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Elitsa Dimitrova:
Family and Reproduction in Post-Socialist Bulgaria – Towards a New Demographic Transition

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the changing demographic profile of contemporary Bulgarian society. In particular, we study the main factors that influence individual values and perceptions regarding the ideal age for a woman or a man to become a parent. For this purpose we utilise the European social survey dataset for Bulgaria (N=1400) and run logistic regression models. The trends of postponing childbearing and re-organising reproductive timing have facilitated the recent transformation of the country's demographic makeup. These transformations are interpreted in the paper as behavioural manifestations of the developing new demographic transition, which is shaping the familial profile of the globalising world today.

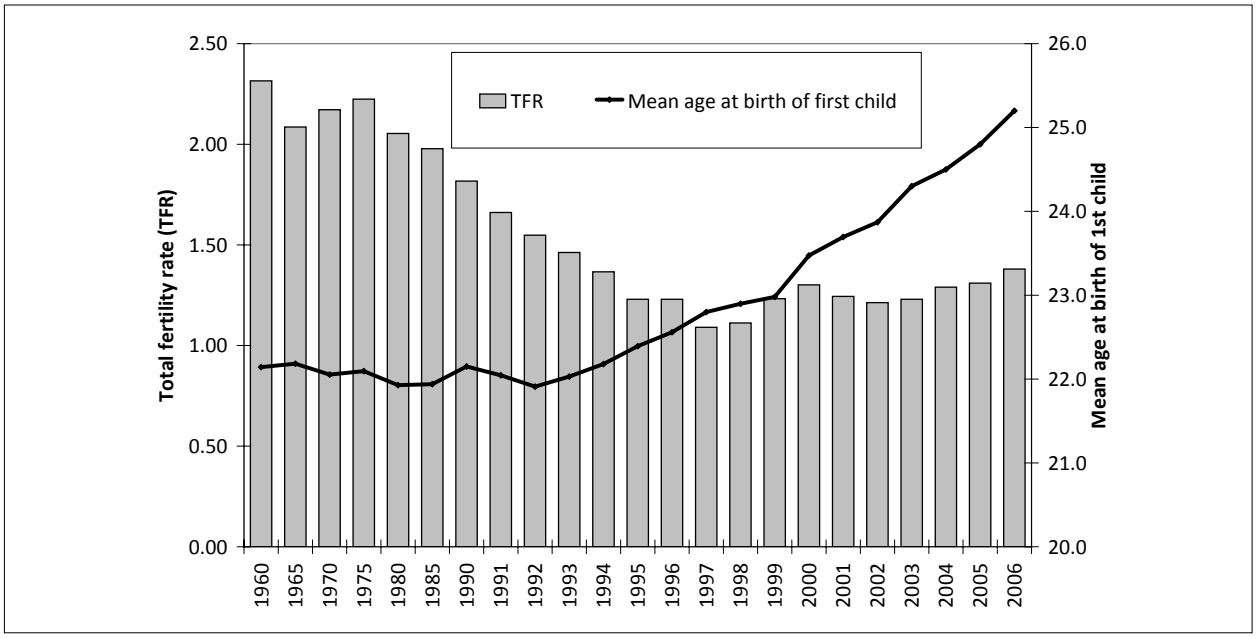
The results of the analysis uncover various socio-economic and demographic variables that shape individuals' attitudes regarding the ideal age of parenthood for women and men in Bulgaria. In particular, people with higher incomes and educational levels tend to express stronger preferences towards a later start of reproductive life. The variables of gender, ethnicity, number of children and marital status also exert a strong influence on individual perceptions of the ideal age of parenthood. The empirical analysis further reveals that in the aspect of generational differences, Bulgarian society is still relatively homogeneous: its subjective landscape is much more diversified in terms of gender and ethnic divisions.

The general conclusion from the empirical analysis is that the Second Demographic Transition in Bulgaria is developing as a gradual shift in individual reproductive behaviours and norms, which favour the late fertility model. However, the new transition does not proceed simultaneously on the behavioural and ideational levels. The uncovered discrepancy can be interpreted as one of the main causes for the ongoing dissimilarities between national trends in Bulgaria and pan-European processes. Thus, the Bulgarian case confirms that in terms of demographic development, the advancing globalisation is not a homogenising trend but is instead proceeding as a form of 'integration towards diversity' within and between the countries.

1. Introduction

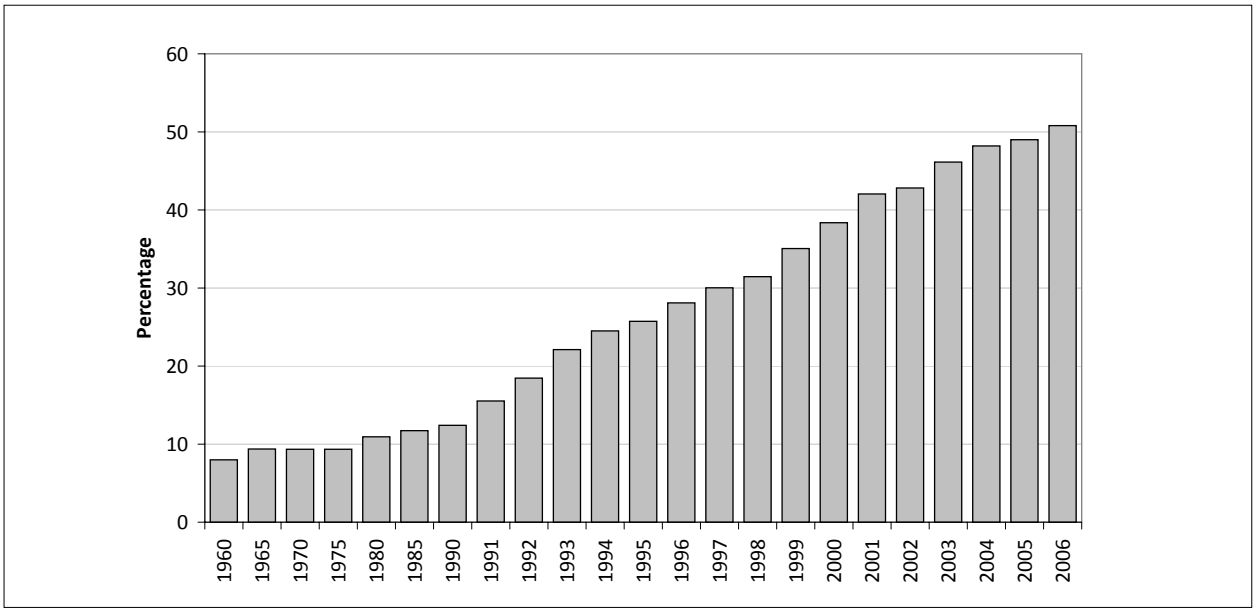
The period following the end of socialism in Bulgaria was characterised by substantial changes in individual marital and reproductive behaviour. The postponement of childbearing and the overall reduction of fertility have led to a profound transformation of the country's demographic profile.

Figure 1: Total Fertility Rate (TFR) and Mean Age at Birth of First Child in Bulgaria, 1960–2006



The decrease of the total fertility rate to the 'lowest low fertility levels' in Europe (below 1.3 children per woman)[1] was followed by a significant tempo distortion caused by the changing age pattern of fertility. In particular, the mean age at birth of first child became 25.2 in 2006, whereas the indicator fluctuated around a value of 22 years in the beginning of the 1990s[2]. As a result, the recent demographic profile of the country has been shaped by a continual displacement of the early childbearing model (concentration of first births in the age interval 20–25) with a new one in which reproductive careers begin later in life (in the late twenties or early thirties).

Figure 2: Extramarital Births in Bulgaria (% of all live births), 1960–2006



The destabilisation of the previously dominating fertility regime in the country has also been facilitated by a trend of dissociation between entry into marriage and becoming a parent as interrelated life course events. Indicative for the changing behaviours, norms and values associated with marital parenthood is the remarkable increase of extramarital births witnessed since the beginning of the 1990s. During the initial period of political changes in Bulgaria, the percentage of extramarital births was 12.4% of all live births. It was recently found that more than 50% of newborn children in Bulgaria are raised in non-marital settings[3]. This trend is an exemplary behavioural manifestation of the changing familistic views and values of the new generations beginning the most active part of their demographic lives in the post-socialist period in Bulgaria.

The causes of the new reproductive behavioural patterns in the country are diverse. In the initial period, the worsened economic situation was the leading cause of postponement and reduction of fertility. However, in the later stages, when the political and economic situation gradually stabilised, the changes in individual views and values towards family and parenthood became the leading cause of the new patterns of reproductive behaviour.

From a demographic point of view, the recent transformations in the country's reproductive profile can be considered part of the Second Demographic Transition, which started in the early 1990s in Bulgaria. The postponement of childbearing, the reduction of fertility below population replacement level and the increasing number of children born and raised in non-marital settings are core elements of the new de-

1 Kohler, Hans-Peter/ Billari, Francesco C. / Ortega, José Antonio: The Emergence of Lowest-Low Fertility in Europe during the 1990s, in: Population and Development Review, 2002 (Vol. 28), No 4, pp. 641–680.

2 Statistical Yearbook. Population, Sofia: National Statistical Institute, 2007.

3 Statistical Yearbook. Population, Sofia: National statistical Institute, 2007.

mographic transition. This profound demographic transformation is not limited to post-socialist countries, however; it is also unfolding across the rest of Europe.

The concept of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT), which will serve as the theoretical framework of this paper, was introduced by R. Lesthaeghe and D. van de Kaa in the second half of the 1980s[4]. According to them, the changing demographics in northwestern Europe starting at the end of the 1960s marked the beginning of a new demographic transition whose core elements included the emergence of sub-replacement fertility levels and the spread of non-marital forms of interpersonal unions.

Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa claim that the SDT was triggered by the fundamental value changes that emerged in the social setting of the post-industrial economy[5]. The child-oriented familistic culture lost ground to individualism in late-modern societies, with marriage and parenthood competing with many other choices. Self-realisation was no longer limited to marrying and starting a family.

The decrease in overall fertility levels and the increasing postponement of marriage and childbearing, together with the rise in non-marital cohabitation, one-parent families and divorces, were transformations commonly experienced by the majority of European countries after a certain point in their recent demographic developments. The SDT unfolded in several waves, producing a step-by-step integration of the different parts of the continent[6]. The first wave swept over the Scandinavian societies and the Netherlands in the late 1960s. The new family values and behaviours began to diffuse from the north to the south of the continent during the 1980s, when the Mediterranean countries showed the first signs of diversification in their familistic profiles. This was the second wave of the SDT, which gradually changed the demographic profile of southern European societies. Eastern Europe, and in particular the post-socialist countries, began to show the first signs of the SDT in the early 1990s and formed the third wave of the process. This continent-wide transition thus continues to shape the demographic face of the global age in Europe.

In this paper we will explore the normative aspect of the changing demographic profile of contemporary Bulgarian society by focusing on the shifting values, norms and perceptions regarding the ideal age for a woman or man to become a parent. On the one hand, the change of the reproductive ideals and norms in society can be considered a main driver of the rapid diffusion and social legitimisation of the new behavioural phenomena related to parenthood. On the other hand, the changes in the subjective norms and ideals related to the temporal organisation of one's life course with respect to reproduction and family formation also constitute an indicator for the future development of fertility trends in Bulgaria and their convergence to the increasing global demographic tendencies of de-standardisation vis-à-vis individual life choices.

2. Data and Methods

In the next part of the paper we will focus on the changes in attitude with respect to the ideal age to become a parent for a woman or man in Bulgaria. This indicator has recently been discussed in the demographic literature as a proxy of social norms and personal values related to the temporal organisation of individual life trajectories.

4 Lesthaeghe, Ron/ van de Kaa, Dirk, Twee Demographische Transities?' (Two Demographic Transitions?), in: Lesthaeghe, R./van de Kaa, D. (eds): Bevolking: Groei en Krimp? (Population: Growth and Decline?), book volume of 'Mens en Maatschappig', Deventer: van Loghnm Slaterus, 1986, pp. 9–24. Van de Kaa, Dirk J.: Europe's Second Demographic Transition, Population Bulletin (Vol. 42), No 1, Washington: Population Reference Bureau, 1987.

5 Lesthaeghe, Ron: The Second Demographic Transition in Western Countries: An Interpretation, in: Mason, Karen O./ Jesen, An-Magritt (eds): Gender and Family in Industrialized Countries, Oxford: Claredon Press, 1995, pp.17–62. Van de Kaa, Dirk: Postmodern Fertility Preferences: From Changing Value Orientations to New Behavior. In: Bulatao, Rudolfo / Casterline, John (eds): Global Fertility Transition, suppl. to vol. 27 of Population and Development Review, New York: Population Council, 2001, pp. 290–331.

6 Van de Kaa, Dirk J.: Europe's Second Demographic Transition, Population Bulletin (Vol. 42), No 1, Washington: Population Reference Bureau, 1987.

For the purposes of the analysis, the European Social Survey dataset for Bulgaria (N=1400) has been utilised. The survey was conducted in 2006. It is representative for the population above the age of 15. The survey has a special module of questions aiming to reveal individual perceptions and attitudes towards fundamental events and transitions in life such as becoming a parent, entering into marriage, getting a divorce, etc. The module integrating these topics covers a special sub-sample of individuals. In particular, we have divided the original sample of the population into two sub-samples according to the questions covering attitudes and perceptions towards women's and men's life courses in terms of family formation and parenthood. Splitting the sample enables us to study the reproductive ideals and norms for women and men separately; the division is important because the ideal age of parenthood substantially differs across gender. The main limitation of the dataset is that the sub-division of the sample decreases the number of individuals in the studied population and thus precludes the application of more complicated statistical procedures.

To pin down perceptions and ideals regarding the most appropriate time to become a parent, we used the question 'In your opinion, what is the ideal age for a girl or woman to become a mother?' and the corresponding variant for men – 'In your opinion, what is the ideal age for a boy or man to become a father?'. In the original dataset it is scaled as a continuous variable. We treated the answers 'I do not know' and 'There is no appropriate time for this' as missing values and excluded them from the analysis for two reasons. Although it could be argued that these responses constitute important information on the changing perceptions regarding the temporal organisation of reproduction, we are more interested here in the particular time-framing of the transition to parenthood in one's life course. The second reason for excluding these responses is more technical and relates to the fact that a very low percentage of the sampled population chose these answers. This means that the participants in our study had relatively clear perceptions, views and values regarding the most appropriate time to become a parent in men's or women's lives.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the Ideal Age for a Woman or Men to Become a Parent

	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. dev.	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
Ideal age for a woman to become a mother	598	17	16	33	23.74	2.78	7.72	-0.03	-0.20
Ideal age for a man to become a father	632	27	18	45	26.42	3.17	11.83	0.38	0.19

Source: European Social Survey

The descriptive statistics of the variables reflecting the ideal age to become a parent for the two sexes are presented in Table 1. It is clear that from a comparative perspective the ideal age to become a parent for men and women in Bulgaria is still closely associated with the previously dominating pattern of early childbearing. The variance within the group responding to the question about the ideal age of parenthood for women is slightly lower. This suggests that there is a greater degree of homogeneity in the respondents' perceptions regarding the ideal childbearing age for females.

In order to identify the main factors influencing the individuals' perceptions regarding the ideal age for women and men to become parents, we ran separate logistic regressions for the two sub-samples. In particular, the direction of influence was studied in order to reveal whether particular socio-demographic characteristics are more closely associated with strong preferences for the previously existing model of early childbearing, or if they in fact facilitate the emerging new pattern of reproduction later in life.

For the purposes of the analysis, the dependent variable in each of the models was split into two categories covering different perceptions towards men's and women's ideal age for parenthood. In particular, the calculated means of the dependent variables in the two sub-samples were used as cut-points to delineate the categories that reflect contrasting age patterns of fertility in Bulgaria. The following groups were created:

Ideal age for a woman to become a mother:

1. The first category covers the interval from the lowest age to 24 – that is, below the sample mean. It reflects reproductive perceptions and ideals that are closely associated with the model of early childbearing.
2. The second category covers the interval from age 25 to the highest fertile age of women mentioned by the respondents. It is interpreted as reflecting the subjective preferences that lay the ground for the new patterns of postponed childbearing in Bulgaria.

Ideal age for a man to become a father:

1. The first interval ranges from the lowest age to 26 (below the sample mean). It is associated with subjective perceptions supporting more traditional types of reproductive behaviours strongly focused on early parenthood.
2. The second interval ranges from age 27 to the highest age mentioned by the respondents. It is interpreted as reflecting the subjective preferences of those individuals who create a permissive subjective environment for the diffusion of the new patterns of reproductive behaviour.

The independent variables that have been studied for their influence on the individuals' reproductive ideals include various socio-demographic characteristics. The impact of the chosen variables has already been empirically studied and discussed in the literature. In particular, we tested the impact of education, number of children, gender, age, income, place of residence, marital status and membership in an ethnic minority. After running several models, we present here the most informative and statistically robust ones.

3. Results and Discussion

The two models run to determine the respondents' estimation of the ideal age to become a parent for women and men in Bulgaria reveal that education exercises a significant impact on individual preferences towards early or postponed parenthood. The odds of choosing a later ideal reproduction age for either men or women significantly increases among the respondents with higher education levels in comparison to the group with lower levels. This is particularly true when the ideal age of parenthood for women is concerned. This result shows that the educational differentials have a strong influence on the individuals' perceptions regarding the timing of parenthood. The people with higher education levels tend to start their reproductive careers later in life, and accordingly, they tend to express stronger preferences for later reproduction.

The previous reproductive history of the respondents (number of children) also produces interesting effects on the odds of holding more traditional or more progressive subjective preferences towards the ideal age for reproduction. The variable is significant when the ideal age of a woman to become a parent is concerned, whereas in the case of the men's ideal age the number of children loses its explanatory power. In comparison to those respondents who have 3 or more children, the individuals with lower parity (0, 1 or 2 children) are more likely to cite a higher ideal age for a woman to enter into parenthood. This result reveals that the ideals regarding the timing of men's reproductive lives is not so strongly shaped by past reproductive experience, whereas the perceptions regarding the timing for females are much more influenced by the past reproductive careers of the individuals.

Interestingly enough, the ideal age of parenthood cited by respondents does not fluctuate significantly according to age group. Concerning the female ideal age, perceptions regarding the timing of motherhood are still relatively stable across generations. The respondent's age also has a weak influence in the case of the temporal organisation of men's reproductive careers.

Table 2: Result of Binary Logistic Regressions

	Independent variable **Ideal age to become parent**			
	Women		**Men**	
	16–24 (*ref.)*		18–26 (*ref.)*	
	25+		27+	
Independent variables	Exp(B)	Sig.	Exp(B)	Sig.
Education Primary (*ref*.)		**		**
Secondary	1.054		1.648	**
Tertiary	2.421	**	2.532	**
Number of children 3+ children (*ref*.)		**		
No children	2.653	***	1.022	
1 child	2.661	**	1.143	
2 children	2.880	**	1.372	
Gender Woman (*ref*.)				
Man	0.637	**	0.663	***
Age of respondent 46+ (*ref*.)				**
15-25	0.875		0.384	
26-35	1.271		2.419	**
36-45	0.508	**	1.121	
Income Low (*ref*.)		*		**
Medium	1.804	**	1.793	**
High	3.392	*	2.009	**
Place of residence Big city (*ref*.)				
Village	0.263		0.753	
Small town	0.677	**	0.646	***
Marital status Married (*ref*.)				**
Divorced	1.434		1.053	
Widowed	0.937		1.368	
Never married	1.347		7.131	*
Ethnic minority No (*ref*.)				
Yes	0.311	**	0.498	**
Constant	0.263	**	0.288	**

* $P \leq 0.001$; ** $P \leq 0.05$; *** $P \leq 0.10$

The homogeneity across age in the norms and ideals regarding women's reproductive arrangements can be explained with some specifics about Bulgarian society, in which reproduction and motherhood are still perceived as constitutive elements of female identity. In contemporary Bulgarian society motherhood is still considered one of the fundamental paths to self-realisation for a woman, whereas perceptions regarding fatherhood as a means of self-realisation for men are much more ambiguous and conditional.

In addition, with respect to the female life course, the perceptions about reproduction are much more framed and scheduled in terms of time. This might be one of the reasons for the lack of statistically significant differences between the age groups regarding the ideal age of parenthood for both sexes. Another explanation could be that the reproductive ideals of some segments of the population are frustrated in the contemporary period of political and economic upheaval. Thus, on a behavioural level, we observe faster adaptation to delayed reproduction from the younger cohort, while on the level of reproductive values and norms, there is a certain lag in the acceptance of the new models among certain groups in Bulgarian society. This explanation is supported by the next result concerning the influence of gender on the ideal age of parenthood.

The analysis uncovers important gender differences in the respondents' perceptions on the ideal age of parenthood. The models reveal that the men are less likely than the women to choose a later ideal reproductive age when either the mother or father is concerned. This result confirms that the postponement effects registered by the demographic statistics are complemented by a faster process of adjustment to the new reproductive standard by Bulgarian women.

Furthermore, the results of the analysis confirm that the respondents' socio-economic status accounts for significant differences in personal reproductive ideals and norms. The individuals who belong to medium or high income groups are more likely to choose a higher ideal age of motherhood than those who belong to low income groups. The same relation holds true with respect to the ideal age of fatherhood.

The empirical analyses uncover a very weak impact of one's place of residence on personal ideals for reproduction. Nevertheless, the models do register that people from small towns are less likely to cite a higher ideal age of parenthood than respondents living in big cities.

Marital status is another important predictor of the individuals' reproductive preferences, yet its explanatory power is valid only with respect to the perceptions on men's reproductive careers. Individuals who have never been married are much more likely to support a higher age of fatherhood than those who are or have been married. We do not observe statistically significant differences among the categories created on the basis of current marital status for women, however.

And finally, the empirical analysis confirms the existence of substantial differences among ethnic groups in Bulgarian society in terms of subjective orientations towards parenthood and the start of reproduction. The respondents who consider themselves as belonging to the Bulgarian ethnic group are much more likely to express a strong preference for a later start of reproductive careers for both men and women than the respondents who belong to some of the ethnic minorities in Bulgaria (mainly the Turkish and Roma populations).

4. Conclusion

The analysis reveals the influence of the various socio-economic and demographic variables on individual perceptions, ideals and attitudes regarding the temporal organisation of Bulgarian men's and women's reproductive lives. In particular, people with higher incomes and education levels tend to express stronger preferences towards having children later in life. The research that has already been done confirms that in many empirical cases, high status groups tend to postpone family formation and reproduction due to prolonged time spent on their careers and education. Our analysis reveals that this empirical correlation is also valid in current Bulgarian society.

The variables of gender, ethnicity, number of children and marital status also exert a strong influence on respondents' conceptions of the ideal age for parenthood. In terms of generational differences, Bulgarian society is still relatively homogeneous. Yet its subjective landscape is much more diversified when viewed through the prism of gender and ethnic divisions. In particular, individuals belonging to the Bulgarian ethnic group tend to express reproductive preferences, norms and ideals favouring a later start to one's re-

productive career. In terms of gender differences, Bulgarian women show faster adaptation and stronger preferences towards the new model, i.e. a later start to reproduction.

The general conclusion from the empirical analysis is that the Second Demographic Transition in Bulgaria is characterised by the gradual convergence of individuals' reproductive behaviours and norms towards the late fertility model. However, the new transition is not proceeding simultaneously on the behavioural and ideational levels. This discrepancy can be interpreted as one of the main causes for the persisting dissimilarities between the national trends in Bulgaria and pan-European processes. The late fertility model that we observe in most of the European countries is continuing to gain popularity in contemporary Bulgarian society. Thus, the Bulgarian case confirms that in terms of demographic developments, the advancement of globalisation is not a homogenising trend but proceeds as a form of 'integration towards diversity' within and between the countries. As some researchers point out[7], the recently emerging demographic profile of Europe is multi-faceted and consists of diverse demographic landscapes that certainly will not disappear in the near future.

7 Billari, Fancesco C./ Wilson, Cris: Convergence Toward Diversity? Cohort Dynamics in the Transition to Adulthood in Contemporary Western Europe. MPIDR WP 2001-039, Rostock, 2001. http://ideas.repec.org/p/dem/wpaper/wp-2001-039.html