



# The UNFPA Demographic Resilience Programme

A REGIONAL PROGRAMME  
ENABLING COUNTRIES IN EASTERN  
EUROPE TO THRIVE AMID RAPID  
DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE



DECADE OF  
**Demographic  
Resilience**



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# Addressing Eastern Europe's demographic crisis

The countries of Eastern Europe are confronted with two major demographic challenges at the same time: people on average are having fewer children than what would be needed to keep populations stable, and many young people of reproductive age have been leaving their countries in search of better opportunities elsewhere.

Low birth rates are not unusual; in virtually all developed countries people are having few children, under two per family on average. However, only in Eastern Europe have low birth rates been accompanied for decades by high levels of outmigration, mostly to economically stronger European

Union countries. As a result, populations in the region have been shrinking, in some cases by 25 per cent or more since the early 1990s. Populations are also getting older, with the proportion of people 65 years or older sharply increasing.



Eastern Europe's demographic woes are exacerbated by the strong demand for workers, including health workers, in European Union countries that are also facing low birth rates and labour shortages, but are economically more dynamic and capable of attracting talent from abroad. While this provides welcome opportunities for Eastern Europeans and an inflow of remittances and know-how from returnees, it has also led to a significant loss in human capital in the sending countries, and has accelerated population decline and population ageing.

## **Demographic concerns**

The prospect of sustained population shrinking and ageing has caused alarm in the region, as governments are concerned about the impact of demographic change on the future of economies and social support systems, as well as the sustainability of infrastructures and services, especially in areas – often rural – with decreasing population numbers. In some countries, the public discourse around demographic change has become politically and ideologically charged, with political actors fuelling fear and anxieties with narratives conjuring up scenarios of national and civilizational doom, and at times intersecting with anti-immigrant, anti-gender and anti-LGBTI agendas, as well as ethnic tensions.

Governments in the region have mostly responded to the demographic trends they are facing by trying to increase birth rates. This has been done primarily by increasing family support and providing financial incentives for having more children. Although this has led to small increases in birth rates in some countries, these changes have been temporary and

have not led to a substantial increase in the number of children women have over their lifetime.

Attempts at increasing birth rates alone are unlikely to stop or reverse population decline; to date, only countries that have attracted immigrants have managed to maintain, or return to, population growth. However, many countries in Eastern Europe are unable (for economic reasons), or unwilling (for political reasons), to attract immigrants to the extent that doing so would tangibly mitigate population decline.

The singular focus on increasing birth rates, coupled with the accompanying anxiety-laden narratives, has threatened to undermine human rights, including women's reproductive rights, and gender equality in the region, as governments have put pressure on women to have more children, advocated for a return to traditional gender roles and introduced incentives for women to prioritize childbearing.

## **Distraction from solutions**

The attention on increasing birth rates has also distracted from finding constructive solutions to demographic problems that are challenging but entirely solvable. The lack of adequate responses to demographic change, firmly rooted in evidence and human rights, comes at a significant cost to the countries affected, aggravating economic and financial challenges, social inequalities and political polarization. This has potentially far-reaching repercussions for the future of economies and democracies in the region, as well as overall stability, and risks undermining countries' ability to progress on their path towards European integration and achievement of the SDGs.

# The Demographic Resilience Programme

Against this backdrop, UNFPA developed a regional programme aimed at supporting countries in managing demographic change while respecting human rights. The Demographic Resilience Programme, launched in 2021, is grounded in the understanding that **demographic change is the result of complex social, economic, political and cultural factors, and that it can be addressed successfully only if all these factors are taken into account.**

The programme is also based on the conviction that responses to demographic change must not infringe on the rights of people, including their reproductive rights, and that, on the contrary, successful policies expand people's rights and choices, enable them to have the number of children they want and empower them to realize their full potential in society. Through the programme, UNFPA supports governments in designing responses that are comprehensive, based on evidence, and in line with human rights and gender equality commitments.



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The UNFPA Demographic Resilience Programme recognizes that the demographic shifts countries are experiencing determine the progress they make towards their national development goals and Agenda 2030. They shape efforts to reduce poverty and inequality; respond to crises, as exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic; ensure decent work and social protection; provide universal health coverage and quality education; empower women and young people; promote and protect the rights of older people; and create dynamic economies and protect the environment.

**Demographic resilience, as a concept, emphasizes the importance of population dynamics for socioeconomic development and individual well-being, as well as for political stability and security.**

At the 2019 Nairobi Summit on ICPD25, Member States committed themselves to draw on demographic diversity to drive economic growth and achieve sustainable development. A Decade of Demographic Resilience was launched at the Ministerial Conference 'Shaping Europe's Demographic Future', organized by the Government of Bulgaria and UNFPA in Sofia in 2021, to galvanize action in the region to enable countries to thrive in a world of rapid demographic change.

# Achievements

UNFPA, together with its network of partners and experts, has made a real difference in supporting governments in addressing critical demographic concerns. In Armenia and the Republic of Moldova, for example, UNFPA has worked with governments to develop modern national population strategies emphasizing the importance of building human capital over numeric targets. In Serbia, UNFPA, together with UNDP, organized a population lab, advising the government on a range of strategies and interventions to address concerns about population decrease. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, UNFPA conducted a high-profile survey among young people on emigration intentions and underlying push factors.

Youth indices have been developed with UNFPA support in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine for evidence-based policies aimed at unleashing young people's potential, and, across the region, UNFPA has helped governments formulate youth laws, policies and strategies. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and other countries, UNFPA has established centres and other initiatives helping older people to remain active and engaged in society.

In the Republic of Moldova and the Western Balkans, UNFPA has engaged governments and the private sector in introducing gender-responsive family policies, making it easier for women and men to combine work and family and have the number of children they want. Across the region, UNFPA has supported the development of data-collection systems and the production of various forms of population analyses, expanding the capacities of governments for planning and forecasting, and the design of evidence-based policies.





# Programme interventions

The Demographic Resilience Programme supports countries in creating societies that are resilient to, and can thrive amid, unfolding demographic changes. The achievement of this overarching goal critically depends on the capacity of governments to anticipate, plan for and shape demographic futures so that they can mitigate potentially negative effects for individuals, societies, economies and the environment, and harness the opportunities that come with demographic change for people, prosperity and the planet.

**The programme is built around four main areas of intervention:**

## SCIENCE-POLICY LINK

**Strengthening government capacities to integrate demographic change in policymaking processes**

UNFPA works to strengthen national capacities to collect population data, produce population estimates, analyse demographic impacts on development, evaluate policy responses to demographic change, and formulate social and population policies. It supports the development of governance structures such as population advisory bodies to ensure that population challenges are addressed in a comprehensive, cross-sectoral manner and that demographic change is considered in policymaking across all affected policy areas.

## HUMAN CAPITAL

**Building capacity to prioritize human capital development throughout the life course and strengthen inclusion**

Excluding large segments of society from the economy and public life comes at a cost, and this is particularly true for countries with shrinking and ageing populations and workforces. UNFPA assists with developing measures aimed at building human capital through investments in health, education and job skills, and by tapping into the potential of those often excluded – women, older people, youth, migrants, minorities and other marginalized groups – by fostering their inclusion in the workforce and society at large.





## **“DEMOGRAPHY-PROOFING”**

Enhancing government capacity to adapt social policy systems, services and infrastructures to demographic change

UNFPA works with countries to help ensure that social policy systems, service delivery and infrastructures are adapted to changing demographics. “Demography-proofing” goes well beyond adjustments to pension funds and health-care systems, and involves a systematic and integrated review of all social protection mechanisms and social policies. The provision of essential services and infrastructures in remote and rural areas needs to be planned with a view to creating equitable living conditions across geographic spaces.

## **CHANGING THE NARRATIVE**

Fostering a constructive, solution-oriented public discourse around demographic change and policy responses

Together with governments, academia, civil society, the media, influencers and other stakeholders, UNFPA helps offer spaces for conversations about demographic futures, with an emphasis on comprehensive solutions based on evidence and human rights. UNFPA also plans to help build the demographic literacy of journalists, influencers and activists working on related issues. This will help shift the public discourse away from a focus on threats and security risks, and towards a more constructive focus on realizing the opportunities that come with demographic change.

## Partnerships

In implementing the Demographic Resilience Programme, UNFPA works closely with governments, civil society, academic institutions and think tanks, the private sector, as well as other UN agencies and other international bodies, including the European Commission. It draws on a diverse body of internal and external expertise, including a roster of nearly 100 experts who are members of UNFPA's International Advisory Panel on Population and Development. Key academic partners include the Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital and the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis in Vienna, the Einstein Centre for Population Diversity in Berlin, as well as Population Europe and its network members, and national research institutions.

## Implementation

UNFPA supports countries in addressing demographic change through a broad range of implementation modes, tailored to the specific needs in each country. At the core is UNFPA's experience in national population data analysis and ability to bring in world-class expertise and team up with local stakeholders to build innovative and sustainable solutions. The menu of options includes the engagement of leading academic institutions and think tanks to help develop policy options, organize population policy labs and hold multi-month expert residence programmes.

UNFPA is the UN's go-to agency on population issues. With more than 50 years of experience working with countries in addressing demographic change, UNFPA is operating in more than 150 countries and territories around the world. The Demographic Resilience Programme for Europe and Central Asia is overseen and managed by UNFPA's Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, based in Istanbul, and supported by UNFPA country offices in the region.

## Your engagement

If you are interested in benefiting from, or supporting, UNFPA's Demographic Resilience Programme, please get in touch through the contact details below or the nearest UNFPA office.

## Contacts

For more information, contact:  
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