



Republic of Bulgaria
ECONOMIC
AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

OPINION

on

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS AND CHALLENGES TO THE DEMOGRAPHIC POLICY OF BULGARIA

(on its own initiative)

Sofia, 30 March 2005

On 13 November 2004 the Plenary Session of the Economic and Social Council took decision to draw up and adopt on its own initiative an Opinion on Demographic Trends and Challenges to the Demographic Policy of Bulgaria.

The Commission on Social Policy that had been responsible for the preparation of the Opinion approved a draft of the Council's Opinion on 17 March 2005.

Dr. Konstantin Trentchev was appointed Rapporteur.

The Economic and Social Council approved this Opinion at its Eleventh Plenary Session, held on 30 March 2005.

I. INTRODUCTION

The problems of the demographic development of Bulgaria have been a subject of constantly growing concern since the sixties of the last century due to the decreased birth rate and the delay in the growth rates of the Bulgarian population. Most of the assessments made by the academic circles as well as the objectives and the actions of the demographic policy realised on the part of the government point to the presence of a sustainable, objective and of growing potential **trend towards aggravating the demographic situation in Bulgaria.**

This process got intensified still further at the beginning of the 90-ties. For 14 years only the population of the country has dropped down by over 1,2 million people, out of which 868 thousand have emigrated from the country mainly due to economic and social reasons. The other factor for the reduction of the population is the negative tendency in the birth rate. The reasons for these negative tendencies are economic and social, external and domestic, objective and such ensuing from the demographic policy on the part of the government. The factors of the natural reproduction of the population are strongly restrained. The traditional values of the Bulgarian family are getting destroyed. A number of social funds based on the solidarity between the generations are placed under serious pressure.

The issues, specified so far, lie beyond the control of the society and the state. Treating them as an objective fact without any efforts extended to overcome them shall bring forth strong concern from the standpoint related to the future of the Bulgarian nation and state. **That is the main reason why the Economic and Social Council, voicing the interests of the organized civil society in Bulgaria has undertaken to work up, adopt and present to the institutions concerned an opinion with an assessment of the demographic trends and problems as well as proposals for overcoming them in the coming years and decades.**

On the authority of art. 5, para 4 and 5 of the Economic and Social Council Act,

The Economic and Social Council has taken a decision to work up an Opinion on the problems of the demographic development and the challenges to the demographic policy of Bulgaria.

The Council has stated that the present Opinion is a follow-up from a number of meetings and discussions, organized by the Social Policy Commission of the Council, plus the participation of experts in the area of legislation, social practice and the scientific media. The views, standpoints, and suggestions of the organizations of the employers, employees and other organizations of the civil society have been taken into account at the discussions held on the demographic problems of Bulgaria.

The Opinion of the Council is directed to attract the attention of the public, the state bodies, the political parties, and the scientific circles on the problems of the demographic development and the options for their settlement.

II. ASSESSMENTS OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

The global and particularly the European demographic trends have been also valid for Bulgaria since the sixties of the last century when the impact of the post-war factors for the accelerated reproduction of the population were exhausted. The industrialisation of Bulgaria during that period “drew out” enormous for our country groups of the rural population and directed them to the cities and industrial branches of economy. This way **many settlements and regions** of the country **were depopulated**, which has been notably true for the last 10-15 years. Since the beginning of the nineties the population of Bulgaria has switched from a **delayed growth to an intensive reduction**. The demographic trends have become distinct and the consequences thereof shall further manifest themselves in the decades ahead.

Referring to the information sources **from various investigations**, as well as to **the current data of the official statistics, to our own and foreign analyses and forecasts** about the development of the population **including assessments of the demographic processes and trends** in Bulgaria, **the Economic and Social Council** considers that there are present **extremely serious grounds for concern in the society and the governmental institutions regarding the issues and challenges faced by the demographic development**. Taking into account that **the substantial demographic parameters**, which exercise influence and decisive impact on the situation, the trends and forecasts about the future development of the population, involve **the total coefficient of fertility as a basis for measuring the level of the birth rate, the coefficient of death rate and the net migration level, the Economic and Social Council** has outlined the following **facts**:

First: A serious crisis in the birth rate is at hand, which has marked a constant decreasing tendency since the beginning of the 70-ties, in spite of the policy conducted partially by the state for its encouragement. The tendency has sharply deepened after 1990-1992. The total coefficient of about 2.2 fertility rates in 1970-1975 fell down to 1.1-1.23 for the period 2000-2005.

The birth rate reduction, combined with the direct impact of the socio-economic processes too hard for the population, the commercialisation and the difficult access to health services under worsened parameters of the healthcare and the mass emigration mostly of young people, have brought about the obvious **insufficiency** in the number of the younger generations when compared to the elder ones, to **an infringement of the natural balance in size and proportions of the different generations**. With the birth rate decrease the initial age groups reduce by size and even a partial replacement of the generations is impossible. **The Bulgarian population ages** and this process **cannot** be mastered in the near decades. All these factors of the demographic development in Bulgaria have led to **an almost irreversible shrinking of the opportunities for a normal reproduction of the population, including of the workforce**.

The birth rate issue has also some particularly sensitive dimensions, where its **ethnicalisation**, unfortunately in the permanently marginalized population groups mainly from the Roma

community, is one of the most disturbing ones. 70 out of 100 live childbirths belong to this community. Another crucial dimension is that the enhanced economic migration represents an **export of births, erudition and qualification**, which are paid **by the entire population of the country**.

Other **alarming trends in the birth rate** can be seen in the analysis of **different demographic indicators**. From 12.1 ‰ in 1990 **the birth rate coefficient** fell to 8.6 ‰ in 2003. **The number of the illegitimate childbirths** scales up incessantly. Their relative share of 25% increases up to 30% in 2003. 1318 **abortions** fall per 1000 live childbirths. Marriages, divorces, informal family communities, family planning, illegitimate births and etc. are included in the closed ring of the population reproduction and they contribute to the considerable **sustainability** of the negative trends already under way.

The Economic and Social Council considers **that the crisis in the birth rate** finds expression in multi-directions, and the major ones are as follows:

- the birth rate reduction and the aggravation of its structure are **a social problem**. It is generated by the changes in the economy, by the high level of unemployment, by the low revenues of the predominant part of the population. On this background the incentives for the socialised layers to give birth to children fall away. Marriages and childbirths turn into a luxury, which not everyone can afford if one feels responsible. The sociological data evidence for arrangements towards mass postponing of childbirths. The barriers of resorting to violence and exploitation of children weaken – both our own and somebody else's. Brutality and apathy towards children gradually replace humanity and concern about them. The responsibility of taking good parental care of the children born disintegrates;
- The demographic shrinking **is a direct risk for the integrity of state**. In fact large territories of the state have been depopulated, unique natural resources for production and economy have been deserted. The density if the population has dropped down catastrophically;
- **The workforce scales down** both in absolute proportion and as a percentage of the whole population. Shortage of workforce is coming up and hence pre-conditions for seasonal or permanent "import" of human resources even in the next 5-7 years. With insufficient emigration supplements of young people and continuing emigration of young generations the age of the economically active population will go up. The share of the aged people among the employed will increase and the workforce will become more conservative and more passive, more difficult and more slowly inclined in the uptake, learning and mastering of the new technologies;
- There is a tendency of retarding the economic growth, stagnation and contracting the markets, caused **by the shortage of skilled workforce**, capable of learning and applying the modern knowledge and technologies;
- **Deficiencies in the pension system and in the other social systems** are at hand, based on the solidarity between the generations;
- The data point to a process of ageing of the population without compensation with a birth rate increase, which in turn leads to an **constant demographic pressure** on all economic and social systems, to an accelerated **reduction of the nationally determining portion**

of the population in the country and to changes in the ethnical and political balance in our state;

- **The ethnalisation of the birth-rate issues** provokes extremely **serious challenges** to the economic and social policy. The excess of the childbirths of the Roma strata, combined with their marginalization, creates deviations that are potentially endangered by the anti-social behaviour of the non-socialised contingents of generations, for which the state finds it **difficult to provide resources for their integration** with the remaining part of the population **in the near future**. Childbirth is getting ethnicised in the non-integrated ethnical strata. A serious quota of illiterate people emerges and moreover it is socially and groups driven. **All this will have a stable negative impact in the next 10-15 years**. These contingents will flow into the lines of the workforce but their chances for prosperity are slim and minimal without starting and holding an active and consecutive demographic policy in the years ahead on the part of the state regarding their **education, qualification and socialisation**.

Second, the trends in the **death rate and longevity in Bulgaria are also extremely disturbing**.

Death rate in Bulgaria is the highest in comparison to the one in the EU countries. Being about 11 per one thousand as of 1990 **the coefficient of death rate** went up to 14.7 ‰ in 1977 and about 14.3 ‰ in 2003. For most of the European states, incl. Greece and Malta, the death rate is within 500 – 600 persons per 100 000 persons while for Bulgaria it is 1102.62 persons. **The situation of the child death rate is a catastrophe – three – four times higher than the EU levels** – 13.3 against 4.5 ‰.

With the quantities and tendencies indicated in the birth and death rates **Bulgaria stands in a crucial situation** also by the indicator of the **natural population growth**, which in the transition period runs between minus 7-8 and 5,6‰ in the year 2003. A lasting tendency of a continuous shrinking of the reproduction process of the Bulgarian population is at hand. The number of the deceased exceeds almost twice the number of the live born children. A residential area of about 70-75 thousand inhabitants disappears from the map of Bulgaria every year. **There are no real grounds to expect a break of the negative birth rate tendency in the near future and hence we have to admit the fact that Bulgaria will have a negative natural population increase during the next 10-20 years**.

The high levels of the death rate, generated by the influence of factors insuperable for the individual people, shall reflect also on the **average longevity**. With an average longevity of 75.8 years for the men and 81.9 years for the women in EU-15, in Bulgaria it is respectively 68.5 years and 75.4 years. **The high social death rate among the men at age of 50 and 60** should be noted in particular. Natural mortality more and more turns into a **social one involving increasingly younger generations**. The average life expectancy for men and women in Bulgaria is **by 7-8 years lower** than the one in the countries of EU-15. It is namely the people of the third age that feel punished by the permanent negative demographic trends in the natural reproduction of the population, by the poor healthcare, by the inability of the social funds to meet the objective needs of this 2.4 million group.

When presenting the characteristics of the going demographic processes by different institutions and researchers a **strange fact** is noticeable – it is considered that the reason for the demographic crisis is the drop of the birth-rate, the negative natural population growth and the reduction of the population, **while the death rate issue is left behind**. Most of the researchers think that the main reason for the low average life expectancy and the high mortality is the **collapsed healthcare system** and they define it as clumsy, ineffective, uncivilised, non-adaptable, non-cost efficient and misbalanced. **Sick people and sick families, particularly when they live in absolute poverty and misery cannot reproduce healthy young people, capable of working and motivated to work.**

Third, the changes in the social and economic situation in the country have led to the influence of new factors and conditions, forming **the migration behaviour of the population**. Due to the specific peculiarities of our historical and socio-economic development, **the external migration has been always related mainly to the emigration of the population.**

During the years between **the two last taking the census of the population (1992 and 2001)**, its total reduction has amounted to about 514 thousand persons, or by over 6% in comparison with the average annual population of the country for that period. Different investigations indicate about 800 thousand to 1.1 million people who go each year to Greece, Spain, Italy and other countries of EU-15 as season-employed workers. Because of this **Bulgaria loses workforce in the most active youth ages**. Not a small part of “those working for their living abroad” seek for any reason **to stay permanently** in those countries and at least **one third** of them manage to do so.

Predominantly **the youth emigration is an export of childbirth, erudition, and qualification**. This process has a direct impact not only for misbalancing the reproduction of the remaining population and its number, but also in the reduction of the **qualitative potential** of our nation.

The Economic and Social Council considers that alongside with birth rate and death rate issues, the mass emigration of young generations lasting for over 15 years is **one of the most hard challenges before the future demographic, economic and social policy**, which should provide favourable environment to **stop the emigrations** of those generations to other countries.

Fourth, the state practically does not pursue a demographic policy. In most researches and developments during the last 7-8 years there are explicit ascertains that the demographic processes and problems have been entirely forgotten by the government. There are no authorized **state institutions**, which would analyse, assess and work up the respective policies for the settlement of the demographic issues. The Economic and Social Council considers that inactivity and social insensibility of the state have been at hand for the transition period so far.

As a result **social degradation and revival of the primary illiteracy** among the generations have been noted since the beginning of the nineties. The causes for this are mainly related to the sharp reduction of the economic and tangible capacities of the families to provide the most elementary conditions of life for their children. As a consequence Bulgaria is in grave danger of **fertility, cadre and intellectual potential drain** of the nation abroad. The lack of state policy has and distinct allowed **a clear ethnicalisation of the demographic problems**, and it will be hard to overcome the consequences thereof in the next 10 – 15 years.

Disregarding the demographic problems on the part of the state has been in principle preconditioned by the large scale processes of the transition to market economy, which has been going on for 15 years now, without solving at a satisfactory level the problems that refer to the normalization of the living standard of the population as a prerequisite for the normalization of the demographic processes as well. In this connection the following **more important circumstances** should be also pointed out:

- **the demographic processes are inert and complex.** The official studies give information about them but **it is occasional to analyse the general picture and the scope of the negative tendencies.** That is the reason why different researchers speak about “demographic crisis”, “demographic catastrophe”, demographic collapse” or “demographic depression”. In this relation it is necessary to accept a **public assessment** of the nature of the demographic situation in the country and on this basis to develop adequate strategies and policies;
- **the politicians in the country do not know the demographic problems, they underestimate their complexity** and hence they will be occasionally tempted to discuss them, or make suggestions. **Granting** social assistance benefits for children is most often considered to be a solution of the demographic problem of the birth rate. The death rate issues **are omitted** in silence, or they are transferred to the fault of the healthcare system. The issues related to the emigration of the young generations and the reasons for it **are not on** any strategy, programme or policy;
- **the demographic issues are occasional topics for information and discussions in the mass media.** This is one of the serious reasons for the lack of a uniform public opinion and civil pressure on the government and administrations for a consistent solution of these problems
- **The demographic crisis** has well-defined outlines for all **quantitative dynamic rows** regarding:
 - the critical shrinking of the fertility quota;
 - the disastrous reduction of the young cohorts who have to replace the older;
 - the painful differentiation of the genital norm in the foundations of the social – ethnical – religious – cultural groups;
 - the structure of the panic emigration through which the reproduction of the remaining population is misbalanced;
 - the structure of the minimum or potential emigration because of which the reproduction of the available population in Bulgaria will also be misbalanced.

What is still more important, however, is that **the demographic crisis has clear qualitative projections towards degradation of the population and movement to the dividing line beyond which the Bulgarian population will not be able to reproduce itself sufficiently.**

- Attention is not paid to **the direct connection between the qualitative structure of the present and forthcoming birth rate and the structure of the population** by some particularly important features of the human potential – capital of the nation and the state: **the education and the civic civilization; the health and capacity of work; the social integration and the socialization and etc.**

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR FORMATION AND PURSUANCE OF A MODERN DEMOGRAPHIC POLICY IN BULGARIA

The present day values in the area of the demographic policy in the EU member states and in the other advanced countries are related with:

- providing favourable conditions for normal reproduction of the population;
- ensuring incentives for the setting up of sustainable families;
- universal protection and encouragement of motherhood;
- up-to-date regulatory frameworks for ensuring equal chances for all the children.

The Economic and Social Council shares the opinion that the demographic problems in Bulgaria have piled up over the years, they will show in a long-term plan and can be solved for a long period of time. The overcoming of the challenges outlined **is not a party task** and not for one political mandate in the government. The Economic and Social Council considers that it is necessary to unite the efforts of scientists, politicians and statesmen, of the mass media and the public as a whole. **The demographic policy of Bulgaria has to be a national priority for many years ahead.**

Based on the appreciations made on the demography situation in the country, the Economic and Social Council suggests to the governmental institutions and the representative organizations of the organized civil society the following major recommendations and proposals:

First, the demographic policy of the state has to be coordinated and target driven, developed, and pursued by the respective governmental institutions in charge of it. It is necessary to guarantee, by a wide presentation, the involvement and participation of scientists, the mass media, the leaders of the public opinion and the organized civil society.

Second, non-partisan political consensus shall be needed for holding a demographic policy in long-term aspect. The dramatically worsening demographic trends demand urgent actions. On the basis of a clear quantitative and qualitative estimation of the demographic situation and perspectives, a **“State strategy for the development of the population and**

its qualitative reproduction” should be prepared, debated, adopted and implemented in coordination with an outlook at least till the year 2050.

Third, on the basis of the Strategy the parameters of an Emergency Demographic Policy should be worked up for the next several years where focus is to lay on the qualitative aspects and the plan views of the issues – measures for qualitative reproduction of the Bulgarian nation; matching the state policy towards the family, parenthood and birth rate with the moral and material incentives and restrictions from the positions of attaining both qualitative amendments in the number and the structure of the population not later than the coming 10-15 years.

Fourth, direct encouragement or restriction of birth rate is impossible at today’s democratic conditions. But this does not mean that the state refuses to regulate the birth rate. It is necessary, on the basis of a political and public consensus to define and adopt the parameters of the state regulators pertaining to the birth rate – motivating for the middle and elite classes and restraining for the marginalized and non-socialized communities.

Fifth, the strategy, and the politics for normalization of the demographic processes have to be based on generally accepted principles, such as:

- providing good parenthood while taking care of and bringing up the children;
- ensuring economic and social conditions for a qualitative birth rate;
- awareness of the high value of human life and providing universal protection by the state to the family and the children against economic, social and criminal risks;
- reorientation of the state demography policy from social assistance benefits to social investments in the new generations, their parents and families;
- reduction of children’s death rate and abortions and on that basis raising the birth rate;
- improving the attitude towards children and cultivating in the values of the modern society;
- guarantee for the physical and psychic health and development of the intellectual potential in the first seven years of children’s growth;
- introduction of compulsory sexual education from the third-fourth form at school and training in family planning and good parenthood from the eighth form;
- special attention to the birth rate normalization in the permanently marginalized strata and prosecuting child’s exploitation in all its forms accompanied by an exceptional protection of motherhood in giving birth and bringing up the children.

Sixth, the policy of creating a favourable migration environment and minimizing the emigration of young people abroad and for their adequate training in the country is necessary to be based on modern principles and actions, such as:

- preferential loans for students and young families;
- tax preferences for the employers hiring young specialists right after their graduation;
- acknowledgement and registration of the couples in actual marriage but without having contracted a legal one;

- setting up a system of incentives for economic development and occupation in the regions of the country endangered of demographic collapse
- implementation of the European forms of family income taxation;
- raising the contraceptive culture of the marginalized strata of the population;
- developing a system for monitoring the emigration and the reasons thereof;
- pursuing a principally new policy towards the Bulgarians from the communities beyond our state borders via relieved regimes for repatriating to their former fatherland.

The Economic and Social Council,

Underlying its anxiety about the aggravation of the demographic situation in Bulgaria,

Stressing the need of future qualitative development and reproduction of the Bulgarian nation,

Expressing its concern about an almost complete lack of an all-round, adopted with a consensus and consecutively implemented state policy in this area,

Appeals to the governmental institutions, the political parties, the structures of the organized civil society, the representatives of the scientific circles and the mass media for their contribution to the development and implementation of a long-term strategy and emergency policies for overcoming the negative tendencies in the demographic development and the solution of the country's demographic problems in compliance with the global and European standards.