

# The likely future increase of fertility in Europe

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At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century period fertility rates in Europe were at the record low levels reached in peace time. In 2002, period total fertility rates (TFR), which constitute a problematic measure of fertility strongly affected by changes in the timing of childbearing, fell below the 'lowest-low' threshold of 1.3 (Kohler, Billari, and Ortega 2002) in 16 out of 39 European countries with population exceeding 100,000 and representing about one half of Europe's population (Sobotka 2008). Part of these extreme low levels in the period TFRs were caused by the shift in the timing of childbearing towards higher ages, which has been typical for most parts of Europe in the last three decades (Bongaarts 2002, Sobotka 2004). Recent rise in the period TFR in many countries of Europe indicates that the lowest-low period TFR levels might be temporary by-products of fertility postponement and that the cohort TFR in most countries is unlikely to fall to such low levels (Sobotka 2004). At the same time, many analysts argue that whatever way fertility is measured, its level in most parts of Europe is worryingly low and unlikely to increase much in the future. Within a broader consensus formed around the notion that fertility rates in developed countries will stabilize below or, at the maximum, around the replacement-level threshold, distinct arguments about the future of Europe's low fertility can be distinguished. These arguments are based on analytical observations, on the ongoing discussion about the need for birth-enhancing policies and the effectiveness of such policies, as well as on theoretical arguments. With a simplification, these arguments can be subdivided into the following streams:

*1) Fertility is low and will remain low (or may even decline further) in the future*

A typical example of this line of reasoning is a detailed study of European fertility by Frejka and Sardon (2004), which concludes that fertility in Europe "is almost certain to remain as low as it was at the turn of the century and it is likely to decline in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and perhaps even beyond" (p. 375), unless "significant profound changes" take place in "the array of social, economic, and political forces which are exerting downward pressure on fertility" (p. 382). Much of the reasoning on the 'status quo' maintenance focuses on the possible effects of pronatalist or family-related policies. For instance, Demeny (2003) views contemporary low fertility in Europe as an outcome of the preferences with children competing with other 'attainable' preferences (p. 23), where government efforts to "buy children" through an allocation of rewards to the families with children are ineffective and likely to fail (pp. 25-26). Among the theoretically-informed arguments, the concept of the second demographic transition provides a complex narrative pertaining to the persistence of a low-fertility *regime* in developed countries: the forces of cultural, technological, economic and value changes that lead to a diminishing importance of children in individuals' life and that stimulate an increased orientation to personal self-fulfillment, work (especially among women) and non-family activities lead to a "structural long-term sub-replacement fertility" (Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006: 669).

*2) Fertility is low and is likely to decline further in the future*

This argument is less frequent and, again, often explicitly tied to the expected governments' inaction in supporting families with children or in supporting a work – family combination. A particular stream of theoretical arguments has been developed by Lutz and Skirbekk (2005), who suggest that societies experiencing an extended period of very low fertility may fall into the "low fertility trap," where self-reinforcing processes of diminishing fertility preferences, diminishing

economic opportunities for young adults and a growing mismatch between their consumer aspirations and bleak economic prospects will lead to lower and lower birth rates, accelerated population ageing and shrinking population size. In the view of Lutz and Skirbekk a concerted policy action, possibly aiming at lowering age at childbearing, may be needed to avoid or counterbalance the 'low fertility trap' situation.

3) *Fertility is low and may increase with an engaged government support to families*

This is a modified version of the previous two streams of arguments. It is best represented by Peter McDonald, who posits that the fertility rates are too low in many developed countries, that these countries cannot afford to wait passively to the solutions to their low fertility and that there are many examples of successful government policies that succeeded in stimulating fertility (e.g., McDonald 2005). He views the common finding on the continuing preferences for a two-child family as a clear sign of an unfulfilled desire of women and couples for higher fertility, which also signals a need for a stronger engagement of the governments in supporting bearing and raising of children.

4) *Fertility is not as low as it seems and/or it is likely to increase in the future*

This last, somewhat 'optimistic' line of arguments, needs more detailed elaboration. The first statement, "fertility is not so low as it seems," may be roughly subdivided into two streams of arguments. The first one emphasizes that fertility rates in Europe may not be so low when tempo distortions in period fertility rates are taken into account. The second one stresses regional diversity in fertility rates in Europe. Besides a couple of outlying regions still undergoing the (first) fertility transition (most notably, Albania and Kosovo), many of the most economically and socially advanced countries in Europe have relatively high levels of low fertility (e.g, McDonald 2005, Coleman 2006). Nordic countries, together with Benelux, France, and the United Kingdom form what could be euphemistically labeled as a "higher-fertility belt" in Europe (Sobotka 2008).

The second statement, "fertility is likely to increase in the future," forms the topic of this paper. Noting first that the prevailing voices in the debate on low fertility seem foresee a continuation of low or very low fertility in the future, this contribution aims to combine selected empirical analyses with descriptive findings and theoretical arguments supporting the view that fertility rates in Europe are likely to increase in the next decades. A pioneering inventory of some of these arguments has been provided by Lutz (1994 and 2006). Without weighting the 'positive' and 'negative' arguments against each other, the latter contribution has outlined six arguments suggesting a future rise of fertility in Europe and eight arguments suggesting its further decline.

In a short term, a slight increase in the commonly used period fertility rates will probably occur as a result of the diminishing pace of first birth postponement and a reduction in some of the economic factors contributing to employment and economic uncertainty, such as excessive youth unemployment in Southern Europe and much of Central-Eastern Europe. This paper will, however, primarily focus on a longer-term perspective on period and cohort fertility in the next 50 years. The arguments on the diverse forces that may stimulate a modest increase in fertility rates will encompass the possible emergence of the positive effect of education on fertility, the impact of expanding higher-fertility populations, the emergence of a positive link between economic and social development and fertility rates, the lack of evidence on the importance of 'postmodern values' as the driving forces of very low fertility, and the likelihood of some success of the governments' efforts to support families. Furthermore, in the countries with the currently lowest fertility levels a long-term improvement in the economic position of young adults and a small positive effect of partnership instability on second and third birth rates may also lead to higher aggregate fertility in the future. A discussion of these factors will be complemented by an analysis of selected cohort fertility trends and also of social status fertility differentials in selected countries. A particular attention will be paid to the special cases of 'higher than theoretically expected fertility', such as highly educated women in the Nordic countries, Hispanic minority in the United States, socially disadvantaged women in the United Kingdom, regional pattern of higher fertility in the most religious areas of the Netherlands and to Israel, which constitutes a peculiar example of modern society with persistent high fertility rates.

This contribution will not attempt to argue that higher fertility trend in Europe is 'inevitable' in the future. It will readily recognize many sources of uncertainty about future fertility trends in Europe and also some of the factors that are likely to put a downward pressure on fertility rates. In addition, it will not suggest an end to the low-fertility *regime* in many parts of Europe and it will not suggest that fertility rates will bounce well above the replacement level threshold. Rather, it will argue that despite the envisioned modest rise in both period and cohort fertility rates, fertility levels in Europe will remain regionally differentiated, with many countries and smaller regions retaining completed fertility deep below the replacement level threshold. However, with a slight exaggeration, it might be argued that European fertility rates reached their long-term trough at the beginning of the new Millennium and such a widespread low-fertility situation is unlikely to occur again in the next decades.

## **References**

*[To be added]*