

Europe's New Geostrategic Pivots

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The power of demography

Europe's ethnic landscape is undergoing an epoch-making change as a result of the interconnection of a number of factors, most notably migratory phenomena, aging processes and the constant disparity among the birth rates of different ethnic groups co-living in the same territory.

Demography is often overlooked and not fully understood in international relations but future trends cannot be forecasted adequately without taking into account its world-overturning power. Indeed, demography is the foundational pillar of nations and civilizations: they cannot hope to resist the force of history – or the enemy's army – if their baby cots are empty. Positive demography is also tied to positive economic growth – because automation will prove helpful up to a certain point – but also to welfare sustainability. In short, a nation's fertility rate must be high enough to make the generation replacement possible (2,1 children per woman).

Last but not least, history teaches and shows us that demography can be weaponised to the detriment of low fertility-stricken countries. This is no political fiction: let's only bear in mind the forgotten case of the Texas revolution. The former Mexican province was conquered by means of demography, namely through a silent ethnic colonization which over the years would lead Americans to overcome Mexicans.

Texas revolution tells a lot to present-day readers and strategists because it proved the effectiveness of the demographic bomb theory. Indeed, in particular contexts characterised by low fertility rates and/or scarcely populated – with the overall situation worsened by the presence of shortsighted statesmen – it is possible

to exploit all these factors in order to produce a dystopian ethnic revolution useful for destabilizing purposes. In such contexts, large communities of citizens and oriundos sharing the same space can be properly exploited and turned into dangerous fifth columns.

More recently other powers pursued the demographic bomb strategy with high degrees of success. For instance, Iran fostered the growth of Shia communities all over the Middle East and got extraordinary results in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen – where Shiites ceased to be small minorities and turned into large national communities which can be used to give rise to “productive” insurgencies.

The Balkans

Now, after this very short introduction about the importance of the demography factor, the time has come to explain how demography can alter the geostrategic importance of lands and countries and how the West's demographic winter is going to transform Europe by giving rise to new geopolitical pivots.

The most important demographic change is taking place in the Balkans, the region which – according to the United Nations and the World Bank – is experiencing the world's most severe depopulation crisis. This crisis is due to emigration elsewhere, aging, and constant disparity between high mortality rates and low fertility rates. But, against the background of the depopulation, there is something that most demographers seem not to observe nor to fully understand: there is a demographic revolution within the demographic involution.

We, Vision and Global Trends, have written about this topic on many occasions and this is the right place and time to resume some facts, data and scenario analyses again.

New pivots in the Eastern Balkans

The Balkan peninsula is recording the world's worst demographic crisis and no government has found any solution to reverse the trend until now. According to the United Nations' projections, whose reliability is strengthened by national data and studies, by the end of the century countries like Moldova, Romania and Bulgaria could virtually disappear as their native populations are expected to decrease at critical levels until the extinction point. In the above-mentioned countries, the fertility rate has been being below the replacement line – 2,1 children per woman – since the late 1980s because of the constant discrepancy between deaths and new births and high rates of mass emigration abroad.

Bulgaria represents the most emblematic case of such demographic crisis: the country is estimated to resize at a rate of 164 people less per day. Between 2050 and 2100, the total population is set to diminish from the current 7 million 128 thousands (2016) to 3 million 400 thousands.

But there is something untold about what is going on in the Eastern Balkans. While it's true that the Slavic-centered ethnic core that has characterized the peninsula for centuries is likely to fade significantly, it's true as well that these countries will continue to exist but under a different cultural and ethnic framework. In fact, while natives emigrate abroad and those who don't re-settle choose not to have children or to have small-sized families, Roma people, whose presence in the Balkans dates back to the year 1000, tend to have very large families and their growth is now posing a challenge to the traditional social order because of the gradual disappearance of ethnic Slavs.

By the year 2050, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Hungary, Slovakia and Czech Republic are likely to be Roma-majority and the ethnic transition will not take place peacefully. Inter-ethnic clashes, appearance of far-right vigilantes, political rallies and people-led assaults on Roma ghettos have become common phenomena in

Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary, and they will characterize the rest of the Balkans as soon as the social pressure coming from the increasingly numerous Roma community will start arising and being felt in the neighborhood.

Turkey has understood what is going on and has significantly extended and deepened its presence in Bulgaria's Roma community by means of culture centres, schools and mosques. Bulgarian Romas tend to be Muslims and Turkey – along with the Islamist international – is pursuing here a strategy of re-Islamisation which also led to the first cases of religious radicalisation and to the appearance of some of the world's most dangerous terrorist organizations, like the Islamic State.

According to Sofia's Center for Demographic Policies, by 2050 Bulgarians could be the country-third ethnic group, after Romas and Turks, and by 2100 their presence could be insignificant – 8 million Romas, 1 million 500 thousands Turks, and 300 thousands Bulgarians.

It's clear that whoever is interested in shaping Sofia's internal affairs must deal with the ethnic revolution and find the instruments to conquer the favour of Romas: today's persecuted and much-hated minority, tomorrow's major ethnic group. The same reasoning applies to the other mentioned countries – all of them are set to experience the same path, although we focused on Bulgaria.

It's only matter of a few decades until the time bomb to blow up. And wherever there is a time bomb about to blow up, there is a pivot. And this ethnic revolution is making the Balkans more pivotal than ever, with Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary – NATO and EU member countries – set to become extremely vulnerable and exposed to malicious foreign interferences. The West's Eastern periphery has never been so potentially explosive.

Geopolitics needs new pivots and we have found some of them: the aforementioned trio. But they are not alone. Other European countries and regions

are likely to become more relevant in international affairs or at least within the great-power competition in the light of the ethnic changes happening within them.

The Eagles' Belt

Some weeks ago Bulgaria Defense Minister Krasimir Karakachanov said publicly that North Macedonia “can only become an EU member if it became a part of Bulgaria or an Albanian province”. He was speaking about Skopje's EU integration process and Sofia's position on the matter, but his claim hides an element of truth.

North Macedonia, indeed, is on the path to become an Albanian-majority country – that's why the joke about its evolution into an “Albanian province” – that is to become a full member of the so-called “Eagles' Belt”, a term coined by us to refer to Tirana-Pristina-Skopje trio. The Eagles' Belt is the Albanian peoples' civilizational bloc and its turning into reality is to going to shape significantly the region's political, interethnic and geopolitical dynamics.

Is this political fiction? No, not at all. North Macedonian authorities fear so much this scenario that they are willingly postponing the population census from 2002. At that time, Albanians made up one-quarter of the total population (25%) but the natives' low fertility rate, counterbalanced by the minority's high birth rate, may have changed deeply that demographic situation. North Macedonia's Albanians may now represent between 35–50% and the repercussions of such change are as natural as obvious: recognition, power sharing, geopolitical shift, and so on. The alternative to recognition is chaos, and Skopje knows it very well: it experienced an ethnic-driven insurrection in early 2000s and interethnic tensions are increasingly felt in public opinion.

Then there are Albania and Kosovo, the hearts of the Eagles' Belt, which are known for their traditionally strong pro-Western standing. The Albanisation of the

region, in short, may mean further Americanization and, accordingly, extraordinary pressure over Serbia. But, until that moment – Albanisation is still on the way – the Eagles' Belt may be skillfully leveraged to weaken the NATO southern border – namely North Macedonia – by instrumentalizing the increasingly high interethnic tensions between Macedonians and Albanians in Skopje.

The Eagles' Belt is a rising pivot of high importance destined to work as the Balkan peninsula's key-stone. Whoever controls it, can exert pressure over a number of nations (Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, etc), and whoever controls the Southwestern Balkans, controls the Balkans. And whoever controls the Balkans, controls Europe.



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