

Module 06: A European Crisis? Demographics and Immigration

Conclusion

The future is never written in stone. Human decisions can and do matter, and individuals do change the course of history. Yet below the events of human history, the collective actions that we call demographics shape the choices we can make. Principles as abstract as the rate of natural increase have profound implications that we as individuals have little control over.

While immigration is fundamentally a political debate about citizenship, it is predominantly shaped by demographics. If recent trends continue, Europe's population will dramatically decline without large-scale immigration. At the same time, Europe's population will age substantially. The consequences of such a transformation are serious: a substantial decline in population would mean a significant contraction of economic growth, which could be devastating. Similarly, the aging of the population will mean a smaller workforce to care for a growing elderly population. European welfare systems could eventually collapse without the curtailment of current generous social welfare benefits. In addition, people will be forced to work later into their lives, while younger workers will have to pay larger portions of their income to help support pensions and health care costs.

Immigration is fundamentally tied to demographic trends. In one sense, immigration diminishes the effects of Europe's low birth rates and longer life spans in two ways. First, immigration increases the number of available workers, and immigrants tend to be willing to do the menial jobs that Europeans prefer not to undertake. Second, immigrant families in Europe tend to produce more children than Europeans, which raises the average rate of natural increase for the entire continent. Yet these economic imperatives are increasingly butting up against another set of values in the debates over immigration and citizenship. The riots in France in November 2005 were symptomatic of a greater problem. Immigration does not necessarily mean incorporation into society and the body politic, a fact viewed differently by both sides of the political spectrum. While the Right tends to note the conflict of fundamental values between Europeans and (particularly Muslim) immigrants, the Left often sees structural political and economic barriers to integration as the cause of tension between immigrants and natives. In both cases, the debate centers around the notion of belonging. Politicians on the anti-immigrant Right, such as Jean-Marie Le Pen and the late Pim Fortuyn, claimed that immigration must be halted or European values will be subsumed by an immigrant

population that shares a different view of the world. On the pro-immigrant Left, politicians stress the barriers to belonging; granting immigrants citizenship does not preclude their economic, geographic, or social marginalization.

The debate will ensue in the foreseeable future. While immigration almost certainly will continue in one fashion or another, the debate over belonging will shape the form that immigration takes, and the policy decisions that will impact larger demographic trends.