Marital intentions and realization around the Great Recession in the Netherlands, France and Hungary

Submission for the European Population Conference 2020, extended abstract
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Background

Several studies have looked into the demographic consequences of the Great Recession, especially on fertility, while the number of studies for consequences on marriages is lower and they often use macro-level data. The few exceptions include studies that found reduced household and partnership formation (e.g. Lee & Painter 2013), reduced marriage rates and postponement (e.g. Sobotka et al. 2011) as a result of the economic crisis. For the US, studies found either no change in partnership formation (Morgan et al. 2011; Cherlin et al. 2013) or lower likelihood of marriage among low-SES women (Schneider & Hastings 2015). Our analysis is also motivated by the changing institution of marriage. Marriage is becoming an individualized choice, increasingly decoupled from fertility, and cohabitation is emerging as an alternative, thus the recent economic crisis may have different effects on marriages than previous recessions did.

But how economic factors may matter for marriage? First, there are direct expenses (e.g. the wedding party) associated with marriage. Second, expectations about material standards, housing, employment status and security, etc. are attached to marriage. Third, marital status may have consequences for taxation and government benefits. Fourth, decreased fertility intentions or partnership quality may mediate the effect of an economic crisis on marriages and marital intentions (Sobotka et al. 2011). And fifth, uncertain future prospects may in themselves reduce the level of intentions, but may also increase it (reduction of uncertainty). Couples – especially people with low education – may turn to marriage as a source of safety during times of hardship and unpredictability (Friedman et al. 1994).

If we look at changes in marriage behaviour around the Great Recession, we can see that the three examined countries represent three pathways in the new millennium: there has been a steady decline in France, ups and downs in the Netherlands, and a decline followed by a marriage boom in Hungary (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1: Total female first marriage rates in France, Hungary and the Netherlands, 2000–2017
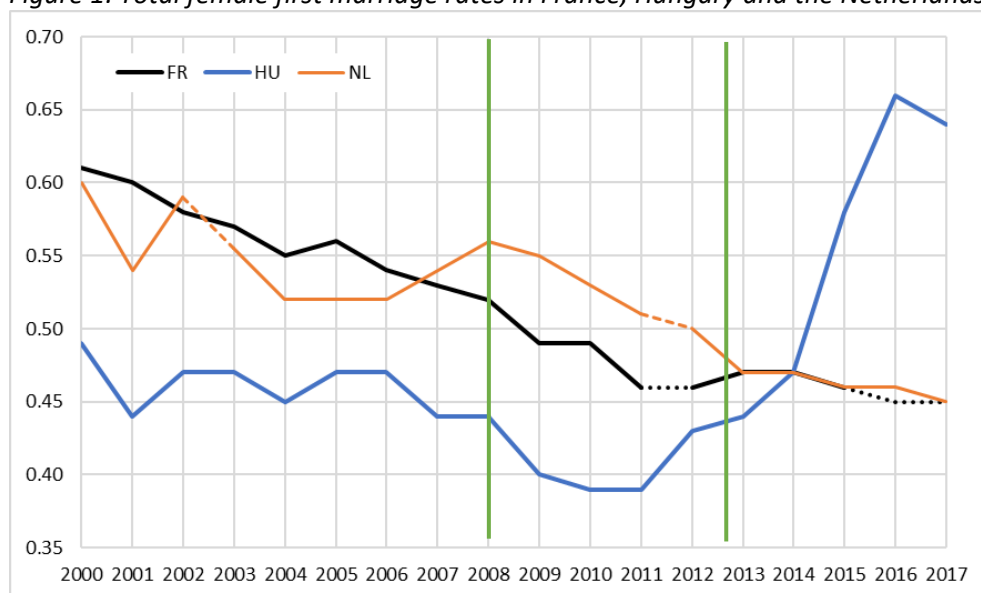
Sources: Eurostat marriage indicators, extracted on 11 October 2019; Hungarian Central Statistical Office.

Research questions and hypotheses

The empirical analysis is centred around three research questions.

The first question is about how the *level of marital intentions* changed during the Great Recession. We formulate two alternative hypotheses. First, marital intentions may have decreased due to worsening economic and labour market prospects, general insecurity, decreased fertility intentions, among other reasons. (H1a). Second, marital intentions may have also increased due to lower level of realization and insecurity reduction processes at play during the economic crisis (H1b).

The second question concerns how *socioeconomic differences* in marital intentions changed. We expect that inequalities emerged because people with low education are more "sensitive" to adverse economic conditions (H2).

And finally, the third question is about how the *realization* of marital intentions changed. We expect that realization decreased and postponement increased during the recession (H3).

Data and methods

We use data from the three waves of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) for France, Hungary and the Netherlands, supplemented by the latest wave of the Turning Points of the Life Course survey (the Hungarian GGS) and the fourth wave of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Survey (the Dutch GGS). We select cohabiting respondents aged between 20 and 49 for the analysis. We exclude respondents with inconsistent sex or birth dates across waves and respondents who lived with a same-sex partner in any wave. The number of cases in our subsample tend to be rather low in certain cases, especially in wave three and four and when we only look at respondents with marital intentions.

The successive waves of the surveys did not take place at the same time in the examined countries and their relationship to the periods of recession also differ (*Figure 2*). While the Netherlands had two waves before the crisis, the other two countries had only one. Both France and Hungary had two waves during the recession, the Dutch survey had one, and there was no wave after the crisis in France. As a result, when we look at changes between successive waves, we need to keep in mind that changes between waves 1 and 2 refer to the pre-recession period in the Netherlands but not in the other two countries.

Figure 2: Timing of survey waves (boxes) and periods of recession (lines) by country
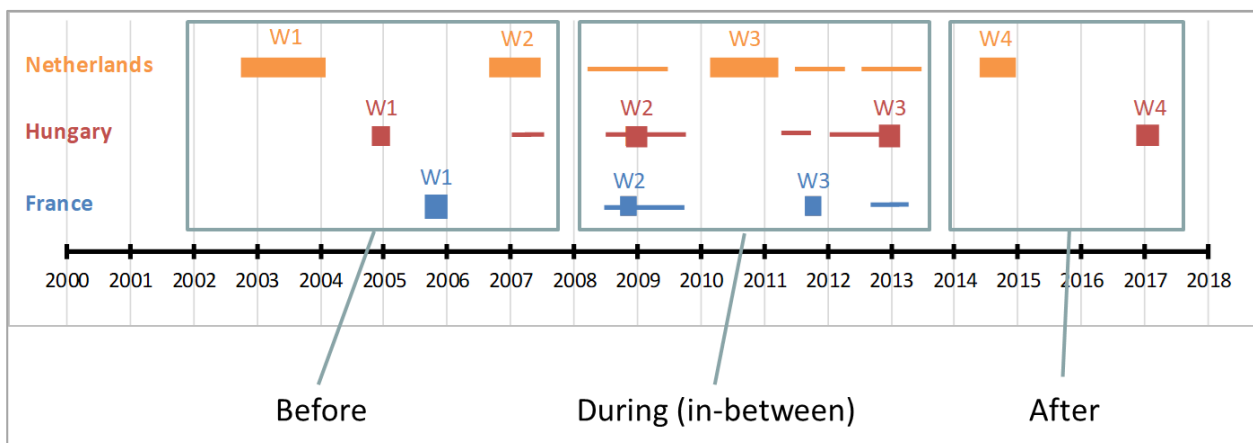
The marital intention of cohabiting respondents is measured with the following question: "Do you intend to marry your partner during the next 3 years?". The answer categories are: definitely yes, probably yes, probably no, definitely no, don't know. We treat respondents who chose any of the first two options as having marital intentions.

The realization of marital intentions is measured with a categorical variable with four values, similarly to the outcome variable often used in studies on the realization of fertility intentions. (1) Planned marriage: the respondent had marital intention in wave t and got married between wave t and $t + 1$. Respondents who had intentions in wave t and were still cohabiting with the same partner in wave $t + 1$ were labelled as (2) postponers if they still had marital intention in wave $t + 1$ or (3) abandoners if they gave up their intention. (4) Respondents whose cohabiting union broke up between wave t and $t + 1$ formed a separate category.

For the analysis of the level of intentions (questions 1 & 2), we employ random-effect logistic regression models on the pooled sample of all countries and waves, with an interaction term between country and wave. When the changing socio-economic differences are in focus (question 2), a three-way interaction between education, country and wave are added. For the analysis of the realization of intentions (question 3), we use multinomial logistic regression models on changes between pairs of waves. Control variables are basically the same for all regression models: sex, age, born abroad; education, employment status; parenthood status, fertility intention (within 3 years); previously married, length of current partnership, satisfaction with relationship; partner's age, education, employment status; parental separation in childhood; religiosity; number of months between interviews.

Results

The level of marital intentions was highest in Hungary (60%) before the Great Recession and around 35–40% in the Netherlands and France (*Figure 3, panel a*). Random effect regression results indicate that the level of intentions significantly decreased in France and Hungary after the economic crisis started but returned to its earlier level during the second half of the recession (*Figure 3, panel b*). Dutch cohabitees, however, did not have lower levels of intentions during the crisis than before, but their intentions decreased after the recession was over.

Figure 3: Cohabiting respondents aged 20–49 with positive short-term marital intentions in France, Hungary and the Netherlands

a) Descriptive results (%)
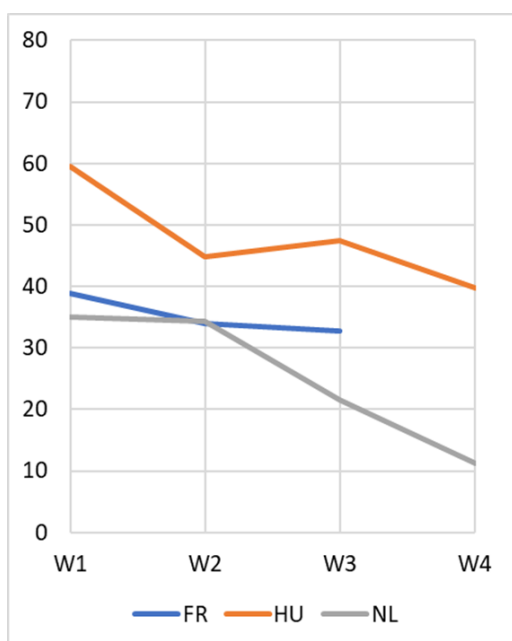
b) Results of random-effect logistic regression models with controls (odds ratios, reference: France, wave 1)
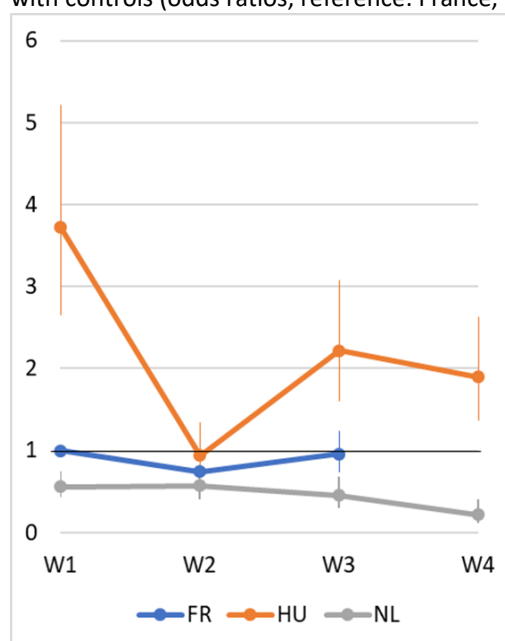

Regarding educational differences in the level of marital intentions (table not reported), there is a positive educational gradient in Hungary. The recession seemed to have affected all educational groups in Hungary but respondents with tertiary (and to some extent secondary) education soon "recovered", while low-educated persons did not. We cannot see any educational differences or changes by education in the other two countries.

What happened to these intentions? The rate of realization was highest in the Netherlands and lowest in Hungary (*Figure 4*). It was constant over time in Hungary, while it increased in the other two countries between W2 and W3 and decreased between W3 and W4 in the Netherlands. Results from multinomial logistic regression models (not reported here) show that the rate of realization actually decreased during the crisis in Hungary and more cohabitees postponed their marriage than earlier. In France

and the Netherlands – contrary to Hungary and what we expected – realization increased and postponement decreased during the recession.

Figure 4: The realization or change of positive marital intentions of cohabiting respondents aged 20–49 between survey waves (%)
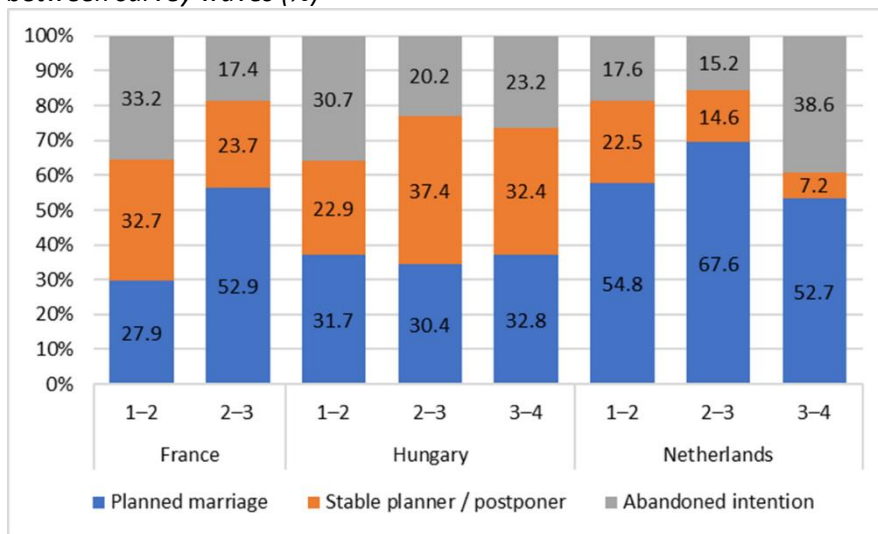
Discussion

Our first hypothesis about the lowered level of marital intentions during the Great Recession (H1a) was confirmed for Hungary and France but we found no change in marital intentions related to (the start of) the economic recession in the Netherlands.

Our second hypothesis about emerging social inequalities in marital intentions during the crisis was confirmed for Hungary, where we found a positive educational gradient and a lasting negative impact of the Great Recession on people with at most primary education. However, there seem to be no educational differences in any examined period in the Netherlands and France. These results may reflect the different meaning of marriage in different parts of Europe (marriage as an individualized choice in the Western countries and marriage as a life transition for the advantaged in Hungary).

We found some support for our third hypothesis for Hungary, where realization of marital intentions decreased and postponement increased during the crisis. However, the results are the opposite for the other two countries than for Hungary. Taking the certainty of intentions into account may help understand the result that realization was more likely during the crisis than before it in the two Western European countries.

Future plans

We plan to improve the analysis the following ways. First, we wish to add the Hungarian refreshment sample of respondents aged 18–49 who was first asked in wave 3 (2012/13) and then followed-up in wave 4 (2016/17) in order to have more cases and respondents aged below 29 for Hungary. Second, we also plan to take the certainty of intentions (differentiating between "definitely yes" and "probably yes") and macro-level economic indicators (e.g. consumer confidence index) into account. The certainty of intentions may be an important factor for realization: e.g. engaged couples or couples who have already set the date of the wedding and started organizing it are more likely to follow through than cohabiting couples who are only considering marriage.

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