


To cite: Carella, M., Bellis, G., & Parant, A. (2022). Population and Space in the Mediterranean: The Challenges of the 21st Century (Introduction). *Investigaciones Geográficas*, (77), 09-12. Retrieved from <https://www.investigacionesgeograficas.com/article/view/21639>

Population and Space in the Mediterranean: The Challenges of the 21st Century (Introduction)

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The Mediterranean region features diverse and overlapping socioeconomic and demographic dynamics, with collateral effects that have become increasingly more significant and difficult to solve. The region's demographic evolution has been uneven. Indeed, while natural population increase in the countries of the northern shore has been weak for several decades (when it did not turn negative, as it did in Italy), the southern and eastern shores continue to benefit from a still considerable natural surplus despite a sharp decline in fertility (Angeli & Salvini, 2018; Bellis, Carella, Léger, Parant, 2021a).

Furthermore, the contrasting demographic regimes along the northern (European), eastern (Asian) and southern (African) shores have resulted in a major change in the distribution of the populations whose composition by age group is also very different (Parant & Léger, 2020). In 2020, the countries of the African shore represent the most populated area of the Mediterranean Basin (39% vs. 38% for the countries of the European shore), while in 1950 the northern shore grouped two-thirds of the total population. Moreover, 47% of individuals on the southern shore and 42% of those residing on the eastern shore are now under 25 years old; while the under 25s represent just over a quarter of the population (26%) on the northern shore (Bellis, Carella, Léger, Parant, 2021b). The population of the northern shore is inexorably aging, whereas those of the southern and eastern shores have remained young despite the increase in life expectancy.

The projections of the United Nations show that the differences in demographic dynamics and behaviors between the Mediterranean shores will persist and lead to possible consequences that could stem mainly from intergenerational imbalances—some of the major challenges of the future (Carella & Parant, 2016; Léger & Parant, 2021).

Additionally, these demographic dynamics occur within an economic, political, health, and environmental context disrupted by several crises in recent decades: the Great Recession of 2008, which has particularly affected the southern European countries (Golaz, Lefèvre, & Véron, 2018); the social and political crises of the 2010s in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East, which have had dramatic socioeconomic consequences and have produced numerous flows of migrants (Eljim & Sahraoui, 2021; Fargues, & Fandrich, 2012); the “refugee crises”, which have revealed the fragilities of European migration policies (Jeandesboz, & Pallister-Wilkins, 2016; Schmoll, Thiollet, & Wihtol de Wenden, 2015); the COVID-19 pandemic, which has struck all human populations and all countries, the effects of which are still far from completely understood (Egidi & Manfredi, 2021; Horton, 2021); the environmental crisis related to the spatial constraints and ecological threats (Bergouignan, 2021) that many populations of the southern and eastern shores are facing more and more frequently (Hugo, 2011; Benoit & Comeau, 2012). All these events have upset the expected course of economic and social life in Mediterranean societies.

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The Mediterranean region is also a space of historical internal circulation, a reminder of the necessity of addressing demographic challenges, not only at the national level, but also at the level of broader regional areas (Carella & Parant, 2014). In this respect, because of the diversity of its past and current migration background, and of varying development levels of the surrounding countries, the Mediterranean Basin is a prime area in which to grasp – in both a specific and a global way – the demographic responses to political, economic, health, and (soon) ecological crises.

This special issue highlights the challenges that have concerned the Mediterranean region and that will shape its future as well as the ongoing efforts to better acknowledge the impacts of the contemporary crises in this area from the point of view of populations in their diversity (social groups, age categories, etc.) and on different geographic scales.

The contributors of the seven articles examine the effects of such crises on populations and demographic dynamics, as well as the role played by the populations themselves in the crises that have affected them. Each article explores what these crises say about our societies and lifestyles, and reflects on the possible responsibility of individuals and/or on the long-term errors of public policy. Most of the contributions contextualize from a geographical point of view the relationship between crises and populations, underlining the specificity of the national or local context and explaining how the geographic dimension is relevant to understanding the analyzed cases.

Each article remains independent and stands firmly on its own. Nevertheless, we have chosen to order them thematically and logically, so as to emphasize convergences in their content, methodological similarities and differences related both to the geographical space investigated and to whether a retrospective or prospective approach is taken.

Thus, the first five contributions focus on the recent crises pertaining to health, the economy, political governance and social equity, pointing to their effects on populations over two different temporalities: the short and the medium term. They explore the demographic ruptures (increase in migration, peak in mortality, depression in fertility, rural depopulation, urban socio-inequalities) arising from the multiple crises at various geographical scales, from the global down to the national, regional, and urban scales.

The relationship between crises and demographic dynamics should be identified as spatial processes related to specific places where it originates partly as a result of the contextual factors and takes on a dynamic of its own that characterizes the uneven development of its consequences. This approach strengthens the importance of geography in capturing the variety of demographic responses to the multiple challenges in the Mediterranean and the relevance of the context in explaining them. In a space analyzed at different degrees of aggregation (global, national, and local), the effects of the diverse crises on the populations should not be interpreted as homogeneous. Nevertheless, the Mediterranean is a privileged area in which these effects can acquire a distinctive connotation through repeated spatial and territorial interactions.

The last two contributions continue the discussion on the critical effects of crises on Mediterranean populations, but they capture them over the long term and stand out for their openness to the many uncertainties of the future, which may themselves result in new crises. Both articles deal with themes (related to genetic diseases and education) that show that crises can operate not only as a sudden event, but also as the end of a long process (Bellis et al., 2021). In this way, the articles are involved with a groundwork to advance the theoretical framework that could evaluate a temporality centered on the long-term demographic response, and they complement the retrospective analysis with a forward-looking reflection on the crises that could be provoked by the demographic changes underway.

In a scenario marked by multiple crises in this century, demographic patterns and dynamics in the Mediterranean remain to be explored. They require further investigations of interrelated political, socio-economic, and environmental dimensions to gain a better and alternative understanding of crises, their genesis, and their effects.

The question of how to face the recent challenges is still open and crucial in policy debate as well as relevant for academic research. Nevertheless, the analysis of future scenarios based on current ones, which has long been neglected in the literature, should be a top priority in order to anticipate potential crises linked primarily to the fragility of existing policies.

We hope that the collection of papers in this special issue contributes to a deeper and broader discussion of this process and encourages grounded analysis for understanding and addressing the relationship between crises and demography in the Mediterranean.

The structure and content of this special issue has been influenced by various studies conducted within the framework of the PHC-Galileo 2019–2020 research program under the leadership of the University of Bari Aldo Moro and the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED). The funding provided by this program allowed this collaboration to be extended to representatives of two universities (the Institute of Demography of the University of Paris 1 and the University of Thessaly in Volos) and an association specializing in foresight, the Futuribles International group in Paris.

The articles presented here have passed a rigorous peer-review process, and the authors have modified the original submissions versions according to the requirements made during the review. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Editors and Managing Editor of *Investigaciones Geográficas*, and the anonymous reviewers for their many insightful suggestions. The individual articles as well as the contribution of this special issue have been greatly improved and strengthened thanks to their work and constructive comments.

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