

PUBLIC INTEREST, RESPONSIBLE SOLIDARITY AND DEMOGRAPHIC SUSTAINABILITY

A Strategic Framework for Rights, Family, Care and Intergenerational Continuity in Europe

A sustainable society protects individual freedom in the present while preserving the human, social and demographic foundations that make freedom possible for the generations that follow.

Executive Summary

European social policy is often discussed as a set of separate fields: human rights, welfare, family policy, employment, education, housing, demography, migration and public finance. In practice, however, these fields form one interdependent system because a society cannot protect individual freedom over the long term if it neglects the social, demographic and institutional conditions on which that freedom depends. Public policy therefore requires a framework capable of connecting the dignity and rights of the individual with responsibility towards the community and future generations, without allowing either collective goals to erase individual freedom or individual claims to consume the foundations of collective life.

This paper develops such a framework around three connected concepts: public interest, responsible solidarity and demographic sustainability. Public interest describes the democratically determined common goods and long-term conditions that a political community has a legitimate responsibility to preserve and develop. Responsible solidarity describes a social model in which protection is combined with reciprocity, opportunity and responsibility, so that society neither abandons those who genuinely need support nor normalises permanent dependency where participation is possible. Demographic sustainability describes the capacity of a society to maintain intergenerational continuity, human capital and viable communities while allowing individuals and families to make their own choices freely.

The demographic dimension has become impossible to treat as secondary. Eurostat reported that the total fertility rate in the European Union fell to 1.34 live births per woman in 2024, the lowest EU figure recorded since the comparable series began in 2001. The European Commission now treats demographic change as a strategic challenge affecting competitiveness, public finances, labour markets and territorial cohesion, while its Demography Toolbox explicitly identifies support for parents, opportunities for younger generations, active ageing and managed legal migration as complementary elements of the response. These developments do not establish one simple policy solution, but they demonstrate that demographic continuity can no longer be separated from the design of the European social and economic model.

The central argument of this paper is that public policy should distinguish more clearly between universal rights and public priorities. Human dignity and equal legal protection belong to every person and should not depend on majority approval, economic usefulness or conformity with a preferred lifestyle. Public priorities, by contrast, necessarily involve democratic choices about the allocation of limited resources, institutional attention and long-term investment. A free society may therefore protect all lawful ways of life while at the same time giving particular public support to children, education, family formation, health, scientific development, productive work and other activities that generate broad and durable benefits for society.

Within this framework, the paper introduces a further proposal: a universal Parental Care Income for a parent who personally assumes the primary daily care of a child, available without means-testing or household-income ceilings until the child reaches the age of fourteen. The entitlement would be open equally to mothers and fathers, transferable between them, independent of previous employment history and designed as recognition of socially productive care rather than as poverty relief. Its purpose would be to add a genuine parental-care option to a policy environment that presently concentrates strongly on reconciling paid employment with formal childcare, while preserving the freedom of families to choose employment, childcare, part-time work or direct parental care according to their circumstances.

The paper does not suggest that any single family benefit can reverse demographic decline. OECD research finds that parental leave, early childhood education and care, financial support and housing conditions all interact with labour-market realities and family decisions, and that family policy is only one part of a wider explanation of fertility trends. The proposed model is therefore broader: it links rights, care, family policy, housing, education, human capital, intergenerational finance and quality of life into one strategic framework whose purpose is not to prescribe private choices, but to ensure that public institutions do not make the formation and care of future generations structurally more difficult than it needs to be.

1. Public Interest as a Democratic Principle

Democratic societies cannot govern only by adjudicating individual claims, because government must also decide how scarce resources are allocated, which common goods deserve strategic support, which risks justify collective action and what obligations the present generation has towards the future. The concept that connects these decisions is the public interest, but it is useful only if it is defined narrowly enough to prevent arbitrary state power and broadly enough to permit meaningful collective priorities. Public interest should therefore be understood not as whatever an institution declares to be useful, but as the democratically determined responsibility to preserve the conditions that make freedom, justice, social cohesion, prosperity, security and long-term societal continuity possible.

This definition requires constitutional limits. Human dignity, fundamental rights, equality before the law, democratic legitimacy, proportionality and judicial review remain boundaries that public-interest reasoning cannot simply override. The fact that a majority prefers a policy does not make every restriction legitimate, just as the existence of an individual right does not mean that government must promote every lawful activity equally. A mature democratic order must be capable of holding both ideas at once: rights limit collective power, while public interest guides the legitimate use of collective resources within those limits.

The distinction becomes clearer when public recognition is separated from public priority. Equal citizenship requires that individuals receive equal protection and can live without unlawful discrimination, but public budgets and institutions inevitably establish priorities. Schools receive public investment because education creates future capability, hospitals because health is a common condition of human flourishing, infrastructure because individual prosperity depends on shared systems, and scientific research because knowledge generates benefits that extend beyond a single investor or generation. The same logic permits democratic societies to treat children, family formation, caregiving, human capital and demographic continuity as legitimate public interests without turning private life into a field of coercion.

Public interest should also be evidence-based rather than merely rhetorical. Every major claim that a policy serves the common good should be testable against its effects on rights, social cohesion, fiscal sustainability, human development and future generations. This approach prevents the concept from becoming an ideological shortcut and instead turns it into a discipline of democratic justification, in which government must explain not only what it wishes to do but why the benefit is genuinely public, why the burden is proportionate and how the result will be evaluated over time.

2. Responsible Solidarity: Protection Without Permanent Dependency

European welfare systems embody a civilizational decision that illness, disability, poverty, unemployment, childhood and old age should not automatically reduce a person to destitution. That principle remains essential, yet solidarity becomes politically and financially fragile if it is detached from responsibility, reciprocity and the development of human capability. Responsible solidarity therefore rejects two opposite errors: a society that abandons people when they genuinely need protection and a system that unintentionally converts temporary support into permanent exclusion from participation, autonomy and productive life.

The objective of responsible solidarity is not simply to minimise public expenditure or to maximise redistribution. It is to preserve dignity while expanding the real capacity of people to participate in society according to their abilities and circumstances. For some people, responsibility means paid work; for others it may mean raising children, caring for a disabled relative, studying, recovering from illness, undertaking civic service or contributing in forms that conventional labour statistics only partially recognise. A social model that values only market income risks underestimating forms of work without which families, communities and the economy itself could not function.

Reciprocity should therefore be understood over the life cycle rather than as an immediate transaction. Children receive before they contribute, adults may contribute economically while also caring for younger or older generations, and elderly people may depend upon systems they previously financed and institutions they helped to build. The social contract is sustainable when these transfers remain intelligible and broadly fair across generations, not when every person receives precisely what he or she pays in at every moment. This is why responsible solidarity naturally leads to the demographic question: if the relationship between generations becomes severely unbalanced, the economic and moral foundations of solidarity weaken together.

The same principle applies between Member States and regions. Solidarity can strengthen cohesion when assistance expands capability, resilience and equal opportunity, but it becomes more difficult to sustain when transfers have no connection to reform, participation or a credible path towards greater autonomy. The general rule is therefore not conditional compassion but responsible reciprocity: society protects dignity unconditionally while designing institutions so that support, wherever reasonably possible, strengthens agency rather than replacing it.

3. Demographic Sustainability and the Freedom to Form a Family

Demographic sustainability is sometimes reduced to the number of births, but the strategic problem is wider. Population structure shapes the future labour force, pension and healthcare systems, education networks, regional viability, military and civil resilience, tax capacity, innovation and the transfer of knowledge between generations. A society with fewer children can remain prosperous for a long time, particularly if productivity rises, but persistent demographic imbalance eventually changes the ratio between those who depend on shared systems and those who sustain them. Demography is therefore neither a private matter alone nor a justification for state control over reproduction; it is a field in which private choices have cumulative public consequences.

The proper role of democratic policy is not to instruct people to have children, but to remove avoidable obstacles for those who wish to form families. Housing affordability, employment insecurity, the cost of

care, long working hours, delayed economic independence, access to healthcare, educational expectations and confidence in the future all influence whether family aspirations can be realised. OECD research accordingly treats fertility as the outcome of a complex interaction between employment, family policy, childcare, financial support and wider economic conditions rather than the product of one isolated incentive. A serious demographic strategy should therefore resist simplistic promises and instead ask whether the total institutional environment makes family life realistically compatible with a dignified modern life.

This perspective also changes the relationship between family policy and gender equality. The aim should not be to restore a compulsory division of roles, nor to assume that the only emancipated model is continuous full-time labour-market participation by both parents from the earliest years of a child's life. Genuine freedom requires more than one socially and economically viable option. A mother or father who wishes to remain at home for a period, to work part-time, to use formal childcare or to share these arrangements over time should not face a system whose subsidies and social-insurance rules make one choice overwhelmingly privileged and another economically irrational.

Demographic sustainability is therefore best understood as freedom supported by infrastructure. Public institutions should make parenthood compatible with housing, employment, education and social security while recognising that care itself has value. Such an approach respects personal autonomy because it does not demand a particular family form or reproductive decision, yet it also respects the public interest because it acknowledges that children and the human capital they later embody are not merely private consumption choices but part of the continuity of society.

4. A Universal Parental Care Income Until the Age of Fourteen

A central practical proposal of this framework is the creation of a universal Parental Care Income for a parent who assumes the primary daily care of a child. The entitlement would remain available until the child reaches the age of fourteen, would not be means-tested, would not disappear when household income exceeds an administrative threshold and would not depend on the parent's previous employment or contribution record. It would be open equally to mothers and fathers and could be transferred between them as family circumstances change, because the public value being recognised is care for the child rather than the sex, profession or prior income of the caregiver.

This proposal should be distinguished from a universal basic income paid to every adult. It is a universal caregiving entitlement attached to a defined social function and available to every family that chooses direct parental care under the same rules. Its purpose is also different from conventional social assistance, because it does not assume poverty, incapacity or unemployment; instead, it recognises that a parent who devotes substantial time to raising a child is producing a form of social value whose benefits appear only gradually in the child's health, education, emotional stability, socialisation and eventual participation in society. Treating that work as economically invisible while publicly financing many substitutes for it creates a policy asymmetry that deserves democratic examination.

The age of fourteen is deliberately broader than ordinary maternity, paternity or parental-leave systems. The social function of parental care does not end when a child enters kindergarten or school, because school-age children still require supervision, emotional support, transport, help during illness, coordination of education and activities, and substantial parental time during holidays and transitions. Current EU work-life-balance legislation establishes minimum rights to maternity, paternity and

parental leave and gives working parents of children up to at least eight years a right to request flexible arrangements, but it does not create a long-term universal income for direct parental care. The proposal therefore addresses a different question: whether society should recognise sustained parental caregiving as one legitimate form of contribution throughout a larger part of childhood.

The entitlement should be designed around choice rather than withdrawal from society. It should be compatible with part-time employment and gradual re-entry into the labour market, and the period of recognised care should generate pension and social-insurance credits so that a parent does not pay for socially valuable care through permanent insecurity in old age. At the same time, the benefit should not be designed as a full replacement for a professional salary, because the objective is to establish an economic floor that makes caregiving possible, not to create a new privileged occupational category. The appropriate amount, taxation, interaction with other child benefits and treatment of multiple children would require transparent fiscal modelling and periodic evaluation rather than being fixed by principle alone.

The proposal also requires safeguards against reproducing gender inequality by default. Equal legal availability to both parents, easy transferability, social-insurance protection and public reporting on uptake by mothers and fathers would make the arrangement genuinely parental rather than implicitly maternal. Families should remain free to choose formal childcare, full-time employment, shared care or direct home care, and public policy should not stigmatise any of these choices. The essential reform is that direct parental care would cease to be treated as a private luxury available mainly to households that can absorb the loss of one income.

A universal design is important for another reason. Means-tested benefits often create threshold effects, administrative complexity and a distinction between families considered needy and families expected to absorb the full private cost of a socially valuable activity. If care is recognised as a public contribution, its basic value does not disappear when a family moves from low income to middle income. Universality can therefore be defended not as indiscriminate spending but as a statement that raising and caring for the next generation is a public interest shared across income groups, while progressive taxation can recover part of the fiscal cost from higher-income households without transforming the benefit itself into a stigma or poverty programme.

5. Human Capital Begins Long Before Employment

Demographic sustainability without human development would be an incomplete objective. Europe's strategic asset is not population size in the abstract but the knowledge, health, creativity, competence, trust and productive capability embodied in people. Human capital begins before formal education and continues through childhood, schooling, professional formation, employment, entrepreneurship, research, caregiving and civic participation. Family policy, education policy and economic policy should therefore be treated as parts of the same long-term investment system rather than as separate budget compartments.

This perspective exposes a weakness in conventional public accounting. Expenditure on education, early development, preventive health, parental care and scientific capacity is often recorded simply as current spending, while physical infrastructure or financial assets more readily appear as investment. Yet the loss of a generation of skills, social trust or research capability can be more difficult to reverse than the deterioration of many physical assets. A strategic public-interest framework should therefore evaluate

expenditure partly by whether it creates durable human capability, not only by the ministry through which the money is spent.

The same logic applies to the relationship between work and family. A society that invests heavily in education but creates housing, employment and time structures that make family formation increasingly difficult may undermine its own future labour force and tax base. Conversely, a family policy that encourages withdrawal from education, skills development and later economic participation can also weaken long-term capacity. The objective should be continuity across the life cycle, in which care and work are not treated as mutually hostile spheres but as different forms of contribution that individuals may combine differently at different stages of life.

A Parental Care Income fits within this wider concept because it recognises care as part of human-capital formation while preserving the need for later re-entry, retraining and continued development. The long-term goal is not to maximise the number of parents outside paid employment or inside it, but to maximise the capability of children, parents and society over the entire life course.

6. Quality of Life as Social and Demographic Infrastructure

Europe's demographic debate cannot be separated from quality of life. Young adults make long-term decisions in the context of housing costs, employment prospects, commuting time, security, healthcare, education, environmental conditions and confidence that institutions will remain reliable. OECD analysis increasingly highlights housing affordability alongside parental leave, childcare and financial support as an important part of the fertility environment. This suggests that demographic policy should not be confined to family ministries, because the viability of family life is shaped by urban planning, taxation, transport, labour law, finance and regional development as much as by child benefits.

Quality of life should therefore be understood as productive infrastructure rather than as a residual benefit enjoyed after economic growth has been achieved. Safe communities, accessible housing, good schools, healthcare, predictable public services and sufficient time for family life make societies more capable of retaining skilled people and sustaining social trust. They can also become a competitive advantage for Europe in a global economy in which talent can increasingly choose where to live and work. A society that offers high nominal income but makes housing, caregiving and family time prohibitively costly may be less attractive than one with somewhat lower monetary income but stronger public goods and greater life stability.

This approach does not eliminate trade-offs. Generous family support must be financed, housing supply requires difficult planning decisions, and shorter or more flexible working arrangements can impose costs on firms and public services. Public-interest analysis should make those costs visible rather than pretend that every desirable social outcome is free. The relevant question is whether resources are being allocated in a way that preserves the productive and demographic base from which future public services will be financed.

7. Migration as a Complement, Not a Substitute for Demographic Policy

Migration forms part of Europe's demographic reality and can contribute labour, skills, entrepreneurship and cultural exchange, particularly where economies face shortages that cannot be filled quickly from within. The European Commission's Demography Toolbox accordingly includes managed legal

migration as one element of the response to labour shortages, while explicitly presenting it as complementary to supporting parents, younger people and the mobilisation of talent already present in Europe. This sequencing is important because migration and demographic renewal address related but different questions.

A sustainable demographic strategy should therefore avoid two simplifications. It should not treat migration as inherently harmful, because well-managed migration can generate real economic and social benefits, nor should it treat migration as a complete substitute for policies that allow the resident population to form families and build human capital. Labour shortages can sometimes be addressed through migration in a matter of years, while intergenerational continuity concerns the social structure of decades. Democratic governments must therefore consider scale, integration capacity, labour-market needs, housing, education, social cohesion and the preferences of affected communities rather than converting a complex demographic issue into a binary ideological dispute.

The broader principle is that demographic policy should strengthen the capacity of society to reproduce itself socially as well as numerically. Integration matters because a functioning political community depends on common legal obligations, language acquisition, civic participation and mutual respect, while openness remains compatible with a clear expectation that newcomers participate in the shared institutions of the society they join. The objective is neither demographic isolation nor demographic substitution, but continuity combined with openness under democratically legitimate rules.

8. Intergenerational Responsibility and the Social Contract

Every welfare state is an intergenerational institution even when its laws are written in annual budgets. Working generations finance pensions, healthcare and public services, previous generations built much of the infrastructure and institutional capital now in use, and future generations will inherit today's debt, environmental conditions, education systems, technologies and demographic structure. Responsible solidarity therefore requires a longer time horizon than electoral politics naturally provides.

Intergenerational justice should not mean that no generation may borrow or consume resources, because borrowing can be entirely justified when it finances infrastructure, education, research or other assets that benefit those who will later repay it. The relevant distinction is between transferring costs and transferring value. A society can legitimately ask future citizens to share the cost of a railway, university system or strategic technology that they will use, but it should be more cautious when borrowing merely preserves current consumption while the demographic and productive base needed for repayment is weakening.

The same reasoning applies to family policy. Support for children and parental care is often treated as current social expenditure, yet much of its benefit accrues to future taxpayers, workers, entrepreneurs, carers and citizens. This does not mean every family programme is efficient or that demographic objectives justify unlimited spending. It means that evaluation should include future returns in human and social capacity rather than measuring only immediate fiscal cost.

A mature public-interest framework should therefore ask of major policies what assets, capabilities or obligations they transfer to the next generation, whether the distribution is proportionate and whether future citizens retain meaningful freedom to make their own choices. Demographic sustainability is one

part of this test because a society that leaves behind generous promises but too few people, insufficient skills or weakened social cohesion has not truly transferred prosperity.

9. From Social Expenditure to Strategic Social Investment

The practical consequence of this framework is a change in how Europe classifies and evaluates social policy. The traditional distinction between productive economic policy and redistributive social policy is too crude for an ageing knowledge economy. Education, child development, family stability, health, skills, housing and care can all influence future productivity, labour supply, innovation, fiscal capacity and social trust, which means that part of what is conventionally labelled social expenditure is better understood as strategic social investment.

This does not justify relabelling every benefit as investment in order to avoid fiscal discipline. On the contrary, the investment concept imposes a stronger requirement for measurable outcomes. Programmes should be assessed according to whether they reduce avoidable dependency, improve child development, strengthen human capital, expand genuine choice, support family formation where desired, increase social participation or improve the long-term sustainability of public systems. Policies that fail repeatedly should be redesigned even when their intentions are morally attractive.

The Parental Care Income proposed here should be subject to the same standard. Its effectiveness should be evaluated not only through fertility rates, because family decisions have many causes, but through a wider set of outcomes such as parental choice, child wellbeing, poverty risk, labour-market re-entry, gender distribution of care, pension security of caregivers, administrative simplicity and fiscal sustainability. A strategic paper can establish the principle, but implementation should remain empirical and revisable.

The same requirement applies to institutional priorities more generally. Public expenditure should be transparent enough for citizens to compare declared goals with actual allocation, and demographic strategy should be evaluated alongside education, housing, health, migration and labour-market policy rather than being confined to symbolic campaigns. This is the point at which public interest becomes operational: not as a fixed ideological hierarchy, but as a transparent process for deciding, measuring and correcting long-term priorities.

10. Relationship to the European Strategic Doctrine

This paper should be understood as a supporting Strategic Paper rather than as an additional volume of the European Strategic Doctrine. Its function is to connect several concepts that already appear across the doctrine and translate them into a coherent social-policy framework. European Ethical Sovereignty provides the normative distinction between universal human rights, public interest and long-term civilizational responsibility; Integrated Democracy addresses how citizens retain authority over public priorities; Financial Sovereignty asks whether capital supports human and productive development; Strategic Resilience recognises the importance of social cohesion and human capability; and the institutional model of a Modular Federation provides the constitutional space within which different societies could implement shared principles through different policy instruments.

The present paper occupies the practical space between these domains by asking what kind of social settlement allows freedom to reproduce its own conditions. Its answer is not a comprehensive welfare-

state design but a set of relationships: rights require institutions capable of protecting them, solidarity requires responsibility and reciprocity, demographic continuity requires real freedom to form and care for families, human capital requires long-term investment, and intergenerational justice requires that present choices do not consume the capacities of the future. The proposed Parental Care Income is one concrete instrument within that wider logic rather than the whole strategy.

This position also preserves subsidiarity. Europe does not require one uniform family model, one benefit level or one institutional design across all countries, because demographic structures, labour markets, housing systems and cultural traditions differ. Common European principles can define rights, transparency and strategic objectives while national and regional democratic systems retain room to determine the precise balance between cash benefits, childcare services, tax treatment, housing support, education and parental-care arrangements. The purpose of the framework is coherence without unnecessary uniformity.

Conclusion: Rights Need a Future

The central challenge is not to choose between individual freedom and social responsibility, because a sustainable democratic society requires both. Human rights protect individuals against arbitrary power, while public interest enables a political community to identify the shared conditions without which those rights gradually become impossible to guarantee. Responsible solidarity connects protection with agency and reciprocity, while demographic sustainability ensures that the social contract continues across generations rather than becoming a promise made by the present to itself.

The future of Europe's social model should therefore be judged not only by how much income it redistributes or how many services it provides, but by whether it enables people to build capable and meaningful lives. That includes the ability to acquire knowledge, work productively, care for others, form families if they choose, raise children without disproportionate economic penalty, participate in civic life and grow old without placing impossible obligations on those who follow. The goal is not demographic engineering but demographic freedom: a society in which the decision to have and care for children is not made unnecessarily difficult by institutions that recognise the market value of labour while ignoring the social value of care.

A universal Parental Care Income until the age of fourteen would make that principle concrete by recognising one form of contribution that modern accounting largely leaves invisible. It would not replace childcare, paid employment, parental leave or other family policies, and it should not be presented as a guaranteed cure for low fertility. It would instead widen the range of viable family choices by ensuring that a parent who undertakes substantial direct care does not have to justify that choice through poverty, unemployment or prior contribution status before society recognises its value.

The broader standard is ultimately simple but demanding: a society is sustainable when it protects people living today without consuming the freedom and capability of those who come after them. Public interest, responsible solidarity and demographic sustainability are therefore not separate policy themes. Together they describe the intergenerational architecture of a democratic society that intends not merely to survive, but to remain free.

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