



III EUROPEAN CONGRESS ON FAMILY

PUTTING AN END TO EUROPEAN DEMOGRAPHIC WINTER

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS AND KEY CONCLUSIONS

Dates	11-13 September 2026
Locations	Dubrovnik, Croatia
Organiser	ECR Party

1. Project overview and objectives

From 11 to 13 September 2026, the ECR Party organised the III European Congress on Family, “Putting an End to Europe’s Demographic Winter”, in Dubrovnik, Croatia. The event brought together Members of the European Parliament, national and regional parliamentarians, political leaders, government representatives, academics, experts and civil society stakeholders from across Europe and beyond.

The conference examined Europe’s demographic challenges and the factors shaping family life and demographic trends. The programme addressed declining birth rates, the role of parents and schools in raising the next generation, family and individual freedom, the impact of social media and artificial intelligence on family life, and the political and social changes required to address Europe’s demographic decline.

The project sought to foster political dialogue on the demographic future of Europe and to identify possible approaches to supporting families, strengthening freedom and creating the social and political conditions necessary for demographic renewal.

2. Event format and participation

The programme combined opening statements, keynote speeches, moderated interviews, thematic panels, video messages and networking sessions.

The conference connected European and national decision-makers with regional institutions, civil society organisations, businesses and young participants. Youth contributions were developed through five dedicated information papers, each linked directly to the relevant thematic panel.

3. Conference proceedings

Friday, September 11, 2026

Opening greetings

Speakers: Stephen Bartulica (MEP, Croatia), Antonio Giordano (MP, ECR Party Secretary General, Italy), Nikola Grmoja (MP, President of Most, Croatia).

The opening remarks formally inaugurated the III European Congress of Family, drawing attention to Europe’s demographic decline. The speakers stressed the need for a shift in national and European policies, with more effective measures to support future generations and families and birth rates in order to reverse the current trend.

Panel: The Empty Cradle: The Numbers Reshaping Europe

Moderator: Petra Mandić (Head of Most’s Council for Family and Demography, Croatia).

Panellists: Sara Bogdan Bešlić (Municipal Councillor, Croatia), Jorge Jraissati (President of Economic Inclusion Group, Venezuela), Mihovil Klarić (Religious Education Teacher, Primary School Petar Zoranić, Croatia), Elina Treija (Chairwoman of The Union of Latvian Large Families, Latvia).

In her opening remarks, **Petra Mandić**, panel’s moderator, explained that the demographic crisis cannot be understood solely through fertility rates. The number of people—and particularly women of childbearing age—who can realistically form families is also decreasing. Referring to Croatia, she noted that the country has lost more than one-fifth of its women aged between 20 and 39 in approximately fifteen years. She also highlighted the growing distance between young people’s desire to have children and their actual ability to

form a family, linking this gap to delayed independence, housing difficulties and the increasing age of marriage and parenthood.

Sara Bogdan Bešlić focused on the way demographic statistics are presented. She argued that the reported growth of the European and Croatian populations conceals a substantial natural decline, since deaths considerably exceed births and the overall population is maintained only through migration. She also addressed the postponement of motherhood and the decline of larger families. In her view, Europe has not stopped having children altogether but has increasingly stopped having third and subsequent children. She attributed this development to housing and financial difficulties, but also to social and cultural models that present motherhood—especially at a younger age—and large families as obstacles to personal fulfillment.

Jorge Jraissati analysed the demographic crisis from an economic and cultural perspective. He argued that young Europeans face an environment characterised by insecure employment, expensive housing, restricted access to credit, excessive regulation and limited opportunities for entrepreneurship. These conditions create uncertainty and discourage long-term decisions such as starting a family. At the same time, pessimistic cultural narratives about Europe's future weaken young people's confidence and willingness to have children. He warned that the combination of a shrinking workforce and an ageing population threatens the sustainability of pensions and welfare systems. He therefore proposed easier access to housing and credit, tax incentives for young families, support for entrepreneurship and reforms allowing young people to achieve economic independence earlier.

Elina Treija concentrated on housing policies as a practical means of helping families have the number of children they desire. Drawing on Latvia's experience, she presented measures such as affordable municipal housing, housing allowances, state-backed mortgage guarantees and grants for families purchasing a home. She argued that support should also be provided when another child is born after a family has already taken out a mortgage. Treija emphasised that family policies should not be limited to low-income households: middle- and higher-income families may also decide against having another child because of the financial risks involved. She therefore advocated universal and flexible support adapted to different family circumstances.

Mihovil Klarić addressed what he considered the deeper cultural roots of demographic decline. In his view, Europe has concentrated too heavily on financial incentives while overlooking the diminishing desire to have children. A culture centred on personal comfort, individual fulfilment and cost-benefit calculations can lead people to view children primarily as a burden or limitation. He argued that demographic policies must therefore be accompanied by a recovery of the values associated with family, responsibility and intergenerational continuity. Among the measures he proposed for Croatia were increased public expenditure on families, universal child allowances, accessible childcare, the use of state-owned properties for housing and shorter working hours for parents of young children.

At the end of the panel, Lloyd Opdam (ECR Youth, Netherlands) raised concerns about Europe's projected demographic decline and the potential long-term implications of migration, asking Sara Bogdan Bešlić whether she considered population decline or reliance on immigration to be the greater challenge. In response, Bešlić argued in favour of stronger border controls and greater support for family formation and higher birth rates. She highlighted the need to create social conditions that encourage both women and men to have children, while enabling parents to pursue education, professional activities and public engagement alongside family life.

Presentation of the research “Europe’s Demographic Winter” by: Fabrizio Masia (Managing Director & Partner at EMG, Italy).

Introduced by MP **Antonio Giordano**, **Fabrizio Masia**, Managing Director and Partner at EMG, presented the main findings of a study based primarily on Eurostat data concerning the scale, development and consequences of Europe’s demographic decline.

Masia showed that both births and fertility rates have fallen steadily across Europe. More than five million children were born in 1990, while the current fertility rate has declined to approximately 1.34 children per woman. Ten European countries now have rates below 1.30, and no country reaches the replacement level of 2.1. Since this decline now affects the continent as a whole, he argued that it should be addressed collectively at European level. If current trends continue, Europe’s population will begin to decline after 2029 and could fall below 400 million by 2100. Population ageing will also reduce the ratio between workers and retirees, creating serious economic and welfare challenges.

Although migration has helped stabilize the population in countries such as Spain, France, Germany and Ireland, it has not offset the decline in Italy, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Latvia. Migrant populations generally have higher fertility rates, but their contribution remains insufficient to reverse the overall trend. Masia therefore stressed that migration cannot, by itself, provide a solution to Europe’s demographic winter.

A central finding of the study is the gap between the number of children Europeans have and the number they would like to have. Surveys show that many women consider between 2.2 and 2.4 children ideal, while actually having between one and 1.4. In Italy, 53% of men would like to have children and 68% of women would like to have two or more. The problem, therefore, is not simply a lack of desire for parenthood, but the existence of economic and social obstacles that prevent people from forming the families they want.

Masia also identified a strong inverse relationship between fertility and the age at which young adults leave the parental home. Young people leave home at around 21 in Finland, but only at 30 or 31 in Croatia and Italy. Remaining dependent on one’s family for longer makes it more difficult to create an independent household and plan for children.

He concluded that Europe needs structural, long-term policies focused on affordable housing, stable employment, adequate wages and accessible services. Temporary bonuses are insufficient: young people must be given the economic security and independence necessary to plan their future and fulfil their desire to form a family.

Panel: Scrolling Past Parenthood? How Social Media and AI Are Rewriting Family Life

Moderator: Anamarija JURKOVIĆ TRTICA (Member of the Lika-Senj County Assembly; Master of Public Administration, Croatia).

Panellists: Jürgen Joost (President of Wir Bürger, Germany), **Adela Mirza** (President of Alternativa Dreapta, Romania), **Branimir Pervan** (PhD – Political Secretary of Most, Croatia), **Zvonimir Troškot** (MP, Croatia), **Ivan Vidović** (President of MOST Istria and Umag City Councillor, Croatia).

Moderator **Anamarija Jurković Trtica** introduced the discussion by examining how social media and artificial intelligence are influencing young people’s expectations regarding relationships, marriage and parenthood. She noted that 71% of young people compare themselves with others because of social media content, while 41.8% turn to AI when they feel sad or worried. The central question was whether technology can remain a tool serving individuals and families rather than replacing human relationships and reshaping family life.

Jürgen Joost argued that technology itself is not the enemy, but becomes dangerous when virtual relationships replace real ones, algorithms replace parental judgement and AI weakens personal responsibility. AI may assist with homework, translation and organisation, but it cannot provide children with the attention, guidance, boundaries and example offered by parents. He also warned against attributing Europe's demographic crisis solely to technology, stressing the importance of housing costs, economic security, taxation and work–family balance. He supported greater protection for minors, including discussion of a minimum age for social media and stronger accountability for digital platforms.

Adela Mirza focused on parents' responsibility to prevent children from replacing real life with a virtual one. In her view, technology should not necessarily be prohibited, but its use and, above all, its content must be carefully supervised. Parents should teach children how to manage emotions and transmit values through reading, handwriting, play, prayer and voluntary activities. No chatbot can replace the empathy, love, respect and personal presence of a parent. She also cautioned that adults themselves risk “scrolling through parenthood” and outsourcing their educational role to technology.

Zvonimir Troskot contrasted the individualism and artificial identities encouraged by digital platforms with the family as a place where freedom is combined with responsibility, commitment and continuity between generations. AI should remain a practical tool for learning and organising information, while values must continue to originate in the family. Referring to examples from Japan, South Korea and China, he identified loneliness, social pressure and isolation as factors that can drive people toward virtual relationships and digital escapism. Europe should therefore learn from these developments and protect family relationships before such patterns become more widespread.

Ivan Vidović focused on who should control online content and determine what children may access. He expressed strong scepticism towards the systems promoted by European institutions, arguing that measures presented as protection against hate speech could instead restrict freedom of expression and exclude opinions for ideological reasons. In his view, responsibility for supervising children's use of social media should remain primarily with parents rather than being transferred to governments or supranational authorities. He recognised a positive role for social media, which can offer young people access to opinions and information that may not be represented in mainstream media.

Branimir Pervan focused on excessive fear of technological development. His principal concern was that people may stop thinking independently because AI provides ready-made conclusions that appear authoritative. Education should therefore develop critical thinking and teach young people that AI systems are models capable of producing false but convincing answers.

During the final discussion, Jelte Elgersma (ECR Youth, Netherlands) raised the question of how children's relationship with technology should be managed, asking whether they should be protected from it or instead taught to use it responsibly. The discussion highlighted the need to balance children's protection with gradual exposure to digital technologies, emphasizing parental responsibility, greater awareness of the risks associated with social media and AI, and the importance of developing children's ability to use these technologies critically and responsibly. At the same time, the speakers recognized the potential of technology and social media to provide young people with opportunities for learning, access to information and exposure to alternative perspectives. The discussion ultimately focused on the broader question of what kind of adults and citizens today's children should become, and on the importance of ensuring that technology remains a tool serving human development rather than replacing human relationships, education and responsibility.

Saturday, September 12

Panel: Raising the Next Generation: Parents, Schools—or the State?

Moderator: Cristina DASCALU (MP, Romania).

Panellists: Adrian-George Axinia (MEP, Romania), **Joachim Stanisław Brudziński** (MEP, Poland), **Sharon Keogan** (Senator, Ireland), **Igor Peternel** (MP, Croatia), **Ivaylo Valchev** (MEP, Bulgaria).

In her opening remarks, **Cristina Dascălu**, **moderator** of the panel, highlighted Europe's declining birth rate, the difficulties faced by young families—including expensive housing and the tension between professional and family life—and the need to create conditions in which parenthood is not perceived as an individual burden. She stressed that the state should support families and protect children without replacing parents, while schools should foster knowledge, critical thinking and personal development. She also emphasised the importance of safe community spaces where children can socialise and develop independence.

Adrian-George Axinia, focused on the impact of artificial intelligence on education. He warned that excessive reliance on AI could lead children to confuse information with knowledge and undermine their ability to think critically. He advocated for maintaining rigorous educational standards, including reading, memorisation and the development of independent reasoning. While recognising that AI is inevitable, he argued that its use should be adapted to children's intellectual and emotional maturity and supervised by teachers and parents, with parents retaining the final say on sensitive matters.

Joachim Stanisław Brudziński, emphasised the primacy of parents in shaping children's values and identity, alongside the role of schools and the Church. Referring to Europe's Christian and classical heritage, he argued that education should not become an instrument of ideological influence or social engineering. He called for clear boundaries protecting parental authority and expressed concerns about changes to school curricula, religious education and the portrayal of traditional family models.

Sharon Keogan, underlined the importance of the community, neighbourhood and safe spaces for unsupervised play. She argued that children develop social skills, resilience and independence through interaction with their peers. She criticised excessive regulation and the culture of fear surrounding childhood, calling for safer communities and a state that prioritises public security while respecting parents' role in education. Drawing on her experience as a foster parent, she also stressed that state intervention is necessary when parents fail to protect their children.

Igor Peternel, reaffirmed that the family is the foundation of society and that the state's role is to support parents rather than assume responsibility for raising children. He highlighted the challenges posed by digitalisation and the difficulty of controlling the information children access. He called for schools to focus on education and reliable knowledge rather than ideological indoctrination, advocating for expert-led, centrally established curricula.

Ivaylo Valchev, argued that parents, schools and the state should work together rather than compete. He stressed the importance of national history, cultural heritage and identity in education, maintaining that national and European identities are complementary. He called for a balance between tradition and progress, while raising concerns about the ideological influences embedded in AI systems and the need for democratic oversight of their development.

During the discussion, Mattia Vicentini (ECR Youth, Italy) asked whether, given the growing role of AI in society, a balanced approach should be adopted to integrate it responsibly into children's education and upbringing. The discussion highlighted the need to recognize AI as an increasingly unavoidable tool while ensuring appropriate human oversight, particularly by teachers in schools and parents at home. Speakers also raised concerns about who develops and controls AI systems, how information is selected and

presented, and the risk that excessive reliance on AI could weaken children's critical-thinking, learning and problem-solving skills. Particular attention was given to the responsible use of AI in education and academia, with the consensus that AI should support rather than replace human judgment, education and independent thinking.

Panel: The united center rights at the service of freedom

Moderator: Ramona-Ioana Bruynseels (MP, Romania).

Panellists: Stephen Bartulica (MEP, Croatia), Maria Chiara Fazio (Vice President of Noi Moderati, Italy), Nikola Grmoja (MP, President of Most, Croatia), Rihards Kols (MEP, Latvia), Marko Milanovic Litre (Former MP, Croatia).

Ramona-Ioana Bruynseels, Member of the Romanian Parliament and moderator of the panel, introduced the relationship between freedom, family and Europe's demographic challenges. She highlighted how population ageing may lead to increasing dependence on the state, while the family represents a fundamental space between the individual and public institutions. She also addressed the role of education and the risk that, when families withdraw from this role, younger generations may become increasingly influenced by digital platforms and algorithms. Throughout the discussion, she emphasised the importance of dialogue, political cooperation and respect for the diversity of European countries.

Stephen Nikola Bartulica, Member of the European Parliament for Croatia and member of the Bureau of the ECR Group, defended the principle of limited government and greater freedom of choice for families, particularly in education. He advocated greater educational freedom through instruments such as homeschooling and school vouchers, arguing that parents should retain primary responsibility for decisions concerning their children's education and use of social media. He also stressed the importance of the family and the need for greater cooperation among centre-right political forces. In the second part of the discussion, he called for divisions and personal rivalries to be overcome, arguing that politics should serve citizens and focus on delivering concrete solutions. He concluded by recalling the Christian principle of mutual love as a basis for closer political cooperation.

Nikola Grmoja, Member of the Croatian Parliament and President of Most, focused on authenticity and personal consistency as essential elements for building a lasting political project. He argued that political support cannot be built solely through electoral agreements or the combination of different parties' percentages, but requires credibility and values that are genuinely lived. He connected this principle to family policy, highlighting the personal example of several members of Most who have large families. He also stressed the need to strengthen the party's organisational structure and to develop cooperation among political forces based on shared values and concrete results, while maintaining clear distinctions between political actors with whom cooperation may be more difficult. He concluded by emphasising the importance of truth, courage and credibility in the relationship with voters.

Maria Chiara Fazio, Vice-President of Noi Moderati, described cooperation among different political forces as not merely an opportunity, but a responsibility. She emphasised the importance of dialogue between different political perspectives and of developing demographic policies based on the principle of subsidiarity. According to Fazio, the demographic challenge cannot be addressed through birth-rate policies alone, but requires a broader ecosystem of measures concerning housing, public services, territorial cohesion, young people, sport, culture and support for families. She also highlighted the social contribution of older generations and the importance of genuine intergenerational dialogue. Referring to the Italian experience, she emphasised the convergence within the governing majority on the importance of family and parenthood, while also pointing to the potential of European-level instruments for developing areas of common action.

Rihards Kols, Member of the European Parliament for Latvia and Deputy Chairman of the National Alliance, focused on the concept of freedom as a daily practice rather than merely an abstract principle. He proposed assessing every new legislative measure according to its impact on the freedom of citizens, families and businesses, the amount of regulation it introduces and its effect on national resilience and autonomy. Drawing on Latvia's experience, he also linked freedom to the ability to protect national sovereignty and territorial security. In the second part of the discussion, he argued that demographic policy should be placed at the centre of the political agenda, including measures concerning affordable housing, parental leave and support for family formation. He also highlighted the difficulties faced by younger generations in establishing stable relationships and the wider social consequences of rising divorce rates and single-parent households.

Marko Milanović Litre, Former Member of the Croatian Parliament and International Secretary of the Croatian Sovereignists, defended the principle of subsidiarity, identifying the family as the level closest to the individual and therefore a fundamental space for the exercise of freedom. He stressed that family policies must take into account the different historical, cultural and economic circumstances of individual Member States and argued against excessive centralisation at European level in this field. He also addressed Croatia's demographic challenges, including population loss and emigration to other European countries, stressing the need to create conditions that encourage families to remain in or return to the country. In addressing younger generations, he ultimately emphasised the importance of promoting, over the long term, values centred on family, responsibility and strong communities.

At the end of the panel, Sil Kok (ECR Youth, Netherlands) asked Marko Milanović Litre how younger generations, particularly in increasingly secular societies, could reconnect with family values and a shared sense of purpose. Milanović Litre emphasized the importance of promoting family-oriented values, strengthening the role of the family in society and fostering a sense of partnership and responsibility within families. The discussion also highlighted the importance of preserving historical awareness among younger generations, particularly regarding Europe's communist past, and concluded with a broader reflection on the role of family, faith and personal responsibility in shaping the future of young people.

Interview: Eugenia Roccella (Minister for Family, Natality and Equal Opportunities, Italy) interviewed by Antonio Giordano (MP, ECR Party Secretary General, Italy).

Antonio Giordano, Member of the Italian Parliament and Secretary General of the ECR Party, moderated the discussion with Eugenia Roccella, Minister for Family, Natality and Equal Opportunities of Italy, focusing on Europe's demographic decline and the political, economic and cultural factors affecting family formation. Giordano opened by referring to research showing that many Europeans have fewer children than they would like and highlighted the connection between young people's delayed economic independence, leaving the parental home and the decision to start a family. Roccella described demographic decline as a structural challenge affecting not only Europe but increasingly countries worldwide, with consequences for economic growth, public finances, territorial and social cohesion, and the sustainability of future development. She presented Italy's approach, including measures to reconcile employment and family life, strengthened parental leave, investment in childcare and nurseries, and a national housing plan aimed at making family formation more accessible to younger generations. At the same time, she stressed that economic incentives alone are insufficient and must be accompanied by a cultural change that restores value and dignity to motherhood, fatherhood and family life. The discussion also addressed the professional impact of parenthood, particularly on women, with Roccella emphasising the need for workplaces and society to

ensure that motherhood does not prevent women from pursuing professional ambitions, while recognising the complementary role of both parents. Giordano also raised the question of whether immigration can compensate for Europe's declining fertility. Roccella argued that immigration cannot constitute the sole or decisive answer, noting that fertility patterns among migrants tend to converge with those of host societies and that declining fertility is increasingly visible in other regions, including Africa. The discussion ultimately stressed the need for coordinated action by governments, employers, social organisations and wider society to create the conditions in which young people can freely choose to have children, while reinforcing a culture of family, hope and responsibility towards future generations.

Interview: Nick Adams (U.S. State Department, USA) interviewed by Antonio Giordano (MP, ECR Party Secretary General, Italy).

Antonio Giordano, Member of the Italian Parliament and Secretary General of the ECR Party, interviewed **Nick Adams**, U.S. State Department representative, on the relationship between tourism, cultural exchange, family and shared Western values. Giordano opened by connecting Europe's demographic decline with broader changes in values and social behaviour, asking whether greater independence, travel and international experience could help young people overcome some of the obstacles to family formation. Adams highlighted several factors behind the delayed transition to independent adulthood, including difficulties in accessing the housing market, changing attitudes towards renting and the growing role of smartphones and digital relationships. At the same time, he emphasised the central role of the family in European societies, particularly in countries such as Italy and Greece, while encouraging young people to explore the world, gain experience and ultimately build independent lives and families. The discussion then focused on tourism as a form of soft diplomacy and cultural exchange. Adams argued that travelling allows people to experience other countries directly, creating personal memories and positive perceptions that can strengthen relations between societies. Giordano underlined the importance of transatlantic exchanges in shaping shared Western culture, while Adams pointed to major international events, including the 2026 FIFA World Cup, and the growing influence of travel influencers as examples of how direct experiences can challenge preconceived perceptions and improve relations between the United States and Europe. At the same time, Adams stressed that travelling and seeking independence should not indefinitely postpone family formation, which he described as essential to the continuity of society. The discussion also addressed the United States as a tourist destination, with Adams presenting the country's diversity, hospitality and variety of landscapes and experiences as key attractions. During the Q&A, a young participant raised concerns about poverty, homelessness and disorder in some American cities. Adams responded by framing these issues within the American emphasis on individual freedom and stating that the Trump Administration was prioritising crime and public order. The discussion concluded with Giordano emphasising the importance of national attachment and the role of patriotism within conservative political thought.

Panel: Family, Freedom and the Future of Europe

Moderator: Zsófia Bódi-Rácz (Head of Communications, Danube Institute, Hungary).

Panellists: Adam Bielan (MEP, Poland), Brian Brown (President International Organization for the Family, USA), Carlo Fidanza (ECR Party Executive Vice President, MEP, Italy), Tina Mercep (IDU Secretary General and Executive Director, Croatia), George Simion (ECR Party Executive Vice President, President of AUR, Romania).

Zsófia Bódi-Rácz, Head of Communications at the Danube Institute and moderator, opened the panel by framing Europe's demographic decline as both a demographic and cultural challenge, asking how family policies, national sovereignty and freedom can contribute to preserving Europe's future. She questioned

whether the European Union should do more to support its own citizens and encourage birth rates, rather than relying primarily on migration, and throughout the discussion connected demographic policy with housing, cultural attitudes, economic conditions and national decision-making.

Adam Bielan, Member of the European Parliament from Poland, argued that Europe is facing both a demographic and cultural crisis and stressed that demographic strength is also closely connected to economic and national security. He presented Poland's previous family policies, including the 500+ programme later increased to 800+, the exemption from personal income tax for people under 26 and measures aimed at improving young people's housing and income prospects. He maintained that financial support alone cannot resolve the demographic challenge and that policies must also address Europe's economic competitiveness and cultural environment. He emphasised the importance of national interests in shaping effective demographic policies and highlighted the role of Poland's Christian heritage in preserving family-oriented values.

George Simion, Executive Vice-President of the ECR Party and President of AUR, Romania, focused on the relationship between demographic policy, freedom and national sovereignty. He criticised what he described as double standards in the application of democratic principles across Europe and argued that national governments should have greater freedom to respond to their own domestic challenges. He strongly opposed illegal migration and rejected the idea that migration should replace policies aimed at strengthening native birth rates, while stressing the importance of protecting national identity, Christian roots and democratic choice. He also highlighted housing as an important concern for young Romanian families and called for stronger cooperation among conservative forces at European level.

Brian Brown, President of the International Organization for the Family, argued that demographic decline should be understood alongside a broader cultural and spiritual crisis. Referring to demographic and sociological research, he stressed the correlation between religiosity and higher fertility rates and argued that the renewal of Europe's Christian cultural heritage should form part of the response. He maintained that conservative forces in Europe and the United States share fundamental interests and should cooperate while learning from successful policies implemented in countries such as Hungary. Brown also emphasised the importance of distinguishing between individual freedom and the common good, arguing that government can legitimately support families through taxation and other incentives without dictating how many children individuals should have. He described the family as a primordial institution that predates both the state and the market, arguing that it transmits values, protects social cohesion and prevents the state from becoming a substitute for parental roles.

Tina Mercep, Secretary General and Executive Director of the International Democracy Union, stressed the importance of cooperation among centre-right parties and of combining financial support with cultural change. Referring to international examples, she argued that demographic recovery requires making parenthood more visible and socially valued, including through positive representations of mothers and parents in public life. She also highlighted housing as a fundamental component of family policy, noting that financial incentives are insufficient if young couples lack adequate living space. Mercep further argued that demographic policy should be institutionalised at the highest level of government and treated as an economic, security and defence priority so that it remains relevant regardless of changes in government. In discussing migration, she stressed the importance of considering not only its economic but also its cultural dimension.

Carlo Fidanza, Executive Vice-President of the ECR Party and Member of the European Parliament, presented the Italian perspective, highlighting the connection between employment, economic growth, housing and family formation. He referred to the increase in employment under the Italian Government,

particularly among women, and to measures designed to reconcile work and family life. However, he stressed that Italy's persistently low birth rate demonstrates that economic support alone cannot solve the problem and that demographic policy must also address cultural attitudes towards family and parenthood. He argued that family policies should be considered an investment in future generations rather than simply a cost within national budgets. Fidanza also connected demographic policy with Europe's economic competitiveness, arguing that young people need stable employment, affordable housing and confidence in the future in order to form families. On migration, he supported legal, controlled and skills-based migration while arguing that it cannot replace policies aimed at addressing Europe's underlying demographic decline. He concluded by highlighting Italy's national housing plan, aimed at making more than 100,000 homes available at affordable prices, particularly for young people and families.

During the final exchange, **Valeria**, a young participant, asked how Europe could achieve the cultural change necessary to encourage family formation while preserving its traditions and values. **Tina Mercep** responded by encouraging young Europeans to remain confident in their identities, openly express their values and resist social pressures that may distance them from family and community. She also raised the question of timing, suggesting that young people should consider family formation as an important part of their life planning rather than automatically postponing it until after professional achievements.

In her closing remarks, **Zsófia Bódi-Rácz** brought together the panel's central themes—demography, migration, culture, economic conditions, family policy and freedom—around the shared objective of creating a Europe in which people have the social, economic and cultural conditions to choose to have the children they desire.

4. Youth contribution

Five Youth Information Papers were prepared, corresponding to the conference's main thematic panels:

1. The Empty Cradle: The Numbers Reshaping Europe by Lloyd-Leonard Opdam
2. Scrolling Past Parenthood? How Social Media and AI Are Rewriting Family Life by Jelte Elgersma & Lourdes Wansink Mangano
3. Raising the Next Generation: Parents, Schools—or the State? By Giorgio Saddi & Mattia Vicentini
4. The united center rights at the service of freedom by Sil Kok & Mikuláš Semerák
5. Family, Freedom and the Future of Europe by Roshina Watt & Valeria Zaporozhtseva

The five papers are listed below and form part of the conference's substantive record.

5. Main outcomes and European added value

- The conference established a high-level platform for dialogue among European and national political representatives, Members of the European Parliament, experts and civil society stakeholders on Europe's demographic future.
- It brought together demographic trends, family policy, education, individual and family freedom, social media and artificial intelligence within a broader discussion on Europe's demographic challenges.

- The event increased awareness of the structural factors contributing to Europe's demographic decline and of the need to address the conditions surrounding family life and the raising of the next generation.
- The conference provided a platform for examining possible approaches to demographic renewal, with particular attention to the role of families, parents, schools and wider social and political institutions.
- The Youth Information Papers ensured that young people's analysis and recommendations formed part of the conference's final substantive record.



