



Declassified¹

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4 June 2026

Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

Minutes

of the hearing on “Towards a family-friendly Europe: policy recommendations for demographic renewal” held on Thursday, 23 April 2026, in Strasbourg

The Committee **held** a hearing with Ms Livia Sz. Oláh, Associate Professor of Demography at the Department of Sociology, Stockholm University, Sweden (online), and Mr Ioannis Vardakastanis, President of the European Disability Forum (online). The hearing was held in the context of work on the report being prepared by Mr Stamatis.

The Chairperson, Ms Carmen Leyte, asked members’ approval for the participation of representatives from the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE) and the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and reproductive Rights (EPF). The Committee **agreed** to this demand.

Mr Stamatis, in his introductory remarks, outlined the report’s holistic approach, linking demographic challenges and family-friendly policies. All family types and households – including rainbow families and persons with special needs – had to be taken into account when considering policies and strategies to resolve demographic decline. Factors such as the economic crisis, housing situation, migration and environmental concerns impacted decisions to have children, yet financial investment alone (as in the case of South Korea) did not guarantee demographic stability. Focus should be on early childhood care and enabling young people to form families at young age, including better support for first-time parents and a favorable environment to counter negative trends such as youth emigration and environmental degradation.

Mr Vardakastanis, speaking on behalf of the European Disability Forum which represented some 100 million persons with disabilities across the European region, said that full social inclusion of persons with disabilities was impossible without strong rights-based public policies that supported families and community life. Persons with disabilities were rights holders and full citizens, not passive recipients of care. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities guaranteed the right to live independently, participate in the community, and enjoy family life on an equal basis.

In practice, families were often forced to fill gaps left by weak public services, with parents reducing work, siblings becoming carers, and women bearing a disproportionate unpaid burden of care. Family-friendly disability policy should not shift responsibility away from the state: it should instead provide accessible services, inclusive education, affordable support, income protection, community-based services, personal assistance, accessible housing, and inclusive local infrastructure. Children with disabilities should grow up in their families and communities rather than in segregated settings, and persons with disabilities should be directly involved in policy design, monitoring and implementation under the principle of “nothing about us without us”.

Ms Oláh, speaking as lead coordinator of the Families and Societies project, presented a detailed demographic picture for Europe. As population growth had ended, a particularly strong population decline was expected from 2050 onward. The share of older people continued to rise, creating greater pressure on healthcare, long-term care, pensions and public finances. These trends were linked to the shrinking labour force and lower economic competitiveness. Births were no longer sufficient to balance deaths, so future growth in much of Europe depended on migration which could not be a long-term solution on its own. Fertility remained below the replacement level across the continent, with especially low levels in Southern and Eastern Europe. There was a growing fertility gap between the number of children people would like to have and the number they actually had, as well as the rise in

¹ The minutes were approved and declassified by the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development at its meeting on 4 June 2026.

childlessness and the postponement of first births to around the age of 30 in most regions, while medically assisted reproduction had its limits. Family-friendly policies should reflect changing family forms, including single parents, reconstituted families and same-sex couples.

Turning to work-life balance and policy design, **Ms Oláh** stressed that maternal employment rate was an important indicator of whether policies allowed people to combine caring and earning: there were large differences in mothers' employment when children were very young (under the age of three). Longer leave for mothers than for fathers reinforced gendered care patterns, while greater fathers' leave uptake was associated with higher chances of having a second child. Access to and high-quality of public childcare for very young children was crucial for women's labour market participation. Inclusive family policies should thus support all family forms, encourage employment for all adults, expand fathers' leave, allow more flexible use of leave by grandparents and partners in diverse households, and pay special attention to young adults facing delayed family formation because of labour market insecurity, automation, gig work, housing costs and the pressures of post-secondary education.

During the discussion that followed experts' presentations, **Mr Gevorgyan** asked for the presentations to be sent to members because they contained important information for members' ongoing work.

Ms Piller Carrard, President of Pro Familia in Switzerland, reflected on philosophical aspects of family life, expressing concerns about declining fertility influenced by environmental, health-related, and socio-political uncertainties. Unequal access to and affordability of medically assisted reproduction was a major problem in many countries. Policies should help create a more positive image of family life and childbearing.

Ms Oláh replied that uncertainty was a core reason behind people's hesitation to have children, which called for state support to reduce costs of assisted reproduction and better communication to dispel misconceptions about parenthood. Regarding the costs of medically assisted reproduction, states pursued different policies. Ideally, states should step in to alleviate the financial burden so that families would bear just a symbolic part of the cost. For many families it was difficult to reconcile child-raising with the professional life of both parents. Barriers to parenthood also included labour market and societal factors in addition to individual preferences. Clearly, there was a big fertility gap in Europe that should be addressed through family-friendly policies.

Mr Vardakastanis echoed the view that personal choices were strongly influenced by the socio-economic environment, noting the negative impact of governments paying more attention to competitiveness, liberalisation of the economy and privatisation of vital support services, which dissuaded family formation.

Mr Stamatis followed with a question about internal migration, especially from villages to capitals in southern and Mediterranean countries, wondering if there was any data on how this work-related mobility affected family formation and what made cities more family-friendly.

Ms Oláh answered that national statistical offices and Eurostat should have relevant data by age. Access to affordable quality housing was a major issue linked to both childlessness and the number of children people had.

The Chairperson then closed the hearing, thanking the experts, the interpreters and the secretariat.

List of presence / *Liste de présence*

(The names of members who took part in the meeting are in bold /
Les noms des membres ayant pris part à la réunion sont en caractères gras)

Chairperson / *Président-e*:

Saskia Kluit (Netherlands / <i>Pays-Bas</i>)	
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Carmen Leyte (Spain / <i>Espagne</i>)	
Yuliia Ovchynnykova (Ukraine)	
Sophia Chikirou (France)	

Members / Membres	Country / Pays	Alternates / Remplaçant-es
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Mr Cerni Escalé	Andorra / <i>Andorre</i>	Mme Bernadeta Coma
Mr Armen Gevorgyan	Armenia / <i>Arménie</i>	Ms Hripsime Grigoryan
Ms Claudia Arpa	Austria / <i>Autriche</i>	Ms Doris Bures
Mr Andreas Minnich	Austria / <i>Autriche</i>	Ms Agnes Sirkka Prammer
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Mr Marko Pavić	Croatia / <i>Croatie</i>	Ms Rada Borić
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Ms Ivana Mádllová	Czechia / <i>Tchéquie</i>	Mr Ondřej Šimetka
ZZ...	Czechia / <i>Tchéquie</i>	ZZ...
Ms Camilla Fabricius	Denmark / <i>Danemark</i>	Ms Charlotte Bagge Hansen
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M. Alain Milon	France	M. Alain Cadec
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Mr Vinzenz Glaser	Germany / <i>Allemagne</i>	Ms Christin Willnat
Ms Inge Gräßle	Germany / <i>Allemagne</i>	Mr Julian Joswig
Mr Serdar Yüksel	Germany / <i>Allemagne</i>	Ms Franziska Kersten
Mr Georgios Stamatis	Greece / <i>Grèce</i>	Mr Dionysios-Charalampos Kalamatianos
Ms Maria Syrengela	Greece / <i>Grèce</i>	Ms Maria-Nefeli Chatziioannidou
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Ms Mónika Dunai	Hungary / <i>Hongrie</i>	Mr István Hollik
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Mme Valérie Piller Carrard	Switzerland / <i>Suisse</i>	Mr Niklaus-Samuel Gugger
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Mr Berdan Öztürk	Türkiye	Ms Sevilay Çelenk
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Mr / M. Sabih Gazi Öztürk, Türkiye

Experts / Expert-es

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Mr / M. Ioannis Vardakastanis, President of the European Disability Forum / *Président du European Disability Forum*
Mr / M. Jean-Yves Camus, Director of the Observatory on Political Radicalism, Jean Jaurès Foundation / *directeur de l'Observatoire des radicalités politiques à la Fondation Jean Jaurès*
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Mr / M. David Thunder, Researcher and political philosopher / *chercheur et philosophe politique*

Other persons present / Autres personnes présentes

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Ms / Mme Roxane Kelles
Ms / Mme Teresa Gerns, UN and CoE Advocacy Director
Mr / M. Leonidas Galeridis, Senior Policy and Research Officer, European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Right / *chargé principal des politiques et de la recherche, Forum parlementaire européen pour les droits sexuels et reproductifs*
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Ms / Mme Miranda Mchedlishvili, NGO / ONG
Ms / Mme Camilla Portinaro, NGO / ONG
Ms / Mme Maria Waszkiewicz, Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE)

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