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# CAN THE FERTILITY IN FRANCE BE EXPLAINED BY THE GOVERNMENT POLICY?

**Gerard-Francois Dumont**

*Summary:* It is made a complete analysis on the European demographic profile and particularly in the EU countries regarding the natural increase, fertility pattern, family policy and individuals' attitude toward having children and responsible parenthood. The dimensions are compared by groups of countries, this way demonstrating the similarity and diversity between the efficiency of diverse social policies and political measures.

In this context the first place of France is underlined regarding the fertility level, natural increase and birth rate. The explanations are related with the long term family policy and to some extent the immigrants' contribution because of their higher fertility. France is not out of the “demographic winter”, i.e. out of the lasting period of fertility at a sub-replacement level, but nevertheless it deserves the first place being much closer to the replacement level and it is in positive correlation with the family policy and the strong propensity for giving birth to at least one child.

The slogan of the European Union “Unity through Diversity” also refers to the demographic problems. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Union experiences a number of similar processes. In the first place there is that which I called back in the beginning of the 70's “demographic winter” with which I denoted a definite and lasting period of fertility under the replacement level of the generations<sup>1</sup>. In the second place related to the first one is the population ageing<sup>2</sup> with a share of people at and above 65 years old which may increase from 17.1% in 2008 to 20.06% in 2020 and to 26.8% in 2040<sup>3</sup>. In the third place related to the second one is a strong “gerontogrowth” in case we must use a term which I suggested,<sup>4</sup> e.g. a future growth of the aged people

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which will occur in the following decennials which means that the number of the people over 65 and more may increase from 84.6 million in 2008 to 103 million in 2020 and to 140 million in 2040. In the fourth place this is urbanization and metropolization <sup>5</sup>, and at the end, in the fifth place this is the new migration logic <sup>6</sup>.

In spite of this the analysis of the demographic situation in the EU countries uncovers above all certain differences. This leads us to the denial that the demographic characteristics of the countries guide us not to a common model especially having in mind that as shown above there also appear differences in the above indicated processes.

The European demographic differences specially refer to fertility level. In this regard France has a superior place compared to all other EU countries even it is under the generation replacement level. Such a ranking deserves an explanation. Above all there comes the question of whether this level of France is a result of a specific development during the recent decades. Then it is good to seek other possible reasons.

### **France is first for three times**

France deserves the first place by number of births, by natural increase and maintains a high level as compared to average fertility of the EU.

### **Greatest natural increase**

Having in mind the last preliminary data <sup>7</sup> from Eurostat, i.e. for 2007 then we can say that there are 18 countries which have a positive natural increase, i.e. greater number of births as compared to deaths and 9 countries have negative natural increase, i.e. with more deaths than births.

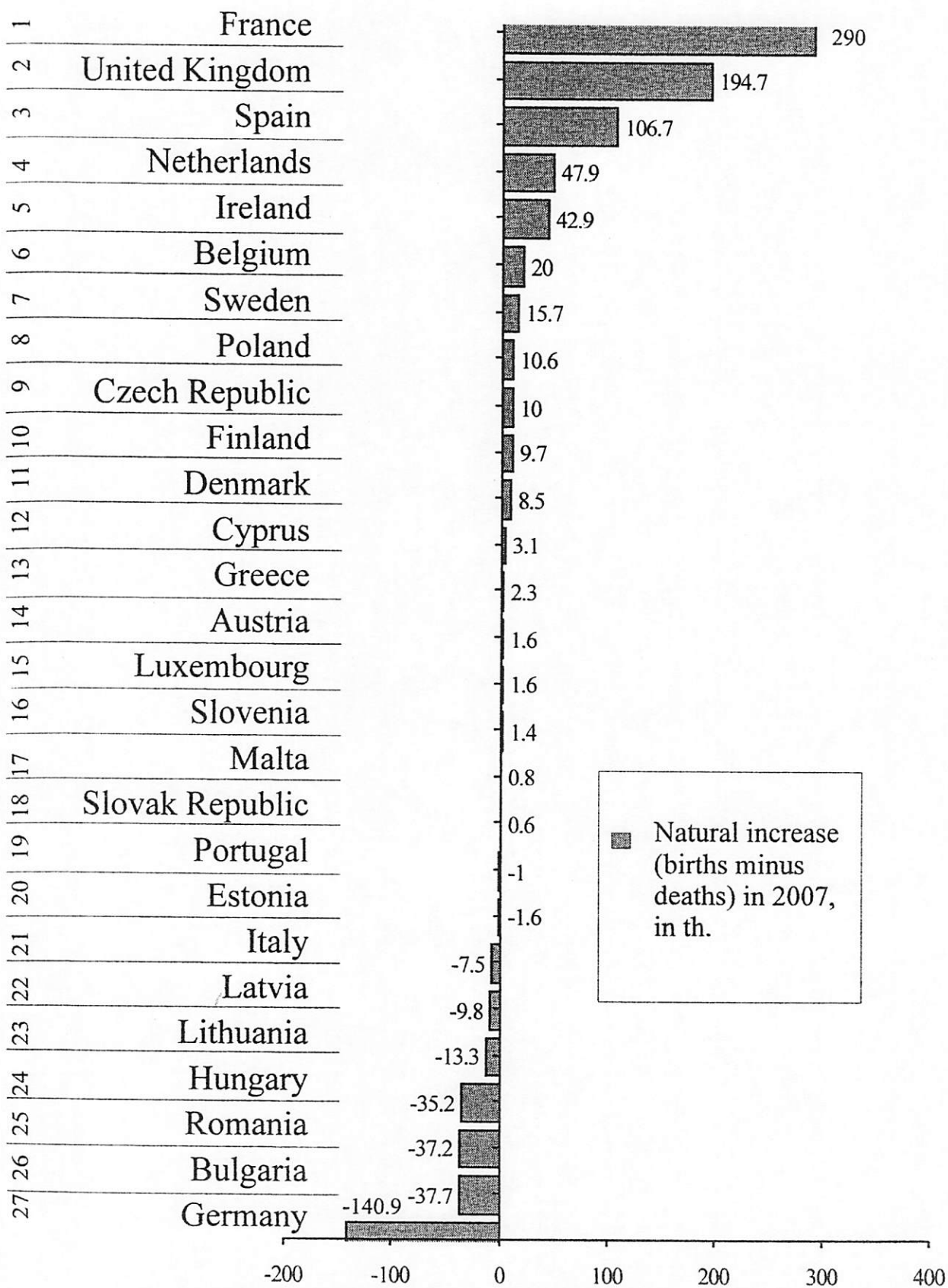


Figure 1. Natural increase of the EU countries - 27

### **1. Solde of the natural increase in EU-27**

In each of these groups, however, there is a strong variation. France has the highest level of all 27 countries, but is in the second place with a natural increase of 4.6‰. By absolute numbers Ireland is in the fifth place of all the 27 countries but due to the weak peoplement of the country it has the greatest natural increase with 9.8‰. Consequently, the other countries have a very weak increase, Slovakia for example which is with an insignificant increase of 0.01‰.

There are also significant differences among the nine countries with negative balance. For example Portugal and Hungary which have equal size. Portugal has a negative solde of only 1000 people while for Hungary it amounts to 35 th. Bulgaria which has less inhabitants than Hungary has also a negative solde of 37.7 th at a negative natural increase of -4.9‰.

### **Fertility netly superior to the community average**

One of the explanations of these differences in natural solde is related to the changing fertility level. Even if all the 27 countries account for fertility levels under the replacement one, Slovakia has its level of 37% under the country with less fertility decrement France having in mind that the two countries express the extreme values. The countries of different variations are ranged between these two limits. There remain the important consequences of the "effet tir a l'arc", i.e. the fact that the differences in the limited consequences for a short period of time act with time as important differences due to the existence duration of population.

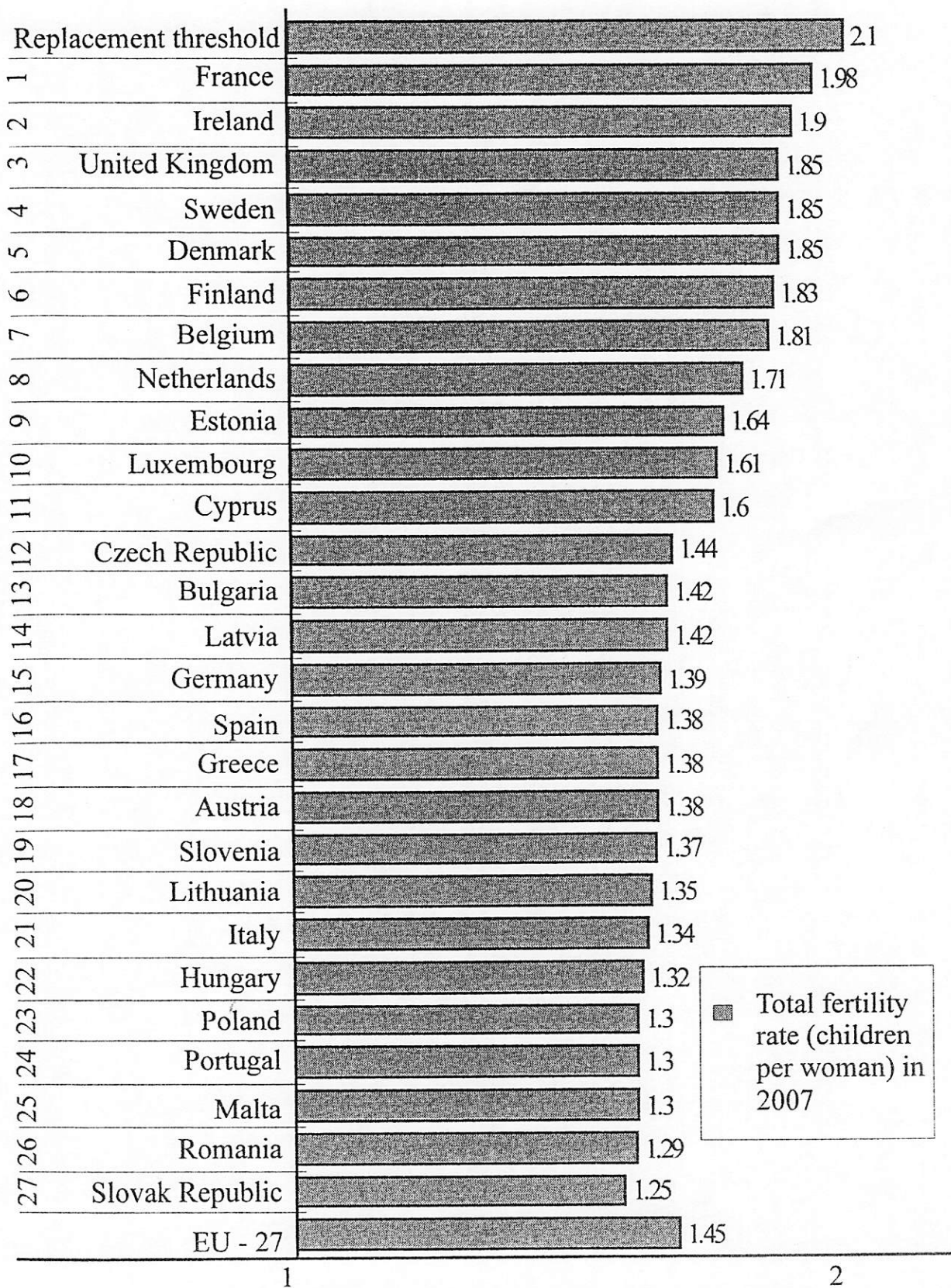


Figure 2. Fertility of the EU countries - 27

## **2. Fertility in the countries of the European Union EU-27**

In order to explain the position of France in the classification of the EU countries by fertility we must first of all ask ourselves if this country has a specific schedule (calendar) of fertility.

The calendar for entering into the “demographic winter”.

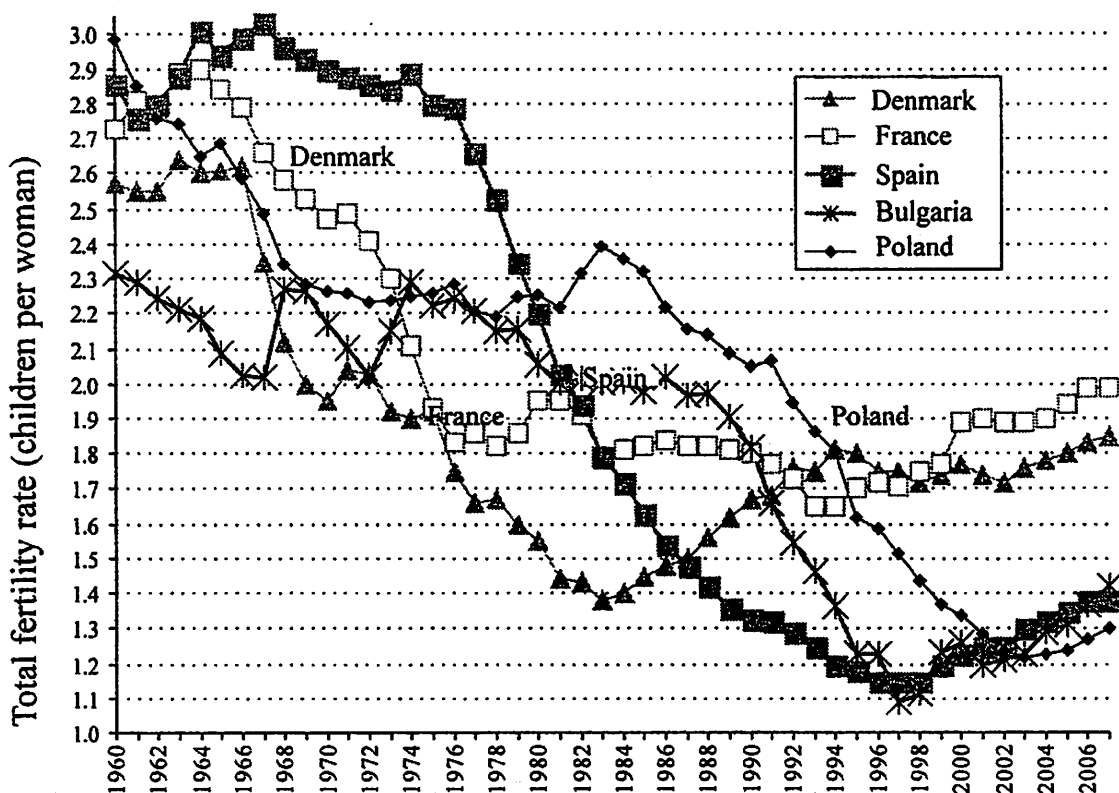
During the demographic renaissance in Europe after the Second world war, the European countries had differences in fertility which did not correspond to the political regimes. The lowest level was sustained by the countries of the central massive going from Sweden to Italy and being called the Western countries (West Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Greece) as well as the countries from the Soviet block (Baltic countries, East Germany Bulgaria, <sup>9</sup> Romania, <sup>10</sup> but also Ukraine). The other European countries surpassed these countries by fertility level till the middle of the 1960's.

## **3. Typology of calendar development of fertility in Europe**

In consequence the fall in fertility became different by geographic locations and brought about the calendar outlining of 4 stages.

### **Central Europe in the 1960's**

Since 1960, each year one or more countries marked a fall in births as compared to the preceding year: Belgium in 1960, the Netherlands, Spain and Italy in 1965, Denmark and Sweden in 1967, Norway in 1970 and then France in 1975. Fertility starts falling especially in northern Europe. Finland, Sweden and Denmark reach 2.1 children per woman in 1969 but the average



These countries indicate the four period of transition under the replacement level

Figure 3. Calendar typology of fertility development

fertility of Europe in this period is above the generation replacement level.

### Western Europe in the 1970's

The beginning of the 1970's marks the second stage of the fall in fertility together with the increase of the number of the countries where fertility falls under 2.5 children per woman: Luxemburg in 1970, Austria and Belgium in 1972, England in 1973.<sup>12</sup> In this period the most fertile countries, except for Ireland (3.63 children) are in Mediterranean Europe: Spain (2.89), Portugal (2.68), Greece (2.38) and Italy (2.33). It was not supposed



that these countries will undertake this way or that they would follow it at an accelerated rate.

### **Mediterranean Europe in the 1980's**

The third stage 1977-1982 of the lowering of European fertility during which southern Europe reached under the replacement level was started by Italy: Spain and Greece in 1981, Portugal in 1982. The only country with high fertility remained Ireland with 2.95 children in 1982 and with a lowering in 1991 under 2.1 children.

### **Eastern Europe in the 1990's**

During the three stages of transition to low fertility in Western Europe the countries under Soviet influence turned out to be isolated.<sup>13</sup> These are closed countries in regard to migration movements (excluding some people who worked in the "brother" countries), tourist flows and western information. The greater part of the population could not use modern contraceptives. The public authorities decided to introduce the abortions as means of birth control: their number exceeds the number of births and sometimes by 3 or 4 abortions per birth. The nuptiality remains near to the 1950's level so the time interval (the calendar) of births includes a pre-cautious birth rate.

By the way the development was chaotic since the government policies were transitory and sometimes brutally change the demographic conditions. Thus for example, the abortions which were gradually introduced since 1955 in separate socialist countries were a solution for their limitations without even introducing other means for birth control. The most impressive is the decision of 1966 in Romania forbidding legal

abortions without any warning which is followed by a doubling in the birth number in 1967 as compared to the preceding year. The opportunities for aborting are limited in Bulgaria in 1968 and in Hungary in 1973 due to worrying of the states by their natality fall.

There, where the birth rate is lower, the governments introduce policies favorite to its growth (1976 and in the following years). Such is the case with East Germany where the population was aligning since 1945 its demographic behavior with that in West Germany.

Further in the conditions of the Soviet regime the East European countries resist to the fertility fall. After the fall of the Communist regimes the fertility lowering is by a record rate in 1989-1992, which is the fourth period of changing European fertility.

The fertility analysis in France concerning the past decennials does not show that it takes a special place. Its higher level in 2007 does not prove that it is late in entering into the “demographic winter” since actually France is in it since 1970.

It is better therefore to look at first for another explanation while comparing the family policies in Europe.

### **Correlation between the family policies and the fertility level?**

Actually, through the laws, reglements and education policy all European countries develop measures which as a set form one explicit or implicit family policy. The analysis of the eventual correlation between budget expenditures for family policies and the fertility level in Europe brings about correlated results.

#### 4. Family assistance and fertility in the EU

The research between the proportion of the function family/children in the GDP<sup>14</sup> and the level of fertility in each EU country brings about a clear typology as compared to the community mean.

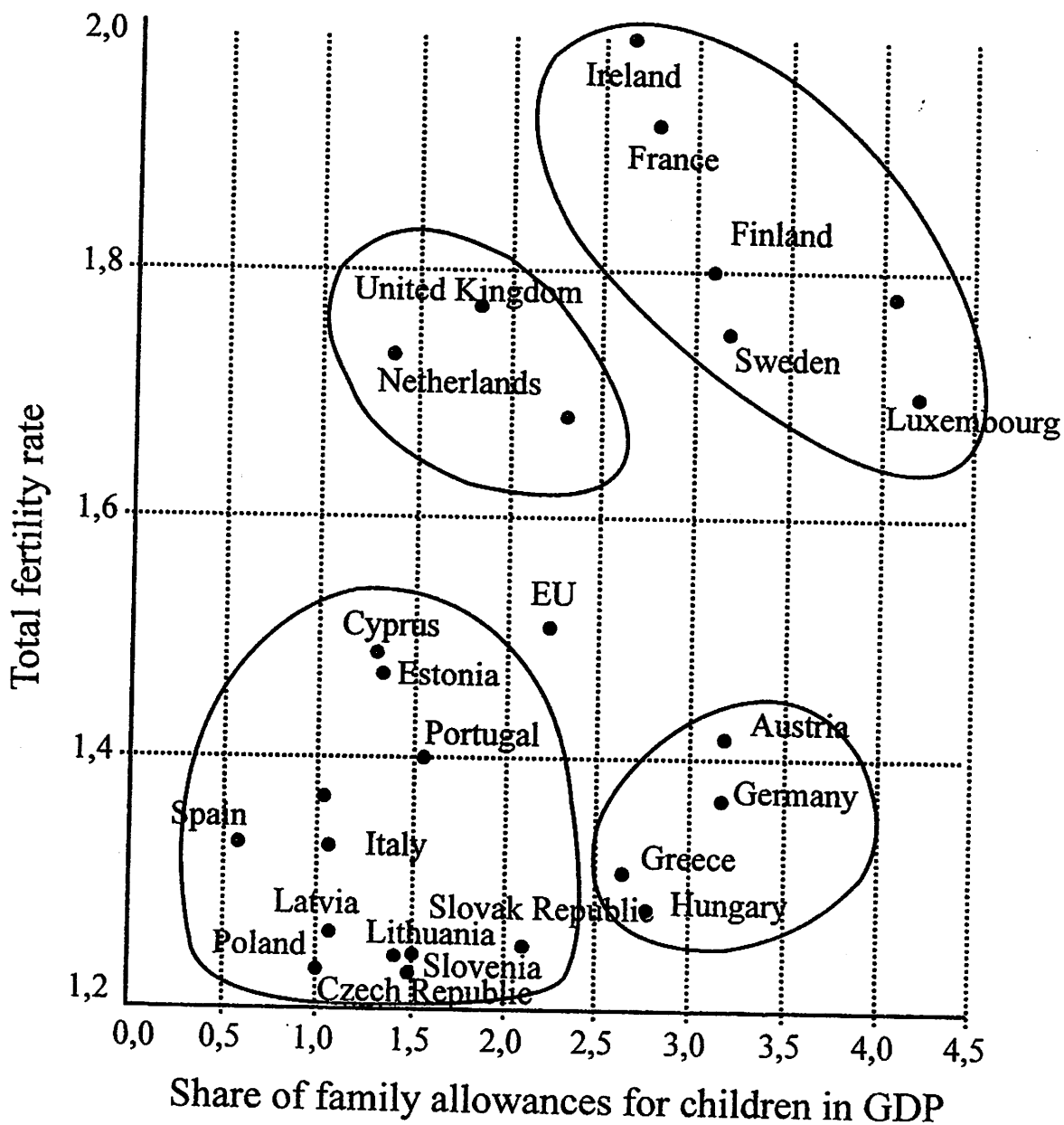


Figure 4. Family allowances and fertility in the EU countries

### **Twelve countries with a weak family policy**

Of the 25 EU countries, 12 are characterized by a fertility level which is lower than the average for EU population (1.51 children per woman) at a lower value of the mentioned percentage of the function family/children in the GDP (of the EU - 25 average is 2.2%). These are the countries: Cyprus, Spain, Estonia,<sup>15</sup> Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia. For these countries there is the relation low fertility - weak budget for the family function for children.

### **Four countries without family policy efficiency**

Four countries (Germany, Austria, Greece and Hungary) with a proportion in GDP higher than the EU average have a fertility which is lower than the average one. This can be explained in two ways: either the separated according to this proportion assets are not distributed favorably for birth stimulation or because other reasons, cultural for example cause a significantly lower fertility.

### **Three countries with partially important fertility**

Three countries (Belgium, Holland and England<sup>16</sup>) have a fertility over the European average at a proportion family function in GDP equal to or under the EU average. The fertility level here can not be explained by a high investment in the family with children and there must be accounted for other reasons such as the efficient distribution of the corresponding expenditures or due to higher fertility of certain population strata.

### **Six countries twice superior to the European mean**

Six countries (Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland,

Luxembourg, and Sweden) simultaneously have a higher percentage of the family/children coefficient in the GDP than the average one combined with higher than the European Union average fertility.

At the well sketched specifics of the EU countries the analysis shows a significant correlation between fertility level and the GDP percentage paid as child allowancies. The results confirm the importance of the political activities: the orientation of the countries in the family policy is not neutral as compared to the condition of the family in the separate EU countries.

France is most advanced in the area of family policy. There is needed a more profound analysis in order to explain the relatively high level of its fertility.

#### **Analysis of the explicative elements**

There are four explanations for this: contents of the family policy; the trust of the population in it; cultural reasons concerning the role of the child and at the end the immigration role.

#### **Contents of the global family policy**

In fact even if family policy in France needs an improvement, as compared to other countries in Europe, it provides for a greater freedom of choice. One of the measures includes maternity schools, which besides their educational function have the function of making the coordination of family and professional life easier.

There must be taken in view the two types of political measures - direct financial aid and services either as subsidies or free of charge childcare such as kretches and kindergartens.<sup>18</sup>

France includes both types of measures, e.g. financial aid and services for the families. It has a network of kindergartens and

other forms of assistance directed to little children. In the same time there is financial assistance for the families with more than one child which prefer to take care of their children at home or to use baby sitters which is an alternative to the institutionalized kindergartens. The whole set of political measures allow more or less to freely choose between the different forms of family life organization. The family policy in France has always been favorable for fertility and for the family even when the definition of the “family” interpreted traditionally changed deeply having in mind the compatibility between family life and work. In France there is a system for daylong care for the children (for a long time and out of home) which is institutionalized before many years and in which the municipalities are massively incorporated. Accordingly 1/3 of the children younger than two and almost 100% of the children between 3 and 5 use the “maternity schools” while schooling is obligatory from the age of six. In the same time the public authorities help the alternative forms through financial assistance which means that there is assured a great flexibility. In France there are 3 types of leaves for mothers (or fathers). The first one includes 16 weeks during which the last salary is 84% on the average. The second type of leave is without payment but the job is preserved even 2 years after delivery. The third one refers to parents with more than one child, known as educational parenthood assistance which provides for financial assistance till the age of three.

Therefore, the demographic results by the family policy of France are favored.

### **Presence of confidence in the family policy**

Another reason for the fertility level in France is that the

French can believe in the permanence of the family policy in the sense that some former attempts to seriously cut it off were not successful.

More specially the trust in it was renewed at the end of the 1990's. In the middle of this period the political leaders were aspiring to menace again the overall character of the family allowances. This aim was propagated by the right which looks for a way to decrease the budget of family policy in favor of other public spending and mainly to take into consideration the stabilization measures caused by the previewed introduction of the euro on 1 January 1999 in answer to the Maastricht treaty.<sup>19</sup> This embarrassment is also shared by the left but remains more of an ideological approach since it claims that the family policy must give way to a totally justified social policy. Otherwise said the public policy will not be directed to helping the families to freely choose between one or more children but will just refer to families of limited incomes and which are in relative poverty.

The dissolution of the Parliament by President Chirac in 1997 brought the left to power. Its Prime minister Lionel Jospin abolished the common family allowances since 1 January, 1998. This decision, however caused unrest including in the French communist party which participated in the government.

This decision menaces one of the measures which for decennials is in the heart of the French social contract. Besides, it creates injustice since it introduces the threshold effect, e.g. one franc over the determined income threshold can change the allowance size or to deprive the families from their allowances. There is created injustice due to the risk that this threshold in the future will decrease<sup>20</sup> due to family allowances.

Thus the Prime minister Jospin was forced by these

contestations to restore the common family allowances in a symbolic nine month period.

This decision restores the confidence in the family policy so needed in view of the long period of investment for education. The abolished by the Prime minister measure destroyed the programs of all political parties.

### **The place of the child in life**

There are other things to take in view besides the family policy. For example, the surveys on behavior show that a child in France more than in Germany is treated as an advantage, as an element of oneself's realization since the professional aims both for women and for men cannot entirely fulfill one's life. Regretfully, the available data are only segmentary, but nevertheless they indicate that France is characterized by a strong women's wish to have at least one child.

In fact among the considered here countries France has the highest level of biological natality surpassing Portugal, Holland and even Ireland. The second place of Portugal is surprising having in mind its low fertility but it is coherent having in mind the before last place of Portugal in the classification by the level of biological fertility of three or more. In opposite, Finland is in the inverse position which brings about a similar result: good position, second place of fertility of three or more, but the married with bad classification at birth of rank 1, therefore not bringing about high fertility for the country.

These results make one think that one of the reasons for the relative superfertility of France is due to the women with at least one child, opposing Finland and Sweden relevant to higher propensity for having three or more children.



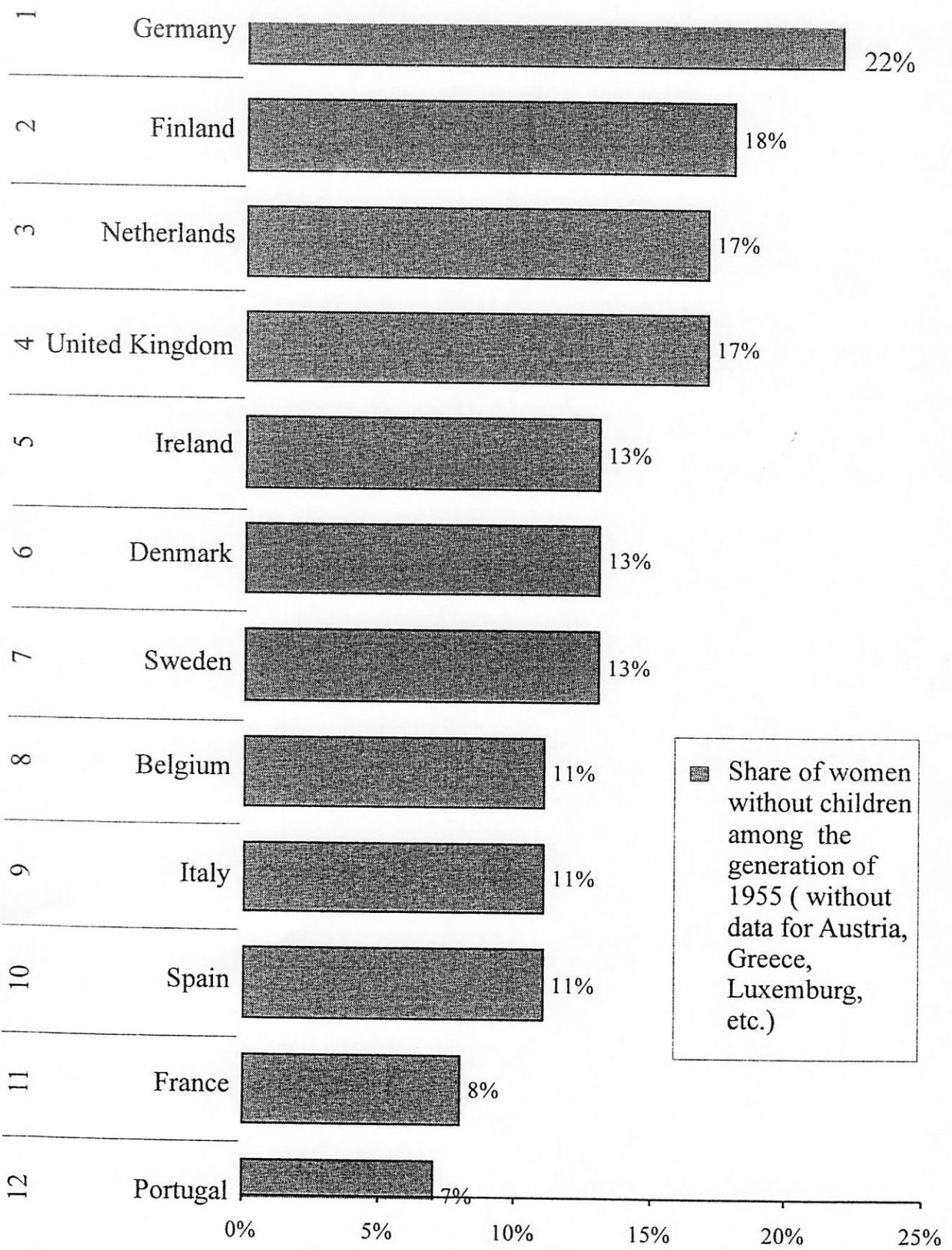


Figure 5. Share of childless women among the generation of 1955 in the countries of EU - 15

## **5. Share of the childless women in the 1955 generation**

This characteristic of France can be evaluated through the longitudinal analysis <sup>21</sup> having in mind the share of childless women in the EU at least by including those countries for which there is information. In this way there is also estimated the share of childless women from one generation. The last data which are more complete refer to the 1955 generation. The greatest percentage of childless women refers to Germany and Finland. France is before last with 8%, before Portugal - 7%.

While comparing the countries with a propensity to have many family members with those preferring to have at least one child we find a certain demographic logic. Low fertility is in those European countries which have a high share of childless women at a weak propensity towards large families such as Germany, Italy and Spain.

In the second category there are these countries with a very high share of childless women as compared to those which have children and at a relatively high share of women with large families (Finland, the Netherlands, Great England, Sweden). The level of fertility in France refers to a third category with few childless women and an average propensity towards three and more children. This is an additional explanation for the first place of France by fertility level.

## **6. Fertility of the immigrants in France**

The data concerning people permanently residing in France but born abroad, e.g. the immigrants show a greater fertility. The number of immigrants in France increases uncessingly for example according to the census of 1999 they are 4.3 million and in 2005 - 4.9 million.

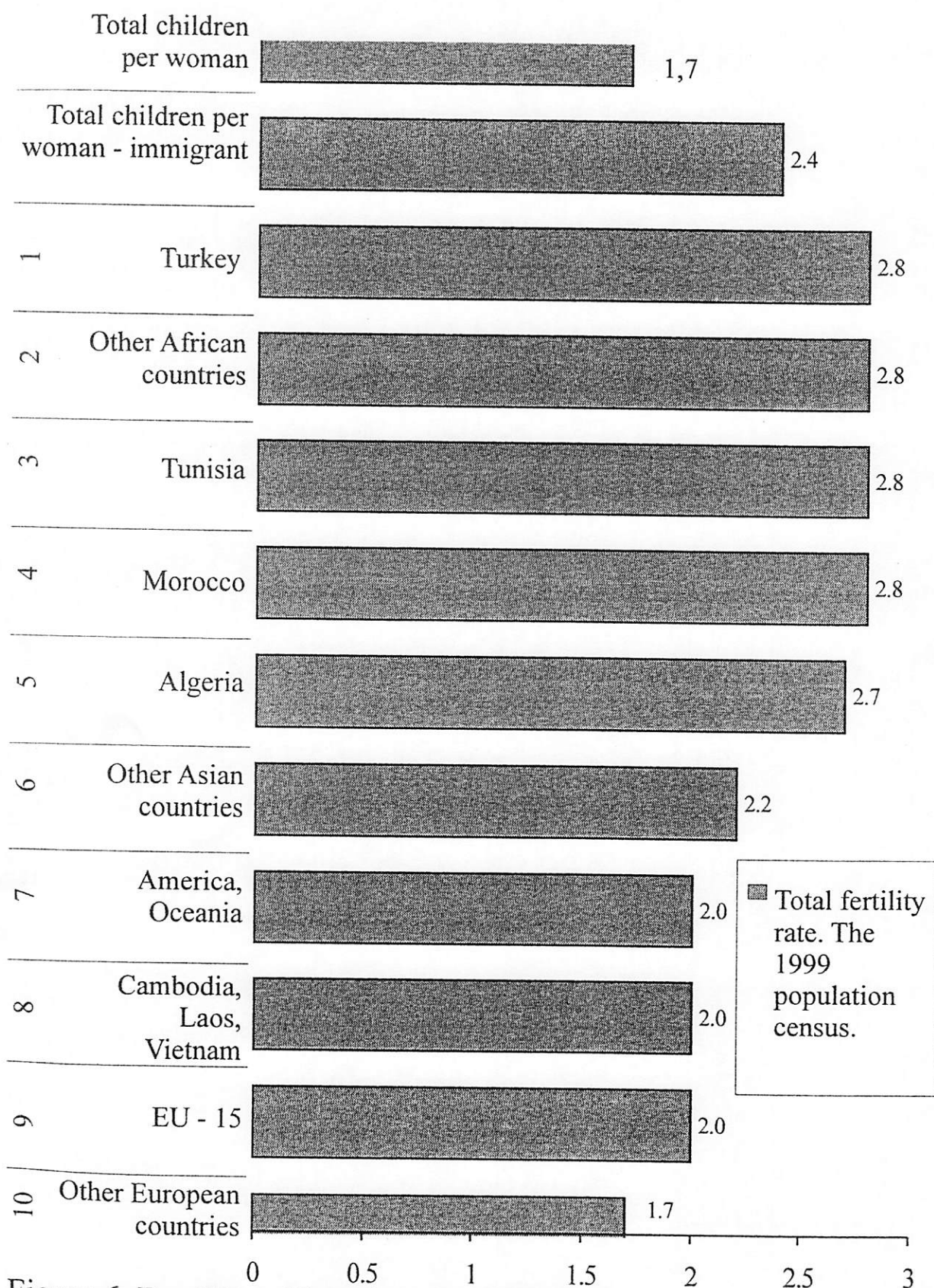


Figure 6. Fertility of immigrants in France

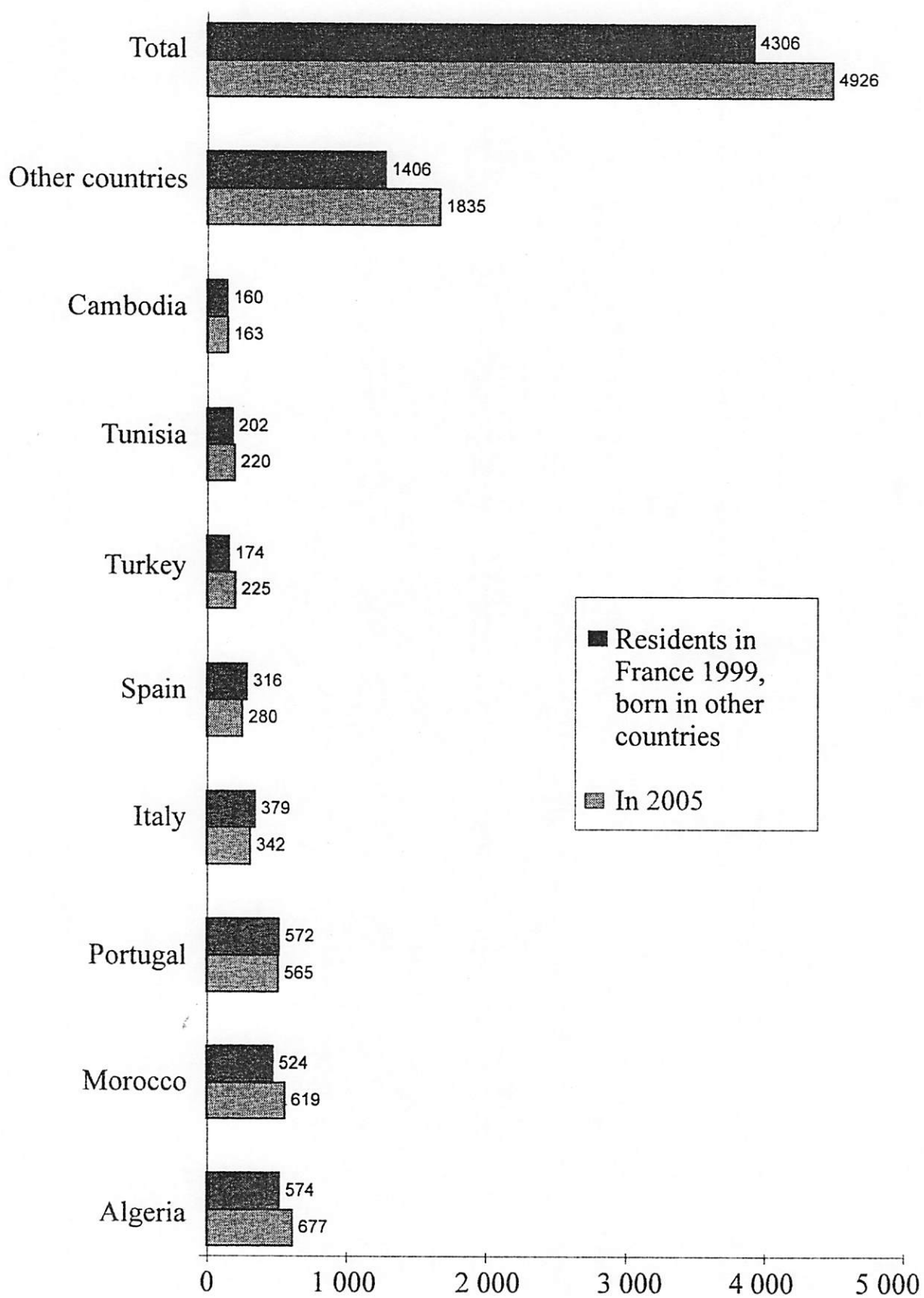


Figure 7. Increment of immigrants in France

Even if the French statistics has not yet published the birth rate estimates of the immigrants according to the last census, this increase in the immigrant number shows the role of immigration for the achieved birth rate level. In fact the number of immigrants according to the country of their origin increased significantly between 1999 and 2005. The number of immigrants born in Spain, Italy and Portugal decreased while they have a low fertility. In revenge, those born in Turkey increased by 29.3%, from Morocco by 18.4% and from Algiers by 17.9%. These immigrants from the indicated countries definitely surpass the French average fertility.

As a whole due to immigration this supplementary fertility augmented by 0.2 children per woman. France has a higher fertility and the country remains in the category with the lowest fertility decrease even without it.

### **Conclusion**

According to the available statistical data, none of the EU countries can assure the simple generation replacement including Ireland and France whose fertility is not so weak. Besides, amongst the 27 EU countries, in 2007 only France is in such a demographic situation which puts it in the first place by natural increase rate, number of births and the synthetic fertility indicator.

Having in mind the development of the birth rate in the last two decennials this first place of France could not be previewed. Doubtlessly, the explanation is in the family policy guided by public authorities, the central and the local governments.

There must also be mentioned the position of France concerning the role of the child in life as it is seen from the strong propensity for giving birth to at least one child and by the relatively satisfactory propensity for three and more children. There must

also be mentioned the merit for the birth rate augmentation of the increased immigrations which have a mean of more children per woman than the other inhabitants. There must also be studied in depth the relation between fertility on the one hand and nuptality, the share of out-of-wedlock children and the employment on the other.

In the modern European society the undertaken family policies are favorable for a fertility level which could decrease the serious ageing. Of course, this does not decrease the necessity to approach the fertility level taking also the other determinants in view.

### Notes

1. The notion used later, for example in: Dumont Gerard-Francois et alii, *La France ridee*, Hachett, Paris, seconf edition, 1986.
2. Dumont Gerard-Francois et alii, *Les territoires face au vieillissement en France et en Europe*, Paris, Ellipses, 2006.
3. According to the Eurostat medium scenario, *Statistics in focus*, 72/2008.
4. For example in: Wackermann, Gabriel (direction), *Dictionnaire de geographie*, Paris, Ellipses, 2005.
5. Damon, Julien (direction), *Vivre en ville. Observatoire mondial des modes de vie urbain 2008-1009*, Paris, PUF, 2008.
6. Dumont Gerard-Francois, *Les migrations internationales. Les nouvelles logiques migratoires*, Paris, Ed. Sedes, 1995.
7. *Statistics in Focus*, 81/2008.
8. In the end of the 1970's I suggested the expression of "demographic winter" in order to denote a fertility which is lastingly under the generation replacement's boundary. Later this definition is used in: Dumont, Gerard-Francois et alii, *La France ridee*. Hachette. Paris, Second edition, 1986.
9. Dumont, Gerard-Francois, Sougareva, Marta, Tzekov, Nikolai, "La Bulgarie en crise demographique « *Population & Avenir*, N 671, 01-02, 2005.
10. Dumont, Gerard-Francois, Flamand, Regis, *La Roumanie, terre d'emigration et de depopulation* » *Population & Avenir*, N 680, 11-12, 2006.

11. The retrospective data is from: Eurostat, Statistiques de populations, 2006, chapter Population and Social Conditions and from Evolution demographique recente en Europe, 2005, Council of Europe, 2006.
12. The name used among politicians before the transition period.
13. Dumont, Gerard-Francois, Les populations du monde, Editions Armand Colin, second edition, Paris, 2004.
14. This analysis became possible due to the data published over "La protection social dans L'Union Europeene", which for each EU country show the percentage of social aid destined to function family/children together with other chapters: ageing and life duration, illnesses/health protection, disabilieness, unemployment, homes, social exclusion. The estimation of the social costs as a percentage of GDP allows to estimate the share of family/children allowances in GDP. Eurostat, Population et conduits sociales, 14/2006. The data after 1 January 2007 refer to 25, not to 27 countries.
15. According to the contribution of immigration to the birth rate. See: Dumont, Gerard-Francois, "Birth rate and immigration in Spain", Population & Avenir, N 679, 9-10, 2006.
16. Dumont, Gerard-Francois, Chalard Laurent, « Des statistiques « ethniques » en Angleterre a la situation francaise », Population & Avenir, N 681, 01-02, 2007.
17. Despite the efforts for making the statistical methods uniform, this relatively low percentage may also be due to the way the country estimates it.
18. Spielauer, Martin "Les politiques familiales en Europe: une typologie", Population & Avenir, N 666, 01-02, 2004.
19. Dumont, Gerard-Francois, Verhulst, Pierre, Geopolitique de l'Europe, Paris, Editions Sedes, 2009.
20. Or from increase under inflation.
21. Ibid
22. Dumont, Gerard-Francois, " L'immigration etrangere en France et le developpement des territoires", Futuribles, N 343, 07-08, 2008.

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