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Gemma Pinyol-Jiménez/Andreu Domingo

Demography and migration governance in the 21st century in the European Union: a push for democracy?

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Abstract: *The European Union faces a key structural challenge: managing deep demographic change in a context of increasing political polarisation around migration. The combination of population ageing, low fertility and regional differences in development has made migration a central element for the sustainability of economic and welfare systems. However, migration management presents significant challenges, from the lack of consensus on the Common European Asylum System to the outsourcing of migration control to third countries. At the same time, the debate on migration and demography has become politicised, with discourses ranging from the narrative use of immigration in repopulation and economic development to its instrumentalisation as a threat to identity and security. The growing influence of populist and Eurosceptic parties has reinforced polarisation, making it difficult to implement inclusive and sustainable policies.*

This chapter analyses the current demographic dynamics of the EU, the impact of migration and the challenges of its governance, as well as the role of politicisation in the formulation of migration policies today. The ultimate objective is to examine the extent to which these issues represent a challenge to the quality and stability of democracy in the European Union.

Keywords: *Demography, Migration, Migration governance, Discourses, Spain.*

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Demography and migration in the European Union: a strategic view from Spain

Migration policy, in two of its main aspects — the management of flows and border control, which covers both mobility within the European Union and migration flows between the EU and non-EU countries, on the one hand, and integration policies, which define the rights and duties of immigrants, on the other — has been a central element in the construction of the European project itself.

This strategic area has required a complex multi-level governance framework, characteristic of the European Union. In terms of migration control, national governments, and in particular interior ministries, have taken on a predominant role. In contrast, integration policies have been marked by the action of a variety of local administrations, from municipalities to regional governments, which have played a key role in their implementation.

In the 21ST century, two crucial factors coincide that must be taken into account in the design and strategic vision of European migration policy. On the one hand, economic globalisation and the acceleration, growth and diversification of migratory movements, in a context of rapid population ageing due to the confluence of declining fertility and increased longevity. On the other hand, the construction of the Union with the progressive accession of new partners with very different political and socio-demographic characteristics. However, it is not only the demographic reality of the countries of the European Union that has changed, with migration increasingly playing a key role in the population growth of most of them, but also the assessment of the demographic situation and the challenges that migration posed to the governance of the Union.

In order to understand the strategic crossroads at which we find ourselves, this text aims to offer a perspective that includes data and political actions. First, we must look at the demographic evolution of the different countries of the European Union, with a special emphasis on the conceptual framework used to explain the evolution of fertility, on the one hand, and the contribution of migration to population growth and its heterogeneity in the different EU countries, on the other. Secondly, it is worth analysing the construction of both migration policies and the politicisation of demography when discussing migration, which requires an analysis to accompany the data in the first section. Thirdly, it is worth

rethinking the future challenges of migration policies in light of demographic trends, but also in relation to the tension introduced by conflicting narratives on the subject within the Union. We conclude with some final reflections on demography and democracy from a strategic perspective.

From the second demographic transition to complex systems of demographic reproduction

Fertility and the second demographic transition

In THE MID-1980S, the rapid and continuous decline in fertility that followed the *baby boom*—which had occurred in northern and central European countries after the Second World War—led to the formulation of a theory about a 'second demographic transition' (Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 1991), which attempted to explain the reason for these changes and predict their future evolution, following in the footsteps of the demographic transition theory (Notestein, 1945). If that theory had explained the transition from an old demographic regime—characterised by high fertility and mortality—to a modern regime characterised, on the contrary, by low fertility and mortality, with significant savings in biological energy (Livi-Bacci, 2002)— the second demographic transition, through empirical observation of demographic trends in northern European countries after the *baby boom*, sought to anticipate the progression of all post-transitional countries.

The observation of the evolution of children per woman born in the different countries of the European Union from 1960 to 2022, expressed by the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), represented in Figure 1, allows us to see the different stages, as well as the regional differences in this evolution marked by convergence in the decline. Before analysing the data, we would like to point out that the geographical grouping adopted by the European Statistical Institute, which seems to be the most neutral and functional for the latest data, masks the great divide between the countries that belonged to the communist bloc — colloquially known as "Eastern countries" — and the rest, with the former now spread across the East, the North (the Baltic countries) and the South (the countries of the former Yugoslavia). In the foreground, we have highlighted the evolution of the EU (current) average and that of Spain compared to the rest of the Union countries. Thus, while the EU average peaked in the mid-1960s with the *baby boom,* at 2.6 children per woman, by

2022, which is the last year for which we have data for all EU countries, it stands at 1.45, which means a return to early 21ST century levels, after a slight recovery that peaked in 2009 at 1.59, coinciding with the start of the Great Recession.

EU TOTAL

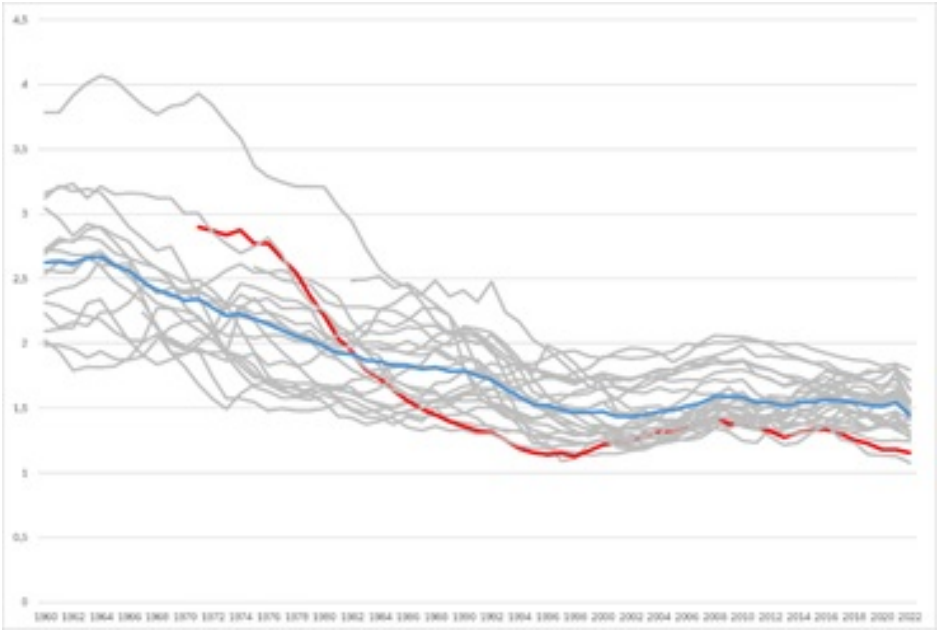
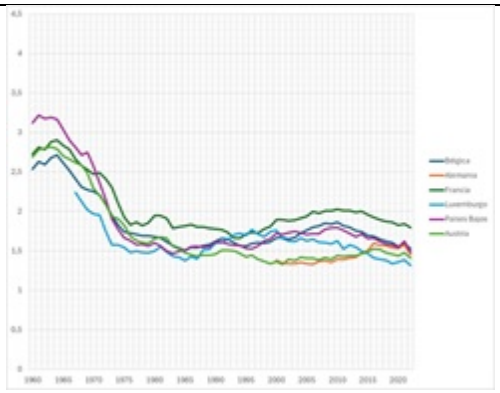
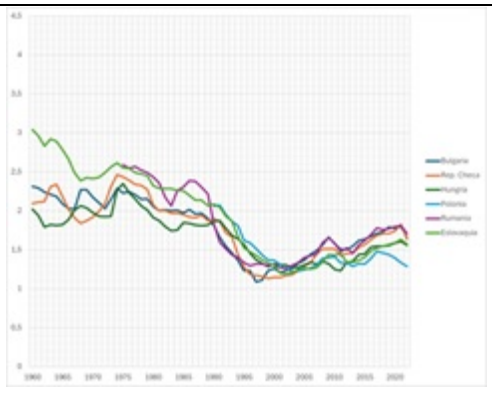
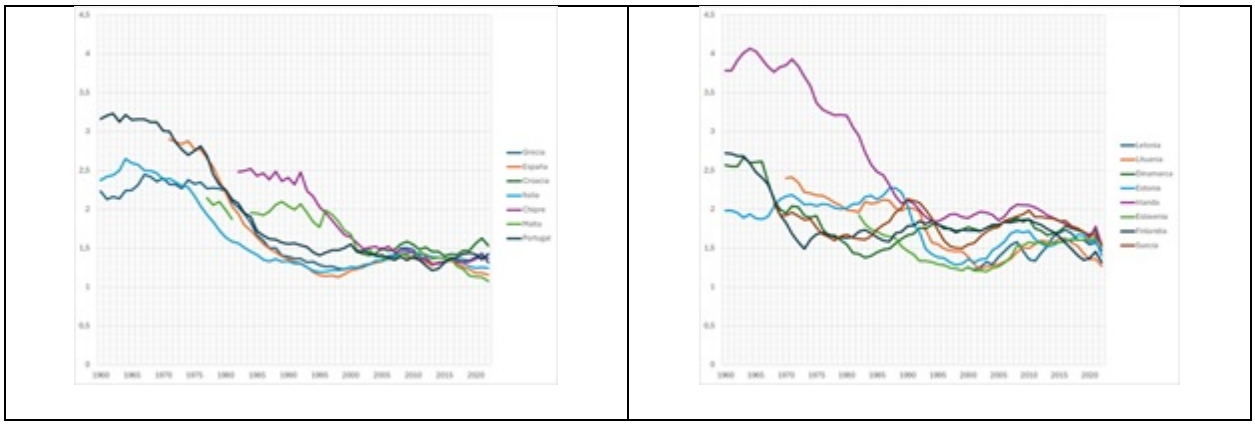


Figure 1. Evolution of the total fertility rate for EU countries, total and major regions, 1960-2022. Source: CED compilation, Fertility rates by age [demo_frate__custom_14895684]. [Consulted on 3 September 2024]. Eurostat

WEST	EAST
	
SOUTH	**NORTH**



Spain's evolution stands out for having gone from occupying the top spots in high fertility during the *baby boom* in the 1970s, with 2.9 in 1971, which is the first year for which records are kept in the Eurostat series, to plummeting to the bottom of the list with a low of 1.13 in 1998, only ahead of Bulgaria with 1.1. As we have seen for the EU as a whole, these minimum values improved during the first decade of the new millennium with the economic expansion cycle — partly thanks to the arrival of migrants, partly due to the age structure of Spanish women — reaching a maximum of 1.45 in 2008, before falling again to 1.16 in 2022, surpassing only Malta, which had a rate of 1.08, with values just below Italy's 1.24, in contrast to those achieved by France and Romania, which have the highest fertility rates in the EU, with 1.79 and 1.71, respectively.

In any case, if we compare the evolution of the different geographical areas, what stands out first are the peaks in all European countries during the *baby boom*, exceeding three children per woman in all geographical areas for countries with data, for example, the Netherlands with 3.12 children per woman among the Western countries, with Ireland taking the lead with 3.78 among the Northern countries, which even reached four children per woman in the mid-1960s, followed closely by Denmark with 2.57, Portugal with 3.16 among the Southern countries, and Slovakia with 3.4 among the Eastern countries. The second characteristic feature of this evolution is the different timing of the decline in fertility at the end of *the baby boom*, which was earlier for those countries in Northern and Central Europe whose *baby boom* had already begun at the end of the Second World War, and later for countries in Southern Europe such as Spain, with declines that also stand out for their different intensity. Thus, Denmark and the Netherlands were already at 1.9 in 1973, while Ireland — exceptional in its geographical area — did not reach this

level until 1992, even behind Spain and Portugal, whose TFR did not fall below 2.1 until 1982 and 1983 respectively. Among the Eastern European countries, Hungary appears to be a pioneer, falling to 1.9 in 1980, followed by the Czech Republic in 1983 and Bulgaria in 1987. This decline generally accelerated with the collapse of communism in the early 1990s. As we have already pointed out for the EU as a whole, during the first decade of THE 21ST century, there was a general recovery, but always with minimum values for most EU countries, only to fall again with the Great Recession, without fertility rates accompanying the emergence from the economic crisis. A comparison of countries for the last year confirms a convergence in the narrow range between the French maximum of 1.79 and the Maltese minimum of 1.08 mentioned above. Thus, we find countries from all geographical areas in the different fertility ranges. Among those above 1.5, we find countries in the west such as France, in the east such as Romania with 1.71, and in the north such as Denmark with 1.55 and Ireland with 1.54. The same is true of the intermediate range, which is around the European average of between 1.3 and 1.49, such as the Netherlands or Germany with 1.46, representing the West with 1.49, Latvia or Estonia in the North, with 1.47 and 1.41 respectively, or Greece in the South with 1.32. Finally, along with Spain in the last band, we find other southern countries, such as Italy with 1.24, but also eastern countries such as Poland with 1.29 and northern countries such as Lithuania with 1.27.

In an attempt to explain the changes in fertility and, in general, in the formation of couples—the emergence of cohabitation, the increase in divorce, and the decline in marriage, among the main ones—which would precipitate the decline in fertility—along with the delay in the age of motherhood and the reduction in family size— various reasons were quickly put forward, forming more of a heterogeneous repertoire of possible causes than a theory per se. Among the primary causes, the change in values that would explain the progressive deinstitutionalisation of the family was highlighted. This view, in which the generational imprint would be decisive, drawing on Ronald Inglehart's (1977) theory of the "Silent Revolution" and the shift from materialistic to post-materialistic generations to explain social change, with echoing the utopian projects of May 1968 and the feminist movement—which would also count the massive entry of women into the labour market as an essential factor in the decline in fertility. At the same time, neoliberal theories applied to the family, on rational choice and the cost of child-rearing, represented by Gary

Becker (1981), were evoked, which had already been identified as a cause of the decline in fertility by Ron Lesthaeghe, before the formal enunciation of the theory of the second transition (Lesthaeghe and Meekers, 1986).Competition between productive and reproductive work would also explain the general decline in fertility from this perspective.

The differences between northern and southern Europe (remember that we are talking about the European Economic Community with twelve members, among which Spain and Portugal had just joined in January 1986) would be sought in the delay in the process of secularisation in the southern countries, ultimately dating back to the division between Catholics and Protestants, following Weber's thesis on the origin of capitalism. Very soon, however, differences in the welfare state were also associated with this, especially to explain the pioneering role of the Scandinavian countries in the second demographic transition, both in terms of the increase in cohabitation—and the consequent decline in marriage rates— as well as in single-parent families, specifically contrasted with the 'backwardness' of the models in Mediterranean countries, characterised by placing families (and heads of households) at the centre of their policies rather than individuals (Esping-Andersen, 1993). This association continued to favour the interpretative approach of 'values' over structural economic factors, overlooking the brutal effect that the economic crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s had on these southern countries and the erosion of the welfare state, already weak in these countries, which began with the triumph of the neoliberal creed—which in Spain coincided with the democratic transition.

This initial interpretation based on values continued to be applied to explain the decline in fertility in Eastern European countries following the collapse of the Communist bloc, attributing the fall in the number of children per woman to the adoption of Western values and individualism (Lesthaeghe, 1991) and thus ignoring the devastating effect of the dismantling of social housing policies and policies for young couples, in the context of the economic and social crisis caused by the structural adjustment to which these countries were subjected. Thus, at the very beginning of the attempt to interpret the decline in fertility in European Union countries, it is possible to identify one of the misunderstandings that has been dragging on, which may explain the difficulty in understanding demographic change: we refer to the neglect of structural economic factors, which act as the primary constraint on Europeans' reproductive projects. Thus, in the aforementioned theory of the

second demographic transition, key factors are conspicuous by their absence, such as the systematic disinvestment in reproductive work hand in hand with the progressive dismantling of the welfare state, together with the precariousness of working conditions for both men and women, and the colonisation of time to the point of making it a scarce commodity, which will particularly affect women in terms of reconciling productive and reproductive work for the formation of a family, with the added difficulty of reconciling the biographies and professional projects of the members of the couple.

As early as the beginning of the 1990s, in an attempt to explain the failure of very low fertility rates to recover in southern European countries — joined by some of the more developed Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea — the hypothesis was put forward that this failure to recover from very low levels, lower than those in Scandinavia, the pioneers of demographic transition, should be understood as the delay in the emancipation of women, or the maintenance of cultural and political contexts where the burdens on women continued to subject them to levels where they were inhibited from reproduction, which demographer Anna Cabré, thinking of Spain and Italy, called the "family transition" (Cabré, 1995). This has subsequently remained one of the hypotheses for the maintenance of this very low fertility (Esping-Andersen and Billari, 2015), so that, contrary to some of the initial interpretations that opposed women's emancipation and fertility, they argued that greater gender equality could guarantee higher levels of children per woman in developed countries than those being recorded in the southern European Union. This thesis is contrary to the narratives of the far right, which calls for a "return to traditional values" as a way of encouraging fertility.

The evolution of life expectancy

Taking a historical perspective since the 1960s, it is in the field of mortality trends that we find the second demographic phenomenon that will ultimately shape both natural population growth and the sex and age structure of the different countries of the Union, and in particular its impact on longevity. To this end, the evolution of life expectancy at birth by sex, which we represent in Figures 2 and 3, will serve to mark both the different stages and the comparison of different countries by geographical area, in the same way as has been done with fertility. Thus, the European Union average for life expectancy

shows a positive trend from 66 years of life expectancy at birth for men and 71 for women in 1960 to 16 points above that for men in 2022, reaching 77 years, while women reach 83, an improvement of 12 years. The difference between men and women has remained average. However, this average masks much more disparate patterns than those seen in fertility, with, on the one hand, the exceptional improvement in some southern countries, including Spain, and, on the other, the uneven evolution of the countries of the former communist bloc.

Total EU

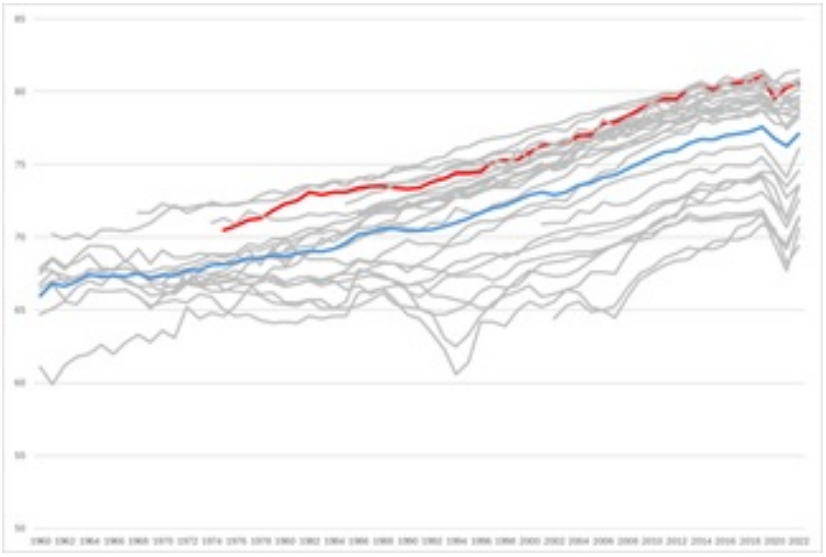
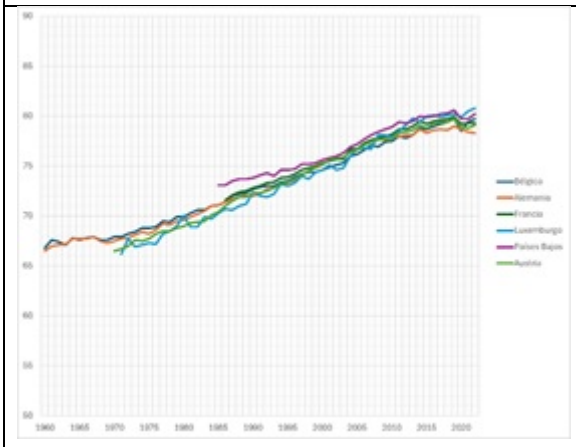
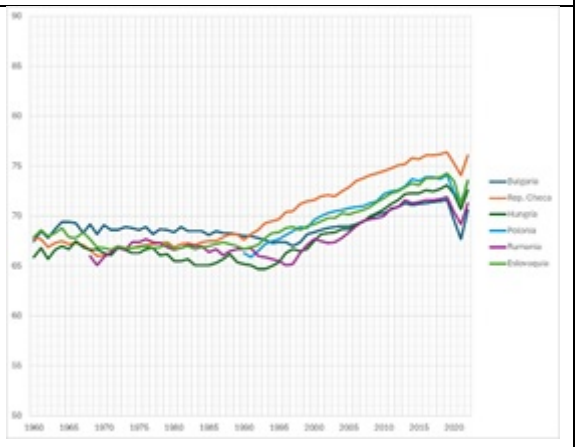
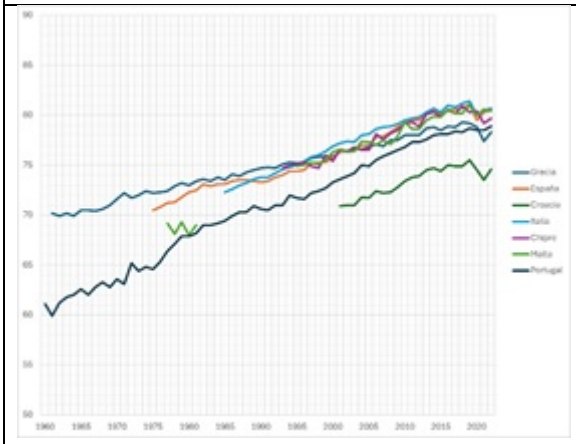
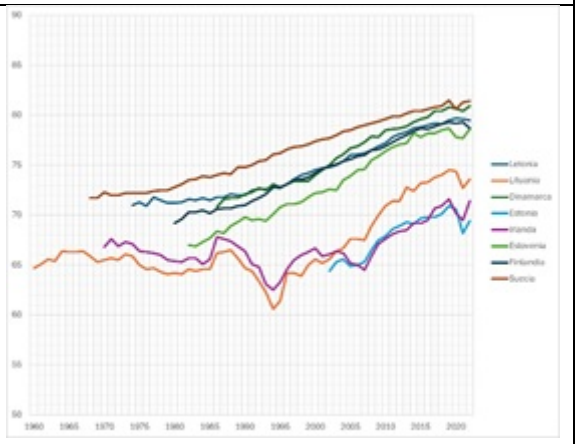


Figure 2. Evolution of life expectancy for men in European Union countries, Total and major regions, 1960-2022. Source: CED compilation, Life expectancy by age and sex [demo_mlexpec__custom_14911357]. [Consultation: 4 December 2024]. Eurostat

WEST	EAST
	
SOUTH	**NORTH**
	

Total EU

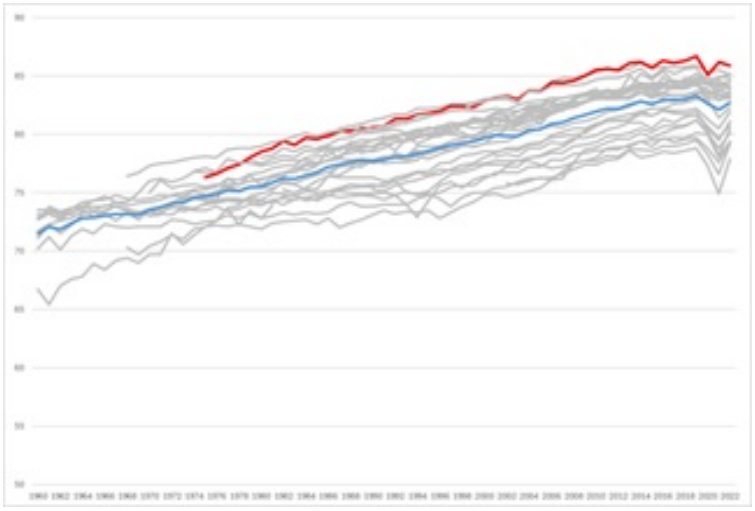
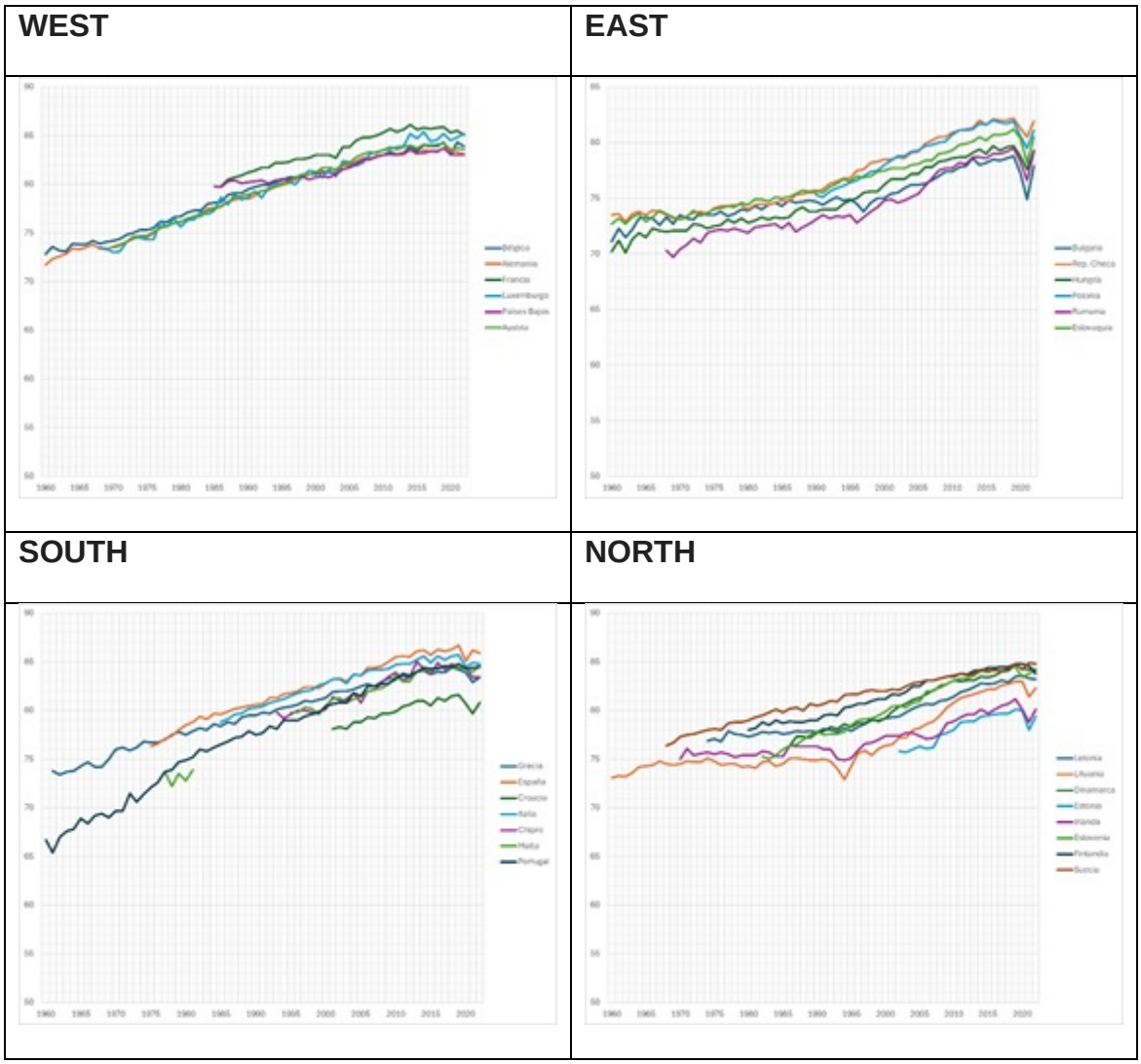


Figure 3. Evolution of life expectancy for women in European Union countries, total and major regions, 1960-2022. Source: CED compilation, Life expectancy by age and sex [demo_mlexpec__custom_14911357]. [Consulted: 4 December 2024]. Eurostat



Overall, Spain stands out for its privileged position, boasting the best results in the last year for both sexes, with 80.5 years for men and 85.9 years for women, which is 3.4 years above the EU average in the last year for men and 3.19 years for women. This means that both men and women have gained more than twenty years of life since the 1960s. This takes into account the temporary decline and its consequences in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic on life expectancy, which, although it did not reach one year for the average of the countries in the Union, in the case of Spain meant a decline of 1.6 years, reaching the lowest level in the EU.

As we have anticipated, what is most striking about the evolution of mortality is the different chronology of the countries of the former communist bloc , noticeable due to the shock represented by the collapse of the socialist regimes, which for some countries still mark a disadvantage in life expectancy today. Thus, while the data recorded in 1960 for some countries were comparable to the best among the capitalist bloc countries, with 67.9 years for men and 72.2 years for Slovak women, while Belgians stood at 66.8 and 72.8 respectively, well above the levels of southern countries such as Portugal, with 61.1 for men and 66.7 years for women. However, this initial advantage is lost because improvements are much slower than in other European countries, or are even marked by setbacks, as in the case of Lithuania, which will go from 66.5 years for women in 1988 to a minimum of 63.9 in 1998, widening the gap between them and placing them at the bottom of the ranking for both men and women in 2022, always below the European average, which in the case of Estonia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria does not exceed 80 years for women, while men are below 73.

The components of population growth: natural increase and migration

The first thing to bear in mind, when referring to the population of the European Union, is that the main factor in its growth between 1986, coinciding with the entry of Spain and Portugal, when the Union had 322.8 million inhabitants, and 2024, when it has reached 449 million, has not been due to demographic trends, but rather to the accession of new members. There were clear growth spurts in 1991 with German reunification, in 1996 with the accession of Austria, Finland and Sweden, in 2005 with the integration of most of the Eastern European countries — the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, as well as Cyprus — in 2007 with the incorporation of Romania and Bulgaria, and to a lesser extent in 2014 with the accession of Croatia, but also the loss of 67 million with the effective departure of the United Kingdom on 31 December 2020.

To represent the evolution of natural growth —that is, the difference between births and deaths— and migratory growth —the difference between immigration and emigration— in total population growth, which appears in figure 5 for natural growth and in figure 6 for migratory growth, we have decided first to focus only on the evolution of THE 21ST century, and secondly, to divide this evolution into three periods corresponding to the economic

cycle: from 2000 to 2007, with the first migration boom in southern countries such as Spain; from 2008 to 2013, coinciding with the negative cycle of the Great Recession; and, finally, from 2014 to the present, including the hiatus caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first thing that stands out is that in the last period from 2014 to 2024, 17 of the 28 countries in the European Union will have negative natural growth, including Spain, dragging down the European average. This negative natural growth is due both to the reduction in births as a result of very low fertility rates and to the increase in deaths due to the growing proportion of elderly people, which is a result of population ageing. On the other hand, Ireland and France, apart from Cyprus and Luxembourg, are at the forefront of natural growth in the three periods thanks to their birth rates. Meanwhile, the countries of Eastern and Southern Europe, with higher levels of ageing and low birth rates, are the ones with the worst developments, especially in the last period.

If we look at the migration balance during the same three periods, Spain stands out first during the period of initial economic growth, followed by Ireland and Italy (former countries marked by their tradition of emigration). In the case of Spain, the decline in the second period of economic crisis and its subsequent recovery, but already below other countries with more significant percentage balances, such as Ireland, Austria and Sweden, if we exclude the microstates of Malta and Luxembourg.

We find losses in the countries of the former communist bloc, together with Greece, in almost all the periods observed. Thus, Croatia, Bulgaria, Poland, Latvia and Romania continued to receive fewer people than they expelled. Meanwhile, the growth in the balance has always been below the European average in other countries in the same bloc, such as Hungary and Lithuania, but also France and Italy in the last period.

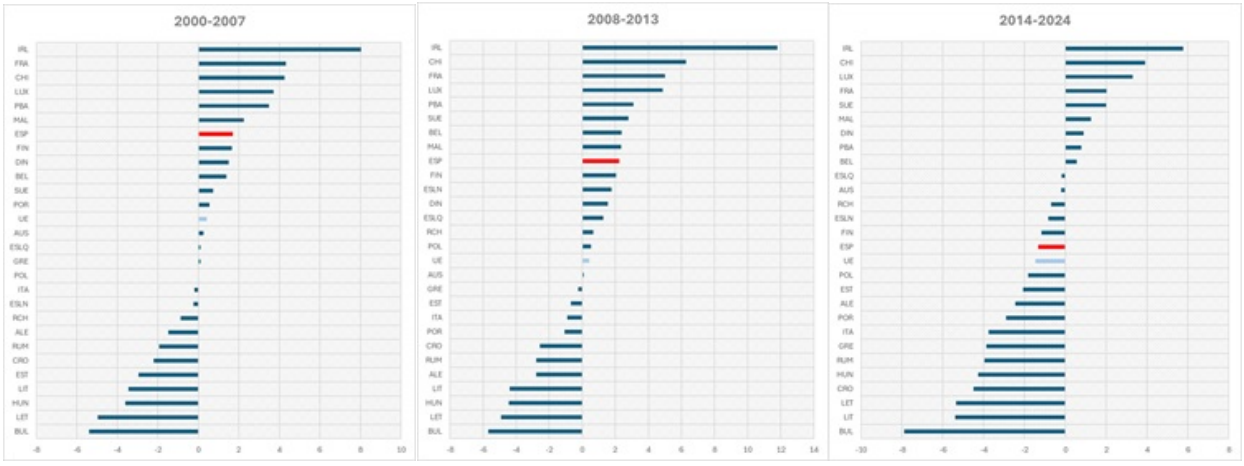


Figure 4: Evolution of natural growth for European Union countries and the total, by periods 2000-2007, 2008-2013 and 2014-24. Source: CED compilation, Population change - Demographic balance and crude rates at national level [demo_gind__custom_14911273]; Last update: 08/11/2024, EUROSTAT.

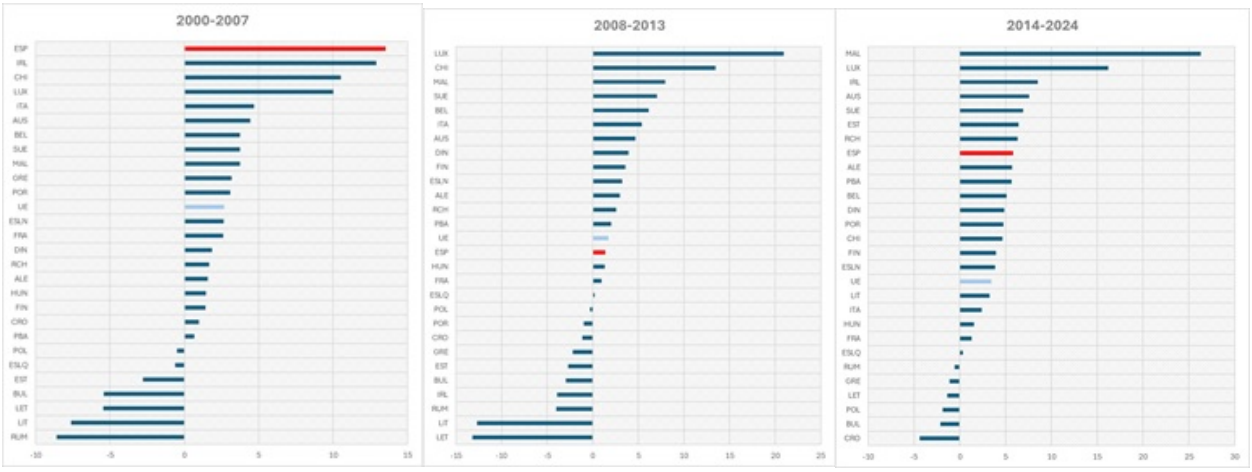
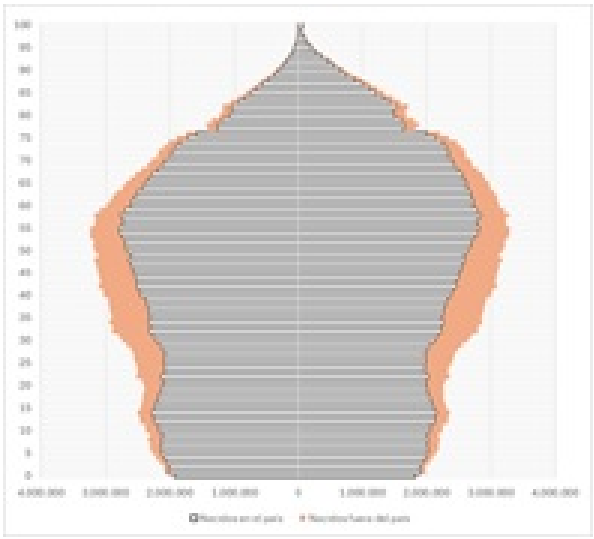


Figure 5: Evolution of migration growth for European Union countries and the total, by period 2000-2007, 2008-2013 and 2014-24.Source: CED compilation, Population change - Demographic balance and crude rates at national level [demo_gind__custom_14911273]; Last update: 08/11/2024, EUROSTAT.

The structure by sex and age of the population of EU countries and the contribution of migrants

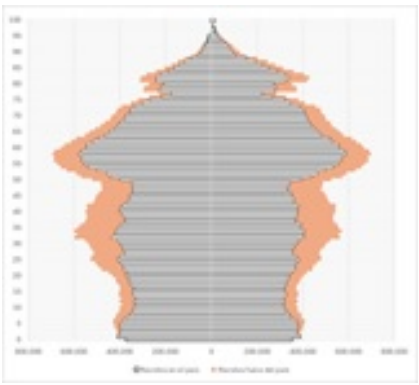
Before going into detail about the heterogeneity of the international migrant populations established in the different countries of the European Union, it is worth taking a look at a comparative view of their population pyramids, taking into account place of birth (within or outside each of the countries considered), for the last year of 2024 (Figure 6).

Total European Union

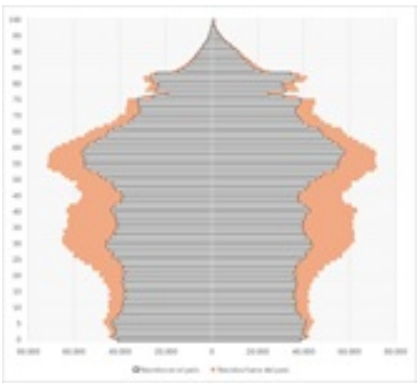


Western Europe

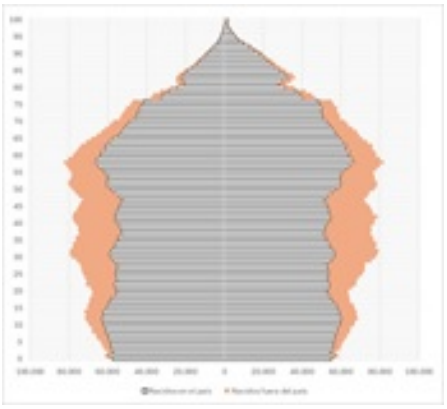
Germany



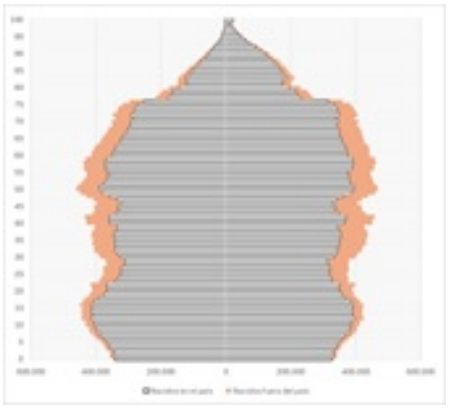
Austria



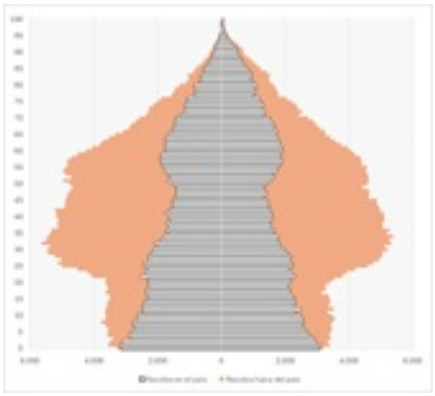
Belgium



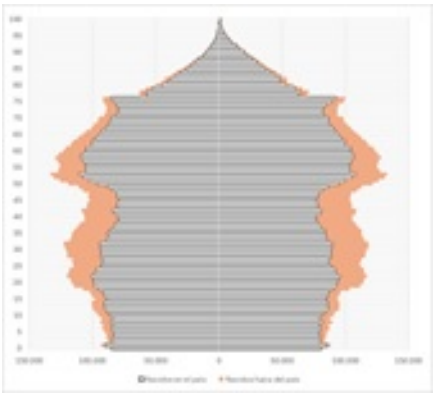
France



Luxembourg

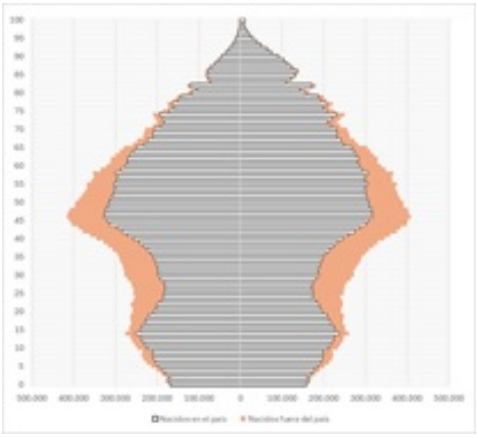


Netherlands

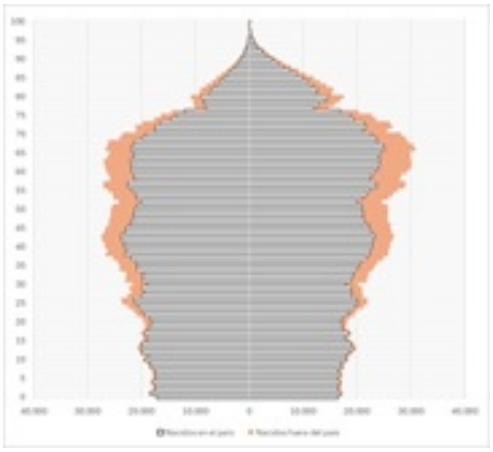


Southern Europe

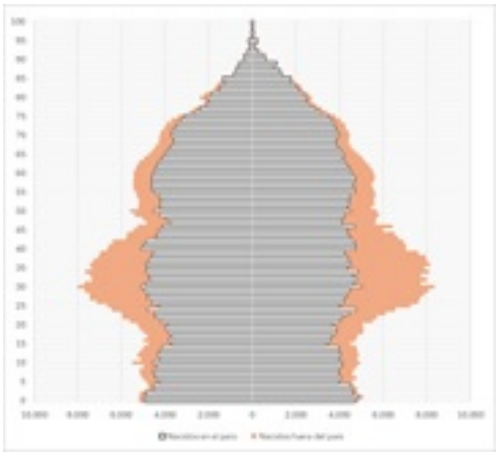
Spain



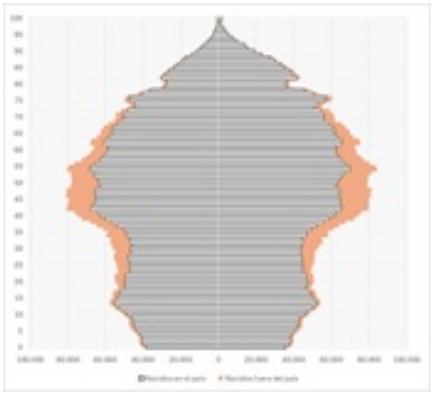
Croatia



Cyprus



Greece



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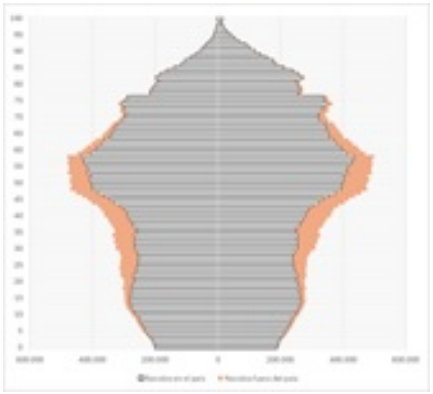

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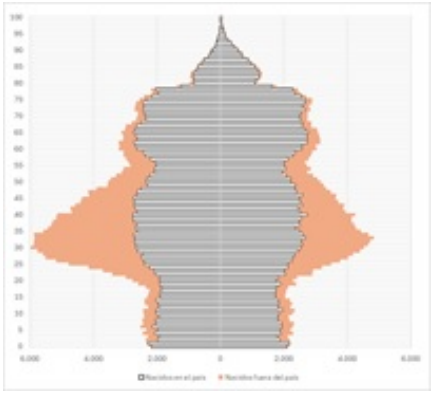

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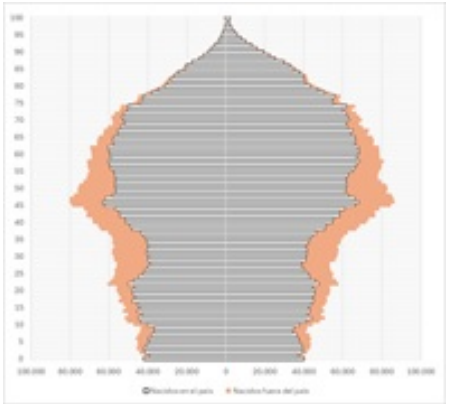
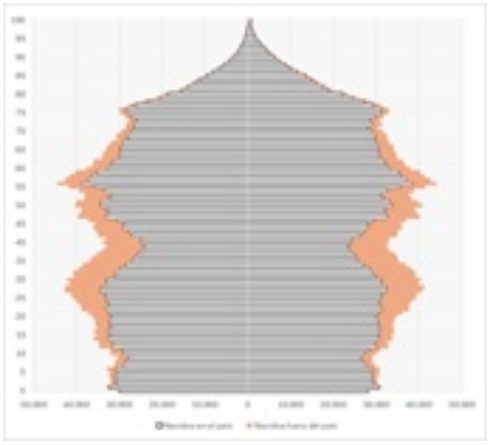


Northern Europe

Denmark



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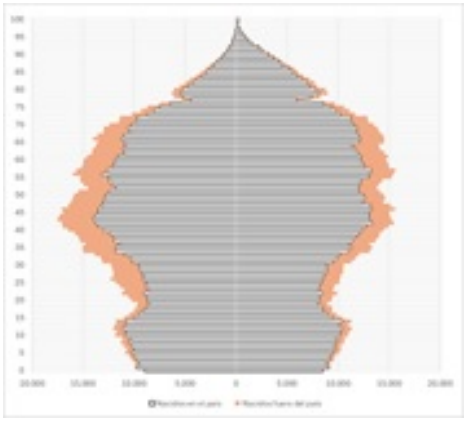
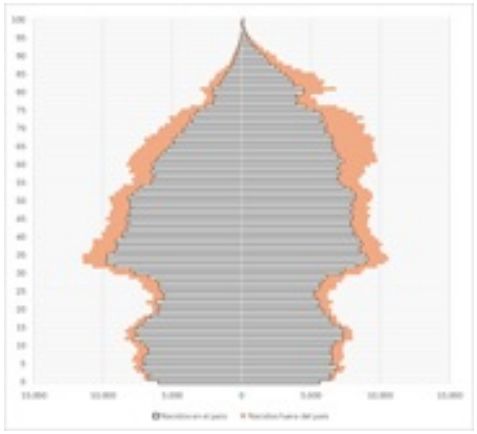


Estonia



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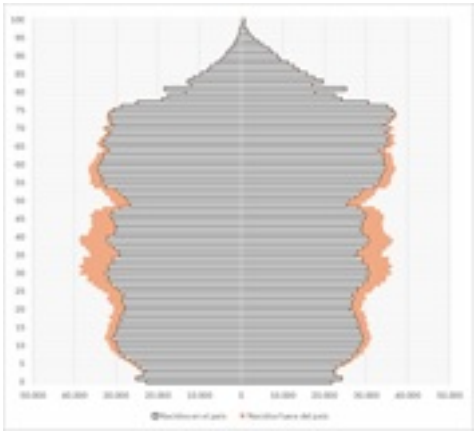

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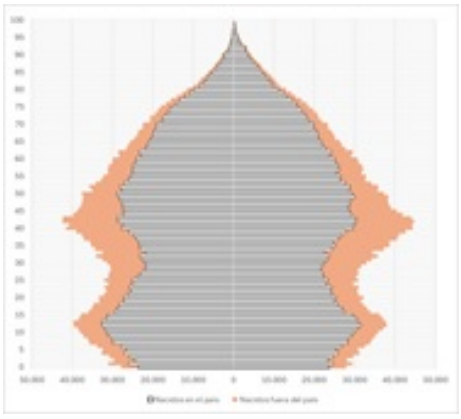

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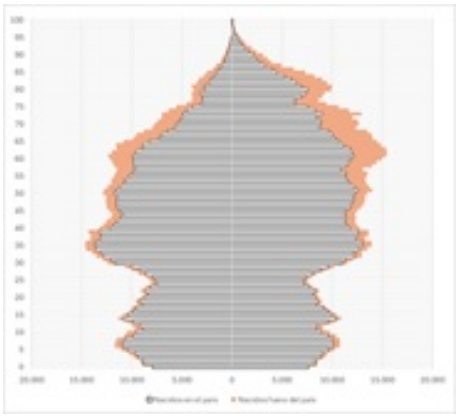

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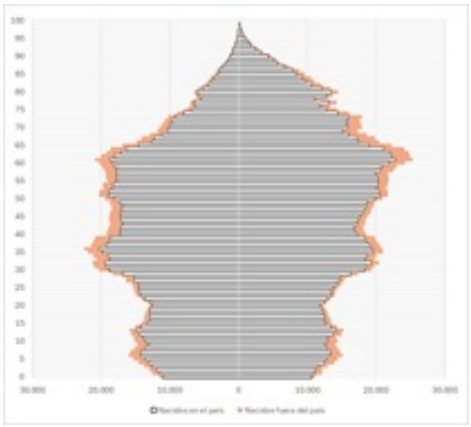
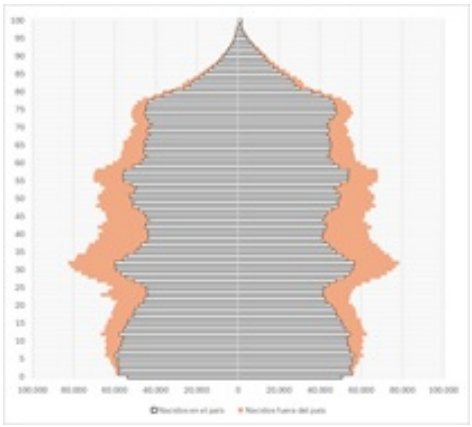
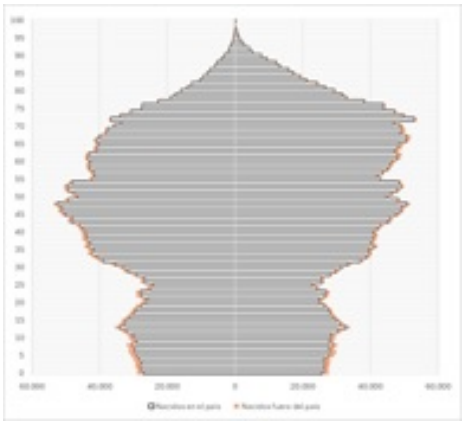


Sweden



Eastern European countries

Bulgaria



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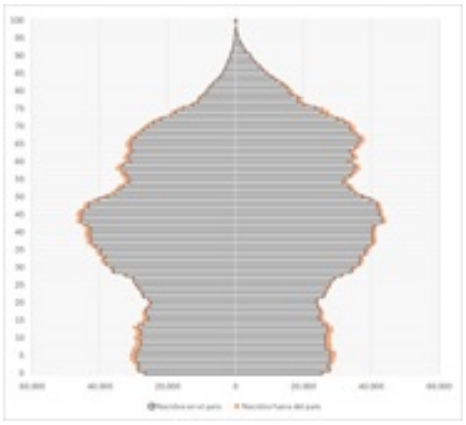
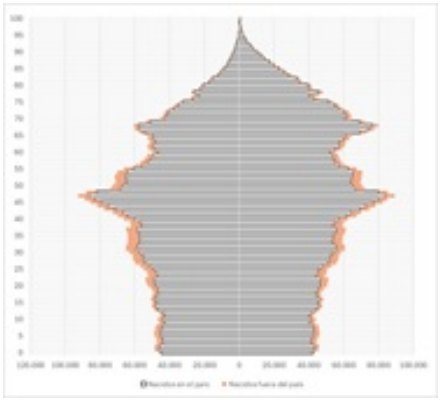
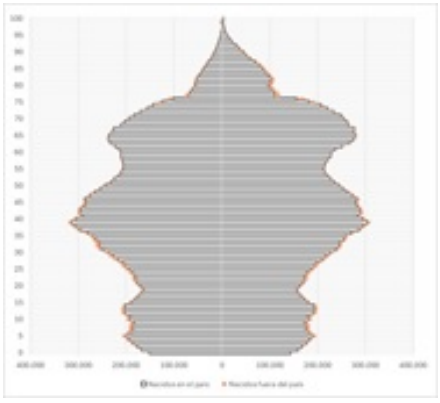


Hungary



Poland



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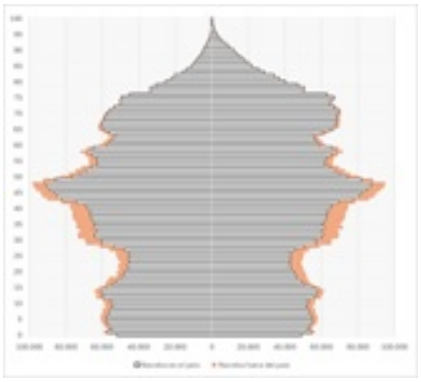

Romania

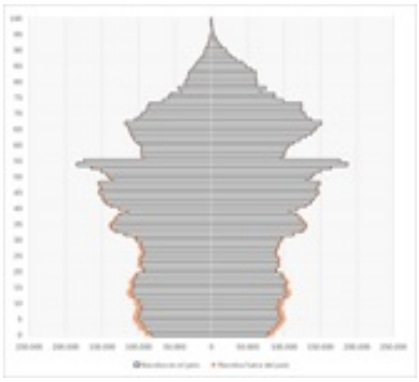

Figure 6: Population pyramids by origin (born in the country and abroad) sorted by large geographical areas, Total European Union and countries, 2022. Source: CED elaboration, Eurostat population data, 2022.

In terms of the age structure itself, all the pyramids share an ageing profile, with no major asymmetries between men and women, beyond the differential mortality for older ages, with the exception of the Baltic republics and other Eastern European countries, where this is much more pronounced. The percentages of people over 64 are therefore high, ranging from 14.88% in Luxembourg to 24% in Italy (Figure 7). While the EU average was 21.32%, Spain was below this, at 20.16%. Spain's intermediate position is due to migration, as with 17.1% of the population born abroad, despite not yet being in the high range of immigrant percentages, it is also above the European average of 13.3% (Figure 7).

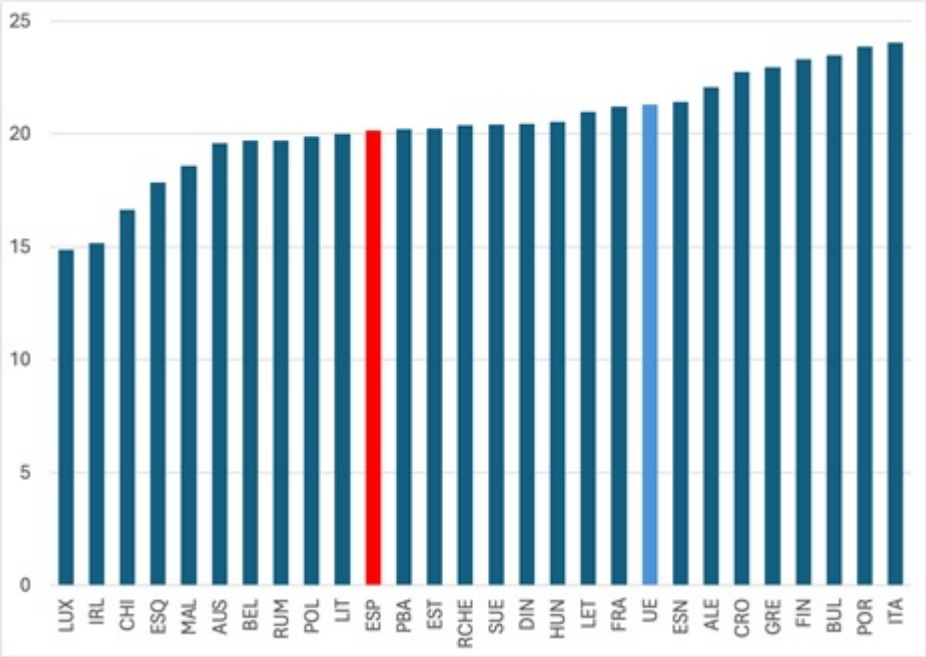

Figure 7: Percentage of people over 64 years of age for European Union countries, 2023.

Source: CED, Eurostat

Each population pyramid summarises the demographic history of each country. We will not dwell on them, but it is worth mentioning, by way of example, the curious shape of the pyramid for Romania, which shows the generational effect of the ban on abortion and contraceptive methods, or the aforementioned Baltic countries and others in Eastern Europe with a deficit of men at the top due to mortality caused by the Second World War and emigration. However, rather than the weight of immigrants in each of the pyramid , which we will analyse in the next section, what interests us here is to examine their distribution by age (or by generation). There are four reasons for this: the first is to observe how the generations corresponding to the *baby boomers* differ from country to country; the second is to note how the size of the generation is not directly related to any pull factor for migrants, especially in the case of Spain, where its late *baby boom* coincided with the first great wave of international migration, thus refuting the demographic determinism of the "replacement migration" theory, which assumes that the arrival of migrants is due to a shortage of young people entering the labour market caused by low fertility; Thirdly, despite the above, the coincidence of migration with empty generations means that the relative weight of migrants is very significant. Finally, fourthly, among immigrants to some countries there are clear gender biases, for example in favour of men in the case of Malta.

Growth and heterogeneity of migration flows and immigrant populations in the EU

In the statement of the theory of the second demographic transition, migration itself was almost ignored—as had already happened with the theory of demographic transition—and limited to pointing out how improvements and reductions in the cost of transport favoured the growth of migratory movements (Kaa, 1994). This is understandable, given that the acceleration of migratory flows occurred in the late 1990s, becoming apparent in the first decades of THE 21ST century until the Great Recession of 2008, with Spain also playing a notable role in this revival of migratory flows.

With economic globalisation, there are three main factors that explain the migration *boom* of the new millennium: first, the demand of the labour market — progressively segmented, where migrants were added to the secondary segment comprising the most precarious sectors, with lower skill levels, as already observed by economist Michel Piore (1979) —; secondly, the specific demand for reproductive work—once outsourced from European families, particularly acute in countries such as Spain with a low level of welfare and a rapidly ageing population—which would give rise to what has been called 'global care chains' (Hochschild, 2001); and, thirdly, the increase in cycles of expulsion in countries within the world system, leading to forced emigration and an increase in the number of people seeking refuge (Sassen, 2015).

Since the 1990s, migration flows to the European Union have almost quadrupled, from 1.75 million in 1990 to 6.9 million in 2022. Apart from the accession of new members, which could turn former international migrations into internal (inter-community) migrations, the evolution of these flows is a barometer of global conflict. It is for this reason that we have included asylum applications in Figure 8. The peak in 1991 reflects the confluence of the Balkan crisis and, in 2001 the refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan, up to the crisis of 2015 led by Syrian refugees, or the rise in 2018 where Venezuelans stand out, or the latest in 2022 with the invasion of Ukraine, partly responsible for the jump recorded in the last year, together with the rebound effect of COVID-19.

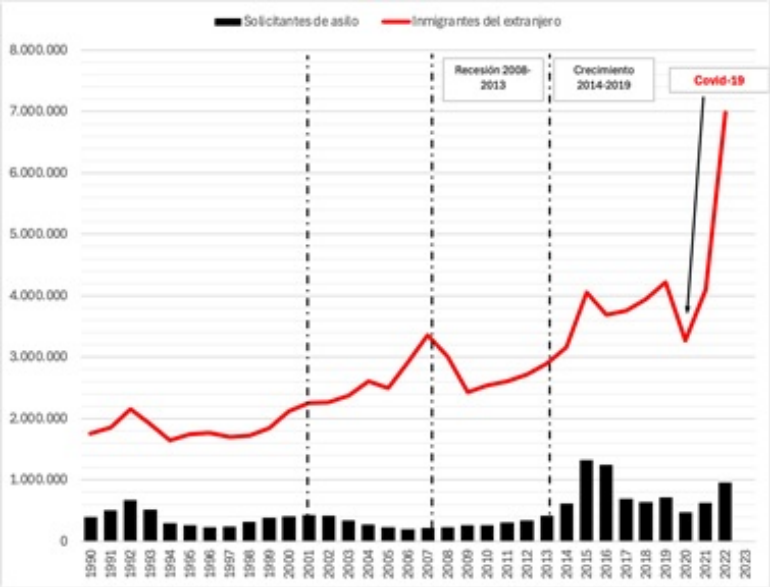

Figure 8: International migration flows to the European Union and asylum applications 1990-2022. Source: CED, based on Eurostat data

It is important to note that not only are the levels of immigration and, consequently, the immigrant population residing in each of the European countries very different, but so are the socio-demographic characteristics, origins and motivations of these migrations, together with their legal status and integration into the host society. This can be seen in Figure 10 at , which shows the percentage of the population born abroad and the foreign population for each of the countries in the Union. Unsurprisingly, Luxembourg, given its status as a microstate and its strategic location within the EU, is the country with the highest percentage of both foreign-born people, with just over half of immigrant residents (50.4%), and foreigners (47.4%), followed by Malta and Cyprus. The first thing that may strike us is how the countries of the former Soviet bloc, which today defend more anti-immigration positions, are precisely those with the lowest percentages —remember that some of them also have negative values for migratory growth— Poland has a mere 2.5% of immigrants and 1.2% of foreigners, Hungary only 6.7% of people born outside the country and 2.4% of foreigners, far removed from countries such as Austria with 21.6% of immigrants and 19% of foreigners. It is also worth noting the difference that sometimes exists between the status of immigrant and that of foreigner in some countries, for example, the cases of Croatia and Sweden, the former with 12.7% immigrants and 1.8% foreigners, and the latter with 20.4% immigrants and only 8% foreigners. More than the

time of arrival, which also has an influence, it is worth considering the importance of asylum in some countries such as Sweden.

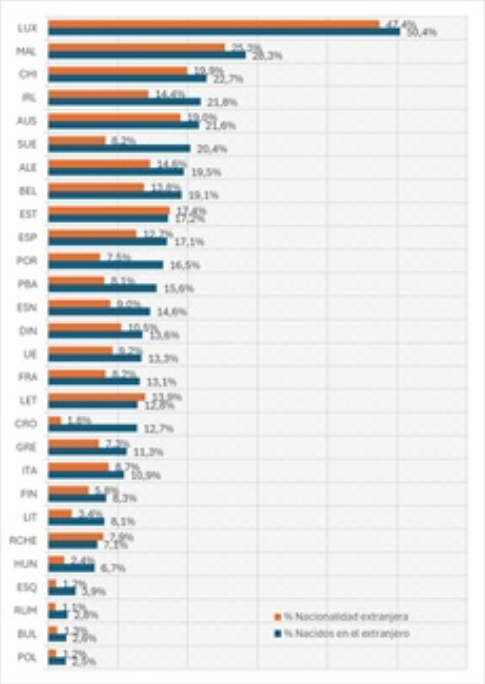

Figure 9: Percentage of foreign-born population and foreign population in European Union countries, 2023. *Source: CED, EUROSTAT.*

These differences can be intuited from the varied composition of migrants by origin, which is another of the major disparities between European Union countries (Figure 11). Thus, despite the lack of information for Greece and Ireland, it is significant that, for the EU as a whole, one third of the immigrant population in the European Union corresponds to intra-Community movements, with 33.1% originating from one EU country and living in another, and 37.7% born in another European country, while those born in Asia represent 13%, in Africa 9.65%, and in America 6.37%. Although in most countries Europeans (both EU and non-EU) continue to occupy first or second place, in northern and central European countries the reception of refugees has been a historical constant, challenged by the 2015 refugee crisis, with a significant proportion of Asians. In new immigration countries such as those in southern Europe, we find flows of migrants, mainly workers, who in the case of Spain and Portugal have had a very significant presence from the former colonies, Brazil and Africa in the case of Portugal, and Latin America in the case of Spain. Italy has selected its migration by prioritising countries that were formerly

recipients of Italian migration, together with new Moroccan, Albanian and Indian migration. Finally, in Eastern European countries, migration from the rest of Europe predominates.

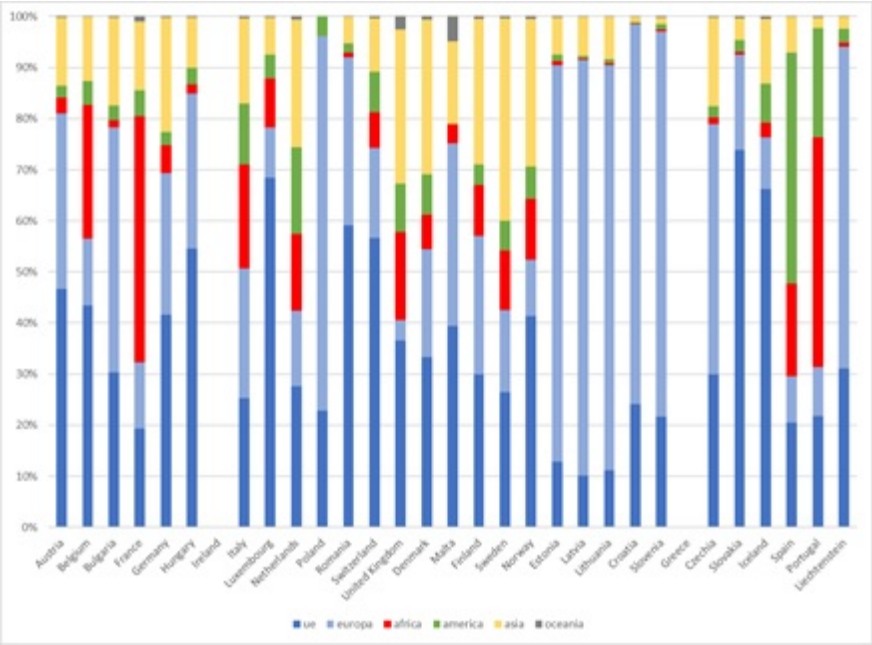

Figure 10: Percentage distribution of the origin of international migrants by major continental groups in European Union countries, 2023. *Source: CED, Eurostat*

The process of building European immigration and asylum policy and the predominance of Member States

The different migration histories of the European Union countries explain the difficulties in advancing the construction of a European immigration and asylum policy. In addition to formal issues—the defence of state powers—and political issues—partisan constructions of otherness—the impact of the timing and intensity of demographic transformation processes must also be taken into account in order to better understand the predominance of the voices of Member States in half a century of European migration and asylum policy.

In 1999, the Treaty of Amsterdam nominally established the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (AFSJ) in the European Union, covering areas such as judicial cooperation in civil and criminal matters, police cooperation and border control, asylum and immigration policies. The AFSJ was further strengthened with the entry into force of the

Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, and its development in the area of immigration and asylum is closely linked to the Schengen Agreement, through which the signatory states abolished controls at their internal borders. This created an immediate need to apply common rules for the management and control of external borders, including visa regulations. Thus, immigration and asylum policies have acquired strategic relevance and become a politically sensitive area (Mitsilegas *et al*., 2003), where Member States have shown a high degree of political contestation (Trauner and Ripoll, 2016).

The process of building European immigration and asylum policy

The Tampere European Council (1999) established four key pillars for immigration and asylum policy: cooperation with countries of origin, a common asylum system, fair treatment of third-country nationals through integration policies, and management of migration flows, addressing both legal entry routes and the fight against irregular immigration. However, the process faced obstacles, such as resistance from Member States to cede powers, the fragmentation of migration policy, the institutional particularities of the EU (where Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom had specific clauses limiting their participation in migration cooperation in the first case, and in Schengen in the other two) and the impact of the 9/11 attacks, which refocused European priorities on security (Carrera and Geyer, 2007). In this context of new political and institutional challenges, two new work agendas were defined to strengthen the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice: the Hague Programme (2005-2009) and the Stockholm Programme (2010-2014). Both marked the evolution of European migration policy, consolidating progress and, at the same time, reflecting the tensions between the supranational approach and intergovernmental dynamics.

The Hague Programme (2005-2009) consolidated the ELSJ with a more structured proposal than Tampere. It focused on migration management from a comprehensive perspective, covering the causes of migration flows, admission and return, and integration instruments. Its priorities included the creation of a common asylum area, balanced migration management, the integration of third-country nationals and the development of a common border policy. Within this framework, financial instruments such as the External Borders Fund, the Return Fund and the Integration Fund were established. The role of

FRONTEX in coordinating the management of the EU's external borders was also consolidated (Leonard, 2009), and the external dimension of migration policy was emphasised, promoting cooperation with countries of origin and transit.

For its part, the Stockholm Programme (2010-2014) was adopted in a context of economic crisis and with even greater resistance from Member States to cede sovereignty in migration and border management. The programme emphasised the economic dimension of migration, addressing the demographic needs of the EU and promoting the attraction of talent. However, tensions between supranational and intergovernmental logic limited its impact on the development of a more ambitious common policy (Goig, 2017; Pinyol-Jiménez, 2018). In this regard, while The Hague sought to consolidate the common immigration and asylum policy with a comprehensive approach, Stockholm reflected a retreat towards more controlled and restrictive approaches, in a context of crisis and growing political pressure in Member States. The Stockholm Programme coincided with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, which marked a new turning point in the European Union's immigration and asylum policy. This treaty redefined the institutional framework, giving greater decision-making power to the European Parliament and establishing migration management as a shared competence between the EU and Member States. However, it was the emergence of external events that transformed the European migration agenda. The Arab Spring of 2011 caused significant population movements, especially towards the Italian coast, prompting the EU to rethink its migration strategy. In this context, the external dimension of immigration and asylum policy was strengthened with the development of the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM), which consolidated cooperation with Mediterranean countries through mobility and border control agreements (Pinyol-Jiménez, 2012; Emiliani, 2016).

Despite these efforts, the EU failed to establish an effective mechanism for managing large-scale migration crises. This fragility was highlighted by the 2015 asylum crisis, when the significant arrival of refugees, mainly from Syria, exposed the limitations of the intergovernmental cooperation approach (Geddes and Hadj-Abdou, 2018). These factors—the new institutional framework of the Treaty of Lisbon, the external dimension of the policy, and the migration crises of 2011 and 2015—explain the shift in the EU's strategy and the adoption of a new working agenda focused on crisis management and

with a short-term view, prioritising border control, the externalisation of migration management and the containment of flows in third countries.

The European Agenda on Migration (EAM), presented in 2015, emerged in this context of humanitarian, institutional and political crisis in the EU, marked by the war in Syria, instability in Libya and growing migratory pressure in the Mediterranean, motivated more by political than demographic causes. With the EMN, the European Commission presented emergency measures such as the strengthening of maritime rescue operations, the fight against human trafficking networks and the creation of relocation mechanisms to share the burden among Member States. In addition, *hotspots* were established as centres for registering and screening migrants in countries of first entry, reinforcing a logic of containment rather than protection (Léonard and Kaunert, 2020). At the structural level, the EMN took up elements of Tampere, highlighting the need to implement the European Asylum System, reform the Blue Card and strengthen cooperation with countries of origin and transit. However, its approach prioritised border control and the externalisation of migration management over the creation of regular channels and integration policies. The implementation of the relocation mechanism failed due to the refusal of several Member States to participate, highlighting the lack of solidarity and coordination within the EU (Gortázar and Santos, 2020).

Ultimately, the EMAP proved to be a reactive and minimalist instrument. Its restrictive approach consolidated the *securitisation* of migration and the fragmentation of European policies, weakening the principles of solidarity and shared responsibility. This failure paved the way for the European Pact on Migration and Asylum (EPMA).

Presented in September 2020, the MAP attempted to correct the shortcomings of the EMF, but failed to resolve the political tensions and lack of solidarity among Member States that had marked EU migration policy (Bruycker, 2019). Structured around three pillars (external dimension, reinforced border control and restructuring of internal solidarity rules), the MAP maintains the EU's restrictive approach, with measures such as the pre-entry assessment system, a solidarity mechanism for returns and migration conditionality in relations with third countries (Wessels, 2021). The AMP generated tensions among Member States: on the one hand, border countries pointed to the lack of balance in the distribution of responsibilities (Carrera, 2020), while on the other, Hungary

and Poland opposed moving forward with common rules. In fact, the AMAP was not approved until 2024, when the European Parliament and the Council gave the green light to the five main regulations that comprise it. Approval in the Council was not unanimous, as the Visegrad Group countries opposed (or abstained from) the agreement, with very harsh rhetoric against immigration that is not present in their territories (see Figure 5). This lack of consensus reflects the persistence of deep divisions among Member States over immigration management and solidarity within the bloc, confirming that migration policy remains one of the most fragmented areas of European governance.

Some challenges for the European Union's immigration and asylum policy

Since the Tampere European Council in 1999, the European Union has been working to build a European immigration and asylum policy. However, the development of this policy has been marked by the persistence of the intergovernmental principle, which has limited the transfer of powers by Member States and hampered joint decision-making (Geddes, 2008; Trauner and Ripoll, 2016). Furthermore, the separation between the management of legal immigration and the fight against irregular immigration has led to fragmented and uneven regulatory development, with more restrictive and slow-to-implement rules regarding legal immigration (Goig, 2017).

The lack of solidarity among Member States, particularly evident after the 2015 crisis, has been and continues to be another challenge for this common migration policy. The gap between the northern and southern countries of the EU, traditionally differentiated by their exposure to migration flows, has been accompanied by an east-west divide, with the Visegrad Group countries opposing the fair sharing of responsibilities in the area of asylum (Lehne, 2019). This lack of cooperation has hampered the implementation of mechanisms for distributing asylum seekers and has led the European Commission to highlight the urgent need to rebuild trust between Member States (European Commission, 2015). Similarly, the external dimension of migration policy has focused on outsourcing border control and making development cooperation conditional on migration collaboration.

Finally, the *securitisation* of immigration has shaped the European agenda, with a focus on policing and border management rather than integration and respect for human rights

(Lavenex and Kunz, 2008). This approach has reinforced the security perspective in migration decision-making (minimising the role of social and economic actors) and the development of strategies such as the strengthening of FRONTEX and readmission agreements with third countries. Furthermore, this control and security perspective does not provide legal channels of access and affects the protection of the rights of migrants and refugees, issues that impact the objectives and democratic quality of immigration and asylum policies.

The politicisation of the demographic debate and the securitisation of migration governance

The politicisation of a phenomenon such as demography or immigration involves its transformation into a central topic of public debate and a focus of political confrontation (Hampshire, 2013). This process occurs when different actors, from political parties to the media and civil society organisations, articulate discourses that present immigration not only as a social or economic phenomenon, but as a problem or an opportunity that requires specific responses (Scholten, 2011; de Wilde, 2019). Politicisation also involves a significant reconfiguration of social perceptions of the politicised issue, leaving aside explanatory structural factors to focus on those that support the narrative of politicisation.

In recent decades, the politicisation of demography has transformed the debate on population dynamics into a field of ideological dispute, where demographic data and trends are no longer interpreted exclusively from a technical perspective but have become tools for political legitimisation. In this process, certain elements, such as population ageing, migration and fertility, are reconfigured within discourses that reinforce narratives of crisis, threat or national identity. As a result, the structural factors that explain demographic changes may be relegated in favour of interpretations that respond to political objectives (Bourbeau, 2011; Geddes and Scholten, 2016), generating normative responses based on perceptions rather than rigorous empirical analysis.

The politicisation of immigration is not a neutral process, as it involves the selection of certain interpretative frameworks that can generate support or rejection of migrants and the policies that affect them (Boswell, 2003; Lahav and Messina, 2005). In some cases, immigration is presented as an opportunity that can strengthen economic development,

contribute to the sustainability of welfare systems, or enrich cultural diversity (Ruhs and Martin, 2008). In others, it is used as a factor of social division, linking it to problems such as insecurity, competition for public resources or the loss of national identity (Mudde, 2007; Brubaker, 2017). These narratives can have direct consequences on public policy, influencing the direction of migration reforms, access to rights, and social perceptions of human mobility (Triandafyllidou, 2018).

The level of politicisation of immigration varies according to the context and circumstances of each society. In times of economic crisis or social transformation, immigration tends to become more prominent on the political agenda, becoming a central issue in election campaigns and the subject of polarised discourse (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). Furthermore, the role of the media is key in this process, as it amplifies certain discourses and contributes to the construction of images of migrants (Eberl *et al*., 2018).

In the European context, the politicisation of immigration has been driven mainly by nationalist, Eurosceptic and nativist parties, which have used migration as a scapegoat to channel social discontent and justify restrictive measures. Through alarmist rhetoric, they have managed to frame immigration as a permanent crisis, even at times when the figures do not support the alleged emergency. This has had two key aspects: on the one hand, the politicisation of demography and, on the other, the *securitisation* of immigration.

Politicised demographics as part of the European debate

Since the very constitution of the European common market, the free movement of people, together with that of capital and goods, has been contingent on the configuration of an ideal labour market for the Union as a whole, in constant tension with the actual flows that would occur and the changes experienced by the member countries. Take Spain, for example, along with the rest of the southern European countries, which, as they became integrated, were transformed into immigrant countries, breaking with their centuries-old tradition of emigration (Izquierdo and Muñoz, 1989). The same could be said of the Eastern European countries, in view of the effects of German reunification in 1989 and the enlargement of the EU with the gradual integration of the countries of the former Communist bloc. At the beginning of the new millennium, the attacks of 2001 caused the balance of migration control policy to shift towards an approach that prioritised

security, sacrificing a more inclusive vision from a human rights perspective (Lucas, 2009; and 2012). This was without prejudice to the discussion that had already begun at the United Nations (2001) on the subsidiary role of migration in counteracting population ageing and ensuring the sustainability of the pension system. The Great Recession of 2008, which precipitated the death knell for multiculturalist policies in 2011 (Chin, 2017), and the refugee crisis of 2015, would once again raise the need for a more inclusive common policy, defined as "safe and orderly" in line with the United Nations (2018), but which at the same time would better define the position of migrants in European societies. Following the United Kingdom's departure from the Union in 2019 —with migration from the EU playing a very important role in the arguments in favour of Brexit— the growing political polarisation within the European Union, marked by the rise of far-right and nationalist parties and right-wing populist parties that are openly anti-immigration, has also placed migration policy at the centre of the political debate on the European Union and its very viability.

The politicisation of immigration has been closely linked to demographic debates in Europe. With an ageing population, declining birth rates and the impact on welfare systems and the labour market, migration has become a central issue in the political strategies of different actors. While some defend immigration as a key tool for filling labour shortages and ensuring the sustainability of pensions, others present it as a factor putting pressure on public resources and access to essential services, generating debates around redistribution and social balance. However, beyond the empirical data showing the contribution of migrants to economic growth and the labour market (OECD, 2019; Milanovic, 2018), immigration has been used as a framework for ideological confrontation. While some political parties argue that Europe's future depends on more open and planned management of migration flows, others insist on models of closure and autarky, without offering viable alternatives to the demographic challenges facing the continent. The lack of a solid consensus has led to fragmented policies and contradictory responses, with immigration being presented both as a structural necessity and a threat to social cohesion, depending on the political approach adopted.

The first fracture in this regard seemed to divide the countries of Eastern Europe from the rest, fearful of the ethnic replacement of their populations (Krastev, 2023) and that both their traditions and democracy would be threatened by the change in the composition of

the electorate due to migration, with an irreversible marginalisation of the native population due to its demographic decline. This phantasmal perception was exacerbated by the identification of migrants with the undemocratic countries or anti-Western or anti-liberal values from which they came. It is in this context that we can explain, for example, the creation in 2019 of the European vice-presidency for 'Democracy and Demography', with the implicit aim of counteracting the use that regressive discourses were making of a pseudo-demographic narrative, in which declining fertility was interpreted as 'demographic suicide', ageing and population decline were interpreted as political decadence, in the popular and metaphor of the 'demographic winter', and migration as the 'great replacement' (Domingo, 2023). To these topics could be added the impact of rural depopulation on social cohesion and territorial balance, referring to a 'demographic desert', although these have been resolved by appealing to 'demographic suicide'. What until 2020 seemed an eccentricity of Eastern European countries – characterised precisely by their low proportion of immigrants – and of some small groups on the far right and supporters of conspiracy theories, has skyrocketed since 2022, contaminating most of the countries of the Union and threatening the adoption of increasingly restrictive policies on migration, with obvious repercussions on the democratic quality of the different countries of the European Union.

The process of securitisation of immigration

With regard to the *securitisation* of immigration and asylum, it should be understood that this does not happen automatically, but requires a prior process of politicisation. In terms of *securitisation* theory (Buzan *et al.*, 1998), for a social phenomenon to be considered a threat to security, it must first be constructed in the discursive sphere as a high-priority political problem. In the case of immigration, this process has manifested itself in public debates, institutional discourses and the formulation of migration policies that have emphasised the need for control and surveillance at borders. The politicisation of immigration has led to the consolidation of the *security* discourse, which, in many cases, has reduced the scope for alternative approaches based on integration or regulated mobility, reinforcing a view of immigration as a challenge to the stability and internal order of the EU (Léonard, 2010). A clear example of this phenomenon is the contradiction

highlighted by the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs when presenting the New Pact on Migration and Asylum in 2020: although she criticised the media for focusing on the 142,000 attempts at irregular entry in 2019 rather than on the three million initial permits granted, the document she presented reinforced the narrative of border control and the fight against irregular immigration, relegating legal entry routes to the background. This shows how the political and media framework is dominated by a security-focused view, where immigration is seen as a threat that must be contained, rather than a phenomenon to be managed in a comprehensive manner (Pinyol-Jiménez, 2018).

Even more interesting is the fact that the countries that have most strongly expressed their opposition to migration and to the development of a common European immigration and asylum policy are those in Eastern Europe. As confirmed by the figures presented (see especially section 2.3 of this chapter), the countries with the smallest non-EU foreign populations are countries such as Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, which have been very aggressive in their anti-immigration rhetoric, always pointing to the risk of immigration as a threat to cultural identity.

The *securitisation* process is complete when exceptional measures are adopted that would not be tolerated under other circumstances. Over the last decade, this exceptionality has become the norm in migration matters. For example, since 2015, internal border controls have been temporarily reintroduced in several European countries. In 2017, a Council decision pointed to the need to continue these temporary controls "in order to address the serious threat to public order and internal security facing these States [Austria, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway] due to deficiencies in the control of external borders in Greece"[1] . The normalisation of the dismantling (albeit temporary) of Schengen is accompanied by indifference towards refugee detention centres in the European Union. Far from the concern that existed in 2015, today the *hotspot* model no longer deserves media attention, and there is no mention of the failure of the attempt to relocate, among the different Member States, some 160,000 people stranded in these camps. Finally, and more recently, it is worth noting the proposal

[1] See: Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2017/818 of 11 May 2017 establishing a recommendation to extend the temporary internal border controls in exceptional circumstances threatening the overall functioning of the Schengen area.

presented by the European Commission in March 2025 relating to returns[2] . In addition to proposing various actions to improve the return of people in an irregular situation in the European Union, the Commission also proposes to enable the creation of return centres, allowing the return of people to third countries under bilateral or EU agreements. This initiative, which follows the model proposed by Italian Prime Minister Meloni, leader of an extreme right-wing government (Mudde, 2019), confirms the normalisation of the nativist and anti-immigration option in European institutions as well.

This process, as noted in Chapter 3, is not new. The debate on immigration as a risk to European security has been on the table for some time. On the one hand, migration is considered to be a consequence, among other factors, of the lack of security in the countries of origin. But it is migrants, not geopolitical insecurity, who become a risk when they move. On the other hand, (irregular) immigration is presented as a risk to European security, as it is equated with organised crime, human trafficking and drug trafficking. This perception of immigration as a risk justifies the adoption of extraordinary measures that would be unacceptable in another context, reinforcing the logic of *securitisation*. Thus, the circle of *securitisation* is closed: the discourse constructed around immigration as a threat has legitimised the adoption of extraordinary measures.

Finally, *securitisation* not only affects European security, but also the very idea of European identity, as reinforced by discourses originating, although not exclusively, from Eastern European countries. This phenomenon shows how the *securitisation* of migration policy can lead to the construction of the figure of the 'suspicious other', that is, anyone who does not fit into the 'constructed' dominant European identity (Sassen, 2015).

The challenges of a future that is already here and the need to reframe the debates

In recent decades, instead of analysing the real challenges facing these political and economic systems, the dominant discourses have diverted attention towards immigration as the cause of social discontent, the precariousness of the welfare state and the erosion of social cohesion. However, this approach is not only fallacious, but also prevents us

[2] See: *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC*. COM/2025/101 final.

from addressing the underlying problems: the crisis of the capitalist production model and its consequences in terms of inequality, the inability of democracies to manage diversity, and the political disaffection that fuels the rise of anti-liberal movements. Reformulating the terms of the debate means shifting the focus away from immigration as a problem and instead asking about the reasons for social unrest and growing distrust of institutions.

Realities that are already here

Liberal democracies have faced difficulties in managing the growing diversity that characterises their societies. Although the principles of equality and non-discrimination are enshrined in their regulatory frameworks, implementing policies that guarantee social cohesion without eroding the rights of minorities remains a challenge. All too often, diversity has been exploited in the political arena. On the one hand, it has been used to legitimise neoliberal principles of competitiveness, promoting identity politics, blurring inequality and social class, and erecting this diversity as an ethical principle (Vertovec, 2012). On the other hand, it has been presented as a threat to national identity rather than recognised as a social and economic asset (Joppke, 2017). Debates on multiculturalism, assimilationism and integration have oscillated between restrictive approaches and more inclusive proposals, without achieving a clear consensus on how to articulate models of coexistence that avoid both segregation and cultural imposition. In this context, the inability of liberal democracies to address the management of diversity has generated tensions that have been exploited by populist and nativist movements, which present immigration and cultural pluralism as factors of social fragmentation (Mudde, 2019).

The challenge of diversity is not only a cultural issue, but also a political and institutional one. The lack of representation of minorities in positions of power, structural discrimination and the persistence of inequalities based on ethnic origin or religion undermine the credibility of liberal democracies in their commitment to equality. Instead of viewing this challenge as an opportunity to strengthen democracy and its principles, many policies have oscillated between rendering differences invisible and imposing models of integration that sometimes reinforce social exclusion (Kymlicka, 2015).

On the other hand, it is also clear that the welfare state, which in the 20TH century was the cornerstone of the social contract in liberal democracies, is undergoing a structural crisis that has been intensified by globalisation, population ageing and changes in labour markets. Neoliberal reforms have transformed social protection systems, prioritising the containment of public spending and the promotion of individual responsibility to the detriment of collective solidarity (Streeck, 2014). This process has led to a progressive weakening of the mechanisms of redistribution, increasing the perception of economic insecurity and precariousness, especially among the middle and working classes.

Against this backdrop, immigration has been presented as a factor putting pressure on public services, when in reality the dismantling of the welfare state is a response to political and economic decisions that predate current migration flows (Pierson, 1996). The narrative of the "migration burden" has been used to justify cuts in health, education and social benefits, diverting attention from the real causes of the crisis in the welfare model. This is particularly paradoxical when public systems in countries with high immigration have remained sustainable thanks to the labour and tax contributions of the migrant population (Schierup *et al.*, 2006). However, the association between the welfare crisis and immigration continues to be exploited by political forces seeking to mobilise social unrest through exclusionary rhetoric.

Finally, it should be noted that this deterioration of the welfare state coincides with a deepening of inequalities both globally and within states themselves. The financialisation of the economy, digitalisation and globalisation have generated economic growth concentrated in highly specialised sectors, while large sections of the population have seen their working conditions and purchasing power deteriorate (Piketty, 2014). The gap between capital and labour income has widened significantly, fuelling social discontent and eroding trust in democratic institutions (Streeck, 2014).

One of the most visible effects of this transformation has been the polarisation of the labour market. While the technology and financial sectors have experienced a boom, jobs in manufacturing, agriculture and traditional services have been displaced by automation and offshoring (Rodrik, 2011). This reality has accentuated territorial inequalities, leaving behind regions that depended on traditional industries and now experience high levels of structural unemployment. The inability of governments to redistribute the benefits of

economic growth and mitigate losses in these sectors has been key to the expansion of anti-globalisation and protectionist discourses, often linked to anti-immigration positions. Meanwhile, as has happened in Spain, low value-added, labour-intensive sectors have grown, often precarious, where the immigrant population is concentrated, such as the tourism sector, construction, or intensive agriculture. Precariousness, with the proliferation of informal employment, reduced labour protections and weakened trade unions, has eroded workers' ability to negotiate fair conditions. While the mobility of capital is unlimited, the mobility of workers remains highly restricted, creating asymmetries in access to economic opportunities (Milanovic, 2016).

Refocusing the debates: paradoxes and contradictions of the system

The limit to the EU's growth due to the incorporation of new members and the growing centrifugal danger of Eurosceptic secessionism highlights the need for immigration both for demographic reproduction and for social reproduction in each of the countries of the European Union and as a whole. The apparent paradoxes facing the European Union in demographic terms, and its difficulty in defusing the exploitation of demographics by far-right movements, can, in our view, be found in the contradictions inherent in the economic system itself in terms of population.

We will briefly mention three paradoxes intrinsic to the contradictions of the capitalist order that condition the migration debate: 1) the contradiction between the need for sustained economic and demographic growth and the environment, 2) the contradiction between productive and reproductive work, which, as we have said, is also at the root of the causes of migration, and 3) the contradiction between economic growth and the creation of redundancy, both in demographic terms, i.e. population, and in spatial terms, i.e. territories.

In this sense, one of the key factors behind social unrest is not immigration, but territorial inequality and the decline of certain regions, known as geographies of discontent (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Globalisation has created enormous economic disparities between dynamic urban regions and declining rural or industrial areas. The difficulties of the territories most affected by deindustrialisation and automation have been ignored,

leading to a sense of abandonment that translates into a protest vote against the political *establishment* (Colantone and Stanig, 2018).

This territorial unrest has been exploited by far-right and populist parties, which offer simplistic explanations for the economic crisis, pointing to immigration as responsible for job losses, insecurity and pressure on public services (McCann, 2020). In reality, regional inequalities have much deeper roots in the transformation of the productive model, the dismantling of the welfare state and the lack of investment in territorial development. However, anti-immigration rhetoric has been useful in diverting attention from political responsibilities in managing these crises.

Beyond economic inequalities, liberal democracies face a crisis of legitimacy and effectiveness. The liberal paradox describes how democratic mechanisms themselves have been used to restrict rights, particularly in relation to immigration and security (Hollifield, 1992; Joppke, 2017). Fear and insecurity have served as justification for the erosion of fundamental freedoms, allowing the rise of authoritarian policies within formal democratic systems (Boswell, 2020). This is a clear blow to the survival of the liberal democracy model. In this regard, it is worth recalling Rodrik's trilemma (2011), which argues that globalisation, national sovereignty and democracy cannot fully coexist at the same time. This is reflected in the growing influence of supranational institutions and the reduction of citizens' decision-making power over key aspects of their economic and political lives (Streeck, 2014). In other words, it seems that many democracies have chosen to preserve globalisation and sovereignty at the expense of democratic quality. The perceived lack of control over these processes has fuelled mistrust in institutions and facilitated the rise of leaders with anti-liberal rhetoric.

The instrumentalisation of immigration as a problem has diverted attention from the real challenge facing liberal democracies: the rise of political forces that seek to undermine their very principles. Populist and far-right movements have exploited social discontent and the sense of crisis to propose authoritarian and nationalist models of governance, delegitimising democratic values and promoting policies of exclusion (Mudde, 2019).

While immigration has been used as a central element in their discourse, the real problem is the erosion of trust in democracy and the lack of structural responses to economic and territorial inequalities. Reformulating the debate means moving away from discussing

immigration in terms of threat and starting to address the structural problems that are undermining the stability of liberal democracies.

Conclusions: demography and democracy, strategic elements under debate

Migration policies are the touchstone of Western democracies and, in particular, of the countries of the European Union. In the case of migration, this process of politicisation has been exploited not only by far-right parties, but also by conservative and even social democratic parties which, rather than challenging this narrative, have chosen to adapt to it in order to avoid losing electoral support (Hinnfors *et al.*, 2012; Nedergaard, 2017). In this context, the moral panic described by Zygmunt Bauman (2015) has become a political tool to justify restrictive measures and erode the principles of solidarity, equality and human rights on which the European project was built.

From a strategic point of view, the closure of the European Union's enlargement processes, which we have seen as the main factor in the growth of the EU's population, leaves migration as the only factor that is not only capable of slowing down the rate of ageing, but also of preventing decline, when population size has also become crucial in the geostrategic sphere with regard to Russian and American expansionist ambitions (in clear reference to claims on Canada or Greenland). From this perspective, immigration and population growth in Africa over the coming decades should be seen as an opportunity rather than a threat. If the European Union is unable to make this strategic shift in migration policy, migration will become a tool used by its enemies.

To address these challenges, it is necessary to shift the focus of public and academic debate. Instead of discussing immigration as a problem, it is essential to analyse how democracies can regain their ability to manage diversity, reduce inequalities and strengthen political representation. This means questioning simplistic narratives that attribute social discontent to migration and, instead, examining the structural transformations that have weakened the social contract in many Western democracies.

The real challenge is not immigration, but the ability of liberal democracies to respond to economic, territorial and political crises without sacrificing their own principles. As long as immigration continues to be used as an excuse to avoid addressing these problems, anti-

liberal forces will continue to gain ground, progressively eroding democratic values in Europe and around the world.

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*Gemma Pinyol-Jiménez**
Instrategies/GRITIM-UPF

*Andreu Domingo**
Centre for Demographic Studies/CERCA