

**SPIEGEL ONLINE**

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## Berlin's Baby Panic

### Fewer Germans in the Future?

**Recently released statistics suggest Germany has the lowest birth rate of all the European Union -- a figure that is dropping. With fears a shrinking population will equate to a shriveled economy, it's little wonder the country's family affairs minister is disputing the figures.**

Germans don't like coming last. It's a national stereotype but it's one that is particularly true of Ursula von der Leyen, the German minister for family affairs, when it comes to the German birth rate. This week figures released by Eurostat, the European Union's statistical office in Brussels, appear to indicate that Germany's birth rate is the lowest of all the 27 EU member states. And now a minor row is brewing between Brussels and Berlin, with Jens Flosdorff, a spokesperson for the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, claiming the Eurostat figures are "either wrong or outdated."



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Family minister, Ursula von der Leyen, disputes the latest European Union figures on German birth rates.

A report released on Monday by Eurostat says that for every thousand inhabitants in Germany, only 8.2 children were born in 2008. Which indicates a decrease of 0.1 percent in the German birth rate and makes Germany the only EU member in which the crude birth rate did not increase between 2007 and 2008. The crude birth rate for the 27 EU states is 10.9 births per thousand people, with Ireland having the highest birth rate, at 16.9, and Lithuania, the highest increase in birth rate.

The German Federal Statistical Office won't officially be releasing their own population statistics for 2008 until September. But the office has already indicated that they expect the figure for the amount of children born in Germany last year to be 682,524; the Brussels study is working with a figure of 675,000.

Which means that the German birth rate is actually relatively stable, sitting at 8.3 births per thousand inhabitants. And while it is true that around 2,300 fewer German babies were born in 2008, Flosdorff told SPIEGEL ONLINE on Monday, statistically speaking, the difference would end up in "tenths of a percentage point" and is therefore "no longer statistically

meaningful."

Perhaps such a reaction from the Ministry for Family Affairs is predictable. In February the ministry released its Family Report 2009 claiming that the German **birth rate was rising**. Working on the basis of an estimate by the Federal Statistical Office they noted that births for 2008 were expected to go up to 690,000. And as the politician who had pushed for more childcare and for the "**Elterngeld**" (literally "parent's money") scheme -- where the state pays parents almost 70 percent of that parent's net income for up to a year if they choose to take time off work after the birth of their child -- von der Leyen was quick to claim responsibility for encouraging the extra procreation. But in politics, pride often comes before a fall, and after opposition politicians attacked von der Leyen, saying that her main talent was for publicity and that she had done nothing about child poverty in Germany, the Federal Statistical Office also **revised its figures**, which resulted in a lower birth rate than von der Leyen had been boasting about.

The latest numbers from Eurostat are **just another blow**. Added to the "stable" birth rate comes a rise in the German **death rate**, going up from 10.1 deaths per thousand inhabitants to 10.3 in 2008. This makes Germany the country with the highest death rate among the EU states. And, according to Eurostat, it also

means that the nation's population declined by 168,000.

Meanwhile, Germany's Federal Statistical Office estimates that the country's current population of 82.1 million will decline to between 69 million and 74 million by 2050 -- less than the population in 1963, when Germany had 75 million. Which could have serious implications for the country's economy: a combination of low birth rates, high death rates and longer life expectancy means fewer people of working age supporting Germany's financially demanding social security system.

*cis - with wires*

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