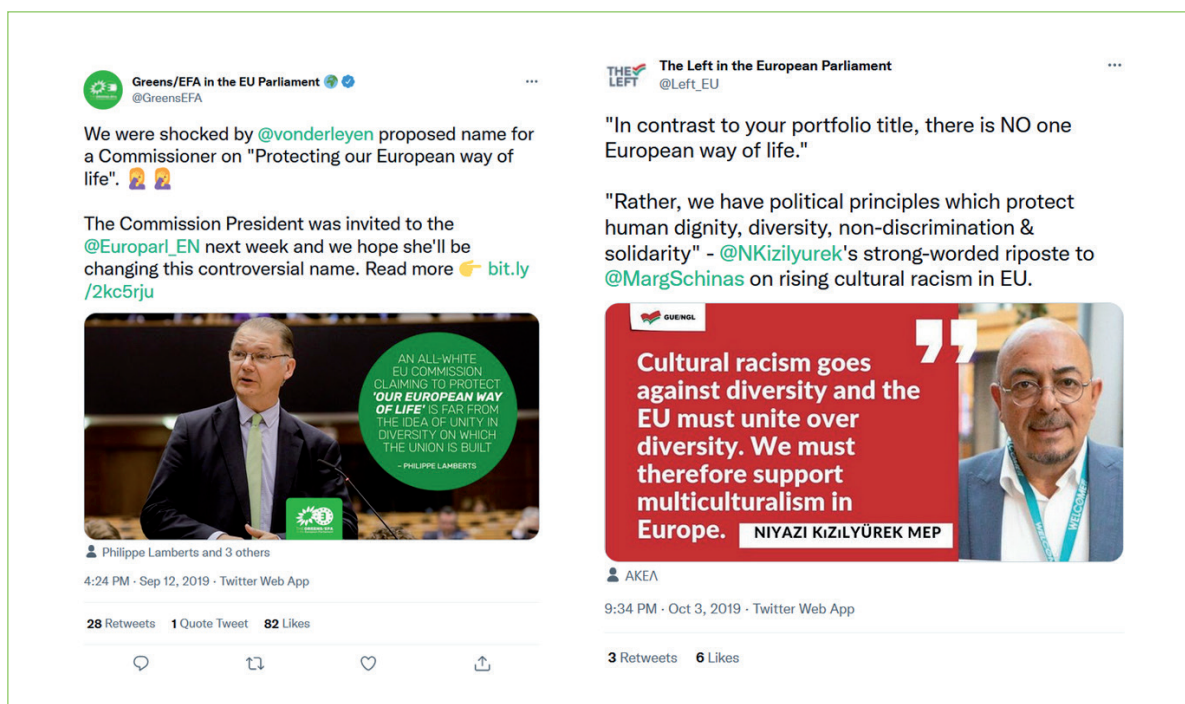
forecast stating that Europe's share in the world's population will decrease from 12 percent in the 1960s to four per cent in 2070 (Figure 5). Thus, demographic transformations also imply changes to "Europe's position in the world. Its share of global population and GDP will become comparatively smaller. This makes the need for Europe to be united, stronger and more strategic all the more important."<sup>[7]</sup>

**Figure 5. Video screenshot on population decline highlighted in the European Commission report of 2021<sup>[8]</sup>**



This forecast produced by the European Commission is just one way of looking at the demographic data. ECFIN states that the decline of Europe's share of the world population is not an exception, but rather common among states like Japan, China, Russia, and the US.<sup>[9]</sup> The selectivity and demographic visualisation of the EU Commission's quotations show how their way of portraying demographic change creates an interpretative template on which the discourses of ultraconservative and right-wing actors can build. The Greens/EFA MEP Philippe Lamberts is shocked by the proposed title "protecting our European way of life" and made this criticism via an attached press release: "The phrase 'protecting our European way of life' is nothing but dog-whistle terminology designed to encourage the far-right, especially when used in connection with migration."<sup>[10]</sup> (Figure 6). The MEP Niyazi Kızılyürek, from the Left Group, denies that there is a "European way of life", warning about "rising cultural racism".

**Figure 6: Screenshots from Twitter Greens/EFA<sup>[11]</sup> and the Left<sup>[12]</sup> opposing the name of a “European way of life”**



The EU Commission’s framing of migrants as a cost-intensive burden to the welfare state opens an empty signifier that right-wing actors can fill with their alarmist rhetoric described above. The quotations exemplify how existing demographic challenges became a fertile ground for far-right actors to combine the general discourse with their perceived threats emanating from invasive mass migration. MEP Manfred Weber (EPP) warned in a speech in the European Parliament of supporting smugglers and advisers that “we must defend our identity - the European Way of life”.<sup>[13]</sup> His colleague Roberta Metsola, newly elected president of the European Parliament, added “Our European Way of Life is the only way to achieve a holistic approach to migration, to security, to equality, to integration and to ensure people’s concerns are met” (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Screenshots from Twitter by EPP<sup>[14]</sup> on “European way of life”, ECR<sup>[15]</sup> on “Europe – a dying continent” and Renew Group<sup>[16]</sup> on “demographic suicide”**



How the spreading fear of a “migration crisis” is connected with demographic concerns can be observed via the activities of Renew Europe and the ECR Group. Renew Europe (2019) organised a lecture on what the Spanish author Alejandro Macarrón Larumbre called “demographic suicide in Europe”. He is also the founder of the think tank *Demographic Renaissance* that works together with the ultraconservative organisation *Hazteoir*, which is known for initiating the right-wing platform *CitizenGo*. The ECR Group held a lecture on the topic “Europe – a dying continent” to which the demographer Gunnar Heinsohn was invited. Heinsohn assertion that “Western Europe (excluding perhaps the UK) may be acting too late to avoid becoming a haven for the world’s angry and low-skilled” was also welcomed in the ECR’s report on *Europe’s Demographic Winter* (2020), which was published by their Working Group on Demography, Intergenerational and Family Policies.<sup>[17]</sup> Other demographers, like Bird Hedwig, were also cited, summarising that “there is no gain to be had from poorly educated foreigners, only a loss of prosperity”.<sup>[18]</sup>

Tweets with anti-migration discourses stood out for being by far the tweets that received the most engagement, both in the form of likes and sharing. The rankings were topped by tweets from the French MEPs from the EPP Group, such as Nadine Morano<sup>[19]</sup> and François-Xavier Bellamy,<sup>[20]</sup> Dutch MEP Rob Roos,<sup>[21]</sup> MEPs from the Identity and Democracy Group, such as the French MEPs Gilbert Collard,<sup>[22]</sup> Jordan Bardella<sup>[23]</sup> and Nicolas Bay,<sup>[24]</sup> as well as Italian MEP Silvia Sardone,<sup>[25]</sup> all of which received a lot of attention for their tweets. An exception among those popular tweets is Elżbieta Rafalska’s<sup>[26]</sup> tweet on maternal pensions. For the Polish MEP from the ECR Group, maternal pensions are “recognition for those who contributed most to the demographic development of Poland.”<sup>[27]</sup>

## 5.3 Decrease of fertility-rates

The EU Commission presents the decline of birth rates as a fact that needs no further explanation. Despite not suggesting an explanatory framework, the EU Commission presents the facts in a way – comparing recent birth rates with the 1960s – that a certain direction of interpretation is more likely adopted by the reader.<sup>[28]</sup> Other official EU tweets or documents also do not provide clear explanations for low birth rates. By reading between the lines and looking at the connotations of used imagery, we find that the decline of birth rates is addressed indirectly by promoting policies that seek to improve gender equality. Some of these measures were directed towards improving work-life balance and promoting new models of parental leave (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Screenshots European Commission<sup>[29]</sup> on work-life balance

**European Commission** @EU\_Commission

1 in 3 Europeans wasn't able to take any family leave last year.  
Only 4 in 10 men took (or intend to take) parental leave.  
This is not sustainable. We made proposals to change this which urgently need to be taken forward.

Eurobarometer ↓ [europa.eu/!yC83vN](https://europa.eu/!yC83vN) #GenderPayGap

**Europeans and work-life balance**

**FLEXIBILITY FOR WORK-LIFE BALANCE**  
FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS ARE NOT AVAILABLE FOR ONE IN THREE EUROPEANS AGED LESS THAN 65.

EUROPEANS WITHOUT ACCESS TO FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS WOULD OPT FOR	20%	25%	Flexitime 58%
	Telework	Part-time	

**EUROPEAN MEN LAGGING BEHIND WHEN IT COMES TO FAMILY LEAVE...**

ONLY 41% OF THE EUROPEAN FATHERS AGED LESS THAN 65 YEARS OLD TOOK / ARE THINKING OF TAKING PATERNITY LEAVE

EVEN FEWER (LESS THAN A THIRD OF MEN) TOOK/ARE THINKING OF TAKING PARENTAL LEAVE COMPARED TO MORE THAN HALF OF WOMEN

**EUROPEANS PERCEIVE BARRIERS WHEN TAKING FAMILY LEAVE**

MORE THAN HALF OF WOMEN (53%) AND MEN (52%) THINK THAT IT IS EASIER FOR WOMEN THAN MEN TO TAKE FAMILY LEAVES	42% OF WOMEN AND 35% OF MEN THINK THAT TAKING FAMILY LEAVE HAS A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON THEIR CAREER
Easier for women than men	Has a negative impact on their career
53% (Women) / 52% (Men)	42% (Women) / 35% (Men)
35% (Women) / 32% (Men)	Flexible work arrangements
	34% (Women) / 28% (Men)

**SUPPORTING FATHERHOOD**  
EUROPEAN FATHERS WOULD FEEL MORE ENCOURAGED TO TAKE MORE PARENTAL LEAVE WITH...

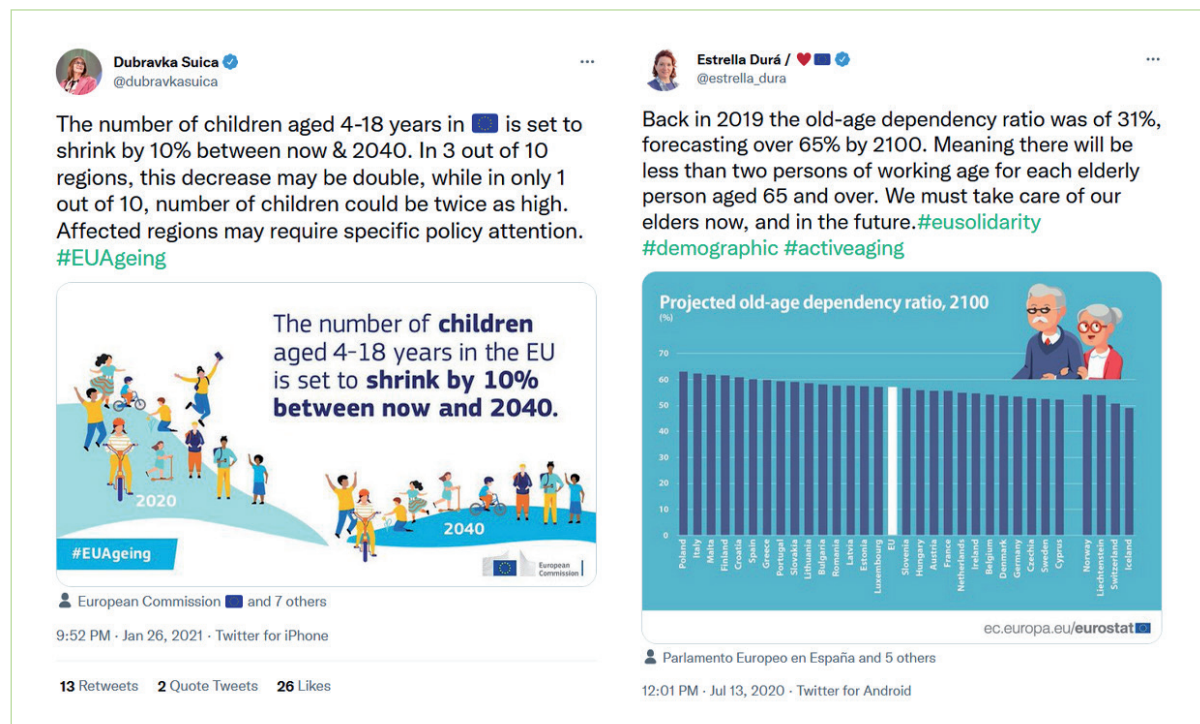
... more financial compensation during the period of leave	41%
... a choice to take the leave in blocks or into part-time working	35%
... better guarantees in respect of career	30%
... support from superiors	

MEN ARE MORE LIKELY THAN WOMEN TO TAKE PARENTAL LEAVE IF THEY HAVE AT LEAST 75% OF THEIR SALARY

Men	47%
Women	39%

Věra Jourová and 4 others  
12:27 PM · Oct 26, 2018 · Twitter Web Client

**Figure 9: Screenshots from Twitter Dubravka Šuica<sup>[30]</sup> and progressive MEP Estrella Durá<sup>[31]</sup>**



Most liberal and progressive groups address low birth rates rather indirectly. Exceptions are Spanish MEPs from the S&D Group, who primarily deal with demographic challenges in relation to rural depopulation in Spain. In the last few years, the fight for reproductive rights has been highly contested by right-wing politicians in the European Parliament. When Members from the European Parliament made the effort to secure abortion as a human right, anti-choice agents even went so far as to threaten and insult pro-choice MEPs by sending them little plastic fetuses, reports M. Eugenia R. Palop from the Left Group.<sup>[32]</sup> The heated debates on reproductive rights did not prove unsuccessful as this year the European Parliament approved the so-called “Matić report”, which anchored the right to abortion as a human right.

Figure 10: Screenshots on tweets on reproductive rights by S&D<sup>[33]</sup> and ECR<sup>[34]</sup>



In contrast, ultraconservative and right-wing actors address low birth rates directly and take a clear pro-natalist position (Figure 10). In the ECR report *Europe's demographic winter*, Gérard-François Dumont states that “given the consequences of the ‘demographic winter’, we should be seeking to bring about a ‘demographic spring’,<sup>[35]</sup> which implies affirming the ‘value of parenthood and family’ in European policies”.<sup>[36]</sup> According to the authors, caregivers face discrimination through EU policies such as parental leave and obligatory care facilities.<sup>[37]</sup> Consequently, “tackling this problem will require a deep change of mentality and a genuine cultural revolution (or counter-revolution)”.<sup>[38]</sup> The MEP Joachim Kuhs, from the Identity & Democracy Group and Alternative for Germany (AfD), alleged abortion rights to be “self-righteous self-determination rights”<sup>[39]</sup> that negatively affect birth rates among “autochthonous” Europeans and demands a “welcome culture for the new and unborns” (Figure 11). With this reference to *Willkommenskultur*, Kuhs alludes to anti-migration discourses in 2015, in which Angela Merkel was accused of creating a so-called “welcome culture” for refugees. Maximilian Krah, who is also from AfD and the Identity and Democracy Group, posted: “Demography is our destiny. If it is not possible to noticeably increase the number of children of the autochthons, there is a risk, thanks to the immigration lust of the established parties, that cannot be talked about: #Umvolkung”; he did so with reference to Hungarian natalist policies, as seen in the following example.



**Figure 11. Screenshots on natalist tweets from Joachim Kuhs<sup>[40]</sup> and Maximilian Krah<sup>[41]</sup>**



## 6. Conclusions

The e-paper presented here has shown that political debates on demography continue to gain in importance at the EU level. This is proven not only by the numerous documents that have been published by EU institutions, but also by the recently established European Commission for Democracy and Demography under the direction of Commission Vice-President Dubravka Šuica. In the political debates in the EU, however, mainly conservative and right-wing extremists dominate as they know how to present the topic in their own interest. This e-paper has pointed out that three issues play an important role with regard to demography: decreasing birth rates and an ageing population, as well as the combination of migration and mobility. Our investigation has also shown that the same statistical data (e.g. Eurostat) that deals with these topics are consistently interpreted (and/or instrumented) differently by different actors in order to legitimise political action for their respective political purposes. This is all the easier for these actors because according to our analysis the demographic discourse may be classified as an open signifier framing of the EU Commission, which leaves an open room for interpretation, for example with regard to the decline in the birth rate, which is filled by right-wing extremist groups. Moreover, in the area of migration, the demographic discourse generates an interpretation template

on which right-wing anti-migration discourses can build. Finally, the metaphors used by EU officials, such as “demographic winter”, can be understood as a clear indication of the hidden political agenda.

All in all, this does not seem surprising as the focus on demographic-political issues brings numerous advantages for the far right. By using demographic developments as their key point, they are not only able to address topics of social, family, women’s and reproduction policy, but also to link these with questions of migration and immigration, on the one hand, and with gender relations, on the other. The narrative of demographic change has opened up opportunities for the extreme right to modernise racist discourses and to establish their topics in mainstream media, thus reaching the so-called centre of society. The potential results primarily from the fact that talk of social and demographic change is very widespread and has been discussed in many areas of society. The extreme right was able to build on these discourses and both introduce and further disseminate their (mostly racist) points of view. In an essay on the reproductive policy of white supremacists, Barbara Perry (2004, p. 89) also considers “the extent to which it reflects the mainstream” to be “remarkable”. To deal with the demographic discourse of the extreme right thus seems to be particularly important because it is one of those “political – ideological overlaps between the ‘centre’ and the extreme right [...] which will probably gain in importance in the years to come”, as Christoph Butterwegge (2002, p. 167) stressed twenty years ago.

## 7. Policy recommendations

Policy recommendations that can be derived from our e-paper include first of all **taking the importance of demographic issues seriously** and being able to decipher right-wing positions within the debates. Furthermore, the necessity of political groups, as well as political decision-makers and other relevant actors within this field, to take a position with progressive points of view needs to be recognised. In addition, the **disclosure of the dangerous gender-specific and racist consequences of right-wing and conservative demographic policies is required.**

The current debate on demography at the EU level has no connection to the social Europe agenda, which makes demography an easy target for instrumentalisation by illiberal and right-wing forces. Therefore, it is all the more important to **combine demographic political agendas with social and feminist issues.** This requires the strengthening of feminist demographic research and policy, as well as improved relationships between political decision-makers, on the one hand, and universities and knowledge producers, on the other, in order to work together on the creation and interpretation of data at the national, as well as the EU level. Only a feminist analysis of the data, as well as the problem areas and the challenges associated with them, can lead to a righteous feminist answer and solution to social imbalances.

In order to curb the further spreading of right-wing positions with regard to demographic-political issues, it is therefore necessary to study the issue more intensively. For progressive actors, there is not only an **urgent need to contribute to the relevant debates with forward-looking positions**, but also the potential to use the data in their interests as well. Progressive actors need to **step up in the discourse around demography**, otherwise conservative and far-right actors will dominate and instrumentalise the debate. In order to meet this pent-up demand, a feminist perspective, in particular, is required - above all, in order to reveal the gender politics inscribed in demographic-political discourses, as well as to provide equality-oriented answers to the challenges described.

Crenshaw developed the concept of intersectionality to remind us about the blanks regarding official statistical data about the prison population. Feminist scholarship should use intersectionality in this way and to underline why certain elements of demography, such as birth, are prioritised, while little attention is paid to other demographic aspects like mortality. As a response to the illiberal turn of demography, the feminist demography cannot be reduced to criticising the factual, descriptive character of demography, but must offer a constructive and inclusive policy based on the undoubtedly existing socio-demographic processes.

# Endnotes of primary sources

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