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Immigration and ethnic change in low-fertility countries – towards a new demographic transition?

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The demographic effects of continued international migration into developed countries have attracted some attention in recent years. Any population with sub-replacement fertility whose numbers are being maintained, or increased, by net immigration, is bound eventually to be replaced by a population of immigrant origin. Some foreign origin populations, especially where augmented by higher fertility than the national average, are growing in absolute and relative terms to such an extent that they are nearly certain to outnumber the native population in some major urban areas in Europe in the near future and, according to some speculations, at national level as well. Any substantial trend along these lines would have interesting and important consequences for the social composition of the population, its domestic and foreign policy, the use of language and the pace of integration and the cohesion and self-identity of the society as a whole.

This paper presents a comparative analysis of the likely future effects of immigration on the ethnic or foreign-origin composition of the developed world, using (mostly) official and some unofficial projections from five European countries and the US, with new projections for the United Kingdom. Some of the UK findings, on fertility, migration and projections of various ethnic minority groups, will be presented here for the first time. The paper analyses the relative growth of different minority populations in comparison with the native population under different assumptions, the role of inter-ethnic unions in creating populations with new identities, the effects of this growth on future migration, both through chain migration and through the effects of migration on the electoral dynamics of the populations concerned. It is suggested that the projected changes in population composition, if realised, might be considered to be a ‘third demographic transition’.

The seven projections that are compared are made on a variety of assumptions, all using conventional cohort-component methods but with various refinements. Two, those from the US and the UK, are based on an ‘ethnic’ concept which is, potentially, a permanent characteristic of an individual and his or her descendants. Most others are based upon a two-generation foreign descent criterion whereby the third generation is deemed to have become of local or national origin and ceases to be ‘foreign’. In the medium and long term that inevitably understates the foreign-origin component compared with the ethnic criterion, although it maybe argued that by that time the distinction would have become immaterial. Despite that contrast in assumptions, up to 2050 the medium variant projections for the countries studied show very similar rate of increase of the foreign origin population. On (mostly) conservative assumptions, and from different starting points, the foreign-origin proportions are projected to rise to between about 18% and 33%

of the total national population by mid-century, at an almost linear rate of increase and mostly showing little sign of moderation by mid-century. Substantial changes in the relative size of different ethnic minority populations are also projected, generally with Asian and sub-Saharan African populations gaining most. On plausible ranges of assumptions, the migration assumptions in variant projections are demographically more important than the fertility assumptions. The variant projections including zero-migration typically show only about 50% of further growth in ethnic minority populations, driven by demographic momentum and the assumption of (near) fertility convergence, followed by stabilisation or slow decline. That contrasts with the two to fourfold increase in the medium-variant projections over the same period.

The UK projections employ new estimates of the fertility, mortality and migration of different ethnic minority groups. These are derived from a variety of sources including the Labour Force Survey (using the own-child method), the ONS Longitudinal Study, the General Household Survey, immigration and vital registration data. The categories include separately persons of mixed origin arising from various forms of inter-ethnic union, a component absent from most other national projections. Here, the populations of mixed origin are the most rapidly growing 'ethnic group', although derived very unequally from the original minority populations (Asians least of all). This has a number of important consequences. Through interethnic union, and depending on the self-attribution of offspring by their parents and by themselves, the population size of some low-fertility immigrant populations is beginning to decline. Most of the offspring of mixed unions themselves form unions with whites. Inevitably the populations of mixed origin in subsequent generations are acquiring a more complex ancestry. That may eventually make the ethnic categorisation of a growing part of the population increasingly difficult or meaningless, casting doubts on the practicability or even the propriety of continuing with potentially divisive concepts of ethnicity as opposed to the more inclusive concept of citizenship.

While the components of international migration are notoriously difficult to project, some demographic elements give some basis for projection. Immigration is related, among other factors, to the size of the existing population of that origin in the receiving country; especially if arranged marriage with imported spouses is the norm. The rapid growth of non-Western minorities in many receiving countries, allied to the persistent desire for arranged marriage among some groups, indicates that marriage migration will underwrite future immigration flows for some time. Marriage-migration flows are assuming increasing demographic importance in, for example, the UK and the Netherlands

Growth of foreign origin populations also has major political implications, depending among other factors on the incidence of naturalisation and therefore upon entitlement to vote. Because ethnic minority growth is so powerfully influenced by public policy on immigration, this feeds back onto the magnitude of immigration itself. Foreign origin populations tend to support left/liberal political parties, partly because these have tended to favour more open immigration policies. As numbers grow and opposing political parties in some countries (e.g. US, UK) compete for their votes, immigration flows may be affected indirectly through the subsequent direction taken by government policy. For

example it may be that in some polities, such as the United States, the electoral importance of immigrant minorities is already such as to make future restrictive changes in immigration policy unlikely. In other countries, immigration policies have divided political parties (e.g. Germany) and recent changes of government have altered the direction of immigration policy (e.g. Denmark). As noted above, immigration is the more important variable in future growth of many of these populations and thus the direction of public policy on migration is most important for the future demographic development.

A model is under development to explore the effects of the possible ranges of some of these parameters. Various scenarios for the future demographic development of foreign origin populations, including those of mixed origin where data permit, will be presented. A second set of models will explore the range of effects of the growth of foreign origin groups on electoral balance. Parameters will include a range of fertility and migration assumptions, the propensity to form interethnic unions, levels of naturalisation, voting propensities and the stability, or otherwise of ethnic self-identification. Up to 1000 simulations will be run to show the possible distribution of outcomes. A full-scale probabilistic projection will not be attempted as some limitation on the ranges of uncertainty will have to be set. Artificial examples will be run to ascertain sensitivity to the assumptions, to see which ones are limiting. These will be mapped onto empirical demographic and psephological data from the British Election Study and similar sources, to show the likely consequences of current and projected inflow and other sources of minority growth.

Finally it is suggested that if current trends continue, which involve most of the richer lower-fertility countries of the developed world, then a 'third demographic transition' might emerge. The first transformed vital rates to low levels, the second is transforming living arrangements, the continuation of current trends will transform the composition of populations themselves, certainly making them much more ethnically diverse and possibly displacing the current majority groups in the long run. While population replacement has a long history, the current process is different in being peaceful and at least to some extent continuing with the acquiescence of the receiving populations concerned, while still being substantially dependent on the direction taken by public policy.