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18.1 Introduction

Europe faces a number of major challenges, with one of the most important being aging and, therefore, the quality of life of its elders. The declining birth rate coupled with the increase in life expectancy is transforming the structure of the European population. According to Eurostat data from 2017, the proportion of elderly people was 19.4% of the total population, with the presence of this particular population group having risen by 2.4 percentage points compared to ten years earlier in the European Union. In addition, there is progressive aging of the elderly themselves, with the percentage of people aged 80 and over within the European Union expected to rise from 5.5% in 2017 to 12.7% in 2080, according to data from Eurostat's population projections. This trend towards aging will also drastically affect the dependency rate of older people, which is forecast to increase from 29.9% to 52.3% (EUROSTAT n.d.).

In this scenario of aging, the cultural, environmental and socioeconomic diversity of countries

makes it difficult to analyse what impact their different policies have on the quality of life of their citizens and, above all, on the elderly. This population group suffers major inequalities in Europe as a whole. For example, gender gaps in life expectancy at birth in 2016 favoured women by over eight years in some countries, especially in certain Baltic and Eastern European countries (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Poland) (Eurostat 2017).

There is no doubt that the country we live in is one of the determining factors when it comes to aging. The climate, culture, economy, as well as social policies affect how we age and our quality of life. Some authors have suggested that levels of quality of life (QoL) depend not only on individual factors, but also on the welfare provision of the country in which the person lives (Motel-Klingebiel and Gordo Romeu 2009). In addition to the importance of socioeconomic inequalities, eastern European and Mediterranean countries are characterized in this respect by more limited social welfare and by greater socioeconomic inequalities, and consequently a lower QoL than is the case in countries in northern and central Europe (Knesebeck et al. 2005).

In this scenario, it may be interesting to compare whether there are spatial patterns in elderly people's quality of life levels. Such information would provide key insights into the way in which state activity, through different policies and strategies, triggers different quality of life outcomes.

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