

The Political Economy of Policy Vacuums: The European Commission on Demographic Change

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Abstract

Supranational organisations can only confront politico-economic issues that are recognised as important. Typically, issues gain recognition either when they provide an external shock to the system, shaking political actors into action, or when they are framed as important in policy networks concerned with developing the appropriate scientific approach. Ideally political and scientific actors align in creating pressures to recognise the issue as salient and to mobilise organisational responses. Issues differ in their capacity to be driven by both political and scientific pressures, creating crisis management, technocratic, and reform agenda outcomes. Here we explore a further variation, where pressures around an issue are insufficient, creating a policy vacuum. We examine one such policy vacuum in Europe: demographic change. This issue belongs to no particular Directorate-General in the European Commission, but is subject to policy frames from DG EMPL and DG ECFIN. Without sufficient political and scientific pressures, no particular policy position is occupied and advocated despite recognition of the issue's importance. We discuss the role of policy vacuums and the need for their identification in political economy research.

Keywords

Demographic change; agenda setting; European Commission; policy vacuums; expert networks

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*If I want to get really depressed,
I think about what we're not talking about at all
— the ticking demographic time-bomb.*

Senior Eurozone Official¹

Introduction

How to get issues on the policy agenda is a long-standing concern for political economy scholars. Classic works point to how placing issues into the rooms of decision-makers is a mix of adequate information sharing, the alignment of political and economic interest groups, the establishment of clear policy paradigms, and institutional receptivity (Kingdon 1984; Campbell 1998). All of these elements are important for issues to be adopted. Understanding how agents can push issues on the agenda is a complex matter. Entrepreneurs may be able to promote particular ideas about issues during times of uncertainty (Blyth 2002), but implementation comes when 'policy is superintended by experts or by administrators with long tenures in office' (Hall 1993, p. 291).

Getting issues on the agenda requires the presence or creation of both political and scientific pressures. The literature on scientific consensus formation demonstrates that scientific communities need to move through a series of controversies to congeal around evidence of an issue's importance, excluding what is considered non-scientific evidence (Gieryn 1983, 1999; Shwed and Bearman 2010). Once a scientific group has congealed over a particular understanding of an issue they can introduce it to political and economic actors and try to get it on the policy agenda. Technocrats can also leverage scientific consensus in pursuing their policy agendas. Research warns us that we should not exaggerate the power of scientific communities, and that issue adoption is dependent on political and economic interest groups (Lindvall 2009; Pagliari and Young 2015), as well as the composition of expert groups (Gornitzka and Sverdrup 2008), which sometimes misrepresent the science at hand (Hopkin and Rosamond 2018).

The presence of political and scientific pressures is also important in international and supranational organisations, where multiple political layers exist, such as among Member States, as well as within the bureaucratic apparatus and its agents. The interaction of political and scientific pressures has been analysed in a range of organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund (Kentikelenis and Seabrooke 2017), the World Health Organization (Chorev 2012), and the World Trade Organization (Eagleton-Pierce 2018). Obtaining the right mix of politics and science has been of particular interest to scholars of the European Union (EU), which is known as an especially complex environment for agenda-setting (Peters 1994). The European Commission can act as a policy entrepreneur when the mix of political and scientific pressures permit it. Radaelli's (1999, 2005) research on policy formation and adoption in the EU has demonstrated how issues considered technocratic can be politicised to propel reform, as well as how political context directly shapes adoption on politico-economic issues (see also Eberlein and Radaelli 2010). Rosamond (2012) has discussed how the European Commission (EC)'s activities are backed by a technocratic discourse of shared policy objectives of marketisation within the community. Recent research has also pointed to how competition among policy agencies can impede reform processes in Europe and more generally (Hustedt and Seyfried 2016; Knill et al. 2018).

We contribute to this literature by identifying how policy actors interact over an issue that is recognised as potentially important but where there are weak or absent scientific and political pressures. We consider pressure as a combination of *salience* and *mobilisation of bias*, following the notion that action requires the organisation of biases (Schattschneider 1960). It is commonly assumed that when something does not happen there are active forces at work preventing it from doing so, or that there simply isn't any explicit interest in the issue (Bachrach and Baratz 1963). But it may be the case that an issue is recognised as significant but no actors take up the mantle in building scientific and political pressures around it. Such cases are important to study for two reasons. First, they question our common assumptions about expert coordination and policy mobilisation. Second, the actual effects of the problem being ignored can be a source of social change.

Our case is demographic change in Europe, a politico-economic issue that is a complex but not a 'wicked' problem given it is open to policy definition and experimentation (Rittel and Webber 1973; cf. Danken 2017). The combined processes of demographic ageing in Europe – below replacement-level fertility rates and increasing life expectancy – confront the EU with economic and social challenges (May 2005; Seabrooke and Tsingou 2016). In policy terms, the EC notes that there are potentially grave consequences from demographic change with respect to the working age population (WAP) and growth rates. As the WAP decreases fewer people enter the labour market than leave it, so economic growth will eventually rely on productivity gains and increases in the employment rate of the WAP (EC 2015a, p. 52). The European WAP started decreasing in 2012 (EC 2012, p. 57), and it is projected that this decline will result in a sustained decrease in the number of persons in employment, which, from 2022 onwards, would no longer be offset by increases in the employment rate (EC 2012, pp. 29–30, 57). Historically, economic growth rates in the EU were composed of employment growth rates and productivity growth rates of around 1 % each annually, resulting in an average of 2 % GDP growth. When employment growth turns negative in the near future, productivity growth rates will need to exceed 2 % annually to maintain the desired levels of GDP growth (EC 2015a, p. 47). This has not occurred in Europe since 1995 and is unlikely in a politico-economic environment of low growth where investments in productivity gains are weak. The EC's own forecast views productivity growth as not exceeding 1.4 % annually on average for the period 2013 - 2060 (EC 2015b, p. 44). Despite expected productivity gains linked to automation and artificial intelligence, demographic ageing brings new challenges and uncertainty to the EU's own projections of economic growth and global competitiveness.

Europe's social challenge from demographic change is also significant (Demeny 2016). Notwithstanding the social achievement that is the remarkable rise in life expectancy (80.6 years in 2013), a shrinking workforce will – *ceteris paribus* – have to provide for more people outside the workforce, corresponding to a significant increase in the overall dependency ratio.² This means greater health care expenditures for Member States (EC 2015b, p. 126) and raises questions about pension sustainability and adequacy (an ongoing concern, see Minns 1996). Whereas pension sustainability has received a great deal of attention among EU Member States, which project a stable share of GDP spending on public pensions for the period 2015-2060, the adequacy dimension has, according to the OECD, been neglected (OECD 2015, p. 9). Efforts have been made in various countries to raise the retirement age, but the matching of increased life expectancy to years of work is haphazard (Hofäcker 2015). Old-age poverty is on the rise in even the richer EU countries, especially for women (c.f. Bertelsmann Stiftung 2017). In OECD countries there is an expectation that facing climate change requires more public

investment, and that demographic change will inhibit fiscal and pension systems from providing such funds (Bailey 2015). The European think tank, Fondation Robert Schuman, has declared 2050 as Europe's year for 'demographic suicide', by which time 'the desire to live [as] expressed through economic initiatives and raising children' will have been thoroughly undermined (Boussemart and Godet 2018).

The implications of demographic change for public administrations have been considered, with a great deal of variation within the OECD states (Lodge and Hood 2012). At the European Union level a case has been made for EU policies on demography and demographic change. These are addressed as distinct issues primarily by two DGs in the EC: the Directorate Generals for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion (DG EMPL) and Economics and Finance Affairs (DG ECFIN). There is also a scientific community researching the issue.

Below we establish how the issue has been tackled within EC DGs and contrast their positions on demographic change. Our analysis shows how ideas to address demographic change were presented in a context where competency is shared among DGs, where resources are primarily at the national level, and where there is no established best practice. We also look at how external experts engage with the Commission, as well as with each other. We find that no particular policy position is occupied by either DG, nor is there strong advocacy by the scientific community for reform. In short, internal EC dynamics do not provide an environment for a policy position to be articulated on demographic change, even when it is not being opposed by an interest group. While considered of social importance, demographic change has low political and scientific salience and mobilisation, existing in what we characterise as a policy vacuum.

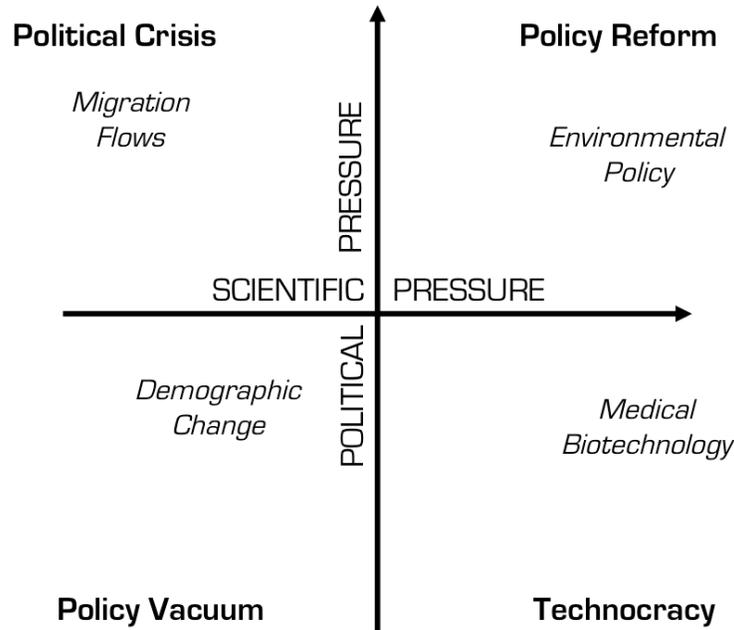
Locating Policy Vacuums

A policy vacuum exists when there is insufficient political and scientific pressure for policies to be produced, where the issue at hand is not considered salient and where there is lack of mobilisation to create policy change. Politics and science are both present in all policymaking settings and scholars typically pick cases where sufficient pressure is clear. Figure 1, below, illustrates political and scientific pressures in policymaking. On the x-axis we have scientific pressures moving from the left to the right. At the extreme left one can imagine weak scientific interest and advocacy, and then on the extreme right a firm consensus on the evidentiary basis for the issue at hand and willingness to mobilise. On the y-axis we have political pressures. At the extreme bottom one can imagine an apolitical treatment of an issue. At the top of the y-axis one can imagine issues that have very high political salience, which any politician must mobilise on to maintain their claim to authority and legitimacy. We have populated the diagram with types of analysis in studies of public policy, as well as locating particular cases within the quadrants that reflect the mix of political and scientific pressures.

Working from the top-left, the extensive literature on political crises alerts us to how leaders deal with crises that have high political salience but where scientific opinion is not the driver of political action. This literature highlights both how leaders address crises, assign blame and set agendas (Birkland 1997; Boin et al. 2005), and the cultural and institutional obstacles to learning from crises (t' Hart 2013).⁹ Elsewhere, scholarship has considered what issues might elicit an emotional bond to the public - have 'valence' - (Cox and Béland 2012), with politicians failing if there is a large distance between public valence and political salience. Within polities

like the EU, coordination among the agencies dealing with political crises typically follows who can establish dominance. The migration flows associated with the asylum seeker crisis of 2015-16 are an example of an issue with a weak scientific consensus on how to react but high political pressure for nearly all European political leaders.

Figure 1: Political and Scientific Pressures in Policymaking



Moving clockwise, in the top-right quadrant we have ‘policy reform’, where both political and scientific pressures can be said to be present in a manner that pushes a reform process. This is an ideal situation for issue transformation. Much of the literature on public policy and advocacy coalitions points to how the balance between political and scientific pressures is managed, especially on tensions among coordinating agencies. For example, Knill and co-authors (2018) highlight that managing demands from technocracy and politics can lead to hypocritical behaviour from policy entrepreneurs. Focusing on European environmental policies, they show how the EC has evolved in the past two decades to decouple ‘talk’ and ‘action’, allowing it to claim leadership of policy reforms while also permitting Member States to prioritise economic growth over environmental regulation. Scholars following advocacy coalition frameworks demonstrate that such coalitions are most effective when they combine information about the issue to be reformed with knowledge about policy processes. Luxon’s (2019) work on how the EU’s Habitats Directive recast forestry policy from the conservation of isolated land parcels to recognition of habitats as ecological spaces provides a recent example. The point is that reform requires the constant balancing between political and scientific pressures.

Going further clockwise, to the bottom-right quadrant, we have technocracy. Multiple studies have discussed how technocratic interests can pursue policy agendas based on superior policy science and technical expertise, and how such interests ensure that political pressures do not sully their control. Technocracy uses science but is not reducible to it, since technocratic

authority comes from administrative control within mandated institutions to pursue what are considered scientifically-informed policies. For example, Schmidt (2016) has shown how, post-financial crisis, the Commission was heavily involved in adding economic policy issues to its agenda to assert technocratic control and direct rules 'by stealth' (see also Schön-Quinlivan and Scipioni 2017). Similarly, Littoz-Monnet (2015) has demonstrated how the EC was able to mobilise 'ethics experts' to place medical biotechnology policies in the hands of technocrats and out of political debate. The Commission did so by expanding the role and size of the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies and then embed the expert group into the Commission's Bureau of European Policy Advisors. This permitted technocratic control over issues such as human stem cells. An important element in the extension of technocratic control is turning issues into 'tame' problems that are clearly defined and where routine solutions can be applied (Head and Alford 2015: 717).

This brings us to the bottom-left quadrant: the policy vacuum. Here insufficient scientific and political pressures leave issues unaddressed. This may be for two reasons: defence or denial. The case for how issues end up in a policy vacuum from defensive activity is straightforward. The most common story is that the most powerful policy actor, who also controls the purse, blocks an issue from gaining traction. For example, in the case of post-crisis financial reform, Seabrooke and Tsingou (2014) demonstrated how professional networks limited the range of issues to be included on agendas. The presence of prominent professionals on a number of expert committees, sometimes offering contradictory policy solutions, had the effect of occupying the space so that particular issues were not raised. Similarly, policies can rollback when those who put them forward are challenged by new interests or through the expansion of policy alternatives (Jacobs and Weaver 2015). These defence-based actions can leave an issue sitting in a policy vacuum.

Our case on demographic change is a case of denial. There is no active interest group lobbying to remove demographic change issues from Commission or Council agendas as 'non-decisions' (Bachrach and Baratz 1963). But neither are there actively organised political and scientific groups creating pressures for demographic change to be treated as a serious issue that requires intervention, despite the concerns about the economic sustainability and social unrest detailed above. Internal dynamics within the EC also prevent policy entrepreneurship on demographic change as a key issue. As such demographic change sits in a policy vacuum.

Data and Methods

This paper relies on three sets of data: i. primary documents derived from EU output related to the demographic dimension since the start of the 1990s; ii. an extensive social network analysis (SNA) based on participation in key events and citations in relevant policy outputs; and iii. semi-structured interviews with key high-level professionals from within and outside the EC, all linked to the EU policy process on demographic change issues.

A total of 55 documents were identified corresponding to a timeline of European policy engagement with demographic change issues. Content analysis of these documents was used to provide insights into major trends across time and shifting focus areas (Bowen 2009). The SNA is based on a dataset of demography experts created by noting, first, participation in 23 key expert groups, conferences, seminars and workshops since the 2006 Communication *The Demographic Future of Europe* (EC 2006), which marked a renewed ambition of the European

institutions to address demography at the EU level. The SNA was also supported by citation networks of the flagship *Ageing & Demography* reports. This resulted in the identification of 856 named individuals (nodes) tied together through 4,569 affiliations. To highlight interrelations among the nodes, standard centrality measures were applied, and a Louvain cluster analysis was conducted to underline community structures in the field (Blondel et al. 2008). The SNA maps the social capital structures among actors and distinguishes key individuals.⁴

The results of the network analysis provided us with information on those who were most important to talk to for interviews within the Commission and among the expert community. Based on centrality scores from the SNA we approached a number of policy makers and conducted 11 semi-structured elite interviews in the Spring/Summer of 2017. The paper includes direct quotes from these interviews, and attributes them when such permission has been granted.

Demographic Governance in the EU: The Legal Basis for European Action

The demographic dimension is addressed in EU work at several institutional stages: the European Semester, the Social Policy Committee, various Commission DGs, and the European Parliament. But it is within the Commission that the important analytical groundwork takes place and where European ideas about demography and ageing societies are developed. As is the case for social policy-related matters, the EU and Member States enjoy shared competencies and the subsidiarity principle gives the right to legislation to Member States, with the EU's role limited to supporting and complementing their efforts. The legal basis is provided in Article 3 TEU and Article 9 TFEU, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights which, *inter alia*, includes the right to reconcile family and professional life (Article 33), a right to social security (Article 34) and a right to health care (Article 35). Whereas implementation remains in the hands of Member States, the Commission provides ideational leadership to frame a European approach to the dual challenges of ageing societies and demographic transitions. This is in line with the Commission's use of a 'policy identity' for steering Member States, including on social issues. The clarity of this identity has recently been questioned, with policy stagnation on social, labour, and migration issues the result (Menz 2019). Based on the outputs produced and the networks analysed, two DGs are the main sources of policy activity: DG EMPL produces reports on demography with a focus on the social implications of societal changes and DG ECFIN publishes the analytical flagship report on ageing and plays a crucial role in the European Semester.

Our research suggests that two questions need to be answered in understanding the EU's efforts to govern demographic change. First, how is work at the Commission coordinated between different DGs and how are institutional dynamics affected by crisis events? Second, what are the dynamics among the external actors that provide expert input, including their access points to policymakers? The next sections address these questions in turn, looking into internal dynamics within the EC, and EC-external expert dynamics. We then discuss how demographic change is left in a policy vacuum.

Internal Dynamics in the European Commission

Within the EC, the main institutional actors are DG EMPL and DG ECFIN. Each DG publishes its own report, ECFIN the *Ageing Report*, and EMPL the *Demography Report*. The

different foci of the reports are apparent in the citation network analysis: the reports published in the period 2007-2017 (five *Demography Reports* and two *Ageing Reports*) share only one citation. Other features worth highlighting based on the citation analysis include: *Ageing Reports* attribute 54% of academic citations to trained economists, with citations to work in Demography making up 7.5%. Almost half (46%) of the cited academics are affiliated with U.S. universities and research institutes. On the other hand, *Demography Reports* rely to an overwhelming extent (95.5%) on scholars from European universities and research institutes in their academic citations, and the scholars cited come from a wider range of academic backgrounds: 36% are trained economists, 22% are demographers, with further citations to work in Sociology, History, Health, and Medicine. This underscores the prominence of Economics within DG ECFIN, including a reliance on approaches not embedded in the specific contexts of the EU. DG EMPL, on the other hand, favours an approach rooted in the European experience and puts emphasis on social investment for addressing demographic change. This distinction between a monetarist and an interventionist camp in the two DGs is in line with scholarship on the social dimension of EU policy (Crespy and Menz 2015) and reflects the broader asymmetry between economic and social issues in the Commission's work and current policy tools (cf. Parker and Pye 2018).

DG policy disagreements emerge only partly from content analysis of the units' outputs. Given the semi-autonomous nature of the DGs, political recommendations that are in direct conflict with official Commission policy are rare. Our content analysis of the two respective major outputs of the ECFIN and EMPL services did not uncover glaring differences in framing strategies. For example, the term 'investment', closely associated with social investment frames for dealing with demographic issues, does not feature prominently in the DG EMPL-produced *Demography Reports*. However, it seems that this has little to do with political priorities and a lot to do with political balancing since according to one of our interviewees:

calling an investment an investment was very difficult

- *Senior Official, DG EMPL*

An interventionist policy narrative within DG EMPL can instead be found in the Communications from 2005-7 and the Social Investment Package from 2013. For example, the 2006 Communication on *The demographic future of Europe – from challenge to opportunity* and its accompanying documents make a clear case for more resources: from better access to childcare and increased investment in access to assisted reproductive technologies, to lifelong learning. Similarly, both the 2006 Communication and the 2005 Green Paper on Demography highlight Scandinavian best practice in achieving high employment rates combined with relatively high fertility levels and social protection. This approach culminated in the 2013 Social Investment Package which combined the bundle of interventionist measures under the term 'life-course approach'. This approach maintains that 'social policy interventions to tackle disadvantage throughout the course of life appear to yield the highest returns if started as early in life as possible' (EC 2013a). By contrast, the *Ageing Reports* of DG ECFIN merely outline the extent of the economic impact and provide projections for individual Member States. In doing so, they rely on optimistic productivity growth projections that make projections significantly less alarmist. The market-based frames of DG ECFIN are reflected in these growth projections that diminish the need to tackle demography as a free-standing issue.

Do these differences matter for policy uptake? A closer look at the composition of Commission in-house experts highlights how the field is mainly populated by DG EMPL staff. First, the network analysis, which covers the period of 2006–2017, identified 60 out of a total of 112 EU actors as Commission staff (plus 10 Eurostat-staff), thus confirming the crucial role of the Commission. Second, within the Commission, 56% of actors were affiliated with DG EMPL and 11% with DG ECFIN, with the remaining experts working in other directorates. This leading role of DG EMPL was also consistently asserted in our interviews.

DG EMPL's leading role is further evident in the multiple Communications, Green Papers and White Papers relating to demographic change since 2006 under its leadership, including the 2006 Communication on the Demographic Future of Europe, the 2008 Renewed Social Agenda, the 2010 Green Paper on Pensions, the 2012 White Paper on Pension, the 2013 Social Investment Package and more. Crucially, however, the internal dynamics within the Commission worked in another direction as our interviewees continuously highlighted:

We [DG EMPL] are their [DG ECFIN's] supplement. Previously, we were more equal in the analytical processes and political priorities, which we haven't been for a number of years. Now, DG ECFIN is acting as the President's right hand.

- *Senior Official, DG EMPL*

During that time when I was dealing with social policy [2011–2014], I had a lot of discussions with DG ECFIN because I was also in charge of the European Semester, Europe 2020, and I had all the time to discuss and come to agreements and disagreements with DG ECFIN. And over that period, the Secretary General always took the side of the DG ECFIN. Partially because they were the first ones to seriously increase their power after the crisis in 2008 and 2009.

- *Lieve Franssen, Former Social Policy Director, DG EMPL*

When the Euro crisis hit in 2011–2012, Commission dynamics were altered, strengthening DG ECFIN's position by placing them at the centre of the European Semester (Copeland and Daly 2018). According to our interviewees, DG ECFIN's political priority to stabilise public finances through austerity policies dominated the overall approach of the EC Presidency, including the demographic issue. A personal advisor to President Juncker stated:

When you live 20% longer and I take 20% of your monthly pension, you'll get exactly the same amount. You just feel poorer. These are allocational things [...]. People think they have an entitlement to retire. Forget it! This is an insurance product! [...] It's a policy of let the markets rule.

Our interviews suggest that the DGs don't agree about competency and task allocation in dealing with demography, nor about the relative importance of the issue. Their collective 'image of Europe' as officials is not only plural but lacks a clear idea of what a Commission-driven consensus could look like (Hooghe 2012). Not seeing demographic change as a 'real issue' and employing pre-existing ideas sidelined specific efforts to give demographic concerns a stable institutional footing and downgraded the Commission's focus on the social (de la Porte and Natali 2018). The two DGs are at odds based on their 'in principle' propensity to endorse certain types of reforms, with interviewees pointing to DG ECFIN's repeated insistence on costs and DG EMPL's close links with trade unions and enshrined labour and pension rights.

In this context, the institutional inter-DG dynamics narrowed the possibility experts have to present issues and introduce novel ideas to a broad audience.

External Expert Dynamics and Commission Interactions

With internal competition and DG power asymmetries overshadowing substantive debates and limiting resources, it is left to external experts to drive the debate. Whereas the ‘epistemic communities’ literature focused on scientists with clear institutional access, mainly through the United Nations system (Haas 1992), when scientists are left to their own devices they are often unwelcoming to institutional actors seeking to transform science into policy. In this case, the Commission DGs have engaged extensively with external experts in the demographic field. This process was largely institutionalised through multiple expert groups, fora, conferences and roundtable discussions. For the period covered, 586 external actors were identified, and their links traced so as to allow us to identify central nodes in the network. These actors are overwhelmingly academics; interest groups account for only 15%, the majority of which are in the private sector and participate through BusinessEurope.

As discussed in the previous section, we know from the content and citation analyses that DG EMPL considers demographers to be experts on these issues, while DG ECFIN focuses on the work of US-based economists. And while many economists have participated in EU-led events, the grouping that stands out in the SNA links 26 individuals who are institutionally affiliated through Population Europe.⁵ This demographic community of external experts, defined as people working primarily with demographic issues in a holistic context rather than in sub-sections, such as pensions, is densely connected and exhibits characteristics that allow few outliers. First, the field is relatively small. People know each other and tend to be employed in only a handful of research institutes.⁶ They interact regularly and routinely engage in peer review of each other’s work. As a prominent demographer stated in an interview:

We all go to the same meetings and someone who takes a PhD here goes off to Vienna [Vienna Institute of Demography] and the other way around. So, we all work closely together. We evaluate each other and give each other high grades.

Second, the field is committed to common academic norms. Demography experts are data-driven and very cautious about predictions; political activity is not incentivised through funding structures. Population Europe, for example, was funded out of the research budget of the Max Planck Institute. The effect is that the demographic community by and large shows little commitment to getting their message out to the wider public and to political circles. This was particularly highlighted by the recently retired President of the Migration Policy Institute:

Formal demographers don’t care much about how you might take or not take what it is they are offering in order to solve the particular problem. They are creating a new framework - a theoretical way of thinking - on these issues and the necessary mathematics that will make other formal demographers understand it and move the ball forward.

Expert consensus on demographic issues may thus be possible but there are few professional incentives within the most easily identifiable expert grouping to formulate related policy knowledge for the Commission. In the words of one official, ‘we don’t need more evidence, we

need action'. It is not clear, however, that even as they engage with experts, Commission officials have had much sustained capacity to use expert-driven policy ideas. Hall famously argued that alternative policy ideas only gain traction and practical leverage when they provide answers to concrete political problems (Hall 1993, p. 290). Expert advice is not judged solely on the grounds of its substantive contribution. Instead, a premium is put on solutions that allow EC officials to put these ideas into practice with the aim of legitimising their pre-existing policy enterprise.

Focusing on the interaction, our findings suggest that the most organised experts not only lack the professional and institutional incentives but interacted mostly with DG EMPL, which had lost political influence relative to DG ECFIN. DG EMPL was the main event organiser and its role as the policy access point is further highlighted by the results of the SNA. The closeness centrality measure, which provides a measure of how close one actor is to everyone else in the network, is dominated by DG EMPL staff. Among the entire EC staff, DG EMPL occupies the first ten positions. Policy input is therefore densely concentrated. An advantage of such concentration is that expert input can be more easily coordinated and translated into day-to-day work content. The drawback is that this concentration accentuates isolation if the policy actor is weak. A focus on demographic issues was being developed at the time of the arrival of the Juncker administration. The latter's Secretariat General, however, brought with it a new set of policy priorities and norms into the Commission's work. Appointed heads of DGs were instructed to follow Juncker's approach of not being distracted on issues that fell between them and to focus instead on directions from the Secretariat General, enabling a more top-down management of issues (Bürgin 2018). From there the potential for the institutionalisation of demographic issues unravelled.

Left in a Policy Vacuum

As a free-standing issue with a designated unit, demographic change was dropped with the departure of Commissioner László Andor from DG EMPL in 2014. The institutional mandate to deal with demographic issues was displaced with a focus on short-term questions, especially those to do with economic crisis management. On the question of who is responsible for demographic change after the unit was dropped in 2014, we were told:

I think it has been less targeted. If you ask me who does demographics, you won't get an answer. I have a personal interest. So, people would probably approach me, but my portfolio doesn't include explicitly demographics. Who's in charge with demographics? Nobody.

- Senior Official, DG EMPL

With no institutional home and fewer resources, as well as urgent competing issues, demography came to occupy a policy vacuum. Key events such as the demography fora initiated by the EC were outsourced to Population Europe, diluting the public policy element of the institutional setting of professional interaction and further weakening the opportunities and incentives for academics to directly engage with the Commission. The loose alliance of Commission and scientific actors also came under pressure with the development of the Social Investment Package, which altered the relationship between experts and DG EMPL.

In July 2010 Commissioner Andor highlighted that ‘demographic change will be one of the main challenges of my term as Commissioner’ (Andor 2010) and proceeded to propose a new Communication on demography in 2011. This was supported by then Director for Social Policies and Horizon 2020, Lieve Fransen. The aim of this Communication was to bring the issues of ageing, demographic change, mobility, migration, future trends for the financing of education, and health care into a single framework. Our interviews suggest that this was a deliberate move to introduce a life-course approach to thinking about demography and its effects on European populations. Our interviews also provide evidence of political will within DG EMPL and significant support among member states to develop such a Communication. However, the proposal was shut-down by the Barroso Secretary General and Commission for two reasons:

Officially, because demography was not something supposed to be dealt with in social policy [...] and then the migration issue. They felt that we should not talk about migration because it was politically so explosive.

- *Lieve Fransen, Former Social Policy Director, DG EMPL*

In practice, the Secretary General’s agenda-setting powers, backed by DG ECFIN, were used to deny that demographic change was an issue of concern, effectively ruling out a life-course approach. Part of the change under the Juncker Presidency was to increase the power of vice-presidents to screen and veto proposals not conforming with established priority. The Commission’s potential to ‘backdoor’ by placing issues on the agenda of the Strategic Planning and Programming (SPP) apparatus had also been thwarted with its closure (Kassim et al. 2017, pp. 664, 667). With the life-course approach hobbled the DG EMPL’s only option was to attempt to repack threads of the demographic issue into the social investment package.

The 2013 Social Investment Package (SIP) was one of the key EU responses to the social dimension in a post-crisis setting (de la Porte and Heins 2014). Framing social policy as investment rather than cost, the SIP can be understood as a break with the dominant austerity paradigm favoured by the EC at that time (Kvist 2015). Explicitly addressing the issue of public investment remained a challenge, even with support of an expert group. This ‘Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion’ group was composed of 12 individuals, ten of whom were affiliated with universities or research institutes. The relative dominance of academics working in business/economics universities (five individuals) was no coincidence as the group’s informal task was to translate the known set of solutions into a language that stood a chance of gaining DG ECFIN’s approval. Hence, the re-packaging and integration of the demographic material into the SIP acknowledged DG ECFIN’s dominance in providing issues with political and scientific pressure. At that time, DG EMPL had to show sensitivity towards the structural political setting, and address the social dimension of demographic change without making it too explicit (as we were told in an interview with László Andor). Notwithstanding its monetarist language, the SIP introduced aspects of lifelong learning (p. 14), poverty eradication (p. 5), gender equality (p. 7) and social exclusion (p. 2) (EC 2013b). Substantially, then, the SIP is a social investment strategy that is “fit to cope with many societal challenges” (Kvist 2015: 147). However, in adopting the dominant language of ECFIN, the focus moved to redirecting rather than increasing social investment. This left little room for DG EMPL and the Commission to make an intervention on demographic issues. As commented by Lieve Fransen to us in an

interview: “At the end, demography became a little bit of an annex to the SIP and was lost in the whole thing.”

Conclusion

Placing issues on policy agendas requires political and scientific pressures. Political economy scholars have established the conditions under which policymaking proceeds when these pressures can push forward an issue. We know a great deal about the power of policy actors to combine political and scientific pressures to give sustenance to reform processes, and how these pressures can lead to clashes or deviant outcomes. Studies of crisis management have articulated how leaders handle political shocks that require immediate treatment, with or without the backing of the scientific community. Those researching technocracies, especially within the European Union, have detailed how policy can be developed under the radar of politics, often with great effect. Our claim here is that we know much less about policy vacuums, where political and scientific pressures are not sufficient to push forward an issue onto a policy agenda, even when not encountering resistance.

Policy vacuums come in two main forms: defence and denial. Defence cases are the easiest to identify, where a policy has been actively turned into a *non-issue* by interest groups removing or preventing it from being on an agenda. Demographic change in Europe is not a case of defence. While there are no active interest groups seeking to turn demographic change into a non-issue, the issue has not been supported within the Commission, even when agencies in the Commission have produced reports detailing the severity of change demographic shifts will bring Europe. Our combination of content analysis, social network analysis and interviews with key players reveals tensions within and among DGs and expert groups on demographic change, and how denial was the result. Because of internal EC dynamics, those working on demographic change were unable to promote a policy position, even when it was not contested by interest groups. The absence of expert mobilisation serves to numb the issue further. As a consequence, demographic change is denied as a challenge that requires a coordinated political or scientific effort. This denial is important as it undermines the Commission’s dual role in being both an agenda setter and information provider on issues of concern to the European population (Crombez et al. 2017).

As demographic change occupies a policy vacuum it did not join the range of issues dealt with in the EU’s development of post-crisis ‘new intergovernmentalism’ (Bickerton et al. 2015). Nor has the issue gained attention from the more interventionist ‘new supranationalism’ in Europe. Both modes of governance require strong political salience pressures for action or a technocratic actor willing to push forward an issue on the basis of a scientific consensus (Carstensen and Schmidt 2017). In the past, more horizontal forms of networking among policy and scientific actors, such as the Open Method of Coordination, have permitted both ‘cognitive’ and ‘political’ shifts in social policy design (Zeitlin 2010). Following the financial crisis, changes in European modes of governance have led to a situation where “more socially oriented goals seem to be eclipsed from the European agenda” (Bieling 2012, p. 264). The absence of consistent professional incentives for outside experts to provide sustained scientific arguments for policy interventions has reduced pressure for demographic change to be addressed (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2015). The vertical tightening of control over agenda-setting since the Juncker Presidency also means that the Commission became even less likely to mount political

and scientific pressure for demographic change, despite the obvious challenges to Europe's employment, fiscal and pensions systems that have been well identified.

Finally, discussions around demographic change can be considered part of a larger ideational struggle between interventionist and market paradigms. These paradigms have influenced DGs such as DG ECFIN and DG EMPL and what ideas they consider appropriate for demographic change, such as letting the market sort out the problem, or finding the means to frame social policies as investments rather than costs. Overall the emphasis has been to affirm Europe as primarily an economic space rather than one where politico-economic inventions are welcome (Rosamond 2002). In the case of demographic change the Commission may need to consider public opinion to harness an agenda (Haverland et al. 2018). Further research can contribute to developing a body of cases where political and scientific pressures are weak or absent. Developing such research can help us understand how issues can be denied relevance, even when the politico-economic implications being threatened are in the not-too-distant future.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in 'Demographic time-bomb: Finland sends a warning to Europe', *Financial Times*, April 3 2019, available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/8ebb54bc-5528-11e9-91f9-b6515a54c5b1> (accessed May 1 2019).
- 2 The dependency ratio is defined as all people outside the working age population (0-14 years and above 65), relative to the 15-64 cohort (EC 2012, p. 27); it is projected to increase from 52.6% in 2015 to 71.6% in 2040 (Eurostat 2017). The old-age dependency ratio (defined as the age group of 65 years and above relative to the working age population of 15-64 years) (EC 2012: 27) is projected to increase from 28.8 % (2015) to 46.4% (2040) (Eurostat 2017). Simultaneously, the cohort of the so-called oldest old (85 years+) is growing at the fastest rate.
- 3 While we highlight political crises in this quadrant we appreciate that the crisis management literature does include cases concerned with the handling of natural disasters and long-term crises such as climate change that have a strong scientific element. How crises are handled also includes a temporal dimension within this literature, such as the distinction between 'fast-burning' and 'slow-burning' crises ('t Hart and Boin 2001) that has recently been revisited (Coman 2018; Seabrooke and Tsingou 2018).
- 4 The dataset is based on publicly available information from these reports. We coded the individuals involved, including their occupation, affiliation, and educational background (by discipline). Following data management protocols for projects funded by the European Commission, the dataset has been anonymised; we do not include it here as the network illustrations become abstract.
- 5 Six out of the ten highest scoring external experts on the betweenness score have links to the network. This indicates that members of this sub-network are well-positioned to broker and exert control over information flows within the larger network by linking several sub-groups. This Population Europe group of experts is also relatively homogenous.
- 6 The Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, the Vienna Institute for Demography, the French Institute for Demographic Studies, the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, the Barcelona Center for Demographic Studies, and the Oxford Institute for Population Ageing.

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