

Which mechanisms leading to childlessness prevail? A search for similarities and disparities among Eastern European countries

Cristina Faludi

Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

The topic of childlessness only recently gained a particular place in demographic literature, after a sharper or slower increase in number of people remaining childfree was remarked throughout the European continent. The phenomenon captured the attention of scientists on population studies, as soon as they became aware that the pathways leading to childlessness are not similar with those explaining the low fertility. Getting aware that the recent raise in childlessness is only in a negligible measure issued from a precarious state of health or infertility, they started to search for the prevalent mechanisms which could determine people to remain involuntary or voluntary childfree.

In our investigation, we aim to identify the determinants of childlessness among men and women from Bulgaria, Romania and Russia, using data on a sub-sample of 30-49 years old respondents from the Generations and Gender Survey (2004-2005). Descriptive statistics provided in Table 1 distinguishes between three categories: fathers or mothers, involuntary, respectively voluntary childless men or women. Data provided in Table 1 indicate that prevalence of involuntary childless decreases with age, while voluntary childless slightly increase in Bulgaria and Romania and stagnate in Russia. Involuntary childless is more widespread among men, while voluntary childless is higher among women, and these tendencies persist in both age groups and in all three countries.

Table 1. *Samples by sex, age, country and three categories: involuntary childlessness, voluntary childlessness and parents (fathers/ mothers). Column percentage and absolute numbers*

	Bulgaria (%)			Romania (%)			Russia (%)		
	30-39	40-49	Total (N)	30-39	40-49	Total (N)	30-39	40-49	Total (N)
Men									
<i>Involuntary childless</i>	25	7	378	23	6	391	11	2	106
<i>Voluntary childless</i>	3	5	89	3	8	109	3	3	51
<i>Fathers</i>	72	88	1795	74	86	1833	86	95	1564
Total (N)	1218	1044	2262	1455	878	2333	799	922	1721
Women									
<i>Involuntary childless</i>	10	3	162	12	2	206	3	1	43
<i>Voluntary childless</i>	2	3	57	2	4	64	1	1	20
<i>Mothers</i>	88	94	2145	86	94	2122	96	98	2515
Total (N)	1307	1057	2364	1529	863	2392	1012	1566	2578

We used two models using weighted logistic regressions to contrast childless (involuntary or voluntary) men and women with fathers and mothers. The first model includes covariates related to background and work related characteristics, early life course variables, attitudes and values. The second model adds a set of three variables about family formation. Results reveal similarities and disparities on determinants of childlessness among men and women and across countries, as well as some changes in the sign and significance from the first to the second model.

Table 2. *Weighted logistic regression on the risk of childlessness among men from Bulgaria, Romania and Russia*

Covariates	Bulgaria		Romania		Russia	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Background						
<i>Age (40-49)</i>						
30-39	0.386***	0.558*	0.459***	0.579**	0.370***	0.489*
<i>Education (below secondary)</i>						
secondary	1.806**	4.453***	0.696*	1.606*	0.631	1.181
tertiary	2.084**	6.685***	0.852	2.100*	0.476*	0.869
<i>Current type of job (blue collar)</i>						
manager	0.366**	0.371*	0.643	1.323	0.163*	0.335
white collar	1.172	0.976	1.112	1.848**	1.548*	1.523
unemployed	1.557**	0.857	1.190	0.821	2.383**	0.941
looking after home/family	-	-	-	-	0.536	0.291
Early life-course						
<i>Mother's education (below secondary)</i>						
secondary	1.284*	1.679*	1.170	1.077	1.215	1.428
tertiary	1.464*	2.623*	1.584	1.787	1.158	1.148
<i>Number of siblings (1)</i>						
0	1.295*	0.742	0.885	0.797	1.206	1.253
2 or more	0.540***	0.696	0.627***	0.651*	0.797	0.915
Family formation						
<i>Current marital status (married)</i>						
never in union	-	1317.6***	-	292.7***	-	217.7***
divorced/widowed	-	5.071**	-	8.498***	-	2.404*
<i>Cohabitation (never cohabited)</i>						
ever cohabited	-	0.016***	-	0.022***	-	0.046***
<i>Divorce (never divorced)</i>						
ever divorced	-	2.313*	-	17.14***	-	2.503**
Attitudes and opinions						
<i>Women have to have children to be fulfilled (agree vs. disagree)</i>	1.409**	1.146	1.870***	2.087***	0.909	0.853
<i>Marriage is an out-dated institution (disagree vs. agree)</i>	2.105***	0.802	1.535*	0.767	1.952**	1.143
<i>Religious attitudes (religious)</i>						
secularized	1.334*	1.019	0.980	0.617*	1.099	0.892
Total (N)	2011	1978	2048	2048	1224	1211

*** p<0.01 ** 0.01≤p<0.05 * 0.05≤p<0.1

When family formation variables are left apart, childlessness among men seems linked to better educated Bulgarian men and poor educated Romanian and Russian men. Among men in all three countries, top job positions prevent from childlessness, while unemployment increase the risk of remaining childless. Having a more educated mother is associated with childlessness, and the opposite is true for men descending from larger families of origin. Childless men regardless country seems to be less traditionalist regarding marriage and the role of children in women's life (Table 2).

Table 3. *Weighted logistic regression on the risk of childlessness among women from Bulgaria, Romania and Russia*

Covariates	Bulgaria		Romania		Russia	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Background						
Age (40-49)						
30-39	0.511***	0.686	0.437***	0.435***	0.597*	0.743
Education (below secondary)						
secondary	1.509	2.408*	1.280	1.790*	3.0E+07	2.3E+07
tertiary	3.115**	4.956**	2.630***	4.055***	5.0E+07	3.0E+07
Current type of job (blue collar)						
manager	0.805	2.099	2.060*	2.082	0.330	0.312
white collar	0.962	1.397	1.636*	1.583*	0.959	1.075
unemployed	1.581*	2.157*	1.583	1.093	1.255	0.733
looking after home/family	0.761	4.196*	0.737	0.936	0.605	0.882
Early life-course						
Mother's education (below secondary)						
secondary	1.268	0.901	0.951	1.020	1.441	1.275
tertiary	1.592*	1.151	0.971	0.984	1.261	1.294
Number of siblings (1)						
0	1.243	0.912	1.656**	1.957**	1.079	1.275
2 or more	0.788	0.506*	0.724*	0.942	1.180	1.294
Family formation						
Current marital status (married)						
never in union	-	271.6***	-	46.02***	-	75.06***
divorced/widowed	-	2.037	-	5.584***	-	4.235*
Cohabitation (never cohabited)						
ever cohabited	-	0.087***	-	0.185***	-	0.188***
Divorce (never divorced)						
ever divorced	-	1.375	-	1.403	-	0.917
Attitudes and opinions						
Women have to have children to be fulfilled (agree vs. disagree)	2.591***	2.762***	2.676***	2.462***	2.152*	1.992
Marriage is an out-dated institution (disagree vs. agree)	1.818***	0.855	1.496*	1.059	1.181	1.221
Religious attitudes (religious)						
secularized	0.786	0.693	1.484*	1.306	0.669	0.681
Total (N)	2797	2761	1902	1902	1950	1932

*** p<0.01 ** 0.01≤p<0.05 * 0.05≤p<0.1

Analyzing the results of the first logistic regression model for women, childlessness seems linked to higher levels of education in all three countries. Having top job positions significantly encourage motherhood for Romanian women, while the opposite pattern stands for Bulgarian and Russian women, although results lack significance. The influence of early life-course variables on women's childlessness is less clear. Similarly as in case of men, childless women from the analyzed countries hold less traditionalist attitudes regarding marriage and the role of children in females' life (Table 3).

Family formation covariates added in the second logistic regression model represent major causes for childlessness. As expected, celibacy and couple's breakdown play the most important role in childlessness, for both men and women from all the three countries. Cohabitation instead reduces the probability of remaining childless regardless gender and country.

The novelty of this study is that it tries to shed light on an unexplored topic: a comparative view on childlessness from a gender perspective and for three neighboring ex-communist Eastern European countries. Unfortunately, the small number of voluntary childless men and women from the analyzed countries did not allow us to make a clear distinction between this category and that of the involuntary childless in the multivariate analysis.

Despite their limits, our results seem to support the idea that determinants of childless among men and women and across countries partly differ. As a consequence, the couples' fertility would fluctuate according to the type of gender matching. Such an explanation is sustained by our main findings that couples' fragility and permanent celibacy are still the most influent ways leading to childlessness, regardless gender and country.