

## THE PHENOMENON OF THE FERTILITY GAP AS AN EXPLAINING FACTOR FOR THE LOW TOTAL FERTILITY RATES IN CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE

Gyorbiro Nora Alice

PhD Student

*Abstract:* After the transition to the democratic capitalism in 1989-1990, a massive fall could be noticed in all post-socialist countries in Central-Eastern Europe in terms of the total fertility rates, as from an average value of around 2.2. it fell to 1.2-1.4., without significant moves in the last two and half decades.

A large part of the public opinion but also of the scientific communities believed that the main explaining factor is the change of the values, the spreading of the individualist way of thinking which results on the level of the society a permanent delay of the family founding and thus a significantly lower fertility rate.

Therefore it was rather surprising to find out from international researches, that in terms of the desired number of children, there is no significant difference between the European countries, the differences thus can not be explained by differences in values and attitudes. The demographic scientific literature refers to this term as fertility gap, which indicates the difference between the desired and the finally realized number of children. In the Central-Eastern European countries, such in Romania, this is the main reason, so the desired number of children can not be reached in the majority of the cases due to several factors. In my paper I take a closer look to all these socially relevant aspects.

*Keywords:* Fertility, fertility gap, total fertility rate, individualism

After the collapse of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, beyond many other things the researchers of the social sciences could notice a remarkable alternation in the region's demographic processes. The total fertility rate, which actually means the average number of children each woman gives birth to in her entire life, has dropped from values of about 2.1 -2.2 to values around 1.3- 1.4 (Kaalwijk, 2014).

Something that was not really noticed in the first publications, yearbooks and any other materials, was the demographical change, especially in the case of the fertility. It can be understood, as there has been a large number of changing issues in these societies but it was very clear that these are the things which will determine on the long term the perspectives of these societies (Van Bavel, 2012).

Even if in the first decades, as we could roughly say, until the middle of the 1990s the biggest problem of the ex-socialist countries was the high rate of unemployment and all the social issues related to this. (The main reason which caused these rather high rates of unemployment was the collapse of the socialist economy which also grows with itself the shutting down of whole Industries (heavy industry, textile industry, mining) which did not seem to be sustainable in an open market competition (Zandberg, 2016).

Back in those times few would have thought that in less than two decades the toughest social problems will not be linked to the unemployment but rather to the very small share of employable

persons in the society. Of course the employability has several aspects, we mean that those who wish to get employed need to meet certain specific criteria: they need to be healthy, they need to have a proper labor confidence, they need to have a qualification which entitles them to occupy positions on the labor market and so on, but all these criteria are only secondary aspects, when a country literally lacks labor force (Boeri, van Ours, 2013).

In the case of Hungary and Romania it should be mentioned that the relatively low total fertility rates are not the only factors which explain this upcoming crisis on the labor market. Another factor may be the even more dramatic tendency that about 40% of the employable, highly qualified experienced labor force left Romania in the last 10-13 years as it became obvious for a large share of the population that as long as the level of wages will not get any closer to the level of wages from Western and Southern Europe, while the prices are about to be gradually on the same level it is impossible to create any kind of personal fortune in Romania. So for example a young couple which does not inherit apartments, houses, various real estates, cars, and everything which is necessary for their lives that's, than they not really have any other option but to leave the country.

So the mix of the two dynamic tendencies, the drop of the total fertility rate and the growing of the number of immigrants put into a very delicate situation the Central-Eastern European countries. It is no wonder, that this drew gradually more and more attention over the issue of the demography and fertility. The various sociological, demographical and economic explications have rivaled with each other, trying to offer comprehensive and plausible explanations to the massive fall of the total fertility rates (Van Bavel, 2012).

As for the Hungarian minority in Romania, we have to mention, that all these above mentioned factors are valid for this community, but in addition, the emigration was in two waves noticeable. The second coincides with the general tendency of emigrating, affecting the whole Romanian society, which in the first step showed signs when the Schengen visa was not anymore compulsory, since 2004, and in the next step, when Romania joined the European Union in 2007. However, in the case of the community of the Hungarians from Romania, the emigration started, in mass-size, already in the very first period of the 1990s. The main destination was Hungary, especially its central regions with the capital Budapest as the top destination and the most affected regions within Romania, from where the most left, was the region of Mures, Harghita and Covasna counties. The exact numbers are now known, but from the census data and other empirical researches, there is a certain kind of consensus among the sociologists that the figure should be at around 250,000 Hungarians left between 1990-2000 (Sandu, 2010).

The second large emigrational wave, which affected the Hungarian community in Romania was as it was possible for the Hungarians living in Romania to receive the Hungarian Citizenship and passport with a simplified process. As in the case of Romania, which joined the European Union in 2008, there has been a moratorium in the case of the most European labor markets, that moratorium was not valid in 2011 for the Hungarian citizens. As about 300,000 Hungarians from Romania received the Hungarian passport, it fostered a new wave of emigration, this time not towards Hungary any longer, but to Western-European countries, where thanks to their newly gained Hungarian citizenship they could get employed legally with the same conditions as any local citizen in France, Germany or in any country within the European Union (Sandu, 2010).

We needed to mention this, to underline the demographic challenge the Hungarian community from Romania has to face. In this context, the only natural way to slow down the reducing process of the Hungarian population in Romania would be a raise in the fertility rate, as (unlike the ethnic Romanians from Republic of Moldova) there are no more, extra-communitary (outside the EU) populations which could move to Romania and replace the left Hungarians. All these concepts can help the readers get an impression about the depth of the demographical

challenge, so it is not surprising, that the demographic researches in the case of the Hungarians in Romania are very common research topics both for sociologists in Hungary and for the Hungarian sociologists in Romania (Rosta, 2010).

The issue of the decreased total fertility rates in the region has been one of the most vital and influential debate among experts from among the sociological processes which have followed the transition from the one-party socialism to the free market based, plural democracy. The reason, on the one hand, was the above presented importance of the issue, by far not only in the case of the ethnic Hungarian community in Romania, but in all the ex-socialist countries, as the total fertility rate indicators dropped in each and every country from values ranging between 2.2-2.6 to values ranging between 1.1-1.4. (Van Bavel, 2012). On the other hand, there was no comprehensive evidence based research in the issue, which gave a very large space of interpretation to the issue.

We can assume, that this topic would not have been a leading research topic, in case, if it was not in coincidence with the region's toughest political debates, as there was a large debate in the newly elected national parliaments in the post-soviet region, where the liberals (basically focusing on the extension of the secular state and to the neutralization of the conservative values) fought on the ideological and political battlefield, and the issue of the fertility has been one which could be very easily ideologized (Coffe, van der Lippe, 2010).

This meant, that we could notice a liberal and a conservative ideological approach to the issue, which, repeatedly, had a large space to be spread all around in the press and in the society, as there was not any empiric data available related to the topic, so actually each political and ideological group could create its own narrative, interpretational framework and accordingly, a priority of the tasks in order to reach a progress in this issue (Buzogany, 2011).

The liberals and socialists believed, that the main reason of the fertility rate was that the people did not feel the state efficient enough to provide all the necessary conditions which can ensure that bringing up children would be supported by the national social system, the healthcare, education and so on. This was actually something that could be linked with the neo liberal economical thinking, which, sometimes reaching extreme points, resembling the reforms implemented in Chile during president Pinochet inspired by the Chicago University linked Economists and the thoughts of Milton Friedman (Ffrench-Davis, Heresi, 2016).

As they claimed, that the old socialist structures need to be privatized, and so the national healthcare, pension and social system, they could link the assumed inefficiency of these systems with the figures of the dropping fertility rates, claiming that these systems are of poor quality, cannot provide the feeling of security and support for the citizens for a life-long project, like having babies, and thus the solution would be a market-based, more efficient social structure.

On the other hand, the conservative side in every country claimed, that the liberal values have been adapted too fast and without any limits in the societies, and the misinterpreted individualism, hedonism, and the change within the priorities both on the level of the individuals and on the level of the families caused the drop in the fertility rate. They blamed the liberal political values, the media, the globalized individualist values as a key factor for this negative demographical tendency (Buzogany, 2011).

The main question was, which could have put an end to this debate or at least could have provided some evidence based research results which could have led to a more professional and sophisticated scientific debate was, whether

-the women, regardless of their age, level of education, marital or social status (or the families in general) did not want to have as many children as they used to before, so the value system and its alternations are the key factor when it comes to give a comprehensive explanation to this demographical tendency?

-the women, regardless of their age, level of education, marital or social status (or the families in general) still wished to have as many (or nearly as many) children as the previous generations, but for some reasons, they could not finally realize the initial purposes in this field?

The question was basically, whether the values and family planning preferences, or the unsatisfying and underperforming policies are to be blamed primarily because of the decrease of the fertility rate. As we mentioned, this was one of the issues, which had a scientific debate as the basis, but was far more perceptible for the people than other, rather abstract issues in the transformation period, like the constitutional rights or any other issue, as it affected every single family.

The first , evidence based data were provided by the Gender and Generations Research Program, in the frame of which researchers collected data from several countries, including both Romania and Hungary, and the results seemed to put an end to the debate related to the question „why` in terms of the drop of the fertility rate.

The data suggested, that the main reason behind the sharp decrease of the fertility rates was not that much the change of the value systems and the family planning preferences, as for the question „How many children would you like to have?` the researchers received rather similar answers across Europe, ranging between 2-2.3. This is where we arrive to the phenomenon of the fertility gap, which actually is the difference between the desired and realized number of children. In some countries, like Ireland or France, where the total fertility rates are at about 2, which is roughly enough for the natural reproduction of the population. (Dereuddre, Van de Velde, Bracke,2016)

However, it became clear, that in some countries the relative success, which means reaching fertility rates of about 2 is not because in those societies, in general, there is a higher number of desired children. The difference is made by the fact, that in the most European countries, like in Romania and also in the case of the Hungarian minority of the country, the women, regardless of their age, level of education, marital or social status or the families in general can not reach the desired number of children.

This has put an end to the debate, whether the alternation of the values or the weakness of the policies is to be blamed. As the latter proved to be right, these findings could open the door for further thinking in the case of the possibilities to increase the total fertility rate by decreasing the fertility gap.

What can this mean specifically in the case of the ethnic Hungarians in Romania? On the one hand, there is a general part, which is valid for the whole Romanian society. There is nothing which should be invented, there are several recommendations by the demographers which should be taken into account when it comes to shaping the family policies (Hener,2015).

The fight against the discrimination against women on the labor market, legal guarantees that they can re-enter the labor market after the maternity leave, as well as providing well-functioning kindergartens and to foster the babysitting as a social institutions could all have an impact. On the other hand, the Hungarian politics should realize, that the reasons are not value-focused, so it is useless to encourage the families to wish for more children. It would be important, to find those specific solutions also in the case of the Hungarian community, which create the conditions for the families to have children and to bring them up. Well-functioning Hungarian kindergarten network, information for Hungarian employers and further researches would make a real difference in our view, but it is however a step forward, that even if the solutions seem to be far yet, we are probably on the right track to tackle the real sociological background of the issue.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Boeri, T., & Van Ours, J. (2013). Active Labor Market Policies. In *The Economics of Imperfect Labor Markets: Second Edition* (pp. 351-374). Princeton University Press.

Buzogány, A. (2011). Stairway to Heaven or Highway to Hell?: Ambivalent Europeanization and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe. In Kouki H. & Romanos E. (Eds.), *Protest Beyond Borders: Contentious Politics in Europe since 1945* (pp. 69-85). Berghahn Books

Coffé, H., & Van der Lippe, T. (2010). Citizenship Norms in Eastern Europe. *Social Indicators Research*, 96(3), 479-496.

Dereuddre,R.,& Van de Velde,S.,& Bracke,P. (2016).Gender inequality and the 'East-West' divide in contraception: An analysis at the individual, couple, and country level.*Social Science & Medicine*, Vol.161, pp.1-12

Ffrench-Davis, Ricardo, et al. "The Chilean Economy Since the Global Crisis." *Macroeconomics and Development: Roberto Frenkel and the Economics of Latin America*, edited by Mario Damill et al., Columbia University Press, 2016, pp. 111–133,

Hener, T. (2015). Do Couples Bargain over Fertility? *Annals of Economics and Statistics*, (117/118), 211-231

KALWIJ, A. (2010). THE IMPACT OF FAMILY POLICY EXPENDITURE ON FERTILITY IN WESTERN EUROPE. *Demography*, 47(2), 503-519.

ROSTA, G. (2010). Youth and Religiosity in Hungary, 2000-2008. *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 19(1), 54-67.

Sandu, D. (2010). Modernising Romanian society through temporary work abroad. In Black R., Engbersen G., Okólski M., & Panțîru C. (Eds.), *A Continent Moving West?: EU Enlargement and Labour Migration from Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 271-288). Amsterdam University Press.

Van Bavel, J. (2012). The reversal of gender inequality in education, union formation and fertility in Europe. *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research*, 10, 127-154.

Zandberg, I. (2016). Toward Globalization or Localization: Multinational Advertising in Eastern Europe. In Boyd-Barrett O. (Ed.), *Communications Media, Globalization, and Empire* (pp. 217-226). Indiana University Press.