

Children in the 21st Century: The Case of Hungary



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When I was born, the population of the world was a little over 5 billion. By the time I started avidly browsing the back of atlases in primary school, with all the information about populations, it had reached 6 billion. We reached 8 billion in 2022, and – according to estimations – around 2058 the world will be inhabited by 10 billion humans¹. Yet, we constantly hear how the birth rate is dwindling in the European Union (EU) and the United States². Countries therein are trying desperately to incentivize people to boost the population –to little avail. This phenomenon, in turn, leads to an aging population, which increasingly burdens social systems.

On the other hand, there is talk³ about the cost of every new human life with regards to the climate change, how Earth's resources are gobbled up faster than they can reproduce, and how a Malthusian catastrophe⁴ is imminent. These might seem like paradoxes. How can birth rate be a problem in higher-income regions, when it takes only slightly over a decade to add another 1 billion to Earth's population? Why do measures to reverse population decrease in areas such as the EU more likely than not to fail? Would it not be better for the planet to sustain fewer people? And how come, that despite the increasing numbers, not only is there no sign of a looming catastrophe, but the number of those suffering from hunger are declining throughout the world as are the number of conflicts (at

¹ <https://populationconnection.org/blog/world-population-milestones-throughout-history/>

² [Data of the World Bank: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=EU-US](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=EU-US)

³ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20220905-is-the-world-overpopulated>

⁴ https://www.economicsonline.co.uk/managing_the_economy/what-is-the-malthusian-theory-of-population.html/

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THE INTRODUCTION OF THE STATE, WHICH TAKES ON THE JOB TO TAKE CARE OF YOU, ALSO TAKES AWAY AN INCENTIVE TO HAVE CHILDREN

least up until the war in Ukraine), while life expectancy in general is increasing? What exactly is the tally of positive and negative developments in our world, and how do they affect people's propensity to want to have children? Let us, therefore, examine these questions, with the aim to provide proposals on changes that need to be brought about in order to boost birth rates in the West.

A COMPLEX ISSUE

Most of the current policies in the European Union and the United States fail to acknowledge how complex the matter is, and by focusing only on single measures (such as tax benefits), the excluded other issues (such as climate anxiety, prospects for the future, career choices, mental well-being, and many others) are left neglected. Nowadays, information is more readily available than ever. Before a major decision (such as deciding to have children), couples will consider matters such as healthcare, schooling, careers, housing, and security. These complex systems all need to align to bring people to a decision.

Then there are adoption and abortion laws, education on family planning, the matter of abuse in the family, divorces, and a plethora of other matters that sway birth rates. Most importantly, why does it really matter? Should there be incentives to boost birth rates, or should governments retreat completely from this decision?

This very complex issue is worth investigating with its different perspectives and best practices. The situation in the EU – with a particular focus on Hungary – could provide a better understanding of birth rates all over the world. Different sectors (such as healthcare, the job market, academia, or policy makers) have various relationships to the matter – though interconnected, they need to be looked at individually.

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

One thing must be said early on: low birth-rate is inherent to any developed society⁵. One can tweak the numbers or recognize complex systems, the birth rate, however, will remain lower than in less-developed countries⁶, due to obesity and other health issues that come with more prosperity, along with housing issues and women delaying having children for career opportunities. Globally, policy makers must aspire to at least balance the death rate and the birth rate, without taking away the opportunities for men and women to have as many children as they want, to have career opportunities and to prosper.

⁵ [World Population Prospects 2022 Available \[online\]: https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/wpp2022_summary_of_results.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/wpp2022_summary_of_results.pdf)

⁶ Nargund, G. (2009) "Declining Birth Rate in Developed Countries: A Radical Policy Re-Think Is Required", [in]: *Facts, Views & Vision in ObGyn*, Vol. 1(3), pp. 191–193. Available [online]: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4255510/#:~:text=In%20addition%20there%20are%20socio,current%20low%20fertility%2Fbirth%20rates>



THE PROBLEM OF AN AGING SOCIETY IS HERE TO STAY

There are two major factors leading to the fertility crisis of today: the Industrial Revolution and welfare⁷. The culprit of the former is difficult to pinpoint. Thanks to complex socio-economic developments, the cost of production got cheaper, innovation got faster, and, in turn, life became exponentially better. True, there were terrible road bumps (dismal working conditions, child labor, and pollution), but humankind slowly figured it out. The Industrial Revolution led to a system of free market economics, which could guarantee progress and, as a consequence, better healthcare, more food, and less war.

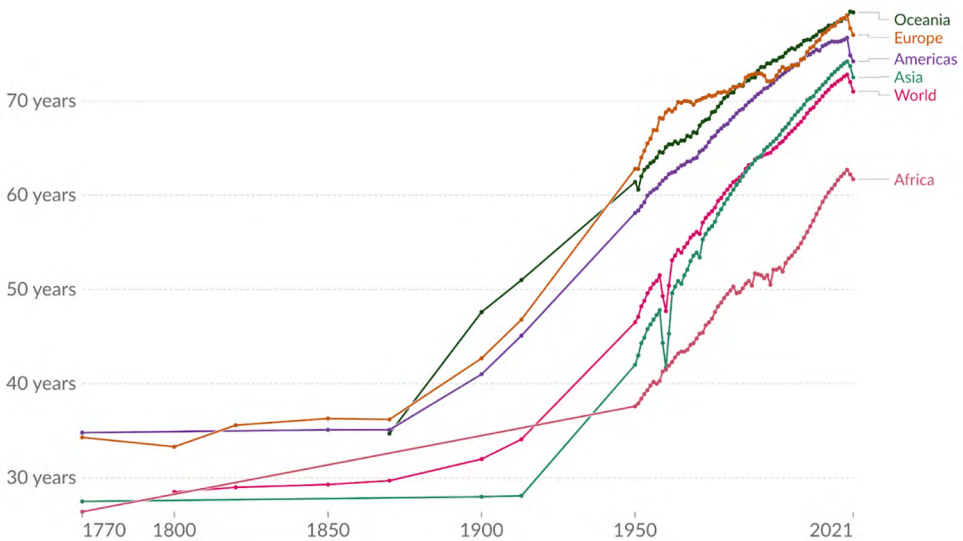
There is a common misconception that before the modern era people only lived until they were in their 30s⁸. It is not true. Although the average life expectancy was around 35, it was mainly due to a very high child mortality rate⁹.

⁷ Fenge, R. and B. Scheubel (2014) "Pensions and Fertility Back to the Roots: The Introduction of Bismarck's Pension Scheme and the European Fertility Decline", [in]: *European Central Bank's Working Paper Series*. Available [online]: <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/pdf/scpwps/ecbwp1734.pdf>

⁸ Cave, C. (2018) "Did Ancient People Die Young?" Available [online]: <https://www.sapiens.org/biology/human-lifespan-history/>

⁹ Roser, M. et. al. (2013) "Life Expectancy", [in]: *Our World in Data*. Available [online]: <https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy#:~:text=Globally%20the%20life%20expectancy%20increased,more%20than%20twice%20as%20long>

Figure 1: Life expectancy between 1770 and 2021



Source: Our World in Data

Over the years, the number of those who died of protein-energy malnutrition also showed a steady decline¹⁰ – so did the number of lives claimed by an armed conflict¹¹. This has led to an ever-aging population. With life expectancy increasing, more and more young people would be needed who, when entering the job market, could pay for the care for the elderly.

This brings us to the second reason the birth rate is slowing: welfare. Here, one can name exactly who was responsible. An elderly, austere looking mustachioed man, by the name of Otto von Bismarck, who is considered to be the father of the welfare state. He introduced insurances and pensions, which is great, but there is a catch. It leads to people wanting fewer children.

¹⁰ <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/malnutrition-deaths-by-age>

¹¹ <https://ourworldindata.org/war-and-peace>

It used to be that one needed children, so they can take care of you when you are old. Given the high mortality rate among children, the more, the better – just to be sure. The introduction of the state, which takes on the job to take care of you, also takes away an incentive to have children¹²,

The welfare state only works well if it can roll the burden of paying for the welfare before itself, constantly burdening future generations. When future generations decrease in size, the problem is imminent.

As the world will keep getting better and better at medical sciences, developing more resilient and nutritious foodstuff,

¹² Fenge, R. and B. Scheubel (2014) "Pensions and Fertility Back to the Roots: The Introduction of Bismarck's Pension Scheme and the European Fertility Decline", [in]: *European Central Bank's Working Paper Series*. Available [online]: <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/pdf/scpwps/ecbwp1734.pdf>

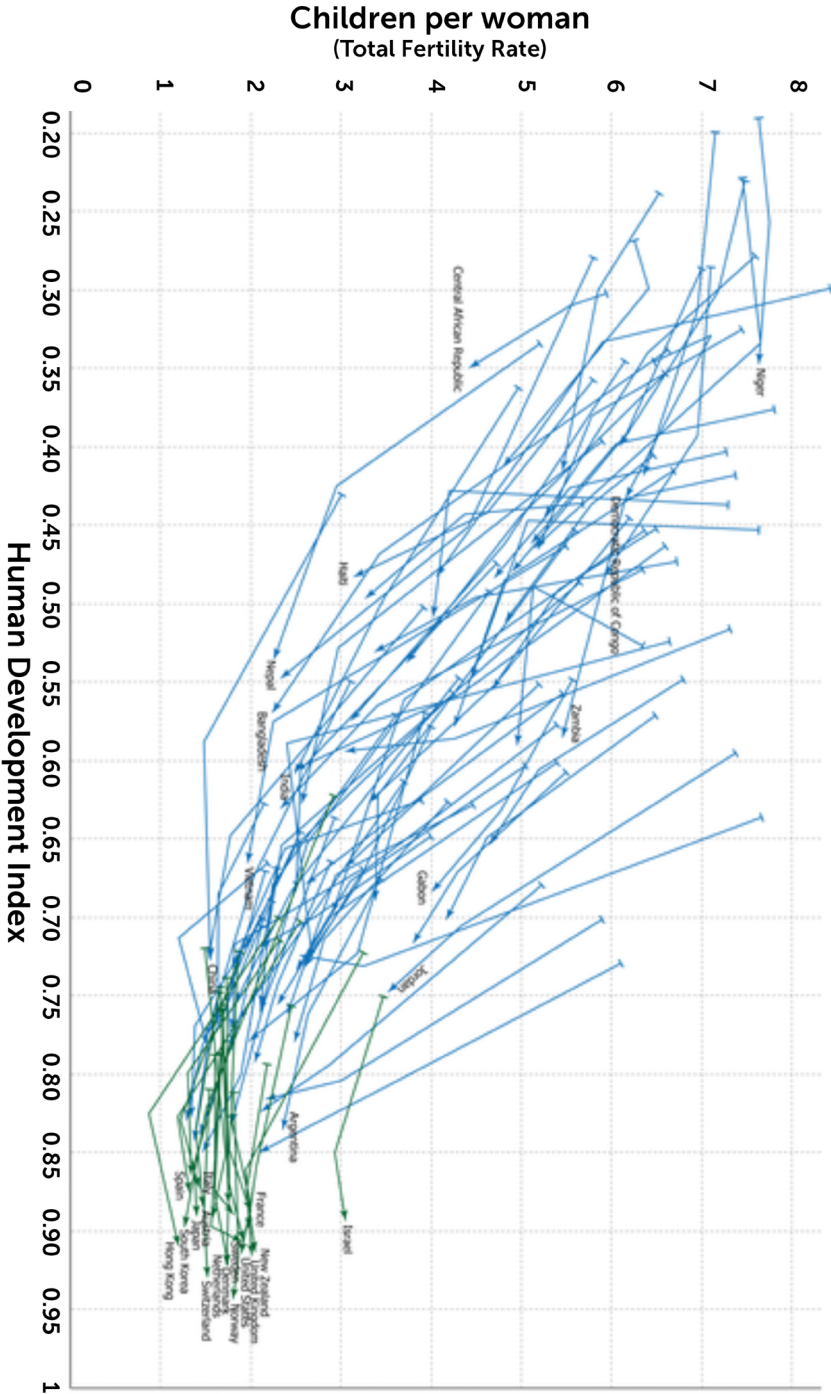


Figure 2: Relationship between fertility and the Human Development Index

Source: Our World in Data



HEALTHCARE PLAYS A KEY ROLE IN BOTH THE PRO- SPERITY OF PEOPLE TO HAVE CHILDREN, AND THEIR ABILITY TO DO SO

and all in all in prolonging life expectancy, which is excellent, the problem of an aging society is here to stay. There are two options to mitigate this: tackling the welfare state or addressing basically everything.

Since no politician would cut back on welfare in the required levels at the current climate, as that would mean the end of their career, this leaves us with the tackling of 'everything else' – from education to schooling to nudge people to have more children.

PROSPERITY

There seems to be a trend in economics, according to which, the more developed a country is, the lower the birth rate. Although the birth rate is decreasing the world over, it seems to be an even bigger problem in the developed world. It is only true up to a point. When a certain amount of development is reached, birthrate slowly increases again¹³ [See: Figure 2].

¹³ <https://ourworldindata.org/fertility-rate#fertility-is-first-falling-with-development-and-then-rising-with-development>

In more developed countries, schooling is higher for women, and job opportunities are better. These are welcome developments; however, they lead to a lower birth rate¹⁴. When wanting to boost the number of newborns, opportunities for women to learn and work must not be taken away – in fact, efforts to grant and improve these opportunities must redouble.

Data actually shows that people want to have more children than they have. All across the EU and the United States, there is a large gap between the actual and ideal number of kids [See: Figure 3].

When the Institute of Family Studies conducted a survey in the United States among those who do not have the 'ideal number' of children, the main reason was that the right partner was not yet found (44%), followed by not being able to afford having children (36%), and that it is due to lifestyle or career (25%)¹⁵.

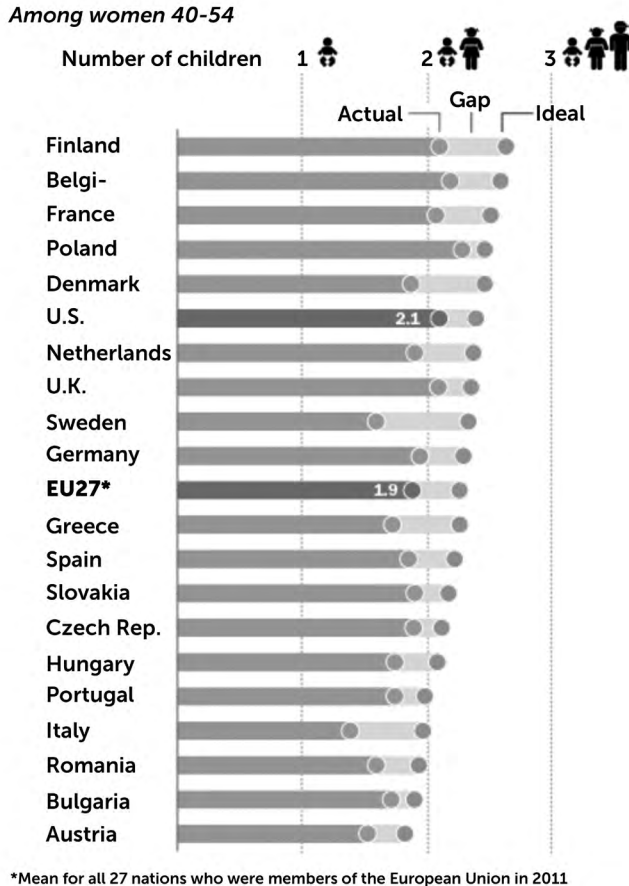
Just throwing money at the problem does not seem to work. For example, Hungary spends a lot of money on subsidies for families planning children. Housing subsidies, government loans, tax credits, and a load of propaganda engineered to boost birthrate did not manage to reach its desired effect. It benefited wealthier families but not the poor it should have helped. The number of marriages indeed grew, but the number of babies born did not increase significantly¹⁶.

¹⁴ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/health/female-education-and-childbearing-closer-look-data>

¹⁵ See: Table 1.

¹⁶ <https://telex.hu/english/2022/07/07/hungarys-current-family-policy-draws-a-dividing-line-between-the-deserving-and-the-undeserving>

Figure 3: Actual and ideal number of children



Source: PEW Research¹⁷

The Swedish model might be more promising. There, the government is not running an ideological propaganda on families, but instead supports people on an individual (and not family) basis¹⁸. Although this model was popular among numerous family policy experts, such as Jonas Him-

melstrand¹⁹, the Swedish birth rate is constantly fluctuating, making it difficult to assess how well their policies are working²⁰.

The Hungarian government's notion that a couple must get married in order to have children is outdated, not based on evidence, and shifts the focus from family

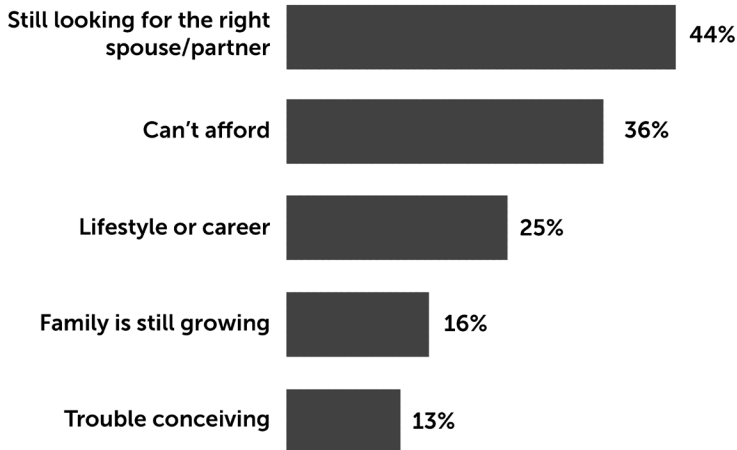
¹⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/04/11/birth-rates-lag-in-europe-and-the-u-s-but-the-desire-for-kids-does-not/>

¹⁸ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ebauer/2019/08/09/is-sweden-our-fertility-boosting-role-model/?sh=104b458613cb>

¹⁹ United Nations (2011) *Work Family Balance*. Available [online]: <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm11/jonasppt.pdf>

²⁰ Ibid.

Table 1: Reasons for not reaching desired fertility



Source: IFS

planning to an ideologically charged ‘need to get married’. In fact, according to the Cohort ‘18 survey, only 54.4% of expecting women are married in Hungary²².

Existing societal expectations also hinder women in having an independent income. Although 83.3% of the expectant women were employed – according to the same study, – and 5.7% of them are self-employed, six months after giving birth only 3.6% were actively working, mainly because it is expected of them not to work, just stay with the child for 3 years²³.

²¹ <https://ifstudies.org/blog/no-honey-no-baby-the-relational-and-economic-factors-associated-with-having-children-in-america>.

²² Veroszta, Z. et.al. (2021) *Pregnancy in Hungary: Report on the First Wave of the Cohort ‘18 - Growing Up in Hungary*, Hungarian Demographic Research Institute. Available [online]: <https://demografia.hu/en/publicationsonline/index.php/workingpapers/article/view/975/760>

²³ Veroszta, Z. et.al. (2021) *Infancy in Hungary: Report on the Second Wave of Cohort ‘18 – Growing Up in Hungary*, Hungarian Demographic Research Institute. Available [online]: <https://demografia.hu/en/publicationsonline/index.php/workingpapers/article/view/976/761>

The Labor Code in Hungary requires employers to provide part-time jobs for those employees with children who request it²⁴. 75.8% of mothers who were working when their child was six months old, retired to their previous jobs²⁵. However, a great possibility for stay-at-home moms to boost their income and help their financial independence is to create a business environment in which it is easy to enterprise. This is not the case in Hungary. A new law²⁶ increased the opportunity cost rather than lowering it when Hungary is already in 52nd place of the Ease of Doing Business Index²⁷.

The current financial situation is one thing, it is another thing entirely to consider how

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ <https://yveu.org/blog/f/hungarys-new-tax-law-attacks-small-businesses-and-entrepreneurs>

²⁷ World Bank (2021) *Ease of Doing Business Rank*. Available [online]: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IC.BUS.EASE.XQ?most_recent_value_desc=false

well-off future children would be. Citizens of many Western countries, Hungary included, think²⁸ that their children would be worse off than they are. This pessimism is also a hurdle in wanting children and it is something that is not easy to change – but change it must.

FREEDOM

Freedom might not be an obvious contributing factor to the birthrate, but as we demonstrated in the previous chapter, prosperity is, and thus anything that bears an effect on prosperity will influence the birth rate. Freedom and prosperity are clearly demonstrated to be correlates²⁹. Conditions with a high commitment to rule of law, media plurality, democratic values, and a safe business environment help life to be more predictable. Let us see through the example of Hungary how complex a task governments have in tackling the issue of low birth rates. Instead of indoctrination that it is moral to have children, the policies should focus on creating a nurturing environment.

Hungary comes dead last in the Atlantic Council's Freedom and Prosperity Index³⁰ in the freedom category compared to other EU countries with its rank of 58th. Its prosperity rank is not much better at 45th. The index draws data from a myriad of other indices, in which Hungary is doing awful, and the country tends to be in the bottom place among EU countries. Wages are low (third lowest in the EU)³¹, and due to a mismanaged economy, prices are increasing

²⁸ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/08/11/large-shares-in-many-countries-are-pessimistic-about-the-next-generations-financial-future/>

²⁹ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/the-big-story/the-freedom-and-prosperity-indexes-how-nations-create-prosperity-that-lasts/>

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Wages_and_labour_costs

so much that Hungary has the worst inflation in the EU³².

Hungary has 4.95 points in Fraser's index in the protection of property rights category. The size of the government received 5.92³³. This shows that the government is expanding at the cost of the private sector, yet the public sector is not doing its job adequately as demonstrated in the next chapter. Businesses in Hungary are not in the greatest environment either.

Credendo, a European credit insurance group, gave the Hungarian business environment an E out of an A to G scale, where A is the best. The expropriation risk out of 1-7: is 3 in the same index³⁴. A good business environment would also aid young mothers in finding an extra source of income – but the worse it is in indices, with a risk of expropriation, the more dissuading it is for people to start business. Moreover, due to an unfair competition (usually in the form of state intervention), competition is not based on merit, but on how close to the government a business is.

The World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index gave Hungary 73 points, the worst in the EU³⁵. Freedom House defines Hungary as partly free³⁶. Political rights are given 26 points out of 40, civic liberties 43 out of 60. The Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International shows Hungary has the worst corruption in the EU³⁷.

³² <https://www.portfolio.hu/en/economy/20230119/hungarys-sky-high-inflation-in-eu-perspective-591272>

³³ Economic Freedom of the World. See: <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/studies/economic-freedom>

³⁴ <https://credendo.com/en/country-risk/hungary#>

³⁵ <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/>

³⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary>

³⁷ Corruption Perceptions Index. See: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022>



THE FOCUS OF POLICY SHOULD NOT BE TO PUSH THE BIRTH RATE AT ANY COST

This environment does not give too much hope for the future. Some of these indices, such as the Corruption Perceptions Index or sub-indicators in other indices are based at least partially on perception, such as the corruption index, showing a dismay from the part of the population as well. In these conditions it is no wonder young couples do not want to have children or want to have them abroad. There is a widespread problem of emigration from Hungary³⁸, so part of the problem is not that people do not want children, but that they do not want to have them in bad environments.

HEALTH

Healthcare plays a key role in both the propensity of people to have children, and their ability to do so. The healthier a society is, the higher its fertility.

Education is an important aspect to teach people about a healthy lifestyle. Sex education helps reduce teenage pregnancies, education on contraceptives and STIs promotes a better understanding that leads to

people having the number of children they want, when they want. Education helps choice and allows sexes to understand each other better.

The importance of education is recognized by the people as well. A good public school can increase property prices in the area. Education is the first step in a healthy lifestyle³⁹. However, states can fall into the error of trying to interfere too much into what otherwise would be a free choice of individuals, that is, how healthily they chose to live.

Countries that decide to take a greater hand in controlling the health of people fall short of their goals. There is no correlation between health measures, and the actual health of people⁴⁰. Hungary for instance is fourth in the list of countries with most nanny state policies⁴¹. Yet Hungary is one of the most obese and overall unhealthiest countries in the European Union⁴². Obesity, for example, has been linked with infertility, among other health problems⁴³.

Inadequate healthcare can also lead to issues when deciding to have children. The Hungarian healthcare system is so bad that preventable deaths are the highest in

³⁹ <https://societyhealth.vcu.edu/work/the-projects/why-education-matters-to-health-exploring-the-causes.html#:~:text=Education%20can%20also%20lead%20to,and%20may%20improve%20cognitive%20ability>

⁴⁰ <http://nannystateindex.org/>

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² European Commission and World Health Organization (2013) *Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity – Hungary*. Available [online]: https://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0014/243302/Hungary-WHO-Country-Profile.pdf

⁴³ Gambineri, A., et al. (2019) "Female Infertility: Which Role for Obesity?", [in]: *International Journal of Obesity Supplements*, No. 9, pp. 65–72 Available [online]: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41367-019-0009-1>

³⁸ Horváth, T. (2022) *Erősödik a kivándorlás Magyarországról*. Available [online]: <https://index.hu/gazdasag/2022/04/20/kivandorlas-ausztria-lakashelyzet-fiatalok/> [in Hungarian]



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Hungary⁴⁴ in the EU and deaths avoidable through adequate care is much higher than the EU average. It is no surprise that a lot of people would choose private healthcare, and on average Hungarians spend around EUR 263 annually⁴⁵ on private healthcare while still having to pay taxes that fund the public health sector. In comparison the monthly average net wage in Hungary is around EUR 888⁴⁶.

Pregnant women in Hungary would also opt for private solutions. 30.5% of them used only private gynecological care, yet 97.6% of women gave birth in a public

hospital.⁴⁷ The expectancy period comes with its own costs as well. Families spent around EUR 330 on expenses associated with pregnancy, and an additional EUR 474 on baby equipment. This is already a lot compared to the average wages, yet if a woman would decide to give birth in a private hospital, it could cost somewhere between EUR 2,184 and 5,262, depending on whether women want to choose their doctors or not, and what services they require⁴⁸.

Most people cannot afford such expenses and must go to a public hospital, where services are not what one calls comfortable or friendly. Obstetric violence⁴⁹ is still a major problem. Doctors often do not respect the basic human rights of women, and do not seek their consent when giving them medications or when examining them. Doctors often see the interests of the baby only, disregarding the wellbeing of the mothers, when both are important. These are common problems, and they infantilize and submit women, rather than treating them as a human with rights⁵⁰.

⁴⁴ European Commission (2021) *State of Health in the EU – Hungary*. Available [online]: https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/2021_chp_hu_hungarian.pdf [in Hungarian]

⁴⁵ Political Capital (2022) *Overt and Covert Privatization in Healthcare – Whose Interest Is It?*. Available [online]: https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/FES_PC_Healthcare_Summary_EN_220622.pdf

⁴⁶ <https://dailynewshungary.com/here-is-how-much-the-average-hungarians-salary-is/>

⁴⁷ Veroszta, Z. et al. (2021) *Pregnancy in Hungary: Report on the First Wave of the Cohort '18 - Growing Up In Hungary*. Available [online]: <https://demografia.hu/en/publicationonline/index.php/workingpapers/article/view/975/760>

⁴⁸ Haiman, É. (2021) *Aki magánkórházban szeretne szülni, annak most változatos árakra kell készülnie*. Available [online]: <https://novekedes.hu/elemezsek/aki-magankorhazban-szeretne-szulni-annak-most-valtozatos-arakra-kell-keszulnie> [in Hungarian]

⁴⁹ <https://www.lamaze.org/Giving-Birth-with-Confidence/GBWC-Post/what-is-obstetric-violence-and-what-if-it-happens-to-you>

⁵⁰ Enikő, B. (2022) "Amit tapasztalunk a szülőszobán, azt éljük meg nőként is a társadalomban. Kizárnak a minket érintő döntésekből", [in]: *Marie Claire*. Available [online]: <https://marieclaire.hu/riporter/2022/05/20/masallapot-a-szuleszetben-magyar-szuleszet-problemak/?fbclid=IwAR0Z6U8dITCqtJ8cTKXeDC6bIW6PqFpXxTrlT9lypufJQhGx55ehldnSnow> [in Hungarian]

Then there is the problem of mental health. Evidently more attention should be given to mental health globally, but even more care should be given to pregnant women and those with a newborn.

A study found that anxiety and depression are both present in around half of pregnant women⁵¹ and around the same have newly onset anxiety right after childbirth. We should do away with the notion that childbirth is all great, and a mother should be overwhelmed by joy at the arrival of their child. They are, but they should not be embarrassed by having postpartum depression or anxiety and seek help. Mental health issues are even 40% more prevalent in young mothers (21 years old, or younger). A study found that three out of four of them have some kind of mental health issue⁵².

Furthermore, there are other kinds of anxieties that can hinder people from having children. For instance, dread about the future, such as in the form of climate anxiety. According to a study, 75% of young people have serious concerns about the future, moreover half of the people said that their everyday lives are negatively affected by climate anxiety⁵³.

This can affect the birth rate given the fact that there is an ongoing debate about the moral obligation of well to do areas to have fewer children so that they do not

impact the environment negatively. A study claimed that parents are responsible for the emission of their children which will be five times more than their own. This finding, however, did not consider falling emissions, and is now considered to have been incorrect⁵⁴.

WHAT WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT

There are several sensitive topics that need to be discussed when talking about birth rate policies. The focus of policy should not be to push the birth rate at any cost. The health and wellbeing, mental and physical health of people should not be negatively affected.

For instance, there is the topic of abortion. A study conducted in the United States shows⁵⁵ that banning abortion would increase the birth rate, but it would also increase poverty and health issues of children by not giving at risk people access to terminate pregnancy.

Then there is the issue of women's health. In places where abortion is banned, maternal death rates are 24% higher⁵⁶. Also, some women will seek illegal abortions or go elsewhere, often with a dubious reputation to perform abortion placing them and their reproductive health at risk. These should be factored in the debate on abortion, beside the morality of the issue at hand, which is – no doubt – also important.

Adoption should also be an area of focus. 'Unwanted' children should not suffer from policies that hinder providing children with a warm and nurturing home.

⁵¹ <https://www.mentalhealthjournal.org/articles/an-overview-of-maternal-anxiety-during-pregnancy-and-the-post-partum-period.html#:~:text=In%20fact%2C%20a%20study%20by,51.4%25%20immediately%20after%20childbirth10>

⁵² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/claryestes/2020/02/25/mental-health-challenges-are-4-times-higher-among-young-mothers-study-finds/?sh=110e9f7d7a4b>

⁵³ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/sciencenature/how-to-deal-with-the-anxiety-caused-by-the-climate-crisis-180980093/>

⁵⁴ <https://theconversation.com/why-parents-shouldnt-be-saddled-with-environmental-guilt-for-having-children-189933>

⁵⁵ <https://www.prb.org/articles/are-the-states-banning-abortion-truly-pro-child-or-just-pro-birth/>

⁵⁶ <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/abortion-bans-will-result-in-more-women-dying/>

For instance, most western countries allow same sex couples to adopt. Yet, globally speaking, there are still numerous barriers. Hungary, for example, banned adoption rights of same sex couples in a recent law⁵⁷ and introduced a law mandating women to listen to the fetal heartbeat before abortion⁵⁸.

Adoption rights and abortions should be considered together because not only the birth rate should matter, but also the future wellbeing of the newborns as well.

If the reduction in the size of the population of countries is a problem, there is another way of fixing the problem, that is much quicker than the family policies that often do not work, yet take a long time to have an effect, if any: the solution could be immigration. Although in the US the fertility rate among immigrants is also dropping, it is still higher than among the native-born population⁵⁹. Immigrants themselves can supplement the number of people that are missing from the economy.

CONCLUSION

Birth rate is a hard nut to crack. There are many seemingly unconnected issues that can affect birth rates directly or indirectly. The reason birth rate is a matter of concern is primarily not ideological or moral (meaning that it is the moral duty of people to reproduce), but, nowadays, the problem is more economic. The welfare state in its current form requires a steady or growing



BIRTH RATE IS A COMPLEX MATTER WITH NO QUICK FIX, OR A 'ONE SIZE FITS ALL' SOLUTION

number of population in order to sustain itself and provide benefits for those who are incapable of producing wealth for themselves – either because they are too young, too old, are ill, or have disabilities.

Politicians would not dare touch the welfare system radically, although, at one point, they will be forced to. In the short term, however, it would mean taking away money from people, and it would require a major overhaul to supplement the current welfare system with another one that allows the same or more wealth to people. So, if the welfare states are here to stay, solutions are needed to tackle the problem of falling birth rates. It is a complex issue, and simply 'throwing money' at it is not working at all.

There are several areas that need attention. Primarily a good economic environment must be created, even if this means in the short term that birth rates will fall even more. After a certain point, more development will mean more children because the concerns about money and opportunities will cease.

⁵⁷ Same-sex adoption. See: <https://www.equaldex.com/issue/adoption>.

⁵⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/sep/13/hungary-tightens-abortion-access-with-listen-to-foetal-heartbeat-rule>

⁵⁹ <https://cis.org/Report/Fertility-Among-Immigrants-and-NativeBorn-Americans#:~:text=Thus%2C%20the%20presence%20of%20immigrants,has%20also%20declined%20somewhat%20more>

Closely related to the economy is freedom. They correlate, and more freedom gives more hope and an overall better environment in which people would be keener to have children. Giving people the freedom to choose is much better than essentially forcing them through economic means to have children in order to receive money.

It shows that freer countries attract more immigrants that boost the birth rate, so people will flock (or at least want to) to places with more liberty. Increasing freedom could stop emigration and would increase the birth rates of the country.

Birth rate is not the only focus. It should go hand in hand with wellbeing, both of the parents and the children. Women should not be forced to give birth, whatever the cost. They should have the opportunity to study even if it would negatively affect the birth rate. Their health, both physical and mental, should be a priority, rather than their assumed duty of giving birth. So, a pregnant woman must be given better treatment in the hospital and should not be objectified as a mere vessel for the future generation. The mental health of mothers should not be a taboo topic, but rather something that people can talk openly about.

It is also important to consider the wellbeing of children. It is not enough that they are born, they should be born with the opportunities to prosper and live in peace.

Birth rate is a complex matter with no quick fix, or a 'one size fits all' solution. The bottom line is that states should focus on giving all people a good opportunity to live in freedom and prosperity, with opportunities rather than throwing money at the problem, and if these conditions are met, more people will be happy to have children. If

there are people still choosing not to, they should not be demonized. After all, it is their choice, and choice is what freedom is all about.



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