

**Welcome Address, European Population Conference (EPC),
Bologna - June 3rd, 2026**

Emilio Zagheni

Dear Colleagues, dear Friends, dear Friends of Demography,

On behalf of the Council of the European Association for Population Studies, it is both an honor and a joy to welcome you to the 2026 European Population Conference.

Benvenuti a Bologna!

My name is Emilio Zagheni, and I currently have the privilege of serving as President of EAPS.

A few weeks ago, I traveled to the United States for the annual meeting of the Population Association of America. While I was there, I met with Nicola Barban, one of the key members of our Local Organizing Committee. Of course, we spent most of our time talking about the excitement of EPC fast approaching, about the final preparations, about all of you arriving here.

And perhaps because we talked about EPC so intensely, that night I dreamed of Bologna.

In the dream, Nicola was showing me around the city and the university. We eventually arrived here, in this room at Palazzo Re Enzo, surrounded by beautiful frescoes and centuries of history. And in the dream, Nicola told me three things that stayed with me after I woke up.

The first thing he reminded me of was this one: the University of Bologna is considered the oldest university in the Western world. But what makes Bologna truly remarkable is not only its age. It is the way it began.

Unlike many universities that came later, Bologna emerged from the initiative of students themselves. Students organized, defined educational goals, and held teachers accountable. Professors were often paid directly by students, and many welcomed students into their homes, creating relationships that were not only intellectual, but deeply human.

Students were at the center from the very beginning.

And that spirit is certainly alive today at our conference here in Bologna.

If you walked through the halls of Complesso Belmeloro today, you could feel it: the energy of workshops, conversations, debates, new collaborations beginning. You could see scholars of all levels of seniority learning from each other, as well as students often stepping into the role of teachers.

That exchange of knowledge across generations is one of the most beautiful things about this gathering.

So let me ask a question: how many of you are attending your first EPC?

To all of you who are here for the first time: Welcome! We are truly glad you are here.

Please come talk to me, to Nicola, to the organizers, to anyone wearing an EPC badge. Introduce yourselves. Tell us about your work, your ideas, your hopes for this conference and beyond.

And if you are a student, I especially encourage you to connect with the EAPS PhD Student Network and with the student representatives. EAPS becomes stronger every time new voices join and shape its future.

And of course, do not miss the EPC party on Friday evening, where we will also celebrate the 20th anniversary of the European Doctoral School of Demography, a remarkable community that, under the auspices of EAPS, has helped train and connect generations of demographers across Europe and beyond.

Now, in my dream, Nicola shared a second reflection.

By the 12th century, Bologna had become a gathering place for students and scholars from all over Europe. People traveled across borders to study, to exchange ideas, to build knowledge together.

In many ways, this was an early expression of something we deeply value in our association: that is diversity.

Diversity is essential to science.

Research advances in the most original ways when people with different experiences, identities, disciplines, methods, and perspectives come together. Innovation rarely emerges from uniformity. It emerges from dialogue, sometimes even from disagreement, and from the willingness to listen to realities different from our own.

This is why I am particularly grateful for the work of the EAPS Working Group on Equity and Diversity in Demography, whose efforts continue to push our association to become more inclusive, more reflective, and ultimately better.

Then Nicola shared a third thought.

He reminded me that, although foreign scholars came to Bologna from many places, they initially had very limited rights and protections. But around the year 1155, the decree known as 'Authentica Habita' granted scholars legal protections and established important principles of institutional autonomy.

It recognized something fundamental: that scholars must be able to pursue knowledge freely, protected from political interference and arbitrary pressure.

In many ways, it was an early foundation for what we now call academic freedom.

And this matters profoundly today.

We are living through a time in which academic freedom is under pressure in many parts of the world. According to the Academic Freedom Index, over the last decade academic freedom has declined in dozens of countries, while improvements have been rare.

Many colleagues face restrictions, intimidation, censorship, or the loss of institutional support. Some students and researchers have seen funding withdrawn for political or non-scientific reasons.

EAPS stands in solidarity with those colleagues.

As an association, we have worked together with other regional and international population organizations to defend academic freedom and scientific independence. We have also expanded our travel grant programs to develop mechanisms to support students whose opportunities are disrupted by political circumstances beyond their control.

We know that institutional autonomy can erode quickly. And history teaches us that protecting it requires vigilance, solidarity, and collective action.

I do not remember much else from the dream. But I do remember that, at one point, Nicola turned to me and asked:

“Wouldn't it be beautiful to have an EPC in Bologna?”

And then I woke up before I could answer.

So let me answer now.

To Nicola, to the Local Organizing Committee, and to all of you: Yes. It is truly wonderful to be here together in Bologna for EPC 2026.

The European Population Conference is synonym with joy. At the same time, moments like this also remind us of colleagues who are no longer with us.

Over the past couple of years, members of our community have passed away, leaving behind not only important scholarly contributions, but friendships, mentorship, and human connections that shaped many of our lives.

We asked EAPS members to let us know of colleagues who recently passed away.

We learned that Konstantin Kazenin passed away in 2025 at the age of 54. Many in the EAPS community knew Konstantin through his active participation in the EAPS Working Group on Migrant Fertility, which he joined from its earliest meetings, including the first workshop in Hanover in 2017. Others came to know him as a PhD student at the Stockholm University Demography Unit (or SUDA), where he was an active and collegial member of the Department of Sociology, contributing to teaching and collaborative research projects. Konstantin's path to demography was remarkable. He began as a linguist before moving to the Higher School of Economics and Moscow State University, where he worked alongside leading Russian demographers.

Kirk Scott passed away in Sweden in 2025 at the age of 57. Through his extensive academic contributions, Kirk advanced research on immigrant integration and demographic behavior, especially how immigrants and their descendants integrate into labor markets, education, family formation, and broader demographic patterns. He played a significant role in connecting demographic researchers across Sweden and Europe and served on scientific boards related to demographic research and training.

Antonio Golini, one of Italy's most distinguished demographers and statisticians, passed away on May 10, 2025. Born in Catanzaro in 1937, he devoted more than six decades to the study of population dynamics, helping generations of scholars, policymakers, and citizens better understand the profound demographic changes shaping our society. As professor at Sapienza University of Rome, Interim President of ISTAT, member of the Accademia dei Lincei, and representative of Italy at the United Nations, he combined scientific excellence with public service.

His research primarily addressed demographic aging, international migration, mortality, family, and social policy. He published over 240 scientific pieces, including academic articles, essays, and policy analyses. His work often explored the socio-economic impacts of demographic shifts and advocates for evidence-based policy responses.

Less than two weeks ago, on May 22nd 2026, Dirk van de Kaa passed away in The Hague, in The Netherlands at the age of 93.

Dirk van de Kaa was the founding father of contemporary Dutch demography and a pillar of the scientific study of population in the Netherlands, Europe and beyond.

Among the many positions that he held, he was the very first President of our association, of the European Association for Population Studies, from 1983 to 1987, and Honorary President afterwards. He was the founding director of NIDI, the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, where he served as director from 1971 to 1987. He was the project-director of the World Fertility Survey in 1981 and 1982. And the list goes on and on.

In his various roles in the Royal Netherlands Commission on Population, in the Netherlands Interministerial Committee on Population Questions, and in the Population Commission of the United Nations, Dirk van de Kaa forged bridges between the scientific and policy communities and laid the foundations for the development of population-related policies.

In addition to his policy-oriented scientific work, Dirk van de Kaa is widely known for his groundbreaking work on co-developing the Theory of the Second Demographic Transition, as a framework to understand modern population dynamics.

Many in our community have had the privilege of collaborating with Dirk van de Kaa and remember him not only as a highly reputed and learned scientist, but also as a person of great integrity and wisdom.

Now I would like to ask those of you who can, to stand up so that we can observe a minute of silence to honor these colleagues and any other member who may have passed away during the last two years, but of whom the EAPS Council is not yet aware.

[Minute of Silence]

Dear Colleagues,

As demographers, we have the privilege of doing research on topics that are very close to our lived experiences. We study life and death, family and migration, health and care needs among many topics. But the beauty of demography is that it is also deeply connected to broad societal transformations.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, demography was dominated by concerns about rapid population growth and fears of overpopulation.

Today, in many societies, the conversation has shifted toward low fertility, population decline, aging, and shrinking rural communities.

But reality, as we know, is always more complex than a single narrative.

In just a few days, Swiss voters will vote on an initiative called “No to a Switzerland of 10 million.” This is a proposal to cap the country’s population growth, largely by restricting immigration. And this is for a country where immigration is largely from EU countries, mostly includes high-skilled professionals, and has helped Switzerland become a hub of innovation.

This is only one example of the tensions, contradictions, and new demographic realities shaping our world today.

As demographers, we are not distant observers of these transformations. Our research is deeply connected to how societies understand themselves and how institutions respond to change.

Whether we study migration, fertility, longevity, families, armed conflicts, climate change, or artificial intelligence, one thing becomes increasingly clear: no single sub-field, method, or perspective is sufficient on its own.

We need dialogue.

We need collaboration.

We need curiosity across boundaries.

And that is exactly what this conference makes possible.

The theme of this year’s EPC is “Meeting New Realities.” You will hear much more about that in the roundtable that follows, so I will not anticipate that discussion.

But I would like to leave you with one final thought.

Science is a collective endeavor. We all contribute to building the edifice of science.

Some of us work on foundations. Some build windows. Some design doors. Some paint walls. Some strengthen the roof.

Each contribution matters.

But we can do our own work much better when we also understand the larger structure we are building together.

That is what EPC offers us: the opportunity not only to deepen our expertise, but also to see the broader landscape of demographic science.

During these days, I encourage you to be curious. Attend a session outside your specialty. Start a conversation with someone whose methods are different from yours. Talk to junior scholars. Talk to senior scholars. Talk to people you have never met before.

Because conferences are not only places where we present research.

They are places where communities are built.

And sometimes, where new dreams begin too.

Thank you for being here. I wish all of you an inspiring conference, and I hope that each of you experiences your own dream EPC here in Bologna.