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Family Formation and Child-Bearing in Europe
Questions and Question Marks

Ferenc Kamarás

Similarity or difference, convergence or divergence? Whither Europe's population, and whither the demographic trends forming it? Why is it that the same demographic phenomena have different impacts on Europe's various regions? Are we faced with influences that are merely transitory or specious, or is there a problem with the theory used to generalize and synthesize the processes, in that it has effects different from what is assumed or expected of it? At issue is the frequently quoted second demographic transition, often the subject of heated debate, which described—and sought to generalize—the developed world's most recent demographic changes, along with the underlying causes (Van de Kaa, 1987). The phenomena are widely known and are clearly spreading rapidly throughout Europe. The most visible changes have occurred in the realm of family formation and child-bearing. Key features include reservations about getting married and starting a family, the rapid and significant spread of forms of non-marital cohabitation, a fall in the stability of relationships and a large increase in the number and ratio of single people and single parents. The spread of these behavioural patterns has brought about marked changes in demographic trends. The tendency to get married has fallen dramatically, the divorce rate has increased drastically, the number of children born out of wedlock has jumped and fertility has tumbled. These phenomena have occurred in different ways across space and time in the western and eastern parts of Europe. The behavioural patterns that emerged in the 1970s and began to spread quickly in Western Europe, reached central and Eastern Europe after some delay, and have seen a remarkable expansion in the fifteen years since the political upheavals.

As far as the underlying reasons are concerned, the most frequently quoted are: a shift away from traditional values and norms, the spread of individualism, freedom from previous material, moral and sexual restrictions, and the spread of post-materialistic and post-modern values and lifestyles (Van de Kaa, 2001, 2002). In such circumstances, people can freely choose whether or not to have children, whether to live in wedlock or

in a common law marriage, whether to spend their lives in any other arrangement or on their own. Generalization, as always, must be treated with circumspection. What is debated, though, is the extent to which these phenomena have spread and become embedded in the lives of individuals and society, and what sort of impact they have on demographic attitudes (Coleman, 2005).

While there is a marked tendency toward homogeneity, some differences do remain, and not just between the various regions and countries, but also among populations with different socio-economic backgrounds and cultural heritage.

This study looks at the characteristics of family formation and child-bearing in countries and regions of Europe, along with their impact on demography. Special emphasis is placed on Central and Eastern European countries, these being the countries that have fundamentally redrawn Europe's demographic map over the past fifteen years. The description of the Hungarian situation serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it compares Hungary with its immediate neighbours in the region and with European countries generally, according to the demographic phenomena and indicators under review. On the other hand, taking Hungary as a country representative of the Central and Eastern European region, the study endeavours to illustrate the background and the reasons that underlie differences *vis-à-vis* Western European attitudes, using Hungarian data and research outcomes. The time horizon mainly covers the past one and a half decades, and international data were gathered, for the most part, from demographic publications of the Council of Europe (CE, 2005) and the UN.

The 'Hajnal line' has collapsed

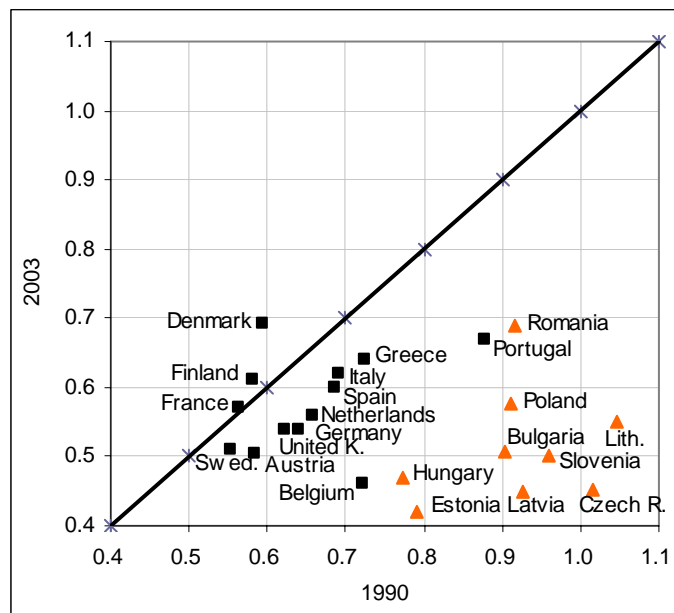
This claim may seem like an exaggeration, yet it carries an element of reality. Upon examining the marital patterns of Europeans, John Hajnal, a British demographer of Hungarian origin, split the map of Europe into two using a straight line (Hajnal, 1965). The line extended from Trieste to St. Petersburg and divided the map according to differences in marriage patterns west and east of it. The Western European pattern was characterized by relatively late first marriages, which resulted in a high proportion of the population never getting married. East of the 'Hajnal line', marriage was more frequent and first marriages occurred earlier, and the proportion of single women and men was low. This may be the reason why some Hungarian expressions with the meaning of 'spinster' have negative connotations, as it was almost a disgrace not to get married. This pattern was typical right up to the 1980s, but in the past 15 years it has been followed by fundamental changes that have erased, eliminated or simply redrawn the 'Hajnal line'. According to some observers, the line still exists, but it has

moved further toward the east, and now stretches between Dubrovnik and St. Petersburg (Philipov, 2001).

How can we characterize this radical change in marriage patterns? Demography often uses indicators that express the key characteristics of a demographic phenomenon compressed into a single number. In marriage trends, such an indicator is the total first marriage rate. For women, this gives us the rate of single women who, subjected to the marriage conditions of the period under review (typically one year), will get married by the age of 50. This indicator may be computed for 1, 10, 100 or 1,000 women. Of course, a woman can have a first marriage only once in her lifetime. Therefore the value of the indicator calculated for one woman will usually fall between 0 and 1. This is true if we are examining the lifespan of a cohort, but is not necessarily the case if we are describing the population's propensity for marriage over a period of one year. In this latter case we measure the rate of first marriages in 35 different age groups of single women aged 15–50. In 'peak' marriage periods the indicator can temporarily exceed 1. For instance, one such period in Hungary was the mid-1970s, or the early 1990s in the Czech Republic or Lithuania.

Figure 1

Change in the female total first marriage rate in Europe between 1990 and 2003



Let us now see how the value of this indicator changed in Europe between 1990 and 2003 (Figure 1). The year 1990 was a milestone in the history of Central and Eastern European countries not only from the social, economic

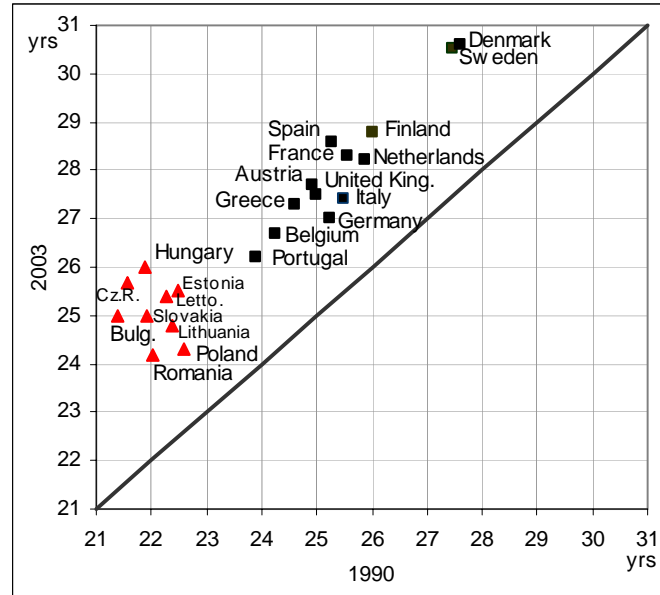
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and political perspective, but also in terms of the resulting demographic impacts and consequences. (In what follows, I will deal separately with Western European and Central and Eastern European countries and will use different symbols to mark them on the charts, in order the better to display similarities and differences.) Countries below the diagonal line showed a drop, while those above it produced an increase in the value of the indicator between 1990 and 2003. Obviously, no material change occurred in the case of countries on or near the line.

As can be seen from *Figure 1*, in 1990 the marriage patterns described by Hajnal were still valid in Europe. The value of the indicator is at or above 0.8 in all Central and Eastern European countries, and this exceeds the values in all Western European countries under review, with the exception of Portugal. It is worth noting that in 1990 Hungary already stood out among former socialist countries with its relatively low tendency toward marriage, which implies that the fall in the trend began as early as the 1980s. Thirteen years on, in 2003, seven of the ten European countries with the lowest rate of marriage were former socialist states. The marriage indicators of deeply religious Poland and Lithuania are already lower than those of Denmark or Finland, champions of the second demographic transition. The propensity for marriage fell in most Western European countries as well, but the change has been much smaller. At the same time, the increase in the tendency toward marriage in some Northern and Western European countries in recent years has been difficult to interpret, as it does not clearly fit into the theory of the second demographic transition and thus requires further analysis (Coleman, 2005).

Figure 2

Change in women's average age at first marriage in Europe between
1990 and 2003 (years)



Another widely used indicator of marriage trends is the average age of women at the time of their first marriage (*Figure 2*). It is worth noting that, in this indicator, the distinctive features described by Hajnal are preserved. There was not a single country among the European states under review where this age did not increase between 1990 and 2003; however, attitude differences between Western and Eastern Europe are still clearly visible. With an average age of 26.1 years, Hungary heads the former socialist countries in this respect, too; however, this value is still much lower than in Western, and especially Northern European countries. Therefore, we are faced with a rather strange situation: in Western countries people have their first marriage later in life, but in total there are more marriages than in most former socialist countries.

This could have more than one explanation. The higher age could be partly explained by non-marital relationships, which are not only more common, but also last longer in many Northern and Western European countries. Young people leave the parental home at a relatively early age, and start living in their own homes, but they do not do so with the express intention of getting married. If they establish a relationship, most do so in the form of a common law marriage, which—if it proves lasting—can turn into marriage. The situation is different in Southern European, Mediterranean countries, where cohabiting outside marriage is relatively rare. Here, young people embark on their own lives at a later age, they ‘park’ at the parental house for longer, and when they do leave, they typically do so because they wish to get married. There are background socio-economic and cultural reasons for this: family ties are much stronger, and family members have

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stronger bonds between them and count on each other much more than people in Northern European countries. At the same time, it is more difficult for young people to start out on their own in terms of getting a job and starting a family. Social and family support systems are much more modest than in the west and north of Europe, and thus young people need more help from their parents (Billari *et al.*, 2002).

What is the situation in the former socialist countries, and why are people in the region so much less inclined to get married now than before? Here, too, there are a number of explanations. According to the crisis hypothesis, the social and economic crises that confronted the former socialist countries were so serious that they necessarily had an impact on demographic attitudes, including a drop in marriages (Macura, 2000). Simultaneously, attitudes, norms and values that had been present in Western European countries for some time made their way into these post-socialist countries. The 'thirst for knowledge', demonstrated in the high numbers of further education students, is basically a good development; however, given the current employment opportunities, it is, in part, sheer necessity that drives young people to continue with their studies. The longer time spent at school has pushed back the time when young people start out on their own. Life strategies have changed along with young people's priorities in terms of timing. In these countries, too, new forms of non-marital relationships are becoming more widespread. People have lost their faith in the institution of marriage; child-generations of the 'divorce boom' have learned from their parents and have misgivings about getting married. All this has significantly upped the age of potential marriage and reduced marriage indicators per calendar year.

There is another appealing theory, which uses the increase in marrying age to explain the drop in marriage indicators. The thrust of this theory is that if people's propensity for marriage drops suddenly and by a large amount, and if this occurs at the same time as the average age at marriage increases, then part of the decrease is only specious, with a change in timing, i.e. the postponement of marriage, in the background. According to this theory, postponement of marriage ceases after a certain age, and all or some of the previously delayed marriages will eventually take place. The authors of this theory (Bongarats and Feeney, 1998) originally created it to demonstrate timing patterns of calendar-year fertility, i.e. child-bearing; however, of late it has been applied to marriage as well (Coleman, 2005).

Figure 3

Change in the main features of female marriages in Europe
between 1990 and 2003 (%)

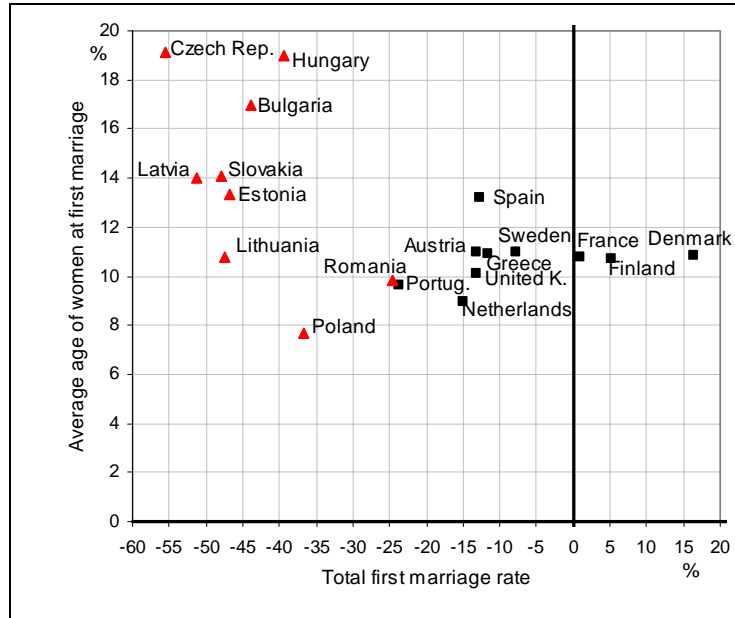


Figure 3 gives a combined view of the change in first marriages and the average age of women at the time of first marriage in Europe between 1990 and 2003. The chart clearly reveals that former socialist countries head the list, both in the drop in the propensity for marriage and in the increase in the age of those getting married. In the Czech Republic and in Hungary, the average age increased by almost 20%, while marriage rates in most of the former socialist countries fell by more than 40%. It appears fair to assume that the drop is partly caused by postponed marriages, and that younger generations are not as reluctant to get married as it would seem from calendar-year indicators. The problem is, though, that the theory says nothing about how long the tactics of postponement might last or what proportion of the marriages postponed today will be made up in the future. For instance, today 30% of Hungarian women in their early thirties are single, whereas 92% of their parents, i.e. the generations of the 1950s, were already married at that age. Thus the difference is so huge that it is hard to blame it on postponement alone. Hajnal's theory that 90% of people will get married at least once in their lifetime will probably not hold true for today's young generations.

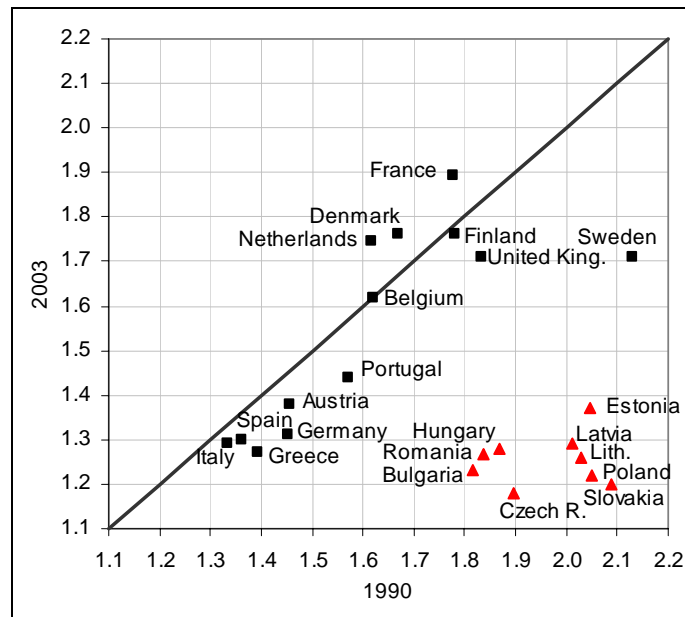
Falling fertility, growing reproductive deficit

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At the time of the political changes, Central and Eastern European countries led Europe in terms of fertility rates. A total fertility ratio (TFR¹) of over 1.8 in 1990 not only exceeded the European average, but even the figure for most Western and Northern European countries. Back then, as today, Italy, Spain and Greece were among the countries with the lowest fertility ratio. The situation has changed, in that the former socialist countries not only match the fertility rates of the Mediterranean countries, but most have actually ‘overtaken’ those countries. In a very short space of time, Europe’s central and eastern regions have become the world’s least fertile region (*Figure 4*). Fertility of below 1.3 is an unprecedentedly low rate of human reproduction in mankind’s history—as is pointed out by a recent UN report (UN, 2005a). In 2003, 12 European countries had a TFR of below 1.3, and nine of those are former socialist countries.

Figure 4

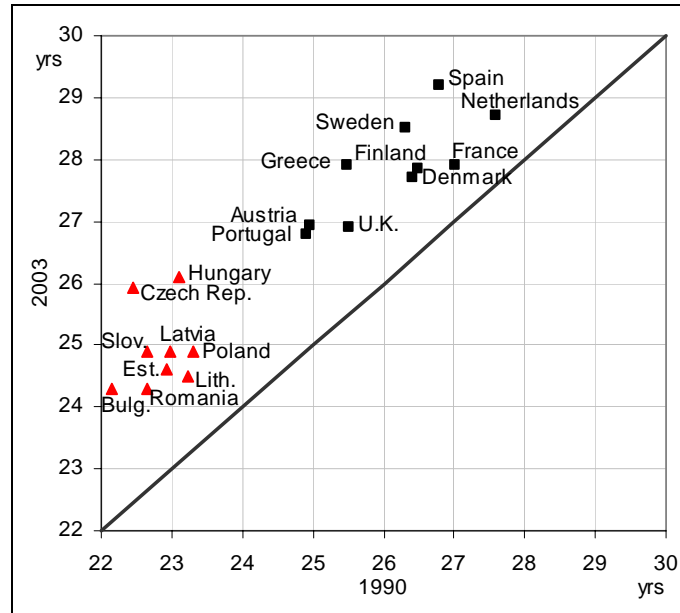
Change in the total fertility rate in Europe between 1990 and 2003 (per woman)



¹ TFR is a synthetic fertility indicator that indicates the number of children that a woman would have during her lifetime, given the birth rate valid during the time period under review. The indicator is also used as a measurement for reproduction in the population. The population’s long-term reproduction is guaranteed if the indicator is around 2.1 per woman.

Figure 5

Change in women's average age at birth of first child, in Europe between 1990 and 2003 (years)



For a long time fertility rates decreased even though women were giving birth earlier in their lives. The main reason for this was that the proportion of mothers and families with four, five or more children fell. When early child-bearing and the two-child family model came to be the norm, women completed their reproductive lives at a relatively early age, around 30. Today, however, we are at the stage where 30 is almost the age when women are starting to have children. The average age of child-bearing is growing apace, and the age at which women are having their first child, or subsequent children (if any), is being pushed back. First the modal age for child-bearing surged from the early 20s to over 25, and today women in their early 30s are more likely to give birth than women ten years younger. In this trend, too, Western European countries are taking the lead, where women have their first child two or three years later on average than women in Eastern Europe. Putting off the age of child-bearing is happening across all European countries, yet there seems no clear correlation between fertility and the average age of women giving birth (*Figure 5*). If we only look at the two extreme values, it is plain that Spanish women have their first child at the age of 29, on average five years later than women in Romania or Bulgaria, yet fertility rates in all three countries are quite low. Counter-examples are France or the Scandinavian countries, where late child-bearing is accompanied by high fertility, by European standards.

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A similar contradiction exists between the proportion of children born outside marriage and fertility rates. In terms of the frequency of births outside marriage, Europe is divided between North and South, while differences between East and West are not material. The ratio of births outside marriage has grown in almost all European countries over the past one and a half decades, yet differences remain and continue to be significant (*Figure 6*). The difference between less than 5% of births outside wedlock in Greece and more than 55% in Sweden or Estonia is more than ten-fold, and there is probably no other demographic indicator (apart from abortion rates) that divides Europe so starkly. Drivers mainly include a difference in the incidence and the social acceptability of common law marriage, along with the cultural customs and traditions that motivate this form of cohabitation. However, Central and Eastern European countries may offer the clearest examples of how these attitudes, too, can change. The spread of births outside marriage is most dynamic in those countries, where two, three or even four-fold increases over the past fifteen years are not rare (*Figure 7*). It is hard to explain why Bulgaria is among the European countries with the highest rate of births outside marriage, practically reaching the level of Nordic states, but Romania's seven-fold increase is also worthy of note. The three-fold jump in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia and the 2.5-fold surge in the Hungarian and Polish rates are significant as well, but they are not so uncommon by European standards.

Figure 6

Change in the proportion of extra-marital births in Europe between 1990 and 2003 (%)

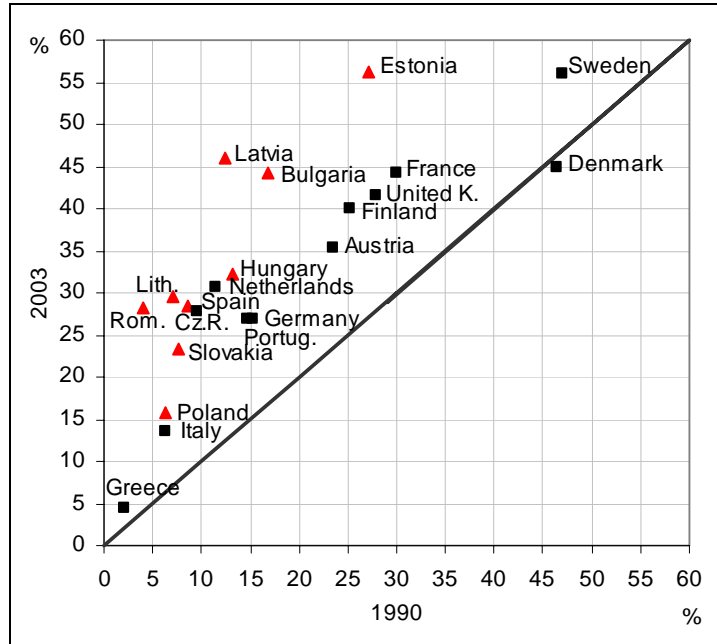
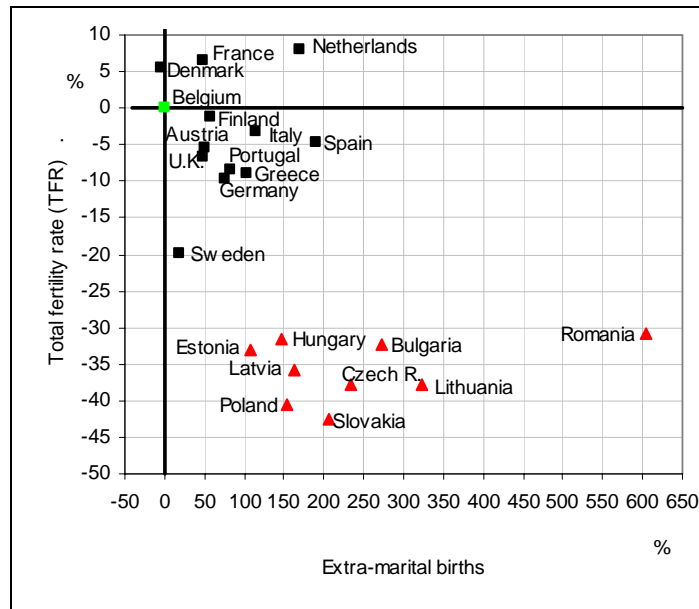


Figure 7

Change in extra-marital births and the total fertility rate in Europe between 1990 and 2003



The relationship between fertility and non-marital child-bearing is quite complex. On the one hand, the Scandinavian countries, with their traditionally high rates of non-marital births, have never belonged among the

low-fertility countries of Europe, and they are now clearly in the lead in terms of fertility. The situation is similar in France, where fertility rates and the proportion of non-marital child-bearing have increased hand in hand. At the same time, neighbouring Italy, along with other Mediterranean countries, is a counter-example with low fertility rates and a relatively low proportion of non-marital births. Central and Eastern European countries add another dimension to the picture. In each of these countries, the rate of non-marital births has grown dynamically, yet fertility rates have declined sharply. However, specific differences remain between these countries. In Poland, birth outside marriage is half as common as in Hungary, yet fertility in Poland is below the Hungarian level. However, in Estonia, an indirect neighbour of Poland, more than half of babies are born in non-marital relationships, yet fertility in Estonia is higher than in Poland or Hungary.

Some say that the complex relationship between fertility levels and non-marital births is due to the fact that common law marriages have different functions in different societies (Billari, 2005). In some, common law marriage is a precursor to marriage; in others, it comes as an alternative to marriage. Where common law marriages are more or less institutionalized, they appear as competition to marriage, and in such societies couples are more willing to have children outside wedlock. In other countries, though, even if common law marriages are widespread, couples typically have children only after they get married. Good examples of this are Germany and Switzerland (Macura *et al.*, 2002).

The same demographic processes and features often have opposite impacts. Pearson's correlation coefficient shows a relationship of nearly identical force but of opposite effect between fertility levels and non-marital births in West European countries and in the former socialist countries. In both cases, the relationship is significant, yet in Western Europe it has a positive and in the former socialist countries a negative effect. The postponement of child-bearing has had practically no effect on fertility rates in Western European countries, while in Eastern Europe it has had a negative impact.

A similar contradiction exists between declining trends of marriage and fertility rates. In the former socialist countries this relationship is strongly positive, while in Western Europe it is weakly negative. In other words, it appears as though, in Western Europe, the spread of common law marriages and non-marital births is effectively compensating for the fall in the number of births, which is attributable to fewer new marriages and a lower proportion of couples living in marriage. In the former socialist countries, though, the sudden and marked drop in marriages has entailed a fall in fertility, which has not been offset by non-marital births. We are aware that, in general, no cause and effect relationship should be assumed if the two indicators move together or apart, as that might be accidental; however, in our specific case, a direct link does appear to exist (*Table 1*).

Table 1

Relationship between the total fertility rate (TFR) and certain features of births and marriages, in Europe between 1990 and 2003 (Pearson's correlation coefficients)

	Total fertility rate (TFR)	
	West European countries	Former socialist countries
Extra-marital births	0.604**	-0.591**
Mean age of women at child-bearing	0.140	-0.336**
Mean age of women at birth of first child	-0.067	-0.548**
Total first marriage rate	-0.152*	0.810**
Mean age of woman at first marriage	0.289**	-0.695**

** p<0.001; * p<0.005

It is also possible that, over the past 15 years, the former socialist countries have been undergoing the first wave of the second demographic transition and experiencing its negative effects, and that they are a few steps behind their Western neighbours in a demographic sense. Following the 'baby boom' of the 1960s, Western countries saw similarly dramatic changes in the fields of family formation and child-bearing, but these countries seem to have recovered from the resulting demographic shock. Europe's demographic situation is, nonetheless, insecure, at a level that is far below the needs of simple reproduction;² it may continue to decline, although this is not reflected in the latest population forecasts (UN, 2005a).

Advocates of the second demographic transition have similar explanations for the fall in fertility rates as for the decline in the number of marriages. These reasons, though, should be augmented by at least two other influencing factors. One is the change itself that has taken place in marriage patterns; for the move away from marriage to other forms of non-marital relationships preceded the decline in fertility rates and helped accelerate it. This is also true of Western European countries, since no country has managed to regain the fertility levels of the early 1970s—still less to make up the shortfall in simple reproduction, which seemed so assured in the 'baby boom' period.

The other and potentially more important factor is the spread and general acceptance of birth control. This does not explain the drop in fertility, but since it is a tool used to prevent unwanted conception and pregnancy, it has played an important role in the falling numbers of children. The choice between having a child and preventing conception or birth according to the

² EUROSTAT estimated the TFR value of the EU-25 countries at 1.48 in 2003. This is about 30% less than the 2.1 necessary for simple reproduction.

individual's wish or desire is unthinkable without the means of modern contraception. Birth control is an option for the human race only, and has played a key role in falling fertility rates over the past one hundred years and in the creation of a reproduction deficit.

Throughout its history, Europe's population has used only a fraction of its biological capacity to ensure its own reproduction. Even when fertility peaked, only half as many children were born as would have been possible under the conditions of natural fertility,³ and the current average of 1.5 children is about one tenth of the reproduction capacity (Van de Kaa, 2002). Looking at long-term trends, the question arises whether we are faced with a halving process in human reproduction that is similar to the 'half life' process of radioactive materials. In fact, the current level is nowhere near the lowest limit. In theory, the value of 1.5 could halve. Based on child-bearing patterns of populations with the lowest fertility rates, fertility could go as low as 0.75. This would happen if, for instance, 20–30% of women had no children at all and the rest had only a single child in their entire lifetime (Golini, 1998). A ratio of around 20% of childless women is already present in some generations with completed fertility in Germany, Finland and The Netherlands (UN, 2005b). In some provinces in Northern Italy, fertility rates fell below 0.8 at the end of the 1990s, and, together with voluntary childlessness, the one-child family model is very popular. Not surprisingly, Italian demographers say sarcastically that what Chinese family policies made obligatory for Chinese families more than two decades ago, Europeans are now voluntarily embracing as the ideal family model (Caselli and Vallin, 2001). A continued sharp fall in the reproduction level, however, would launch a new halving process, which, in turn, would cause an accelerated decline in the number of population. According to the stable population model,⁴ with a long term fertility level of 1.3, the population would halve in about 44 years, and with a value of 1.1 this process would occur in just 33 years (Billari, 2005). Today we are not at this stage and thus such assumptions are rather pessimistic; in theory, they are possible, but in practice they are not likely scenarios. The stable population model does not take migration into account, and similarly disregards ever more ambitious opportunities to increase life expectancy (Caselli and Vallin, 2001).

³ The biologically possible number of children for women living in partnership and not using any contraception. L. Henry found such conditions in the Protestant Hutterite colony, and estimated that the average family might have 11–12 children. Van de Kaa speaks of 14–15 children in the case of full utilization of the reproduction capacity.

⁴ The stable population model describes a population whose actual increase or decrease would equal the level indicated by its net reproduction rate. With a TFR level of 1.3, the net reproduction rate is approx. 0.62, i.e. it forecasts a population decrease of 38%. This decrease would occur in a single generational distance. Generational distance is the average age of women when they give birth to a female child.

Nonetheless, the situation facing Europe's population is far from comforting, and its future is downright insecure.

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