

Transformation of partnership behavior and fertility in Russia

It is often assumed that informal unions are much less likely to produce children than traditional marriages, so that extension of the practice of unregistered cohabitation will have negative impact on the overall fertility. So advocates of traditional family life see its erosion as a cause of the recent fertility decline. But is fertility in fact so different in different types of union?

To answer this question we analyze the average number of children born in the first union (first for the woman), which still make the chief contribution to the overall fertility. Thanks to the data came from the first wave of the Russian “Generations and Gender survey” (RusGGS-2004) we are able to compare fertility in three types of union: (1) unions, which began with official registration (about 50% of all first unions for women born in 1975-1979); (2) unions, which began with cohabitation, followed by marriage registration (about 40%); (3) informal unions, which remained unregistered (about 10%).

As of today, unions, which started with marriage, and consensual unions, which were converted into marriage at a later date, are almost identical with respect to fertility for women aged 25 and 35. Nor was there ever any clear trend in differences between fertility for the two types of union in the past. However, it should be mentioned that, for generations born in the second half of the 1950s and first half of the 1960s, and who created families at the time of intensive state family policy (in the 1980s), the difference of fertility in favor of “traditional” marriage was maximum – equaling 0.2 births per woman aged 35. A difference of comparable magnitude but in the opposite direction is registered for generations of women born in the 1930s and in the 1940s. In these generations fertility in unions, which started with cohabitation and led to marriage, was higher.

First unions where marriage has never been registered have twice lower fertility than unions, which were eventually registered as marriage. There is no specific long-term trend of change in fertility in these unions. So there are no significant changes in ratio of fertility in ever registered and never registered unions.

From the point of view of completed fertility, official status of the union does not seem to have any significance in modern Russia, though a psychological sense of uncertainty about the relationship in case of unregistered unions may have negative impact on decisions about child-bearing. On the other hand, it could be that such unions are not registered and the relationships are more liable to threat of breakdown precisely because the partners cannot agree about having a child together?

Most first unions, in which marriage is never registered, are “trial marriages”, which initially had a matrimonial purpose but failed the “durability test”. These breakdowns predetermine the low average duration of informal unions. However, the share of informal unions, which break down after birth of children, has been declining in recent decades and, on the contrary, the probability of breakdown of childless unions is becoming higher. But whatever the reproductive behavior of unions, which never lead to formal marriage, their demographic significance in modern Russia is very weak due to their relatively small number (10% maximum of the total number of first unions).

When partners who start their union with informal relationships make a success of their cohabitation (the usual case), they eventually register a formal marriage and form the second type of union (according to the terminology we use here), which are in no way inferior to traditional unions by either duration or by birth rates. Informal unions eventually leading to official marriage are becoming much more widespread at the expense of traditional married unions, so they deserve particularly careful attention. It is quite possible that such unions will come to dominate both first and repeat unions in Russia within the next 10-20 years, as has

already happened in many European countries (particularly France and the Nordic countries), as well as, to some extent, in the USA. The latter all have overall fertility, which is above the average for developed countries.

Sergei V. Zakharov, =Ph.D.
Deputy Director, Institute of Demography
State University – ‘Higher School of Economics’
Moscow, Russian Federation
szakharov@hse.ru

Address: Arkhitektora Vlassova street, 18-137
117393 Moscow
Russia
Phone: +7 (495) 580-26-83