Conference report: Transforming Anxieties of Ageing in Southeastern Europe: Political, Social, and Cultural Narratives of Demographic Change

2026-11-04|**by:** Andi Balla

Final project conference, 10 to 12 September 2026, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

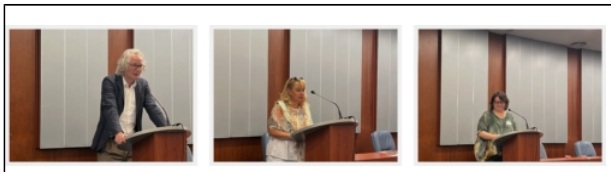
Report by Andi Balla (IOS Regensburg)

Southeastern Europe is home to some of the fastest-shrinking and fastest-aging populations in the world, and public debate in the region has long met these changes with alarm. Since 2023, the project *Transforming Anxieties of Ageing in Southeastern Europe*, which receives funding from the German Volkswagen Foundation, has studied where those anxieties come from, how they are narrated and what policy impact they have. In September this year, the project brought scholars, policy makers and practitioners to Sofia to take stock of and discuss what it has found. The project's final conference, held at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" from 10 to 12 September 2026, was organized by Galina Goncharova, the principal investigator of the project's Bulgarian team.

The event brought together the project's partner teams from the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) in Regensburg (Germany), Sofia University, the Center for Southeast European Studies and the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Aging and Care (CIRAC) at the University of Graz (Austria), and the Hungarian Demographic Research Institute in Budapest, along with invited speakers from across the region and beyond. Over two days, eighteen presentations in five panels, two keynote lectures and a round table approached demographic change and aging in Southeastern Europe from historical, sociological, demographic and cultural angles, and the round table looked at the policy implications. The five panels mirrored the project's five research clusters. A visit to a cultural center for older people in Sofia closed the program on the third day. Like the project as a whole, the conference was also funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

Sonya Karabeliova, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University, opened the conference, highlighting the importance of the topic by referring to the demographic challenges Bulgaria is currently facing. **Ulf Brunnbauer** (IOS Regensburg), the project coordinator, gave a short history of

the project, explained why the demographic history of Southeastern Europe makes the region a distinctive case and introduced the partner institutions. He presented the conference as a chance to reflect on the project's results ahead of a joint book. **Galina Goncharova** (Sofia University) described the conference as linking demographic questions with individual experiences of aging, and encouraged participants not to miss a single session.



From the opening ceremony. From left to right: Ulf Brunnbauer (IOS), Sonya Karabeliova (Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University), and Galina Goncharova (Sofia University).

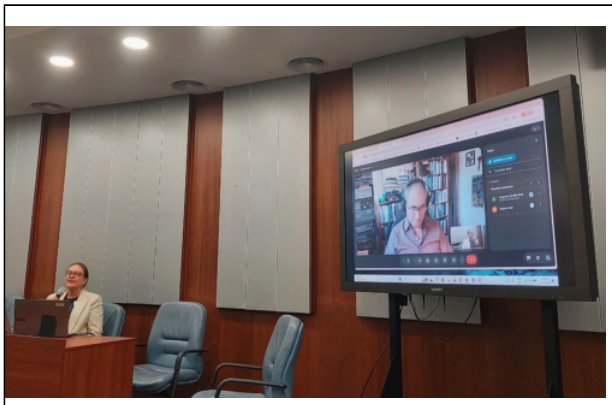
The first panel, chaired by **Sara Žerić Đulović** (IOS Regensburg), turned to socialist legacies and ambivalent transitions. **Inxhi Brisku** (Sofia University) traced the development of social protection and old-age pensions in Albania from the monarchy into the early years of the communist regime. He stressed that during communism, pensions were framed not as an entitlement but as a gift from the party. Workers in heavy industry were privileged. **Andi Balla** (IOS Regensburg) presented the findings of his doctoral dissertation, written within the project, on Albanian demographic debates since 1980. In each era a single demographic indicator overshadowed the rest in public discourse, from births and population growth under socialism to emigration after 1991. Aging, present all along in debates on intergenerational relations within households and on care homes, has now become a dominant concern, as Albania grows old before it grows affluent. The dissertation traces these shifts through archival research, newspapers from the 1980s and 1990s, oral history interviews, a corpus of Albanian films and a systematic content analysis of contemporary media. **Ulf Brunnbauer** (IOS Regensburg) examined socialist Yugoslavia, focusing on actors who transformed the experience of old age. Large surveys and expert research shaped the debate, and the media, freer than elsewhere in socialist Europe, promoted active aging and intergenerational solidarity. He pointed to the vast gap between the richest and poorest parts of the federation, from Slovenia to Kosovo. Self-management, the Yugoslav model of socialism that placed enterprises under workers' councils and gave the republics and provinces wide autonomy, was in his view better at producing ideas than at implementing them. **Botakoz Kassymbekova** (University of Zurich), who joined online, presented part of her new monograph on aging after Stalinism. She employed a bottom-up approach, based on letters, diaries and memoirs of older Soviet citizens. She showed how older people searched for coherence in their life stories, in a state that treated a life without duties as parasitic. One of the important results of the discussion after the presentations was the need to explore the subject positions available to older

people under the specific conditions of state socialism.

The afternoon panel on demographic and expert discourses was chaired by **Ivana Spirovska** (University of Graz). **Denitsa Nencheva** (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences) showed how gerontology in late socialist Bulgaria, which was strongly influenced by Soviet gerontology, made longevity its focus, studying the lifestyles of long-livers and mapping them across the country. Already during socialism, Bulgarian gerontologists called upon older people to age "actively", with particular emphasis on physical exercise. **Kristijan Fidanovski** (Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies) made the case for "progressive pronatalism". Starting from population aging and the gap between the number of children people say they want and the number they have, he argued that the details of family policy matter and that progressive actors have so far left the issue to right-wing and nationalist voices, although pronatalism could just as well be a progressive cause. **Mariya Tsolova** (Sofia University) used SHARE data on people aged 50 and over in 26 European countries to show that self-perceived health follows inequality, which weighs more on how people judge their health than a country's overall wealth. Individual education is a very strong predictor as well. She also pointed to a substantial gender difference, as women on average report worse health than men. **Orsolya Udvari** and **Attila Melegh** (Hungarian Demographic Research Institute) approached the Hungarian case from two angles. Melegh, who leads the project's comparative study of media discourse in Albania, Hungary, North Macedonia and Romania, showed that Hungarian discourse links aging mostly to the economy and struggles to treat it as a social issue. The comparison also brought out national differences: Albanian discourse, for example, ties aging to emigration, while the Hungarian one is concerned with immigration. Udvari's expert interviews framed demographic aging as a social problem tied to a care crisis, with little room for longevity as a success story. The panel presentations made clear that the silences in a discourse are as important as what is said.

The first day closed with an online keynote by **Stephen Katz** (Trent University), introduced by **Ulla Kriebernegg** (University of Graz) as one of the founding voices of critical gerontology. Katz examined how population aging came to be told as a crisis. Writing on the subject typically opens with an alarming statement about costs, backed by dense demographic data, while grouping people by age breeds stereotypes. Dependency ratios, he noted, leave out the unpaid work of older people, much of it done by women. He traced this way of thinking to the early modern state, which linked population with power as statistics developed alongside it, and followed it into today's image of a war between generations, the caricature of the greedy baby boomer and the spread of Western models of old age to the Global South. As alternatives that could foreground more inclusive visions of aging, he pointed to posthumanist, environmental and Indigenous perspectives, paraphrasing Donna Haraway's call to "make kin, not population", and to approaching aging as a matter of care. Studying aging, he

concluded, is an occasion for optimism.



Keynote speech by Stephen Katz (Trent University), chaired by Ulla Kriebernegg (University of Graz).

The second day opened with the third panel, on cross-cultural pathways and life stories of aging and care, chaired by **Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl** (University of Graz). **Stefania Gabrovska** (Sofia University) examined narratives of worth among older Bulgarians and asked whether a person can be fulfilled without being productive. From her interviews, she identified two main tropes used by old people to speak about their experience: useful and empty time. She also highlighted that older people in Bulgaria she interviewed struggled to come to terms with being dependent. Dependency, she argued, is the human condition. **Kristine Krause** (University of Amsterdam), who is one of the principal investigators of another aging project funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, looked at the historical sentiments of transnational care for older adults in an unequal Europe, where care moves from wealthier to poorer countries and becomes a market. Drawing on ethnographic observations in care homes in Poland, she described these institutions as “space-time envelopes.” **Galina Goncharova** (Sofia University) and **Anna-Christina Kainradl** (University of Graz) presented their joint paper with **Saša Nedeljković** (University of Belgrade), who could not attend. Based on interviews from two of the project’s clusters in five countries, it explored intergenerational care and what older adults consider good aging. Intersecting care, aging and migration, they challenged entrenched notions of care homes as places of decline and highlighted the importance of experiential knowledge.

The fourth panel, chaired by **Ulla Kriebernegg** (University of Graz), dealt with public narratives and their politicization. **Sanja Klempić Bogadi** (Institute for Migration Research, Zagreb) showed how demographic revitalization has become a central political narrative in Croatia. Public debate frames emigration as demographic loss, immigration as both an economic necessity and a threat to Croatian identity, and the return of ethnic Croatian emigrants and their descendants as desirable renewal. Aging is told mainly through vulnerability, dependence and pressure on public systems, overlooking the diversity of older people’s lives. Demography has become heavily politicized in Croatia because it is

linked with questions of national identity. **Róbert Iván Gál** (Hungarian Demographic Research Institute) asked "Who is actually dependent?" Looking at transfers between age groups in Europe, he showed that children receive far more than older people if interfamilial transfers are added to the picture. The notion that older people are the main beneficiaries of social and financial support is a cliché, and the fear of a "creeping gerontocracy" is out of place. Transfers to older people are more easily socialized and, therefore, more visible. **Ivana Spirovska** and **Florian Bieber** (University of Graz) analyzed Serbian media discourses on aging and demographic threats, paying attention to what the media leave unsaid. They started with a 19th-century adage that "at the end, all Serbs will have a place under one plum tree." What their discourse analysis reveals is that media coverage rejects immigration as a solution, places the burden of having more children on women and frames aging exclusively as a crisis. Yet overall, the media debate on demography is subdued, reflecting the government's hesitancy to foreground an issue where it cannot achieve much.

Keynote speech by Daniela Koleva, "Ageing and Its Sciences".

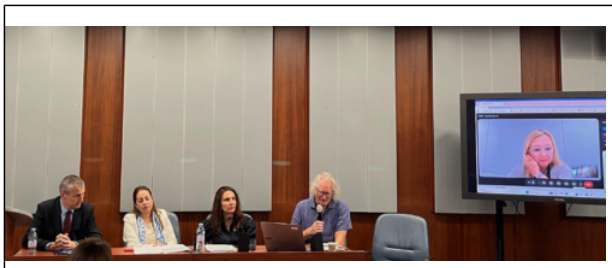
The final panel, chaired by Galina Goncharova, turned to cultural representations of age and aging. **Adriana Teodorescu** (Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca) followed the cultural imaginary of aging in contemporary Romania. From her analysis of media, she pointed to widespread gerontophobia which many people have internalized. Old people are described as a collective burden and are scapegoated. Yet in private contexts, older people are more likely to be presented as providers of care. She also stressed the ambiguities of longevity discourse in which the body becomes a life-long project turning inequality into a matter of lifestyle. **Nevena Dimitrova** (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences) discussed similar issues, but in relation to the representation of old age in socialist Bulgaria. She focused on aging femininity, analyzing representations in the then-leading women's issues magazine, *Zhenata dnes*. She contrasted the absence of older women on the magazine's pages with a recent artistic intervention which presented the naked body of an aged, well-known Bulgarian actress. **Dagmar Gramshammer-**

Hohl (University of Graz) turned toward literature to examine how eminent Southeast European writers speak about aging. From the analysis of novels such as *Zsömle odavan* (Zsömle is gone) by the Hungarian Nobel laureate László Krasznahorkai or Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov's much acclaimed *Vremeubezhishte* (Time Shelter), she concluded that aging is "unshown" in a process of literary erasure which reflects societal erasure. **Boryana Angelova-Igova** (National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski") traced how the female athlete's body moves from admiration to body horror as ageism and prejudice set in. Drawing on examples from Bulgaria, Serbia and Turkey, she discussed the ambiguities of public excitement about the achievements of "old" female athletes.

After that**, Daniela Koleva** (Sofia University) gave the second keynote, "Ageing and Its Sciences", introduced by Ulf Brunnbauer. Koleva, who is one of Bulgaria's best-known historians and one of the founders of oral history in Bulgaria, currently works on a book about the development of gerontology in socialist Bulgaria. Starting from the long-standing complaint that gerontology is fragmented among biologists, physicians and sociologists, she sketched the different models by which knowledge about aging was produced in Bulgaria. The country's many centenarians drew fascination and study, medicine absorbed the gerontology center and steered it toward disease, demographers watched the indicators, and sociologists turned to the aging individual in the 1980s. The field remained poorly institutionalized and after 1992, gerontology all but disappeared. When EU funding brought it back, there were hardly any gerontologists left in the country.

The conference concluded with the policy-oriented round table "Ageing Regionally: Regimes of Value and Policy Futures", chaired by Galina Goncharova and Ulf Brunnbauer. The round table asked how policy making relates to demographic change in Southeastern Europe and, specifically, how context-sensitive policies on aging can be supported. Speaking online, **Zornitsa Roussinova**, President of the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria, stressed that demographic trends affect every sector of society, even though demographic policy has rarely topped the government's agenda. Recently, Bulgarian policies in the realm of aging have been guided by the model of intergenerational justice. She also stressed the importance of addressing regional disparities and improving access to public services. **Zlatina Naydenova** (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy), who heads the department responsible for demographic issues in the ministry, described population aging trends in Bulgaria. Combined with low fertility and high mortality by EU standards, it amounts to a challenge to all social systems that calls for joint action across education, health and the economy. She outlined Bulgaria's national demographic strategies, from the first for 2006–2020 to the updated one for 2012–2030 that replaced it early. One of the strategy's key priorities is to create favorable conditions for active aging. **Željko Blagojević** (United Nations Funds for Population Activity/UNFPA, Sarajevo) recalled the older concept of "demographic security" and UNFPA's shift toward "demographic resilience", which centers on human capital. The UNFPA gave it a regional platform at a first ministerial conference in Sofia in

2021 and a second one in Skopje last year. He stressed that “money does not buy children.” Instead, UNFPA encourages governments to invest in healthy aging and care. As a low-cost, but effective best practice model, Blagojević singled out the network of healthy aging centers in Bosnia-Herzegovina that were established with support from the UNFPA. In his assessment, local governments are more ready to invest in older people but often lack the means to do so. **Lora Lyubenova** (Alzheimer Bulgaria) presented her volunteer-based association, which works with students and young people, runs information and prevention campaigns and cooperates with academia, including research on ageism. However, the enthusiasm of volunteers cannot make up for failures of public policy: Bulgaria still lacks a national register of people with dementia, and even in Sofia there is no day care center for people suffering from it.



Roundtable discussion “Ageing Regionally: Regimes of Value and Policy Futures”. From left to right: Željko Blagojević (United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA, Sarajevo), Lora Lyubenova (Alzheimer Bulgaria), Zlatina Naydenova (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy), and Zornitsa Roussinova (President of the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria).

Overall, the contributions showed how persistently aging is framed as a crisis across the region, in socialist expertise as much as in today’s media and policy debates. Emigration and immigration are told in very different ways from country to country, the burden of reversing decline is placed mainly on women, and the social side of aging, from care to longevity as a success, remains at the margins of public debate. On the other hand, the work of activists, experts and the occasional politician showcases the potential for more inclusive, transformative approaches, centered around the idea of caring communities. These findings will feed into the project’s joint book.

The "Srebarna Esen" (Silver Autumn) Club with Zoya Paprikova-Krutilin.

On Saturday, participants visited the "Srebarna Esen" (Silver Autumn) Club in central Sofia, a club for older people with interests in music, literature and the arts. It was founded by art historian **Zoya Paprikova-Krutilin**, who gave the lecture, and continues the charitable work of her late mother, Donka Paprikova, whose society runs a hospice alongside the club to offer dignity to those in need. The visit began with a documentary on the center's origins, and participants received literature on how the hospice and club are run. Club members performed classical music, and the day ended with snacks and drinks in the garden. It was a touching close to the conference and reminded the participants of something Velislava Delcheva, the Ombudsman of Bulgaria, wrote in her letter to the conference participants: "Older people are not a burden on society. They are the people who built it."