

Co-organized by the Republic of Bulgaria, Georgia,
and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

Thursday, 16 June 2022 13:15pm – 14:15pm

The Government of Bulgaria and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), held in December 2021 the first ever Conference on Demographic Resilience. The Ministerial Conference concluded with a call for constructive and positive responses to demographic changes, as well as the launch of the Decade on Demographic Resilience. This side-event, which will be co-organized by the Government of Georgia, discusses outcomes and commitments of this conference, which will help countries address concerns about population ageing, and population decline, and build societies that thrive amidst demographic changes.

While the ageing of populations is fundamentally a success of development -- attributable to modern infrastructure, improved living standards, and innovations in medicine -- today population ageing is often viewed as a threat to sustainable development. Anxieties around population ageing are compounded in a growing number of countries in Europe by the experience of population decrease, especially in Central And Eastern Europe, where low fertility rates have been accompanied by high net emigration for decades. The fact that many young persons from Central and Eastern Europe are emigrating and having their children abroad, further exacerbates population ageing and population decrease there.

The fear about demographic change typically has to do with anxieties about the implication of population ageing and lower population numbers for labor markets, labor productivity, pensions, health care, other social protection measures, and the mounting pressures on public and private financing of these social protection measures. However, the concerns are also frequently linked to worries about the implications of population ageing and lower population numbers for cultural and democratic shifts, political and military might, national integrity and defense, among others.

Population ageing, while it should be understood as a success of development, is now frequently seen as a threat to development with concomitant implications for older persons. Older persons are viewed as a burden, and spending on older persons is seen as a cost. Such negative attitudes also represent a fertile ground for age-based discriminations. Associated with such views are efforts to curb spending on older persons, and as the COVID-19 endemic has uncovered, such efforts have had terrible consequences for many older persons. Older

persons often do not have the necessary economic, social and medical support to live a life of dignity, and are therefore also particularly vulnerable to pandemics and other crises. Curbing spending on older persons is problematic from a human rights perspective, and ensuring decent living standards of older persons is a moral imperative. Moreover, spending on older persons can also be understood, at least in some cases and to some extent, as an investment in their human capital. If older persons are able to age in good physical and mental health, older persons will also continue to remain an economic and societal asset. Even in cases where they will retire, they often make invaluable contributions to society, as they lend financial and in-kind support to their children and grandchildren. Also through capital deepening – notably higher investment in human and physical capital, which raises productivity levels – countries can achieve a second demographic dividend.

However, a growing number of countries have voiced major concerns about population ageing, and in response a growing number of these countries are now taking measures to slow and reverse population ageing and population decrease. These measures largely focus on raising fertility levels. The fact that many women and men would like to have two or more children, and end up having only one or no child, suggests that there is indeed a space for rights-based policies that help women and men close the gap between desired and actual fertility and have more children. Many countries have policies that ultimately support women and men who have more children. Such pro-natalist policies can be perfectly compatible with human rights and freedoms. However, this is not always the case. In a drive to raise fertility levels, some countries no longer pursue the aim of universal access to modern family planning; have made abortions more difficult or illegal; oppose the introduction of comprehensive sexuality education into school curricula, and have propagated gender stereotypes.

In short, anxieties about population ageing, as well as population decrease, have resulted in negative attitudes towards population dynamics. In some cases, they have also encouraged policies that negatively affect older persons, women and youth, and are effectively undermining human rights and freedoms. Rather than viewing population ageing as a threat and older persons as costs, population ageing can be seen as an opportunity. The fact that today we live about ten years longer than our grandparents did is first and foremost a present to people and society. Investment in the real economy, human capital and healthy ageing can help older persons to remain engaged in the economy and society for longer, and can help countries realize a second demographic dividend, provided these measures go hand in hand with a fight against ageism.

Against this backdrop, UNFPA's Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia has developed and launched its Demographic Resilience Programme, and together with the Government of Bulgaria, UNFPA has hosted the first in a series of bi-annual Ministerial Conferences on Demographic Resilience. The conference launched the Decade on Demographic

Resilience which is aimed at working with countries to build societies that are resilient to demographic change. Such societies not only recognize the challenges, but also the opportunities posed by demographic change. By anticipating and addressing demographic change, countries can develop constructive and positive responses to demographic change and build thriving societies. **This side-event will discuss some of the shifts that are necessary to build demographically resilient and thriving societies. These have to do with shifts in the way we see older persons and address their needs, as well as shifts in the way we help women and men achieve desired fertility levels. This session will also look beyond national averages and focus on rural regions that are particularly affected by population ageing and population decrease.**

Session (60 mins)

Moderator:

Ms. Marta Dialova, Deputy Regional Director a.i., UNFPA Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Opening remarks:

Mr. Zurab Azarashvili, Minister of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs, Georgia

Dr. Velislava Petrova, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bulgaria

Dr. Diene Keita, Deputy Executive Director (Programme), United Nations Population Fund

Panellists:

Mr. Narek Mkrtchyan, Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, Armenia

Ms. Jovanka Trenchevska, Minister of Labour and Social Policy, North Macedonia

Mr. Marcel Spatari, Minister of Labor and Social Protection, Republic of Moldova

Mr. Stuart Gietel-Basten, Professor of Social Science and Public Policy, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology