

THE REAL DEMOGRAPHIC PROBLEM IS THE SIGNIFICANT AND PREVENTABLE MORTALITY

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Abstract

Demographic public policy in Bulgaria usually concentrates on measures to affect births and family support. However, data show that mortality is much higher than the EU average and especially problematic is the treatable and preventable mortality. Premature deaths in Bulgaria are also high leading to low life expectancy. Consequently, it is not the promotion of fertility that is needed to relieve the demographic pressure, but a policy to limit the excessive preventable mortality in Bulgaria. Effective measures related to improving the health of the population are needed which usually involves also reforms in the healthcare.

Keywords: *demographic public policy; Bulgaria; demographic problem; population.*

The latest parliament elections are over and very soon we will again start listening to the politicians practicing on the regular topic of the demographic situation in our country and proposing measures for its quick solution. Of course, these processes do not have a quick solution, but moreover, it is usually not where the government is looking for it. The data show that it is not the promotion of fertility that is needed to relieve the demographic pressure, but a policy to limit the excessive and preventable mortality in Bulgaria.

The last 5 years have been marked by one of the most significant events in the recent history on the world – the covid-19 pandemic. Excess mortality in April, 2020 reached 24,9% more than the baseline period (2016-2019) in the EU. Bulgaria also experienced the effects of the crisis and was hit hard by extremely high morbidity and excessive mortality². Covid-19 became the third most frequent cause of death in 2020 and 2021. The pandemic put a great strain on the healthcare systems across the world and was tackled by different measures including lockdowns, ban of public gatherings, vaccination campaigns and financial stimuli to health workers and hospitals.

The political context in Bulgaria in the last years has been defined by numerous general elections and inability to form a stable government. During that time, we observed political destabilization and lack of reform efforts to improve important public services. Healthcare has

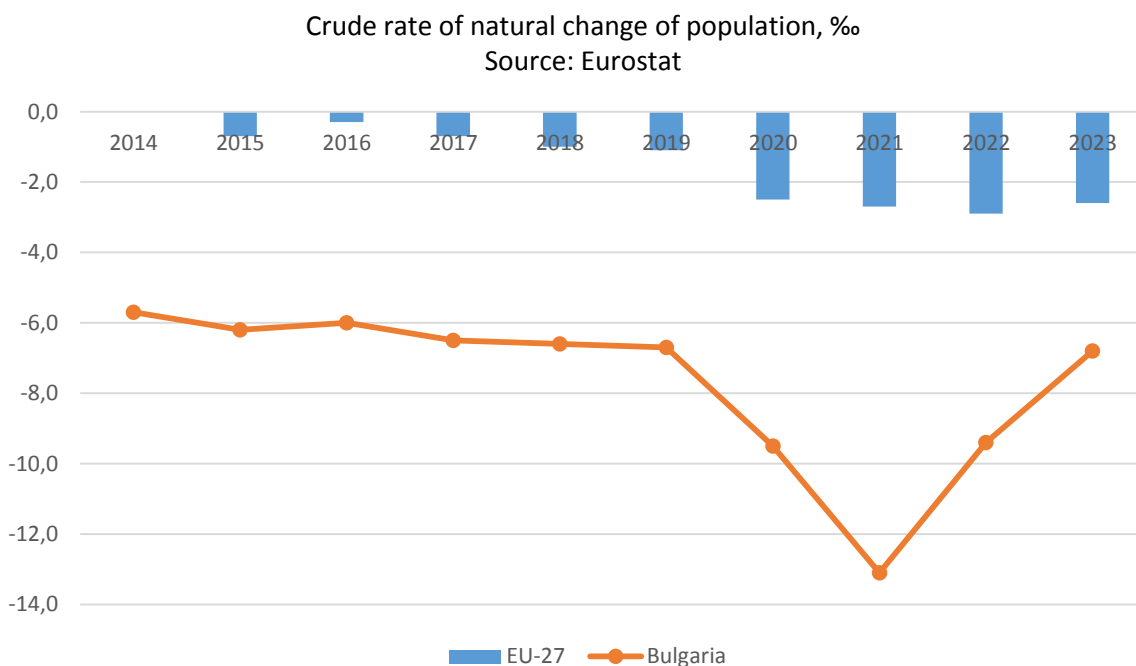
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² https://nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/events/images/excess_mortality.gif

been in a state of deep sleep and the ministers of healthcare in the many interim governments have not shown enough strength to impose any significant changes in this sector.

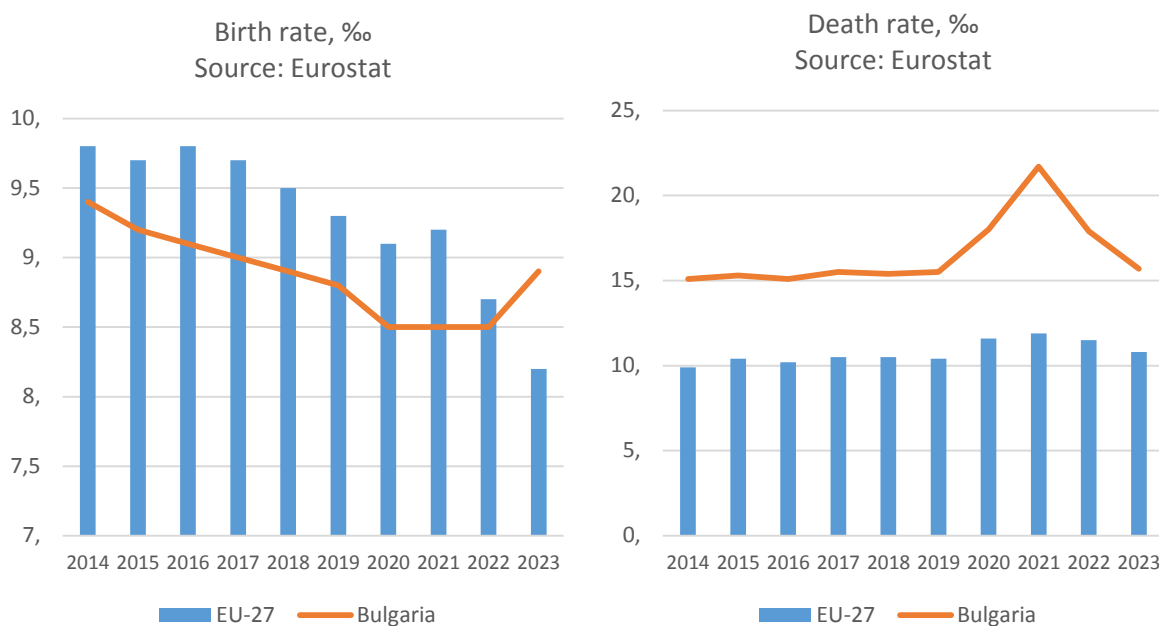
Let's get ahead of the political events and pay attention to the information on the development of the population of Bulgaria, for which there is national and European statistics available. For the last 10 years, Bulgaria's natural population growth rate has been negative, ranging between -6 and -13‰. The highest negative natural growth is recorded in 2021 during the covid-19 pandemic. Practically, this means that every year Bulgaria loses population and this process is sustainable over time. For comparison, the European Union is also steadily losing population, but not on such a scale as here.

Graph 1. Crude rate



The natural growth is the difference between the birth rate and the death rate. And while the birth rate has stabilized and even increased in the year 2023, during which it exceeded the average value for the countries in Europe for the first time, the situation is not the same for the death rate. The intensity of the population dying in Bulgaria after the end of the pandemic has stabilized at a level of about -15‰, or about 5‰ above the EU level, and there is no sign of a downward trend at all.

Graph 2. Birth and death rate



What else do the data show?

- In Bulgaria, mortality is mostly due to diseases of the circulatory system (61.1% of all deaths in 2023³), neoplasms (16.5%) and diseases of the respiratory system (4.9%)⁴. Over the last year, deaths from covid-19 has dropped from third to ninth place as a cause of death for Bulgarians.

- Declining population since 2020 is associated mostly with the impact of covid-19. In 2021, the Bulgaria's extraordinary mortality rate (excess mortality) was the second in the world after Peru⁵. The explanation is the ineffective prevention policies, originally involving only public hospitals (while private ones had a greater efficiency rate in attending non-pandemic causes of death), late budget allocations and procrastinated vaccination of population groups at risk.

- Premature mortality is 19.2%⁶ - one in five dies before reaching 65 years of age. Premature mortality shows the share of people who died before the age of 65. It has fallen slightly over the last 10 years, but is still at a high level. These are people of working age and their death has a direct negative effect on the economy.

- The bigger problem, however, is that the treatable and preventable death rate in our country is one of the highest in the EU member states - only Romania is ahead of us. It is 2,3 times higher than the European average. This indicator provides information on those causes of death that could be largely avoided through effective health care system actions and

³ NSI data.

⁴ <https://ncpha.government.bg/index/119-sustoianie-i-dvijenie-na-naselenieto.html>

⁵ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

⁶ NCPHA data.

preventive interventions before the illness/injury occurs⁷. Treatable and preventable mortality are a direct indicator of the low quality of the healthcare system and the inefficient public policies to improve population health.

- Regional disparities in mortality are also significant and demonstrate both differences in the lifestyle of the population, as well as gaps and deficiencies in the local health systems.

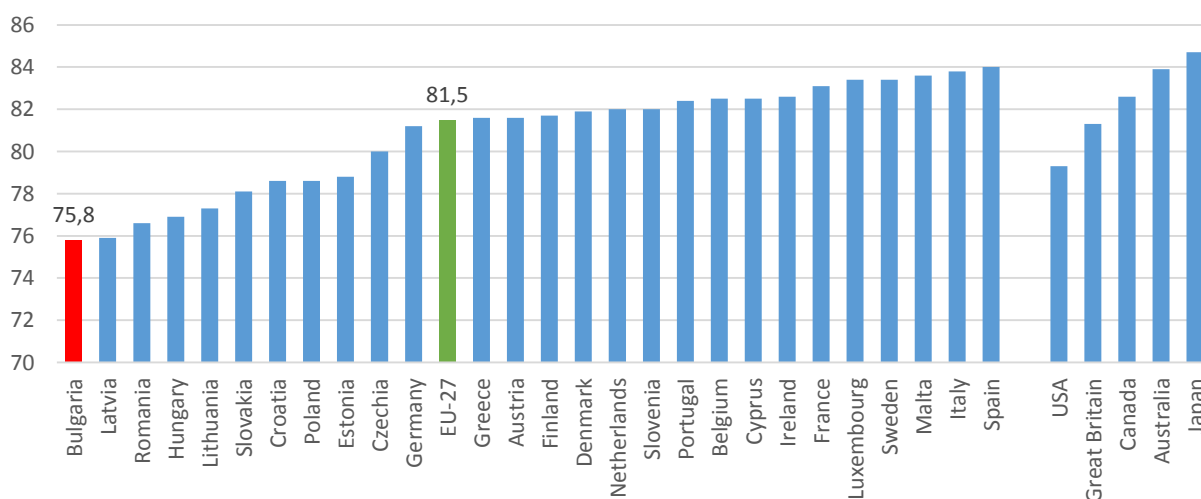
The negative effect of mortality can be observed in the changes in life expectancy at birth. Life expectancy is an important demographic indicator of the functioning of the healthcare system. The average life expectancy has risen significantly across all regions in the world⁸ and in the last 150 years it has doubled in size. The rise is the result of a wide range of advances in health and healthcare – in nutrition, clean water, sanitation, neonatal healthcare, antibiotics, vaccines, and other technologies and public health efforts – and improvements in living standards, economic growth, and poverty reduction. A fall in this indicator has been observed during significant societal and health crises, the latest most notable being the covid-19 pandemic.

In 2023 the average life expectancy in the EU has reached 81,5 years, while Bulgaria marks the lowest at 75,8 years, followed by Latvia and Romania. South European countries show higher life expectancy than Central and Eastern Europe.

Graph 3. Life expectancy

Life expectancy at birth in the EU and some countries, 2023, years

Source: Eurostat, UN



Note: Data for Ireland is for 2022.

Data unequivocally show the lack of effectiveness of our healthcare policy. Serious action is needed in terms of: improving the emergency care system, strengthening preventive care in

⁷Definition of OECD from 2019: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/3b4fdbf2-en.pdf?expires=1724398836&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=E4BA46722A48A097D021B25FAA0090E0>

⁸ <https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy>

the early detection, diagnosis and treatment of diseases, channeling resources from hospital to outpatient care for the purpose of prevention, serious incentives and mechanisms for GP-s to implement more serious prevention measures and many others. If goals related to limiting mortality and improving the health of the population are not set and achieved, the constant annual increase of the budget of the NHIF will be another pouring of water into the sand - as it has been for many years.

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