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What we know that we don't know: globalisation, demographic balances and security issues

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Declining population volumes, aged demographic structures, and the rise of migration rate dependency label today's European reality. Fears associated to those changes risk to become part of an endless crisis for Europe's future and its identity. However, changes must be assumed as challenges, not threats. Knowing Europe's demographic dynamics can act as a relevant tool to guarantee a better knowledge of security balances and sustainable policies.

Introduction

Knowledge of population dynamics makes it possible to monitor the rapid changes undergone by today's societies, helps to understand and anticipate risks and threats, and should be viewed as an essential tool for decision support. The volumes, the age and gender balances of a given demographic universe, as well as residents' spatial distribution characteristics, and collective behaviours

represent an added value for social scientists, due to the predictability associated with collective human behaviour (especially in terms of fecundity and mortality). The analysis of demographic dynamics thus provides a relatively secure basis in terms of information about a given society. This text discusses the impact of the foreseen European demographic changes in a globalised world. Which adjustments must be made in political options and in economic and societal practices, while the population volume declines, European citizens age, and the relative number of migrants increases? What are the challenges and risks that those inevitable changes might rise, and to what extent can they represent opportunities to ensure European's position and smart power in a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) world?

New populations in a new (in)secure world

Population issues are more and more often included in the political agenda by Political

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Demography (DP).¹ DP is relatively new for Political scientists. It helps the understanding and prevention of security risks and combines two perspectives: one more focused on the issues of national power and classic balance of internal security (which identifies priorities to ensure a balance between human and material resources of the security forces on the basis of the volume, composition and distribution of citizens), and another which evaluates the power of each society based on balance, advantages and disadvantages that given human universe can get in international chess given its volume and demographics.²

The predictability of demographic dynamics allows prospective scenarios with a reasonable degree of certainty. We know that in the coming decades, it will be essential to deal with the effects of unprecedented demographic ageing in wealthier countries and to address the still rapid population growth and population's youth in others. It will also be necessary to manage the globalisation of migration as every region, irrespective of its degree of development, will be forced to deal with the increasing volume of economic migrants and human movements due to local environmental crises, political and social instability or conflict.

What about the European Union?

From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, the European Union (EU) has been undergoing a change in its demographic regime that combines the reduction of natural

population increase (the surplus of total births over deaths) with the increase of migration (the difference between immigration and emigration). That accounts for more than 90 % of EU-28 global increase. Some countries have been able to counterbalance the negative or zero difference between births and deaths with positive net migration balance, while others have not.

A double ageing phenomenon (fewer youngster and large percentage of elderly) is a common characteristic of the EU. This process has been accentuated since the 1990s. While countries with pro-natalist policies and stronger socio-economic contexts have managed to minimise the losses in terms of births, others have managed to maintain positive migration balances by investing in favourable immigration policies (Ireland and Luxembourg, for example). Since 2004, the number of elderly persons exceeds that of young people in the EU. Only 33 % of EU residents are under 30 years old, but with great disparities (more than 40 % in Ireland and Cyprus; less than 30 % in Italy, Germany, Spain, and Portugal). Prospective scenarios are not encouraging, and predict a steady reduction in the total of young adults: the EU is getting grey. Between 1990 and 2018, the progressive reduction of the total number of young people and the increase in the average life expectancy led to a rise in the median age of the population from 35 to 42 years. Germany and Italy have the

¹ Rodrigues, Santos, 2018

² Goldstone, Kaufman, Toft, 2011; Weiner, 2001

highest median ages, whilst Ireland and Cyprus have the lowest.³

Many of the new challenges facing the European society will be based on the consequences of demographic ageing and migration, which will affect economic activity in the labour market, and also reduce the number of taxpayers. The percentage of foreign residents in all Member States increased significantly in the last few years. In Mediterranean countries, this number has tripled or quadrupled since 2015, and the asylum applications reached expressive numbers. The European society is at a crossroads: it needs migrants to rejuvenate, but fears the effects of their arrival and the changes that it will involve. This fear opens doors to conservative political speeches and xenophobic behaviours that link migration to criminality, terrorism and general insecurity.

The future security implications of demographic trends will depend on the political capacity of institutions, governments, and a growing set of actors to manage change without succumbing to the temptation of *securitising* the demographic vector. The relationship between demographic dynamics and security is ambiguous, as the same demographic behaviour can have different impacts, depending on the time, social reality and political context to which it reports. As we speak of dynamic realities, the interconnection between demography and security requires a continuous process of adjustment. Hence, the

interest that can result from the monitoring of the demographic transition model.

The future implies the redesigning of a global society, ensuring sustainable management among older, complex and distinct communities; easy, rapid and new migration flows; needs in terms of economic progress at local, national and global scales; and rights and guarantees. The new concept of human security based on the individual's dignity implies a concern with our space and with what surrounds us. Security is mainly a result of proactive and preventive attitudes and behaviours.

Conclusion

Population issues are gaining prominence on the political agenda, and a rigorous knowledge of the dynamic characteristics of a given population is of major importance at the moment of the decision making. Studying collective behaviours, volumes, features of groups and gender, as well as geographical distribution allows measuring, predicting and estimating where and what kind of demographic profiles may constitute risks or potential threats. This knowledge is a resource that the rule of law cannot abdicate in order to fulfil the commitment made with the citizens it represents. In the current model of democratic rule of law in the EU space, security is a fundamental right of citizens, gaining the dimension of an essential service to which the state is bound.

³ Rodrigues, Filipa, 2017

However, information on aging structures, lack of youth and adults in active age, and total migrants are evidences that Europeans fear and that open the way for the securitisation of the population vector. Thus, it is necessary to be careful in the use of statistical information and to be able to see beyond the calculation results. Demographics matter to security because they provide secure information, essential to decision making, and a new way of looking at the world. This knowledge is a resource that the political actors cannot abdicate. Security results from proactive and preventive attitudes and behaviours and demographic studies are a still undiscovered instrument for security studies.

In this era of profound changes, the geopolitical role that the demographic vector can assume is inescapable: “population issues are so fundamental in geopolitical analysis that their omission has terrible consequences for those who ignore them”.⁴

In a globalised world, windows of opportunity might rise if ageing Europe assumes in a proactive way the advantages of still having the best Human Development Indicators. The future will be determined by its capacity to solve social changes in a sustainable and inclusive way.

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⁴ Dumont, 2007: 474



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