The Bulgarian Anomaly: Demographic Transition and Current Fertility*

Whether approached as an example of demographic transition or as a contemporary study, historical analysis of Bulgarian demographic development reveals anomalous characteristics. Mortality and fertility rates declined at a rapid rate from the high levels of the late nineteenth century, and certain features of this experience are consistent with the general European pattern, but in other respects Bulgaria stands outside this familiar sequence. While non-universal and delayed marriage played a crucial role in the West European fertility decline, Bulgaria entered into its fertility transition with an opposite pattern of early and nearly universal marriage. By the 1920s relatively low overall fertility levels had been achieved in what remained a backward agrarian society, despite the continued presence of this elevated nuptiality pattern, and the absence of substantial overall modernization. The fertility reduction was thus achieved within marriage, inviting attention to the specific marriage and fertility patterns as well as to their causal roots.

After consideration of this historical evolution, Bulgarian fertility patterns are traced from the abortion liberalization of 1956 up to the present. Despite widespread adoption of legal induced abortion, the fertility effects were negligible in Bulgaria, entirely unlike the other East European countries which introduced similar policies in the mid-1950s. Although the explanation of the development of low marital fertility earlier in the twentieth century is itself not completely satisfying, the fact of its achievement is important in understanding the exceptional fertility behavior of the last twenty-five years. Fertility levels prior to the 1956 reforms were already very low, sharply limiting the potential effect of abortion liberalization. Brief mention is also made of the rise in Bulgarian fertility in the period after 1967, resulting from a combination of positive pronatalist incentive programs and partial restriction of abortion availability.

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European Marriage Patterns and Eastern Deviations

In a classic study, Hajnal has identified a complex of historical demographic characteristics constituting a "European" fertility pattern in which relatively late and non-universal marriage served to hold aggregate fertility levels far below those existing elsewhere in the world. The uniqueness of this West European pattern lay in the relatively advanced age of marriage of women, a small difference in the age of husband and wife, and a relatively large proportion remaining single through the fertile years.

Hajnal observed that the European demographic pattern "pervaded the whole of Europe except for the eastern and south-eastern portion," and suggested that if a line were drawn connecting Trieste and Leningrad almost all of the area falling west of that line would be found to have exhibited the Western marriage and fertility patterns. All areas on the other side of the geographical line were poor societies with high crude birth rates attributable at least partially to early and nearly universal marriage.

Table 1 provides data for 1900 on the proportion of the population remaining single at various ages in three East European countries, Serbia and Russia, as well as four representative West European countries. The countries within each group are not perfectly alike, but the enormous differences between groups dwarfs any such variation, leaving, in Hajnal's words, "a distinct cleavage between any (of the West European countries) and the East European pattern of Bosnia, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia or Serbia. The cleavage is especially marked for women."

2. Ibid., p. 101. Hajnal characterizes the western fertility pattern as combining relatively late marriage for both sexes and a significant degree of life-long abstinence from marriage, with the result that no more than 45 to 50 percent of all the women in the fertile 15-49 (or 50) age group are married at a given time.
3. Ibid., pp. 102-03. Hungary differs somewhat from the other Eastern European countries, setting the lower bound of that group with respect to the proportion married. While Hungary has intermediate marriage proportions in the younger age groups, once the proportion ever married is considered, it is clear that it is quite unlike the Western countries. The similarity between the figures on the proportion married for Bulgaria and Serbia is striking, but the lack of comprehensive data for Serbia (and Bosnia) prevents a more detailed exploration of the possible common "Balkan Slavic" pattern. In 1900 the average age of marriage for women in Serbia was even lower at 18.7, while the Bulgarian average was 20.9, according to Ansley J. Coale, letter, 12 June 1972.