

FAMILY FORMATION TRENDS  
IN THE BALTIC COUNTRIES

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This paper examines the transformation of nuptiality patterns in the Baltic countries since the late 1960s, in the context of long-term trends. The aim of the study is to compare the entry into first conjugal union in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and analyze the position of the Baltic countries in a broader European perspective. The analyses employ microdata from national surveys conducted in the framework of the European Family and Fertility Surveys program. Our main results on the timing and mode of union formation show that in Estonia and Latvia the shift from direct marriage to cohabitation started well before the fall of the state socialist regime, and followed a trajectory close to Scandinavian countries. In Lithuania, on the other hand, the change in the pattern of union formation has been much slower. The paper discusses the factors underlying the observed similarities and dissimilarities in union formation.

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## 1. Introduction

Over more than three decades the demographic development in Europe has been shaped by a transformation in the nuptiality and fertility regime that took start in Scandinavia in the mid-1960s. In the early 1970s it spread to the countries of western Europe and later to southern Europe<sup>1</sup>. The transformation involved interlinked changes in several processes, particularly fertility, union formation and dissolution, and living arrangements. In the countries concerned, marriage rates decreased considerably and fertility fell below the replacement level, marriage and childbearing were postponed until later in life and were, to a certain extent, even forgone. The break with the preceding patterns appeared so radical that in the late 1980s these changes, along with related shifts in values and attitudes, were generalized into a concept of the second demographic transition [Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa 1986; van de Kaa 1987].

In eastern Europe, statistics revealed no major transformation in the patterns of demographic behavior until the 'meltdown' of the Iron Curtain and the onset of radical societal change. During the 1970s and 1980s, marriage and childbearing remained relatively early and universal in the region, which increasingly contrasted with the developments in other parts of the Continent. From the late 1980s, the scale of divergence led scholars to conceptualize the situation as the appearance of a new 'East-West' divide in family and fertility behavior [Monnier and Rychtarchikova 1992; Ni Brolchain 1993; Roussel 1994]. Apart from the historical delineation introduced by John Hajnal (1965), the new cleavage tended to follow the political boundaries that separated the state socialist regimes from the rest of Europe.

Since 1990 the profound changes in the demography of eastern Europe have rapidly reduced the previous contrasts, especially in family formation and fertility. The tempo of the recent changes has altered the population map of Europe within barely a decade and brought into question the previous views that underlined the divergence along political faultlines. In particular, the need for reconsideration stems from the interpretations offered for the recent transformation. In a stylized approach, these can be divided into two major streams — one proposes that family and fertility changes in the region were driven primarily by the social and economic crises of the 1990s, and the other perceives the changes as stimulated by complex social and cultural shifts that were accelerated by the fall of state socialist regimes [Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2002; Sobotka 2004]. Although the 'crisis factor' and societal change were evidently operating in tandem, the contribution of the latter has gradually become recognized as more fundamental. During the recent decade, this assertion has received support from studies on East Germany, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia, that demonstrate the emergence and spread of new family patterns before the shift of regime [Huinink and Wagner 1995; Kantorova 2004; Speder 2005; Stropnik 1995]. From a complementary viewpoint, revisiting the demographic development before the 1990s is motivated by the new data that have become available during the recent decade. Most importantly, the retrospective event history surveys allow to address phenomena that are characteristic of the era of the second demographic transition but have remained largely beyond the grasp of traditional census and vital statistics.

The present study aims to complement the referred body of research by analyzing the family formation in the Baltic countries. The objective is to compare the patterns of entry into first conjugal union in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and discuss the position of the Baltic countries in a broader European context. Although there are analyses published on individual countries [e.g. Katus, Puur and Põldma 2002; Stankuniene 1997; Vikat

1994; Zvidrins and Ezera 1999], comparative research focusing on family formation in the Baltic region appears scarce. The study employs microdata from national surveys conducted in the framework of the European Family and Fertility Surveys program. Partnership histories of the birth cohorts 1945-73 that are available for all three countries provide an insight into the patterns of union formation from the late 1960s, i.e. the period when the second demographic transition got under way in the Scandinavian countries. On the other end, the timeframe of the study stretches until the 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

The results are expected to enhance knowledge on family formation in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania during the later stages of the state socialist regime. Although the demographic regime has undergone profound change since then, the results can highlight some long-standing similarities and dissimilarities in the demographic development between the Baltic countries. A further value of the study arises also from the specific demographic, economic and cultural contexts of the Baltic countries that provide grounds for testing the validity of general explanatory models. Structurally, the paper consists of four main sections. Following the introduction, the second section provides a concise overview of long-term trends in family formation in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The third section briefly explains the data sources employed in the study. The fourth section presents the results, covering the timing and mode of partnership formation. The concluding section includes a summary and a discussion of the findings.

## **2. Long-term trends in union formation**

The institution of marriage has been the foundation for family, and for centuries the only accepted way of forming a new family. With the space allotted, the following section sketches the more distant and somewhat less distant historical precursors of nuptiality transformation in the Baltic countries, addressed in the paper.

### **2.1. Before the Second World War**

In the middle of the 20th century, British demographer John Hajnal identified two fundamental marriage patterns in Europe (1965). Referring to the situation around 1900, he distinguished the west European marriage pattern, characterized by high age at first marriage (particularly for females) and a high proportion of people who would never marry.<sup>3</sup> In the referred article, Hajnal pointed out that this pattern was “so far as we can tell, unique or almost unique in the world. There is no known example of a population of non-European civilization which has had a similar pattern”.

With regard to geography, according to Hajnal an approximate dividing line of the west European marriage pattern runs from St. Petersburg at the Baltic Sea to Trieste at the Mediterranean. The areas west of this line shared the late-marriage/low prevalence pattern whereas the populations on the eastern side were characterized by earlier marriage and lower proportions remaining single, termed as the east European pattern. In the global context, the marriage pattern in eastern Europe can be regarded as intermediate between the west European and non-European patterns, with the features of early and universal marriage particularly pronounced in the latter. Although noticeable diversity was observed on both sides of the Hajnal line, it did not overcome the large-scale difference between the late marriage/low prevalence and early-marriage/high prevalence patterns [Goody 1983; Reher 1998].

The question about the timing of the west European marriage pattern ought to be answered by historians as it can be traced back to the times before the era of modern population statistics. Based on evidence from Denmark, England, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden, Hajnal concluded that the late marriage/low prevalence pattern came into existence in the 17th and 18th centuries. Although relatively little is known regarding the specific circumstances that facilitated the emergence of the late-marriage pattern, it is obvious that the transformation of marriage regime preceded the onset of any large-scale urbanization and industrialization. What seems to arise from a variety of studies is that in pre-industrial Europe, the social, demographic and economic setting favored the establishment of independent households upon marriage, and hence contributed to the formation of the late-marriage pattern [United Nations 1990].

Turning to the Baltic region, although Hajnal did not explicitly mention Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, his delineation left these countries in the realm of the west European marriage pattern. In fact, leaving aside Ingria, which was historically inhabited by Finno-Ugric peoples but repopulated after the establishment of St. Petersburg, the Baltic countries and Finland formed the boundary of the phenomenon in the North. The eastern boundary of the European marriage pattern was elaborated by June Sklar (1974) who calculated the indices developed for the operationalization of Hajnal's typology for the countries and provinces of eastern Europe. Table 1 presents the singulate mean age at first marriage and proportions never-marrying based on Sklar's study for the areas that later became Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, derived from the 1897 census of the Russian Empire.<sup>4</sup> For the sake of comparison, the table provides comparable information on Scandinavian countries and Finland around the same date.

**Table 1. Female singulate mean age at marriage, proportion never-married and Coale's nuptiality index.**

The Baltic region and Scandinavian countries around 1900

Province or country	Date	Singulate mean age at marriage	Proportion never-married at age 40-49	Coale's nuptiality index $I_m$
Estland	1897	26.3	12	0.493
Livland	1897	26.6	13	0.467
Kurland	1897	25.6	15	0.515
Kauno	1897	25.4	10	0.502
Denmark	1901	26.3	15	0.471
Finland	1900	25.6	15	0.482
Norway	1900	26.9	20	0.420
Sweden	1900	27.5	21	0.411

Source: Coale and Treadway 1986, 86-149; Katus 1994, 96-99; Sklar 1974, 232-233.

The data reveal that at the end of the 19th century marriage behavior of the Baltic populations fitted the west European pattern. According to Hajnal (1965), the late-marriage/low prevalence pattern was characterized by the mean age at first marriage above 23, and usually above 24 years for females. The proportion of single women around age 50 was nowhere below 10% in the areas of the European pattern.<sup>5</sup> In the provinces of Estland, Livland and Kurland and the Kauno gubernia the percentage of remaining single ranged between 10 and 15, and the singulate mean age at marriage for women was between 25.4

and 26.3 years. Comparative indices for Denmark and Finland fall into the same range, in Sweden and Norway the pattern appears only slightly more pronounced.

The position of Baltic countries was corroborated by the Princeton European Fertility Project, which aimed to document and analyze the long-term fertility decline in Europe since the late 18th century [Coale and Watkins 1986]. To achieve its goal, the Princeton project elaborated on the evolution of nuptiality patterns and their impact on the overall dynamics of fertility across more than 600 provinces in Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals. In the final monograph of the project, Ansley Coale (1986) concluded that the geographic pattern of their nuptiality index  $I_m$  around 1870 (the earliest year for which a comprehensive map with provincial data can be made) “shows the remarkable validity of Hajnal's designation of a line from Trieste to St. Petersburg”.<sup>6</sup> The dynamics of nuptiality indices in the Baltic region since the 19th century are discussed in the project's monograph on the Russian Empire [Coale *et al* 1979] and in a study of fertility transition in the Baltic countries by Katus (1994).

Historical sources indicate that the emergence of the late-marriage/low prevalence nuptiality pattern in the Baltic region dates back to the period before the 19th century. The family reconstitution studies based on parish registers from Estland and Livland by Heldur Palli indicate a gradual increase in male and female mean age at marriage throughout the 18th century. In the Otepää parish the female mean age at first marriage rose from 22.1 years in 1725-49, and 22.8 years in 1750-74 to 24.2 years in 1775-99 [Palli 1988]. An even greater increase was observed in the male mean age at first marriage, from 23.2 in 1725-49 to 27.1 years in 1775-99. Estimates for the Karuse parish in the last quarter of the 18th century were 27.0 for males and 24.4 for females [Palli 1984].<sup>7</sup> The material assembled by Andris Lapinch (1991) for Kurland and the Latvian part of Livland indicate that in these areas the late-marriage/low prevalence nuptiality pattern was prevailing already at the beginning of the 19th century. The same conclusion would, presumably, hold true also for Lithuania.

It is important to note that the change of marriage pattern had long-term implications for the societies where it occurred. Although the introduction of a new marriage pattern itself is not regarded as a transition to a modern demographic regime, it is generally agreed that the west European marriage pattern paved the way towards a subsequent more radical move, the switch to controlled marital fertility. In a broader framework, attention has also been drawn to the impact on socio-economic modernization, family relations and the status of women.

According to Hajnal (1965; 1982), marriage and family patterns contributed to the acceleration of economic growth after the second half of the 18th century, particularly in the north-western part of Europe. In the latter areas, late marriage was paralleled by an institution of service under which a substantial proportion of young unmarried people of both sexes were engaged as servants for some portion of their life, most servants were members of their masters' households for a limited period under some sort of a contract.<sup>8</sup> These features, Hajnal argues, fostered individual responsibility, self-reliance beyond the support of one's family of origin, and economic behavior, which must have differed fundamentally from joint household populations. It has been hypothesized that the mere presence of a large number of adult women not involved in childbearing and -rearing activities must have been a considerable advantage to contemporary economies. In other words, the features related to nuptiality pattern could help to understand how the groundwork was laid to the European 'take-off' of modern economic growth.

The fact that marriage joined together two mature adults must have considerably affected the nature of the relationship, the methods of choosing and allocating marriage

partners, the relation between the couple and other relatives, etc. The service system apparently also added to the greater independence of women as service was in general about as common among women as it was among men. While in service, women were not under anyone's control, they made independent decisions about where to work and live, and for which employer. Evidence from the works of Palli (1996; 1997) and Vahtré (1973) on the relative number and age composition of servants in the 18th century Estonia, together with the findings of Plakans (1976) about a large proportion of young people living away from their parents in Courland, support the assertion that the household formation system prevailing in north-western Europe, along with its consequences for the societal organization, extended to the Baltic countries.

## 2.2. After the Second World War

The period of the Second World War marked a major break in the nuptiality pattern that had prevailed in the areas west of Hajnal line for about two centuries. The term 'marriage boom' was used by the contemporaries to emphasize a suddenness of the decrease in the age of marriage and a sharp rise in the proportion of those who would marry during their childbearing years — no one examining demographic trends had foreseen such a course of development. Quite noticeably, the unexpectedness is pinpointed by the introduction of the very concept of the west European marriage pattern after the phenomenon itself had ceased to exist.

As any major demographic transformation, the decline of the west European marriage pattern did not follow a precisely similar timeframe across countries, and the events of the war in particular had a strong influence on the dynamics of marriage rates. In the first attempts to generalize the change in nuptiality regime, Hajnal (1953a) ascertained that in several countries the changes can be traced back to the 1930s.<sup>9</sup> In a great geographical detail, the disappearance of the west European marriage pattern was documented in the framework of the Princeton project. According to these accounts, the changes in nuptiality west of the Hajnal line appeared slow, intermittent and progressing in different directions until the 1930s [Watkins 1981]. The changes canceled out each other and the mean value of nuptiality index for more than 600 provinces of Europe remained essentially unchanged from 1870 to 1900, between 1900-30, and rose only marginally, from 0.50 to 0.52. Against that background, the move towards earlier and more universal marriage since the 1930s sharply increased the nuptiality index, with  $I_m$  reaching the average level of 0.62 around 1960 [Coale and Treadway 1986].

In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania the statistics do not reveal clear signs about the weakening of the west European marriage pattern before WWII. Instead, there are indications that it became even slightly more pronounced in the Baltic countries. Comparing the 1897 census with the 1920s, Sklar (1974) noted an increase in the proportion single at age 40-49, and a similar conclusion can be drawn from Coale's nuptiality index  $I_m$  [Katus 1994]. The data for the 1930s show a persistently high mean age at first marriage and no decrease in the proportion single. As regards Estonia, in 1938 (the last pre-war year for which the statistics were published) the mean age at first marriage stood at 26.3 years among women and 29.7 years among men, with no appreciable change over the preceding decade [RSKB 1937; 1940]. Lapinch (1991) has reached a similar conclusion with respect to Latvia.<sup>10</sup>

The lack of reliable information on population stock between 1940-41 and the first post-war census (1959) prevents us from following the nuptiality trend in the Baltic



countries for the immediate post-war decade. In his doctoral dissertation, Andres Vikat (1994) conjectured a relatively slow departure from the European marriage pattern and a very limited, if any, marriage boom in the 1940s and 1950s. These characteristic features have been ascribed to societal discontinuity, which in the immediate post-war decade involved armed resistance, arrests, deportations etc., i.e. the conditions that obviously discouraged family formation. This conceivable influence would deserve a special study, particularly when considering that among the nations, which had reached low fertility before WWII, Estonia and Latvia formed an exception where the post-war baby boom never occurred [Coale 1994; Katus 1997].

Turning back to the nuptiality trends in Europe in general, a new turn occurred after the late 1960s. Marriage rates in most areas of the west European nuptiality pattern turned to decline, marking an end of the post-war golden age of marriage. Younger generations started to marry less and for those who married, the trend has been to do so at older ages than was common amongst their recent predecessors. The corresponding shift began in Sweden and Denmark after the mid-1960s, followed by other north and west European countries in the early part of the 1970s. In the second half of the decade, the new trend gradually spread to southern Europe and became evident also in Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece.

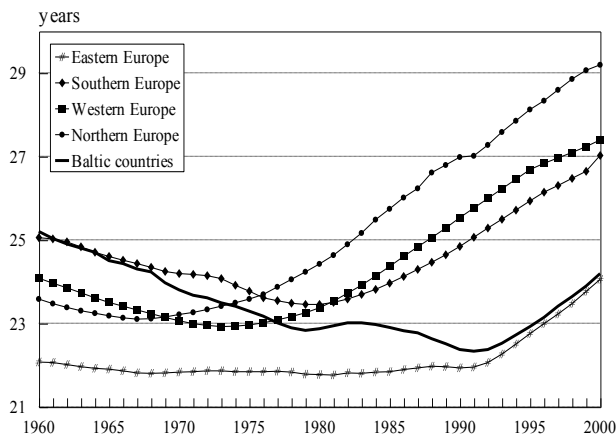
Although there has been a tendency towards the stabilization of marriage rates over the past 10-15 years, the rise in the average age of marriage is still in progress. In the pioneering countries of the new nuptiality pattern, the mean age of women at first marriage has already reached 30 years. From the cohort perspective, the changes have implied a noticeable retreat from marriage. According to recent estimates, among women born in the late 1960s, in several countries the proportion of never-married is likely to reach 30-35% by the end of child-bearing years [Council of Europe 2006]. These levels noticeably exceed the proportions of singles that were observed at any time in history.

However, apart from the heyday of the European marriage pattern, it would be wrong to interpret the present retreat from marriage in terms of abstinence and rising celibacy. The novelty of the new nuptiality regime is revealed by a decrease in the age at sexual initiation, spread of pre-marital sexual relations [Bozon and Kontula 1997], and in many countries, growing prevalence of non-marital cohabitation. Although the phenomenon of men and women living together outside marriage was not unknown in earlier times, usually it was socially and statistically invisible, limited to fairly small subgroups of the population [Trost 1978; Gillis 1985; Ratcliffe 1996]. The form of the cohabitation that came to the fore since the late 1960s could be termed as nubile cohabitation, whereby young people, predominantly in their twenties and early thirties, live together either as a prelude to, or as an alternative to marriage. In many countries of northern and western Europe, the rise of cohabitation fully or partially compensated for the decline in marriage rates so that the overall proportion of the population living in *de facto* partnerships did not undergo a major change.

In the Baltic countries, the trend towards earlier marriage did not reverse but continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In the beginning of the 1980s the general decline in the mean age at first marriage stopped but was followed by fluctuations at a relatively low level, without any substantial increase. Consequently, in comparative perspective the nuptiality patterns in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania started to diverge from those observed in the 1970s in the countries of northern and western Europe, and from around 1980, the deviation from southern Europe became evident. Figure 1 reveals that due to divergent trends, the difference in the age of marriage grew gradually larger and on the eve of societal transformation, women in the Baltic countries married on average of 4.4

years earlier than their counterparts in northern Europe; the lag from western and southern Europe accounted for 3.2 and 2.3 years respectively.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the figure indicates a gradual convergence of the nuptiality pattern in the Baltic countries with that observed in eastern Europe. In the 1970s and 1980s, the latter region generally maintained a relatively early marriage, with an emerging shift towards postponement in a few countries like East Germany and Slovenia.

**Figure 1. Mean age of women at first marriage**  
Baltic countries in comparative perspective, 1960-2000



Source: calculations based on Council of Europe 2006

In comparative perspective, the presented trends in the mean age at first marriage exemplifies the emergence of the new East-West marriage contrast, referred to in the introductory section. Following the shift towards earlier and more universal marriage west of the Hajnal line, around 1970 nuptiality differences across countries and regions reached the lowest level in Europe. However, as we know the convergence proved relatively short-lived, and as revealed by the data, from the mid-1970s the diversity was on the rise again. And as noted above, apart from the period of European marriage pattern, a cleavage along the post-war political boundaries had largely replaced the historical divide identified by Hajnal.

In the latter context, the case of Baltic countries deserves special attention. In the course of two-three decades, nuptiality in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania transformed from the pattern characteristic of north and west European countries to the one shared by state socialist regimes in eastern Europe. A similar shift was experienced by East Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovenia, but in their case the change appears somewhat less pronounced. At the turn of the 1960s the Baltic countries featured the third highest age at first marriage west of the Hajnal line — only Spanish and Irish women married later compared to their counterparts in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In the 1980s, however, the situation had become markedly different.

In the comparison of long-term nuptiality and fertility trends in Estonia and Latvia on the one hand, and Denmark, Norway and Sweden on the other hand, Coale (1994) viewed this change of regime as an evidence that since the 1960s the historical heritage the Baltic populations shared with the north European countries had ceased to generate a similar movement in nuptiality. In the following sections, the pattern of union formation in

the Baltic countries during the latter period is revisited, taking advantage of the new data sources that have become available during the recent decade.

### 3. Data sources

The data for the paper come from a series of national surveys carried out in the framework of the European Family and Fertility Surveys program. The program was coordinated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and covered altogether 25 countries in 1988-2000.<sup>12</sup>

The FFS program builds on the life course approach and contains retrospective histories on all major life careers, including family formation and dissolution, childbearing, education, employment, and residential mobility [UNECE 1992; Cliquet 2002]. From the viewpoint of family demography, a particular merit of the program lies with the comprehensive account of nuptiality patterns that have emerged in Europe during the recent decades. In the framework of FFS, based on a common core questionnaire each participant country carried out a representative survey, covering women and men in reproductive age span with the average sample size over 4,000 respondents. The program foresaw the harmonization of microdata, and production of standardized tabulations and reports, following a comparable format. A combination of innovative research methodology, production of new large-scale datasets and comparative perspective has rendered the FFS a major resource in the study of modern population development, with nearly one hundred international research projects listed on the project's website [UNECE 2006].

Although Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are included in many of these projects, the Baltic perspective is so far relatively little exploited, particularly in view of the fact that the FFS turned out to be the first nationally representative event history survey in all three countries.<sup>13</sup> In Estonia, the data collection was split between a female survey (January-November 1995) and a male survey (February-December 1997). The data for the Latvian survey were collected in September-October 1995, the fieldwork for the Lithuanian survey started in October 1994 and ended in December 1995. All three countries used national probability samples, although the sampling frame and procedures varied. In Latvia and Lithuania, the sample covered resident population in the currently fertile age span of 18-49, which corresponds to birth cohorts 1945-77. The Estonian survey extended the range of the target population to birth cohorts 1924-73, with the purpose to support the reconstruction of main demographic trends for the 1940s-50s for which period the traditional sources of information appear particularly deficient.

Following the general practice of the FFS, the Baltic countries opted for proportionally larger samples for women. As a result, there are 5,021 female and 2,511 male respondents in the Estonian survey, the Latvian survey contains 2,699 female and 1,501 male respondents, and the Lithuanian survey has 3,000 interviews with female and 2,000 interviews with male respondents. The response rate reveals a certain increase from south to north — in Lithuania 71% of respondents in the original sample were successfully interviewed, in Estonia the corresponding percentages amounted to 85%, leaving Latvia in the middle position (77%).

The approach applied in the FFS, understandably, calls for attention toward the quality and validity of the collected event history data. Among others, the common concerns associated with the retrospective design include selectivity bias (only survivors can be interviewed) and the tendency to underreport life events, due to recall difficulties or

other reasons [Bradburn et al 1987; Vaessen 1993; Auriat 1996]. Understandably, the events that are devoid of social ceremony and ritual, and/or often repeated, face a greater risk of going underreported.

These issues were addressed by national teams as well as the international coordinator of the program. The primary focus on the currently fertile age span and the exclusion of cohorts in advanced ages from the target population allow us to assume that the effects of selectivity are fairly limited. In the case of Baltic countries, the attrition due to out-migration can be also disregarded since all three countries featured positive migration balance throughout the postwar decades until the 1990s. As regards the problem of underreporting in FFS, a reference can be made to a comparative analysis of recall lapse and item non-response in major life events, including the commencement of consensual and marital unions [Klijzing and Cairns 2000] — the authors assure that despite variation between countries and characteristics like gender, age and rank of event, the overall analytical validity of the retrospective data is not compromised. They also report a finding, important from the viewpoint of the present paper, that union formation and dissolution experiences, together with childbearing, are apparently stored in the memory more firmly and retrieved more easily than most other life events. Basically similar conclusions were reached by national studies on the Baltic countries<sup>14</sup> and a comprehensive assessment of the FFS data quality by Festy and Prioux (2002).

To secure better comparability with other countries, the present paper focuses on the native population and leaves aside immigrants, who have settled in the Baltic countries after WWII.<sup>15</sup> The main reason for leaving the immigrant population aside relates to their distinct demographic patterns that to a great extent reflect population development in their regions of origin, in the Russian Federation and other parts of the former Soviet Union. Historically these areas did not share the experience of the west European marriage pattern and featured a noticeably later onset of demographic transition. Although these features relate to the past, analyses have shown that differences in behavioral patterns between the native and foreign-origin populations persist, including family formation. Particularly in Estonia and Latvia, the relative size of the foreign-origin populations renders the estimates for the total population an aggregate of rather divergent, sometimes contrasting elements. The heterogeneity inherent in such estimates noticeably blurs the picture, particularly with respect to international comparisons. The demographic patterns among the foreign-origin population are discussed elsewhere [e.g. Katus, Puur and Sakkeus 2000, 2002; Sakkeus 2000, 2003].

#### **4. Results**

Traditionally marriage signaled the onset of family formation, and it was considered a prerequisite when young people wanted to have an intimate relationship, live together and have children. With growing acceptance of non-marital cohabitation, however, the chain of events has transformed considerably with increasing proportions of young people starting their families outside marriage. In the course of time, part of these unions are converted into marriage, particularly when couples have a child, while others may split up or continue for an extended duration.

From the viewpoint of demographic research the spread of non-marital cohabitation implies that it is no longer sufficient to limit the analysis of family formation to marriage. Following the general approach of the FFS program, the present paper addresses the initiation of conjugal unions irrespective of their formal registration. In the

following sections, the analysis of union formation is structured in two parts, focusing on the timing and mode of the first union respectively. Together these two dimensions capture the major shifts that have occurred in behavioral patterns in the Baltic region over the past few decades, and allow a comparison with developments in other countries.

The analysis applies five-year birth cohorts and country as the main units. Cohort membership and country can be related to particular social and cultural contexts that the people face while growing up and starting their adult lives. With respect to Estonia, the data permit to follow the trends starting from the cohorts born in the mid-1920s until those born in the early 1970s, for Latvia and Lithuania the observation starts from the cohorts born in the second half of the 1940s. In terms of calendar time, these are the generations, which carried the nuptiality trends between the late 1960s (from the late 1940s in case of Estonia) and the early 1990s.

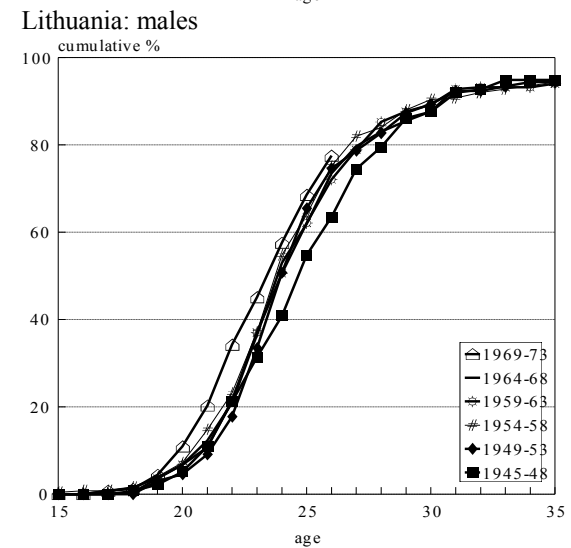
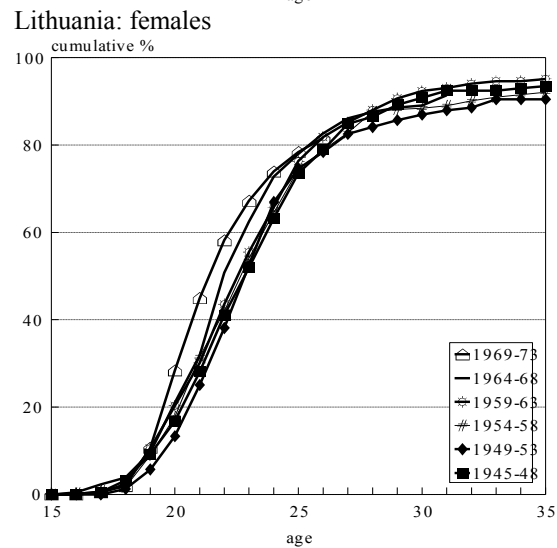
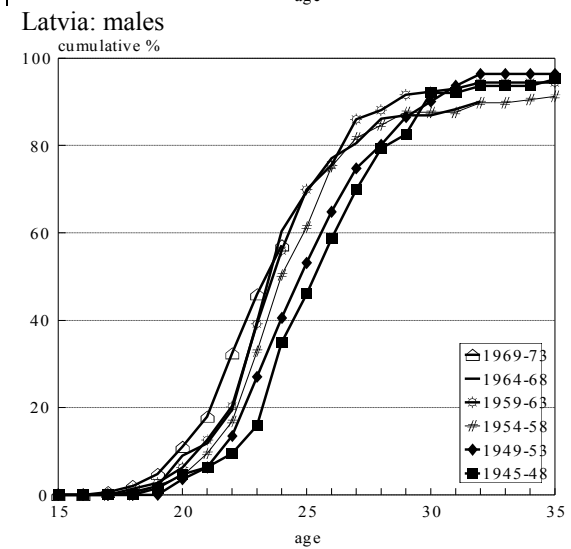
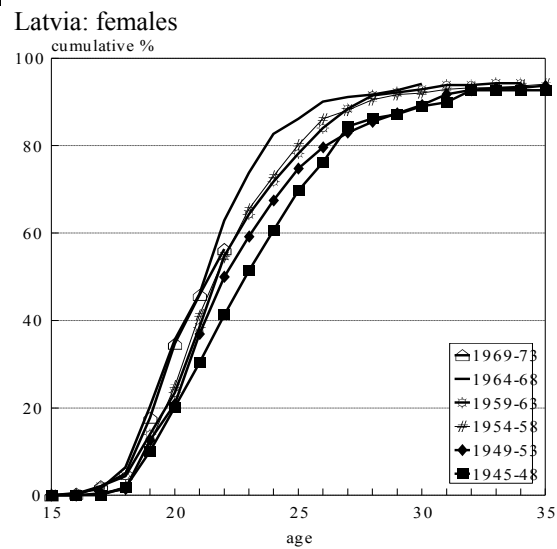
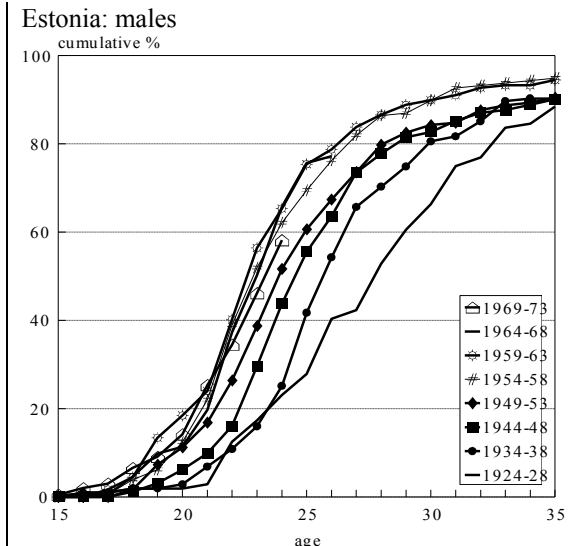
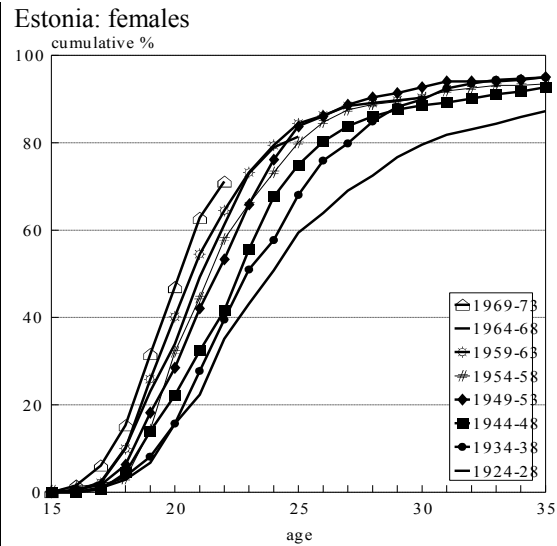
#### **4.1. Timing of union formation**

The panels of Figure 2 present the entry into first union formation by means of survivorship functions, whether by marriage or non-marital cohabitation. Although the cohorts covered in the surveys had reached very different stages in their partnership careers by the time of data collection, the life table method underlying the calculation of survivorship functions renders the cumulative proportions of ever-partnered women and men comparable and permits to draw conclusions before the process of union formation is complete.

Starting from Estonia with the longest cohort span covered by the survey, the data reveal a continuous and extensive shift towards a younger entry into first union, which evidently started in the pre-FFS generations. This long-term shift in the timing of union formation relates to the disappearance of the west European marriage pattern, discussed in the previous sections. In the three oldest cohorts of the Estonian FFS, born in 1924-38, the juvenation of partnership formation was mainly concentrated on the later end of age spectrum: the biggest increase in the cumulative percentage occurred beyond age 25. At the same time it is interesting to note that the referred shift did not concern the ultimate proportion of ever-partnered — by age 50, about 95% of women (as well as men) had entered conjugal union, a level that does not vary noticeably across cohorts.

In the following generations, the changes in the timing of first union shifted towards the younger end of age spectrum. For example, from the 1939-43 cohort to the 1964-68 cohort the percentage of women who entered their first partnership before age 20 more than doubled. Women born in the youngest cohort 1969-73 started their first partnership indeed very early: nearly one fifth of them were already in partnership at the age of 18. Similarly, among Estonian men the juvenation has been quite intensive, particularly in the birth cohorts of the 1940s and 1950s. Regarding younger cohorts born in the 1960s, however, the juvenation appears to have slowed down among men.

**Figure 2. Timing of entry into first union**  
Baltic countries, birth cohorts 1924-73



Source: FFS database

Although a shorter cohort span in the Latvian FFS prevents us from following the developments in the generations born before 1945, the comparison of survivorship functions reveal a noticeable shift towards earlier union formation also in Latvia. With respect to females, a more or less continuous juvenation can be traced until the 1964-68

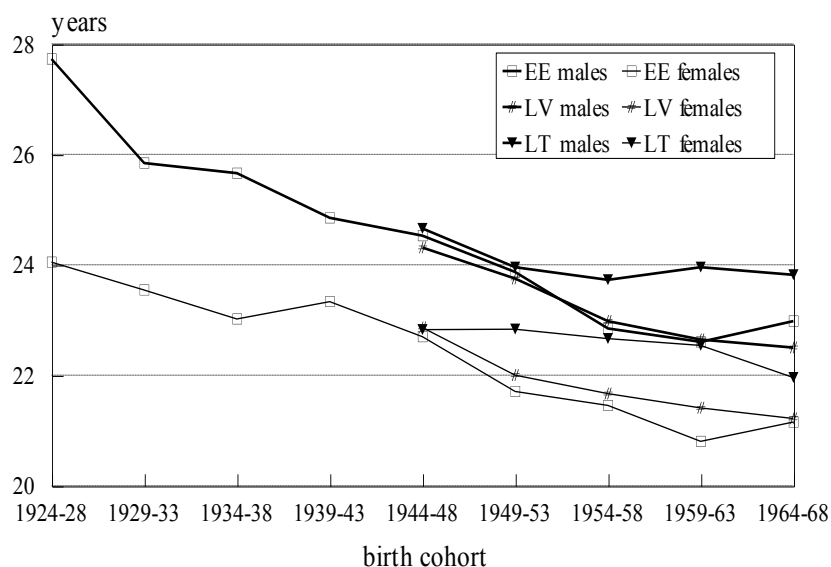
birth cohort, which reached the prime age of partnership formation in the late 1980s. Only in the youngest generation the shift towards earlier union formation displays some signs of slowing down. A systematic and relatively extensive shift towards earlier union formation is characteristic of Latvian men as well: the proportion of men who had started their first union by age 21, for example, has almost tripled between the 1945-48 and 1969-73 birth cohorts. In general, populations of Estonia and Latvia exhibit largely similar trends in the timing of union formation when judged by survivorship functions.

The shift towards earlier union formation can be observed also in Lithuania, but following a somewhat different trajectory. Unlike its neighbors, there was virtually no change in the timing of entry into first union formation in Lithuania among the female cohorts born between the late 1940s and early 1960s. Leaving aside apparently random fluctuations in older age intervals, in the prime age of partnership formation survivorship functions virtually overlap for these birth cohorts. A clear shift towards earlier union formation becomes evident only in a couple of youngest five-year cohorts. Basically similar conclusion can be reached for men, although there are slight differences associated with specific cohorts.

The developments in the timing of union formation can be summarized conveniently by median age at the entry into first union.<sup>16</sup> First of all, the evidence from Figure 3 is generally consistent with the findings based on marriage registration and confirms the prevailing tendency towards earlier union formation in the Baltic region in the 1970s and 1980s. With respect to both women and men it is also interesting to note a high similarity in the median age of union formation between the countries among the birth cohorts of the 1940s (the earliest cohorts for which the FFS data are available for all three countries). Judging by the evidence drawn from vital registration — more or less parallel decline in the mean age of first marriage after the disappearance of the west European marriage pattern — the observed similarity can probably be extended to the preceding birth cohorts covered in the Estonian survey.

**Figure 3. Median age at entry into first union**

Baltic countries, birth cohorts 1924-68



Source: FFS database

Although the trend towards earlier union formation has been predominant in all three countries, the figure also points to country-specific peculiarities that appear starting from the birth cohorts of the early 1950s. In Estonia and Latvia, the median age at first union continued to decline, and a further shift towards earlier union formation followed until the generations born in late 1960s in Latvia and in mid-1960s in Estonia. Conforming with the observation from survivorship functions, in the same generations in Lithuania the juvenation of partnership formation came to a halt and the median age at first union remained largely unchanged. This resulted in a growing difference in the timing of union formation that peaked in the 1959-63 birth cohort. In that generation, Estonian women started their first partnership on average 1.7 years earlier than their Lithuanian counterparts, for men the corresponding difference was somewhat smaller, accounting for 1.2 years. In general, this difference may seem not particularly extensive but it should be considered against the background of close similarity in the earlier generations. And as a result of the stronger continuity of the trend, the scope of overall juvenation in union formation appears more pronounced in Latvia and Estonia.

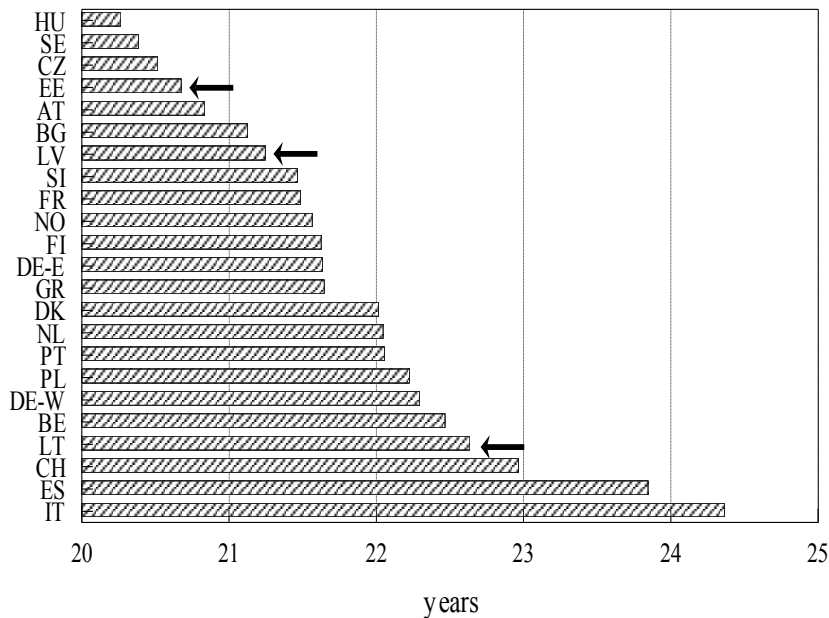
The data from other FFS countries offer a favorable opportunity to place the the Baltic region into comparative perspective also in terms of partnership formation. Figure 4 presents the median age at first union for women in the cohorts born in the early 1960s, who shaped the partnership formation observed before the turn of the 1990s. In general, the data highlight a considerable diversity in the timing of partnership formation, although the contrast between the earliest and latest entry into the first union appears less extensive than suggested by marriage registration (according to the database of the European Population Committee, the variation in the mean age of first marriage accounted for six years in the corresponding period).

Consistent with the observations based on marriage registration, presented in the previous section, Estonia and Latvia can be found among the countries with comparatively early entry into first union, which once again underlines the extent of the shift towards earlier partnership formation. The three countries with the lowest median age at first union include Hungary and the Czech Republic, which is consistent with the expectations derived from marriage statistics, however, much less expectedly the top three also includes Sweden that has for several decades held a position of the latest-marrying nation in Europe. Likewise, a fairly early partnership formation — median age around 21.5 years for females — is characteristic of other north European countries for which the comparable data are available. Understandably, this obvious contradiction between the different data sources is not accidental but reflects the disconnection of *de facto* family formation from marriage, which is most strongly pronounced in the latter region. From the viewpoint of demographic data collection, such decoupling has significantly increased the contribution of survey statistics and depreciated the analytical value of the registration data.

**Figure 4. Median age at entry into first union**

Baltic countries in comparative perspective, female birth cohorts 1959-63





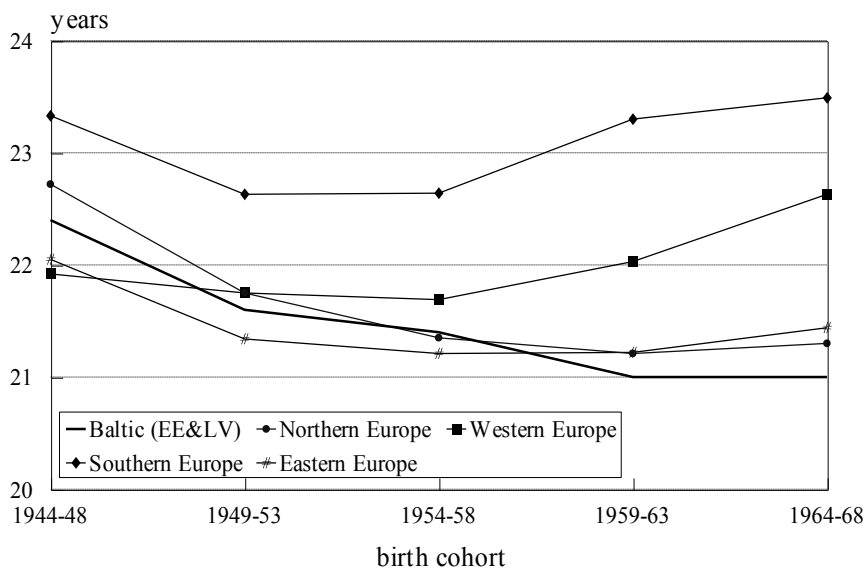
Source: FFS standard country reports

Turning back to the Baltic countries, the comparison with other countries also exemplifies the distinct pattern of union formation in Lithuania. According to the figure, among the FFS countries Lithuania features the fourth highest age at first partnership formation after Italy, Spain and Switzerland. It is important to note that the relatively late onset of union formation in Lithuania is not restricted to women born in 1959-63, but is almost equally characteristic of most other cohorts covered by the survey.

In a broader framework, the evidence from the FFS reveals a noticeable similarity of the trends in the timing of union formation between north European and Baltic countries, particularly Estonia and Latvia. Most importantly, both groups of countries experienced a prolonged shift towards earlier entry into first partnership that extended to the birth cohorts of the 1960s. In respect to individual countries, the data from the standard country reports show that the ranking of countries was maintained throughout the entire FFS cohort range — in all cohorts Sweden featured the earliest union formation, followed by Estonia and Latvia, then Finland and Norway, and finally Lithuania with the latest entry into first partnership [UNECE 2006]. It is also interesting to note a close similarity also at the level of individual countries. For example in Sweden, the trendsetter country of modern family patterns, the median age of women at the entry into first union in the 1949, 1959 and 1969 birth cohorts was 21.3, 20.4 and 19.8 years. In the corresponding cohorts of Estonian women the corresponding figure accounted for 21.4, 20.5 and 20.0 years respectively.

The similarity of the trends in the timing of union formation between north European and Baltic countries is further emphasized by the comparison with western and southern Europe where the decrease in the age at first partnership came to a halt in the birth cohorts of the 1950s (Figure 5). In the latter regions the generations born in the beginning of the 1960s experienced a relatively strong shift towards a later partnership formation. As a result of the divergence in the trends, among the birth cohorts of the 1960s Estonia, Latvia, and the north European countries featured an earlier start of union formation than any other major region in Europe. In these cohorts women from the Baltic and north European countries started their *de facto* partnerships on average even earlier than their counterparts in eastern Europe.

**Figure 5. Median age at entry into first union**  
 Baltic countries in comparative perspective, female birth cohorts 1944-68



Source: calculations based on FFS standard country reports

#### 4.2. Mode of union formation

A characteristic feature of modern family initiation has been the disconnection of partnership formation from marriage. As noted above, over the past three decades it has become increasingly common for young people in many countries to start living together without being married. With respect to the Baltic countries, the FFS offers the first possibility to explore the diffusion of the corresponding behavior on the basis of nationally representative data.

In the life course framework, the prevalence of cohabitation usually refers to the mode of union formation, making the distinction between direct marriage and cohabitation, which may or may not be converted into marriage at a later stage. The first option represents a traditional pathway of partnership formation whereas the other modes reflect the growing acceptance of partner relations outside marriage, either as a prelude to marriage at the beginning of the union or as a more permanent living arrangement. Figure 6 presents the corresponding percentages in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania against the total number of women and men who have started their partnerships in a given cohort, filtering out the individuals who remained single by the time of the survey.

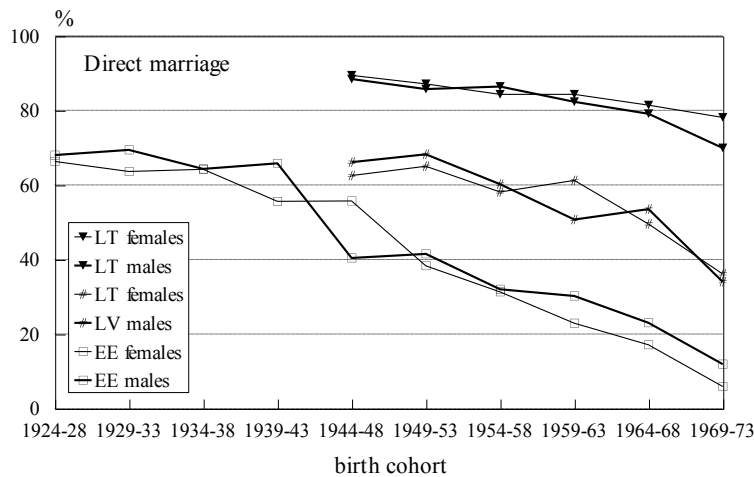
Even a brief glance at the figure is enough to reveal an extensive inter-cohort change in the mode of union formation as well as a difference between the countries. Perhaps the most striking feature is that in Estonia, direct marriage had lost its overwhelming predominance already in the earliest generations covered by the survey — direct marriage accounted for about two thirds of first unions, a proportion that remained fairly stable in the 1924-38 cohorts. Starting with the cohorts born in the 1940s who formed their first partnerships mainly in the 1960s and early 1970s, the proportion began to decrease rapidly. In the 1944-53 birth cohorts it dropped below 50%, which means that

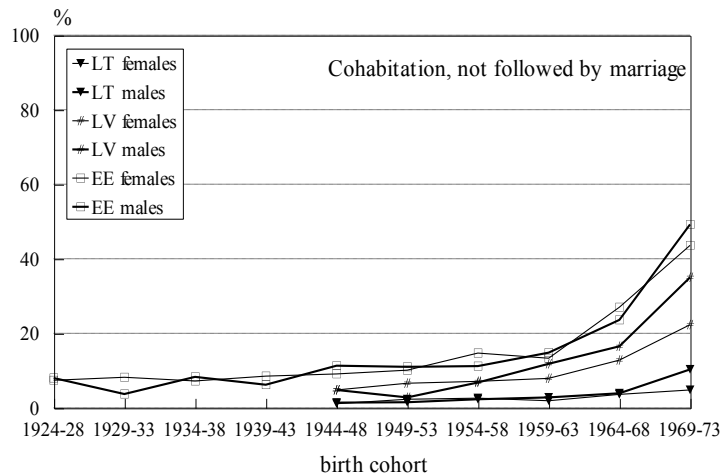
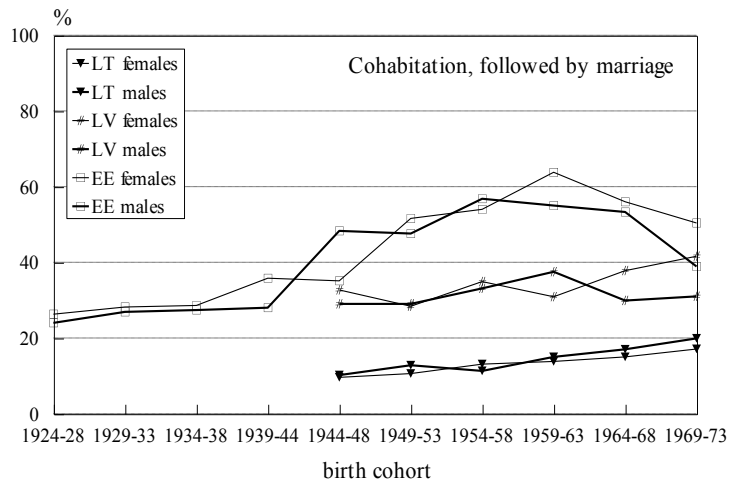
for the first time consensual union had replaced direct marriage as the mainstream route to family building. In the following generations entry into partnership through direct marriage gradually became an exception rather than a rule: in the 1969-73 cohort 11.2% of men and only 5.9% of women started their first conjugal union without preceding cohabitation.<sup>17</sup>

Latvia seems to have followed the same trajectory, but judging by the proportion of direct marriage and cohabitation, it lagged behind Estonia for approximately 15-20 years. The change in the mode of union formation progressed somewhat more slowly and the proportion of direct marriage fell below 50% in the cohorts born in the late 1960s. In Lithuania, the adherence to the traditional mode of union formation has been clearly more persistent with direct marriage accounting for 90% of first partnerships in the earliest generation. Although there has been a downward trend across the FFS generations, in the cohorts born in the early 1970s still around 70-80% of Lithuanian men and women started their first partnership as direct marriage. The difference in the patterns is also emphasized by the fact that in the youngest Lithuanian cohorts the proportion of direct marriage exceeds the corresponding levels observed among the oldest FFS cohorts in Latvia and Estonia.

The second and third panels of Figure 6 indicate that the decrease in the proportion of direct marriage has resulted mainly from the increase in cohabitation, followed by marriage. In Estonia, the proportion of unions that started as cohabitation but were converted into marriage at a later stage ranged between 25-30% in the oldest FFS cohorts. In the 1939-58 birth cohorts the corresponding proportion more than doubled but after reaching a peak the trend reversed.

**Figure 6. Mode of union formation**  
Baltic countries, birth cohorts 1924-73





Source: FFS database

This turn in the trend indicates a change in the nature of consensual unions — starting from the cohorts born in the early 1960s the data reveal a sharp increase in the proportion of consensual unions, which had not been transformed into marriage. Although the latter development could be attributed partly to the censoring of observation at the time of the survey, the break in behavioral patterns is beyond doubt. From the viewpoint of partnership career, this implies a rapid extension in the duration of unmarried cohabitation, which tended to be relatively short until the youngest FFS cohorts. In Estonia, about one half of the partnerships that started as cohabitation were converted into marriage by the end of the first year, by the end of the second year the corresponding proportion accounted for 65-70% [Katus, Puur and Põldma 2002].

In Latvia, and particularly in Lithuania, the prevalence of consensual union has been lower. Despite acceleration of the changes towards the end of the cohort range, neither Latvia nor Lithuania had yet experienced a decrease in the proportion of consensual unions converted into marriage. In a broader framework it seems plausible that the variation in the mode of union formation also accounts for the differentials in the timing of union formation observed between countries. Less binding legal and social obligations associated with consensual unions together with higher and more rapidly increasing prevalence of non-marital cohabitation could at least partly explain the lower average age at partnership formation in Estonia and Latvia, discussed in the previous section.

Figure 7 places the mode of union formation in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into a comparative perspective of other FFS countries. The data used for comparison represent

the cumulative percentage of women born around the second half of the 1960s who had started their first partnerships by age 25, either through direct marriage or cohabitation. In the figure the countries are ranked according to the proportion of consensual unions among all partnerships, the complement to 100% refers to women who remained single until their 25th birthday. In all countries but a few — such as Italy, Spain and West Germany — around 70-80% had entered a conjugal union by the time of the survey, which warrants the comparability of the results.

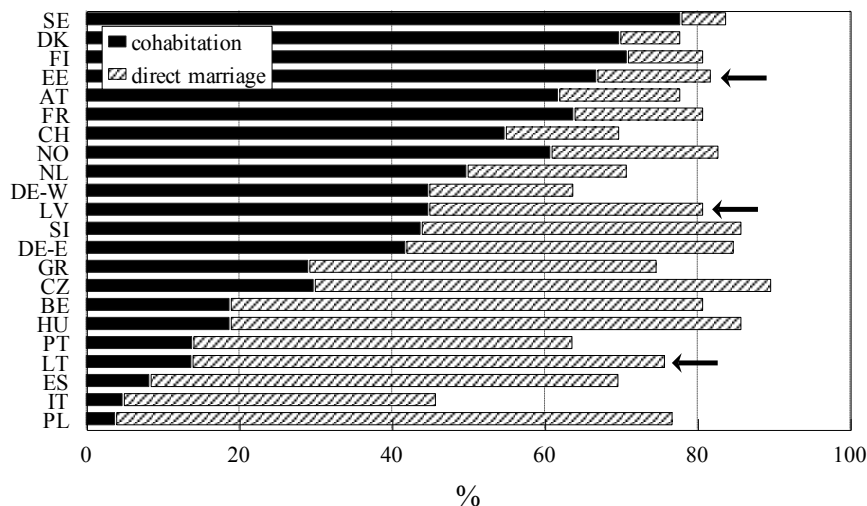
In general, the data reveal significant differences across as well within the regions in Europe. Expectedly, the vanguard consists of the countries of northern Europe, headed by Sweden and Denmark, commonly regarded as the trendsetters of new family patterns. On the other extreme, non-marital cohabitation appears still relatively uncommon in southern Europe, exemplified by Italy and Spain. Against that background, the Baltic countries are dispersed all over the spectrum. Among the FFS countries included in the comparison, Estonia holds the fourth position from the top, after Sweden, Denmark and Finland. Lithuania, on the other hand, can be found among the four countries in the bottom group, before Spain, Italy and Poland. In other words, the patterns in Lithuania and Estonia really refer to the takeoff and concluding stage in the spread of non-marital cohabitation.

Between these two extremes, Latvia belongs to the middle group of countries, occupying the position next to West Germany. It is worth noting that also in Latvia, starting a partnership as unmarried cohabitation appears more common than in Slovenia, the Czech Republic and East Germany, the other eastern bloc countries, which come from the western side of Hajnal line and feature relatively high prevalence of consensual unions.

In a broader framework of demographic trends, a prominent role of consensual unions in Estonia and Latvia can be seen also in the levels of non-marital childbearing. Following the post-war turbulence caused by Sovietization, the proportion of non-marital births has increased steadily in both countries since the late 1960s, rather independent from the overall fertility. By the end of the 1980s it had almost doubled and reached 25% in Estonia, while in Latvia close to 18% of all children were born out of wedlock.

**Figure 7. Mode of union formation**

Baltic countries in comparative perspective, female birth cohorts 1964-68



Source: FFS standard country reports

Considering the native population, the corresponding figures were noticeably higher, lagging behind only Denmark, Iceland, Sweden and Norway [Katus 1997; 2003]. The evidence from the FFS attributes this growth almost entirely to the spread of cohabitation — in both Estonia and Latvia the proportion of births to single mothers, neither married nor cohabiting with a partner, fluctuated at the levels between 6-10%.

## 5. Discussion of the findings

This paper addressed nuptiality trends in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania among the generations who started their family life prevailingly in the 1970s and 1980s, in the context of concurrent developments in other countries of Europe. Among the results, perhaps the most remarkable findings relate to the spread of non-marital cohabitation. The analysis revealed that in Estonia, and to a somewhat lesser extent in Latvia, the shift from direct marriage to cohabitation started well before the fall of the state socialist regime. This corroborates the results, which in the recent years have become available from other countries west of the Hajnal line that were trapped behind the Iron Curtain. Compared to East Germany, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia, however, the rise in unmarried cohabitation started very early in the Baltic region. In the case of Estonia, pre-marital cohabitation became the mainstream route to family building already in the generations born in late 1940s-early 1950s.

As regards the timing of union formation, the analysis confirmed the prolonged shift towards an earlier start of partnership that began in the pre-FFS cohorts in all three Baltic countries. However, the evidence from the FFS did not fully comply with the notion of East-West difference in nuptiality patterns along political faultlines derived from marriage statistics [Ni Brolchain 1993; Roussel 1994]. When *de facto* partnerships were considered, the analysis indicates a largely similar trend in the timing of union formation between northern Europe and Baltic countries, in particular Estonia and Latvia. Apart from other parts of Europe, in both areas the shift towards earlier union formation extended to the birth cohorts of the 1960s, and as a result, women in the Baltic and north European countries started their first partnerships at a younger age than their counterparts in any other part of Europe. What emerged as markedly different between the Baltic and north European countries, was the tempo at which unions were converted into marriage and were followed by childbirth. Unlike in the latter, until the turn of the 1990s cohabitation in the Baltic countries remained a comparatively short phase at the beginning of partnership career rather than a long-lasting status.

Why then have these similarities and dissimilarities in nuptiality patterns arisen? With a certain degree of simplification, the arguments used to explain the trends and differentials in the demographic behavior can be split into two major streams, according to whether they insist on the role of structure or on the role of culture [Billari 2006; Mellens 1999; Pinelli *et al* 2001]. Structural factors relate to the functioning of various societal institutions and instruments of welfare state etc that shape the opportunities and constraints of individuals. Cultural factors, on the other hand, relate to broad ideologies, values, norms and preferences, which are used to define more and less appropriate ways of living and guide the choice between alternative options. To highlight the plausible driving forces behind the patterns of family formation in the Baltic countries, presented in previous sections, both types of influences should be considered.

To begin with structural factors, the societal regimes that prevailed in the Baltic countries until the 1990s featured several characteristics that restrained the ultimate disconnection of partnership formation from marriage and encouraged relatively early family formation. Among such characteristics, several authors have drawn attention to the role of housing allocation [e.g. Ni Brolchain 1993; Nazio and Blossfeld 2003; Speder 2005]. In the state socialist system, the housing market did not exist and the dwellings were distributed according to certain administrative rules. The impact of this on union formation resulted from the point that, as a rule, unmarried couples were not considered families in official proceedings and they could not apply for dwelling. To become eligible, a couple was expected to be in a registered marriage, which indeed encouraged young people to register their partnership.

From another angle, the housing shortage which was a common characteristic of state socialist regimes limited the autonomy of young people and implied their dependence on parents. With reference to Estonia, Vikat (1994) has shown that in urban setting about half of the respondents indicated living together with their or their partner's parents following their marriage. Evidently, this increased the chance that the expectations from the previous generation have influence on the young couple's family formation decisions. This assertion is supported by Rabusic and Mozny (1991) who found in an early study on the Slovak Republic that couples who had cohabited prior to marriage were much more likely to have a place of their own to live after marriage. Furthermore, in all three Baltic countries dwelling density was applied as an essential criterion to assess the needs of families for housing. Since the birth of a child increased the number of family members, it provided an incentive to start childbearing sooner rather than later which, in turn, increased the likelihood of converting the partnership into marriage. The plausible impact of housing allocation is also revealed by the more rapid diffusion of non-marital cohabitation in rural areas where the role of the state as a provider of housing was noticeably lower [Katus, Puur, and Sakkeus 2005].

The comparatively early onset of childbearing and hence the conversion of partnerships into marriage was probably supported also by additional features of institutional fabric. In the recent attempts to generalize the specificity of family and fertility patterns in eastern Europe, Philipov and Dorbritz (2003) and Sobotka (2004) underline the fact that in the 1970s and 1980s most people followed a relatively standardized pathway of life transitions marked by completing education, entering employment, starting a family and having children. The predictability of the life course implied high certainty about the future, as jobs were available for everybody and the cost of establishing a family was relatively low. On the other hand, however, the strict state control, chronic deficit of consumer goods, and low returns from professional achievement limited the choices and opportunities for career, personal development and consumption, cultivating frustration and passivity among the population. It has been hypothesized that under such circumstances, the family provided a private space for authenticity, individual fulfilment and self-realization. Evidently, the same generalisations can be extended to the Baltic scene as well.

Yet another factor that plausibly acted along the same lines was limited access to effective and reliable contraceptives in the former Soviet Union, aggravated by poor sex education and a desire of the authorities to keep the issues related to reproduction out of the public sphere.<sup>18</sup> The supply of modern contraceptives was poor also in comparison with most countries of eastern Europe, especially East Germany, Hungary, and Slovenia [David 1999]. Against that background, the approach to family planning which was implemented in the Baltic countries significantly restricted the couples' autonomy and

options for flexibility in family formation. In particular, it limited the chances to choose an appropriate time for procreation, delaying a shift from preventive to self-fulfilling contraception, which has been regarded as an important element facilitating the transformation of nuptiality patterns since the 1960s [Ryder and Westhoff 1977]. A failure to avoid early pregnancy often led to marriage with a bride already expecting a baby. Evidence from Estonia confirms that the proportion of such marriages in which the birth occurred during the first seven months of marriage more than doubled in the FFS cohort range, and similarly, there was an increase in childbearing that took place earlier than planned [EKDK 1995a].<sup>19</sup>

The described features help to understand why the new patterns of family formation could not manifest themselves in a similar way to what happened in northern and western Europe. From another view, the sudden cessation of the former mechanisms, particularly the end of state-controlled housing allocation contributed to a rapid extension in the duration of non-marital cohabitation after the turn of the 1990s. The corresponding effect can be vividly seen in the rapid postponement of marriage and steep acceleration of the rise in non-marital childbearing in the Baltic countries — according to recent statistics, in 2004 the proportion of non-marital births was close to 58% in Estonia, 45% in Latvia, and 29% in Lithuania [Council of Europe 2006].<sup>20</sup> With these levels, Estonia surpassed Sweden and Denmark, ranking second after Iceland. A close connection between the rise of non-marital childbearing and the spread of cohabitation has been validated in a recent study on the data quality of birth registers in 1993-2001 [Katus *et al* 2006].<sup>21</sup>

As discussed above, structural factors can explain the reasons that contributed to the rapid conversion of consensual unions into marriage in the Baltic countries before the 1990s, but at the same time they can hardly account for the differential spread of new family patterns between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania that took start in the previous decades. The Soviet authorities subjected newly-occupied Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to a far-reaching centralization, and as a result, all three countries developed closely similar profiles with respect to the functioning of economy, educational and employment system, organization of health care, social protection, pension system etc. Statistical evidence for the post-war decades also indicate a rapid convergence of socio-economic differences that shaped the Baltic scene in the late 19th and early 20th centuries [Kahk and Tarvel 1997]. In this sense, there seems to be not much doubt that the factors underlying the differentials in family formation between the Baltic countries stem from beyond the institutional framework.

A plausible clue to the observed dissimilarity in nuptiality patterns could be sought from the cultural boundary that emerged in the 17th century and acquired a long-standing character as a divide between the Protestant (Lutheran) and Catholic domains in the Baltic region. As is well known, Estonia belonged to the former, Lithuania represented the latter, and the territory of modern Latvia was split between the two influences — Kurland and Livland became prevalingly Lutheran whereas Latgale, due to its association with Lithuania, maintained the Catholic tradition.

Among demographers, this historical divide between denominations, and the role of religiosity in general, has attracted considerable attention as a correlate of fundamental behavioral changes. A common finding from many studies is that more secularized populations are likely to shift to new behaviors earlier than their counterparts with stronger adherence to religion. In a comprehensive account of family patterns in Europe, David Reher (1998) underlined the major cultural contribution of Reformation, with its emphasis on the individual and self-reliance that represented a distinct contrast to Catholicism, based on authority and stronger adherence to traditions. In the sphere of nuptiality, the



manifestations of individualization can be seen in the increasing value placed on companionship and the role of personal attraction in the partner selection that came to the fore with the European marriage pattern. Similarly, the shift to parity-specific fertility limitation required a change in mentality — the transition to modern demographic regime took off in the areas where such change had occurred earlier [van de Kaa 1999].

It is interesting to note that despite far-reaching societal modernization, the diversity rooted in long-standing religious and cultural differences has persisted and continues to shape the contemporary demographic patterns. According to frequently cited comparative study by Ron Lesthaeghe (1995), among the various factors considered, the historical experience of Protestantism exerted the strongest effect on the progress of patterns commonly associated with the second demographic transition. Along similar lines, using the FFS data for more than dozen countries Kiernan (2002) has demonstrated that the shift from direct marriage to cohabitation appears to be associated with more secular groups within a population, other research has shown this to be the case both when the new family forms were rare as well as when they became more widespread.

Turning back to the Baltic scene, the temporal pattern of demographic development fits quite well the idea of long-standing cultural differences in the region. This holds for the transformation of nuptiality patterns since the 1960s, discussed in the present paper, but it appears equally true about the transition to modern regime of generation replacement and the introduction of parity-specific fertility limitation that started about a century earlier [Katus 1994; Plakans 1984]. In both cases, the new behavioural patterns emerged earlier in the areas of Estonia and Latvia, followed by Lithuania with a certain time lag. In the given framework, the intermediate position of Latvia with respect to non-marital cohabitation could also be explained by the presence of both Lutheran and Catholic traditions in the country.

With respect to family and fertility patterns in the Baltic countries, the influence of cultural differences related to different denominations has been also underlined by Macura and Klijzing (1997) and Pinelli (2001). In a wider comparative perspective, the same factors could account for the observed similarity in family formation patterns between Estonia and Latvia, on the one hand, and the countries of northern Europe, on the other hand. In many international studies, the latter have turned out as the most secularized countries in Europe in terms of church membership, attendance at religious ceremonies and other religious practices [Dogan 1995; Halman and Rees 2003]. The results from the studies on Baltic region reveal that in Estonia, and to somewhat lesser extent in Latvia, the secularization progressed evidently even further than in the countries of northern Europe [Plaat 2003]. The authors regard such development a combined outcome of several factors, including a relatively low loyalty to Lutheran church established already in the 1920s and 1930s and forcible suppression of religious phenomena during the postwar decades. In contrast, in Lithuania the Roman Catholic Church retained much greater social influence all through the Soviet period, regardless of the same or even harder persecutions by the authorities [Vardys 1990].

The importance of the referred cultural factor is corroborated by the evidence from World Value Surveys. The analysis by Taagepera (2002), based on the WVS 1995-98 round, shows that along the scale which contrasts the traditional religious values and secularism, Estonia and Latvia ranked remarkably high in comparative perspective. Against the background of northern and western Europe, they reached scores that are comparable with Denmark and Norway, but slightly below Sweden and West Germany. In comparison to eastern Europe, Estonia and Latvia featured a closely similar score with the Czech Republic, and only former East Germany positioned clearly higher. All other

countries of Europe, including Lithuania, ranked noticeably lower on the traditional vs secular-rational authority scale.<sup>22</sup>

The other major cultural dimension outlined by World Value Surveys refers to survival vs self-expression as major goals, or materialist vs post-materialist values in a more widely used wording. Along this scale, the Baltic populations appeared almost poles apart from the northern and western Europe, in the same group with Russia and Ukraine. Inglehart and Baker (2000) attributed the somewhat unexpected position of the Baltic countries along the self-expression scale to the decline in socio-economic security and steep rise of uncertainty during the most turbulent phases of societal transition. Among others, this is supported by the extensive labor reallocation and sectoral shift, which surpassed that in other transition countries in the first half of the 1990s. If the conjectured effect of economic hardship is true, then the more recent comparisons, as they appear, will likely show a gradual shift of the Baltic countries from survival towards self-expression. Nevertheless it seems that compared to the spread of postmaterialist values, the shifts associated with secularization have played a more prominent role and possess a greater potential for the understanding of demographic patterns in the Baltic countries. Also, as formulated by Lesthaeghe (1983) more than twenty years ago, over a longer run the transformation of demographic behavior, secularization and several other developments can be seen as parts of a broader emancipatory process. In the course of this process, the traditional regulatory mechanisms, upheld by religious, communal and family authority, give way to individual freedom of choice and the corresponding exchange patterns. From such a viewpoint, the changes in family formation and mindset of the population should not be regarded as independent phenomena but rather as manifestations of the same long-term societal shift.

To conclude the discussion, it must be acknowledged that hard evidence about the influence of cultural shifts in the Soviet period is difficult to obtain. Above all, the attempts to link nuptiality trends prior to 1990s to value changes face the problem of data comparability. Although relatively numerous sociological studies were carried out in the Baltic countries in the 1970s and 1980s, as a rule, these studies did not belong to wider international research programs or apply comparable methodology, they suffered from a lack of reliable sampling frame and other flaws (for the situation in survey research in the region before the late 1980s, see Anderson *et al* 1994; Motivans 1993; Swafford 1992]. Apart from a range of demographic and social processes, which, to a considerable extent, can be reconstructed from event history data behindhand, the information on values and attitudes cannot be collected retrospectively.<sup>23</sup>

More conclusive answers about the development of new family patterns can be sought from new comparative life history surveys that are being conducted in the framework of Gender and Generations Program. These data will reveal to what extent the similarities and dissimilarities observed in the present paper have persisted into the 21st century, through the turbulence of regime change in the Baltic countries. But whatever is in store in that respect, it nevertheless seems that for the understanding long-term trends and regional contrasts in demographic patterns, the post-war period also deserves further research.

## Notes

1. The present article uses comparative perspective to analyze the dynamics of family formation the Baltic countries and place the region into a broader European context. Along with the comparison between individual countries, the patterns in the Baltic region are compared to four major regions of the Continent — northern, western, southern and eastern Europe. The definition of these regions applied in the article follows a delineation, which has been used in demographic studies to outline the transformation of family and fertility formation on the Continent [e.g. Coleman 1996; van de Kaa 1999; Pinelli *et al* 2001]. According to the applied definition, northern Europe refers to Iceland, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, being close to the notion of Nordic countries. Within that group, sometimes a more specific reference is made to Scandinavian countries. Western Europe is used to denote Ireland, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Southern Europe encompasses Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain and Cyprus. Eastern Europe refers to Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, East Germany (until reunification), Hungary, Poland, Romania and the Slovak Republic. In a broader view, the concept of Eastern Europe could be also extended to Albania and the countries of ex-Yugoslavia in the Balkans, the Russian Federation, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine but the latter countries are not explicitly considered in the given operationalization. In terms of the current geopolitical division, the comparisons cover the member states of EU and EFTA.

2. Due to the relatively short exposure in the FFS, the detailed analysis of family initiation patterns after 1990 should be postponed until the data from a new round of comparative surveys become available. Estonia was the first among the Baltic countries to carry out a new survey as a part of the Gender and Generations Program in 2005, the data are currently being checked and cleaned. In Lithuania, the data collection took place in 2006. In Latvia, the plans for a new survey are currently less advanced.

3. Hajnal dubbed it simply the European marriage pattern, for the sake of brevity. In his article (1965), the term *west European marriage pattern* is used for the sake of clarity when comparing western and eastern Europe, delineated by the line from St. Petersburg to Trieste. The term *late-marriage/low prevalence* pattern has also been used in this meaning. In the present article, the referred terms are used interchangeably.

4. Singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) is the mean age at first marriage among those who ever marry. It is usually computed from the census data, from the proportions of singles in each age group. In many instances, especially for the periods of the past, SMAM is preferable to statistics derived from marriage registration, which are likely to suffer from incompleteness and do not distinguish between first and later marriages. For a technical discussion of SMAM, see Hajnal 1953b.

5. The east European marriage type refers to SMAM of 20-22 years and the proportions of never-marrying women of about 5-10%. Geographically, this pattern prevailed in Bosnia, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Russia, Serbia and Slovakia, whereas the areas that later became the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovenia, alongside the Baltic countries featured the west European pattern. In non-European populations, the SMAM was typically under 21 years for women and the proportion of never-marrying did not exceed 5%. Some areas of Russia and the Balkan countries at the turn of the 20th century featured the proportions of never-marrying women around 1-3% and SMAMs of 18-20 years, which resemble the marriage pattern among non-European populations [United Nations 1990].

6. The nuptiality index  $I_m$  is a statistical tool, developed by Ansley Coale to measure the contribution of various behavioral factors to the level of overall fertility. Compared to Hajnal's measures, Coale's nuptiality index combines the timing and prevalence of marriage into a single measure. In establishing a statistical cut-off level of the west European marriage pattern, the

nuptiality index yielded a perfect separation of late-marriage/low prevalence pattern — there were no provinces with an  $I_m$  less than 0.55 east of the line [Coale and Watkins 1986].

7. Judging by the evidence from reconstituted parish records from Rõuge in 1661-1696, Palli proposed that the mean age at first marriage could have been 23-24 among females (1973; 1996). This conjecture would extend the characteristic features of the west European marriage pattern in the Baltic area back to the late 17th century. In this view, the somewhat earlier marriage in the first half of the 18th century may be interpreted as a response to favorable economic conditions, particularly to the availability of farmland, after the devastation of the Great Northern War. Similar fluctuations in the marital timing are well documented elsewhere in pre-modern Europe [e.g. Wrigley and Schofield 1981].

8. In north-western Europe servants apparently constituted up to 10-12% of the total population [Reher 1998].

9. According to a comprehensive study by United Nations Population Division, a decrease in SMAM and a rise in the proportion ever-marrying were documented in Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Germany before WWII [United Nations 1990].

10. The conclusions about Lithuania are hampered by the availability of interwar census data from a single time point (1926).

11. After the turn of the 1990s, the age at first marriage in the Baltic countries started to increase, however, for several years the difference with the countries of northern and western Europe continued to expand and it is only today that the difference is dropping below the levels attained in the late 1980s [Council of Europe 2006].

12. In terms of coverage, the FFS secured a good representation of major regions of Europe. Following the delineation applied in the article, in northern Europe the program covered Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. Western Europe was represented by Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and from southern Europe, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain participated in the program. In Eastern Europe, the survey covered Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia, the data on the former East Germany are also available, separately from the western *Länder*. From overseas countries, Canada, New Zealand and the USA also participated in the FFS but they are not included in the analyses presented in the article.

13. A description of survey methodology, together with an overview of the main findings is available from country reports published by United Nations Economic Commission for Europe [Zvidrins *et al* 1998; Katus *et al* 2000; Stankuniene *et al* 2000].

14. Strict validity tests involve the comparison of the data to external sources, either on aggregate level or through individual-level record matching [Vaessen 1993]. In case of the Estonian FFS, the latter method was applied to assess the accuracy of survey responses on various items against individual records from the population census, taken five years prior to the survey, which had served for a sampling frame. The results confirmed the reliability of partnership histories collected in the survey [EKDK 1995b; Katus *et al* 2000]. Among others, compared to the census the FFS data proved superior in capturing the *de facto* conjugal status of the respondents. Perhaps even stronger support for the validity of information on marriage and cohabitation was provided by the consistency with residence histories of the respondents, which included the moves to start living together with a partner.

15. The working sample focusing on native population comprised 4979 respondents from Estonia, 2308 from Latvia, and 4271 from Lithuania.

16. Median age refers to the point where half of the cohort has experienced an event. In the life course analysis, the measure has an advantage over the mean age because it can be calculated also for the cohorts, which have not yet completed the process. In the present study, medians can be calculated for all cohorts except 1969-73, which was still at an early stage of union formation at the time of data collection.

17. For the youngest cohort the decrease is slightly overestimated because the data do not cover unions contracted at older ages.

18. There are no data available on contraceptive prevalence from the Soviet statistics. According to the estimates for the Soviet Union as a whole, in the late 1980s the percentage of married women in reproductive age who currently used the pill accounted for 1.4%, condom 4.1%, and IUD 13.1% [Avdeev 1994]. The distribution according to a centralized scheme gives no reason to assume a much better access to contraceptives in the Baltic countries — condoms were in short supply and the use of the pill was discouraged by health authorities. The low contraceptive prevalence is also highlighted by the comparisons based on the FFS data [Schoenmakers and Lodewijckx 1999].

19. Despite important consequences on the choice of individuals as well as reproductive health of the population, the availability of different family planning methods on the nuptiality pattern should not be overestimated. In comparison with other structural factors that provided little incentive to postpone family formation, the availability of contraceptives evidently played an instrumental role. If there was a deliberate motivation to avoid childbirth, couples could rely on abortion, which became available on request in the former Soviet Union in 1955, and was widely practiced also in the Baltic countries [Avdeev, Blum and Troitskaya 1995].

20. Statistics reported in the Council of Europe demographic yearbook refer to total population of the countries. In Estonia, the corresponding data for the native population (excluding post-war immigrants) would take the proportion of non-marital births (63%) very close to that in Iceland (64%). Accordingly, Latvians would take the fifth position in Europe [ESA 2006].

21. The study employed a linkage of individual birth records from two independent sources (Estonian Medical Birth Register and Civil Registration Office), and foresaw systematic evaluation of all characteristics recorded. As regards conjugal status of parents at childbirth, both registers included a separate category for non-marital cohabitation. The analysis revealed that the bulk of the decrease in the proportion of marital births during the past decade relates to the increase in the number of births to cohabiting couples. In the registers, the corresponding birth records include a complete set of information on the mother as well as on the father of the child, which distinguishes them from the records of women not living in union (single, divorced or widowed). The proportion of births to the latter has not undergone major change and is still at the level of around 10%. The same conclusion has been also supported by survey statistics [Katus 2003].

22. The data from World Value Survey analyzed by Taagepera (2002) refer to the total population of the Baltic countries, including the Soviet-period settlers. The focus on native population of the countries would have probably resulted in an even greater difference on the secularization scale between Estonia and Latvia on one hand, and Lithuania on the other hand (according to the FFS, in Estonia and Latvia adherence to religion is significantly higher among immigrant population while the opposite is true for Lithuania).

23. The scarcity of representative quantitative evidence can be compensated by other sources of information, including participant observation, in-depth interviews etc. Despite their general usefulness, however, the latter approach has limited validity in international comparisons as exemplified, for example, in the comment by Allik and Realo (1996).

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