10. Demography of family change in Europe

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1. INTRODUCTION

On 22 May 2015, the ‘Marriage Equality Referendum’ in Ireland showed clear support for the recognition of marriage as a contract between two individuals irrespective of their sex, with 62 per cent of votes in favour of the constitutional amendment. This result, together with the outcome of a 2018 referendum that overturned the ban on abortion in Ireland, marked an extraordinary shift in family behaviours and attitudes in that country in recent decades. In Ireland of the early 1970s, divorce, contraception, and abortion were still banned; married women were not allowed to work in the public sector; and state family policy was guided by Catholic social teaching (Canavan 2012; Laplante et al. 2020). At that time, the period total fertility rate (TFR) in the country was close to four births per woman, and fewer than 3 per cent of children were born outside of marriage. Today in Ireland, the period TFR is below 1.8, and close to four out of 10 (38 per cent in 2018) children are born outside of marriage. While the sweeping family-related changes in Ireland arguably represent a more radical break with the past than the shifts that occurred in other countries in Europe (Laplante et al. 2020), they also reflect a broader, continent-wide trend towards lower fertility, less marriage, and more diverse families and living arrangements.

The basic contours of this transformation are well known, and have been repeatedly discussed (e.g., Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). Many studies on family change rely on a small set of indicators that are analysed for selected countries. Our aim is to provide a broad-brush picture of the shifts in family behaviour across Europe during the last half a century, drawing upon diverse datasets and publications. We aim to cover all parts of Europe, and to examine a relatively long period between 1960 and 2018. We complement the analysis of period changes with a cohort view of the transformation of marriage, reproduction, and divorce, especially among women born since the 1940s. We pay special attention to the ongoing shift towards later union formation, marriage, and reproduction; and we show that key family transitions are increasingly taking place among women in their 30s.

Our chapter covers three broad topics: a) trends in union formation, marriage, living arrangements, and divorce; b) period and cohort fertility, including family size distribution and childlessness; and c) the family context of reproduction and parenthood, including non-marital childbearing and single motherhood. We also briefly discuss other important family developments, including less conventional family forms – such as non-residential relationships and same-sex unions – multiple-partner fertility, and social stratification in family behaviour. We cover these trends only briefly, with a more detailed discussion, additional figures, and an expanded reference list provided in a forthcoming working paper (Sobotka 2021). While most of our analysis pertains to women, we also comment on the changes in marriage behaviour and living arrangements among men. Our bird’s-eye review also contributes to the long-standing discussions on the convergence (or its absence) in European family trends across countries and regions.

2. BACKGROUND: KEY FRAMEWORKS AND CONCEPTS EXPLAINING FAMILY CHANGE OVER TIME

The recent shifts in family and fertility behaviour have been explained from different theoretical angles. We highlight the key concepts and explanatory frameworks, most of which are focused on macro-level changes in the family that have been observed in Europe over the last 50 years. These concepts often complement each other, and, when combined, provide a broader and more nuanced view of the multifaceted drivers and complex dynamics of recent family changes than any single theoretical approach could.

The second demographic transition (SDT) framework is intricately linked to the family trends of the last half a century that are analysed here. It sees the changes in fertility, nuptiality, and living arrangements as part of a unique transition driven by broader cultural and ideational changes (Lesthaeghe 2010). The SDT framework predicts that the shifts towards ‘less family’, delayed family transitions, and diverse life courses are irreversible, and will eventually spread to all societies that have completed the first demographic transition and attained relatively low fertility and mortality rates. An alternative perspective on family instability is provided by concepts that attribute the erosion of marriage and the shift towards unstable living arrangements to women and men with limited opportunities and resources. According to this view, family instability is rooted in economic and structural disadvantages, and tends to lead to widening social status disparities in family behaviour and resources (McLanahan 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). A related strand of theories accentuates the society-wide impact of economic uncertainty. These concepts have become increasingly prominent since the onset of the Great Recession in 2007–2008, especially in the context of Southern Europe (e.g., Adsera 2017). In recent decades, labour market risks have grown as globalisation and technological change progressed. When confronted with declining relative income, rising uncertainty, and unstable forms of employment, young adults are avoiding long-lasting, highly committed relationships. This response has, in turn, been driving the shift to later family formation and less stable family forms in Western societies since the 1980s (Mills and Blossfeld 2013). Economic conditions also play a key role in the arguments linking economic and social development (as measured by the Human Development Index and gross domestic product per capita) with fertility, which predict an upturn in fertility in societies that surpass a certain threshold of development (Luci-Greulich and Thévenon 2014; Myrskylä et al. 2009).

The ideational and economic arguments on family change have often neglected the role of the massive transformation in women’s lives in the last half-century, in which women have been overtaking men in university graduation rates, becoming economically independent, and pursuing life-long employment as an expected part of their life course (Goldin 2006). The ‘gender revolution’ (GR) framework posits that the transformation in women’s lives is primarily responsible for the ongoing changes in the family. Building upon earlier arguments by McDonald (2000), the key contributions in the GR debate (e.g., Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015; Goldscheider et al. 2015) argue that the trend towards ‘less family’ observed in the last three decades of the twentieth century was caused by the incompatibility between women’s rising labour force participation and women’s family roles. These two studies predict that when family roles become more gender-equal, a return to ‘more family’ will follow; i.e., fertility and marriage rates will rise and divorce rates will decline, especially among highly educated women. Thus, these scholars anticipate that as gender egalitarianism progresses,

marriage and fertility rates will first decline, and then increase (following a U-shaped trend); while divorce rates will first rise, and then decline.

Family trends are also affected by technological changes (including advances in assisted reproduction), legal regulations, and policies. European countries apply a wide variety of family-related policies aimed at supporting families. These policies implicitly or explicitly encourage childbearing, mainly by helping parents combine their employment and family lives (OECD 2011; Sobotka et al. 2019; Thévenon and Gauthier 2011). Policy changes often respond to behavioural and attitudinal changes in societies, and shape them in turn. For instance, the rise in non-marital births alerted lawmakers to the need to regulate the rights of parents and children in non-marital unions (Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012). The extent to which same-sex marriage is legally recognised varies across Europe. As of 2019, 16 of the 28 European Union (EU) members legally recognise same-sex marriage, while seven EU countries (all in Central and Eastern Europe) define marriage as a union solely between a man and a woman (the remaining countries have laws that partially recognise same-sex marriage). Divorce laws have also become more liberal in recent decades. Malta was the last EU country to grant the right to divorce, in 2011. Assisted reproductive technology (ART) is another broad area of family behaviour that is highly regulated. These legal regulations affect every aspect of ART, and lead to wide differences across countries in the rates of use, cost, and accessibility of these treatments, as well as in the types of treatments that are available (Präg and Mills 2017; see also Passet-Wittig and Bujard in this volume).

3. DATA, INDICATORS, METHODS, REGIONAL GROUPING

To map changes in family behaviour across countries and broader regions in Europe, as well as across cohorts and over long periods of time, we rely on a broad collection of data provided through vital statistics, population registers, and census and survey data. Here, we are unable to provide details of all the data sources used, and instead list only the key resources next to the figures and in the text.

We analyse period indicators that are often affected by the trends in the timing and the spacing of demographic events, as well as cohort indicators that reflect the ultimate intensity of a given behaviour across the life courses of the women and men born in a given year. Depending on data availability, we look at family changes since the 1960s, and focus in more detail on the developments since 1990, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakdown of the state-socialist political systems in Central and Eastern Europe. Our cohort indicators cover family trends among women and men born from the 1930s to the 1970s, paying special attention to the family behaviour of the cohorts born in the 1970s.

We use the indicators readily provided by statistical agencies (especially Eurostat 2020), research studies, data collections, and data repositories (e.g., CFE Database 2020; Council of Europe 2006; Human Fertility Database 2020; VID 2020); as well as indicators we computed on the basis of available data (e.g., indicators on divorce rates). Most of the indicators we analyse are conventional indicators that are widely used. Some of our indicators cover almost all countries in Europe; however, we are unable to analyse and discuss trends in each country (see Sobotka 2021 for more detailed analyses by country). Therefore, we group countries into broader regions, and focus our discussion on trends in these broader regions (data are weighted by the population size of the countries in each region). In cases in which our data cover fewer

countries, we focus our analysis on larger countries, specific cases, and countries that are representative of broader regions. Our regional analysis is based on data for 33 European countries grouped into seven broader regions:

- *Nordic countries* (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden);
- *Western Europe* (Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, United Kingdom);
- (predominantly) *German-speaking countries* (Austria, Germany, Switzerland);
- *Southern Europe* (Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain);
- *Central Europe* (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia);
- *South-Eastern Europe* (Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia); and
- *Eastern Europe* (Belarus, Russia, Ukraine).

The last three regions include the countries that had authoritarian state-socialist political and economic systems until 1989. We do not include some smaller countries and territories with populations below 1 million, or countries that have lower quality population data or gaps in the data, mainly due to conflicts and territorial changes in the 1990s–2010s (e.g., Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, but also Moldova). As data are missing for certain years for south-eastern European countries, some charts do not display indicators for that region.

4. UNION FORMATION, MARRIAGE, AND DIVORCE

4.1 Union Formation: The Continuing Rise and Higher Stability of Cohabitation

In recent decades, the process of partnership formation has shifted away from the traditional sequence, in which marriage was followed by the newlyweds moving in together, and, later, by the birth of the couple's first child. Cohabitation has evolved from being a relatively marginal living arrangement among those born before 1940 to being the new standard way of entering a first union. Indeed, cohabitation has even become normatively expected. Among women and men born in the 1970s, the share of all first unions that started through cohabitation rather than via direct marriage was highest in Western and Northern Europe, where it reached between 79 per cent (Germany) and 92 per cent (France) (Hiekel 2014). While cohabitation remains less common in most countries of Central, South-Eastern, and Eastern Europe – especially in Lithuania and Romania – it has increased markedly in each of the 14 countries analysed by Hiekel (2014) (Table 10.1). More recently, cohabitation has also spread rapidly in Southern Europe, especially in Spain, where it remained rather marginal until the 1990s (Dominguez-Folgueras and Castro-Martín 2013).

In the past, cohabitation was typically a short and unstable living arrangement that was in most cases either dissolved or converted into marriage within two–three years. In the early 1990s, the median duration of cohabitation was 2.4 years in 11 highly developed countries (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). Today, cohabiting couples convert cohabitation into marriage or dissolve cohabiting unions at a slower pace than they did in the past. Among the cohorts born in the 1970s in Austria, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Norway, cohabiting unions lasted three–four years on average (Hiekel 2014).

Table 10.1 Proportion of first co-residential unions that started as unmarried cohabitation, by birth cohort (in per cent)

	Year of birth (women and men combined)				
	1920–40	1941–50	1951–60	1961–70	1971–80
<i>Nordic countries, Western Europe, and German-speaking countries</i>					
Austria				79	87
Belgium	32	35	46	63	80
France	13	28	54	83	92
Germany	23	36	55	72	79
Netherlands		14	41	70	85
Norway	15	33	65	86	89
<i>Central Europe, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe</i>					
Bulgaria	22	40	49	56	69
Estonia	26	36	49	64	88
Georgia	32	38	40	53	63
Hungary	3	5	13	29	60
Lithuania	7	10	16	21	44
Romania	9	12	17	21	32
Russia	23	24	25	35	54

Note: The data are available for a limited number of countries analysed by Hiekel (2014); therefore, we grouped them into broader regional groupings than those defined in Section 3.

Source: Hiekel (2014; based on “Generations and Gender Surveys” 2004–2009 and for the Netherlands on “Onderzoek Gezinsvorming”).

Many people continue to perceive marriage as reflecting a higher level of commitment, and cohabitation as allowing for more freedom. Thus, cohabitation is often seen as an arrangement that provides the partners with an opportunity to test their relationship (Perelli-Harris et al. 2014), or to avoid the costs of marriage and the potential costs of divorce. Cohabiting couples can be broadly divided into two groups: those who perceive cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process, and those who regard it as an alternative to marriage (Hiekel et al. 2014). Over time, the actual behaviour of cohabiting couples suggests that cohabitating unions are becoming more permanent and often involve childbearing, and are thus becoming similar to marriage. Evidence that this is the case has been found for Bulgaria, France, Italy, Norway, and the United States (Di Giulio et al. 2019).

4.2 Marriage, Marital Dissolution, and More Diverse Living Arrangements: Has the Decline of Marriage Come to an End?

Between the late 1960s and the mid-1990s, all European regions experienced a sharp fall in first marriage rates, starting in the Nordic countries and Western Europe (including in the three German-speaking countries), and followed by Southern Europe in the late 1970s and the early 1980s and Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s (Figure 10.1).

The onset of the decline in marriage rates also marked the beginning of a long-term trend towards delayed marriage, which has continued without interruption in an almost linear fashion. As a result, marriage has by and large disappeared from the lives of young adults during the last decades. In most countries of Western, Northern, and Southern Europe, the mean age at first marriage for women is now 30–33 years, up from 22–23 years in 1970. While this shift in the mean age at first marriage did not start until the 1990s in Central, Eastern, and

Note: Recent data on total first marriage rate are unavailable for most countries in Western Europe, therefore, we only show trends for France instead of the whole region.

Source: Own computations from Council of Europe (2006), Eurostat (2020), and national statistical office data.

Figure 10.1 Total first marriage rate in selected regions of Europe, 1960–2018

South-Eastern Europe, it proceeded with a similar intensity, and is now around 28 for women. Among men in these regions, the mean age at first marriage has increased at a similar pace, and is now about two years higher than it is among women (own computations from Eurostat 2020).

Period trends in marriage have been strongly affected by the ongoing postponement of first marriage and family formation. Therefore, period marriage indicators do not fully reflect the shifts in the underlying marriage intensity or the share of women who will eventually marry. Nevertheless, the broad decline in marriage rates in the past 50 years illustrates well the extent and universality of the retreat from marriage across all parts of Europe. By the turn of the century, period marriage rates converged to similarly low levels across Europe, with the period total first marriage rate among women hovering around 0.6. Since that time, marriage trends have displayed ups and downs, partly driven by trends in first marriage timing, but these fluctuations were relatively small compared with the sharp downturn in the previous decades. In Southern Europe and some countries in Western Europe, including France, first marriage rates decreased further; whereas in the Nordic countries and in Central and Eastern Europe, they underwent a modest recovery in the 2000s, before resuming a renewed downward trend in the Nordic countries during the last decade. More recently, first marriage rates increased somewhat in the German-speaking countries and in Central and Southern Europe around 2015, in tandem with the recovery after the economic recession ended around 2013. At present, many countries in Southern, Western, and Northern Europe have total first marriage rates at or below 0.5, or at about half the level in the era of almost universal marriage in the 1960s. Marriage trends are also affected by changes in marriage-related legislation that may stimulate short-term ups and downs in marriage rates. For example, in Sweden in 1989, there was a short-lived marriage boom linked to the abolition of the state pension for widows starting in 1990 (Ohlsson-Wijk 2011). This effect can be seen in Figure 10.1 as a temporary upturn in marriage rates for the whole Nordic region.

Are most women and men simply delaying marriage and marrying later, or has there been a sharp increase in the share of people who never marry? The trends in the cohort indicators of the share of women and men who never marry confirm that marriage has become less common not only at younger ages, but across the life span. The share of young adults who marry before age 25 has collapsed across Europe. Among women born in the early 1990s, only 11 per cent (France, Norway) to 17 per cent (Switzerland) married before reaching that age, down from about 60–90 per cent of those born in the late 1950s. The share of women who married before age 30 has fallen to about 40 per cent in most countries. However, non-marriage has also become much more common later in life. By age 40, which is generally seen as the normative age deadline for parenthood (Billari et al. 2010), more than one-third of women and 43–44 per cent of men in the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden have never married. In the last 25 years, the share of never-married women and men has risen sharply in all parts of Europe (Figure 10.2).

Note: The selection of countries was affected by data availability: these data were computed from the statistics on the distribution of women and men by calendar year, age, and marital status, which are not available for most European countries in the Eurostat database for the two cohorts and both sexes analysed.

Source: Own computations from Eurostat (2020).

Figure 10.2 *Share of women and men who never married by age 40, selected European countries*

This overall trend towards a higher share of women and men never marrying proceeds unevenly across social groups. Research on marriage has emphasised its economic underpinnings: marriage is increasingly seen as a marker of stability and achievement, and is perceived as a ‘luxury good, a step to be taken after one has achieved a comfortable level of economic stability’ (Smock and Schwartz 2020, p. 12). Consequently, marriage rates are eroding faster among women and men with lower socio-economic status, especially in the more gender-equal countries (Kalmijn 2013). However, Perelli-Harris and Lyons-Amos (2016) showed that in all social groups in Europe, marriage has been increasingly postponed or foregone.

What has replaced marriage? In addition to cohabitation with or without children, non-residential partnerships and other living arrangements have become increasingly prevalent.¹ Non-residential partnerships – couples ‘living apart together’ (LAT) – are often perceived as temporary (Ayuso 2019), and, due to their fluidity, they are harder to define and measure than residential partnerships.² Many LAT couples report that they do not live together due to practical barriers, especially work-related constraints or not being able to find affordable housing (Liefbroer et al. 2015). In European countries, the estimated share of LAT relationships among all couples ranges from 1 per cent in Estonia to close to 10 per cent in Belgium and Norway (Pasteels et al. 2017). LAT relationships are also increasingly common in middle and later life course stages, including among divorcees (Régnier-Loilier et al. 2009).

In addition, three kinds of living arrangements not involving co-residence with children or with a partner have become increasingly prevalent, especially below age 30. First, living with parents has become more common among young adults (Eurostat 2019a), mainly because young people are spending more time in education and are delaying economic independence. Often, they are having trouble finding affordable housing. At the same time, huge regional divides in the age at which young adults leave home persist in Europe, with the median age being relatively low in the Nordic countries, and very high in Southern, Central, and South-Eastern Europe.³ Second, single living has become more common, especially in countries that provide subsidised housing, which facilitates early home leaving and residential independence, such as in the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, and Austria. Across the EU countries, single living has been relatively stable among young adults, but it has increased at ages 35–50, with the share of people who live alone rising by two–three percentage points between 2006 and 2016 (Liu and Esteve 2020, data based on EU Labour Force Survey). Third, the trend towards sharing a flat with roommates has likely been rising as well, although empirical studies of this phenomenon in Europe are surprisingly rare.⁴

Same-sex couples have increased in prominence and visibility. Same-sex partnerships represent a small minority of all partnerships, typically accounting for up to 2 per cent of all residential unions (Valfort 2017, see also Evertsson et al. in this volume). This figure broadly corresponds to the reported proportion of adults who self-identify as lesbian or gay, reaching 0.7 per cent to 2.5 per cent in several surveys for North America, Australia, and Canada reviewed by Valfort (2017, p. 28, figure 10.2). This share might be higher among the newly registered partnerships and marriages. In France, same-sex marriages accounted for 3.1 per cent of newly married couples in 2017, and for 3.8 per cent of newly registered civil unions (PACS), with male and female couples being equally represented among the marriages and male couples making up a larger share of the registered unions (Breton et al. 2019, table 14). Population-level data on the lesbian, gay, and bisexual population remain relatively limited, and suffer from differences in definitions and measurement errors. Past research, summarised by Valfort (2017), has indicated that same-sex cohabiting unions are much less stable than the unions of different-sex couples. In addition, same-sex couples are more likely than different-sex couples to be childless, and those who are not often have children from a previous heterosexual union. European countries continue to differ in their levels of acceptance of homosexuality and legal recognition of same-sex unions. For example, none of the countries in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe has legalised same-sex marriage and only three (Czechia, Estonia, and Slovenia) recognise same-sex civil unions. Moreover, except in Czechia and Slovakia, the majority of young adults in these countries oppose same-sex marriage (Pew Research Centre 2018).

Table 10.2 *Share of marriages ending in divorce within 15 years, selected European countries (marriages concluded in 1994 and 2004, in per cent)*

	Marriage in 1994	Marriage in 2004
<i>Nordic countries, Western Europe, and German-speaking countries</i>		
Austria	29.9	35.7
France	23.2	26.6
Germany	27.9	27.3
Netherlands	25.6	24.8
Norway	27.4	33.4
Sweden	34.6	37.1
<i>Southern Europe</i>		
Italy	7.3	8.5
Spain	19.7	26.5
<i>Central and South-Eastern Europe</i>		
Czechia	32.4	30.0
Poland	13.4	16.4
Romania	16.3	15.3

Note: These indicators are computed from the period data on divorces by year of marriage, cumulated over 15 years following marriages concluded in 1994 and 2004. More recent data for France and Germany pertain to marriages concluded in 2003, data for Italy refer to marriages from 2002. Data for Spain show dissolved marriages from 1998 instead of from 1994.

Source: Own computations from Eurostat (2020).

In most countries, divorce has become more widely available and accepted. In Western and Northern Europe and in most parts of Central and Eastern Europe, divorce rates increased sharply during the three decades between 1965 and 1995. During this period, divorce became common, affecting every second to third couple. Since 2000, divorce rates have broadly stabilised in the countries where divorce had been increasing rapidly. The total divorce rate reached levels of 0.4–0.5 in most countries of Western, Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe (Figure 10A.1 in the Appendix). At the same time, in Poland and in Southern European countries, where divorce had been increasing slowly until the early 1990s, the rise in divorce rates has accelerated since 1995. Thus, the cross-country differences in divorce rates have been declining. This trend has been fuelled by a greater acceptance of divorce and the liberalisation of divorce laws in more traditional and socially conservative societies. For instance, in Italy and Spain, previous requirements that couples have an extended period of legal separation before divorcing have been lifted (in 2005 in Spain and in 2015 in Italy), and divorce procedures have been simplified.

Despite some convergence, there are still sharp differences across European countries in the share of marriages ending in divorce and the duration of marriage at the time of dissolution. In the group of countries with higher divorce rates, which now also include Spain, between one-quarter (in the Netherlands) and 37 per cent (in Sweden) of marriages concluded in 2004 dissolved within 15 years (Table 10.2). Among the countries with a lower frequency of divorce, marital breakup within 15 years was much less common, ranging from 9 per cent in Italy to 16 per cent in Poland. Compared with the earlier ‘marriage cohort’ of 1994, the likelihood of divorce has broadly increased or stagnated in more recent cohorts. Highly educated women now have more stable marriages than their lower educated counterparts in an increasing number of European countries, including the Nordic countries, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (Matysiak et al. 2014). Divorce rates are also increasing among older

couples, including those with adult children; the rise of ‘grey divorce’ has been one of the key divorce trends in recent decades. However, due to the rise in cohabiting unions, divorce rates underestimate the prevalence of union dissolution. In all European countries, cohabiting couples are, on average, more likely than married couples to break up (Andersson et al. 2017).

4.3 Fertility Trends: The Shift towards Unstable, Delayed, and Sub-Replacement Fertility

Across Europe and highly developed countries outside of Europe, fertility trends have, in recent decades, been characterised by a shift towards sub-replacement period fertility rates and delayed parenthood. The fluctuations in the period TFR over time have been partly driven by changes in the timing of births (*tempo effect*). Particularly in periods when rapid social and economic changes have been occurring or family policy interventions have been implemented, couples often respond by changing the timing or the spacing of their births, rather than by reducing or expanding their ultimate family size (Sobotka et al. 2019; Thévenon and Gauthier 2011).

Source: Own computations from Council of Europe (2006), Eurostat (2020), Human Fertility Database (2020), and national statistical office data.

Figure 10.3 Period total fertility rate in European regions, 1960–2018

Figure 10.3 illustrates the main waves of fertility decline, from a universally higher fertility level in the early 1960s to a low fertility level today. Around the turn of the century, the period TFRs in many parts of Europe reached a ‘lowest low’ level at or below 1.3, with more than half of Europe’s population living in countries with such low fertility (Goldstein et al. 2009; Kohler et al. 2002). In the 2000s, period fertility rates saw a sustained recovery in most countries, fuelled in part by positive economic trends, falling unemployment, expanding family policies, and, in some countries, a rising share of migrant women with higher fertility rates (Bongaarts and Sobotka 2012; Goldstein et al. 2009). The gap between higher fertility countries in Western and Northern Europe and the other regions in Europe widened. Some

authors have interpreted this ‘bifurcation’ as a sign that countries and regions characterised by higher levels of gender equality, family-friendly policies, and a more stable economic environment have experienced a lasting shift towards sustained higher fertility rates (Rindfuss et al. 2016). However, the global financial crisis of 2008–2013 marked yet another trend reversal. Especially in the Nordic countries and the Western and Southern European countries, fertility rates levelled off or declined throughout the 2010s, with a later, but sharper fall reported in Eastern Europe after 2015 (Hellstrand et al. 2020). Southern Europe has emerged as the region with the lowest fertility rates (VID 2020). However, a sustained fertility decline has taken place in the 2010s across all countries that previously had higher fertility, with the Nordic countries, Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and several other countries in Europe, as well as the United States, reporting a decline in the TFR of 0.2–0.5 between 2010 and 2018. As a result, cross-country variation in period fertility rates declined in Europe during the 2010s, with most countries having a period TFR within a relatively narrow range of 1.4 and 1.7 in 2018 (VID 2020; see also Berrington in this volume).

The onset of the major decline in fertility after 1965 coincided in most countries with the beginning of the shift towards delayed parenthood, which has continued up to now. As a result of this ‘postponement transition’ (Kohler et al. 2002), reproductive timing in Europe has shifted from a relatively early to a late first birth pattern. The mean age at first birth has reached around 30 among women in the Nordic countries, the Western and Southern European countries, and the German-speaking countries; around 28 in Central Europe; and around 26 in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (see also Berrington in this volume). In all of these countries, the mean age at first birth has risen sharply from around 22–25 years in the mid-1970s (Figure 10A.2 in the Appendix). Teenage motherhood – which was relatively common in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe, as well as in the United Kingdom and a few other countries until the 2000s – has become increasingly rare, while fertility rates have fallen fast among young adult women under age 25 (UNFPA 2018). By contrast, in most countries, fertility rates have increased among women over age 30. The shift to a late first birth pattern has also meant that a rising number of women are planning and having children at late reproductive ages, including in their 40s (Beaujouan 2020). This trend has been accompanied by an increasing risk of infertility and by a wider use of ART⁵ (Sobotka and Beaujouan 2018). In 2015, ART accounted for 4–7 per cent of all births, contributing up to 0.1 to the TFR in some European countries, including in Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden (De Geyter et al. 2020).

In European countries with high immigration rates, migrants from higher fertility countries often retain higher fertility patterns in their host countries, and give a minor boost to the fertility rates in those countries (Sobotka 2008; Tønnessen 2019). In addition, migration among women is often interrelated with childbearing (see Andersson in this volume). Rising numbers of migrants have contributed to the sharp increase in the number and the share of births to parents of migrant or mixed origin in Europe (Bagavos 2019). For instance, in Austria, foreign-born women accounted for 26 per cent of the female population of reproductive age (15–49) and 34 per cent of all births in 2018 (Zeman et al. 2019). Changing family policies have also contributed to short-term shifts in fertility rates, especially in Central and Eastern European countries, where family policies have expanded substantially and changed frequently in the last two decades (Frejka and Gietel-Basten 2016; Sobotka et al. 2019).

4.4 Changes in the Number of Children: Will the ‘Two-Child Norm’ Remain Dominant?

In contrast to period TFR, trends in completed cohort fertility rates are not affected by the shifts in the timing of childbearing. In Western Europe, Southern Europe, and the Nordic countries, completed fertility started declining gradually among women born after the mid-1930s, who were having most of their children during the post-war baby boom era. In Central and Eastern Europe, completed fertility started falling among women born in the 1960s as a result of huge fertility declines in the 1990s (Frejka and Gietel-Basten 2016).

The magnitude of the cohort fertility declines varied by region. Family size was broadly stable among women in the Nordic countries born between 1945 and the late 1970s. In Western Europe, minor declines in cohort fertility ended among women born after 1970, with some countries (including France and the United Kingdom) seeing small upturns in family size among women born in the 1970s. In Germany, the long-term decline in cohort fertility also reversed among women born in the 1970s, possibly due in part to the adoption of family-friendly policies during the 2000s and 2010s (Sobotka et al. 2019). The completed fertility rate in Germany recovered from a low of 1.49 among women born in 1968 – one of the lowest levels in Europe – to 1.61 among women born 10 years later (VID 2020). Small upturns in cohort fertility are also observed in Eastern Europe, especially in Belarus and Russia, among women born in the mid-1970s. By contrast, cohort fertility has fallen most in Southern Europe and, more recently, in Central Europe as well.

Source: Human Fertility Database (2020); CFE Database (2020); Council of Europe (2006); VID (2018, 2020); National Statistical Offices.

Figure 10.4 Completed cohort fertility in European regions, women born 1930–78

When we look at cohort fertility in Europe among women born in the late 1970s – the most recent cohorts whose family size can be assessed at present – we observe a rift between the higher fertility countries in the North and in the West, with completed fertility at 1.7–2.0, and

very low fertility countries in the South, with completed fertility reaching the lowest levels of around 1.4 in Spain and Italy. Most countries in the other regions have relatively low cohort fertility levels that fall in-between these values, at 1.5–1.7 (Figure 10.4).

The seemingly similar patterns of cohort fertility decline in different parts of Europe mask different trends in fertility decline by birth order (Frejka and Sardon 2007). The earlier phase of fertility decline among women born between the 1930s and the early 1950s was largely driven by a shrinking share of large families with three or more children. Among women born between 1955 and 1970, the decline in fertility was driven mainly by declining progression rates to a second birth in Central and Eastern Europe; whereas in Southern Europe and German-speaking countries, it was driven primarily by declining first birth rates (Zeman et al. 2018). These region-specific pathways to low completed fertility are also visible in trends in the number of children born to women of various birth cohorts in selected countries (Figure 10.5). In the German-speaking countries, the low completed fertility levels are largely due to their relatively high levels of childlessness (as in the case of Austria); whereas in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the low fertility levels are attributable to a combination of large shares of women with only one child and small shares of women with larger families (as in the case of Russia) (Breton and Prioux 2009; Frejka and Gietel-Basten 2016). Meanwhile, the very low fertility in Southern Europe (especially in Greece, Italy, and Spain) is due to a combination of high levels of childlessness, large shares of women with only one child, and shrinking proportions of women with three or more children. For example, only 9 per cent of Spanish women born in 1974 had three or more children. By contrast, higher fertility countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden, and United Kingdom do not necessarily have low levels of childlessness, but have smaller shares of women with only one child and larger shares of families with three or more children (Frejka and Sardon 2007). Up to now, changes in the number of children born have not dented the dominance of the ‘two-child norm’. A two-child family ideal is broadly shared across the continent (Sobotka and Beaujouan 2014). In most European countries, the share of women with two children has been stable, and has remained at around 40 per cent among women born in the mid-1970s, with a range of 36 per cent in Hungary to 50 per cent in Czechia.

However, levels of childlessness vary considerably across Europe. In the past, the main split ran between the state-socialist countries in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe with lower levels of childlessness and the countries of Western, Northern, and Southern Europe with higher levels of childlessness (Brzozowska 2015; Kreyenfeld and Konietzka 2017; Sobotka 2017). This divide is also reflected in the negative attitudes towards voluntary childlessness that have been observed in Central and Eastern Europe (Merz and Liefbroer 2012). Some countries have much higher levels of childlessness than others. In Greece and Spain, around one in four women born in 1978 is permanently childless. In the German-speaking countries and in Italy, Finland, and the Netherlands, around one in five women is childless (Figure 10.5) (Sobotka 2017; VID 2020). In most countries, childlessness is more common among men than among women (e.g., Jalovaara et al. 2019). Surveys indicate that permanent childlessness is not consciously planned or intended by most of the women and men who ultimately remain childless: according to the 2011 Eurobarometer survey, on average across EU countries, only seven per cent of men and five per cent of women of reproductive age (18 to 40) intended to remain childless (Mietinen and Szalma 2014).

The association between education and fertility among women, and its trends over time, differ across European countries and regions. In three of the Nordic countries, Denmark,

Source: Human Fertility Database (2020); CFE Database (2020); Council of Europe (2006); VID (2018, 2020); National Statistical Offices (published data and own computations).

Figure 10.5 Parity distribution (family size) in selected European countries, women born 1935–75

Norway, and Sweden, completed fertility has fully converged among women with different levels of education born in the early 1970s (Jalovaara et al. 2019). However, the most typical trend among women born in the 1940s–1970s has been the persistence of differences in fertility level by education, either due to a parallel decline in completed fertility across all educational groups, as in the case of Spain, or due to relatively stable differentials over time and across cohorts, as in the case of France (Davie and Mazuy 2010; Sobotka et al. 2017). Yet another pattern can be observed in Eastern Europe and in many countries in South-Eastern Europe, including in Romania and Serbia, where there has been a steep and, in some countries, further widening negative educational gradient in fertility (Sobotka et al. 2017).

4.5 Family Context of Childbearing and Child Rearing: The Eroding Relevance of Marriage

In the 1970s–2010s in Europe, the previously close links between marriage, intimacy, and parenthood progressively eroded, and the timing and sequencing of marriage and childbearing became increasingly disconnected. The shift away from childbearing within marriage can be best illustrated by the trends in the share of children born outside of marriage (Figure 10.6).

Note: Owing to missing data on Ukraine for some years, trends for Russia are shown instead of trends for the whole Eastern European region. Data on South-Eastern Europe are not shown due to missing data for some countries and periods.

Source: Council of Europe (2006); Eurostat (2020); National Statistical Offices.

Figure 10.6 *Share of births outside of marriage (in per cent) in European regions, 1960–2018*

The Nordic countries were forerunners in this trend, with the share of non-marital births in these countries increasing rapidly between 1970 and 1995. Later, this increasing trend slowed down and then levelled off after 2000 at around 50 per cent of births, with a moderate rise noted in the most recent period. A similar sharp rise in extra-marital childbearing began about a decade

later, after 1980, in Western Europe. In Central and Eastern Europe and the German-speaking countries, the rise in non-marital childbearing accelerated after 1990. Subsequently, in the late 1990s, the share of extra-marital births rose sharply in Southern Europe, and especially in Italy and Spain. Today, most countries in Europe report the largest shares of births outside marriage on record, with 10 countries – including Bulgaria, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Sweden – reporting that over a half of all children were born outside of marriage in 2018. At the same time, there appears to be a ceiling to the increase in extra-marital childbearing, as the increasing trend has recently slowed down markedly or stopped in all parts of Europe except Southern Europe. A reversal in non-marital childbearing took place in Eastern Europe, especially in Belarus and Russia, where the share of births outside of marriage peaked in 2004–2005, and declined rapidly thereafter.

Most of the increase in non-marital childbearing was occurring among cohabiting couples (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012), and to a lesser extent among couples in less standard living arrangements. Giving birth as a single mother is a rather rare event: typically, fewer than 10 per cent of all births are to single mothers, with the share being higher for first births. In Europe, especially high levels of single motherhood are reported in Russia and the United Kingdom (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). However, family arrangements have become more complex, and periods spent with a single mother have become more frequent in the course of a child's life due to family instability – divorce, separation, and re-partnering. At the same time, many single mothers start cohabiting with a partner or marry later in life (Jalovaara and Andersson 2018; Thomson 2014). Among children under age three living in the EU, almost one in 10 (9.6 per cent) was living with a single mother in the early 2010s. The United Kingdom was the main outlier, with twice as many children (19.5 per cent) living with a single mother (VID 2015). In an analysis of the prevalence of single motherhood among all children, Härkönen (2017) reported a gradual increase in most countries during the 1990s–early 2010s. In 2006–2010, between 10 and 20 per cent of children in most European countries lived with a single mother, with lower shares in Southern Europe, Serbia, and Slovenia, higher shares of 22–23 per cent in Ireland and the United Kingdom, and a very high share of 27 per cent in Russia.

The rising complexity of partnership trajectories and the higher frequency of re-partnering suggests that having children with more than one partner, or 'multiple partner fertility', has increased over time. While the existing empirical data on time trends are scarce and difficult to estimate (Guzzo 2014; Stykes and Guzzo 2018), this phenomenon has become more visible and is being analysed more frequently, especially in the United States, where 20–25 per cent of all mothers have their children with multiple partners (Stykes and Guzzo 2018). Multiple partner fertility appears to be less common in Europe. Like in the United States (Monte 2019), it is especially frequent in Europe among women and men with larger families. Among Norwegian men born between 1935 and the early 1960s, the share who had children with multiple partners by age 45 increased from a low of about 5 per cent to around 13 per cent (Lappegård et al. 2011). While multiple partner fertility is often linked to becoming a parent early and to having unintended pregnancies (Guzzo 2014), one of the most persistent underlying patterns of this phenomenon is its educational gradient: having children with multiple partners is much more common among lower educated women and men, who often have more complex partnership trajectories (Lappegård et al. 2011; Jalovaara and Andersson 2018; Jalovaara and Kreyenfeld 2020). Paradoxically, men with lower levels of education have the most polarised family distributions, as they are more likely than their better educated counterparts to either

be childless or have a larger family size, often with multiple partners (Lappegård et al. 2011). From a child's perspective, high levels of family instability and re-partnering imply that many children experience the break-up of a parental union as well as living with step-siblings (see Zartler in this volume). In an analysis of Finnish register data for 2003–2009, Jalovaara and Andersson (2018) found that among all children born in a married or cohabiting union, 41 per cent experienced a parental separation before age 15; and that the likelihood of experiencing a parental separation before age 15 ranged from 29 per cent for those with a highly educated mother to 65 per cent for those with a low educated mother.

5. CONCLUSIONS: SHIFTING FAMILY PATTERNS ACROSS EUROPE

Family behaviour in Europe has been fundamentally reshaped in the last half a century. Family changes proceeded at different speeds across the continent, but even the countries that initially seemed 'immune' to this transformation eventually experienced shifts towards lower and delayed fertility and marriage, greater union instability, more diverse families and living arrangements, and 'disordered' family life course pathways. These shifts have been especially rapid in a number of countries where, until the 1980s, the erosion of the traditional family was relatively slow and the influence of the Catholic Church on family attitudes and legislation remained strong, including in Ireland, Italy, and Spain. Changes in family behaviour have also been swift in many parts of Central and South-Eastern Europe that underwent a transition from state socialism to liberal democracy, including in Czechia, Hungary, and Slovenia. Eastern Europe (especially Belarus and Russia) is the only broader region that appears to have taken a different path that is characterised, at least in part, by a return of marriage and a high normative valuation of the 'traditional' family. This re-traditionalisation process is reflected in both the official rhetoric of these countries and in the actual behaviour of the population, as the share of children born outside of marriage has been continuously declining in Eastern Europe since 2005.

In recent decades, the Nordic countries, and especially Sweden, have often been perceived as forerunners in emerging family trends, but also in innovative family policy approaches and gender egalitarianism (Goldscheider et al. 2015). Recently, family transformations in a number of other regions have 'caught up' with the earlier shifts in the Nordic countries. Are new trends emerging in the Nordic countries? Perhaps the most notable recent trend in Sweden and other countries in Northern Europe is a broad stabilisation of family behaviour, especially in the frequency of marriage, divorce, and the level of fertility among women and men born in the 1970s (Ohlsson-Wijk et al. 2020). At the same time, recent period fertility declines in the Nordic countries suggest that there will be shifts towards smaller family sizes, higher levels of childlessness, and even later family formation among women born in the 1980s and 1990s. These trends call into question earlier predictions of a family 'comeback' in the region (Goldscheider et al. 2015).

Education has become a key marker of social status and economic resources, with low and medium educated individuals, and especially men, increasingly lagging behind their counterparts with a university degree (Boertien and Permanyer 2019; Adsera 2017). This trend has been amplified by a shift towards more educational homogamy and assortative mating (Van Bavel 2012). Lower education is closely linked with partnership complexity and instability,

and, especially among men, with a greater likelihood of remaining childless and single over the life course. Cohort data for women and men born before the 1970s do not yet show a consistent pattern of reversals in the previously observed associations between education, fertility, union formation, and marriage. However, recent research has suggested that higher education is becoming a ‘bonus’ that improves the chances of forming a partnership for women as well as for men (De Hauw et al. 2017). Gender equality matters as well: highly educated women are more likely to be married in more gender-equal societies (Kalmijn 2013).

How do the recent family trends fit within the broader theoretical frameworks of family change? By and large, especially at the level of countries, the SDT captures well the European-wide shifts in family behaviours in recent decades. Arguably, the main exceptions to these general trends are the Eastern European countries, where the ‘pattern of disadvantage’ framework appears to be more pertinent, especially in explaining the shifts in childbearing outside of marriage. It appears that applying the pattern of disadvantage framework, together with the GR perspective, can improve our understanding of the shifting social stratification in partnerships, marriages, living arrangements, and family stability. However, country-level trends in family behaviours do not lend support to the arguments that gender equality and economic and social development will usher in a lasting reversal in family trends towards higher fertility, more marriage, and more stable unions.

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NOTES

1. A small share of people who are formally married are not living with their spouse and are either living independently or cohabiting with another partner. However, in most European countries where divorce is relatively easy to obtain, people tend to dissolve their marriage before or relatively soon after moving out to live independently or with a new partner.
2. Since the term LAT first appeared in 1999, researchers of non-residential partnerships have followed different definitions and conceptualisations of these relationships, considering factors such as their length, stability, level of commitment, typology (including or excluding dating relationships), and whether they are voluntary (Pasteels et al. 2017). Surveys on family-related behaviour also offer different conceptualisations of LAT relationships. For instance, the core of the Generations and Gender Survey question on LAT, analysed by Pasteels et al. (2017) asks: ‘Are you currently having an intimate (couple) relationship with someone you are not living with?’.
3. According to the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions survey from 2018, among young adults aged 25–29, only 8 per cent were living with their parents in the Nordic countries, compared with 24 per cent in Western Europe, 29 per cent in the German-speaking countries, and 55 per cent in Central Europe (data exclude Croatia). Two out of three young adults were still living with their parents in Southern Europe (65 per cent, own computation from Eurostat 2019b data).
4. Data for Finland show that the share of young adults co-residing with other people who are not their partners, parents, or relatives peaked at 10–12 per cent at ages 20–22 for women and at ages 21–24 for men in 2016. Between 2005 and 2016, this share increased the most at ages 21–29, and faster among men (by 3.8 percentage points on average) than among women (by 2.4 percentage points on average) (own computations from Statistics Finland 2020).

5. Assisted reproductive technology involves medical procedures that handle both human oocytes and sperm or embryos for the purpose of establishing a pregnancy. ART includes in vitro fertilisation (including intracytoplasmic sperm injection), frozen embryo and oocyte replacement, use of donor eggs, and other methods.

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APPENDIX

Source: Own computations from Eurostat (2020).

Figure 10A.1 Total divorce rate in selected European countries, 1960–2018

Source: Own computations from Council of Europe (2006), Eurostat (2020), Human Fertility Database (2020), and national statistical office data.

Figure 104.2 Mean age at first birth, women in selected European countries, 1970–2018