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The Future of Europe – global trends, economic, social and legal areas

Przyszłość Europy – globalne trendy, obszary gospodarcze, społeczne i prawne

Abstract: The future of the European Union will be shaped by the intersection of three powerful forces: demographic transformation, technological innovation and evolving legal frameworks. This article explores how these trends will redefine the economic, social and legal landscape of Europe by mid-century. It highlights the demographic paradox facing Europe – a shrinking and ageing population contrasted with rapid global growth, especially in Africa – and its far-reaching implications for the labour market, welfare systems and social cohesion. The analysis highlights the role of legal instruments, such as the EU Platform Work Directive and the Artificial Intelligence Act, as examples of anticipatory governance, reflecting the Union's efforts to address structural challenges through forward-looking regulation. The article also examines how urbanisation, environmental risks and shifting social values will contribute to a redefinition of the European social model. The conclusion positions demographic change as the EU's third major transformation, alongside the green and digital transitions, arguing for an integrated policy response grounded in inclusive growth, legal innovation and intergenerational justice.

Keywords: European Union, demographic change, labour market, social security, artificial intelligence, digital transformation, ageing population, sustainable development, intergenerational justice

Streszczenie: Przyszłość Unii Europejskiej kształtować będą trzy potężne siły: transformacja demograficzna, innowacje technologiczne oraz ewolucja ram prawnych. Artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób trendy te przeformułują gospodarczy, społeczny i prawny krajobraz Europy do połowy XXI wieku. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono europejskiemu paradoksowi demograficznemu – starzejącej się i kurczącej populacji w zestawieniu z dynamicznym wzrostem liczby ludności na świecie, zwłaszcza w Afryce – oraz jego konsekwencjom dla rynku pracy, systemów zabezpieczenia społecznego i spójności społecznej. Analiza podkreśla znaczenie instrumentów prawnych, takich jak dyrektywa o pracy platformowej oraz Akt o sztucznej inteligencji, jako przykładów tzw. zarządzania anticipacyjnego, odzwierciedlającego wysiłki UE na rzecz reagowania na strukturalne wyzwania poprzez proaktywne regulacje. Artykuł bada także, jak urbanizacja, ryzyka środowiskowe oraz zmieniające się wartości społeczne przyczyniają się do redefinicji europejskiego modelu społecznego. W konkluzji transformacja demograficzna zostaje przedstawiona jako trzecia kluczowa przemiana Unii – obok transformacji zielonej i cyfrowej – wymagająca zintegrowanej polityki opartej na wzroście inkluzywnym, innowacjach prawnych i sprawiedliwości międzypokoleniowej.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska, zmiany demograficzne, rynek pracy, zabezpieczenie społeczne, prawo UE, sztuczna inteligencja, transformacja cyfrowa, starzejące się społeczeństwo, zrównoważony rozwój, sprawiedliwość międzypokoleniowa

Introduction

The future of the European Union will be shaped by an unprecedented convergence of three transformative forces: demographic change, technological innovation and evolving legal frameworks. As Europe enters the third decade of the 21st century, these forces will define the direction of development for both individual Member States and the EU as a whole. Responding to these challenges requires strategic foresight, social resilience and effective law-making that protects fundamental rights while supporting economic and social cohesion¹.

¹ G. Uścińska, *Changing Work Patterns' Impact on Social Security in Europe*, [in:] *Arbeits- und Sozialrecht für Europa. Festschrift für Maximilian Fuschs*, F. Marchold, U. Becker, E. Eichenhofer, G. Igl, G. Prosperetti (eds.), Nomos-Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden 2020, pp. 769-778.

Global demographic trends and the european paradox

By 2040, the world population is expected to exceed 9.2 billion, growing to 9.7 billion by 2050. However, Europe will not be a part of this global population boom. According to projections, the EU population is expected to peak in 2026 at 453 million and then decline gradually thereafter. At the same time, Africa's population will grow rapidly – from 1.4 billion in 2023 to 2.1 billion in 2040 – with an overwhelmingly young demographic profile².

In contrast, Europe is facing an accelerating process of demographic ageing, declining fertility rates and shrinking cohorts of people in the productive age. This is not just a social challenge but a fundamental economic and political one. Population decline, once seen as a localised European or East Asian issue, is now becoming a global concern with systemic implications³.

Labour market pressures and new legal instruments

Europe's labour market is under increasing strain. By 2040, the number of people of working age is expected to decrease by 17 million, with an additional 10 million lost by 2050. This structural shortage of labour, exacerbated by skills mismatches and digital exclusion, necessitates the rethinking of employment models and the extension of working lives – particularly for older people and women⁴.

The EU is responding with new regulatory approaches. The 2024 Directive on Platform Work⁵ introduces a presumption of employment for platform workers, marking a significant shift in the balance between

² ESPAS, *Global Trends to 2040. Choosing Europe's future*, Luxembourg 2024.

³ See: G. Uścińska, Z. Wiśniewski (ed.), *Zmiany demograficzne a rynek pracy i ubezpieczenia społeczne*, RRL, GUS, Warszawa 2022.

⁴ Eurostat, *Population on 1st January by age, sex and type of projection*, online data code: proj_23np, DOI: 10.2908/proj_23np

⁵ Directive (EU) 2024/2831 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2024 on improving working conditions in platform work; G. Uścińska, K. Berrahal, *Wykorzystanie sztucznej inteligencji w polityce publicznej na przykładzie zabezpieczenia społecznego*, "Zabezpieczenie Społeczne. Teoria, Prawo, Praktyka", no. 18/2023, pp. 61-73, DOI: 10.31971/2299-2332.2023.18.5

flexibility and security. Similarly, the EU Artificial Intelligence Act⁶ – adopted in June 2024 – provides a comprehensive legal framework for the development and application of AI, aiming to mitigate risks and protect fundamental rights.

These initiatives reflect a broader trend: the EU as a legal community is increasingly relying on anticipatory governance. Law becomes not only a reactive instrument but a forward-looking tool that helps steer technological and social processes.

Social security systems

Europe's social protection systems – one of the pillars of the EU's identity – are under significant pressure. The ratio of retirees to workers is increasing, resulting in rising pension and healthcare costs. In Poland, for instance, 85% of pensioners rely on public benefits, and the replacement rate is expected to drop below 30% for men and 23% for women by 2050⁷.

The sustainability of these systems depends on multiple reforms, including prolonging professional activity, encouraging savings, and designing policies that support intergenerational fairness. Without such measures, the adequacy of pensions and access to long-term care will be at risk – increasing social exclusion and inequality in ageing societies⁸.

Urbanisation, environment and shifting values

Urbanisation and climate change are reshaping the physical and social environment of Europe. With 1.9 billion people expected to face heat

⁶ Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence and amending Regulations (EC) No 300/2008, (EU) No 167/2013, (EU) No 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, (EU) 2018/1139 and (EU) 2019/2144 and Directives 2014/90/EU, (EU) 2016/797 and (EU) 2020/1828 (Artificial Intelligence Act).

⁷ International Monetary Fund, *Public System Overview. Republic of Poland*, 2025; G. Uścińska, *Reflections on the digitalisation of pension systems in the EU context, with emphasis on the coordination of social security systems and challenges posed by intra-EU mobility*, presentation on the Science Conference “Digitalisation of pension systems and the movement of EU citizens. Challenges in coordination social security”, Lisbon 30 of May, 2025.

⁸ See: G. Uścińska, C. Sadowska-Snarska, *Praca i polityka społeczna w zmieniającej się rzeczywistości*, Toruń 2022.

stress by 2030 and over a billion already living in slums, the environmental context of demographic change is gaining urgency⁹.

Moreover, social values and lifestyles are changing: smaller households, different approaches to parenthood and shifting roles in society all contribute to a new European social model. These cultural transitions must be understood as both a consequence and a driver of the demographic and technological changes described above.

Conclusion: Demographic change as Europe's third transformation

Demographic transformation joins the green and digital transitions as one of the three defining forces of the EU's future. It will influence economic performance, welfare state sustainability, migration policy and legal norms.

European law plays a critical role in this process – not only as a mechanism of integration and harmonisation but also as a guarantor of citizens' rights and a compass for navigating complexity. Legal frameworks concerning AI, digital labour and social protection must remain flexible yet robust, open to change yet firmly rooted in fundamental values.

Facing the future, Europe must invest in its human capital, build adaptive institutions and shape regulatory ecosystems that reflect the realities of the 21st century. The strategic challenge for the EU lies not only in anticipating change but in turning it into an opportunity for inclusive and sustainable development.

⁹ United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024*.

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