Chapter 2
Demographic Knowledge and Evaluation of Demographic Trends

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Abstract The following article seeks to describe and explain the state of knowledge among the population concerning the scale of demographic trends and the prevalent attitudes towards demographic change. The level of knowledge concerning the number of inhabitants of the country in question, as well as of future trends, can considered to be relatively good. Greater deviations between the actual population size and the number estimated can be found in those countries which have a relatively large population (Germany, Italy and Poland). The fact that a large section of the responses can be found within the 5% confidence interval also speaks in favour of the quality of the estimations. Furthermore, respondents’ anticipation of future demographic trends is relatively accurate. It is noticeable with regard to the formerly Socialist countries that a large section of the population expects further negative trends to result from the massive fall in the birth rate in the nineties. At the same time, there is support for a future increase in the number of inhabitants. In none of the countries was a fall regarded as a preferred trend. The relatively precise estimations of the population size are set against the considerable deviations observed between the actual proportion of elderly people and the figures estimated. The proportion of 65-year-olds and older is considerably overestimated in all countries. It is presumed that the connection between ageing and the danger posed to the social security systems is known, and that it is this situation, which is perceived as a threat, which is the source of the overestimation. In general terms, the ageing of the population is regarded as a negative trend. The respondents are largely in agreement on this in all the PPAS countries. A differentiated view is developed of the trends which are relevant in terms of family demographics. Across-the-board criticism is observed of change in the family. Such criticism is however less widespread with regard to the declining significance of marriage as the basis for partnership-based cohabitation. By contrast, there is firm rejection of trends which point towards the dissolution of the family (divorce, childlessness and one-parent families).

Keywords: Population · Ageing · Birth · Marriage · Divorce

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2.1 Introduction

The intention is to analyse below the extent of knowledge among the populations with regard to some aspects of the demographic situation in their countries, how aware they are of demographic change, as well as which changes find acceptance, and which are rejected. The scale of the differences which arise between the participating countries is demonstrated, as is whether different ways of thinking occur in individual social groups. Finally, factors influencing demographic knowledge are calculated using logistic regression.

All countries participating in the Population Policy Acceptance Study take a more or less unambiguous stance towards the problems of demographic change. All the countries must tackle the consequences of demographic ageing; they have birthrates which do not guarantee the replacement of the parents’ generations, are faced by a higher divorce rate, high proportions of extramarital live births, a falling marriage rate, rising childlessness or increasing proportions of one-person households.

The demographic situations in the PPAS countries are by no means identical, and the course taken by demographic change is not uniform. One should merely consider that the PPAS included both western countries which have had low birthrates for a long time, and formerly Socialist countries for which today’s lowest-low fertility situation is still a relatively new phenomenon. It is therefore presumed that the course taken by demographic trends in the past influences both knowledge concerning magnitudes, and their evaluation. Section 2.2 of this article will therefore firstly provide an overview of the demographic situations and current trends.

The topic of demographic change is attracting increasing public attention in Europe, and naturally also in the countries of the PPAS. In particular the ageing of the population and its consequences for the social security systems have created new social challenges. These are the subject of discussion not only in the individual countries, but also at European level. For instance, these topics are discussed in the Green Paper entitled “Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations” which appeared in 2005 (page 1 et seq.), the success of which the Commissioner of the European Union, Vladimir Spidla, specifically referred to in the closing presentation of the international PPAS results in November 2005 in Stuttgart. “Europe is facing today unprecedented demographic change. (…) European and national level public policies must take these demographic changes into account. This is the goal of the preparatory action adopted by the European Parliament in 2004 which seeks to better take into account the impact of demographic changes in all the relevant policies.” The European Population Conference organised in the spring of 2005 by the Council of Europe’s Population Committee, which featured a broad dialogue between politicians and researchers, is also an indication of increased awareness of the topic. In a publication in preparation for the conference, Charlotte Höhn (Höhn 2005, 116) raises the following questions and brings them to the attention of those in the political arena: “The political assessment of unavoidable consequences for pensions, health expenditures and long-term care will raise difficult questions. Which social security system is demographically