

Sociodemographic Differences in Partnership Behaviour Strategies: the Forerunners of Cohabitation in Lithuania

Since the beginning of the 1990s, like in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, rapid family transformations started in Lithuania: decrease of marriage rates, postponement and “ageing” of marriage, spread of cohabitation, postponement of fertility, transition to very low fertility, increase of extra marital births, etc. They might lead to a conclusion that SDT, which had started in the North and West European countries about four decades ago, followed by the South European countries some time later, has, since the 1990s, turned towards the Central and Eastern Europe. Regardless of the centrality of the emerging new forms of partnership formation in the family transformation process, up till recently there were no sufficient data for the deeper analysis of this phenomenon in Lithuania.

The research is essentially based on the Lithuanian Gender and Generation Survey and on the Population Census 2001 data. The Lithuanian GGS was conducted in the year 2006 from May to October. 10036 respondents were interviewed, out of which there were 5036 women and 5000 men, aged 18-79. The questioner used was based on the international GGS first wave core questioner with additional sub-module C “Intentions of breaking up”.

As GGS was specifically constructed to gather event history data, event history analysis is employed. The process of family formation is analyzed in the life course perspective, considering parallel carries of education, employment and childbearing. Thus, individual decision to form a certain type of partnership is controlled by the intergenerational (parental divorce, family background, parental family household structure) and the individual (educational attainment, urban-rural, social class, values, and gender attitudes) factors.

Preliminary results indicate that the family transformation process in Lithuania is more complex than in North and West Europe, contradictory and has a paradoxical nature. One

of the most striking paradoxes is that while in the light of SDT we can observe “ageing” of marriage, the appearing phenomena of cohabitation is shifting towards younger ages, which in consequence causes the so called overall “rejuvenation” of partnership. It was also found that most different patterns of matrimonial behaviour are demonstrated by the younger generations of Lithuania, which stepped into the marriageable age during the early and run up stages of the transformations. Also, the data reveals paradoxical age and socio-economic differentials of the partnership behaviour. The patterns of this behaviour vary most among the more socio-economically advanced groups of the society (urban, with higher education, etc.) and the most disadvantaged groups of the society, which are marginalized and experience material and social deprivation (rural, with lowest education, etc.)

Social exclusion has a decisive impact on marital behaviour of the rural low educated male population. Among the rural males with low education and born in the second half of the 20th century (after 1950) the proportion of never married is considerably higher than among the rest of the male population. This group of rural male population has a relatively “low value” in the “marriage market”. They are in social and “demographic exclusion”.

While marriage is a dominant form of family formation in Lithuania, cohabitation represents a form of resistance to dominant culture. Thus, the cohabiters, as it might be assumed, must be a socially, economically and culturally distinguishable group. Therefore, cohabitation - looking from the perspective of the individuals - is selective process in terms of attitudes or their socio-economic conditions. First results confirm this selectivity hypothesis. One of the groups of “forerunners” – the groups that are most eager to adopt the new pattern of family formation – consists of the rural population above the age of 30. As compared to urban population, cohabitation trends in the rural area are following different patterns: from the age of 30 the share of rural cohabitants starts rising in each older age group and reaches the peak in the 45-49 age group, whereas among the urban population the number of cohabitants starts falling in each age group from the age of 30 years. The rural population which experiences material and social

deprivation more often chooses cohabitation instead of marriage due to the lack of social and material resources. This type of cohabitation reminds of the historically earlier form of cohabitations, which in the literature are named as the “marriages of poor” (Kiernan, 2004). Therefore, deprivation among the rural population has a stronger impact on the partnership behaviour than the ethno-cultural factors, which usually are associated with the more conservative form of partnership behaviour. Thus, it might be assumed that proliferation of a non-traditional family in the traditional socio-cultural environment (i.e. rural areas) is conditioned not by the modern values, but by the social and material deprivation.

It could be maintained that different socio-demographic groups experience the determining power of factors of the second demographic transition at varying degrees, which would seemingly be confirmed by the growing sociodemographic differentiation of partnership behaviour of the transformation period. However, as the data of the 2001 Population Census, Lithuanian GGS (2006) and other surveys show, the trends of partnership behaviour of advanced and marginalized populations are even going in opposite directions. While the advanced populations (higher educated, urban population) are most eager to adopt new patterns of family formation, the partnership behaviour patterns of the population in social exclusion deviate from these general trends. This enables us to make a symbolic distinction that divides the Lithuanian population into parallel existing populations with fairly different and contradictory patterns of partnership behaviour.