

VITA ACADEMICA

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“Transforming Anxieties of Ageing in Southeastern Europe”

Project Overview: Rethinking Ageing in a Rapidly Changing Region

“Transforming Anxieties of Ageing in Southeastern Europe: Political, Social, and Cultural Narratives of Demographic Change” is a comparative, multidisciplinary research project running from February 2023 to January 2027.¹ Funded by the German Volkswagen Foundation under its initiative “Challenges for Europe: The Greying Continent” and coordinated by the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) in Regensburg, the project brings together research teams from Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, and Hungary. Researchers from Albania, Croatia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Romania and Serbia add to its comprehensive regional coverage. Together, we examine how demographic ageing is perceived, narrated, and politicized across Southeastern Europe.

The region presents a particularly vivid context for investigating ageing and demographic change. Bulgaria, for instance, has experienced a population decline from nearly 9 million in 1989 to just under 6.5 million today – a trend expected to continue. Across Southeastern Europe, persistently low birth rates, high levels of emigration, and deep

¹ See the project’s website <https://transforming-anxieties.ios-regensburg.de/>

socioeconomic shifts have contributed to one of the fastest-ageing populations in Europe.

Rather than accepting ageing populations as inherently problematic, the project explores how demographic change is framed – as a threat, a challenge, or an opportunity – within political, social, and cultural discourses. We aim to move beyond alarmist or crisis-driven narratives and explore how societies can support inclusive, caring, and meaningful lives for older people, including ethnic minorities, migrants, and other marginalized groups. We also ask which policies are informed by the perceptions and framings we encounter in our research, and vice versa.

The project pursues two core objectives. First, it seeks to generate comparative, multidisciplinary research on ageing and demographic change across Southeastern Europe, drawing on insights from ageing studies, area studies, history, sociology, demography, political science, as well as literary and cultural studies. Second, it aims to transform dominant representations of ageing – shifting from narratives of crisis and decline to those that foreground care, interdependence, dignity, and the agency of older people themselves.

In doing so, the project addresses a major gap in existing scholarship. While most research on ageing has focused on Western Europe and North America, this project centers Southeastern Europe – a region whose socialist legacies, post-socialist transitions, migration patterns, and experiences of marginalization make it both distinctive and emblematic of broader European transformations. Our methodology combines qualitative and quantitative tools, with an emphasis on oral history, ethnographic fieldwork, participatory research, and critical discourse analysis. Central to our inquiry is a commitment to amplifying the voices and experiences of older people themselves.

Theoretical Foundations and Methodology: Multi-scalar, Participatory, Comparative

Bridging ageing studies and area studies, the project integrates historical research, discourse analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork. It is grounded in Michel Foucault's notion of population as a constructed object of governance, and in critical gerontology – particularly Stephen Katz's work on how ageing is socially constituted, regulated, and represented.

We understand ageing as a culturally and politically embedded process, shaped by intersecting narratives of gender, economy, and nationhood. Following Katz’s observation that states are increasingly governed through the age structure of their populations, we examine how demographic change is framed in public discourse – often as a crisis or burden. Framing theory (Robert Entman) serves as a key analytical lens, helping us uncover how dominant interpretations of ageing shape the creation of problems, their moral evaluation, and the institutional responses to them. Linking discourses to policies is therefore central to our analytical agenda. We aim to challenge alarmist framings and foreground more inclusive, care-oriented alternatives.

Our methods include critical discourse analysis of policy texts, media coverage, and political speech; literary analysis of representations of ageing; oral histories and life-course interviews; and comparative demographic analysis and public opinion research. We highlight the long historical trajectories of alarmist demographic discourses and explore in particular the socialist period, as a foundational historical moment for the reproduction of demographic nationalism.

Our mixed-methods approach brings together individual narratives, expert perspectives, policy interventions, and demographic and socio-economic data to examine how ageing is experienced and constructed across diverse sociopolitical contexts. Age is treated as an intersectional and dynamic category, shaped by class, gender, ethnicity, and mobility.

A defining feature of our project is its participatory orientation. Through living labs – collaborative spaces for reflection and co-creation – we actively engage older adults, caregivers, service providers, and community stakeholders. These labs are not just data collection tools, but transformative spaces that shape both our research questions and our vision of a more inclusive society. We are attentive to regional specificities: rather than imposing Western frameworks, we explore local traditions, socialist legacies, and intergenerational networks to re-think what it means to age with dignity. By linking micro-level experiences with macro-level structures, the project develops a new comparative lens on ageing in Southeastern Europe.

Rethinking Ageing in a European Context

Southeastern Europe poses urgent challenges and rich possibilities for reimagining ageing. The region is home to some of Europe’s oldest populations (in demographic terms) and features a unique mix of

cultural, ethnic, and generational diversity. Contradictions abound: strong familial care traditions coexist with weak public welfare systems; widespread emigration is counterbalanced by return migration, enduring transnational ties, and growing immigration from outside of Europe; public concerns about ageing exist alongside disregard for the causes of high mortality and low life expectancy in some countries of the region; low fertility is addressed by pronatalist policies, even though they have repeatedly (since the 1960s) proved to be ineffective.

By situating local experiences of ageing within broader transnational dynamics, the project examines how care chains, labor mobility, and EU frameworks shape the social life of ageing. We also explore how demographic anxieties – linked to population ageing, emigration, and minority groups – are mobilized in political rhetoric to fuel nationalism, conservatism, xenophobia, and exclusion. Against such tendencies, we advocate an alternative paradigm. Instead of technocratic fixes or alarmist responses, we emphasize care, participation, and social justice. Ageing should not be feared but better understood. Southeastern Europe – with its underexplored traditions of care and intergenerational solidarity – offers valuable insights for Europe at large.

Research Structure: Five Interconnected Clusters

The project is organized into five intersecting thematic research clusters, each focusing on distinct yet interrelated dimensions of ageing, care, and demographic discourse in Southeastern Europe. Together, they provide a multi-scalar, comparative, and interdisciplinary framework that links individual experiences to policy debates, historical legacies to cultural meanings.

- 1) *Socialist Legacies and Ambivalent Transitions*. Led by Ulf Brunnbauer (IOS Regensburg), this cluster investigates how state socialism and its aftermath have shaped narratives and infrastructures of ageing since the 1960s. It traces policies related to pensions, family obligations, and elder care from the socialist period through the post-socialist transformation. By analyzing archival documents, public discourse, and political debates, the cluster explores how older people were portrayed – as bearers of tradition, beneficiaries of social systems, or as burdens – and how these perceptions evolved with economic restructuring, welfare retrenchment, and changing political ideologies. Another focus lies on the emergence of demography as a policy-oriented science.

- 2) *Demographic and Expert Discourses*. Coordinated by Attila Melegh (Hungarian Demographic Research Institute, HDRI, Budapest), this cluster examines how demographic ageing is constructed within scientific, statistical, and expert frameworks. It critically analyzes how concepts such as "population decline," "burden," or "dependency" are deployed in policy discussions, often linked to fears of national weakening or social unsustainability. It develops a longitudinal database of demographic indicators and conducts interviews with experts across the region to assess how demographic knowledge is produced, circulated, and politicized. Again, long term-trajectories (since the 19th century) are addressed.
- 3) *Cross-Cultural Pathways and Life Stories of Ageing and Care*. Led by Galina Goncharova (Department of History and Theory of Culture at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski), this ethnographically grounded cluster focuses on how older people, caregivers, and families navigate the lived experience of ageing. Drawing on (auto-)biographical interviews and ethnographic observations, it examines how people make sense of ageing in the context of migration, rural depopulation, social inequality, and eroding intergenerational ties. The cluster pays particular attention to care in both institutional settings and informal care networks. It explores older people's agency, and economies of care across both domestic and transnational contexts. Its regional focus spans Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Serbia – complemented by migrant perspectives in Austria and Germany – to enable a comparative perspective on demographic ageing across diverse social, political, and historical settings in Southeastern and Central Europe.
- 4) *Cultural Representations of Age and Ageing*. Headed by Ulla Kriebemegg (Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Aging and Care, CIRAC, at the University of Graz) together with Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl (Department of Slavic Studies at the University of Graz), this cluster analyzes how old age is depicted in literature, theater, and film – both historically and in contemporary culture. Drawing on literary gerontology, narratology, and visual analysis, it examines both dominant and counter-hegemonic imaginaries of ageing. It explores how cultural texts reflect or resist narratives of decline, and how representations of old age are shaped by intersections of gender, ethnicity, and memory. Special attention is

given to Southeast European literatures and cinema, including diasporic and transcultural works. Participatory methods, such as living labs, are an integral part of this cluster's research.

- 5) *Public Narratives and Their Politicization*. Coordinated by Florian Bieber (Centre for South East European Studies, CSEES, at the University of Graz), this cluster investigates the instrumentalization of demographic anxieties in political rhetoric – especially in nationalist, populist, and conservative discourse. Using critical discourse analysis, opinion polling, and media representations, it explores how ageing is tied to broader themes such as migration, identity, fertility politics, and geopolitical positioning. The cluster also studies how demographic fears are mobilized to justify exclusionary policies (e.g. against minorities and immigrants) or to resist perceived “Europeanization.”

Research Output: Public Opinion Poll on Ageing

Building on the work of these five clusters, one of the project's major empirical contributions is a comparative public opinion poll that offers crucial insights into societal perceptions of ageing across the region. Conducted between December 2024 and January 2025, the survey covered four countries – Bulgaria, Hungary, North Macedonia, and Serbia – and was commissioned by the Centre for South East European Studies at the University of Graz. Fieldwork was carried out by Ipsos Strategic Marketing.

The survey explores public attitudes toward ageing, demographic change, and care systems. It investigates how older people are perceived, levels of trust in public institutions, and beliefs about the causes and consequences of demographic decline. It also examines how ageing intersects with identity, migration, and inequality – key themes that resonate throughout the project's broader research agenda.

A mixed-methods design was employed, combining face-to-face, telephone, and online interviews. Nationally representative samples were selected using stratified and quota-based methods, with post-stratification weighting to ensure demographic balance. Fieldwork details by country are as follows:

- Bulgaria: 1,000 respondents (70% face-to-face, 30% online)
- Hungary: 802 respondents (telephone)
- North Macedonia: 1,033 respondents (90% telephone, 10% online)
- Serbia: 1,112 respondents (77% telephone, 23% online)

To enhance accessibility and impact, one-page briefs have been prepared for each country. These synthesize the most significant findings and are tailored for academic, policy, and public audiences alike. The results not only provide a robust empirical foundation for the project’s qualitative components but also serve as an important tool for public engagement and evidence-based policy dialogue. For example, across all four countries, ageing populations are a common concern, with most respondents expressing worry about long-term effects. Immigration as a solution is viewed skeptically, and state support is seen as inadequate. Yet, there is broad agreement on the importance of policies that promote economic stability and support for young families – seen as the most effective response to demographic change.²

From Data to Dialogue: Methodology Workshops and Doctoral Training

In parallel with its empirical research, the project places strong emphasis on academic training and knowledge exchange – especially through its integrated program of methodology workshops and doctoral support. “Transforming Anxieties of Ageing in Southeastern Europe” functions not only as a research initiative but also as a platform for preparing emerging scholars to engage critically with the social, cultural, and political dimensions of demographic change. Acknowledging that ageing-related challenges require cross-disciplinary insight and contextual awareness, the project integrates structured PhD training into its core design.

A series of themed methodology workshops has been organized to deepen theoretical engagement, enhance methodological expertise, and foster collaborative scholarship among participating PhD students. These workshops function as intensive academic forums – spaces where draft chapters are critically discussed, research methods are refined, and local insights are exchanged with academic mentors and community partners.

Each workshop is shaped by a specific thematic and methodological focus:

- The kick-off workshop in Regensburg explored digital humanities tools for ageing research.

² See <https://transforming-anxieties.ios-regensburg.de/output/>

- In Graz, participants examined interdisciplinary and participatory approaches in ageing studies.
- The Budapest workshop provided in-depth training in historical demography.
- The most recent session, held in Sofia, focused on comparative oral history and transnational perspectives.

A final workshop, scheduled to take place in Graz in spring 2026, will center on policy engagement, knowledge transfer, and open science – bridging scholarly research with societal impact.

Together, these workshops not only support individual doctoral trajectories but also help build a shared intellectual foundation across the project's diverse research strands. They cultivate a dynamic scholarly network, encourage cross-border dialogue, and align academic inquiry with public relevance. The most recent Sofia workshop offered a particularly rich example of how the project integrates doctoral training with local expertise, public engagement, and transdisciplinary dialogue. It brought together researchers, practitioners, and community organizations in a setting that exemplified the project's broader commitment to bridging empirical research with lived experience and societal impact. The training program will culminate in a final conference in Sofia in September 2026, bringing together researchers, policymakers, and community stakeholders to reflect on findings, exchange perspectives, and chart future directions.

Sofia Workshop Highlights: Tiny Homes, Oral History, and Dementia Advocacy

Our methodology workshop in Sofia, held on 20 June 2025, brought together project members and local experts for a day of vibrant discussion on ageing, memory, and intergenerational life in Bulgaria. The program began with presentations by university professors Iliya Iliev and Daniela Koleva, followed by a chapter workshop in which PhD students shared and discussed their work in a collaborative group setting. In the afternoon, sessions with the Alzheimer Bulgaria Association and a concluding lecture by public health expert Desislava Vankova offered applied perspectives on dementia care and narrative medicine in the Bulgarian context.

In his presentation, ethnologist Iliya Iliev examined changing patterns of intergenerational cohabitation in Bulgaria during the 1970s and 1980s. Focusing on the effects of housing shortages and state policies, he showed how multigenerational living in cramped apartments shaped

family dynamics, privacy, and generational relationships. His research underscored how structural conditions and everyday adaptations influenced experiences of ageing under late socialism.

Oral historian Daniela Koleva offered a conceptual talk on the possibilities and challenges of comparative oral history. Drawing on scholars such as Ronald Fraser, Riki Van Boeschoten, and Gerhard Botz, she outlined the goals of comparative research – mapping similarities and differences, contextualizing case studies, and theorizing across cultural contexts. She also addressed obstacles in cross-national work, including terminological differences, cultural sensitivities, and national norms around religion and secularism. Koleva’s presentation provided valuable methodological guidance for the project, particularly in relation to the comparative analysis of interview data.

In the afternoon, Maya Marinova from the Alzheimer Bulgaria Association presented the organization, its support services, and its advocacy initiatives. In a country where gerontology is not yet formally recognized, the NGO plays a vital role in improving the rights and well-being of people with dementia and their caregivers. Programs such as the “Alzheimer Café” for family members and the “Friends in Memory” group for people in early-stage dementia offer both psychological support and opportunities for social connection. The Association also promotes inclusivity through cultural initiatives, including the Memorable project.

Desislava Vankova, a public health scholar from the city of Varna, concluded the day with a lecture on narrative medicine as an ethical framework for geriatric care. Her talk explored how storytelling can bridge gaps between clinicians and older patients, moving beyond biomedical models toward empathy-driven, person-centered care. Her intervention enriched the workshop with a reflective and ethical perspective on the future of ageing and care in Bulgaria and was an example of engaged academic work.

Altogether, the Sofia workshop offered a multidimensional lens on the intersections of memory, care, and ageing in Southeastern Europe. It also strengthened links between academic research and local practice – demonstrating the value of context-sensitive, engaged, and interdisciplinary approaches at the heart of the project.

Sofia Outreach Event: Sharing Stories of Ageing and Care Through Research and Literature

Extending the spirit of the workshop beyond the academic setting, a public outreach event held the following day created space for shared reflection, storytelling, and community engagement. Titled “Ageing and Care Stories,” the event took place on 21 June 2025 at Sofia University and was organized in collaboration with the Alzheimer Bulgaria Association. Moderated by Galina Goncharova, the event brought together students, researchers, writers, and caregivers for a rich exchange of academic insight and creative expression. For the purpose of outreach, the event was held in Bulgarian.

The program featured anonymized stories based on interviews conducted by the Sofia project team and by students of Galina Goncharova, alongside literary texts – all presented in Bulgarian with English translations. These narratives spanned multiple genres and perspectives, emphasizing the cultural, emotional, and ethical dimensions of ageing.

The event opened with a welcome address by Professor Sonya Karabelyova, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University, followed by a project introduction by Ulf Brunnbauer. The first panel included presentations by developmental psychologist Michaela Churushinova and Alzheimer Bulgaria Association representative Zhenya Milusheva. Churushinova shared findings from her qualitative research on emotional ambivalence in later life, while Milusheva highlighted the potential for meaning, connection, and self-reflection even in contexts of social vulnerability.

Following this, Cultural Studies (*kulturologija*) students Dalia Nenova and Kristiyana Barzinska presented their nuanced interpretation of an interview with an older woman, focusing on intergenerational themes and the narrative power of storytelling in research. After a short break, the program transitioned into a series of literary performances: journalist and lecturer Rumen Skrinski read a text exploring the ethics of care, followed by poetic reflections from Maria Getova and Vassil Vidinski on memory, ageing, and vulnerability.

The event concluded with a reception and informal exchange. With an audience of approximately 40 to 50 participants from diverse backgrounds, “Ageing and Care Stories” served as a powerful reminder of the value of interdisciplinary, community-based approaches to un-

derstanding ageing. By bridging research and literature, academic insight and lived experience, the event reinforced the project’s commitment to public dialogue, social inclusion, and care-oriented futures.

Summary

In sum, “Transforming Anxieties of Ageing in Southeastern” Europe brings together diverse research perspectives, regional expertise, and public engagement to explore how ageing is experienced, represented, and politicized across Southeastern Europe. Through its interdisciplinary clusters, comparative methods, strong emphasis on collaboration, and its open science ethos, the project not only generates new knowledge but also fosters dialogue between academia, civil society, stakeholders, and communities. With public opinion surveys, local partnerships, lived narratives of older adults and the exploration of experiences, it seeks to reframe demographic ageing as a space for care, inclusion, and critical reflection rather than alarm and apocalypse. As the project moves forward, it continues to build connections – between countries, disciplines, and generations – that point toward more just and thoughtful responses to ageing in contemporary Europe.