

Ageing can drive progress

July 25 2016, by Leonid Grinin

Twenty years from now, the number of retired persons worldwide will have grown by 600 million, almost double the current number. Life expectancy will have increased, bringing new economic challenges. Yet the growing number of seniors can also stimulate important breakthroughs in medicine, biotechnology, nanotechnology, cognitive sciences and robotics.

The UN estimates that the number of people aged 65 and older will have reached almost a billion by 2030. The proportion of those aged over 80 will grow at particularly high rates, and their numbers are expected to reach 200 million by 2030 and triple that forty years later.

Due to a combination of an ageing population and declining birthrates, the demographic structure of most countries will change towards lower proportions of children and young people. As a result, the global division will no longer be between first- and third-world nations, but between old and young ones.

Population Ageing Has Its Advantages

According to the report of Senior Research Fellow of the HSE Laboratory for Monitoring the Risks of Socio-Political Destabilization Leonid Grinin and Senior Research Fellow of the International Centre for Education, Social and Humanitarian Studies Anton Grinin "Global Population Ageing and the Threat of Political Risks in the Light of Radical Technological Innovation in the Coming Decades.", an increase in the number of older people will:

- encourage societies facing workforce shortages to seek solutions to improve [older people](#)'s employability by helping them stay healthy, fit and full of energy for much longer than today;
- encourage societies to focus more on rehabilitation of people with disabilities and provide them with new technology to support their employment;
- encourage the development of labour-saving technologies, such as robotics, to assist caregivers;
- lead to breakthroughs in medicine. Indeed, medical services will be the first to enter a new phase of [technological revolution](#), radically changing the structure of production and people's lives. Such a breakthrough will be associated what the authors call MANBRIC, i.e. a technological paradigm based on medicine, additive, nano- and bio- technologies, robotic, IT, and cognitive technologies;
- boost government spending on healthcare, which today accounts for at least 10% of global GDP and can vary vastly across countries, e.g. reaching 17% in the U.S.;
- promote the development of peripheral countries through higher spending on health care, leading to the emergence of a middle class, poverty reduction, literacy, and a better quality of life;
- increase the demand for innovation and its financing from accumulated funds such as pensions and public allocations to medical and social needs;
- lead to higher investment in supporting the health of ageing populations and the growing middle class.

Longevity Comes at a Cost

A confrontation between generations in the labor market and the weakening of democracy are the key risks associated with longer [life expectancy](#).

Longer life spans and a lower proportion of young people in society may lead to the predominance of 'third age' voters. Politicians will need to tailor their messages to older and perhaps more conservative electorates. According to the researchers, "democracy can transform into a form of gerontocracy which may be hard to overcome; under such circumstances, competition for voters may lead to a crisis of democratic governance."

A conflict between generations is another potential risk. As the retirement age increases, older employees will stay in the workforce longer - a situation which may hinder younger people's careers and slow down technological progress.

A tendency towards gerontocracy has been particularly noticeable in Western Europe and the U.S., where democratic traditions are the strongest, but ethnic and cultural imbalances are increasingly visible. As a result, the U.S. may face confrontation between its younger Latinos and older white populations, and Europe may experience tensions between older white Christians and younger Muslims. Hence, globalization will inevitably cause such conflicts to transcend national borders and become global challenges.

Provided by National Research University Higher School of Economics

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