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POPULATION DECLINE IN EUROPE: FERTILE GROUND FOR POPULIST ISLAMOPHOBIA

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For years the far-right movements in various European and Western countries have warned us of the population decline of the locals. The fear of gradually being replaced with people from the East, either Muslim or non-White, lays at the core of far right movements.

In the Netherlands, the radical politician Geert Wilders with his authoritarian one-man party titled *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom) has been a vocal advocate for sending back Muslims and Arabs as he alleges that it constitutes the biggest threat to the Dutch population.[1] The same is applicable in France, where far-right politician Marine Le Pen argues that France faces similar demographic challenges. Estimates do, in fact, show that by 2050, France could have more Muslim births than native French births.[2] However, as it will be explained later, using a single demographic statistic while overlooking general demographic trends leads to erroneous conclusions that can have dire political ramifications. Both Wilders *Partij voor de Vrijheid*, as well as Le Pens *Rassemblement National* (formerly known as *Front National* until 1 June 2018), were founding political member parties of the short-lived parliamentary group Europe of Nations and Freedom within the European (Union) Parliament (EP) between 2015 and 2019. Besides these two founding political parties, the parliamentary group was eventually joined by far-right movements from Belgium (*Vlaams Belang*), Italy (*Lega Nord*), Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*), Poland (*Kongres Nowej Prawicy*), and the United Kingdom (*UK Independence Party*). In 2019 all member parties, with the exemption

of the marginal Polish *Kongres Nowej Prawicy*, switched to the newly established European parliamentary group called Identity and Democracy which was also short-lived from 2019 until 2024.[3] Identity and Democracy was seen as generally more far rightwing than its predecessor. This becomes immediately clear when looking into the reason for the parliamentary groups demise in 2024; its biggest member, *Alternative für Deutschland* from Germany, had been downplaying or justifying the crimes of the Nazis while promoting that political party.

While Europe of Nations and Freedom (2015-2019) was transformed into Identity and Democracy (2019-2024) to appeal to more radical and rightwing political parties within EP, the demise of Identity and Democracy led to the succeeding Patriots for Europe in 2024.[4] This parliamentary group within EP is arguably the most rightwing of them all, not just because it includes even more rightwing members than its predecessors, but also because it is more insular and less vocal. Patriots for Europe is again chaired by the French *Rassemblement National*, this time in the person of Jordan Bardella. Within the French radical rightwing political party, Bardella is the third in line after founder of *Rassemblement National/Front National* Jean-Marie Le Pen and his daughter Marine Le Pen. Bardella is widely seen as the temporary replacement of Le Pen after she was sentenced to four years in prison, a ban of five year ban for any political role, and a 100,000 Euro fine; effectively crumbling her political career and ambitions.[5] Le Pen is still regarded as the main figure within her fathers political party *Rassemblement National/Front National*, and she has quite vocally refused to quit politics.[6] Her appeal was announced just hours after the verdict by her lawyer, which caused the French politics to fall into disarray.[7]

The chaos in French politics seem to have gained extra support for Le Pen, paving the way for her presidency in 2027.[8] As of now, Le Pen is able to run for presidency for 2027 as her appeal has been accepted by the High Court and pending the final verdict, her ban has been suspended.[9] Despite her potential comeback, her reputation as a politician that misuses European Union (EU) funds for personal gains has preceded her during the presidential campaign.[10] Her negative traits do not only involve funds, but also the statistics concerning her most vocal stance in politics; the gradual takeover of local Christian inhabitants in Europe by Muslim dwellers. She is backed by the South-African/American billionaire investor Elon Musk, who has not only landed his support to European far-right figures, but also alleges an establishment plot behind Le Pen's defenestration.[11] Both are advent supporters of the theory that population decline in Europe will lead to a European population in which Muslims are the vast majority.

However, even in scenarios in which the current percentages will have a high rise by 2025, the Muslim minorities still are not able to reach anything above 18% of the population in France.[12] Currently, the biggest Muslim minority in Europe resides in France, which does explain why Le Pen has her focus on this topic. At present, around 8.5% of the French population is of Muslim background, depending on who one includes in this group (Muslim by descend, or Muslim by religious practice). Even in Le Pens worst-case scenario, an all-time high migration rate would still not result in a majority of Muslims in France by 2050. As a matter of fact, Hans Rosling dedicated his academic work

to show that such demographic change scenarios being thrown around are not accurate.

Hans Rosling is Swedish academic who passed away in 2017, but he was able to finish one last book that was posthumously published and became very popular. His book titled Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World--and Why Things Are Better Than You Think from 2018 shows that nations tend to decline in population as their wealth rises. Rosling takes an objective look into the matter as a Swedish professor of International Health at the Royal Karolinska Institute in the Swedish capital Stockholm. He also established the Gapminder Foundation which monitors the worlds population. Rosling convincingly shows that each and every nation stops having excessive amounts of children whenever its population reaches a certain point of wealth. For his work, Rosling was elected a member of the Swedish Academy of Sciences in 2012, an organization that is responsible for giving Nobel Prizes.

In 1948, one could establish a direct causal relationship between the number of children and the income of each family. This stopped being the case by the year 2015.[13] Statistics show that the number of births worldwide have now been more or less the same for years since 2015, with only the age of death being pushed back. Just as the age of death cannot be delayed forever, the number of births also have a biological limit. Arguing that Muslim populations will forever keep having high amounts of children and end up repopulating the world is therefore not supported either by academia or statistics. Muslim families respond to wealth the same way, for example, Christian or Hindu families do; by having less children and upgrading their quality of life. The statistics of the year 2023 even show that the worldwide fertility rate has slowed to 0.9%.[14] On a different note, the global growth rate has also declined in absolute numbers from 92.8 million people in 1990 to a mere 70.4 million people in the whole year of 2023.

Instead of Le Pen and her European far-right partners questionable theory that Muslims still enjoy a large population growth, the far more logical theory depicts a scenario in which the world population as a whole is in fact declining. Academic David Bloom, Clarence James Gamble Professor of Economics and Demography at Harvard Tse-Hsien Chan School of Public Health, is amongst the academics that challenge the far-right-movement on its population decline in Europe theory. He states that Over the last 25 years, fertility rates declined in every region of the world and in every World Bank country income group.[15] He agrees with Professor Rosling that the current global population of roughly 8.3 billion could peak at 10.3 billion in 2084, but argues another outcome. According to Rosling the world population will stay at approximately 11 billion, but Bloom argues that the population will inevitably start declining after reaching 10.3 billion in 2084. Other academics, like Christopher Murray, put the turning point at an even earlier date based on the findings of a new study co-authored by himself. Murray is the Director of the University of Washingtons Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. He indicates that 2030 is a much better estimate of the University of Washingtons Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluations previous estimate of 2034.[16]

However, the point far-right movements of Europe are trying to make is valid only based one fact; that the countries that have a population decline at the moment are mostly European.[17] Nonetheless, neither France nor any other of the following European

countries where the far-right movements under review are active are in the top 20: the Netherlands, Belgium, and the United Kingdom. In fact, most of the European countries with a declining population are Cold War eras Eastern Bloc countries like Belarus, Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Latvia, Croatia, Albania, Serbia, Romania, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Armenia (if you consider the South Caucasus to be culturally linked to Europe), amongst others. The population decline makes no difference between Christian-majority and Muslim-majority countries (like Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina), which refutes the point of far-right movements in Europe and their populist Islamophobia.

Intensive academic research does, in fact, show that religion is in no way a factor in the decline or increase of a population.[18] The increase or decline of a population revolves around socioeconomic determinants of low-, middle-, and high-income families in various countries around the world. The rule of thumbs remains the same; the higher the income, the less children a family in whatever country of whatever religion will have. Only low-income families consistently have a high childbirth rate. The number one country at the moment is the African country Chad, whose population is 50% Muslim and 50% Christian.[19]

The remaining countries in the top 10 of countries with the highest birthrates are almost exclusively in Middle Africa. Christianity is the majority religion in Middle Africa, with followers accounting for approximately 82% to over 85% of the population, while Muslims make up about 9% to 10%, and adherents of traditional African religions constitute most of the remainder.[20] In 2050, the population balance of Middle Africa will turn even more in favor of Christians, to almost 90% according to the World Religion Database of the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs of Boston University.[21] These statistics annihilate the populist rhetoric of the European far-right movements in terms of a Muslim population becoming the majority in Europe. Although at present, the European population is declining in terms of absolute numbers, the world population is also rapidly beginning to decline with only Middle Africa being the exception. However, as indicated earlier, Middle Africa is pre-dominantly Christian, and will not contribute to the claimed Islamization of Europe nor the world. When the world population reaches its maximum estimated level, only approximately 25% of the people will be Muslim.[22]

Another note to make is that of Russia, which at present is approximately 10% Muslim.[23] It is estimated that the Russian population will consist at most of 30% Muslims in the near future.[24] But instead of denying Islam, Russia has embraced Islam as one of its largest religious groups, only second to Orthodox Christianity. The vast majority of Russian Muslims are Turkish and/or Turkic people from autonomous republics such as Tataristan, Başkırdıstan, and the partly Turkic Karaçay-Çerkesya. The Russian Federation and its predecessors Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, tried to engage in war against Islam from the 1500s onwards, intensifying it in the 1860s with the Circassian massacres (known as *Tsitsekun* by Circassians), up until the early 2000s against the Chechens. Especially the Circassian massacres put an extensive toll on the Muslims in the region, resulting in the death of more than 1.5 million people.[25] In recent years, Russia has adopted a much inclusive policy towards its minorities, especially its Muslim citizens,

which could serve as an example for other European states dealing with Muslim minorities, as Moscow seemingly has accepted that state oppression of a religious group results in profound societal misery for the whole country. The bitter experiences of Russia may be the best lesson one can teach the far-right movements in Europe.

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(**)Picture: Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

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