

GGP RESEARCH NOTE

Why don't Eastern Europeans have more children?

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Since the change of regime twenty years ago, Eastern Europe has seen a large decrease in fertility. This Research Note focuses on whether people are able to realise their plans to have children and uses the results to explore what may have caused the fall in fertility in Eastern Europe over the last two decades. The findings show that individuals in post-communist countries are less successful than western countries in fulfilling childbearing plans and provide evidence of a potential cause.

Eastern European Fertility

One unique aspect of the Generations and Gender Survey is that it asks questions about people's plans to have more children in the next three years and then interviews them three years later to see whether these plans were fulfilled. Analysis of these results suggests that Eastern Europeans are far more likely to fail to realise their plans than those in Western Europe. The question to be answered is therefore why is this the case? Which theory best fits with our results showing that couples in post-socialist countries who want to have a child are often unable to fulfil their plan? This is particularly true amongst existing parents and the findings remain even after taking all kinds of factors into account.

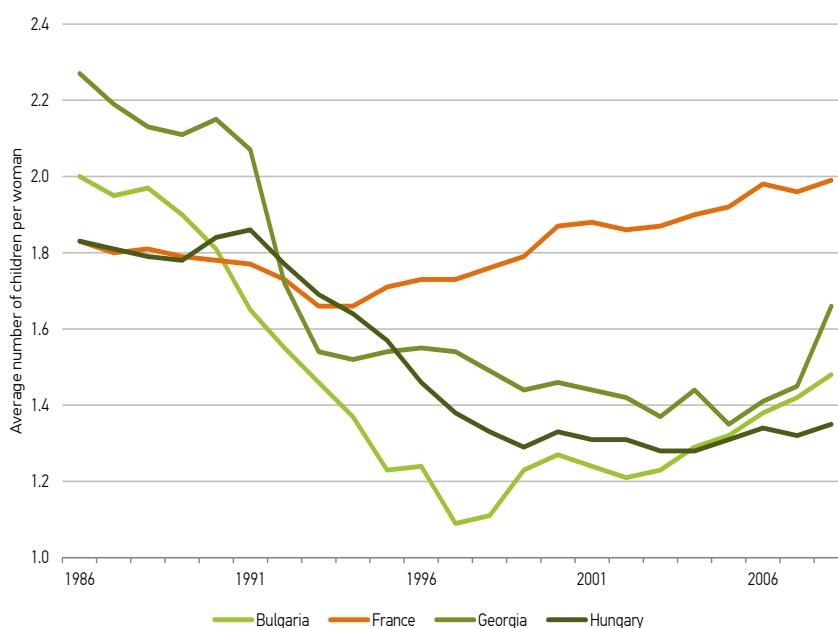


Figure 1 - The Total Fertility Rate in 4 European Countries since 1990

Source: Generations and Gender Programme, Contextual Database

We argue that Eastern Europeans are less likely to achieve their plans because of changes in the values that shape intentions as well as changes in structural factors like family policy and the cost of raising a child. Values and structural factors have changed at different paces since 1989; but financial conditions and family policy have changed at a faster pace than values and attitudes. The different paces of change in values and actual circumstances increase the discrepancy between what couples think their circumstances will be in the near future and what they actually turn out to be. That is to say, whilst couples value family life and the desire to have more children, they are constrained by the uncertainty of the changing world around them. All this leads to the failure to have a child within the planned time frame and an inevitable revision, modification or abandonment of their plans to have more children. In addition, it's those at the lower end of the income distribution that are particularly affected as they are more likely to have to adapt their plans for more children when faced with the uncertainty around them.

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About the Transformation of the Value System

Twelve years after the change of regime, public opinion still favoured traditional partnerships, emphasized the centrality of the child in the individuals' lives, and favoured women's role in home and family life. The values in general, and the attitudes of women of childbearing age in particular, clearly display the traces of the socialist past. It is difficult to draw a clear picture of the transformation of values. There is widespread consensus that communism was followed by a large-scale "westernization" of values. However, changes are very slow especially in the case of attitudes and values related to family and gender roles. These lag far behind the restructuring of society's institutions. The slowness of changes is a result of the coming of age of a new generation and is shaped by the expansion of higher education. Such things take time. Therefore even one and a half decades after the change of regime, important differences may be seen between the attitudes of people living in western and post-communist countries.

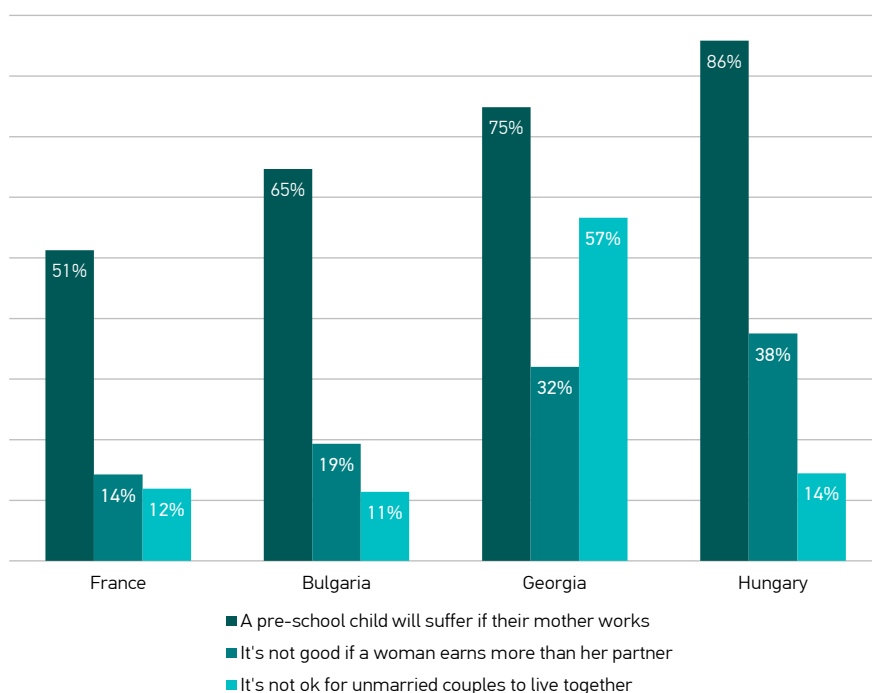


Figure 2 - Percentage of People who agree with statements about traditional family values

Source: Generations and Gender Survey, Waves 1

Well-Known and Overlooked Features of Economic and Institutional Change

The increased costs of childbearing and the reduction of disposable incomes that the change in regime brought about could have ultimately motivated those involved to postpone or forgo additional children. This would have been aided by the characteristics and scale of the economic downturn, the transition to a market economy, the restructuring of price relations, the reorganization of governmental institutions, and reform of welfare entitlements. The reduction of family benefits, the closing of kindergartens, and the move away from universal benefits towards those based on income/means tests are typically general of post-socialist countries. These economic factors have clearly contributed to the fall in the fertility rates.

The economic changes occurred not only due to quantitative decline (GDP, labor market, etc.) but also qualitative changes. The transformation of the labour market exemplifies not only a quantitative transformation (emergence of unemployment) but also the formation of a qualitatively new market. In a labour market with unemployment, people compete fiercely for jobs. So the transformation resulted not only in fewer jobs but also in intensified competition for these jobs and more unstable and precarious employment contracts.

The restructuring of welfare institutions also resulted in unpredictable dynamics. The basic tendency was a reduction in the value of services and undermining of the principle of universality. The welfare regime was not only unable to fulfill its basic function to act as a stabilizer in times of market fluctuations but it became the source of instability as a result of constant institutional changes.

Two paces of change

The change of regime and restructuring of welfare institutions occurred within a short period of time, almost like a shockwave accompanied by hitherto unknown economic dynamism, intensive shifts of individuals statuses, market successes and failures and the development of professional careers. As a consequence, economic and political change has been much faster in Eastern Europe than the continuous change typical of modern democracies and market economies in the west. Contrasting the rapid structural changes with the very slow transition of peoples

values serves as the basis of our conclusion, namely, that in post-communist countries the short-term failure to realize intentions can essentially be traced back to the discrepancies between the value system and structural conditions of childbearing. Specifically, the value system largely reflects conditions from before the change of regime, even though more than two decades have passed. Furthermore, institutional and economic transformations have not only accelerated, but continue at a faster rate than in western societies. Eliminating the discrepancy between social conditions and values is difficult and thereby adds instability in the form of the ambivalence towards welfare institutions. That is to say, citizens in central and eastern European countries are far less trusting of the welfare state than western citizens and prefer to address their own problems rather than allowing social institutions to become involved.

Summary

The unpredictability of markets and institutional context in the post-communist countries has been higher than in western countries, and the individuals did not and could not adapt to the changing conditions, so their plans are more frequently prevented from being realized. This picture is enhanced with the finding that those with poor financial status in post-communist countries are able to realize their intentions at a below average level. The scarcity of resources obviously involves lower adaptability so it requires revision or abandonment of their intentions. Our analysis provides new insights that help explain the post-communist fertility transition. Our conclusion is based on an unusual indicator that is unique to the GGP: the rate of realization and non-realization of short-term childbearing intentions. It is our firm belief that both the structural circumstances, the possession of resources, and the cultural system play a major role in shaping current fertility behaviour in the post-communist countries.

This Research Note is based on the following paper

Spéder, Zsolt, and Balázs Kapitány. "Failure to Realize Fertility Intentions: A Key Aspect of the Post-communist Fertility Transition." *Population Research and Policy Review* (2014): 1-26.

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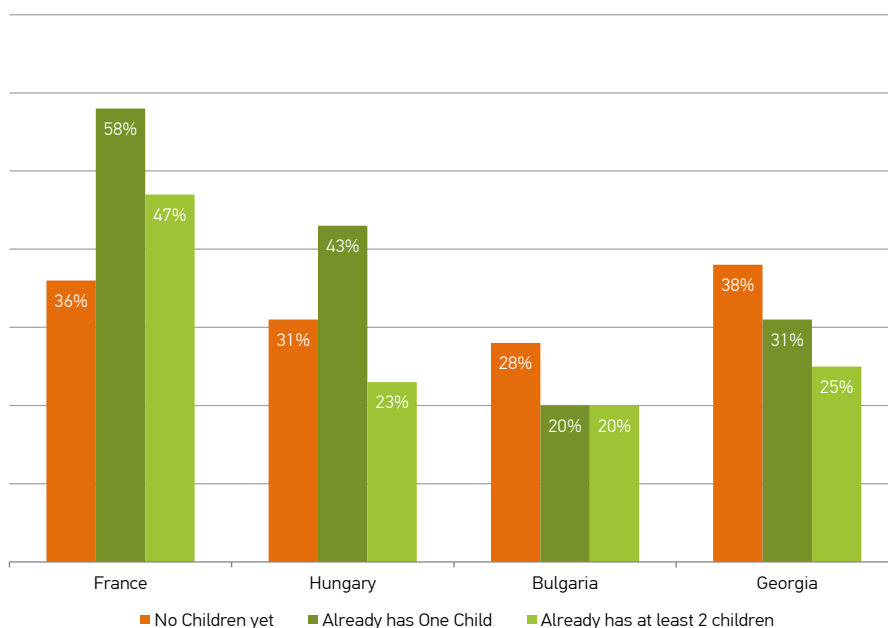


Figure 3 - Percentage of people who realised their intention to have a child by the number of children they had at 1st Interview

Source: *Generations and Gender Survey, Waves 1 & 2*

What is the Generations and Gender Programme?

Family relationships have changed a lot over the past few decades. Today's families differ considerably from the 1950s where a male breadwinner was supported by his doting housewife. Families have become less stable, more complex and highly diversified. The rapid ageing of European populations has also contributed to this rapid pace of change and new types of families have emerged alongside new relationships between generations and between genders. Understanding these changes will help us meet many of the challenges that societies face today such as: How do we support and care for older people? How is disadvantage inherited? Why are women having fewer children? Answering such questions is the primary aim of the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP).

The GGP was launched in 2001 and now covers 19 advanced industrialized countries. It improves our understanding of how various factors affect family life by collecting high quality individual-level survey data on topics such as partnership formation & dissolution, fertility and intergenerational solidarity. Respondents are interviewed every 3 years and changes in the family life are recorded. Importantly, the GGP covers the whole adult life-course, between the age of 18 and 79, and is therefore the only dataset dedicated to the longitudinal and cross-national study of family life and generational relationships from early adulthood to older ages. Over time, the GGP follows respondents through relationships, marriages, parenthood, divorces, deaths and many of the trials and tribulations that people meet with, tracking the impact and consequences of these events at an individual and societal level. This survey data are complemented with indicators at the regional and national level through a contextual database and help us understand what part policy and other contextual factors play in family life.



Generations & Gender Programme

For more information, visit our website: <http://www.ggp-i.org>
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