

## **Patterns of Family Life Courses in Europe – between Standardisation and Diversity**

### **A Cross-national Comparison of Family Trajectories and Life Course Norms in European Countries**

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**Abstract:** Throughout recent decades, a gradual shift away from an early contracted and simple life course pattern which dominated in the 1950s and 1960s to late protracted and more complex patterns could be observed within European countries. Yet, despite multiple cross-national similarities in the changes of individual life course patterns, there exist considerable differences in the form and frequency of these changes. We argue that one possible way of better understanding these variations is to examine the connection between family formation choices and value orientations. Using data from the European Social Survey 2006 we empirically investigate to what extent the family trajectories have changed across generations and how these practiced family trajectories correspond to cross-cohort changes in socially established norms about family transitions. Our results corroborate the assumption of an increasing restandardisation of family lives: Even though family trajectories have become more turbulent involving more stages and stage changes for the younger generation, “deviations” from traditional family patterns (such as unmarried cohabitation) are turning into majority behaviour, i.e. into a “new standard”. Contrasting these trends with developments in family-related norms reveals that the liberalisation in norms appears to precede such changes in actual demographic behaviour, even though European countries differ in the degree and pace to which such normative and behavioural changes have yet taken place.

**Keywords:** Family trajectories · Norms · Cross-national comparison · European Social Survey · Sequence analysis

## 1 Introduction

Throughout recent decades, European countries have undergone substantial changes in the timing and sequencing of family transitions. Childbearing, union formation and getting married are on average being experienced at a later age than several decades ago (*Sobotka/Toulemon 2008; Corijn/Klijzing 2001*). At the same time, the previously close linkage between the individual transitions, especially between marriage and family formation, has loosened. There is also an increasing decoupling between leaving parental home and union formation. As a result, more young people live alone before they enter into a relationship, and out-of-wedlock births are becoming more common across Europe; in some countries in Northern and Western Europe they even predominate (*Billari/Liefbroer 2010; Sobotka/Toulemon 2008*). Empirical data on demographic markers of transitions to adulthood suggest that these changes in family formation from one cohort to the next reflect a gradual shift away from an early, contracted, and simple life course pattern, which dominated in the 1950s and 1960s to late, protracted, and more complex patterns (*Billari/Liefbroer 2010*). These changes are often summarised as a de-standardisation of previously dominant standard life course models, implying that a long-lasting standard social “blueprint” of family structures and the timing of family transitions is losing significance and is gradually being replaced by the emergence of a broad variety of more heterogeneous “choice biographies” (*Furlong/Cartmel 1997*).

Although similar changes in individual life courses are observed across Europe, there exist considerable differences in the form and rhythm of these changes across different institutional and cultural backgrounds (cp. section 3.1).

A number of different explanations have been put forward to explain these cross-national differences. In this paper, we shall argue that one possible way of better understanding these variations is to examine the connection between family formation choices and value orientations. In demography, an internationally common pattern of major changes of demographic behaviour since the late 1960s has been described as the “Second Demographic Transition” (e.g. *Van de Kaa 1987*) and has been explained as the expression of a more general value change. In this sense, changes in family structures can be considered as part of a process of “individualisation” and a weakening of social norms that organise and structure the life course (*Beck 1992*).

Findings from life course research, however, challenge the assumption of a gradual demise of family-related norms. Life course theorists argue that despite trends of diversification, the “standard family course” still serves as an orientation for individual life planning (*Kohli 2007*). Values within the family sphere have been remarkably stable over time (*Scott/Braun 2006*), suggesting that “the demise of traditional family values has been exaggerated” (*Scott 2006: 16*). More than in other spheres of life (e.g. in employment or occupational careers), social norms about the timing and sequencing of family transitions still represent internalised “scripts” about appropriate behaviours (*Buchmann 1989; Settersten/Hagestad 1996*) exerting influence on individual action (*Billari/Liefbroer 2007*). Cross-national variations in norms (and their development over time) thus may provide a helpful analytical

tool to better understand the different forms and “rhythms” of changes in family life courses across countries.

Against this background, the aims of our contribution are twofold. *First, we empirically investigate to what extent the family trajectories of young adults in Europe are becoming more de-standardised in terms of timing and sequencing of four family transitions: leaving parental home, starting a union, entry into first marriage and becoming a parent.* Using sequence analysis, we explore to what extent family trajectories of young adults in Europe aged between 18 and 35 are becoming more turbulent and dissimilar across cohorts as compared to a “traditional family pattern”, defined as entry into marriage preceding childbirth without a previous period of unmarried cohabitation. *Secondly, we analyse how these practiced family trajectories correspond to cross-cohort changes in socially established norms about family transitions.* Our results contribute to the existing research by updating the description of change of family-related social norms and of family trajectories as well as by linking both spheres and processes of change across birth cohorts in an international perspective (cp. section 3.3).

For our analyses, we refer back to Wave 3 of the European Social Survey from 2006/2007 that contains comprehensive retrospective data on family life course transitions and related social norms in a separate questionnaire. Furthermore, its pan-European scope allows us to study the relevant life course transitions across a wide set of different institutional and cultural backgrounds including those of the new EU member states of Central and Eastern Europe, where family forms and demographic processes have changed most noticeably in recent decades. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the ESS, we cannot test for causal effects between individual attitudes and norms on individual decisions and behaviour. Our analytical interest thus is mainly in describing changes in family behaviour and in social norms as well as elaborating associations between these two processes on the macro-level. The macro-level is of interest to us because it is plausible that individual behaviour is not only linked to individual attitudes but also to social norms that are based on dominant attitudes within a given society.

In the following, we shall outline the key theoretical concepts underlying our analysis in more detail (section 2). Section 3 subsequently presents a concise overview of the current state-of-the-art in comparative research on family trajectories, its main results and persistent limitations. Against this background, we develop an analytical framework and derive hypotheses for our empirical analyses (section 4). Subsequent to a short description of the ESS data (section 5), section 6 presents empirical evidence on developments in family trajectories and family norms in Europe based on descriptive statistics as well as a sequence analyses of retrospective survey data. Finally, we critically discuss our results and draw conclusions for further analyses in this field (section 7).

## 2 Theoretical background

### 2.1 Changes in family transitions: standardisation vs. destandardisation

Transformations in family life trajectories have been in the focus of various studies in the social sciences throughout previous decades. The analysis of such changes relates to more general efforts to conceptualise dimensions of life course trajectories (Brückner/Mayer 2005) and to develop statistical measures for them (Barban/Billari 2012; Elzinga/Liefbroer 2007; Fussell 2005; Fussell et al. 2007). Earlier research has described changes in life course patterns using various concepts like “de-institutionalisation”, “de-standardisation”, “pluralisation” and “differentiation” often used interchangeably. However, these processes entail multiple dimensions, which can occur independently or even incoherently. *De-institutionalisation* refers to a progressive weakening of normative, legal or organisational rules that regulate the organisation of sequences in the life course. The term *de-standardisation* of life courses reflects the fact that either certain events in life are experienced by smaller and smaller shares of the population or occur at more diverse ages and for durations that vary more widely (Brückner/Mayer 2005). The processes of de-standardisation thus include both changes in the patterns of family life courses and of their volatility or turbulence, which can take different directions. For instance, the *pluralisation* of family forms (the increase in the number of synchronous states in a population) and the *differentiation* of the life course (the increase in the number of distinct stages within individual life courses, e.g. premarital cohabitation) may be accompanied by standardisation processes (e.g. when premarital cohabitation becomes an almost universal part of family trajectories) and may result in the emergence of a “new standard life course” (Brückner/Mayer 2005). At the same time, the processes of accompanying normative changes (*de-institutionalisation*) – to which we shall turn subsequently – can occur independently from the changes of demographic behaviour or it can precede them.

### 2.2 Family norms

Previous research has pointed to a number of macro-social factors that may jointly have triggered recent transformations in demographic behaviour, including changes in the economic and social structure, cultural changes and technological innovations (cp. section 3.1). Yet, while research results show that social norms about the timing and especially sequencing of family formation are still strong and differ widely across countries (e.g. Billari/Liefbroer 2010), surprisingly little research has considered these normative patterns as potential correlates of cross-national differences of changes in family trajectories. As Liefbroer and Merz (2009: 1) argue, cross-national differences in demographic behaviour may actually stem from “different norms being dominant in different countries.” Individuals may thus not only orient their behaviour at the structural and/or material opportunities and constraints that economic and social structures create; they may equally take the expectable

external evaluation of their actions through their more immediate or wider social surroundings into account and therefore avoid acting in stark contrast to the convictions of people with whom they interact or to general social norms. Expectations by relatives or friends may, for example, influence young people's readiness to leave parental home at a specific age (*Billari/Liefbroer* 2007). From a role theory perspective, individuals seek positive sanctions by significant others and try to avoid negative sanctions such as social exclusion. From a rational choice perspective, individuals may not only be acting "rationally" in their family decisions by seeking for material gains respectively by avoiding material costs. They may, at the same time, act in line with existing norms in order to receive "social consent" from relevant others, respectively to avoid social costs.

Following this line of argument, individuals may in times of rapid social and economic changes not directly adjust their demographic behaviour to changing structural conditions. Instead, they may still tend to adhere to more "conservative" behaviour as norms are changing at a lesser pace. Changes in demographic behaviour thus may then be regarded as a gradual process in which "obsolete" values hinder individuals in the adaptation of the new behaviours for some time, until the values change themselves and catch up with the innovation" (*Rossier* 2010: 8). It thus can be assumed that demographic behaviour will change with a certain "time lag" after norms have changed up to a certain "threshold point" at which deviations from the previous behavioural standard do no longer imply a violation of a dominant norm.

### 3 Previous studies

Following the theoretical overview, we shall now turn to a schematic synopsis of previous research on both changes in family transitions as well as the most recent developments in family norms and values. Based on this synopsis, we subsequently identify research gaps and outline the additional contribution provided by our work.

#### 3.1 Diversity of family formation patterns across Europe

Although pathways to family formation are changing into the same direction in most parts of Europe, significant differences across Europe still persist and there is yet little sign of convergence in the timing and sequencing of family events (*Billari/Liefbroer* 2010; *Blossfeld et al.* 2005; *Corijn/Klijzing* 2001; *Sobotka/Toulemon* 2008). While there are some signs of convergence between Eastern European countries on the one hand and Northern and Western European states on the other hand, living arrangements in Northern and Western Europe and in Mediterranean countries still differ considerably (*Fokkema/Liefbroer* 2008). In Southern Europe, for example, leaving home is still a much more protracted process and there is a smaller proportion of young people living on their own than in Northern and Western Europe. Consequently, alternative family forms (such as unmarried cohabitation, non-marital parenthood, lone parenthood etc.) as "intermediate steps" in family formation have spread differently across the two groups of countries (*Beier et al.* 2010).

Until now, there are only few comparative studies examining the demographic markers<sup>1</sup> of the transition to adulthood in a holistic way – as a series of transitions (Gauthier 2007). Only throughout the last years, such studies were enabled through methodological developments in sequence analysis (cp. section 5) which allow studying entire life course trajectories as a whole (Abbott/Tsay 2000; Aisenbrey/Fasang 2007; Lesnard 2006). Using this method, Elzinga and Liefbroer (2007) explored data from the Family and Fertility Survey from 1998/1999 on 19 European countries. Chanvriil and her colleagues (2009) applied sequence analysis to identify patterns of early family trajectories in European countries, using ESS round 3 data from 2006. These studies revealed that, rather than being a general and uniform trend, de-standardisation of family trajectories proceeds at a distinct pace. Comparing data for women born in 1945-1964, Elzinga and Liefbroer (2007) observed increased dissimilarity of women's family trajectories and increased variation in types of family trajectories across cohorts in most Western European countries.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, cross-cohort differences were rather small. However, these countries experienced a transformation in institutional and economic conditions only in the 1990s, affecting mainly family behaviour of those born in 1970 and later. For Sweden (and partly the Netherlands) Elzinga and Liefbroer (2007) found decreasing variation in types of family trajectories amongst the youngest cohort which might suggest an emergence of "new standard family trajectories" in these countries that have been the pioneers of the second demographic transitions.

However, while much research acknowledges the persistence of cross-national differences in family trajectories, only little research has provided explanations for this asymmetric spread of de-standardisation (respectively re-standardisation). Elzinga and Liefbroer (2007) refer to the varying nature of welfare state benefits in different welfare regimes: In social-democratic countries, generous benefits are being provided irrespective of a person's social position and thus are assumed to weaken reliance on the family, thereby lowering family influence and promoting autonomous behaviour. In contrast, family benefits in liberal, conservative and Southern European regimes are rather marginal, leading to a stronger reliance on the family and thus to stronger adherence to "traditional" family behaviour. A similar conclusion is reached for post-socialist countries, where initial state support throughout communism was high, but was counteracted by "strong normative constraints on individual behaviour" (Elzinga/Liefbroer 2007: 229). Furthermore, in a synthetic work on family formation patterns in Europe, Liefbroer points to the significance of changes in the economic and social structure (e.g. educational expansion, the increasing labour force participation of women and most recent welfare state retrenchment), cultural

<sup>1</sup> These demographic markers usually include leaving parental home, entry to first union or marriage and having a first child. From a broader perspective, the transition to adulthood typically also entails the transition from studying full-time to entering the labour market (Modell *et al.* 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Their study focused on changes in following states: single, married, unmarried cohabitation and (not) having child(ren) (Elzinga/Liefbroer 2007).

changes (e.g. the rise of individualism, the re-emergence of feminism and the decrease in normative controls) and technological innovations (such as the spread of contraceptives and the increasing range of modern mass media; see *Liefbroer* 2009 for an overview). However, the data underlying these analyses often originate from the late 1990s and it remains an open question how the above may still serve as adequate explanations of demographic behaviour in times of increasing economic, cultural and technological convergence among European countries.

### 3.2 Previous research on family norms across Europe

While there has been a plethora of research on developments in actual family transitions, and despite a growing overall interest in values and culture within the social sciences (e.g. *van Oorschot et al.* 2008), research on family-related norms has remained rather scarce. The reasons for this relative “ignorance of social norms in current demographic thinking” (*Liefbroer/Billari* 2010: 288) may be twofold: On the one hand, from a substantial perspective, theorists of the “Second Demographic Transition” have frequently assumed that the significance of social norms in governing individual life courses has weakened (see *Van de Kaa* 1987 and the above discussion). On the other hand, from a methodological perspective, the idea of “family norms” has proven to be rather difficult to operationalise.

Most generally, norms can be regarded as prescriptive, proscriptive or prohibitive statements about the “right” or appropriate behaviour, shared by a certain group of actors and related to some sort of sanctions in case of their violation (e.g. *Billari/Liefbroer* 2010; *Liefbroer/Merz* 2009). Norms may become internalised as attitudes or “individual norms” but it can be assumed that regarding their explanatory power for group behaviour, it is rather norms shared by a sizeable proportion of the population (“societal norms”) that play a role. Previous research on family-related norms had largely focused on “age norms”, i.e. prescriptive *ages* at which specific transitions “should” (or should not) happen. Based on a regional US sample, *Settersten* and *Hagestad* (1996), for example, show that there exist defined and socially shared values about maximum ages until which specific family transitions such as leaving parental home, cohabitation or entry into parenthood should occur. Norms may, however, also entail prescriptions about the *occurrence* (“quantum norms”) and the *sequencing* of specific stages of family life (“sequencing norms”). They provide a somewhat “weaker” type of family norms, as they do not explicitly focus on specific age limits but investigate how far more general deviations from a specific “standard” family model would be tolerated. Existing studies point towards an increasing tolerance of deviations from a “traditional family life course”. Contrasting various indicators of family-related behaviour included into the European Values Studies 1981 to 1999, *Halman* (2009), for example, finds indications of a gradual but persistent trend of “de-traditionalisation”, i.e. a shift away from traditional norms and an increasing importance of individual choice in agency. However, there appear to be considerable cross-national differences in family-related norms (*Liefbroer/Merz* 2009; *Wernhart/Neuwirth* 2007). One extreme is represented by Scandinavian countries which show a high tolerance for “deviations” from the standard life course



model (such as unmarried cohabitation or childlessness). At the other end, there are countries especially in Southern and to a lesser degree in Central Europe in which the acceptance of deviant “alternative” family forms (such as one-parent families or unmarried couples), of childlessness and family dissolution (e.g. through divorce) is still low (*Liefbroer/Merz 2009*).

While much previous research focuses on developments in family-related norms *per se*, only a few recent studies try to systematically link the developments in norms to actual family behaviour. *Billari and Liefbroer (2007)* use a longitudinal Dutch survey to reconstruct the influence of individual family norms on the process of leaving home and indeed find that the timing of young people in leaving home is influenced by the social expectations their parents seem to have. In a similar way, *Liefbroer and Billari (2010)* argue based on Dutch results that relevant social expectations related to the timing of family transitions and their sequencing still exist. Their findings also suggest the emergence of a new set of normative expectations on young adulthood that include living on one’s own and unmarried cohabitation. However, both studies remain restricted to the normatively rather “liberal” case of the Netherlands, thus allowing for only limited generalisations.

### 3.3 Aim and scope of the article

Our study draws on the existing research in both the analysis of family trajectories and family norms but goes beyond it in several respects:

First, we turn from the analysis of single life transitions to a holistic perspective of entire family trajectories. We focus on a series of demographic markers of the transition to adulthood ranging from leaving the parental home, starting a first relationship, making the transition to first marriage up to having a first child for both women and men.

Second, our study combines the analysis of demographic behaviour with a comparative investigation of their correspondence to family-related social norms. Owing to the increasing availability of adequate data sets, cross-national comparative research into gender- and family-related norms has amplified significantly throughout recent years, but patterns and developments in norms and values have hardly been systematically connected to actual changes in family trajectories. The systematic juxtaposition of family-related norms with actual family transitions using one unique data set, as done in this paper, thus can make a substantial contribution to a better understanding of the interrelation between the two spheres.

Finally, unlike much earlier studies, we contrast the development in family trajectories as well as social norms *across birth cohorts* in order to empirically investigate the cohort-specific interplay between structural and attitudinal changes. Earlier studies, using for example data from the Family and Fertility Surveys often were restricted up to the late 1990s. Most recent data from the 2006 wave of the European Social Survey allows us to extend our analyses from the post-war generation to more recent cohorts (i.e. born in the 1970s) which partly experienced their family trajectories after the fall of the iron curtain. This extended “observation window” is of special importance for post-communist countries where family forms and demo-



graphic processes have changed noticeably in the last decades. Until now, existing research has pointed to varying developments across this group of countries, but there has been only limited empirical proof for this claim.<sup>3</sup> Our study intends to provide insights into developments within this still largely under-researched group of countries.

#### 4 Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical outline as well as the research synopsis, we now develop hypotheses for the subsequent data analyses.

As outlined above, empirical research using data up to the late 1990s has pointed to a rise in non-standard family forms and “intermediate” stages in family development (see *Elzinga/Liefbroer 2007*). We assume that this process may not yet be completed and thus expect to find a similar increase in the overall number of states in family trajectories and/or increasing variation in durations of these states, i.e. a rise in the “turbulence” of family trajectories, in our study of family sequences. These changes will be less significant in countries where the level of turbulence was already relatively high among older cohorts. At the same time we expect that family trajectories are becoming more dissimilar from traditional family formation patterns (Hypothesis 1).

However, we assume that, as in the past, developments in family trajectories have not occurred unidirectionally in all modern societies. In line with earlier research (e.g. *Elzinga/Liefbroer 2007: 227-229*), we assume that both *the level of de-standardisation as well as the direction and speed of changes in family trajectories will vary* and that this variation is shaped by *welfare regimes as well as by social norms*.

On the one hand, following *Elzinga and Liefbroer (2007)*, we assume that given different welfare state support for autonomous behaviour, the *level* of destandardisation will be most pronounced in *social-democratic* countries while in both *conservative* and *liberal* countries the relatively low involvement of state policies into the family sphere will delimit autonomy and foster a higher adherence to more traditional family forms, i.e. a somewhat lesser degree of turbulence and destandardisation of family trajectories. For the largely familialistic *Southern European* countries, we expect this pattern of a rather low level of destandardisation and turbulence in family trajectories to be even more pronounced. *Finally, in post-socialist* countries

<sup>3</sup> A recent study on Polish women’s work-family trajectories after finishing full-time education (*Baranowska 2008*) as well as a study on family trajectories of Czechs between age 18 and 35 (*Chaloupková 2010*) have found an increase of heterogeneity in young adult’s life-course trajectories after the fall of communism. However, using entropy analysis, the Czech analyses revealed that the increase in the heterogeneity of age-specific family situations is not uniform, as for young people born in 1980s, a reversal trend of declining diversity in family statuses was found in their early adulthood due to a postponement of family-related transitions (*Chaloupková 2010*).

we expect that the initial strong state support, suggesting a similar development as in Scandinavian countries, has been largely counteracted by rather prohibitive norms through both public policies and traditionally conservative religious values (Hypothesis 2).

On the other hand, concerning patterns of *changes in family behaviour* over time, we assume that different “norms” about family behaviour will moderate the level and speed of change. While welfare regimes define the general institutional opportunities and constraints under which individuals will make their (family) decisions, behavioural changes may be difficult to implement when they are in stark contrast to the norms and expectations of significant others or the “general public”. Existing norms thus may mediate the speed at which demographic behaviour may alter or reverse. In contexts in which deviations from a “standard” family model are being tolerated by large shares of the population, we assume that trends towards a “destandardisation” of family trajectories over time will be most dynamic. On the contrary, in contexts where a sizeable share of the population rejects such deviations and : a certain limit of minimum acceptance is not surpassed, processes of destandardisation will be rather slow or even reversed (Hypothesis 3).

## 5 Data and methods

For testing our hypotheses, we draw upon cross-national data from the European Social Survey (ESS) Wave 3 which was fielded in 2006/2007 and includes 23 European countries.<sup>4</sup> This wave included a special module on “The Timing of Life: The organization of the life course in Europe”, including various indicators on the organization of family life courses using both behavioural as well as attitudinal questions.

To explore changes in family structures we employ sequence analysis. Sequence analysis is a set of methods which focus on complex descriptions of ordered lists of elements (e.g. events, statuses) as an entity. Particularly, it concentrates on the comparison of similarity and dissimilarity of sequences and the identification of typical patterns (*Brzinsky-Fay et al. 2006; Macindoe/Abbott 2006*).

This approach enables to study the changes in a whole sequence of family transitions – and to take into account changes in the timing and order of family transitions. For reconstructing *actual life course transitions*, we draw upon a set of retrospective questions through which respondents were asked in which year (i) they first left their parents for at least two months or started to live separately from them (“leaving home” – L), (ii) they first lived with a spouse or a partner for three months or more (“cohabitation” – U), (iii) in which year they first married (“marriage” – M) and

<sup>4</sup> Namely: Austria, Ireland, the Netherlands, Ukraine, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

(iv) in which year they first gave birth to respectively fathered a child (“childbirth” – C).<sup>5</sup> We restrict our analyses to respondents who were 35 years old or older at the time of data collection. This design permits us to analyse full trajectories of men and women aged between 18 and 35 years who were born up to the early 1970s – these cohorts could not be considered in earlier studies such as the previous work of *Elzinga and Liefbroer* (2007). Using information on the respondent’s age when all “first” family-related transitions happened, a set of 18 count variables representing each year of age from 18 to 35 years<sup>6</sup> was created, and all events that respondents had already experienced by that age were assigned to each new age variable.<sup>7</sup> In total, our data enable to reconstruct 20,486 trajectories. Consequently, our sequences do not take into account possible reversibility of states and higher complexity of family patterns of young adults (e.g. the return to parental home or partnership union dissolution), but only „first“ events. As an illustration, Table 1 displays the family trajectory of a respondent who left parental home at age 20, started to live with a partner at 24, married at 26 and had a child at 27 years of age. In a shortened way, it can be reported as: 0(2) – L(4) – LU(2) – LUM(1) – LUMC (9), where the number in brackets indicates the number of years spent in a given state.

**Tab. 1:** Example of a family trajectory between the age of 18 and 35

Age	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	...	35
State	0	0	L	L	L	L	LU	LU	LUM	LUMC	...	LUMC

Source: Own design

To analyse changes in family trajectories of young European adults, we employ two indicators of destandardisation of family trajectories: the *turbulence index* and the *dissimilarity index*. The *turbulence index* proposed by *Elzinga and Liefbroer* (2007) is a composite measure that accounts for the number of distinct sub-sequences and the variance of the consecutive times spent in each state (for details see *Elzinga/Liefbroer* 2007; *Gabadinho et al.* 2009). It not only measures the increase in the overall number of distinct states in individual family trajectories, but also increases in their volatility, i.e. an increasing variation in the durations of these states. Given our state definitions, increasing values of the turbulence index indicate that family trajectories encompass more so-called “intermediate” states between leav-

<sup>5</sup> All these single questions were preceded by a filter question to establish whether the respective event had actually taken place. Consistency checks were undertaken to exclude wrong or unrealistic answers.

<sup>6</sup> Transitions that occurred before the age of 18 (such as leaving the home earlier, teenage pregnancies etc.) are coded as if they had happened at the age of 18. Nevertheless, these transitions were marginal. At the age of 18 only 3 percent of the respondents already had a first child and 4.9 percent were married.

<sup>7</sup> As we are observing four events, there exist 16 (2<sup>4</sup>) possible combinations of already experienced family stages.

ing the parental home and parenthood (such as living alone or unmarried cohabitation) and that their durations are increasingly flexible.

To map the macro level changes in family patterns across European countries, the second measure – the *dissimilarity index* – compares all observed trajectories with a reference sequence representing a “traditional” family life course, defined as leaving parental home when married and having a child afterwards. The traditional family life course thus neither includes any periods of long-term unmarried cohabitation nor a period of living alone. Technically, our reference trajectory not only includes a 0-LM-LMC trajectory (leaving parental home and marriage in the same year, without unmarried cohabitation) but also 0-LUM-LUMC, i.e. a trajectory in which also a short phase of premarital cohabitation has occurred in the same year, which may have lasted close to 12 months or only a few days.<sup>8</sup> The reference length of the family life course phases were defined based on the highest observed frequencies in the whole data set: (0,3)-(LM,2)-(LMC,13) and (0,2)-(LUM,1)-(LUMC,15). The final distance for each trajectory was determined as the lowest value of the two distances to these two references. The comparison of observed and reference trajectories is based on the length of the longest common sub-sequence (LCS distance) (Gabadinho *et al.* 2009). The normed LCS distance has a value of 0 when all sub-sequences occur in both sequences, and reaches its maximum of 1 if there is no common sub-sequence between these two trajectories. In our study, we measure the extent of destandardisation across cohorts by comparing the average normed LCS distance between empirically observed trajectories and the predefined “traditional family trajectory”. If the average dissimilarity is close to 1, the level of de-standardisation thus is high. The sequence analysis was done using the module TraMineR in R (Gabadinho *et al.* 2009).

For contrasting transition behaviour with related norms, we draw upon a series of questions which focus on possible deviations from a traditional family life trajectory. Although the ESS contains a series of respective questions differentiating between ideal transition ages of men and women for a number of family-related transitions, their comparison with actual transition ages is problematic. The first descriptive analysis showed that across countries individuals tend to choose “round ages” in 5-year intervals, such as 20, 25 or 30 years as ideal transition ages.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the ESS contains no explicit question on the ideal age of leaving the parental home, thus making a direct comparison of actual and normative transition ages on *all* relevant dimensions impossible.

For our analyses, we therefore rely on three different questions using 5-point Likert scales, ranging from “strongly approve” to “strongly disapprove”, which measure in how far individuals support or reject (i) never having children, (ii) living with a partner without marrying and (iii) having a child with a partner one is not married to. These indicators allow us to compare the actual incidence of non-traditional

<sup>8</sup> As data were only collected for the years when the family transitions happened, we cannot make a more detailed distinction.

<sup>9</sup> Based on own analyses; results are available on request.

family formation patterns with their perceived societal acceptance using standard descriptive statistics.

We compare trends – in family behaviour and in family-related norms – between the three birth cohorts: 1941-1950, 1951-1960 and 1961-1972. They allow us to at least partly capture trends between the war and the post-war generation which are known to have grown up under rather different circumstances with the more recent cohorts having been subject to a number of major social transformations (e.g. educational expansion, gradually converging labour market participation of both spouses) as discussed in earlier literature (e.g. *Gradstein/Nikitin* 2004; *Blossfeld/Hofmeister* 2006). For post-socialist countries, this span also allows us to compare cohorts that spend more or less their entire family cycle under socialism with more recent partially “post-socialist” cohorts. We are aware that life courses as well as social norms differ within societies and age cohorts by various factors, especially by education (*Sobotka* 2008). Yet, for reasons of analytical clarity and parsimoniousness of our multi-country analysis, we do not differentiate our cohorts further and follow a more descriptive research interest.

The major strength of the ESS undoubtedly lies in its comparative character including European countries of very different origin. One major restriction of our analysis, however, is the availability of cross-sectional data only. While retrospective life calendars incorporated into the ESS allow for a rather accurate reconstruction of family-related events, this cannot straightforwardly be achieved for family-related norms that are only available for the time of the interview. It thus needs to be assumed that family norms may change *across* generations but remain largely stable *within* a generation, so that the norms measured at the time of the interview may be taken as overall proxies for norms held at earlier points in time. Given that family-related norms relate to very basic conceptions about how to organise one’s own life course (unlike, for example, political norms) we assume that this approximation may be plausible. More detailed analyses with panel data (as, for example, provided by *Moors* and *Lesthaeghe* 2000 for Belgium) will be needed to ascertain the assumptions laid out in this analysis.

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Changes in family trajectories across European countries

Our first set of questions relates to cohort changes in family trajectories across European countries. We expected to find an increase in turbulence in family trajectories and an increase of dissimilarity compared to traditional family patterns across cohorts. Table 2 summarizes the number of distinct sub-sequences and the variance of the respective time spent in each state in an overall index of “turbulence” in family trajectories. Based on Table 2, we can draw several conclusions. The turbulence index reaches its highest values in Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium and France implying that young people in these countries on average experience a higher number of distinct states and/or a higher variation in

**Tab. 2:** Average turbulence per country and cohort

	1941-1950	1951-1960	1961-1972
Denmark**	4.63	5.10	5.38
Netherlands*	4.73	4.72	5.36
Sweden	5.03	5.10	5.22
France**	4.57	4.54	5.19
Switzerland*	4.76	5.06	5.18
Finland**	4.63	4.86	5.18
Norway*	4.51	5.04	5.15
Belgium*	4.52	4.79	5.04
United Kingdom*	4.61	4.55	4.89
Germany*	4.62	4.57	4.88
Austria	4.58	4.68	4.79
Ireland	4.44	4.54	4.79
Spain	4.53	4.41	4.62
Portugal*	4.42	4.01	4.42
Estonia	4.32	4.51	4.37
Cyprus	4.17	4.43	4.37
Slovenia	4.49	4.48	4.30
Poland	4.40	4.27	4.29
Hungary	4.12	4.08	4.27
Russian Federation	4.27	4.35	4.23
Ukraine	4.30	4.05	4.05
Slovakia	4.33	4.16	4.03
Bulgaria	4.05	4.04	3.89

Note: Values of turbulences are between 1-9.5; mean 4.62. Cohort differences significance \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01.

Turbulence is a composite measure that accounts for the number of distinct sub-sequences and the variance of the consecutive times spent in each state (for details see *Elzinga/Liefbroer 2007; Gabadinho et al. 2009*). Increasing values indicate that family trajectories are more volatile and encompass more distinct states.

Source: European Social Survey Wave 3 (own calculations)

their duration. While in most Western European countries the index of turbulence increases significantly across cohorts, it remains quite stable and even decreases for the youngest cohort in some countries of Southern and Central and Eastern Europe. Unexceptionally, the results do not support the hypothesis of an increase of turbulence in family trajectories (H1), but rather point to cross-national differences largely in line with our regime hypothesis (H2).

**Tab. 3:** Average distances to “traditional family trajectory” per country and cohort

	1941-1950	1951-1960	1961-1972
Sweden <sup>a</sup>	0.50	0.63	0.70
Denmark <sup>a</sup>	0.39	0.58	0.66
Ireland <sup>a</sup>	0.48	0.54	0.65
Netherlands <sup>a</sup>	0.41	0.57	0.65
Norway <sup>a</sup>	0.39	0.47	0.64
Switzerland <sup>a</sup>	0.51	0.58	0.64
United Kingdom <sup>a</sup>	0.41	0.52	0.63
France <sup>a</sup>	0.40	0.46	0.62
Finland <sup>a</sup>	0.45	0.50	0.61
Germany <sup>a</sup>	0.46	0.47	0.57
Spain <sup>a</sup>	0.40	0.47	0.57
Austria <sup>a</sup>	0.43	0.51	0.56
Portugal <sup>a</sup>	0.37	0.38	0.51
Slovenia <sup>a</sup>	0.41	0.44	0.49
Belgium <sup>a</sup>	0.32	0.42	0.48
Bulgaria <sup>a</sup>	0.39	0.42	0.47
Estonia	0.43	0.40	0.44
Poland	0.38	0.42	0.43
Russian Federation <sup>a</sup>	0.35	0.35	0.42
Hungary	0.38	0.35	0.40
Ukraine	0.37	0.36	0.40
Cyprus	0.34	0.37	0.39
Slovakia	0.31	0.33	0.36

<sup>a</sup> cohort differences are significant at 0.05 level.

The table shows normed distances of observed trajectories to reference traditional family trajectory (see above for definition) based LCS distance (*Gabadinho et al.* 2009). It reaches values from 0 (similarity of sequences) to 1 (no common subsequence). The closer the value is to 1, the higher is the average dissimilarity to traditional family trajectory.

Source: European Social Survey Wave 3 (own calculations)

In order to investigate whether family trajectories in young adulthood are indeed becoming more diverse across cohorts, we compute average distances between observed family trajectories and the “traditional” reference trajectory based on the longest common sub-sequence for every country and cohort (Table 3). In line with our previous analyses, the findings suggest that family trajectories indeed are becoming more dissimilar compared to traditional family trajectories across cohorts.



The highest dissimilarity is observed in Scandinavian countries, Ireland, Switzerland and in the Netherlands, while in post-communist countries, the dissimilarity is lower and cohort differences are less pronounced.

Obviously, there is a clear correlation between these two measures. In countries where family trajectories in young adulthood are more turbulent, the family trajectories are also more dissimilar compared to the "traditional" pattern.<sup>10</sup> These processes, however, do not necessarily lead away from universal family models as reflected in the idea of "de-standardisation". If, for example, all young adults would follow similar new patterns of family developments "standard family trajectories" may prevail despite an increase in stages passed through. In principle, one can distinguish two alternative scenarios:

Firstly, in line with some earlier findings (*Wagner/Franzmann 2000*) one may expect that despite the observed changes family life courses still remain rather uniform within societies. This scenario of *continuing intra-cohort standardisation* implies that there is *no significant increase in intra-cohort differences in trajectories* and there is *continuing dominance of one "standard" family model* rather than a pluralisation of family forms, even if the "standard" family model changes between cohorts and becomes more turbulent.

The alternative *restandardisation scenario* moves away from the assumption of a unilateral development by linking the ideas of de-standardisation and (re)standardisation as two subsequent phases. It assumes that *while initial family life trajectories may become more diversified, this divergence may only be temporary. In the long-term, a new (more turbulent) dominant model of family trajectories will be established in the youngest cohort.*

To differentiate these scenarios, we compare the share of individuals who experienced specific family states and events until the age of 35. Table 4 shows the share of individuals who have ever (before the age of 35): (i) lived alone (neither living in a parental home, nor with the partner); (ii) lived in unmarried cohabitation (without subsequent marriage); (iii) experienced premarital unmarried cohabitation (lived in unmarried cohabitation at least one year before marriage); (iv) married; (v) had a child out of wedlock; (vi) married after childbirth; and (vii) who have remained childless until the age of 35.

Although the share of young people who left parental home and are not living with a partner is increasing across cohorts, there are pronounced differences across European countries. While in Scandinavia and in most Western European countries, more than 50 percent of individuals have left parental home without starting a union particularly in the youngest cohort, their proportion is much smaller in Central and Eastern European countries. Similar differences arise with regard to the experience of premarital and unmarried cohabitation. Cohabitation before marriage has become the standard pattern of family trajectories in most Western European coun-

<sup>10</sup> In some countries of Eastern Europe, the at first sight surprising dissimilarity to the defined reference trajectory might be influenced by the fact that a notable proportion of those who married and have children continue to live in their parental home.

**Tab. 4:** Share of respondents who have experienced specific family states (in percent), by country and birth cohort

	lived alone	lived in unmarried cohabitation	Had ever (until age of 35)			marriage after childbirth	childless
			lived in premarital cohabitation (% of married)	married	child out of wedlock		
Austria							
1941-1950	44.6	31.8	35.7	92.6	9.3	7.4	19.0
1951-1960	42.1	49.2	56.9	81.4	17.1	12.5	23.0
1961-1972	46.3	64.2	72.0	74.4	23.4	16.1	28.2
Belgium							
1941-1950	15.2	5.7	8.6	95.9	2.0	1.6	11.5
1951-1960	30.2	21.3	25.6	88.9	4.6	2.3	17.7
1961-1972	28.9	39.5	46.4	81.4	11.4	4.8	19.4
Bulgaria							
1941-1950	26.1	8.4	9.7	98.2	1.8	1.8	5.3
1951-1960	24.2	7.8	11.9	95.0	1.8	1.4	11.9
1961-1972	25.9	10.3	19.5	88.6	2.2	2.2	16.8
Cyprus							
1941-1950	22.1	13.0	17.6	95.4	0.0	0.0	13.7
1951-1960	30.5	17.5	23.2	93.2	2.8	2.3	10.2
1961-1972	27.7	26.5	35.5	86.7	3.6	3.0	17.5
Denmark							
1941-1950	68.5	42.6	45.9	88.9	12.6	7.8	14.1
1951-1960	68.5	84.4	87.9	71.6	30.4	17.1	25.3
1961-1972	63.4	87.1	91.9	66.8	40.3	22.0	21.7
Estonia							
1941-1950	65.1	14.3	22.2	88.4	9.5	4.8	12.7
1951-1960	57.0	25.7	32.2	85.2	16.1	8.7	10.9
1961-1972	52.7	39.2	43.8	80.0	20.4	9.2	12.3
Finland							
1941-1950	61.4	29.1	36.2	86.1	8.0	2.7	17.8
1951-1960	58.6	57.3	66.4	74.2	10.8	4.7	24.4
1961-1972	58.0	77.7	85.0	68.5	22.9	9.9	26.1
France							
1941-1950	46.5	21.7	25.4	89.3	6.1	3.4	14.7
1951-1960	51.4	41.6	48.0	76.1	11.6	3.7	22.0
1961-1972	52.0	74.2	81.0	64.6	28.3	10.3	22.7
Germany							
1941-1950	41.9	26.6	31.3	88.3	8.4	4.5	19.9
1951-1960	45.9	41.1	48.3	83.0	12.0	7.9	22.4
1961-1972	51.4	59.5	69.9	69.7	17.3	9.0	32.4
Hungary							
1941-1950	16.5	7.4	13.6	90.9	4.9	3.7	13.6
1951-1960	16.6	12.4	16.2	91.7	4.6	3.3	13.3
1961-1972	21.1	26.3	32.9	82.6	7.5	2.8	17.8
Ireland							
1941-1950	50.5	4.8	20.7	82.4	2.1	1.6	23.4
1951-1960	52.5	13.8	33.6	72.8	5.5	4.1	30.9
1961-1972	53.7	38.3	53.7	66.9	15.6	4.6	34.4
Netherlands							
1941-1950	38.2	15.4	22.9	88.9	3.6	2.6	17.6
1951-1960	53.4	37.7	50.3	74.3	7.5	3.4	36.0
1961-1972	54.5	64.6	76.5	65.7	11.7	3.5	35.2

**Tab. 4:** Continuation

	lived alone	lived in unmarried cohabitation	Had ever (until age of 35) lived in premarital cohabitation (% of married)	married	child out of wedlock	marriage after childbirth	childless
Norway							
1941-1950	70.8	27.6	33.6	89.2	6.4	5.6	12.8
1951-1960	74.5	57.7	61.6	83.9	18.1	11.0	12.6
1961-1972	70.5	74.6	80.1	65.8	37.2	19.7	23.0
Poland							
1941-1950	23.5	4.1	6.6	96.9	3.6	3.6	5.6
1951-1960	25.0	6.2	13.4	91.1	5.8	4.1	11.6
1961-1972	33.5	12.5	21.4	85.6	8.2	4.7	14.0
Portugal							
1941-1950	24.5	2.0	7.6	93.4	7.0	5.6	10.9
1951-1960	19.1	4.7	13.0	91.0	4.7	3.6	16.2
1961-1972	27.1	14.1	24.9	81.7	10.8	5.5	23.0
Russian Federation							
1941-1950	47.4	5.6	11.7	92.1	5.3	2.6	8.6
1951-1960	48.8	8.5	12.6	93.9	6.4	3.5	8.5
1961-1972	42.6	16.2	24.2	87.2	10.3	5.3	12.0
Slovakia							
1941-1950	27.7	6.5	9.8	95.7	3.3	1.6	7.6
1951-1960	29.7	5.6	13.5	91.0	5.3	3.4	10.5
1961-1972	22.1	14.0	23.7	86.3	7.2	5.0	15.6
Slovenia							
1941-1950	34.3	14.8	20.5	92.4	10.5	8.6	9.0
1951-1960	32.1	29.1	33.8	86.5	15.2	7.6	10.5
1961-1972	29.8	40.8	51.7	70.2	26.1	10.1	16.4
Spain							
1941-1950	24.1	5.6	14.9	89.2	4.1	3.6	13.3
1951-1960	27.2	11.8	23.5	82.4	3.7	1.8	25.0
1961-1972	29.9	27.0	38.8	75.1	9.1	4.0	28.6
Sweden							
1941-1950	60.7	59.8	63.7	80.1	28.0	16.1	12.5
1951-1960	60.2	84.4	90.5	65.3	40.1	24.1	22.4
1961-1972	66.9	84.0	90.6	53.9	45.6	16.3	21.5
Switzerland							
1941-1950	66.5	24.8	33.5	83.8	5.4	1.8	24.1
1951-1960	67.1	56.6	62.7	79.3	6.1	2.7	34.2
1961-1972	65.5	70.0	78.4	71.6	7.9	4.5	35.8
Ukraine							
1941-1950	57.4	5.9	8.2	94.5	5.1	2.3	7.4
1951-1960	45.6	9.4	14.2	93.2	3.6	2.3	7.4
1961-1972	44.3	15.5	21.4	89.7	8.1	5.5	11.1
United Kingdom							
1941-1950	44.0	12.9	18.2	90.6	8.3	5.9	16.6
1951-1960	47.7	30.2	37.8	80.3	7.4	3.1	29.8
1961-1972	55.6	58.8	66.4	69.8	19.6	7.1	30.2

Source: European Social Survey Wave 3 (own calculations)

tries. Although marriage still represents the dominant “final stage” in family trajectories, there is an increasing proportion of individuals who have lived in unmarried cohabitation. The share of people who had a child born out-of-wedlock and who enter into marriage after childbirth are also increasing. Comparing the proportion of married people and individuals who experienced premarital cohabitation shows that premarital cohabitation lasting at least one year is experienced by most of the people who entered into marriage in the Scandinavian countries, the UK, France, the Netherlands, Germany and in Austria – thus signalling the emergence of a new standard transition pattern – a process of restandardisation. The share of childless people at the age of 35 differs considerably across European countries. More than 30 percent of the youngest cohort stays childless at the age of 35 in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Ireland and in Germany. The lowest proportion of childless people at the age of 35, although increasing across cohorts, is found in East European countries like Russia, Ukraine, and Estonia indicating relatively low ages when entering into parenthood in a European comparison.

To sum up, leaving home without marrying and an unmarried cohabitation are becoming new “standard” stages in family trajectories in the youngest cohorts and unmarried cohabitation is becoming a standard prerequisite of marriage. These changes mainly occurring in Western and Northern European countries can be interpreted as signs of restandardisation towards a new family model, while particularly in Eastern Europe we rather observe a pattern of continued standardisation.

## 6.2 Family norms related to family state sequencing/quantum

Following the study of actual family transitions, we now turn to the investigation of relevant family norms. Table 5 displays individuals who “strongly disagree” or “disagree” with (i) the decision to remain childless, (ii) the decision to enter into non-marital cohabitation and (iii) the birth of a child out of wedlock, broken down by age cohorts. As further analyses (results not shown here) revealed that gender differences within countries are rather modest, these are aggregated results for both men and women. Table 5 indicates that there are pronounced differences in the disapproval of different types of deviations from a standard life course pattern. In most countries, disapproval is clearly higher for childlessness than for the other two indicators. Only in some countries (Denmark, Sweden, Finland, the UK, Ireland and Switzerland) respondents are similarly or even more in opposition to births out of wedlock. Yet, the degree to which Europeans disapprove of these deviations from a traditional family life course differs markedly between countries: Rejection is most pronounced in Eastern European countries as well as Cyprus where between half (Poland, Slovakia) and four fifths (Russia, Ukraine) of the population disapprove of childlessness. Rejection of unmarried cohabitation as well as births out of wedlock is markedly lower but still remains at around 30 to 50 percent. Slovenia and Hungary partly deviate from this pattern as only slightly less than half of all respondents reject childlessness and less than one fifth disapproves of unmarried cohabitation and childbirth out of wedlock.

**Tab. 5:** Disapproval\* of deviations from a "standard family life course" in percent, total and by birth cohort

	Disapproval childlessness				Disapproval Unmarried Cohabitation				Disapproval out-of-wedlock birth			
	1941-1950	1951-1960	1961-1972	1941-1950	1951-1960	1961-1972	1941-1950	1951-1960	1951-1960	1951-1960	1961-1972	1961-1972
Austria	29.9	24.8	24.0	16.1	10.2	7.5	21.4	15.3	15.3	15.3	13.2	13.2
Belgium	22.4	13.7	11.9	10.0	6.8	4.1	14.4	11.1	11.1	11.1	7.0	7.0
Bulgaria	82.3	80.7	77.7	44.4	34.3	27.0	44.0	32.8	32.8	32.8	28.9	28.9
Cyprus	66.7	58.5	61.9	55.3	28.2	19.2	66.7	42.3	42.3	42.3	39.8	39.8
Denmark	4.7	2.2	5.0	8.6	2.9	3.6	7.8	8.5	8.5	8.5	5.6	5.6
Estonia	81.2	77.2	65.7	38.0	24.4	18.4	36.8	26.1	26.1	26.1	21.1	21.1
Finland	17.8	13.7	11.6	6.8	3.3	3.5	12.7	6.6	6.6	6.6	6.3	6.3
France	37.3	23.6	24.4	9.6	11.0	7.4	13.7	12.8	12.8	12.8	9.2	9.2
Germany	28.6	20.0	18.0	8.6	5.6	6.2	17.6	10.7	10.7	10.7	9.8	9.8
Hungary	56.7	46.4	43.1	14.2	9.7	9.9	15.1	10.9	10.9	10.9	10.6	10.6
Ireland	18.7	11.3	11.3	25.2	13.2	11.8	33.9	20.1	20.1	20.1	18.2	18.2
Netherlands	13.1	10.1	8.2	9.7	8.5	8.0	12.6	12.1	12.1	12.1	9.6	9.6
Norway	6.8	6.2	3.5	6.8	3.4	4.6	7.6	4.7	4.7	4.7	4.8	4.8
Poland	62.3	53.7	50.4	44.1	35.5	29.8	33.2	32.2	32.2	32.2	25.4	25.4
Portugal	26.1	22.0	16.2	16.1	11.6	7.1	16.4	11.6	11.6	11.6	7.1	7.1
Russian Federation	86.4	82.1	81.5	47.0	34.6	30.3	46.3	36.2	36.2	36.2	33.6	33.6
Slovakia	60.8	61.6	47.6	46.4	35.8	26.6	50.0	40.1	40.1	40.1	35.1	35.1
Slovenia	49.8	39.1	32.7	23.1	16.9	13.5	19.5	18.4	18.4	18.4	12.7	12.7
Spain	38.6	18.4	15.0	16.2	8.5	8.5	24.3	11.9	11.9	11.9	9.5	9.5
Sweden	3.8	5.8	5.2	2.9	2.0	3.3	4.1	3.7	3.7	3.7	5.8	5.8
Switzerland	11.8	13.3	12.9	7.9	5.4	10.7	19.5	13.2	13.2	13.2	15.7	15.7
Ukraine	86.7	83.6	75.3	55.3	52.1	33.3	56.3	49.4	49.4	49.4	36.4	36.4
United Kingdom	3.1	5.6	5.7	10.8	7.9	9.1	21.7	16.2	16.2	16.2	15.6	15.6

\* Disapproval summarises the answers "Strongly disapprove"/"disapprove" on a 5-point Likert scale.

Source: European Social Survey Wave 3 (own calculations)

On the other hand, tolerance toward deviations from a standard family life trajectory is clearly highest in Scandinavia where less than one tenth of all respondents object to any of the aforementioned items (with Finland where 14.5 percent reject childlessness as the only exception). This group is joined by the UK, the Netherlands and Switzerland, where similarly “liberal” norms prevail. Most Southern European as well as Central European countries occupy a position in between these two extremes with around a quarter of respondents rejecting childlessness but less than a fifth expressing scepticism towards the other two items.

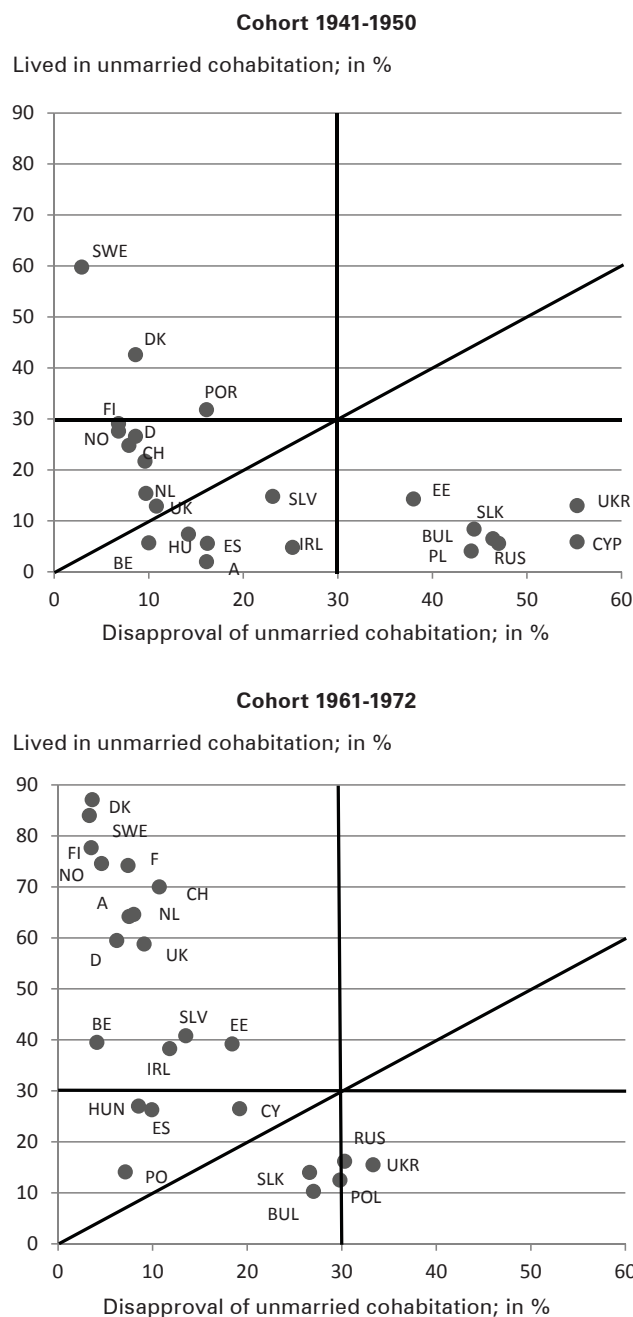
In most of the countries, individuals in the oldest cohort (born 1941-1950) exhibit the most “traditional” family values while the two younger cohorts (and especially those born 1961-1972) seem to follow more “liberal” family norms. Value changes appear to be most pronounced regarding the stigmatisation or acceptance of unmarried cohabitation where disapproval values among the youngest cohorts often only amount to half of that among the older cohort. Only for countries where rejection of life course deviations was already low in the first cohort, we find no clear and systematic pattern across birth cohorts. Liberalisation trends appear to be most pronounced in Southern European countries. In many Eastern European countries, however, the picture of largely conservative family norms remains persistent.

To investigate the relationship between family norms and family structures in greater detail (H3), we select unmarried cohabitation as one exemplary life stage for which both actual occurrence and normative acceptance have increased most significantly. Figure 1 contrasts the incidence of unmarried cohabitation and its normative rejection for the oldest cohort (i.e. those born 1941-1950) with that of the youngest cohort (i.e. born 1961-1972).

Looking first at results for the oldest cohort (1940-1951) three country groupings can be differentiated. On the one hand, there is a group of countries mostly consisting of Northern European nations in which unmarried cohabitation is largely accepted (with less than 10 percent rejection) and its incidence is rather high (ranging between 30 and 60 percent). On the other hand, there is a group of countries mostly consisting of Eastern Europe as well as Cyprus where unmarried cohabitation is still rejected by a majority of the population (i.e. 40-60 percent) and only occurs very occasionally. In between the two clusters, there is a heterogeneous group of nations (including Continental and Southern European countries as well as Great Britain, Hungary and Slovenia) where less than a third of the population rejects the idea of unmarried cohabitation but where it simultaneously remained a behaviour of a minority practiced by less than a third of the cohort under study.

The comparison of these results with those for the youngest cohort (i.e. 1961-1972) suggests that both behaviour and norms are changing. Especially in *Scandinavian* countries, where normative rejection of unmarried cohabitation has been virtually non-existent, it has turned into a new “institutionalised” norm. In this case, family behaviour seems to have temporally followed normative ideas (not necessarily in the sense of a unilateral causal relationship), as transitional phases such as unmarried cohabitation or births out of wedlock have turned into widespread behavioural practices, especially among younger cohorts. This pattern is also increasingly found in *conservative* and *liberal* countries where family behaviour has

**Fig. 1:** Actual incidence (y-axis) and normative rejection (x-axis) of unmarried cohabitation (percentages, cohorts 1941-1950 vs. 1961-1970)



Source: European Social Survey Wave 3 (own calculations)



gradually converged with family norms on non-marital cohabitation among the younger cohort. The *de and subsequent reinstitutionalisation* of family norms thus was accompanied by a *de and subsequent restandardisation* of family trajectories across generations.

For Southern European countries, our findings point to notable tensions between the patterns of family trajectories and their normative equivalence (at least with respect to the exemplary family type of unmarried cohabitation), as family norms have liberalised while family life and family trajectories still appear to follow rather traditional lines. Change of family norms in these countries has progressed significantly while family life has rather remained standardised.

Normative deinstitutionalisation towards unmarried cohabitation can also be observed among the majority of *Eastern European* countries. While among those born in the 1940s, about half of the individuals rejected unmarried cohabitation; resistance only prevails among a third of the 1960s cohort. At the same time, however, behaviour has remained remarkably stable: less than a third in fact live in unmarried cohabitation. The dynamics in family trajectories have been clearly less pronounced than those with regard to normative change. These results reveal a process in which *conformity* between traditional family norms and practices among older birth cohorts has turned into an ambivalent situation of non-traditional family norms despite traditional family practices among the younger population.

The situation in these two regimes appears to be well in line with the description of “gradual” transitions from one dominant demographic behavioural pattern to another. Even though norms about family behaviour have been relaxed among the younger population, there still is a largely prevalent cultural orientation at a “traditional” family model within the overall population, reflected in around 50 percent rejection of unmarried cohabitation. An individual may be affected primarily by dominant social norms within the same cohort (from which peers are typically recruited) but also by acceptance among people from other age groups. This “normative climate” may still present an obstacle for younger cohorts when it comes to adapting their behaviour. Examples from Central European countries indeed seem to indicate that only once a “critical point” of tolerance is surpassed – in the example chosen here: an open rejection by only around 10 percent of the population or less – traditional norms do no longer form an obstacle for individual adaptation of demographic behaviour among the majority of the population. Even though the existence and identification of such a “threshold” is not verified by our analysis, the assembly of countries in figure 1 may be interpreted as a typical pathway of change.

## 7 Summary

In this paper, we have used data from the third wave of the ESS to investigate in how far family trajectories and family-related social norms have changed over time as well as across European countries. Our results provide support for the assumption of an increasing restandardisation of family lives. In most of the analysed countries, family trajectories have become more turbulent involving more stages and stage

changes for the younger generation. This increasing turbulence has led to a rising “dissimilarity” from traditional family life courses in most European countries (destandardisation). While marriage still constitutes the dominant “final stage” in family trajectories, there is an increasing share of individuals across birth cohorts who experiences “intermediate” family phases such as unmarried cohabitation or parenthood before marriage, furthermore, an ever greater share of younger cohorts appears to either postpone first birth beyond the age of 35 (the age window used in this study) or to entirely forego parenthood. In some countries, we find first evidence that previous “deviations” from traditional family patterns (such as unmarried cohabitation) are turning into majority behaviour, i.e. into a “new standard”, thus suggesting a “restandardisation of family life courses”.

However, in line with our regime and social norms hypotheses (H2, H3), we find that the degree and speed of these changes is very different across European regions. Destandardisation appears to be most developed in Northern and Central European countries where family trajectories had moved away from standard “ideal” family trajectories with a higher degree of turbulence in family transitions. These countries also show first signs of a restandardisation. On the other hand, Eastern European countries display a higher proximity to traditional standard life courses and lesser turbulence in family lives and only rather modest signs of destandardisation. Most Southern European countries take an intermediate position between these two regimes with persistently moderate degrees of destandardisation and turbulence in family transitions.

Contrasting the results above showing changes in family trajectories with shifts in family norms allowed us to find indications for the mutual interrelations between these two dynamics from a comparative perspective. Our results point to a notable, yet not complete correspondence between norms and demographic behaviour. In fact, the liberalisation in norms appears to precede changes in actual demographic behaviour. Given the cross-sectional and macro-oriented nature of the analyses conducted, this does not prove a unilateral causality; yet it provides some plausibility for the assumption that normative change (that might be fostered by innovative family life trajectories of a minority as visible examples) may provide the basis for change in family trajectories among the majority of the population. As long as norms stand in stark contrast to specific types of family behaviour, individuals will shy away from such behaviour in order to minimise social cost. However, once rejection of specific types of behaviour decreases below a certain critical level, changes in demographic behaviour may occur quickly across cohorts. Our results indicate that European countries appear to have reached different stages of this continuum, with especially social democratic countries having established non-marital relationships and parenthood as a new “standard type” of the life course, while especially Eastern European countries still largely follow a traditional pattern.

Despite the fact that our study helped to shed some light on the relationship between family structures and family norms and their regime-specific development over time, it apparently also entails some limitations. As indicated, family norms could only be collected *at the time of the interview*; this implies that we probably underscore generational differences in norms *at the time of family formation* at least

in part due to possible attitudinal adaptation across time. Furthermore, due to the lack of longitudinal data on normative orientations, we were not able to establish causality between changes in norms and changes in family behaviour. These limitations call for a more comprehensive coverage of attitudinal data in cross-national longitudinal surveys in order to substantiate the relationship between the structural and normative dimension of social change. Furthermore, given our objective to cover entire family trajectories of individuals from legal age to their mid-30s, we could only consider birth cohorts up to the early 1970s. Especially for Eastern European countries but also for some post-despotism Southern European states such as Portugal or Spain, country-study evidence suggests that substantial transformations in family trajectories have taken place among younger birth cohorts which may only be reliably ascertained by future studies.

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