

## ***Changes in family creation strategies and birth rates in Europe during two generations***

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### **Changes in value orientation, end of traditional life-style in Europe**

During the last half-century – about two generations – a lot has changed in demographic behavior of Europeans. All these changes have the same direction: weakening family and kinship ties, increasing variability of family forms, decreasing birth rate and number of children in families. Leading tendencies in value orientation connected with families are:

- increasing tolerance of society towards different family forms,
- increasing tolerance of society towards sexual behavior
- women's freedom to make decisions (to have sexual relations, to marry or not to marry, to have child or not to have etc).

All these phenomena can be considered as appearances of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) [1].

If we regard the traditional family type, dominating in Europe up to the Second World War and also in 40ies then we see the following picture. For people, especially for women it was prestigious to marry. Still, the marriages were concluded, in general, not very early, but they were – at least formally – stabile, divorces were quite exceptional. In general, women married before impregnation. Being virgin in wedding was highly valued. The means for birth control were poor, hence the number of children was rather big (especially, compared with the situation today). Also, sexual relations before and outside official marriage were condemned by church and also by society, especially for women. Also the illegitimate births were condemned.

The traditional living cycle of a (normal, good) person was quite simple: he or she married (once for whole life), had so many children as God gave him/ her, did not have any sexual relation with anybody but own spouse and the family lasted up to death of one of spouses. Due to simplicity of family structure and their dynamics, it was also easy to make family statistics (including censuses), to use this statistics in analyses and to make forecasts. It was evident that the marriage rate and birth rate were connected: fewer marriages, fewer children. Also, the later people married, the fewer children they had. In the same way the connection between divorce rate and birth rate has been experienced: the higher divorce rate, the lower birth rate. The reason was the same: traditionally the number of births depended on the number of married women in the society. The number of illegitimate children formed a rather small part of all children borne.

### **Change in demographic behavior**

Nowadays the situation in Europe is quite different, but not equally in all European countries. In demographic behavior the following processes have occurred:

- The post-war baby-boom marked the final stage of traditional families in Europe. In 60ies the birth-rate began to decline and has never reached the previous level, being, as a rule, below the reproduction level.
- The age of first marriage declined up to seventies and then started to increase being now about 30 in many countries.

- The number of couples cohabiting without marriage has increased during the whole post-war period reaching nowadays about one-third of all couples.
- From here it follows that also the number and share of illegitimate births has increased reaching also about 30%.
- The difference between marriage and birth of the first child has declined and in some countries the marriage takes place usually after the birth, sometimes also when the first child has reached the school-age.
- The mothers' age has increased and in Europe the women give birth to their first child later than ever.
- Premarital and extramarital sex is more and more tolerated not only for men, but also for women.

### Different ways of development in different corners of Europe

What is interesting, some of well-known regularities and rules describing demographic behavior do not hold in Europe nowadays.

- There are countries with considerably high birth rate and very low marriage rate (Iceland, Sweden).
- The countries, where women marry early (East Europe) have the lowest birth rate, but countries, where they marry late (e.g. Norway) have much higher birth rate.
- Also the low divorce rate does not help countries with very low birth rate (Italy, Spain).

Seemingly, the reason of this is that after SDT the connections and interdependences between demographic processes have changed, but also the fact, that different countries of Europe have different ways and different velocities of demographic development. For instance, if we analyze the values of TFR's in EU countries in seventies and nowadays, then we see that the correlation between them is almost zero (see Figure 1).

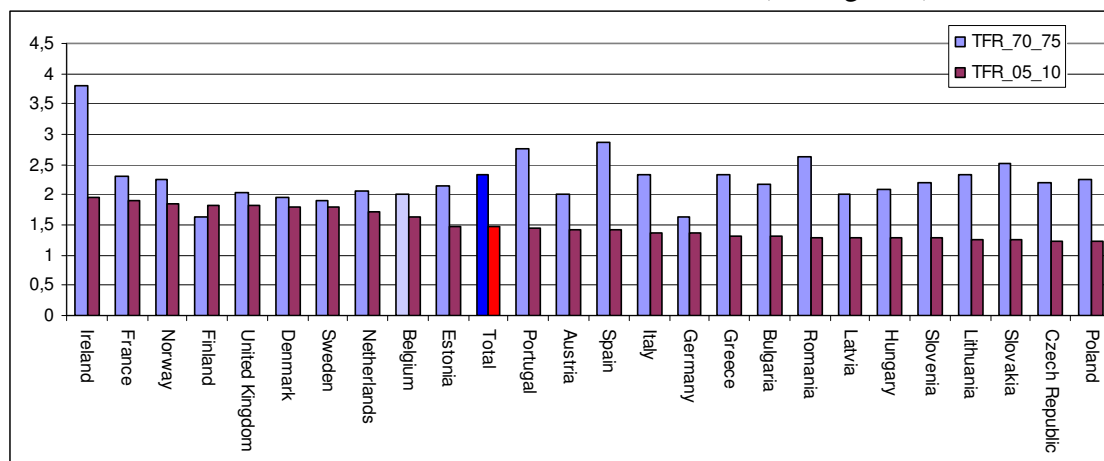


Figure 1.

The changes started in Northern countries, where men and women have had for long time equal education and also women had the best access to labor-market and policy. Here already in 70ies the marriage rate and birth rate decreased and divorces, cohabitation, illegitimate births had increasing tendency. In several decades the situation stabilized; women used to have children several years later than earlier. Then also birth rate started

to increase in spite of the fact that families were changed substantially and only less than half of adult generation lived in traditional families. Nowadays in Northern Europe the birth rate is among the highest in Europe, but still below the reproduction level.

In Southern Europe the baby-boom lasted longer and also in 1970's the traditional family (with non-working women) was dominating. With increase of women education "women started to go away from home" and in 80ies the birth rate started to decline. Still, there the families remained quite stable: cohabitation was not so common, divorce rates were quite low, but women decided much later to marry and have children.

In countries of Eastern Europe the situation was somewhat different. The baby-boom after war was, in general weaker in the countries that were occupied. As in these societies the equity of women with men was a leading principle, the women got soon considerably high education and independence from family that caused quite high divorce rate. On the other hand, due to closeness of society and lack of choices and challenges the young women married early and had also children early. The birth rate did not decrease, but was quite stable nearby reproduction level for several decades 70ies and 80ies.

After liberalization in early 90ies, the situation changed substantially and quite rapidly. The marriage rate declined heavily, also number of divorces increased. The birth rate declined during about 5 years also heavily, forming 50—70% of reproduction rate. Also death rate increased and life expectation shortened. In practically all countries of Eastern Europe the demographic crisis took place. Due to opening of societies also remarkable emigration of young people started that deepened the demographic problems of all these countries. As a result, the population in these regions decreases and by forecasts of UN this process will continue during the half-century.

### **Estonia as an example**

Estonia is a small country belonging to Eastern Europe, but as it is situated in North it has in its demographic development also several traits close to Northern Europe. As in Nordic countries, Estonian women have had quite high education and access to labor market already before the Second World War (during Estonian first independence period). Already then almost 1/10 children were borne out of official wedlock and also divorce rate formed about 1/10 compared with the number of marriages. The tendency continued: traditional family changed substantially in early seventies – the free cohabitation started to be more and more common among younger generation. Already in 80ies about 1/3 of Estonian children were borne as illegal (in spite of the freedom to make abortions), but most of them had fathers who took care of them although they had not married to child's mother. The divorce rate increased reaching in 80ies about 45—50 % compared with the number of marriages. All these changes were similar to the changes in Scandinavia, especially in Sweden.

But at the same time in demographic development of Estonia were traits similar to Eastern Europe. Estonia was one of countries where baby-boom after the war was very weak and the birth-rate started to increase in late 60ies reaching then the reproductive level. Also, the women married and gave birth in quite young age. Probably, one of reasons for that was closeness of society, but also some peculiarities of social and educational policy.

In the further demographic development in Estonia there was a special feature: the baby-boom in singing revolution. Estonia was one of the countries getting the independence from Soviet Union, and this process has been called as “Singing Revolution”. During several years – 1998—1991 the Estonian population lived in emotional heyday of coming freedom, and this time was also the peak of birth rate. After the peak a heavy decrease occurred, and after several years the birth rate had declined up to 55—60 % from the top level. At the same time all other appearances of demographic crisis occurred: the marriage rate declined more than twice and number of divorces exceeded the number of marriages, the life expectancy shortened for 2—3 years, the emigration increased.

Still, with the new millennium the demographic trends started to improve. Due to small number of Estonian population here the inertia is small and hence all processes pass here quite rapidly. From 1995 the life expectation increases, especially for women, but it is still for some years lower than European average. From 1999 also the birth rate increases and TFR has reached for 2007 the level 1,6 that is roughly the European average and highest in Eastern Europe. The average age of mothers increases for 2—3 months per year, but it is still lower than in Nordic countries. The marriage rate started to increase (first marriage rate has increased in 5 years from 40% to 50%), but still the dominating family form in young couples is cohabitation (roughly, 50% of children borne in recent years have cohabiting parents, 40% – officially married parents and about 10% have the single mother). The number of divorces has decreased – what is understandable, as the number of marriages has decreased, too. Also the net migration tends to zero due to active remigration.

To describe nowadays Estonian population the first characteristic trait is mobility.

- The people have more than one living-place (home in working-place and summerhouse in countryside), they also travel to other European countries (especially to Finland) to work there.
- The young people have (during about ten years) several partners before making decision to start family life and to have children.
- The women have higher education compared with men and are also financially independent. Hence, they are also active in making decisions on family formation that is quite opposite compared with traditional family formation process.
- The families are dynamic as well – divorces and remarriages are quite common, but probably the cohabitation partners change more often than married spouses.
- Typical households are rather small and the adult generations prefer to live apart from each other.
- It is quite common, that children have two parents living in different households.

In some sense, it seems that this population describes the future of population in many European countries.

## References

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2. [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?\\_pageid=0,1136184,0\\_45572595&\\_dad=portal&\\_schema=PORTAL](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=0,1136184,0_45572595&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL)