



By: *Sharmila Devi*

# Anti-migrant push thrives while falling birth rates threaten economic horizons



Greece's fertility rate is among Europe's lowest at 1.3 babies per woman and well below the 2.1 population replacement level. But too few people see the irony of the country pursuing what the European Court of Human Rights **called** last week "a systematic practice of 'pushbacks' of third-country nationals" across its borders.

Greece is not the only country failing to grapple with illegal migration and turning to irregular, many say cruel, policies to appease voter anger.

At the same time, the effects of a plummeting population, labour shortages and likely economic stagnation in Greece and other western countries are barely addressed. When they are, often the solutions offered focus on persuading native women to procreate.

Greece encapsulates many of these issues. Over the last decade, it has had to cope with a far bigger influx of migrants across the Mediterranean as well as its northern borders compared with its EU partners who have offered inconsistent support.

More than 60,000 irregular migrant arrivals were recorded in Greece last year, a 50 per cent increase over the previous year, with many Palestinians and Egyptians among them. At the height of the migrant crisis in 2015, more than 850,000 people arrived by sea, including many Syrians.

Greece has consistently denied allegations by human rights groups that it has illegally pushed back tens of thousands of migrants on unseaworthy vessels across the Aegean or over its land border to Turkey.

Greece's unofficial pushback policy was condemned publicly for the first time by the European court's ruling.

## Degrading treatment

The complainant in the case, a Turkish woman, had hoped to claim asylum in 2019 on the grounds of persecution by the Turkish

authorities because she was a follower of the Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen.

But she was detained and expelled by Greece to Turkey, where she was arrested on the charge of being a member of the "Fetullahist terrorist organisation".

Her pushback occurred under cover of darkness with the applicant and several other asylum seekers being forced by commandos in balaclavas to board an inflatable boat to Turkey. The court judgment cited articles prohibiting torture and inhuman and degrading treatment and concluded the Greek authorities acted in clear violation of the European convention on human rights.

### "Pushbacks at the Greek borders constitute a systematic practice of the Greek authorities"

"The court's Judgment confirms that pushbacks at the Greek borders constitute a systematic practice of the Greek authorities, as has been documented for several years in numerous reports by international, European and national organisations," **said** the Greek Refugee Council (GRC).

"The [court's] recognition of this illegal practice of the Greek authorities is a vindication for the thousands of victims who denounce the Greek authorities' pushbacks at the Greek-Turkish border," said Maria Papamina, co-ordinator of the GRC's legal unit.

## Maternity benefits

While failing to admit thousands of people, in 2022 Greece recorded its lowest number of births in 92 years and in 2023, it recorded the second-largest population decrease in the EU.

"You don't need to have studied finance to understand the consequences of these projections on economic indicators, GDP, the workforce, the insurance system, pensions, health, and education even since there're

going to be fewer schools,” Michalis Vlastarakis of the Eurobank Group **told** Euronews.

To boost the birth rate, Greece spends €1 billion a year on measures such as maternity benefits and allowances on baby items and it has announced additional childcare benefits and tax breaks for parents.

### Fertility is declining globally, with rates in more than half of all countries and territories in 2021 below replacement level

None of these measures have worked so far either in Greece or in other European countries pursuing a similar path. Such inconvenient facts are ignored by politicians whose anti-migrant and nationalist rhetoric is on the rise.

“Staggering social change” is likely because of declining birth rates, said a global **study** published in The Lancet last year. “Fertility is declining globally, with rates in more than half of all countries and territories in 2021 below replacement level,” it said. Western Europe faces a particularly steep decline in births over the next few decades and may have to become open to migration, the journal suggested.

The EU’s working population of those aged 20-64 fell from a peak of 270 million in 2011 to an estimated 261 million this year, according to UN data. With the downward trajectory of these numbers likely to endure, GDP per head is forecast to be persistently low while tax revenues shrink.

## The anti-immigration message

This week, a McKinsey **report** said low birth rates meant rich economies would have to at least double productivity growth to maintain rising living standards.

The “prosperity of future generations at risk” and governments had to prepare for a “low-

fertility future,” said the OECD last year.



*Alice Weidel, leader of Germany's Alternative für Deutschland party, has embraced the word “remigration”, meaning the mass deportation of people with a migrant background*

But the anti-immigration message of right-wing parties continues to exert allure. Alice Weidel, leader of Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland party facing elections next month, has **embraced** the word “remigration”, meaning the mass deportation of people with a migrant background.

Perhaps she failed to notice that even Elon Musk has countered far-right activists pushing the Great Replacement Theory, a white nationalist conspiracy notion that posits white European people are being pushed out through mass migration.

Musk said the theory failed to address low birth rates and that there was no “replacement”, just a shrinking away of populations.

Few leaders have yet to take on far-right discourse on migration and have allowed it to seep into the mainstream. Will anyone step into the gap?