

The “Retreat from Marriage” Eastern European way: Educational Gradient in Transition from Cohabitation to Marriage in Lithuania and Belarus

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Extended abstract

Introduction

Cohabitation in many developed countries became the key feature of the family change. However, the role of cohabitation in family life varies across the countries: in some, it became an alternative to marriage, while in the others it is still a stage in a family formation process (Sobotka, Toulemon 2008). Moreover, in some countries, like the US, cohabitation, along with other forms of family behavior, became socially stratified and it concentrates at the bottom of the social ladder (Carlson 2018), while there is more diversity in the Western and Northern Europe (Kalmijn 2013). Besides, the socially uneven retreat from marriage is seen as the consequence, but also as a cause of deepening socio-economic inequalities (DeRose et al. 2018).

In many countries of CEE cohabitation proliferated after the 1990s, which coincided with the dramatic societal change and increase in vulnerability and uncertainty of the individual life-course context. However, transitional paths of the CEE countries took diverse directions and resulted in various forms of political economies (Bohle, Greskovits 2012), which resulted in the variety of junctions of socio-economic and family inequalities.

So far, demographic literature extensively scrutinized the family formation changes after 1990 in CEE and focused on timing, determinants of cohabitation and its role in family life. However, the majority of the evidence covers the second half of the 20th century, as it is mainly based on the *Generations and Gender Survey* conducted in the early 2000s. Thus, the current developments are left out of the sight and there is almost no evidence on the progression of the family formation changes during the dynamic period of the consolidation of the capitalism, of the austerity policies implemented after the 2008 crisis and of the welfare state-building.

In this paper, we raise several questions. How the "retreat from marriage" progressed in CEE countries with different developmental paths? Could we distinguish socially stratified patterns of cohabitation across countries? To answer these questions we analyze the family formation trends in

the birth cohorts 1970-1984 in Lithuania and Belarus across educational and gender groups. We focus on the type of the first partnership and transition out of the cohabitation to marriage.

Our analysis is based on very recent *Families and Inequalities Survey* (2019), Lithuania, and *Generations and Gender Survey 2020 Wave 1*, Belarus (2017).

Data and methods

For the study we use two very recent datasets: *Families and Inequalities Survey* (2019), Lithuania (www.kartosirseimos.lt) and *Generations and Gender Survey 2020 Wave 1*, Belarus (2017) (www.ggp-i.org). The *Families and Inequalities Survey* is part of the bigger project *Families, Inequalities and Demographic Processes* (2018-2021) aimed at unveil interconnections between family life and system of inequalities. The project is based on the multi-method study design and along with the representative survey includes life history interviews (88 life histories collected). The project is funded by Lithuanian Research Council.

Families and Inequalities Survey focus on 1970-1984 birth cohort. It is a representative survey with an effective sample size of 3000 respondents. The questionnaire includes various topics, such as lifestyle and consumption, social mobility, social origin, and parental family; value attitudes and religiosity; intergenerational relationships; partnership and fertility histories; partnership and gender relationships; childcare and parenting; housing and living conditions; employment; subjective health. Based on matching indicators of the two surveys we created the pooled dataset (N= 5859), which includes partnership and fertility histories recorded on the monthly accuracy and encompass individuals born between 1970 and 1984.

Our main dependent variables are the type of the first partnership and transition from cohabitation (first) to marriage. Process time measured in months; respondents followed five years after the start of cohabitation, right-hand censoring performed. The main independent variable is education, recorded based on the ISCED scale and grouped into three large categories: low (ISECD 0-2), middle (ISCED 3-4), high (ISCED 6-8). We also consider the education of the partner. Other control variables are parity-pregnancy status (childless and non-pregnant, childless and pregnant, and with children), age at the first partnership, respondent's birth cohort, parental divorce, urban-rural living area.

We performed descriptive analysis and event history modeling techniques to identify the demographic and socio-economic factors, which have an impact on the transition from cohabitation to marriage.

Results

Descriptive results

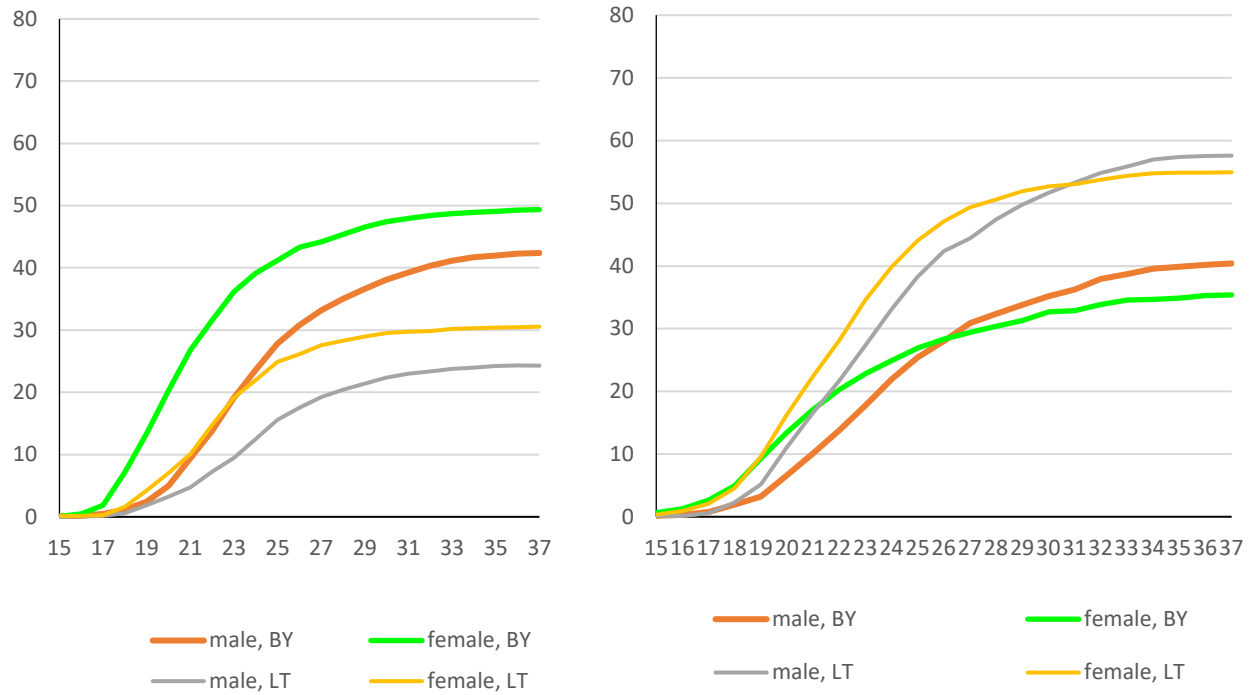
Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 present the cumulative percent of first partnerships, which started as direct marriage or cohabitation by gender and country. Analysis reveals that direct marriage still plays a more substantial role in the family formation process in Belarus than in Lithuania. In the former 50 percent of females and 42 percent of males of the birth cohort, 1970-1984 started their first partnership as the direct marriage, while in Lithuania the share is correspondingly 30 percent and 23 percent. Thus, in Belarus half of the cohort under study by the age of 35 had experienced direct marriage, while in Lithuania only app. 1/3 of females and app. ¼ of males. formed their family as direct marriage. Moreover, as it is portrayed in Fig. 1, direct marriage is conducted at the younger ages in Belarus. Besides, in both countries, there is a gender gap in starting the partnership as direct marriage with women forming a first partnership as marriage more frequently than men.

As it could be expected, in Belarus cohabitation is less regular life course event than in Lithuania. (Fig.2). By the age of 35 years, the first partnership as cohabitation was experienced by the 40 percent Belarussian males and 35 percent of females, while in Lithuania correspondingly 57 percent and 55 percent. In both countries, females start the first partnership as cohabitation at a younger age.

In the next step of descriptive analysis, we observed the transition from cohabitation to marriage by education. Fig. 3 shows the cumulative percent of cohabitees entering marriage by educational groups and the age at marriage. We observe large educational differences in converting cohabitation to marriage in Lithuania (upper pane) and almost uniform transition to marriage by education in Belarus (lower pane).

Fig.1. First partnership as direct marriage, and sex, cumulative percent by age and sex, cumulative percent

Fig.2. First partnership as cohabitation, by age and sex, cumulative percent



Source: Families and Inequalities Survey 2019; Generations and Gender Survey 2020 Belarus

67 percent of high and 61 percent of middle educated Lithuanian men after living in cohabitation entered marriage while the share for low educated men is substantially lower and levels at 42 percent. A very similar trend is observed for females: 40 percent of cohabiting women experienced the transition to marriage, while among the middle and high educated women the share is almost double (73 percent). It could be noted, that middle educated females living in cohabitation tend to marry earlier than high educated, but by the age of 30 educational differences in timing of transition disappears.

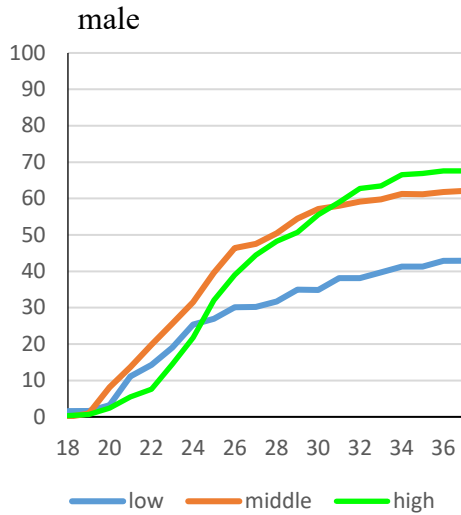
In contrast to Lithuania, the educational gap is almost absent in Belarus. By the age of 35 78 percent of Belarussian men who lived in cohabitation already experienced the transition to marriage, while among the low educated the share is 67 percent. Transition from cohabitation to marriage among Belarussian females is not educationally stratified. There are no educational differences by the level reached in the transition from cohabitation to marriage at the age of 35, however, at the younger ages, we see women with low and middle education entering marriage more frequently in contrast to highly educated women.

Overall, our descriptive analysis proves a) different role of cohabitation in the family formation process in Lithuania and Belarus, b) the "retreat from marriage" is socially stratified in Lithuania,

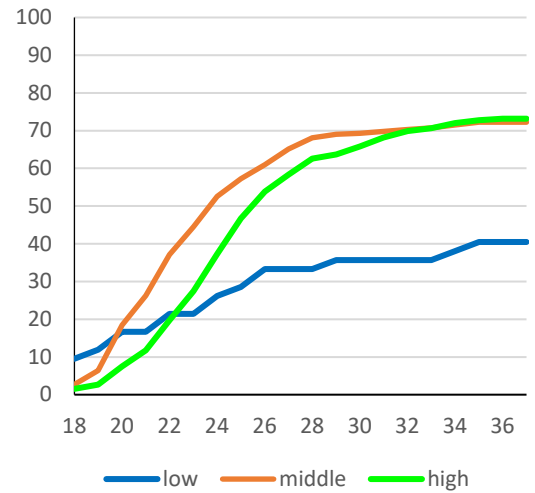
where lower educated cohabitantes to much lower degree enter the marriages in contrast to high and middle educated. In Belarus conversion of cohabitation to marriage seems not to be dependent on education, but is determined by the set of other factors.

Fig. 3. The transition from cohabitation to marriage by education, gender, country (age at marriage)

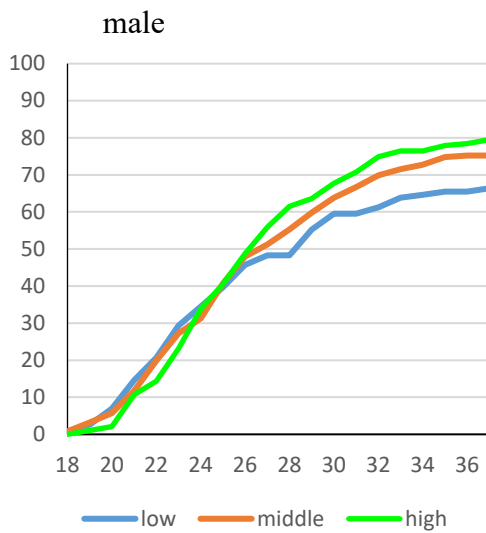
Lithuania



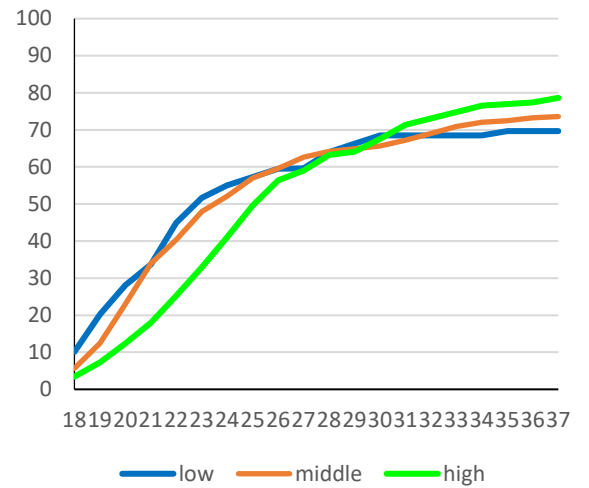
female



Belarus



female



Source: Families and Inequalities Survey 2019; Generations and Gender Survey 2020 Belarus