
Plummeting birth rates. Rosina: “Italy has created a fragile and unstable future for itself by not investing in the next generations”

Yet another record low birth rate: there were 404,892 births in 2020 (15 thousand fewer births than in 2019). The decline (-2.5% in the first 10 months of the year) became sharper in November (-8.3% compared to the same month in 2019) and December (-10.7%) - the two months when births conceived at the onset of the epidemic started being counted. The figures are contained in the report “Birth rate and fertility of the resident population” for the year 2020, released by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) on Tuesday, December 14. Based on interim data for the period January-September, ISTAT reports, there have been 12,500 fewer births, an almost fifty percent decline compared to the same period in 2020. The mean number of births per woman dropped to 1.24 in 2020 for all residents. It was 1.44 in the years 2008-2010, marked by a relatively high fertility rate. SIR asked **Alessandro Rosina**, professor of Demography and Social Statistics at Milan's Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, to comment on these figures, which once again highlight Italy's demographic winter.



Unfortunately, the numbers for 2020 are what we expected. Births declined in the months corresponding to the conceptions prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, i.e. from January to October, consistent with the negative trend of the previous decade. As a reminder, births dropped from over 560,000 to 420,000 in the years 2010-2019. The average number of children per woman fell from 1.44 to 1.27 in the same period, but for Italian nationals the figure was even lower, at 1.18.

This is a record low, both with respect to past trends and to other European countries. The pandemic further contributed to a further decline in 2020.

While the decline in the first ten months compared to the previous year was -2.5%, in November it dropped to -8.3% and in December to -10.7%. This is clearly the result of the first wave and the corresponding lockdown. The negative trend forecast by the international survey conducted by the Toniolo Institute in April 2020, which showed that young Italians were the most concerned about the impact of the pandemic on their future projects, was confirmed. **Based on the data released, what**

do you find most worrying, the 2020 historic low fertility rates or the further decline projected for 2021? ISTAT data show that the impact of the pandemic affected also the year 2021. Indeed, January 2021 was the month recording the worst impact of the first lockdown. Marriage celebrations were suspended at that stage and, in 2020 as a whole, marriages dropped by 50% compared to the previous year. The negative impact on births in 2021 was therefore to be expected. *Our greatest concern today is the ongoing health crisis, which is far from over. This may have serious consequences in a country with a pre-existing fragile demography.* **To what extent has the pandemic contributed to plummeting birth rates, and to what extent do you think it will continue affecting fertility rates?** As regards the overall impact of the pandemic, one thing is sure: the year 2021 will ultimately record under 400,000 births. It is however difficult to estimate the extent to which the decline compared to 2019 is due to the health crisis. In fact, we don't know if the year 2021 would have recorded an increase compared to the previous decade had the pandemic not broken out. ISTAT forecasts prior to the pandemic suggested that 2021 would see an increase in the average number of births per woman. In other words, we can calculate the difference compared to previous years, but not whether the figures for 2021 would have been higher without the epidemic. Furthermore, the extent of post-epidemic recovery must also be taken into account in the overall assessment. *If this recovery succeeds in generating a birth rate upturn, Italy might be able to avoid the worst case scenario, namely a progressively unsustainable demographic imbalance.* **Foreign citizens' contribution to childbearing is decreasing, younger women in particular are postponing motherhood, while the fertility rate of Italian women is at an all-time low: is Italy not a country for children?** *Unfortunately, for too long Italy has been among the countries least supportive of parenthood and lacking appropriate investments in childrearing and education. As a matter of fact, Italy's collapsing birth rates are aggravated by a high risk of poverty for families with children, which subsequently becomes educational poverty. As a result, young adults remain dependent on their parents for a long time, and the later they start a family of their own, the greater the risk of failing to fulfil their family plans because of the inherent difficulties in finding steady jobs and reconciling work and family life. As I point out in my book 'Demographic Crisis. Policies for a country that has stopped growing', (Crisi Demografica, Politica per un Paese che ha smesso di crescere. Vita e Pensiero, 2021). Italy has stopped investing in the younger generations both in terms of quantity and quality. This has made its future dangerously fragile and unstable.* **Do you think that people are sufficiently aware of this problem, which is causing a severe demographic winter in the country?** *There is widespread awareness, but not enough compared to the gravity of the imbalances being created by the demographic crisis and the determination needed to implement policies that could reverse the negative trend.* The population growth of Italy is so dramatic that it is unlikely to resume an upward trajectory during the rest of this century. Nonetheless, a reverse in fertility declines could help mitigate the growing imbalance between the older and younger generations. It would therefore foster a more sustainable development of the country, in both economic and social terms. **How can the trend be reversed, and what is needed to recover the birth rates? What is the role of politics in this respect?** The political world has clear responsibilities.

Family and next-generation policies have been among the weakest and most inadequate in Europe for decades.

In order to restore birth rates, the lowest in Europe and with a more unfavourable demographic structure, we need to shift from being the worst in the past decade to setting ourselves the goal of becoming a role model in policies from 2022 onwards. This requires the best combination of Next Generation EU resources, integrated measures envisaged in the Family Act, and a positive and encouraging atmosphere in the country vis a vis today's decisions aimed at building a positive future.

