

European Union's Plunging Birthrates Spread Eastward

By ELISABETH ROSENTHAL
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PRAGUE — Pushing their newborns in strollers along Na Prikope, Prague's main shopping street, Jele-na Heitmankova and her two friends get emotional as they describe their desire for more children. But, although they're only nearing 30, they know their broods will probably end with the one child each has now.

"Having children here is expensive, and there is no structure: no services, no baby-sitting," said Ms. Heitmankova, who is on maternity leave. "It would be nice if there were still nurseries, like when I was a child," she said, referring to free Communist-era child care.

After a long decline, birthrates in European countries have reached a historic low, as potential parents increasingly opt for few or no children. European women, better educated and integrated into the labor market than ever before, say there is no time for motherhood and that children are too expensive anyway.

The result is a continent of lopsided societies where the number of elderly increasingly exceeds the number of young — a demographic pattern that is straining pension plans and depleting the work force in many tries.

The European Union's executive arm, alarmed by the trend, estimates that, if birthrates remain this low, the bloc will have a shortfall of 20 million workers by 2030.

Immigration from non-European countries, already a highly contentious issue in much of the European Union, would not fill the gap even if Europe's relatively homogenous countries were willing to embrace millions of foreign newcomers, experts say.

A recent RAND Corporation report on low birthrates warned of serious long-term repercussions, concluding: "These developments could pose significant barriers to achieving the European Union goals of full employment, economic growth and social cohesion."

Throughout Europe, women have delayed having children, or opted out entirely. But the free fall in births is most recent and precipitous here in Eastern Europe, where Communist-era state incentives that made it economical to have children — from free apartments to subsidized child care — have been phased out while costs have skyrocketed.

New, vibrant market economies provide young people with tantalizing alternatives. Lukas and Lenka Dolansky, both journalists, would like a sibling for their 3-month-old son, Krystof, but they are not sure that would be practical. "We want to go abroad, study, have a career," Mr. Dolansky said. "Our parents didn't have those opportunities."

The result is birthrates that are the lowest in the world — and the lowest sustained rates in history. European Union statistics put the rate at 1.2 children per woman in the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Latvia and Poland, far below the rate of 2.1 needed to maintain population.

Western European countries are also suffering: Greece, Italy and Spain have had rates of 1.3 and under for a decade.

But Eastern Europe is faced with a double whammy: plummeting birthrates combined with emigration to Western Europe for work, made easier by membership in the European Union.

As countries begin to feel the demographic crunch, Europe's birth dearth is becoming a political issue. Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany pushed through a package of fam-



Lucie Vitkova/Northfoto, for The International Herald Tribune

Prague residents Lenka and Lukas Dolansky, with their son, Krystof, may pursue careers or living abroad rather than having another child.

ily-boosting incentives for working women in June, and President Vladimir Putin warned in May that Russia's population decline was critical. Almost all governments are increasing baby bonuses.

"If you have a fertility rate of 1.2 or 1.3 you need to do something about it — it's really quite a problem," said Tomas Sobotka of the Vienna Institute of Demography. "You have labor problems, economic problems and steep rates of population de-

Vibrant economies offer women more choices than before.

cline."

The Czech Parliament voted unanimously this year to double the payment given to women on maternity leave. The Czech Labor Ministry set up a program several years ago to encourage immigration from Bulgaria, Croatia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine.

In the Czech Republic, the population is projected to drop by 20 percent over the next 40 years, to 8 million from 10 million. "In this year's election, every political party had a platform on family issues," said Prof. Jitka Rychtarikova, a demographer at Charles University in Prague who has been advising the government.

In Brussels, Vladimir Spidla, the European Union's commissioner for employment and social affairs, who is Czech, has asked that all new Eu-

ropean policies be evaluated for their effect on demography. "We take this very seriously and are trying to understand more about it in order to reverse the process," said Mr. Spidla's spokeswoman, Katharina von Schnurbein.

In 1990, no European country had a fertility rate of less than 1.3 children per woman; by 2002, there were 15, with 6 more below 1.4. No European country is maintaining its population through births, and only France — with a rate of 1.8 — has even the potential to do so, according to a recent report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

France has long encouraged larger families through incentives, from direct per-child payments to allocations for clothing and school supplies; it recently offered women about \$960 a month for a year if they had a third child. Austrian women receive about \$570 a month for three years for a first birth.

The new attitudes about children arise from many factors. But with greater educational and professional opportunities available, the average age of first-time mothers has risen significantly in the last two decades, from the early 20's to around 30 in many countries. That means that grandmothers — the traditional caregivers in much of southern Europe — may be too old to help out, especially with a second child.

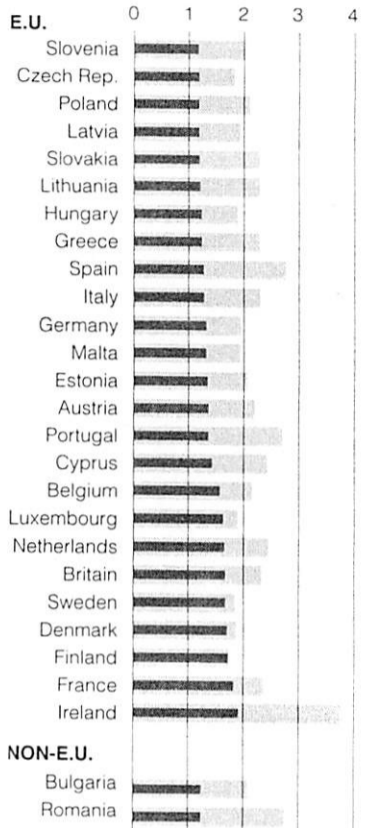
The widespread availability and use of contraceptives, of course, has turned childbearing into a choice rather than an act of nature. The legalization of abortion in many countries has had a similar effect.

But in Eastern Europe, where women worked during the Commu-

Baby Drought

Across the European Union, fertility rates have dropped well below the level that maintains population: 2.1 children per woman.

Fertility rates in 1970 
Fertility rates in 2004 



Source: Eurostat, The New York Times

nist era, the profound societal changes that occurred when the Soviet Union dissolved dramatically changed the equation.

Most Communist countries, like the Czech Republic (then part of Czechoslovakia), provided housing, education and child care. Here in Prague, the only way a young couple could be allocated an apartment was to wed and have a child. Day-care centers, staffed by professionals and operated by the Health Ministry, were widely available. But such policies and services were abolished with the fall of Communism as relics of social control and engineering.

Today, the evolving private market has not provided child-care alternatives. At the same time, women are better educated and their jobs more demanding than under Socialism, Professor Rychtarikova said.

"The external conditions make it really impossible to reconcile professional life and family life," said Professor Rychtarikova, who has encouraged family-friendly reforms, like subsidized nurseries and part-time work.

Like many countries in Europe, the Czech Republic provides for long maternity leaves, generally three years, so that mothers can take care of young children. But the payments are low — even though they recently doubled to about \$300 a month — and the long hiatus makes it harder for women to re-enter the work force.

Radka Jankova, a 30-year-old doctor with a 7-month-old son who was out walking in Prague, said she would like to return to work part time. But, she said, "They want me back full time." She dismissed the possibility of a second child.

"Two kids and six year maternity would be pretty imp. she said.

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