

Europe's families: the pending revolution

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According to a study published in April in The Lancet magazine, by 2100 only six countries in the world will have a fertility rate sufficient to replace their generations, set at an average of 2.1 children per woman: Chad, Niger, Samoa, Somalia, Tajikistan and Tonga. All the others have been in the midst of a demographic winter for years, with a steady decline in the number of children.

This is now a global phenomenon, but it may be worth looking at how we experience it in Europe, as we have been dealing with it for longer.

Experts also tell us that we are now experiencing the second wave, that the next generation of young people are not only “childless” but have no intention of having children. They consider it impossible and prefer to devote their time and money to work, leisure, travel, etc. These are DINK (double income, no kids) couples, in which pets replace children. For example, in Spain we already have six pets for every child under 14. The terrible consequences of this situation are obvious for a welfare system that is based precisely on the replacement of one generation by another, and makes it unsustainable to maintain pensions, healthcare, infrastructure and economic growth.

When we sometimes say that large families today are heroes, we mean that being a large family is fraught with difficulties. And it should not be so, especially in a Europe where demographic winter is causing personal impoverishment (loneliness, lack of family ties, individualism, mental health problems) and also social impoverishment (an ageing society, without strong ties, with a welfare system in crisis and with a growing decline in productivity, consumption, without innovation and with lower economic growth).

For this reason, large European families issued a manifesto on the occasion of the recent European Parliament elections. In this manifesto, we set out the following facts:

- In 2022, 3.88 million children were born in the EU; in 2021, 4.9 million were born.
- In 2070, the European population will represent 4% of the world's population (today it is 6%) (UN demographic projections).
- The average fertility rate in the EU stood at 1.46 live births per woman, ranging from 1.08 in Malta to 1.79 in France.
- Of the 198.5 million European families, 76% have no children, while only 24% have children.
- Of those with children, 12% have one child, 9% have two children, and only 3% have three or more children.
- Only a quarter of children in Europe have two or more siblings (Eurostat, 2022; child: person aged 0 to 18).
- In 2021, poverty affected 32% of large families, 17% of families with two children and 16% of families with one child (Eurostat).

These figures show that the situation of large families in Europe is not good. We suffer social, labour and economic penalties, social stigmatisation, and an ever-increasing risk of poverty and social exclusion. We live in countries where the family dimension of people is absent, ignored, and this is the root of many new problems, the first manifestations of which we are beginning to see and which will continue to grow.

After years of trying different solutions, such as financial transfers for children, measures to reconcile work and family life, etc., to no avail (demographic winter occurs in both rich and poor countries, with or without support measures), we are coming to the conclusion that the problem lies in the social and cultural model we have developed, in which only individual well-being and professional careers are prioritised above family, and therefore children are seen as 'a problem' rather than a social and personal asset, no matter how much help we want to give them.

But how can we put this change into practice?

At the local level, in 2019, our confederation launched the European Network of Family-Friendly Municipalities (familycities.eu), already present in 154 municipalities in ten European countries, to train, disseminate and exchange good practices, and make their territories

attractive places for family life, with the support of local institutions and the local economy.

We have been implementing this initiative for municipalities nationwide in Portugal, Italy, Spain, Latvia, Poland, and Hungary.

At this national level, associations representing families in each country (such as those for large families) are fighting to make the voice of families heard and to implement a family perspective in all public policies, in order to create a society that is truly family-friendly and not hostile to families.

Some countries, such as Hungary, are trying innovative measures based on this family perspective, first to promote a culture that values the family (under the slogan ‘Hungary, a family-friendly country’), and then with concrete assistance for the most difficult issues, such as starting a new home when you are young, being able to have decent housing, or reducing the tax burden when you have dependent children.

At the European level, where our Confederation operates, we specify in our manifesto some measures that could be implemented. These are as follows:

- Recognise the central role of families in society, the economy and sustainability, and to this end include the protection of the family in the European social pillars, in accordance with the European Social Charter, and incorporate the family perspective into all European legislation.
- Establish a Demography Commissioner to develop family-friendly policies and address demographic challenges.
- Defend the right to have the desired number of children and the right of each child to receive the same support, without discrimination on the basis of number.
- Clearly distinguish and separate family policies from social inclusion policies, considering them an investment in well-being and the quality of human capital.
- Promote and support “family-friendly municipalities” by naming the “European Capital of Families”, as is done with smart cities, green cities and cultural cities.

- Promote and encourage “family-friendly companies” and ensure a work-life balance for parents and carers, with equal opportunities and treatment, without interruptions for maternity or paternity leave.
- Recognise the role and value of unpaid care work in the education and well-being of children, including it in the calculation of gross national product, as a first step towards accounting for invisible work and its impact on pensions and wages.
- Finally, work closely with organisations representing families in all Member States and improve research and studies on families and their well-being at all ages.

Today, families who decide to have more children than the average needed for generational replacement are true revolutionaries, the model to look to in order to break out of this self-destructive spiral. Large families make a significant and specific contribution to the European Union, enriching social and cultural diversity, economic growth and social cohesion, while also representing an important demographic factor. They promote a sustainable lifestyle, with a circular economy of scale, as a natural breeding ground for solidarity, sharing and caring, creativity, teamwork and mutual support. In a world where there are no longer brothers, cousins or uncles, large families re-establish the family network as the best social policy against poverty and loneliness.

We therefore call on the European Union to develop a “strategy for large families”, based on the European Social Charter, which encourages Member States to increase financial support through tax deductions and family allowances proportional to the number of children, while providing accessible, high-quality childcare, education, healthcare and transport services to reduce the financial burden on parents. The strategy could include employment policies, with measures to prevent discrimination based on family size.

The strategy should include specific programmes, such as the European Large Family Card, a non-financial support measure to facilitate mobility and access to sports, cultural and educational programmes, preventing the economic and cultural poverty of large families.

Do we want to solve the demographic winter? Then let us promote a family-friendly social and cultural model, in which having children is treated as a positive value recognised at all levels, and in which large families are a model that can be realised and developed, with the support of the whole of society. Large family associations play a fundamental role in leading and raising public awareness of this battle, making it not only possible to have the desired number of children, but also to receive social and economic recognition for doing so.

But, as I said before, for the desire to have children to grow and become a reality, a real change is needed, a genuine revolution, so that the family dimension of people is truly considered in our social model, and so that children are no longer considered a problem, but are treated and recognised as a great value, both collectively and personally. It is a total change of cultural paradigm. Thanks to the work of large family associations and family-friendly municipalities, which are becoming increasingly numerous, this change, this revolution, is already beginning. With the power to bring new lives into the world, and with the testimony and example of today's heroes who bring them, change will come, and in time it will spread throughout the world. There is no other way.

That is why the 21st century must be the century of the 'family revolution', in which the family dimension of people is recovered and given space, above the productivism, consumerism and hedonistic well-being that prevail today. Our future is at stake. In this sense, we can say without fear of contradiction that the large family, in a nutshell, is the springtime of our society. It is the family that can bring light, joy and hope for the future to this old Europe that is on the verge of disappearing.