

Crisis or cultural change? Explaining the growing nonmarital fertility in Romania after 1989

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1. Introduction

Before 1989, in Romania transition to adulthood was occurring at early ages, marriage was universal and divorces were rare, fertility was over the replacement level. This demographic behaviour was sustained by incentives for marriage and pro-natalist measures. Moreover, during the 1980s legal abortions were limited and modern contraception not encouraged. Most of other Eastern European countries shared this general picture.

After 1990 many sharp and rapid changes in demographic behaviours have taken place in Eastern countries (Table 1): postponement of marriages (and decline in marriage rates), postponement of first birth and decline of TFR. Consequently, the very high level of adolescent fertility has declined. However, marriage postponement has not translated entirely into postponement of first birth. The interval between marriage and first birth has narrowed, because of the very high and rapid increase of the proportions of nonmarital births.

These trends are in line with what happened and is still happening in Western European countries (with some exceptions for TFR, where levels are sustained by welfare policies). However, what is really surprising in Eastern countries is the rapidity of the increase of nonmarital births, although age at marriage and age at first birth are still very low.

Table 1. Some indicators of union formation and reproductive behaviour in Eastern European countries, and comparison with other Western countries.

		Poland	Hungary	Czech Rep.	Slovak Rep.	Romania	Bulgaria	France	Spain	Sweden
Mean Age at First Marriage (1)	1980	22.7	21.2	21.5	21.9	21.5	21.3	23	23.4	26
	1990	22.6	21.9	21.6	21.9	22	21.4	25.6	25.3	27.5
	2000	23.9	24.6	24.5	24	23.4	24.1	27.8	27.8	30.2
Mean Age at First Birth (2)	1980	23.4	22.4	22.4	22.7	22.4	21.9	25	25	25.3
	1990	23.3	23.1	22.5	22.6	22.7	22.2	27	26.8	26.3
	2000	24.5	25.1	24.9	24.2	23.6	23.5	28.7	29.1	27.9
(2) – (1)	1980	0.7	1.2	0.9	0.8	0.9	0.6	2	1.6	-0.7
	1990	0.7	1.2	0.9	0.7	0.7	0.8	1.4	1.5	-1.2
	2000	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.2	0.2	-0.6	0.9	1.3	-2.3
TFR	1980	2.26	1.91	2.1	2.31	2.43	2.05	1.95	2.2	1.68
	1990	2.05	1.87	1.9	2.09	1.84	1.82	1.78	1.36	2.13
	2000	1.34	1.32	1.14	1.29	1.31	1.26	1.89	1.24	1.54
Age Specific Fertility Rate (age 15-19)	1980	32.9	68	53.1	48.2	72.3	81.2	25.4	25.8	15.8
	1990	31.5	39.5	44.7	45.5	51.5	69.9	13.3	11.9	14.1
	1995	21.1	29.5	20.1	32.3	42	49.6	10	7.8	7.7
Nonmarital Birth %	1980	4.8	7.1	5.6	5.7	2.8	10.9	11.4	3.9	39.7
	1990	6.2	13.1	8.6	7.6	4	12.4	30.1	9.6	47
	2000	12.1	29	21.8	18.3	25.5	38.4	42.6	17.7	55.3
Median Age at First Sexual Intercourse	c. 1950	20.9	19.1	18.4	19.5	20.1	19.9	18.9	20.1	--
	c. 1970	19.6	18.5	17.8	18.8	19.5	18.7	17.6	19.1	--

Source: Billari, 2004

In Romania in 2000, 25.5% of births were out-of-wedlock, age at first marriage of females was 23.4 and age at first birth was 23.6. In the same year in Spain, 17.7% of births were out-of-wedlock, age at first marriage of females was 27.8 and age at first birth was 29.1. Consequently, it is very important to study the first steps of marital and reproductive behaviour in Eastern European countries.

2. *Aim of the paper*

A main question arises: in which extent are these changes the result of a choice or of some constraints? The rapid increase of nonmarital births, generally concentrated among first births, is a sign of a new form of entry into motherhood, freely chosen by women and couples or, rather, is a clue of marriage postponement due to economic restriction and uncertainty?

Another possible explanation is the diffusion of sexual intercourse among unmarried women. The difference between the median age at first intercourse and the median age at marriage widens from 1-2 years for Romanian cohorts born around 1960 to 4-5 years for the cohorts born twenty years after. In Romania, the proportion of women virgin by 16 and 18 years old has declined since cohorts born during the 1970s, who were adolescent during the 1990s (Table 2). At the same time contraception is diffusing, particularly among young women. The proportion using contraception at first intercourse grows from 25.5% for women born in 1972-81 to 59.2% among women born in 1980-86.

Table 2. Percentage of virgin women by 16 and 18 years old, by cohorts. Romania

Cohort	% of virgins by 16 years	% of virgins by 18 years
1985-1986	78.13	37.88
1980-1984	89.31	51.57
1975-1979	90.52	59.72
1970-1974	91.89	73.75
1965-1969	93.05	71.81
1960-1964	91.15	71.88
1955-1959	91.90	68.02
1950-1954	95.29	71.37
1945-1949	84.75	60.09
1920-1944	92.47	68.82
Total	90.83	66.06

Source: Survey on Demography and Life Styles on Women, 2004

Which is the relationship between sexuality, use of contraception, union formation and entry into motherhood, in this context of rapid changes? Is Romania following the pattern of Western European countries? Which groups are forerunners of these changes? As our first descriptive analyses show that early sex is more and more diffused among less educated people and in villages (Oanes, 2005), may we say that Romania is following the pattern of second demographic transition?

3. *Data and methods*

New individual survey data are now available to go deep into these behaviours: the Demography and Life Styles on Women in Romania, performed in 2004 on a representative sample of 1,982 women aged 18-84 years; the three national surveys on Reproductive Health (1993, 1996, 1999), coordinated by the Centre of Disease Control of Atlanta – USA; and a comparative international research on sexual behaviour of university students performed in 2002 (forthcoming).

In order to answer the questions suggested above, we will perform differential analyses concerning the steps of marital and reproductive behaviour (first sexual intercourse, use of

contraception, type of union, marital and nonmarital birth), by means of regression models. The results will be connected with the descriptive analysis of the reproductive behaviour of cohorts.

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