

Falling first marriage rates in Europe during the Great Recession. A comparison of 17 countries

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The retreat from marriage, especially among young adults, has been a defining marker of changes in the family behaviour in Europe, United States and many other developed countries since the early 1970s. Between 1972 and 2001 marriage rates plummeted in many European countries; the crude marriage rate in the European Union fell by almost 40% during that period, from 7.9 to 4.9 per thousand. Marriages were to a large extent replaced by unmarried cohabitation, which became an accepted and eventually even expected form of living together in most countries (Kiernan 2004; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). The long-term fall in marriage rates in Europe had come to a halt in the early 2000s. Several countries in Western and Northern Europe that had progressed furthest in their family transformation actually experienced increasing marriage rates for the first time in more than three decades, as documented for Sweden by Ohlsson-Wijk (2011). This trend was consistent both with the argument that much of the previous decline of marriage was due to its shift towards older ages rather than its permanent disappearance from people's lives (Goldstein and Kenney 2001), but also with the evidence that marriage continued being valued and scoring high in the life plans and aspirations of many Europeans (Kiernan 2004). In parallel, a new evidence emerged on the changing social status gradient in marriage—in most European countries marriage remains a dominant arrangement for raising children in and this pattern is most clearly manifested among the highly educated parents (Holland 2013; Neels and Perelli-Harris 2013).

However, the tentative revival of marriage in Europe proved short-lived as marriage rates started falling in all parts of Europe between 2007 and 2010, at the time when the economic recession began affecting the continent. In parallel, fertility rates declined in most European countries as well (Goldstein et al. 2013). This trend was not unexpected—economic downturns have repeatedly been associated with declines in marriages and births in the past as people facing uncertain circumstances refrained from making life-long commitments (Sobotka, Skirbekk and Philipov 2011). The consequences of the recession experienced by individuals such as job loss, wage cuts, unstable employment, reduced government spending on families and welfare or home foreclosure, are further aggravated by the awareness of broader economic and labour market trends, which reinforce the perception of instability. These experiences and perceptions could prompt couples to delay marriage or even forego their plans to marry. Across the rich world the recent recession has affected especially young adults who took most of the brunt of the labour market deterioration and increased economic uncertainty (OECD 2014).

Differently from the past economic downturns, the recent recession took place in a context where marriage rates were low at the start and marriage has lost much of its earlier universality and relevance; it has been “deinstitutionalised” and transformed into individualised arrangement based on personal choice and preferences (Cherlin 2004). In this context, the economic recession might have sped up the shift from a universal and early marriage to marriage which is elective, less frequent, less normatively sanctioned, and which typically takes place late in adulthood, often among the couples who are already parents. It is also possible that the diminished importance of marriage in people's lives has made the relationship between marriage and economic conditions stronger than in

the past: as marriage is no longer viewed as a necessary precondition for parenthood or long-term relationship, it can more easily be postponed or “disposed with” under unfavourable circumstances.

Whereas fertility trends in Europe, both before and during the recent recession, have been relatively widely studied (e.g. Goldstein, Sobotka and Jasilioniene 2009; Sobotka 2013), there is surprisingly little literature on aggregate trends in marriage in Europe in the last two decades. The existing studies mostly focus on individual decisions to marry or cohabit, including the gender and social status patterning of partner choice (Blossfeld 2009; Kalmijn and van Tubergen 2006), look at broader family trends (Coleman 2013; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008), analyse cross-country differences in marriage and cohabitation at one period of time (Kalmijn 2007) or study marriage trends in individual countries, often in conjunction with the rise of cohabitation (Gerber and Berman 2010; Ohlsson-Wijk 2011; Prioux 2003). The very limited attention paid to aggregate changes in marriage contrasts with the burgeoning micro-level research on marriage and its consequences for individual well-being and health, especially in the United States (Fincham and Beach 2010).

In this study we aim to bridge the gap in the recent literature and provide a detailed analysis of first marriage trends in Europe since the year 2000. We therefore cover the period of marriage stabilisation and increase after 2000 as well as its subsequent downturn between 2008 and 2013.

We reconstruct and analyse trends in first marriage rates by age among women in 17 countries. This analysis allows us addressing the following questions:

- Was a trend of stabilising first marriage rates in 2000-2007 observed in most countries in Europe?
- Did the period of the recent economic recession bring a reversal in marriage trends in all parts of Europe?
- How was this recent reversal differentiated by age? Has the trend towards delayed marriage further accelerated after 2007?
- Was there a close association between the severity of economic downturn in 2008-2013 and the decline in first marriage rate in that period?

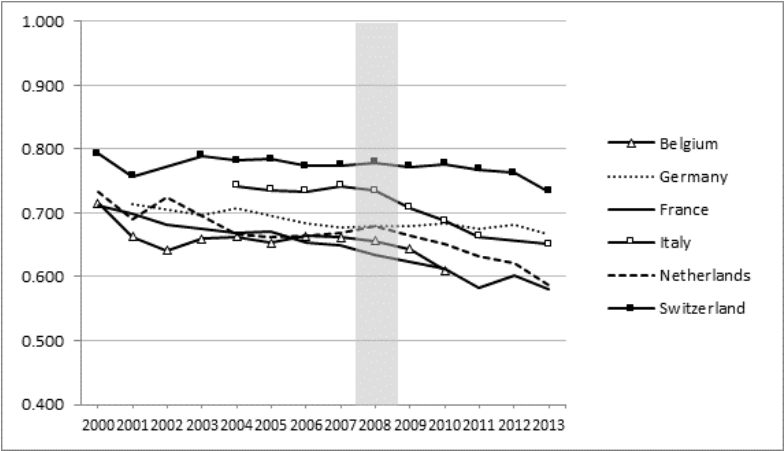
Using data published in Eurostat database (2015) and national statistical offices, we reconstruct two types of marriage indicators for women in 17 countries in Europe: first, age-specific marriage probabilities among single women and the corresponding indicators of the total first marriage probability based on first marriage tables and, second, age-specific first marriage rates (which are not controlling for the marital status of the female population) and the corresponding indicator of the total first marriage rates.

Results

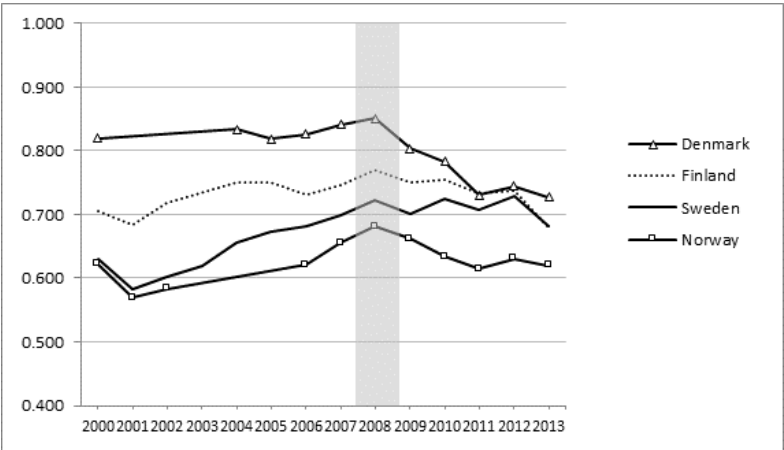
First results indicate that marriage rates have declined between 2008 and 2013 in most European countries (see Figure 1). In Western and Southern Europe, marriage rates had been stable in the period before while they decreased since the time of the Great Recession (with the exception of the German-speaking countries). In Northern Europe, the rise in marriage rates observed since 2001 had either come to a halt (Finland and Sweden) or was followed by a decline (Norway). While in Eastern Europe trends in marriage rates were more varied in the early 2000s—they increased, decreased or were stable—almost all of the countries experienced a decline starting in 2008 or 2009. Further analyses showed that the downturn in marriage rates was moderately associated with the severity of the recession.

Figure 1: Female table first marriage rates, 2000-2013

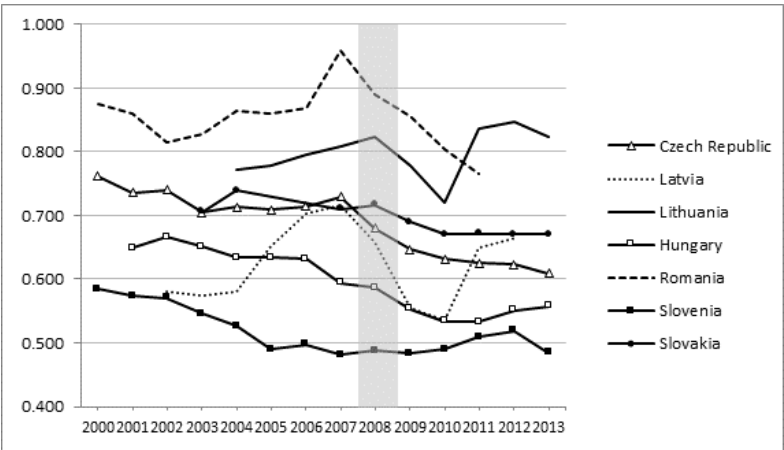
(A) Western and Southern Europe



(B) Northern Europe



(C) Central and Eastern Europe



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