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Gérard-François Dumont

Europe's winter

An assessment of the demographic figures in Europe for this century shows that the drop in fertility to below the mere generation turnover rate has now become a universal trend. In other words, the world's population is getting older. One can already detect a "depopulation" effect on certain countries and many regions, despite migrant influx. This development is going to have particular geopolitical impact on the Old World's influence.

Starting in the sixties, gradually declining fertility brought the population of Europe to a point where it dropped below the generation turnover rate – in other words, below the fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman. In countries with good health care,

that rate allows 100 women to be replaced 30 years later by an identical number of women from the next generation.

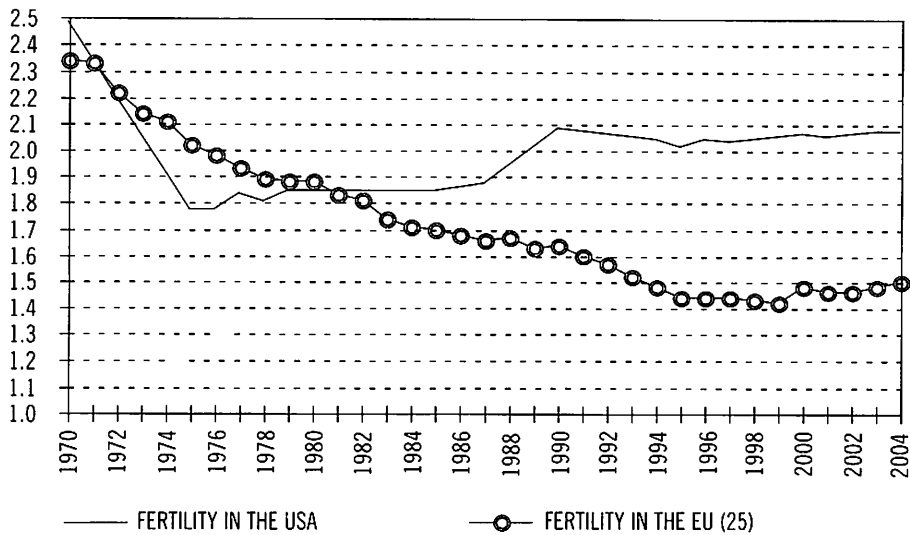
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Thus a trend was set in motion that remained steadily below the generation turnover threshold throughout the next decade, leading to a decline in both the absolute and the relative values of the numbers of

people in the younger generations. To define that situation, I coined the expression "demographic winter"¹ in the late seventies. Thirty years on, in the twenty-first century, Europe is the only continent in the world with a negative natural growth rate (that is, with an annual growth rate of -0.1%). "Old Europe" is turning into a continent of old people; demographic turnover is largely absent.²

THE DEMOGRAPHIC GAP BETWEEN EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES. The thing that distinguishes the European Union from the United States

Figure 1 • Fertility in the European Union and United States



Source: INED and Eurostat.

(where, on the contrary, the fertility rate is rising³) is a weaker fertility situation. Certain differences, however, also exist within the continent of Europe itself: it is as though, despite having collapsed in 1989, the Iron Curtain were still exercising some kind of demographic influence. In actual fact, the countries from the former Soviet bloc are showing lower fertility rates today, after catching up with the world's tail lights, Italy and Spain. Moreover, they also suffer from higher mortality rates.

The low fertility rate reached at the start of the twenty-first century varies from country to country, as does the aging population syndrome. Italy, for instance, took Germany's place at the bottom of the global fertility rate list in 1986, with 1.32 children per woman. In 2007, with 1.34 children per woman,⁴ Italy ranked twenty-first in Europe, with six countries (mostly in the east) ranking even lower.

Given that demographic rationales have a long-lasting impact, Europe's development as illustrated above is inevitably going to have geopolitical repercussions. These will be of two different kinds: external geopolitical consequences impacting the overall conditions that influence Europe's ties with the rest of the world; and internal geopolitical consequences impacting relations between the EU member states themselves.

EUROPE'S LOSS OF INFLUENCE. Let us first take a look at the impact of the decline in the number of Europe's inhabitants by comparison with the world's overall

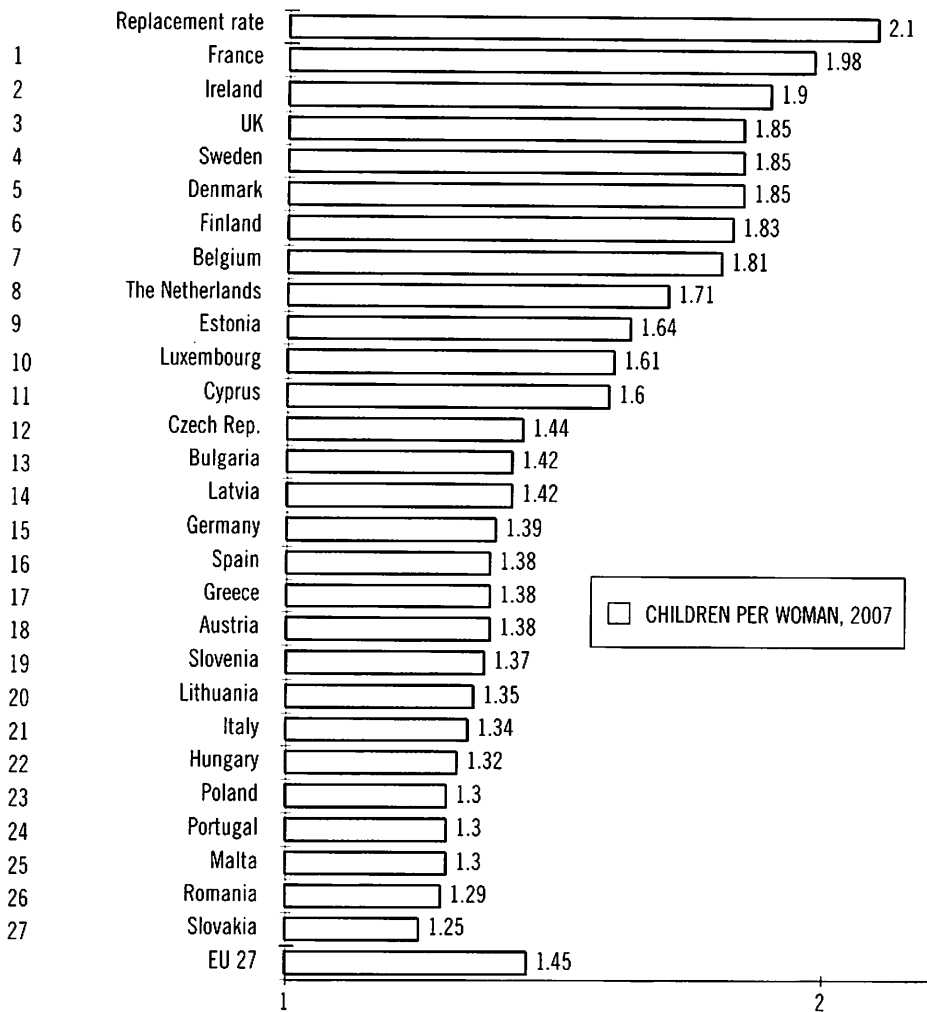
population. In external terms, that decline reduces Europe's capacity for wielding influence. In the definition that I have proposed, the "law of numbers" means that "geopolitical developments depend on the number of people." This is a law that always applies, regardless. Sure enough, Europe in the twenty-first century cannot claim to wield the same clout in international forums that it had in the twentieth.

Take the case of the G8, for instance. It was set up on the initiative of President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1975 as a forum for the world's most powerful economies. Initially it was a G6 group comprising the United States, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Italy. It became the G7 in 1976 when Canada joined, and it expanded to include Russia 12 years later, in 1998, becoming the G8. Thus Europe alone accounts for fully four of its members: Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Italy. These are countries with populations of a great deal less than 100 million people each. Germany, the most heavily populated of the four, still only ranks fourteenth in the world in terms of the size of its population, while the other three are well below the top twenty.

140 Moreover, these countries' demographic weight is continuing to drop. Germany's population is declining despite the country having a positive migrant balance.⁵ The populations of the United Kingdom and of France, on the other hand, are growing, but their growth reflects the magnitude of immigration into those countries. And lastly, Italy has a negative natural balance: Italy's population rose in 2007 thanks solely to a huge migrant influx, with an estimated migratory balance of 454,000.⁶ Demographic growth over the same period in the first 13 countries in the world in terms of population, on other hand, was not only decidedly positive (other than in Japan), it was also much higher.

That is why the G8 has ceased to be representative. It accounts for only 13.1% of the world's population. Understandably, a proposal has been made to extend it to include five emerging countries: China, India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa. The first two are the most heavily populated countries in the world, each accounting for approximately one-fifth of the world's overall population. Brazil ranks fifth in the world in terms of its population, and Mexico ranks eleventh. South Africa, for its part, may not be very heavily populated (it has a population of 48 million), but its per capita GDP is five times higher than the average figure for an African country. Taking its history into account, it is difficult to dispute that it should represent sub-Saharan Africa, even if only in symbolic terms, also in light of the fact that the domestic geopolitics of Nigeria (which is three times more densely populated than South Africa) are far from stable.

Figure 2 • EU fertility



Source: Eurostat.

The total population of these five emerging countries stands at 2,792 million, which represents 42.2% of the world's population. It follows that the G8+5 group is indeed representative of the world as a whole, because the sum of the countries in the group comes to 3.663 million, or half of the world's population (55.3% to be precise).

With its advanced economy, Europe can count on a strong contingent even in the G8+5 group, but the very fact of calling for the G8's enlargement inevitably entails a relative decline in Europe's influence, which is reflected in its demographic development.

A similar problem arises with regard to the makeup of the UN Security Council. France and the United Kingdom, the two European member countries with the right of veto, still benefit from a prerogative granted to them when, on emerging victorious from World War II, they represented huge swathes of humanity by virtue of their colonial empires. Today, their right of veto has become difficult to justify, especially when we consider such enormous countries as India and Brazil, who do not carry the same weight in the Security Council.

In short, it is inevitable that the clout of a country with a relatively weak birth rate should end up declining in the international organizations,⁷ as Aristide Briand warned in a now famous address to the French Chamber of Deputies way back in the twenties: "I am conducting the foreign policy allowed by our birth rate."

DEMOGRAPHIC GAP AND IMMIGRATION POLICY. The fact that the intensity of Europe's demographic winter varies from country to country may well become a source of tension within the European Union. This is what I call its internal geopolitical consequences. We saw an initial example of this in 2005 with the mass regularization of illegal immigrants in Spain.⁸ In the years leading up to that date, Spain had allowed hundreds of thousands of immigrants to enter, mostly from the Andean countries of Latin America, without any form of control. They encouraged immigration to meet the country's economic requirements in light of the major decline in its native active population (caused by a fertility rate well below the European average). Then, in 2005, the socialist government decided to implement a sweeping regularization measure – a decision which, among other things, was enormously beneficial for the country's finances because it turned hundreds of thousands of illegal workers into regular workers, and those workers and their employers thus became liable to both direct and indirect taxation.

Thus the 2005 regularization measure, which was implemented over three months from February 7 to May 7, had more of an economic than a humanitarian impact – especially since José Luis Zapatero's government made the unprecedented decision of entrusting the management of the process to the employers themselves. Spain's mass regularization involved approximately 700,000 "illegals".⁹ The operation proved enormously beneficial for the state's coffers.

The trouble is that this "unilateral" regularization measure was considered most unwelcome both by Germany and by France. Germany was unhappy because of the risk of increasing pressure on it to adopt a similar measure, which would have caused the

temperature to rise throughout the Schengen area. France was unhappy for the same reason, but also because, with its employment situation being so weak, what it certainly did not need in terms of sheer quantity (in what we might call “accountancy” terms) was a mass of job-seeking immigrants pouring into the country. In short, we might say that there was a kind of “French exception”. If France had the same employment to unemployment ratio as, say, the United Kingdom, it would have approximately 1.5 million fewer job-hunters and 3.5 million additional jobs. Thus, short of promoting a migration policy designed to encourage an influx of highly skilled workers, France appears to have no interest in leaving its doors wide open to immigrants until it has improved the national employment figures.

Of course, the tension spawned by differing migration policies could be resolved through the European immigration pact signed by the EU’s 27 member states in October 2008. But the fact remains that the future migration policies adopted by the Union’s member states¹⁰ will inevitably end up diverging on account of the differing demographic trends in those states. What differs is the real evolution of the active population in the Union’s member states: in some cases it is on the rise, in others it is stationary, and in yet others it is dropping. In short, despite all the efforts made to foster a common policy, migration is going to remain a potential source of geopolitical tension within the European Union. This is inevitable as some countries are wide open to immigration due to the gaps in their labor market, and others less so, on account of their limited need for unskilled labor.

DEMOGRAPHIC GAP AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION. Another potential source of tension within the European Community is linked to the ratio between the demographic criterion and political representation in the Union’s institutions, with the European Council and the European Parliament in Strasbourg heading the list. The existing treaties contain no progressively adaptable clauses pegged to demographic trends such as the United States has for the House of Representatives, where the Constitution provides for the number of representatives to be reviewed every ten years on the basis of a regularly held census.

Now, it is a foregone conclusion that the individual member states’ relative demographic weight is going to change as time goes by. According to current mean forecasts, the demographic weight carried by Germany, Italy and Poland may well diminish, while that of the United Kingdom and France could increase. Thus some countries might be prompted to claim a higher number of votes on the European Council

and a higher number of representatives in the European Parliament. This source of tension will only grow if a qualified majority voting system is used more often. And an additional problem would be occasioned by the different ways in which population figures are calculated in each country, because the same results would obviously end up being the object of differing interpretations.

While these examples show the extent to which demographic trends have a decisive impact on geopolitics, we also need to consider other factors such as, for example, developments in the gender and age trend in the electorate, competition in human resource requirements (particularly in the fields of security and defense), or integration issues.¹¹

In conclusion, the geopolitical impact of Europe's demographic winter needs to be analyzed on at least three levels. First of all, the potential influence wielded on the world stage by Europe as a whole is diminishing, and will continue to do so in the near future. At the same time, given that the intensity of the demographic winter changes from country to country, various sources of tension are going to arise within the European Union itself. Lastly, all of this is bound to have specific repercussions on the domestic political scene in each individual country.

¹ This formula was used also in subsequent works, for instance in Gérard-François Dumont et al. *La France ridée*. Hachette 1986.

² It was 2005 before the European Union published a Green Paper on demographic change. See Gérard-François Dumont, "Révolution à Bruxelles", *Population & Avenir*, n. 674, September-October 2005. One of the instances of awareness of reality and of requirements for the future worth mentioning is the excellent opinion expressed by the European Economic and Social Committee in "La famille et l'évolution démographique", March 14, 2007; rapporteur: Stéphane Buffetant.

³ Gérard-François Dumont, *Les populations du monde*. Éditions Armand Colin 2004.

⁴ The fertility rate has risen slightly both in Italy and in Spain in the twenty-first century thanks to the impact of the migrant influx.

⁵ See Josef Schmid, "L'Allemagne encore divisée... démographiquement", *Population & Avenir*, n. 678, May-June 2006.

⁶ Eurostat, initial demographic estimates for 2007, March 2008.

⁷ Using the same rationale, it has also been said that Dominique Strauss-Kahn will be the last European to head up the International Monetary Fund.

⁸ One of Spain's peculiar qualities is that there are no real illegal immigrants in the country. Given that immigrants require no sojourn permit, an overwhelming majority of "illegals" are actually registered in municipal records in accordance with national law. This registration, known as *empadronamiento*, allows immigrants to obtain basic health care and gives their children the right to an education. Indeed, it is to the municipality's advantage to encourage immigrants to register on official lists so that it then can claim higher regional and national subsidies.

⁹ According to official figures published on May 9, 2005, only 3.15% of the 690,679 applications for regularization were rejected.

¹⁰ Such as the so-called "Return" directive approved by the European Parliament on June 18, 2008.

¹¹ Gérard-François Dumont, "L'immigration et l'Europe", *Revue politique et parlementaire*, n. 1046, January-March 2008.