

PANIC OR INTEGRATION: DISCOURSES OF POPULATION AND AGEING IN SOUTH- EASTERN EUROPEAN MEDIA

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEMATIC ISSUE*

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ABSTRACT

Through a systematic discourse analysis and quantitative coding, we explore how population, ageing, and crisis discourses appear, interact with one other, and co-occur in South-Eastern European media. Our central research problem is why and how ageing has remained only weakly integrated into the main population discourses despite the profound demographic changes brought about by population ageing, declining fertility, and migration.

To address this question, we conduct in this volume a comparative analysis of four countries with somewhat similar and also somewhat different discursive traditions, socio-political histories, and population development on a material level. All four countries have experienced substantial population ageing and sustained fertility decline, yet their public discourses have been shaped by different combinations of conservative, ethnic-Narodnik, socialist modernisation, developmental, and other demographic transitions. This comparative design enables us to examine both common regional patterns and country-specific variations in the relationship between population and ageing discourses.

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Keywords: population development, population discourses, ageing, ageing discourses, South-Eastern Europe, discourse analysis

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INTRODUCTION

The demographic dynamics of South-Eastern Europe have become a major issue not only within the region but also globally. By the end of this century, the region containing Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, Croatia, Bosnia, Czechia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Romania is projected to lose more than half of its 2017 population (Vollset, 2020). This would represent the steepest projected population decline among all regions. Driven by various factors, it poses major challenges to social and economic reproduction (Tóth, 2025). Consequently, population ageing, workforce size, pension systems, and migration have become central topics in policy discussions and are increasingly portrayed as symptoms of a forthcoming major crisis, particularly in the neoliberal era (Simmonds, 2021).

From a purely demographic perspective, these developments might indeed appear to justify panic or even a sense of catastrophe. However, in this special issue we argue that this panic and anxiety result less from an unavoidable national demographic catastrophe caused by irresponsible social forces than from longstanding discursive traditions and the accumulation of nationalist narratives since the early nineteenth century, operating within contemporary neoliberal social conditions. We further argue that this sense of panic is reinforced by population discourses that remain largely disconnected from discourses on population ageing. At least in the media, these discourses fail to establish systematic and substantive links to ageing and most importantly the social aspects of ageing. Only the developmental discourses and partially the modernisation population discourses are somewhat open toward ageing, but even in these cases some distance can be observed. The current main population discourses focus only on fertility changes, despite the fact that fertility increases across the region have generally been modest and largely limited to periods of economic recovery. This inflexibility may itself contribute to public anxiety, with the implicit ideological intention to push people and the nation toward higher fertility via raising their level of anxiety.

The central question of this special issue is whether media discourses are capable of integrating discourses on population decline and population ageing into a coherent understanding of demographic change. To address this question, we examine media outlets across South-Eastern Europe, exploring how population and ageing discourses are articulated, how they are related to each other, and how these relationships are shaped by different actors and crisis discourses. Rather than merely describing the distribution of discourses across countries, we

try to understand the discursive dynamics through which demographic change is interpreted and communicated throughout the region.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE THEMATIC ISSUE

This analysis is based on a historical understanding of discursive developments. Societies confront new social challenges with a particular discursive heritage and a repertoire of existing discourses, which are then reconfigured in specific historical situations and institutional settings (Fairclough, 2011). In this regard, our approach aligns with the logic of the discourse-historical method developed by Reisigl and Wodak (2009):

The Discourse-Historical Approach considers intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between utterances, texts, genres and discourses, as well as extra-linguistic social/sociological variables, the history of an organization or institution, and situational frames. While focusing on all these relationships, we explore how discourses, genres and texts change in relation to sociopolitical change. (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 90)

Discourse analysis, as conceptualised by Foucault (1972), seeks to identify the rules and regularities governing the formation and dispersion of objects, subjects, styles, concepts, and strategic fields, thereby revealing why certain “statements,” rather than others, are made and how these statements relate to one another within a broader system of meaning. As Foucault put it:

Whenever one can describe between a number of statements such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statements, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlation, positions, and functioning, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation. (Foucault, 1972, p. 38).

Thus, every discourse entails a particular order of knowledge that creates and incorporates “statements” or systems of statements. These orders are embedded in networks of objects, styles and genres, which are the grids and acts of power. Such “disciplining” discourses are also inherently historical, as they come into being at a certain point in time and may then disappear or be reconfigured. Importantly, these changes are closely tied to broader social and political relations and institu-

tional arrangements, but unfortunately, they are rarely investigated by researchers (Foucault, 1972, 1974, 1999).

In our study we also utilise Ruth Wodak's approach: "the topics that are spoken/written about; the discursive strategies employed; and the linguistic means that are drawn upon to realise both topics and strategies (e.g., argumentative strategies, *topoi*, presuppositions)" (Wodak, 2012, p. 529).

Another important concept in the qualitative analysis of discourse is framing, which, according to Robert Entman,

essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Typically frames diagnose, evaluate, and prescribe [...]. Frames, then, define problems [...]. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

Hence, we examine the metaphors and semantic fields in which ageing is discussed, as well as the silences and gaps in the discourse (Entman, 1993).

By discursive formations, we refer to the regularities or strategic patterns through which complex sets of topics ("statements") related to ageing and population dynamics are interconnected. Our aim is to identify these patterns and examine how they co-occur within selected articles, other media content, and visual materials.

Discourse analysis theorists, such as Fairclough and Wodak, often suggest the inclusion of material and social conditions in the analytical process. However, the interaction between material and discursive processes is rarely analysed systematically. As a result, limited attention is paid to how material conditions develop historically and how discursive changes can be linked to such social processes (Melegh, 2023). This is a major omission in the relevant literature, as it misses the overall historical development and accumulation of discourses, even within specific national frameworks.

In response to this gap, our analysis explicitly examines how population discourses of the earlier periods have changed and responded to the profound demographic transformation associated with population ageing. Yet, in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, inherited twentieth-century population discourses have remained largely unresponsive to ageing and have continued to focus primarily on fertility.

These inherited discourses included the following (Melegh, 2023):

- Malthusian frameworks, focusing on population pressures;
- demographic transition theories, concentrating on modernisation and fertility decline;
- socialist modernisation theories, claiming that (socialist) societies are able to optimise population development via planning;
- conservative discourses, emphasising the role of traditions and religion in maintaining fertility levels;
- ethnic-Narodnik discourses on demography and ethnic competition;
- revitalisation discourses, concentrating on how to maintain national and biological strength; and
- developmental discourses, focusing on how changes in institutional and material structures shape demographic processes.

It is therefore important to ask how these inherited population discourses have become connected with ageing in media discourses and what new discursive potentials have emerged from these interactions.

In this analysis, we take into account the profound changes in the material conditions of population development and in population discourses during globalisation. These include the shift toward service-based economies, the relative openness of economies, the sharp increase in the intensity of migration, and the emergence of a new and more flexible global labour market. These transformations have affected how population processes can be “managed” and which biopolitical aims gain prominence. Throughout the region, migration (including emigration, immigration, and asylum seeking) has become a key developmental and discursive issue, reconfiguring population discourses and contributing to an increasingly polarised discursive arena. However, we should not disregard that, in terms of economic and population development trajectories, different patterns can be observed within the region (Antunes, 2021; Bohle & Greskovits, 2012; Melegh, 2023). It is therefore all the more important to examine how ageing discourses enter this picture and how population discourses accommodate the problem of ageing in an era first shaped by globalisation and, more recently, by processes of deglobalisation.

KEY POPULATION DISCOURSES

Translating the abstract definitions outlined above into the specific context of population discourses, we define population discourses as forms of knowledge production that interpret and define key elements of “population development” from the perspective of the rationality of power. They also identify possible interven-

tions that can be used to define a desired or “optimal framework for development” in a given situation.

Based on previous analyses (Bashford, 2014; Melegh, 2006, 2017, 2023), we identified seven discursive formations in advance. Below, we present this typology and indicate the themes and topics that may indicate the presence of each discursive formation in the texts analysed.

MALTHUSIAN DISCOURSE

Malthusian discourse centres on the need to slow or halt population growth and reduce fertility rates to promote economic development and reduce poverty. It advocates interventions such as abortion, sterilisation, and family planning. A central element of this discourse is that available resources and population size need to be balanced and that, in case of imbalance, intervention should target the population side of the equation (Thornton, 2005). This mode of population control follows from the assumption that social regulators (such as self-restraint arising from property relations, including the postponement of marriage if resources are inadequate) do not operate effectively among large groups of the population. According to this discourse, the vicious circle of population growth and impoverishment must be avoided. As we will see later, this has contradictory implications for ageing. Some versions of Malthusian discourse also draw on ecological and environmentalist arguments.

In its original form, Malthusian discourse did not explicitly address ageing. Ageing could be viewed positively insofar as it reduces “population pressure.” At the same time, however, it can be framed as an economic burden and as a potential source of conflict between ageing and very young populations (Hendrixson & Hartmann, 2019). A firm belief in “rational” market forces and technological advancement generally also accompanies this discourse.

This discursive form can be operationalised and coded by identifying the following elements in the analysed texts: the need to reduce population and ecological pressures; the framing of ageing as a sign of population decline and as a necessary development; the necessity of low fertility and family planning; the need to “discipline” high-fertility groups; opposition to immigrants with high fertility; the framing of ageing as a problem when it increases ecological pressure; the view of private ownership as a key institution governing demographic behaviour; and scepticism towards high levels of state redistribution.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION

In this Eurocentric discourse, humanity is seen as having gradually transitioned from an era of high mortality and high fertility to one characterised by low fertility and low mortality. This shift occurred first in terms of mortality and later in fertility, driven by changes in social conditions rather than by active interventions (Sen, 1994; van de Kaa, 1996). The most important factors underlying this transition included urbanisation, industrialisation, rising levels of education and living standards, the spread of medicalisation and improved hygiene, and an increasing emphasis on individualism (van de Kaa, 1996). As our analysis will demonstrate, this particularly diffuse theory of modernisation encompassed a series of concepts and discursive patterns that were linked in various ways to the Malthusian interpretative framework, as well as to conservative and socialist modernisation discourses (to be discussed later).

Originally, ageing was not thematised, as population growth was expected to stabilise at around zero; however, this expectation was not borne out. In response, the concepts of a second and, finally, a third demographic transition were introduced, addressing ageing and population decline alongside high levels of immigration. On one hand, these developments embodied the idea of an uninterrupted increase in mobility as a form of progress, and on the other, they also triggered a strong conservative turn in regions where fertility was low and immigration was high (Coleman, 2006; van de Kaa, 2010). As we will see, this would later give rise to the idea of a third demographic transition, which turned into a radical discourse of revitalisation and panic centred on the notion of a “grand” population replacement. This fear of population replacement has had a huge impact on our investigated region. We therefore relate these later developments to revitalisation discourses.

In the textual analysis, this discursive form was identified by the presence of the following statements and ideas: the promotion of social development (progress) as a means of indirectly shaping demographic behaviour; the framing of low fertility and ageing as signs of development; the association of individualism with development and low fertility; the care of older people as a necessary and unavoidable task, potentially supported by immigrant labour, the expectation that older people and the bulk of the population should enjoy high levels of material well-being and income; and the belief that technological development will also solve problems related to income and productivity.

SOCIALIST OR STATE-PROMOTED MODERNISATION

This discourse is characterised by a state-led vision of modernisation, in which policy experts and demographers advocate the planned coordination of social, economic, and population processes (for this logic, see Greenhalgh, 2003; Kligman, 1998). While these discourses emphasised social progress and development, they also stressed direct population policy goals. The main target of intervention was to increase population size and especially fertility as part of the socialist programme of industrialisation, economic development, and securing political and military capacity (Avramov & Cliquet, 2016). Although this discursive form emerged under socialism, it did not disappear with the collapse of socialist regimes and can still be detected and identified today.

In our textual analysis, this discursive form was identified by the presence of the following interrelated statements, themes and claims: the need for planning and state intervention to achieve optimal development; the idea that the state possesses demographic sovereignty; the possibility of optimising and improving population composition; the belief that a “normal” level of fertility can be guaranteed; the provision of care and support for children and older people by a socially responsible state; the view that immigration is unnecessary and emigration is to be avoided (“population autarchy”); the role of economic modernisation and technological progress in promoting development; the provision of healthy living conditions through state-sponsored health care; the control or marginalisation of market forces; and competition with the West in the process of modernisation, particularly in terms of mortality and health indicators.

ETHNIC-NARODNIK DISCOURSES

The ethnic-Narodnik discourse is based on ethnic competition. This minor discursive pattern has always been characterised by internal contradictions and tensions, which eventually led to its incorporation into other discursive forms, most importantly to the neo-conservative and the revitalisation types. It occupied an intermediate position between conservative and revitalisation discourses, while also sharing elements with developmental and socialist modernisation discourses. Originally, particularly between the two world wars, the Narodnik/nationalist discourse was based on social liberation and ethnic rivalry (Trencsényi et al., 2018, pp. 142–161). At its core was the advocacy of social reform or radical transformation in order to protect social and/or ethnic groups perceived as undergoing demographic and

social decline, most importantly the peasantry, whose decline was associated with low fertility, high mortality, and/or high levels of outmigration.

The so-called “popular,” “peasant,” or “Narodnik” thinkers of Eastern Europe argued fiercely, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, for challenging existing structures that perpetuated unjust social relationships. This discourse never had a global vision and remained mostly concerned with local conflicts and the representation of minority and majority groups. By the 1980s (and earlier), the conceptual framework of socio-ethnic rivalry was reinforced in many Eastern European countries, conflating ethno-nationalistic framings with concerns about security and economic vitality (Brunnbauer, 2026; Brunnbauer & Taylor, 2004; Vigvári & Gerőcs, 2017).

This discursive form can be identified by the presence of the following themes and claims: the perception that the in-group (“us”) is oppressed by alien ethnic minorities; the belief that elites have an interest in maintaining unjust social and economic systems; the framing of low fertility (one-child families, abortion) as “suicidal” behaviour among the oppressed majority; the interpretation of ageing as a sign of ethnic decay; the perception that more demographically vital minorities oppress the majority; the existence of severe generational conflicts; the portrayal of young people as irresponsible and prone to leaving the local community; the framing of these issues as concerning the nation as a whole rather than the political left or right; concerns about premature mortality among ordinary people, unhealthy lifestyles, and exploitation; and the perception that imbalanced demographic development and minorities threaten the security of the state.

CONSERVATIVE DISCOURSES

This discourse can be traced back to the eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century, it had already emerged in many parts of the world in defence of the family and traditional ways of life and in opposition to Malthusian and modernisation ideas (Thornton, 2004; Weiner & Teitelbaum, 2001, pp. 23–27). It was particularly prominent in the 1970s and 1980s, shaping demographic debates, and it increased its popularity with the subsequent neoconservative turn. This discursive pattern differs from both Malthusian and demographic transition discourses in its approach to fertility, and especially abortion, although the cultural pessimism of the second and third demographic transitions bear some similarities to it. In the 1970s and 1980s, debates revolved around issues of sexual conduct and abortion, sometimes also individualism as a perceived threat to community solidarity. In many countries around the world (including, as noted above, many socialist states), “liberalism” in

relation to abortion, sexuality, and family life met with increasingly fierce opposition (Avramov & Cliquet, 2016). Since the 1980s, both religious and secular conservative movements and discourses have regained strength. It was an important new development, however, that global movements in support of control gained momentum in this period.

This discursive form can be identified by the presence of the following themes and statements: the view that population growth and fertility rates are too low and need to be raised via strengthening “traditional” values; opposition to abortion and other radical interventions in “life” (e.g., euthanasia) on the grounds of traditional values and the need to maintain stability and morale in local society; scepticism towards family planning (birth control); the perception that the family has declined and no longer provides appropriate and morally supported types of care for children and, very importantly, for older people; the view that immigration is not a solution if it undermines the moral integrity of society; support for a welfare system that reinforces traditional (patriarchal) order and gender hierarchies; the expectation that the state should guarantee morality and social stability without undermining the market economy; concerns about generational conflicts; and an emphasis on the importance of decent care for older people.

REVITALISATION DISCOURSES

This pattern, a radical form of demographic nationalism, emerged in the 1930s and sought ways to regain an imagined national biological “power” to compensate for geopolitical and territorial losses in the global struggle for resources. It was based on the claim that each successive generation experienced genetic and biological decline (or degeneration), necessitating urgent corrective measures. Unlike traditional conservative or even Narodnik discourses, revitalisation discourse was not primarily concerned with preserving cultural traditions. Rather, it promoted a modernist, state-centred radicalism to defend biological power (Griffin, 2007). Italian Fascism and German Nazism are prominent examples of this type of discourse, but this pattern was much more widespread, appearing in many regions and countries of the world (Ipsen, 1993; Quine, 1996; Trencsényi et al., 2018; Turda, 2010; Wanrooij, 2002; Weiner & Teitelbaum, 2001).

The principal means of securing biological power were direct eugenic interventions (Turda, 2010), the defence of “identity,” the struggle against plutocratic (Western) nations, the creation of various old/new “empires,” and the redistribution of territories and resources. Central to these ideas was a belief in a hierarchy among

human beings and the rationalisation of open and often violent state intervention (Barrett & Kurzman, 2004).

In more recently emerging revitalisation discourses, there is a fear that a particular country or region will be “flooded” by migrants or that its population will become “overly mixed.” Within this discursive space, which has developed largely outside the academic sphere, ideas of biological-national “survival,” competition, and the hierarchy of social groups have gained ground (Coleman, 2006). A key component of this discourse is the Great Replacement theory, whose contemporary form originated in France and which combines or recombines elements of very different discursive traditions. It is clearly rooted in a personified and cultural critique of globalisation (Leimeiszter & Camus, 2018). It became a specific, essentialised form of such critique, personifying the perceived threat in migrants and elite groups. The language of this discourse tends to be “strong,” provocative, and generalised, overwhelming the reader, and it also often expresses strong hostility towards gender and sexual diversity.

This discursive form is coded by the presence of the following themes and statements in the analysed texts: the view that racial and cultural mixing and gender ideology promote degeneration and should be stopped; the claim that an elite is imposing amoral and irrational cultural and identity patterns in place of the ones we had earlier; the belief that “elites” are facilitating the replacement of the local population by new settlers; the idealisation of the past, including the belief that world of previous generations and older people was “healthier” and that older people embody better cultural perspectives; the view that caring for older people is a biological and cultural imperative but should not rely on permanent immigration; the promotion of pronatalism among the “us” group alongside antinatalism directed at groups depicted as “unhealthy”, including immigrant groups; the belief that the state has moral, cultural, and eugenic duties; and opposition to economic models promoted by the so-called “Davos elites” that are perceived as leading to cultural homogenisation.

DEVELOPMENTAL DISCOURSE

Developmentalist discursive patterns advocate the radical transformation of the economy in the face of population-related tensions and problems (Avramov & Cliquet, 2016). According to these interpretative frameworks, the economy should be placed on a different developmental trajectory in order to produce enough resources both for population growth and investment. This argument was very

strong after the Second World War, not only in Eastern Europe but also in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

Equally important was the rise of critical social sciences that addressed the consequences of colonialism, institutionalised racism, ageism, and gender inequalities (Back & Solomos, 2000). Although population issues were rarely in focus, migration, gender, and ageing received considerable attention. From the 1970s and 1980s onwards, researchers and intellectuals have developed significant bodies of qualitative sociological work, applying a reflective sociological, literary, and social historical analysis of power, representation, and knowledge production. A broad intellectual constellation emerged in support of critiques of the capitalist structural intersections of “gender, race, and class” (Back & Solomos, 2000). These advancements constituted a major progressive trend, albeit at that time they were only prevalent in certain segments of Western academia.

A loose and often contradictory coalition emerged, bringing together postcolonial critique, more radical feminism, social engineering, and a critique of racism, all of which struggled with the problem of subordination and the related economic and social structures. This later formation often opposed state-centred development programmes promoted by other discursive formations and problematised the very concept of development.

This discursive form is identified by the presence of the following statements and themes in the analysed texts: critiques of the market economy; a focus on subordination and identity perspectives; the rejection of ageing as a burden or handicap; the promotion of positive ageing; the view that challenges of ageing should be addressed via economic and social change rather than through increasing fertility; support for migration and cultural mixing, provided that these processes are not exploitative; an emphasis on social progress and development instead of direct intervention in population processes; concern for ecological sustainability; and support for regional or global redistribution.

In this paper, we also assume that various discourses and discursive elements may be linked together into a broader configuration of demographic nationalism. This overarching discursive formation is based on the idea that the small nations of Eastern Europe are in danger of disappearing culturally or even demographically and therefore need to secure their “own” resources for their population development. This overall formation incorporates elements of socialist modernisation, conservative, ethnic-Narodnik, and, most importantly, revitalisation discourses. For the sake of scientific clarity, however, we do not include it as a separate category in our coding scheme. Instead, we analyse what discourses and what elements of

inherited discourses interact with discourses on ageing. In the description of each code, we also provide exemplary literature and illustrative texts to demonstrate the characteristics of the respective discourses.

KEY DISCOURSES OF AGEING

In parallel with the population discourses, we also developed a typology of ageing discourses to examine how the two sets of discursive formations intersect in media representations. Discourses on ageing and ageism are also major cultural phenomena that deserve special attention (Cliquet, 2010; Gramshammer-Hohl, 2017). Based on a review of the relevant literature, we identified a set of ageing discourses for coding, which was subsequently refined through iterative revisions during the textual analysis (Swift & Steeden, 2020; Ylänne, 2022).

POPULATION COMPOSITION AND DEPENDENCY RATE

This discourse frames ageing primarily as a technical issue from demographic and economic perspectives (e.g., Lee & Mason, 2011). It emphasises that current trends in population ageing and declining fertility are unsustainable and pose risks to the long-term stability of social and economic systems. Rather than focusing solely on ageing as a burden, this discourse presents it as a systemic challenge arising from changes in age structure and population composition.

This discursive pattern is identified in the analysis when texts refer to suboptimal or insufficient population reproduction, particularly when framed as economically unsustainable or contributing to irreversible population decline.

AGEING AS DECLINE

The discourse of “ageing as decline” frames ageing as a negative process associated with deterioration, loss, and decline in physical, cognitive, and social functioning (Gulette, 2004; Kribernegg et al., 2014; Makita et al., 2021; Wangler, 2013). It emphasises the negative aspects of ageing, focusing on limitations, dependency, and vulnerability. This discourse tends to view ageing as a problem that needs to be addressed.

This discursive pattern is operationalised by the presence of the following themes: physical, mental, and social decline; emphasis on the negative consequences of ageing; dependency on others and on social support systems; medicalisation and treatment of age-related conditions; and the prevention of decline.

BIOLOGICAL AGE

This discourse focuses on chronological age, measured in years lived, and on life expectancy. It emphasises the biological and physiological dimensions of ageing, focusing on physical changes and their implications for health and functional capacity (Hamilton & Hamaguchi, 2015). It views ageing primarily through a biological lens, highlighting the natural processes and characteristics (Vincent, 2008).

This discursive pattern is operationalised by the presence of the following themes: focus on biological markers of ageing; physiological changes; health conditions; and disability.

CULTURAL AGE

This discourse focuses on the socio-cultural dimensions of ageing (Gulette, 2004). It views ageing as a culturally constructed category whose meaning varies across societies and cultures. It highlights the role of cultural beliefs and norms that shape our views on ageing and the ageing process (Gramshammer-Hohl, 2017). It argues that age is not exclusively determined by biological factors but is also shaped by historical, cultural, and social influences (Lövgren, 2013).

This discursive pattern is operationalised by the presence of the following themes: emphasis on norms and values; cultural roles of older people.

FEMINIST/INTERSECTIONAL CRITICAL DISCOURSES

This discourse draws attention to the intersections of inequalities related to age, gender, race, and class (Holman, 2021; Rishworth & Elliott, 2022; Yläne, 2022). It emphasises that different forms of discrimination and inequality intersect and disproportionately affect certain social groups. It therefore takes into account power dynamics and social hierarchies in shaping experiences of ageing. The perception of ageing affects men and women differently, as ageing afflicts women from a social perspective, and people of different gender identities face different societal expectations.

This code is used when the following themes appear in the texts: the intersection of age with gender, sex, class, race, or ethnicity; experiences of women; power dynamics; the oppression of certain groups; the danger of marginalisation and exploitation; the importance of intergenerational connections; and diversity.

AGEING AS AN ECONOMIC BURDEN

This discourse perceives older adults as a drain on resources and portrays ageing as a financial and economic challenge for society (Gee & Gutman, 2000; Makita et al., 2021). It emphasises the increasing costs associated with an ageing population, particularly in terms of health care, pensions, social welfare, care work, migration, and the labour market. This discourse often focuses on the potential strain that older people place on the economy and calls for measures to address the perceived burden.

This code is utilised when the following themes appear: increased dependence; emphasis on the economic impact of ageing; non-recoverable economic expenditure; encouragement of later retirement.

AGEING AS AN ECONOMIC RESOURCE

This discourse positions older people as valuable and marketable contributors to society and the economy, challenging narratives that frame ageing solely as a burden (Lipp & Peine, 2024; Petersen, 2018; Tulle-Winton, 1999). Instead, it emphasises the potential economic benefits and opportunities associated with population ageing. These include the stimulation of technological innovation, the emergence of new industries tailored to older people, and the growing purchasing power of older consumers. It also highlights the continued economic contributions of older people through participation in the labour market and beyond, thus reframing ageing as a source of growth and resilience rather than decline.

This code is used when the following themes appear: recognition of the skills, knowledge, and experience of older people as valuable economic resources; the commodification of ageing and anti-ageing; active labour market participation; postponed retirement; the emergence of new industries and businesses; services for older people; age-inclusive workplaces; older people as an important consumer target group; the silver economy; intergenerational reallocation of resources; and invisible transfers.

SUCCESSFUL/ACTIVE/PRODUCTIVE AGEING

This discourse promotes a positive and proactive perspective on ageing. It highlights the importance and possibility of maintaining a fulfilling and engaged life in older age, thereby challenging the existing stereotypes of decline and depend-

ency (Formosa, 2013; Langmann & Weßel, 2023; Makita et al., 2021; Waddel et al., 2024). While it may include an economic dimension, its primary emphasis is on the potential of growth, societal contributions, and self-fulfilment throughout later life.

This code is utilised when the following themes appear: personal development and growth; self-fulfilment and self-realisation in old age; an active and healthy physical and mental lifestyle; successful ageing; openness to new experiences; active and meaningful work; contribution to society; and challenges to stereotypes portraying ageing as decline.

ISOLATION OF OLDER PEOPLE

This discourse thematises the loneliness and social marginalisation of older people (Wangler, 2013). It sees them as a vulnerable group that may experience social isolation, digital exclusion, and discrimination. This code is utilised when various forms of vulnerability are thematised, with the exception of poverty, which is coded separately.

WELL-BEING OF OLDER PEOPLE

These discourses concentrate on the overall mental, physical, and social well-being of older people, emphasising the importance of enhancing their quality of life (Fairhurst, 2010; Rishworth & Elliott, 2022). Rather than portraying them as a poor and vulnerable group, these narratives highlight the need for respectful treatment, sustained attention to their well-being, and how well-being is linked to social positions (Read et al., 2016). This code is utilised in the presence of the following themes: concepts of well-being; the decrease of social and psychological stress; subjective health perception; and social care and personal support.

AGEING AS POVERTY

This discourse highlights the economic challenges and vulnerabilities faced by older people, emphasising the widespread prevalence of poverty in later life (Breheny & Stephens, 2010; Grenier et al., 2020). It draws attention to the social and structural factors, such as inadequate pensions, limited access to employment, and life-course inequalities that contribute to their financial insecurity and exposure. By focusing on the systemic roots of economic hardship, this discourse frames ageing not merely

as an individual condition but as a reflection of broader and cumulative social and economic injustices.

This code is utilised when the following themes appear: old age and ageing as risk factors for economic insecurity and poverty; financial challenges; limited income; insufficient pension; rising costs of health care and care; insufficient social security; no employment opportunities; insufficient housing; risk of homelessness; socio-economic challenges.

KEY CRISIS DISCOURSES RELATED TO AGEING

Discourses framing ageing in terms of crises are very important cultural phenomena. They deserve special attention when discussing the relationship between population and ageing discourses. These crisis discourses represent a special genre as both population discourses and ageing have been surrounded by frames of panic. Both are concerned with fundamental questions of life, procreation, and death, making them particularly susceptible to moral panics and fears of social catastrophe. Such frames have been present since the emergence of Malthusian thought at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This is especially true in the neoliberal era, in which (especially in wealthier parts of the world) the decline of the welfare state, persistently low fertility, the attack on increased redistribution, and the promotion of marketisation have created the material conditions for such discourses. These conditions may either foster a sense of crisis among experts and the wider public or be mobilised to construct a perception of crisis that legitimises further social cuts and the destruction of social barriers to further marketisation (Gee, 2000; Simmonds, 2021). From this perspective, we return to our hypothesis of discursive inflexibility. We examine whether certain discursive frameworks continue to depict population developments as crises even when adaptive mechanisms exist that could contribute to more balanced outcomes. More specifically, we ask which crisis discourses (if at all) co-occur with particular ageing and population discourses.

On the basis of a review of the relevant literature, we also identified a set of ageing-related crisis discourses for coding, which was subsequently revised during the textual analysis. Crises may include various individual- and societal-level disruptions and transformations. In this study, however, we focus on the macro level, as most individual ageing-related crises are already captured by the ageing discourse typology (for the individual-level, see Łuszczżyńska, 2021). Here we mainly focus on those “social” crises which thematise the social aspects of anxieties (Katona & Meleg, 2020; Simmonds, 2021).

Migration crisis: This discourse frames migration as a major challenge in the context of population ageing. Special attention is paid to migration driven by the growing demand for migrant care workers, as well as to migration motivated by the search for better social security in later life (Melegh, 2023).

Pandemic crisis: In this discourse pandemics—most notably the Covid-19 pandemic—are thematised as disproportionately affecting older people. It portrays the pandemic as a catastrophic threat to older people and to care workers responsible for their support (Aulenbacher et al., 2020; Ezzeddine, 2024).

Care crisis: This discourse frames care as a major social crisis and has become a prominent topic in critical sociology as well as in public debate. It argues that capitalism, especially in its neoliberal form, excludes and exploits care work in various ways and thus subordinates social interests to economic ones (Fraser, 2022). It also emphasises the growing scarcity of care, which cannot be counterbalanced by redistribution, demographic problems, together with an increasing global labour market (Katona & Melegh, 2020).

Ageing as a crisis: This discourse may have various formats, explained within the ageing discourses. This code is used if ageing is seen as a major social crisis, together with the possible components of ageing discourses (Dewhurst & Campbell, 2025).

Environmental crisis: This discourse thematises the environmental crisis and its relationship to ageing. Very often it emphasises the impact of environmental change on older people or the impact of demographic changes on environmental processes (Marini et al., 2024). Sometimes even systemic links are found between the two phenomena (Fraser, 2022)

Health crisis: This discursive formation encompasses not only the decline of public services or the actual crisis of the health care system in a neoliberal era but also increasing longevity and the widening life course gap between the onset of chronic diseases and passing away (Simmonds, 2021). Pandemic-related crises and mental health issues are treated as separate categories in our coding scheme.

Mental health crisis: The topics of this separate discursive formation include discussions of institutional shortcomings, the increasing prevalence of mental health conditions, including dementia and neurodegenerative problems. Importantly, these discourses include various issues of care, dignity, and human rights, and can be seen as a catalyst of wider ageing discourses like decline and burden. It is also important to mention those discourses which thematise how crises influence mental health (Lavretsky & Pot, 2024)

Economic crisis: In these formations concrete economic crises and their impact on ageing are thematised beyond the overall anxiety over the economic development of societies with ageing population (Foscolou & Panagiotakos, 2018).

Inflation as crisis: In this discursive form a specific economic problem, high inflation is discussed, which disproportionately affects older people (Goyal, 2010). It has gained renewed prominence following the inflationary shocks of 2022–2024 of many economies (both within and outside this region), which generated various social tensions. Some versions of this discourse link inflation to changes in age composition (Kopecky, 2023)

Energy crisis: These forms include high energy prices (related to overall inflation), access to energy, and the challenges older people face concerning the use of energy and heating in particular (Pais-Magalhães, 2022)

Pension catastrophe: This discourse portrays catastrophic visions of the potential collapse of the redistributive systems, most importantly the pension systems. This fear even leads to a constant discussion of a need to save the relevant systems through radical interventions.

Population crisis: This discourse involves fear of a complex “malfunctioning” of the overall population reproduction, including fertility, migration, family formation, morbidity, and mortality (Lahmeyer, n.d.). It often expresses concerns about radical population decline and the foreseeable disappearance of the relevant national community (see, for instance, IntelliNews, 2026). As such, it frequently intersects with various conservative and revitalisation discourses.

Longevity crisis: In this form of discourse, low life expectancy and premature mortality are thematised. Although closely related to health crisis discourses, it is a separate category because it primarily concentrates on ways of living and other social factors.

Composition crisis: This form concentrates on not only the “too big” proportion of older people but also on broader “unhealthy changes” in the overall age and economic composition, including active adults, children, ethnic composition, migrants, and non-migrants. This discourse is closely related to the population crisis discourse (Tóth, 2025).

Mortality crisis: Partially related to pandemic-related population discourses, the key factor of the mortality crisis discourse is its focus on excess mortality in certain historical periods due to epidemics, wars, famines, and other factors (Shkolnikov, 2026).

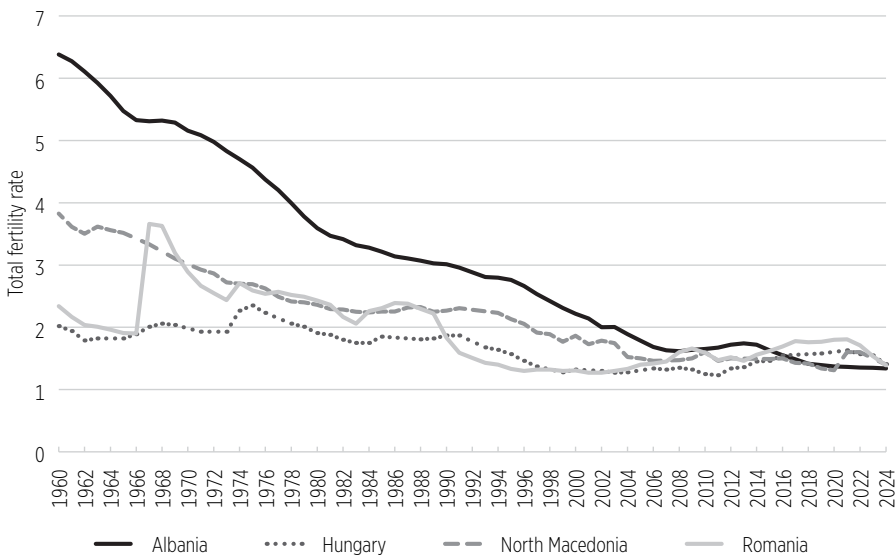
Fertility crisis: Unlike broader population discourses, the fertility crisis discourse is restricted to issues related to fertility. It views declining birth rates, childlessness, delayed childbearing, and abortion from the point of view of a lack of social motivation and behaviour to have children (Marchais, 2022).

MATERIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT AND COUNTRY SELECTION

Although the selected countries belong to the same broad region, they exhibit somewhat different demographic and population developments. At the same time, they also share important historical experiences and display convergence in some respects. Nonetheless, it is necessary to consider the material and historical conditions that have shaped demographic change across the region.

Hungary was the first country in the region to experience sustained fertility decline and, subsequently, population decline, if total fertility rates since 1960 are considered (*Figure 1*). The other countries followed later, with Albania being particularly late. During the socialist period, population policies and the prevailing economic system somewhat stabilised the decline. In the 1990s, however, fertility rates fell sharply in the region, converging at around 1.3–1.5 children per woman. Thus, the dynamics of population ageing also differed across countries, and these differences continue to shape distinct ageing trajectories.

Figure 1: Total fertility rate in Albania, Hungary, North Macedonia, and Romania, 1960–2024

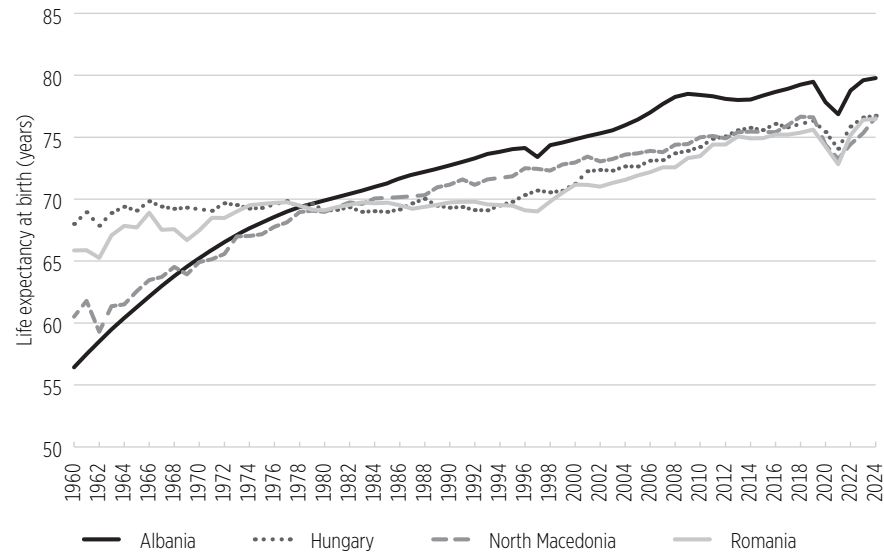


Source: World Bank.

Mortality trends show considerably less variation across the analysed countries than fertility (*Figure 2*). Although Albania and North Macedonia started from lower

levels of life expectancy, they gradually caught up with and even overtook the other two countries during the stagnation period in the 1970s and 1980s, largely because of more favourable trends in male mortality. From the 1990s onwards, life expectancy increased across the region, with Albania keeping its leading position. Overall, improvements in mortality are important material conditions underlying demographic change. Although progress slowed in the 1980s, these countries still performed better than would have been expected on the basis of their gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (Böröcz, 2021; Vallin, 2006).

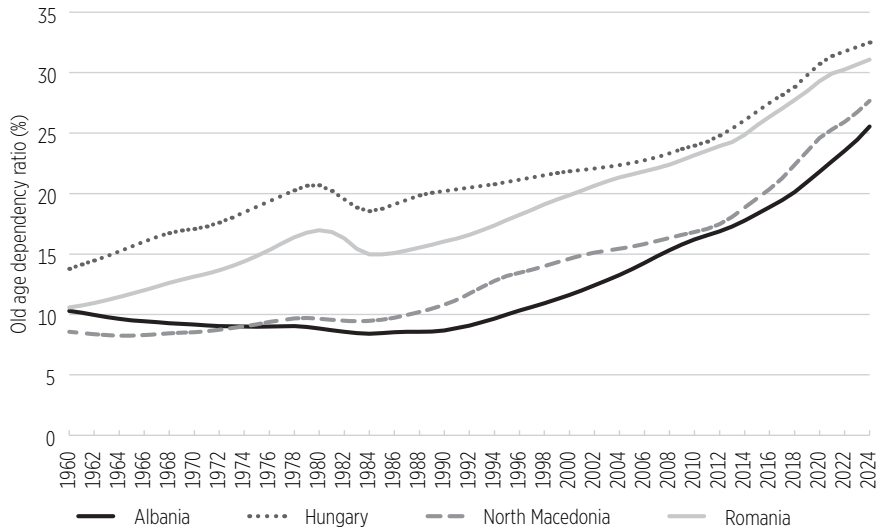
Figure 2: Average life expectancy at birth in Albania, Hungary, North Macedonia, and Romania, 1960–2024



Source: World Bank.

Romania and Hungary followed similar trajectories, as both experienced an early and marked increase in the old-age dependency ratio, which subsequently stabilised for a while (*Figure 3*). In contrast, Albania and North Macedonia initially had much younger populations, but they also experienced a sharp increase in the late 1990s and in the 2000s. The gap between the two groups of countries is still apparent, but the tendencies and dynamics are quite similar. This similarity is largely driven by the convergence of fertility levels.

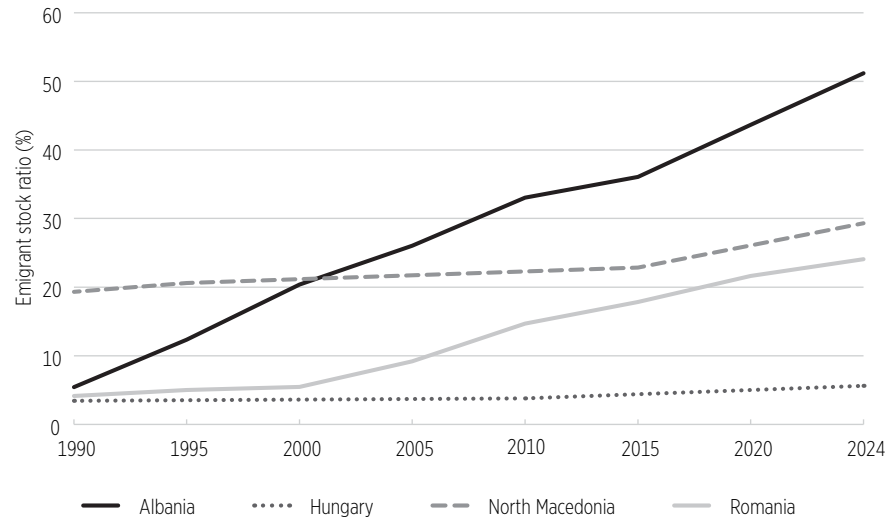
Figure 3: Old age dependency ratio as a percentage of the working age population in Albania, Hungary, North Macedonia, and Romania, 1960–2024



Source: World Bank.

Migration has become one of the most polarizing issues in contemporary population discourses and represents a key material process shaping demographic change. It is therefore essential to look at the different migration trajectories of the selected countries. Emigration rates increased in all four countries during the period when global labour markets became increasingly integrated (Figure 4). However, the starting points, the dynamics, and the rates differed. North Macedonia, as a very small country with federal history, already had very high emigration rates, which increased further during the current globalisation cycle. Albania experienced a huge emigration wave, while Romania followed a similar, albeit less pronounced, trajectory. Hungary started from comparatively low levels within the region (but high by global standards) and experienced a more moderate increase than Albania and Romania. These divergent trajectories reflect a combination of cumulative dynamics, relative well-being, the availability of social services, and the massive move toward open global markets.

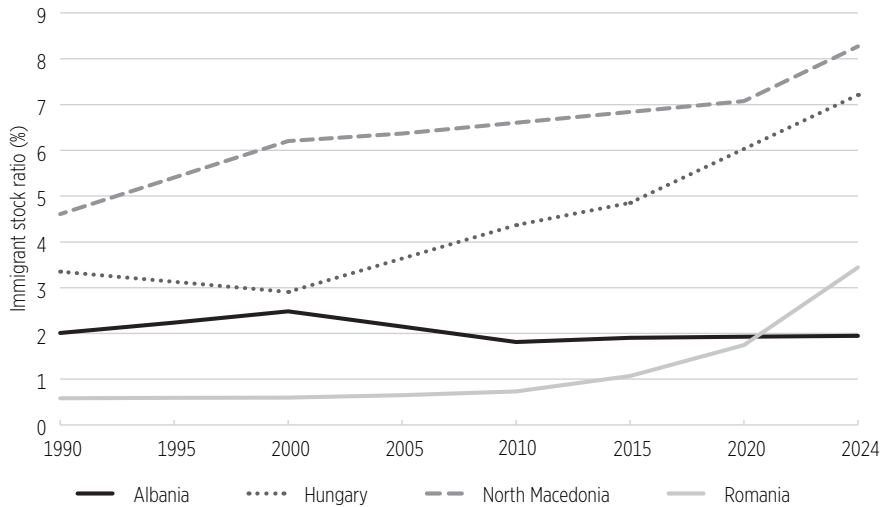
Figure 4: Emigrant stock ratio of people born in Albania, Hungary, North Macedonia, and Romania, 1990–2024



Source: author's calculations based on United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024), *International Migrant Stock 2024*.

Immigration patterns reveal even greater cross-country differences in the region (Figure 5). North Macedonia has long had relatively high levels of immigration by country of birth. Hungary, by contrast, started from a low level within the region—although still high by global standards—but gradually caught up and eventually reached much higher levels of immigration. Albania has always been rather closed in terms of immigration, while Romania initially followed this pattern before gradually converging towards, and eventually surpassing, Albanian levels. These differences in immigration reflect variations in relative well-being, ethnic ties, and the relative attractiveness of the analysed national economies.

Figure 5: Immigrant stock ratio in Albania, Hungary, North Macedonia, and Romania, 1990–2023



Source: author's calculations based on United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024), *International Migrant Stock 2024*.

All in all, the analysed countries exhibit considerable demographic vulnerability in the context of market openness and the marketisation of societies. These material transformations have coincided with profound demographic challenges and have inevitably interacted with the evolution of population and ageing discourses. Against this background, the following analysis examines how these societies have discursively responded to these demographic transformations.

IDENTIFYING CODES, HERMENEUTIC ANALYSIS, AND SAMPLING

The media texts were coded using the operationalised coding scheme presented above. We used the MAXQDA software to code the texts systematically. We selected texts from two periods for each country. The first period covered the publication of the results from censuses conducted in the early 2020s. This period was chosen because the release of census results typically generates extensive public attention, providing an opportunity to examine how demographic “shocks” are interpreted and framed in public discourse, as well as how population statistics become objects of political debate.

The second sampling period covered the weeks around the International Day of Older Persons (1 October), established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1990. This annual event is intended to recognise the contributions of older persons to society and to raise awareness about the challenges and opportunities associated with ageing populations. Each year, the day is marked with various events, campaigns, and initiatives worldwide, often focusing on a specific theme related to ageing and older people. Themes in recent years have included digital equity for all ages, resilience of older persons in a changing world, and promoting the full and equal participation of older persons in society (United Nations).

To capture a broad range of perspectives, we included a heterogeneous sample of media outlets, including tabloids, lifestyle magazines, and business portals, representing different political and ideological orientations. After collecting all relevant articles and some cleaning, we drew a random sample to ensure a manageable corpus while preserving representativeness.

After coding these texts, we generated mental maps of the texts in MAXQDA by establishing an average distance/proximity between population discourses, ageing discourses, crisis discourses, and actors, based on the co-occurrence of certain codes within the same document. The spatial proximity of codes in these maps reflects the frequency with which they co-occur across the corpus. We interpret closer proximity that certain discourses are more likely to appear together within the same text, whereas greater distance suggests weaker associations.

A more detailed qualitative discourse analysis would be required to examine what broader discursive possibilities or strategies are opened up in the texts. Such an analysis falls beyond the scope of the present comparative study but represents an important direction for future research.

SUMMARY OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Through the systematic discourse analysis and quantitative coding presented above, we explore how different population, ageing, and crisis discourses appear, interact, and co-occur in South-Eastern European media. Our central research question is why and how ageing has remained only weakly integrated into the main population discourses despite the profound demographic changes brought about by population ageing, declining fertility, and migration.

To address this question, in this volume we conduct a comparative analysis of four countries with somewhat similar and also somewhat different discursive

traditions, socio-political history, and population development in material terms. All four countries have experienced substantial population ageing and sustained fertility decline, yet their public discourses have been shaped by different combinations of conservative, ethnic-Narodnik, socialist modernisation, developmental, and other demographic transitions. This comparative design enables us to examine both common regional patterns and country-specific variations in the relationship between population and ageing discourses.

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