

## CHAPTER 4

# FERTILITY DECLINE IN THE TRANSITION ECONOMIES, 1982-1997: POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL FACTORS

### 4.1 Introduction

The change of regimes in central and eastern Europe a decade ago and the political and economic transition that ensued have been accompanied by major, often complex, demographic developments. After a few decades of gradual demographic change the populations of this region entered a period of demographic turbulence centred on 1990. International migration, which had been tightly controlled by the State almost everywhere except in the former SFR of Yugoslavia, re-emerged on a scale that rendered some of the newly created states, such as the Russian Federation, major immigration or emigration countries. Mortality took on highly complex patterns of change, declining at an accelerated pace in the majority of central European countries, rising in the Soviet successor states as well as in some countries in the Balkans and mainly stagnating elsewhere. Fertility, which in the 1980s has been generally close to the levels conducive to the long-term replacement of population fell steeply; this was the case everywhere except in a few countries, including Slovenia and Croatia, where the fall already underway since the beginning of the decade did not accelerate into the 1990s. The result of these changes is a new demographic landscape in central and eastern Europe, which is in stark contrast with the demographic situation of a decade and a half ago. One of its defining features, an outcome of these shifts, is population decline, a development unknown in peacetime to the world during the modern era. Another characteristic, primarily a consequence of the recent fertility decline is an acceleration of shifts in the age distribution of the population, in particular population ageing.

The fertility decline, particularly its speed and magnitude has taken by surprise the governments and policy makers in the transition economies; the same is true of population scholars and observers in this part of Europe and elsewhere. Many governments view the resultant low fertility levels with concern. All the European countries with transition economies that responded to the recent Eighth United Nations Inquiry Among Governments on Population and Development indicated that they consider their fertility levels overly low. Several countries, particularly the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), appear to be seriously concerned by their demographic present and

future. To a considerable extent the concern has been caused by the fall in fertility to unprecedentedly low levels and the fact that there are no signs of an imminent recovery. Population analysts and scholars, including those in countries with transition economies rightly perceive the new development as a radical break with the fertility behaviour of the communist era. However, writing about the development in different national settings, they disagree about the causes of the shift to lower fertility. This is partly a consequence of the fact that causes indeed may differ across the region where demographic behaviour, including family and reproductive behaviour, grew increasingly diverse during the 1990s.

The theme of this chapter is the fertility decline in the European countries with transition economies since the time when they broke away from their communist past.<sup>577</sup> The various features of the decline – the timing of its onset as well as its speed and magnitude – are analysed. Other aspects of the fertility transition, from replacement levels in the 1980s to some of the lowest levels on record, are also considered. These include shifts in the age structure of fertility, which often signify changes in the timing of childbearing, as well as the spread of out-of-wedlock fertility, which is usually lower than marital fertility, a major trend permeating the region. The various facets of the recent fertility changes are analysed in a broader temporal and geographic perspective; the analysis starts with the early 1980s and contrasts the transition economies with the European countries with market economies.<sup>578</sup> As the analysis straddles the time when the former republics of the now defunct socialist federal states became independent countries, those republics and their successor states are units of analysis along with the countries that remained intact. Included in the analysis, as a separate entity, is eastern Germany (the former German Democratic

<sup>577</sup> The countries included in the analysis are all the European countries with transition economies except Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, for which the requisite data are not available.

<sup>578</sup> The chapter expands an earlier analysis on the recent fertility decline in central and eastern Europe by M. Macura, "Fertility and nuptiality changes in central and eastern Europe: 1982-1993", *Studia Demograficzne*, Vol. 4, No. 122, 1995.

Republic (GDR)), which deserves to be studied along with the countries with transition economies. The chapter also seeks to explore, however, in a tentative and speculative manner, the causes of the complex fertility changes. Answers to questions, such as the following are sought: was the onset of the decline brought about by uncertainties of what might have been perceived at the time as an oncoming political instability or perhaps as an imminent fall of communism? Were the pace and magnitude of the fertility decline influenced by the intensity and the duration of the economic downturn? Was the decline caused by the spread of western family and fertility behaviour into this part of Europe, which since the 1960s has brought fertility in European countries with market economies to moderate or low sub-replacement levels. Did a combination of these developments play a role in the various countries with transition economies?

## 4.2 Fertility decline to the lowest levels yet observed

By the early 1980s, the fertility trends in central and eastern Europe had brought about a remarkable convergence towards of replacement levels. Over two thirds of what today are the European countries with transition economies (all except Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina) had total fertility rates (TFRs)<sup>579</sup> in 1982 within a very narrow range – between 1.9 and 2.3 – centred on replacement, or 2.1 children per woman.<sup>580</sup> The transition to about replacement fertility was completed by this time in all of these countries, except in the Republic of Moldova and The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, comprising 98 per cent of the combined population of the countries analysed here. By European standards, these fertility levels were high and tightly clustered; the mean and the standard deviation of TFRs for the present-day countries with transition economies (and eastern Germany) were 2.07 and 0.18, those for 16 European countries with market economies and populations of over a million in 1982 were 1.78 and 0.37, respectively.<sup>581</sup> The rates in more than half of the

countries with transition economies that had sub-replacement fertility were similar to those of France, Greece, Portugal and Spain, countries with market economies with the highest fertility rates at the time.<sup>582</sup>

Judging by the west European experience, fertility in central and eastern Europe had substantial room for a further decline and it did in fact decline and at a speed that was faster than anywhere else in postwar Europe. In each and every one of these countries fertility in the middle of the 1990s was lower than in the early 1980s (chart 4.2.1). By the middle of the 1990s, in more than two thirds of the countries with transition economies, the decline that had begun in some countries as early as the late 1980s resulted in TFRs below 1.5 children per woman (chart 4.2.2). In 1996, 83 per cent of the combined population of the countries included in this analysis lived in a setting where, only a few years earlier, fertility levels would have been considered exceptionally low. That same year the population of eastern Germany had the lowest TFR (0.95) among all the former socialist countries or their constituent republics. In 1997, the year for which the Council of Europe provides the latest statistics, five out of seven European countries with total fertility rates below 1.25 were countries with economies in transition.<sup>583</sup> The overall picture for this part of Europe was one of grossly depressed fertility; the mean TFR for countries with economies in transition in 1996 was 1.35, that for countries with market economies 1.53. The former countries now constitute a group with the lowest fertility in Europe, and in the world.

The very low fertility levels recently attained are the consequence of rather complex patterns of change since the beginning of the 1980s. The data reveal two broad patterns, one prevailing in the Baltic states and the European CIS countries and the other in central and south-eastern Europe. The fertility shifts in the former Soviet republics and their successor states displayed remarkable similarities, those in the other parts of the region, a fairly large degree of diversity.

For several years after 1982 the Baltic states and the Slavic republics of the former Soviet Union, along with the Republic of Moldova, experienced a modest gradual increase in fertility at levels higher than two children per women (chart 4.2.3). This fertility revival, a prelude to a subsequent decline, occurred throughout the former Soviet Union in response to the family policy measures announced at the 26th Party Congress held in 1981 and introduced during the period 1981-1983. Within a few years the effects of more generous child allowances and longer maternity leave wore off, a typical outcome of the

<sup>579</sup> Total fertility rate is the average number of children that would be born per woman if all women lived to the end of their childbearing years and bore children according to a given set of age-specific fertility rates. Age-specific fertility rate is the number of births occurring during a specified period to women of a specified age or age group, divided by the number of person-years-lived during that period by women of that age or age group.

<sup>580</sup> Replacement is the level of fertility that in the long run ensures the replacement of generations. In low-mortality populations replacement fertility is slightly over two children per woman. Given generally low mortality in Europe, fertility analyses pertaining to these countries typically assume that 2.1 children per woman is a good approximation for replacement fertility in these populations.

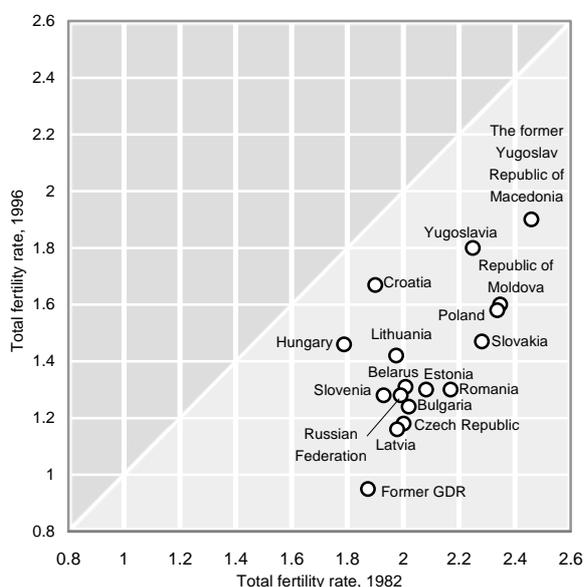
<sup>581</sup> The 16 countries are as follows: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, western Germany (i.e. the territory of the Federal Republic prior to unification), Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. It is these countries with market economies, all having populations over 1 million in the 1990s, that are contrasted with countries with transition economies throughout the chapter.

<sup>582</sup> Total fertility rates in the other market economies varied between the rate of western Germany, 1.41, the lowest on record at the time, and the United Kingdom rate, 1.79. Ireland's TFR (2.96), the highest in western Europe, was the only exception.

<sup>583</sup> In this group were Bulgaria (1.09), Latvia (1.11), Czech Republic (1.17), Belarus (1.23) and Estonia (1.24), as well as Spain (1.15) and Italy (1.22). Council of Europe, *Recent Demographic Developments in Europe 1998* (Strasbourg, Council of Europe Publishing, 1998).

CHART 4.2.1

Shifts in total fertility rate, 1982-1996



Source: UN/ECE Population Database; Council of Europe, *Recent Demographic Developments in Europe* (Strasbourg), 1998.

pronatalist efforts undertaken since the 1960s in the majority of the former socialist countries. In each of these former Soviet republics the fertility rise ended sometime between 1986 and 1988 and turned into a decline, which, in general, was sharp and uninterrupted. Ten years later, according to the latest available data, the decline was still underway in these seven countries, decelerating, however, in the Baltic states.<sup>584</sup>

Writing at the time when it became known that fertility continued to fall, Darski<sup>585</sup> in 1990 attributed the decline to the deepening social and economic crisis in the former Soviet Union. In his opinion, couples were postponing childbearing until more favourable times by temporarily foregoing second- and third-order births. Contrary to this view, Vishnevsky,<sup>586</sup> writing about Russia a few years later states that: “even if the influence [of social and economic crisis] does exist, it is likely that other factors have contributed to, and are perhaps much more significant determinants of, the phenomenon of fertility decline. The universal trends of demographic transition associated with the modernization of the family and society have played a leading role, and served to

draw the Russian and western models of procreative behaviour in the family closer to one another”.

By offering these different views the two authors have opened what is likely to be a protracted debate over the causes of the sharp fertility decline in the former Soviet Union. These competing explanations will be discussed later in this chapter.

In central Europe, the countries belonging to the Visegrad group – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – shared in the sharp decline, but the trajectories were generally different from those of the former Soviet republics (chart 4.2.3). With the exception of Hungary, through the end of the 1980s, they experienced almost uninterrupted declines at varying but moderate speed. In Hungary there was a modest and uneven increase through the beginning of the 1990s from a level that was the lowest in the region. This increase was most probably in response to yet another effort, which started in 1984, at enhancing the already generous support to families with children, which to a certain degree bore comparison with the former Soviet Union. The acceleration of the decline in the Czech Republic and Poland occurred after 1991, in Slovakia after 1993. In Hungary, the turnaround occurred after 1991. In sum, in this part of central Europe, the rapid decline set in a few years later than in the former Soviet republics. In contrast to this, the area of the former German Democratic Republic, before and after unification, experienced a fertility decline that has no known parallels.<sup>587</sup>

For south-eastern Europe, the picture is more complex than for central Europe and the former Soviet Union. The fertility decline has been underway in the various former Yugoslav republics since the beginning of the 1980s, which makes the Yugoslav successor states similar to the central European countries. However, unlike in central Europe, the decline in Croatia, Slovenia, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Yugoslavia did not turn into a rapid fall as the former SFR of Yugoslavia disintegrated.<sup>588</sup> Bulgaria’s and Romania’s fertility decline share the feature common to

<sup>587</sup> The recorded demographic history provides no evidence of a similar drop in fertility in a sizeable population during peacetime. As the effects of the former GDR’s pronatalist policy waned in the first half of the 1980s, the TFR gradually decreased. The decline, similar to that elsewhere in central Europe, accelerated after 1987 and turned into a free fall after 1990. The result was an astonishingly low TFR reached in 1993, 0.76 children per woman. The TFR has rebounded in the last few years but in 1996 was approaching only half of the replacement level.

<sup>588</sup> A comment on the one-time increase in the TFR for The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in 1991 is in order here. This increase, which is spurious, is a result of a change in statistical practices pertaining to the estimation of population followed since independence by the statistical authorities of this country. If it were possible to derive a time series of TFRs since the early 1980s, it would probably show a steady decline in fertility during this decade, although at a level higher than the one shown in chart 4.2.3, and linking up with the trend since 1991.

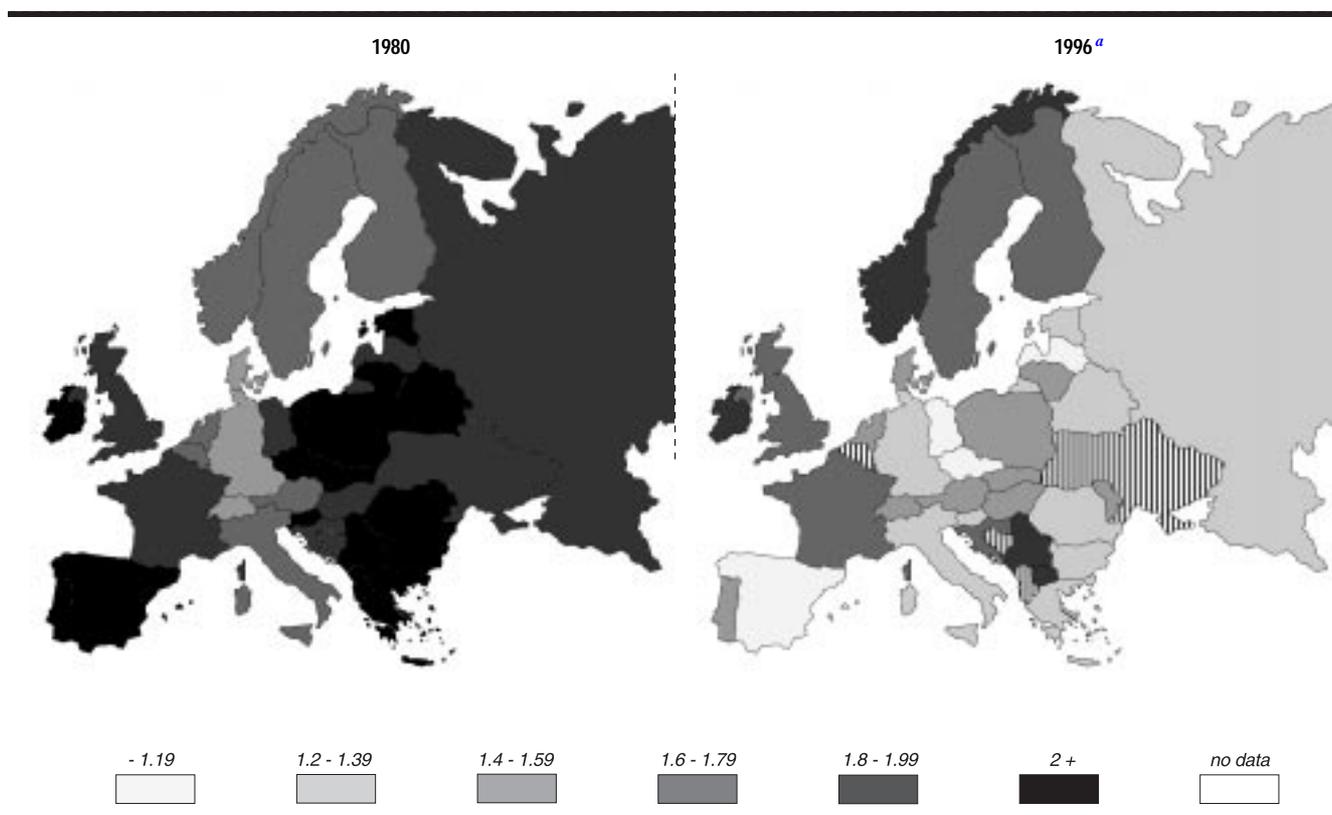
<sup>584</sup> Council of Europe, op. cit.

<sup>585</sup> L. Darski, “Fertility in the USSR. Basic trends”, in A. Volkov (ed.), *Population Reproduction and Family Dynamics*, The State Committee of Russian Federation on Statistics (Moscow), 1992.

<sup>586</sup> A. Vishnevsky, “Family, fertility, and demographic dynamics in Russia: analysis and forecast”, in J. DaVanzo (ed.), *Russia’s Demographic “Crisis”* (Santa Monica, CA, Rand, 1996).

CHART 4.2.2

Total fertility rate, 1980 and 1996<sup>a</sup>  
(Countries with population over one million)



Source: Council of Europe, *Recent Demographic Developments in Europe* (Strasbourg), 1998.

<sup>a</sup> In 1995 Belgium's TFR was 1.55 while Ukraine's was 1.40.

those in central Europe and the former Soviet republics. In Bulgaria there was a gradual decline during the 1980s, which appreciably accelerated after 1988. In Romania, fertility peaked in the middle of the 1980s, most likely as a result of the tightening in 1984 of the highly coercive pronatalist policies practised in the country since the middle of the 1960s. The sharp decline occurred immediately after 1989.

To summarize, there were variations across central and eastern Europe in the paths to sub-replacement fertility during the last decade and a half. The Yugoslav successor states attained those levels without experiencing any major departure from the gradual trends that were underway since the early 1980s. In contrast to this, in all the other countries with transition economies, at one time or another, fertility began to fall at a rapid pace. In some of them, the rapid fall started after a temporary rise, in others after an initial gradual decline. In the majority of countries, the beginning of the new trend occurred during the period 1989-1991. In particular, in Belarus, the Republic of Moldova, Russia and Ukraine, as well as in Estonia, Bulgaria and Romania, it took place earlier than elsewhere – in 1989 or 1990; in eastern Germany and Latvia in 1991. The rapid decline in central Europe started later – in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in 1992, and in Slovakia

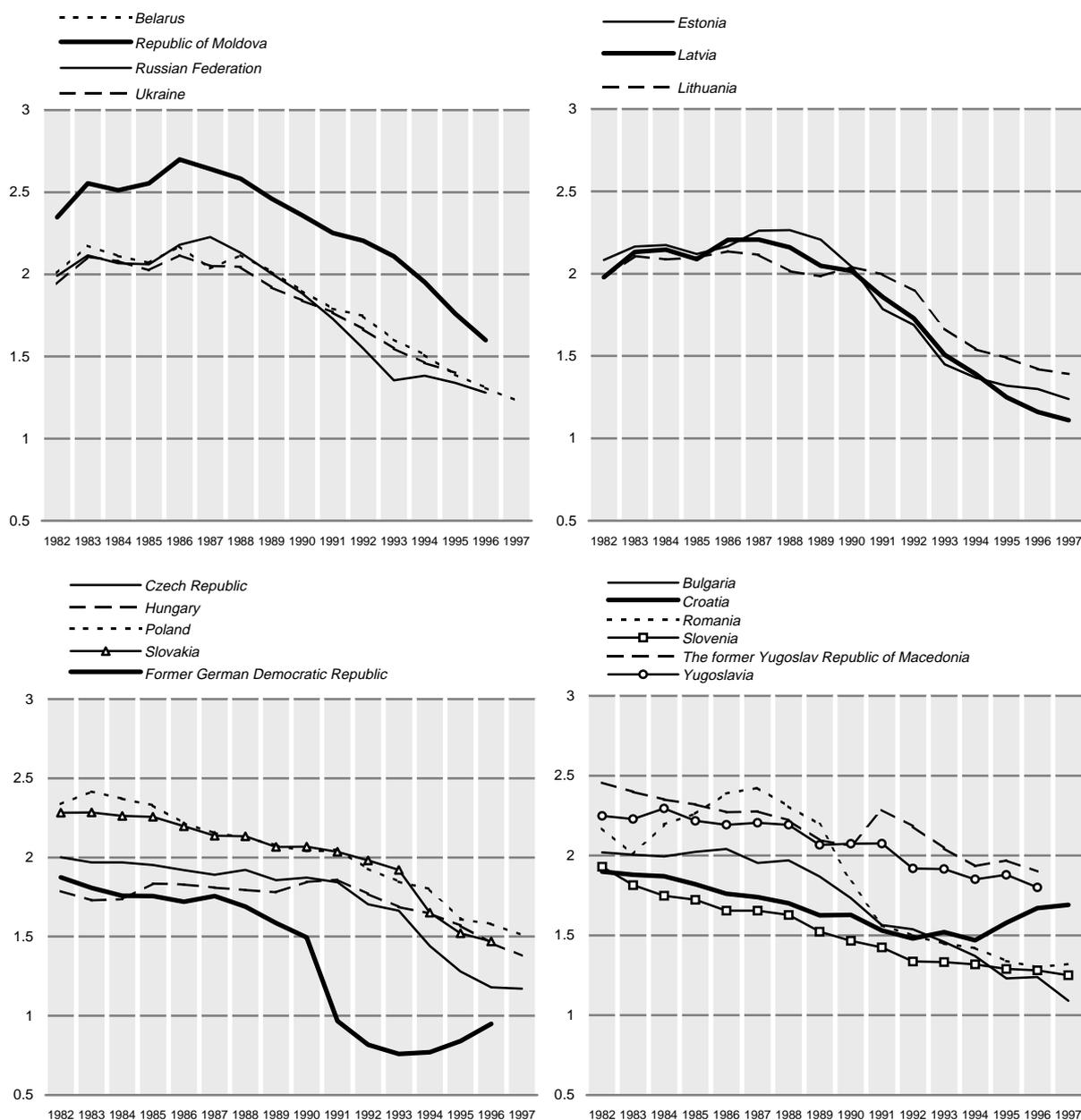
in 1994. Lithuania joined in the rapid decline in 1993.<sup>589</sup> In practically all the countries that shared in the rapid decline, TFR fell below 1.5 by 1997. Among the Yugoslav successor states, only Slovenia attained such a level, although it had started from one of the lowest levels in the 1980s.

Once the rapid decline got underway, it generally proceeded almost everywhere without interruption through 1996-1997. (As indicated earlier, eastern Germany was the exception.) The magnitude of the decline by this time, relative to the pre-decline level, was greatest in countries where the decline started relatively early and proceeded at a comparatively rapid pace: thus, in Belarus, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Bulgaria and Romania, TFRs fell by up to 40 per cent or more. As

<sup>589</sup> Establishing the year in which the rapid decline began is not a problem-free task, however, mainly for the former Soviet republics. There, it appears that an early decline after the TFR peaked in the middle of the 1980s was only a downward adjustment that was typically observed in the former socialist countries following a fertility surge produced by fresh pronatalist policy measures. Then, on the coat-tails of the adjustment came the rapid decline, inviting the non-trivial question: when did it begin? In the secretariat's view, in each particular case, this occurred immediately after TFR had reached a level similar to the one that prevailed before the 1981-1983 pronatalist policies were put into effect. In line with this reasoning, for example, for the Republic of Moldova, 1989 was taken as the year when the rapid decline began.

CHART 4.2.3

Trends in total fertility rate in selected transition economies, 1982-1996



Source: UN/ECE Population Database; Council of Europe, *Recent Demographic Developments in Europe* (Strasbourg), 1998.

these countries had relatively high fertility levels prior to the onset of the rapid decline, they also had the largest absolute losses, approaching one child per woman. The relative losses in transition economies have been generally larger than those in countries with market economies since the middle of the 1960s, a period of rapid postwar fertility reduction in western Europe.<sup>590</sup>

### 4.3 Shifts in the age structure of fertility

The former socialist countries have been long known for their relatively youthful fertility. The most modern and prosperous among them – the Czech and Slovak Republics, the former German Democratic Republic and Hungary – along with Bulgaria and

<sup>590</sup> The largest proportionate losses in the transition economies during the five-year periods after the rapid decline began were in Estonia and Latvia (just over 38 per cent in both cases) and in the Czech Republic and Romania (close to 36 per cent). The loss in eastern Germany during the

period 1991-1993 approached 50 per cent. The largest comparable declines in countries with market economies were in the Netherlands during 1969-1974 and western Germany in 1968-1973, both being within the 35-36 per cent range.

Romania, have greatly contributed to this image. The women in these countries tended to marry early, have their first child soon after, and go on to complete childbearing before long. As a result, in 1982, mean age of childbearing in these countries was below 25 years and 80-90 per cent of fertility was completed by the age of 30.<sup>591</sup> The other former socialist countries, including the former Soviet republics that later became independent states, had had somewhat older fertility, between 25 and 27 years. At the upper end of the range was Latvia with an average of 27 years. One third of the former socialist countries or republics with a relatively old fertility had levels similar to or just below those of the market economies that had the youngest fertility in this group.

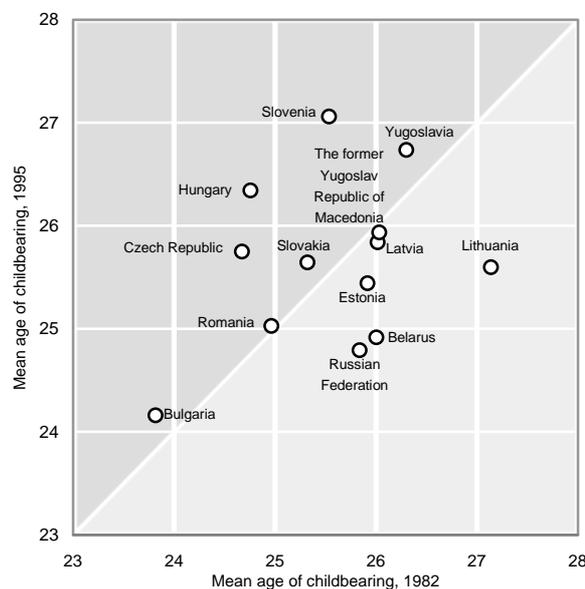
The available, comparable information suggests that parts of central and eastern Europe have departed from this relatively uniform pattern of youthful fertility. The information for the last three to four years shows that the break with the past has resulted in a relatively higher age of childbearing in the central and south-east European countries, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia (chart 4.3.1). In contrast to this, in some of the European CIS countries – Belarus and Russia – as well as Latvia, the age of fertility fell. Over this same period, most of the countries with market economies continued the trend towards ever-older fertility. In spite of data limitations, it is possible to describe the shifts in the age structure of fertility with some accuracy.

With respect to fertility per se, two broad patterns of change in its structure emerged, the first in the Baltic republics and the European CIS countries, the other in central and south-eastern Europe. The former Soviet republics displayed a much higher degree of uniformity than the latter, however, only up to the early- to mid-1990s. In general, their mean age of childbearing remained unchanged or fluctuated slightly from 1982 to 1987 or 1988, signifying that the moderate rise in fertility prior to the onset of the decline was not accompanied by any marked change in its age structure (i.e. the rise in fertility at the various ages was roughly the same). In the late 1980s, as fertility fell, the mean age of childbearing also fell, often appreciably. In Belarus, the Republic of Moldova, Russia and Ukraine, this trend appears to have ended by the middle of the 1990s, resulting in a mean age of childbearing of around 25 years in 1996-1997. In the Baltic states, the decline ended around 1992-1993 and, as recent data appear to suggest, turned into a progressively steeper rise, arriving at a mean age of about 26 years by 1997. In other words, without exception, the rapid drop in fertility up to the early to mid-1990s has been associated with an increasingly younger pattern of childbearing; the fertility rates at higher childbearing ages have fallen relatively more than those at earlier ages.

<sup>591</sup> The proportion of fertility completed by age 30 is used here as an indicator of the age structure of period fertility. It stands for the percentage of fertility that a hypothetical cohort of women subject to the period age-specific fertility rates would attain by age 30.

CHART 4.3.1

### Shifts in mean age of childbearing, 1982-1995 (Year of age)



Source: UN/ECE Population Database.

In central Europe and parts of south-eastern Europe – Croatia, Slovenia and Yugoslavia – the trend has been towards later childbearing. In some of these countries the trend was underway from the early 1980s, accelerating in some instances (Slovenia and particularly the Czech Republic) around 1990. In others, the rise in mean age of childbearing occurred after a moderate drop in the first half of the 1980s or, in the case of Poland, after the late 1980s. In contrast, in Bulgaria and The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia their age structures of fertility remaining largely unchanged, and grew younger, albeit at very different levels. Romania's pattern of change, particularly since the middle of the 1980s, resembled that of the Baltic countries. In brief, with the exception of the latter three countries, in central and south-eastern Europe there was a clear shift towards an older pattern of fertility, a development that typically signifies a postponement of childbearing.

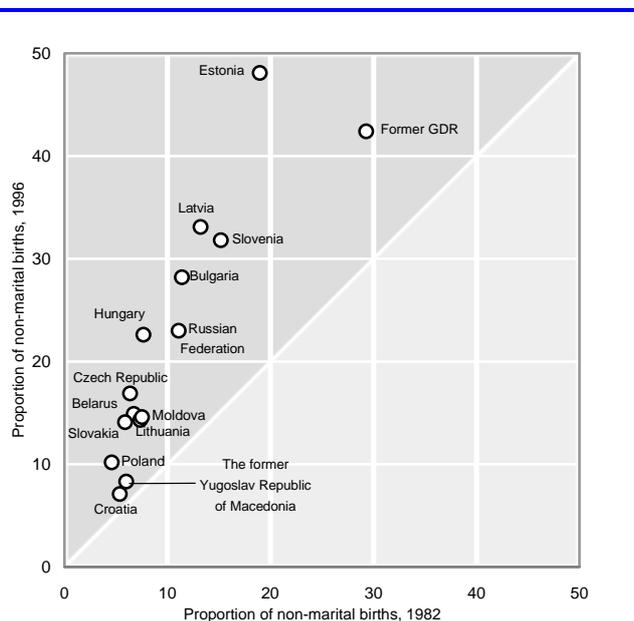
#### 4.4 The spread of extra-marital fertility

Several former socialist countries had what, by European standards, appears to have been an early and relatively high incidence of extra-marital childbearing.<sup>592</sup> In 1970, it was not unusual in this part of Europe to have more than one out of 10 children born to unwedded mothers, the level that can be considered an upper boundary of relatively low prevalence of out-of-wedlock fertility. The proportion of children born to unmarried

<sup>592</sup> The fall in marital fertility, due to delayed or a lower rate of marriages, is usually not offset by the increase in extra-marital fertility, as unmarried couples or single mothers usually opt for fewer children.

CHART 4.4.1

Shifts in proportion of non-marital births, 1982-1996  
(Per cent of total births)



Source: UN/ECE Population Database; Council of Europe, *Recent Demographic Developments in Europe* (Strasbourg), 1998.

mothers was highest in Estonia (14.1 per cent) and the former GDR (13.3 per cent); these were not much behind the proportion in Sweden (18.4 per cent), the highest in Europe. In Latvia, the Russian Federation and Yugoslavia, the proportions have been just above 10 per cent, comparable to Austria and Denmark but not to other European countries. However, when the rise in the prevalence of non-marital childbearing began in earnest in Europe in the 1970s, it was much stronger in the market economies than in the present-day transition economies.

In the early 1980s, almost one third of these former socialist countries had the proportions of extra-marital to total births of over 10 per cent. As had been the case a decade earlier, the former GDR and Estonia were ahead of the others, with, respectively, one third and one fifth of births occurring to unmarried women. The proportions were lower in Slovenia (15 per cent), Latvia (13 per cent), and Bulgaria and Russia (11 per cent) and below 10 per cent elsewhere. However, in the next decade and a half, as out-of-wedlock fertility continued to spread in these societies, other countries crossed the 10 per cent threshold and joined the leaders. In a number of these countries, there was a steady increase during the 1980s, prior to the changes of government in the political and economic systems. In several of them there was a clear acceleration in the 1990s, possibly suggesting that the political and other changes contributed to a more conducive environment for extra-marital childbearing.

The increase in the prevalence of non-marital fertility in the last 15 years was considerably larger in some parts of central and eastern Europe than others

(chart 4.4.1). Estonia and eastern Germany continued to surge ahead, while several other countries – Bulgaria, Latvia and Slovenia as well as Hungary and the Russian Federation – followed behind. At the other end of the spectrum there were a few countries – Croatia, Poland and The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, where non-marital childbearing increased but remained rare. In an intermediate group, the remaining countries with transition economies, the proportion of extra-marital births increased twofold or more, reaching about 15 per cent or above. This group, as well as the low- and high-prevalence groups, includes member countries from all various parts of the region. Unlike the case of fertility and its age structure, there are no discernible subregional patterns in the increase of non-marital childbearing.

## 4.5 Causes of fertility decline

### (i) From one-party rule to democracy

The political changes that swept central and eastern Europe a decade ago were on a scale rarely seen in twentieth century Europe, a period of major political upheavals on the continent. Within a few years, one communist-led regime after another fell, paving the way for multi-party democracies and leading to the dissolution of the former socialist federal states. In the majority of the former eastern European countries, political turbulence preceded the change of government or, in the case of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia, their breakup. A resurgence of nationalism that pitted one ethnic group against another and threatened or caused violations of minority rights added to political instability in some of the multi-ethnic countries. The turbulence lasted anywhere between a few days and a few years. It ended with a violent clash between opposing forces and a forced change of government in Romania, and a string of wars in the former SFR of Yugoslavia. Elsewhere, the change was by and large peaceful although subject to varying degrees of tension and, in some instances, the threat of violence; the fall of the east German regime occurred in a highly charged political atmosphere. The transition to multi-party democracy has been quick and orderly in several countries, slow in some, and painful and unsettled in the rest. In the latter, democratic institutions and norms are only slowly taking root. In recent years they have continued to experience bouts of political turbulence, leading sometimes to early elections and changes of government.

Decisions that individuals and couples take regarding the forming of a family and the bearing of children – intimate decisions *par excellence* – are invariably influenced by their general condition, including political and economic circumstances that may be perceived as leading to an uncertain future. The survey-based studies coordinated and conducted by Moors and Palomba<sup>593</sup> in

<sup>593</sup> H. Moors and R. Palomba (eds.), *Population, Family and Welfare. A Comparative Survey of European Attitudes*, Vol. 1 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995).

nine European countries have, among other things, enquired as to whether individuals in their childbearing years attribute fertility decline, *inter alia*, to “fear of the future”, and also, whether the desire not to have a child might be influenced by concerns that individuals may have about the future. The studies showed, more for some countries than for others, that indeed, in the minds of the interviewees, misgivings about the future *are* responsible, among other factors, for the fertility decline as well as for their personal decision to remain childless or not to have another child. In line with this research, it may be hypothesized that confidence in the future might have declined, in some instances abruptly, among the young people in the former socialist countries as they experienced the political and economic transition. With respect to the political changes, it seems plausible that the political transformation and dissolution of countries, especially where they were abrupt and turbulent, led young people to wonder what the future held for their future families and accordingly chose to postpone or altogether forego forming them or having children.

There is unambiguous evidence that the events that led to the fall of the German Democratic Republic and the Romanian regime in December 1989, caused an immediate and massive fertility reaction. The number of births was cut in the former GDR by close to one half within less than a year and, accounting for seasonal variations, by over one fourth within less than six months in Romania (chart 4.5.1).<sup>594</sup> Frightened by political events, couples drastically curtailed births, the number of which did not rebound after the shock. The anxiety about the immediate future persisted.<sup>595</sup>

The link between political events and fertility is less easily demonstrable in other parts of the region. It appears that in the former Soviet Union, couples began opting for fewer children in 1989, a year before the rapid drop in fertility became manifest in the various former republics. By this time, political changes, including the independence movements in the Baltic states that eventually resulted in the dissolution of the Union on 31 December 1991, gained momentum. It may be that the trend in favour of fewer children got underway in response to what could have been perceived as growing

political instability. At this time, there were no signs yet that the economy would go into a major recession; that started to happen only a year or two later.

In central Europe there does not appear to be any link between the political changes and the drop in fertility and this may be due to the fact that the process leading to the abdication of the communist regimes in 1989 was relatively smooth. In Hungary and Poland it was prepared through the round-table discussions that took place between the authorities and the emerging political opposition following its recognition by the government. In the former Czechoslovakia, a stiff resistance to change lasted until 1989 but the end came relatively quickly and peacefully in December 1989. It was followed by a quick succession of radical reforms. As indicated earlier, the turn to rapid fertility reduction occurred in central Europe a few years later, strongly suggesting that the political changes, smooth as they were, did not lead to couples adopting a wait-and-see attitude, which appears to have been the case in the former Soviet Union.

Apart from Romania, south-eastern Europe presents a puzzle. Within a few years of Tito's death in 1981, disagreements and disputes among the former Yugoslav republics set in motion a slow process that eventually led to the breakup of the Federation. It gained a momentum in 1987 with the rise of nationalism, setting the stage for secessionist movements which gained strength during 1989-1991 and resulted in the declaration of independence by Slovenia and Croatia in June 1991. A brief military conflict flared up in Slovenia, then a larger and protracted war engulfed Croatia, as the Yugoslav army sought to prevent the breakup, which was followed by the carnage in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Surprisingly, these events do not seem to have left an imprint on fertility developments in the Yugoslav successor states.<sup>596</sup> Lastly, Bulgaria also offers a puzzle, as it appears that the shift towards fewer births occurred before any of the major political shocks of late 1989, the year when Zhivkov was deposed.

Did the effects on fertility of the sudden change of government, for example in Romania, or the deepening and protracted political crisis, such as that in the former Soviet Union before and soon after its dissolution, persist for some time? The surveys-based results for eastern Germany, referred to above, suggest that this indeed might have been the case. This, however, is not proven, and the present analysis does not attempt to separate the effects of political change from those of other developments, in particular the onset and progression of economic crisis. There is, however, evidence, albeit inconclusive, that the political situation in the former Soviet Union around 1990 did have a more lasting depressing effect on fertility (see below).

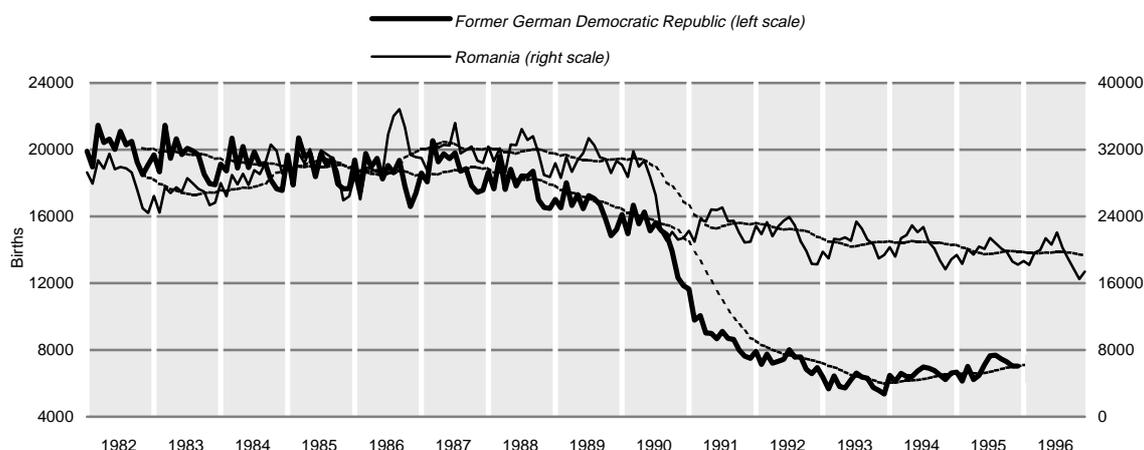
<sup>594</sup> The abrupt drop in fertility in Romania was made possible by a liberalization of induced abortion by the new government. The old regime had banned abortion and modern contraceptives in 1966 and reinforced the coercive policy in 1984. As a result, the annual numbers of induced abortions between 1986 and 1989 were below 20 thousand, more than half of the pre-1984 level. Immediately after the liberalization, in 1990, the number skyrocketed to over 90 thousand, a four-and-a-half-fold increase compared to the previous year.

<sup>595</sup> Nearly half of the respondents in eastern Germany, who were interviewed in 1992 in the German Fertility and Family Survey indicated that “fear of the future” was, in their view, a very important reason for the fertility decline in this part of Germany. B. Störtzbach, “Germany: unification in attitudes?”, in H. Moors and R. Palomba, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-138. The two other very important reasons, which were more prominent than “fear of the future”, were “economic crisis and unemployment” and the “financial burden of raising children”.

<sup>596</sup> The effects of war on fertility in Bosnia and Herzegovina must have been considerable but could not be analysed as data for the 1990s are unavailable.

CHART 4.5.1

Changes in the number of monthly births and 11-month moving averages  
in the former German Democratic Republic and Romania, 1982-1996



Source: UN/ECE Population Database.

## (ii) From slow growth to economic downturn

The 1980s were a period of persistent deepening of structural problems in the former centrally-planned economies. Rates of growth fell to unprecedentedly low levels and the standard of living continued to decline in several of these countries. Perestroika was a response to Soviet economic problems, which eventually contributed to the deepening of the crisis rather than to its resolution. The second half of the decade witnessed a continued sluggish growth in the European part of the former Soviet Union but also in Bulgaria and Poland. Elsewhere, in particular in Romania, the former Czechoslovakia and the former SFR of Yugoslavia, the performance was even worse. As these economies came to a standstill at the end of the decade, the new governments faced the urgent and virtually unprecedented task of reforming them. Economic reforms, accompanied by institutional change were undertaken in many of these countries, with more success in some than in others. Declines in output, employment and trade ensued, accompanied by the emergence (or rise) in unemployment and inflation or hyperinflation. Real wages, social entitlements and services, and living standards declined as well. In some countries the trends have been reversed sooner than in others; in some they still persist. The details have been regularly covered in issues of this *Survey* and need not be discussed here.

The possible relationship between the fertility decline and these economic developments, however, is of paramount interest. The question appears to be not so much as to whether the economic downturn had an effect on fertility but rather; how its strength and duration might have varied in different settings. The question can first be addressed by looking at the bivariate relationship between total fertility rate, on the one hand, and

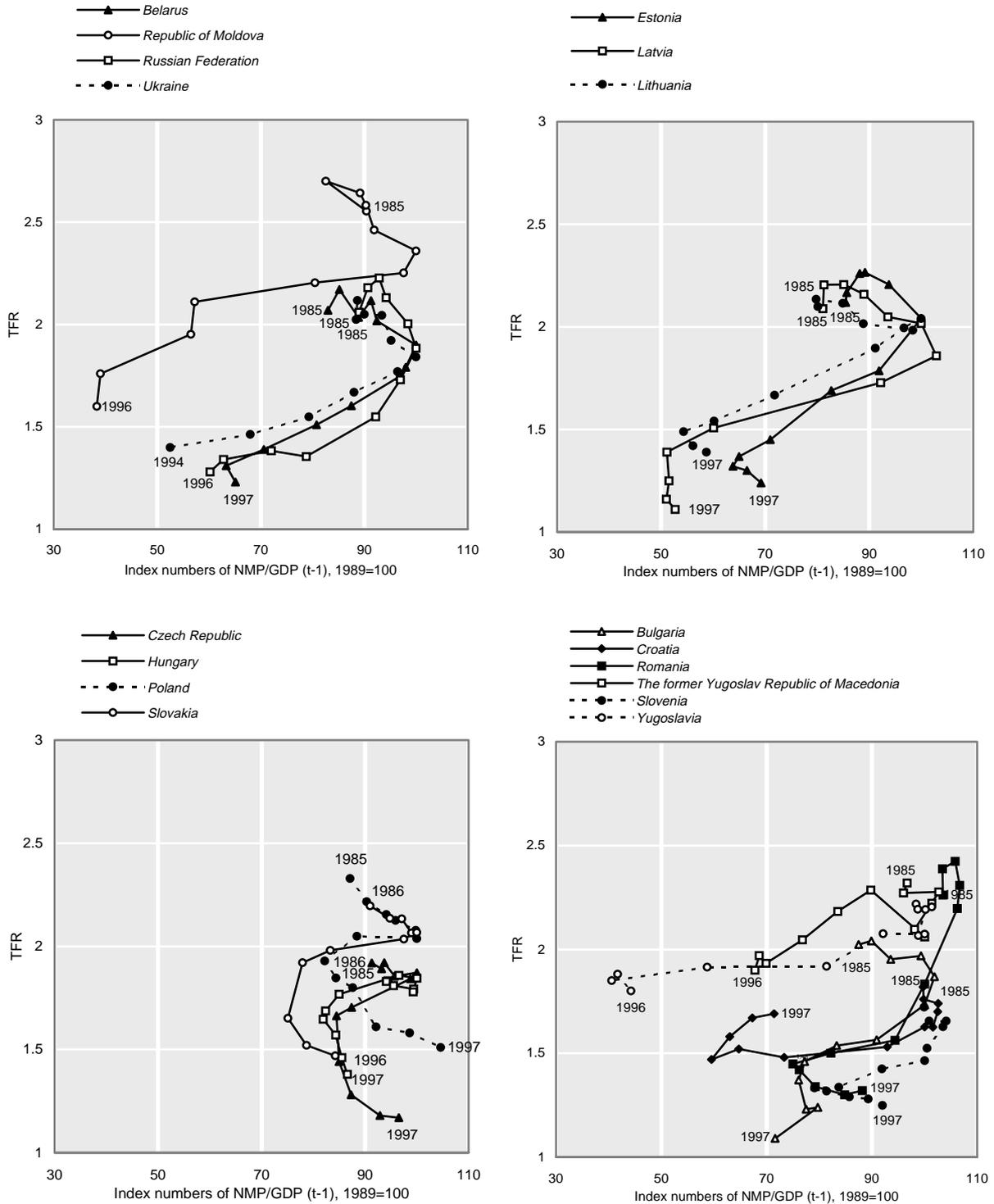
aggregate output, on the other, expressed as the net material product or the gross domestic product relative to its 1989 level (appendix table B.1). Needless to say, bivariate analysis is a primitive tool and GDP is only a crude indicator of the state of the economy and the living standard of the population. Nevertheless, it is used here as a first tentative step towards a more sophisticated study of the relationship between fertility decline and economic change in the transition economies.

The bivariate relationship for all the countries (except eastern Germany, for which the requisite economic information is not available) is presented in chart 4.5.2, where the total fertility rate in any given year, starting in 1985, is paired with NMP/GDP, relative to its 1989 level, lagged by a year. The one-year lag is introduced in order to relate economic conditions at a given time to the reproductive decisions of couples, a decision that affects the number of births about a year later. As with the other various aspects of fertility patterns, there is a high degree of similarity in the relationship in the former European Soviet republics and their successor states. The similarities are less strong in central Europe and almost non-existent in south-eastern Europe.

The relationship between fertility and economic growth in the Baltic states and the European CIS countries is fairly systematic, but only from around the early 1990s. The very early phase of the rapid fertility decline coincided with further, albeit small, improvements in the economy, less so in Russia than in the Baltic republics and the Republic of Moldova. From then on, minor exceptions aside, the decline in TFR went hand in hand with the economic decline. However, the relationship is non-linear: the immediate post-1990 TFR decline is much faster than the decline in output.

CHART 4.5.2

Relationship between total fertility rate and net material product/gross domestic product, 1985-1997  
(children per woman and indices 1989=100)



Source: UN/ECE Common Database, derived from national and CIS statistics; UN/ECE Population Database.

Note: Years indicated in the charts above are for total fertility rate (TFR) while the corresponding GDP data are for the prior year.

Could the fertility decline at this early stage have been primarily a result of the unsettled political situation in the former Soviet Union at the time, exacerbated by the failed coup in August 1991? The answer is probably yes. Towards the middle of the 1990s and beyond, the bivariate relationship in these countries suggests that the economic deterioration then became the dominant factor. In Estonia and Lithuania, the relationship has been almost linear since 1990, suggesting the dominant influence of the economic crisis from the outset.

Darski's view<sup>597</sup> that the social and economic crisis has led couples to opt for fewer children, and particularly fewer second- and third-order children appears valid, but perhaps less so for the years around 1990 than the subsequent period. Not only did the total fertility rate fall throughout the Soviet successor states, but this trend was accompanied by a drop in the mean age of childbearing, signifying a likely greater reduction in second- and higher-order births rates than in first-order birth rates.

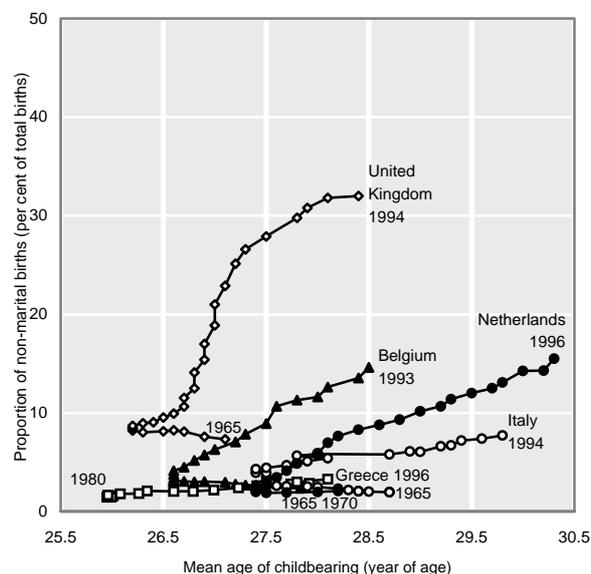
A broadly positive relationship between the decline in fertility and the economy after around 1990 also holds in central and south-eastern Europe, but only up to a point; the patterns vary substantially, and that for Yugoslavia is a clear outlier (chart 4.5.2).<sup>598</sup> In central Europe the two developments went briefly hand in hand after 1990, while fertility continued to decline after the economy began to improve in the middle of the decade. Clearly, this picture raises difficult questions. Most importantly, why did fertility continue to fall in situations where an economic turnaround has occurred or appears to have started? Is it possible that people are still uncertain and awaiting much improved economic circumstances and clear signs of a robust and *persistent* recovery before they commit themselves to having more children than during the early crisis years? Or is it possible that new forms of family and reproductive behaviour favouring smaller families, similar to those seen in western Europe in the last few decades, have been taking root in recent years?

### (iii) The spread of western behaviour

In western Europe the middle of the 1960s marked the end of the postwar baby boom and a beginning of a new era of profound, multifaceted fertility change, referred to by some population scholars as Europe's second demographic transition.<sup>599</sup> The postwar generations, coming of age since the 1960s, have increasingly challenged the precepts and norms of their parents in a variety of areas. Among the results were the

CHART 4.5.3

Relationship between mean age of childbearing and the proportion of non-marital births in selected market economies, 1965-1996



Source: Oxford Population Database (OXPOP); Council of Europe, *Recent Demographic Developments in Europe* (Strasbourg), 1998.

sexual revolution, the anti-war, anti-nuclear and environmental movements, and a revival of the feminist movement ideals.

The norms that for a long time had guided the formation of and the life within families were also brought into question and new forms of family and reproductive behaviour emerged. Cohabitation grew while marriage receded, and having babies in consensual unions became increasingly acceptable. The onset of parenthood, partly in response to longer education of both men and women was gradually pushed towards the late twenties; accordingly, mean age of childbearing increased. Permanent voluntary childlessness spread in some countries, so much so that, for example, 20 per cent of Swiss women now in their late forties are childless. These trends contributed to, and in some instances only accompanied, a rapid reduction in fertility, which in some countries occurred considerably earlier than in others. The rise in cohabitation and non-marital fertility were not, however, the major causes for the postponement of childbearing and fertility reduction; comparisons between the Nordic and Mediterranean countries confirm this. Greece and Italy, the countries that currently have some of the lowest fertility rates in Europe and increasingly later childbearing, also have some of the lowest rates of cohabitation and extra-marital fertility (chart 4.5.3). Growing individualism, changing tastes and expectations, diminishing religiosity, economic independence of women and gender equality seem to be important reasons in many countries for the shift to sub-replacement and late fertility. In the view of some researchers, family policies also play a role.

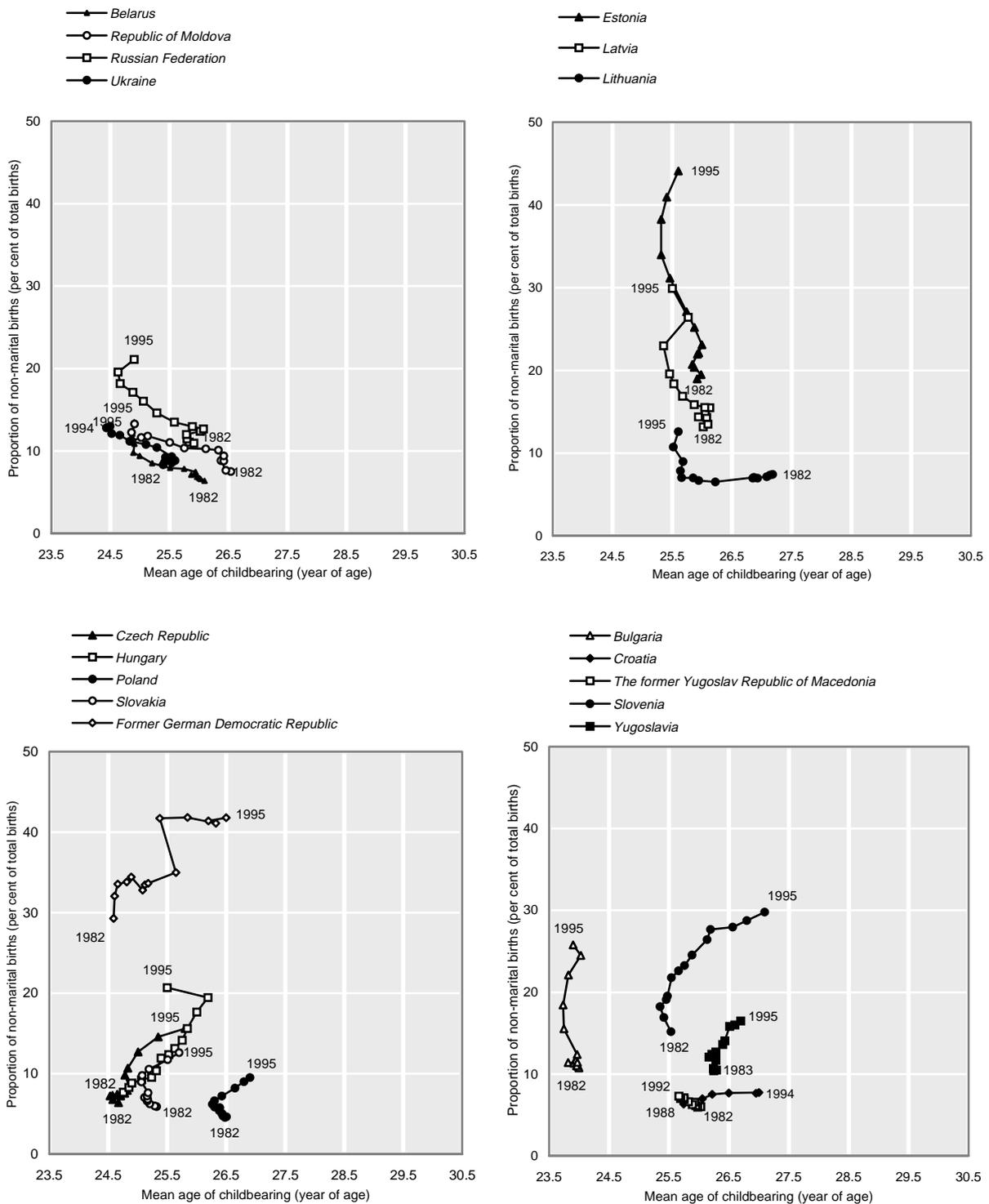
<sup>597</sup> Darski, op. cit.

<sup>598</sup> The massive and steady economic decline in Yugoslavia has not been accompanied by a significant drop in fertility.

<sup>599</sup> R. Lesthaeghe and D. Van de Kaa (eds.), *Bevolking: Groei en Krimp* (Population: Growth and Decline) (Deventer, Van Loghum Slaterus, 1986); D. Van de Kaa, "Europe's second demographic transition", in *Population Bulletin*, Vol. 40, No. 1, The Population Reference Bureau (Washington, D.C.), March 1987, pp. 1-59.

CHART 4.5.4

Relationship between mean age of childbearing and the proportion of non-marital births in selected transition economies, 1965-1995



Source: UN/ECE Population Database; Council of Europe, *Recent Demographic Developments in Europe* (Strasbourg), 1998.

In the context of the present analysis, the consideration of these west European developments invites questions pertaining to central and eastern Europe. Has the spread of the new forms of family and reproductive behaviour been confined to the countries with market economies? Or has it made inroads into the former socialist countries since they opened up to the rest of the world, and particularly to their western neighbours? In particular, has the recent fertility change in this part of Europe, including the fertility decline, been a result of the spread of these new forms of behaviour? Evidence, for some central European countries, suggests that this indeed may have been the case. For example, in Slovenia, as noted earlier, there was a steady fertility decline from the beginning of the 1980s. During much of that period fertility grew older and there was increasing incidence of extra-marital fertility (chart 4.5.4), thus bringing it into line with the experience observed in many countries with market economies. With its borders open to the west since the middle of the 1960s, its family and reproductive behaviour was increasingly westernized during the 1980s. It seems most likely that this has been a major force behind its transition to sub-replacement fertility.

Judging by the ageing of fertility and the rising prevalence of non-marital childbearing, it is possible that the new behaviour also spread to the Czech Republic and Hungary and, to a lesser extent, Slovakia and Poland, starting, however, later – in the early 1990s – that is, just about when the rapid fertility decline began in these countries. (The same development may have occurred even earlier in eastern Germany.) Moreover, it is conceivable that the rapid fertility transition to sub-replacement fertility in these countries was initially driven by both political and economic deterioration and the spread of the new patterns of behaviour, but subsequently, after the economic recovery began, the latter factor became increasingly dominant. In other words, it is conceivable that the generations of young people in this part of Europe, as they came of age in the first half of the 1990s, began to embrace life styles and family and reproductive behaviour conducive to sub-replacement fertility.

In the Baltic states, particularly in Estonia, the signs are that young people are also beginning to embrace the new forms of behaviour, particularly as they contribute to late childbearing.<sup>600</sup> If this indeed is true, then the effect would be to reinforce the fertility depressing influence of what appears to have been the dominant factor, namely, economic deterioration. For the European CIS countries, there are no indications suggesting that Europe's second demographic transition

has arrived there; instead and particularly in recent years, the deepening economic crisis has continued to depress fertility. The view of Vishnevsky,<sup>601</sup> namely, that the fall in fertility in Russia is mainly a consequence of the Russian model of procreative behaviour becoming closer to that of the west, does not receive support. In this respect, south-eastern Europe resembles the European CIS countries.

#### 4.6 Conclusions

As this century of unprecedented global demographic change draws to a close, central and eastern Europe has emerged as an area with the lowest fertility in the world. In much of the region, the transition from replacement to low sub-replacement fertility has been accomplished in less than 15 years. For the majority of the region's population, the transition has taken only about a decade. The rapid decline, which, depending on the country, started around 1989 or later, has been generally steeper than elsewhere in postwar Europe. In practically all of the countries, the decline continued through 1997, albeit showing some deceleration in several instances, probably reflecting timidly rising confidence in the reforms.

The fertility decline was accompanied by diverse trends in the age of childbearing and by a systematic spread of extra-marital fertility. In the Baltic states and the European CIS countries, fertility grew younger up to the mid-1990s, while in central Europe and parts of south-eastern Europe it has stopped growing younger since the late 1980s or early 1990s or, in some instances, even earlier. The diffusion of out-of-wedlock fertility throughout the region has been uneven, but its prevalence in some countries is close to that observed in the Nordic countries, where it is most common. It is not yet known, for the majority of the transition economies, whether this is due to an increase of non-marital cohabitation or a growth in the prevalence of childbearing among women without either a spouse or a partner.

Three competing explanations of the recent rapid decline in fertility have been examined – political instability and the attendant “fear of the future”, economic decline as a proxy for the drop in living standards, and the spread of western family and reproductive behaviour. The central conclusion is that the developments that seem to explain the transition to low sub-replacement fertility vary greatly across the region; what applies to Slovenia, at one end of the spectrum, does not hold true for Russia and the other CIS members, at the other end. Slovenia appears to have gradually embraced, with some delay, the family and reproductive behaviour of its western neighbours and this has contributed significantly to its fertility

---

<sup>600</sup> Clearly, out-of-wedlock fertility, brought about by non-marital cohabitation, has been present in Estonia and, to a lesser extent, in Latvia for some time, including the period when fertility was around replacement and the mean age of childbearing was close to its postwar low. In these two instances, therefore, it would probably be wrong to attribute the steep rise in non-marital childbearing to a spread of western patterns of family and reproductive behaviour.

---

<sup>601</sup> A.G. Vishnevsky, *op. cit.*

decline. In the former Soviet Union, political instability and the attendant social crisis, before and immediately after its dissolution, appear to have triggered the decline. Economic decline, with its many adverse consequences for ordinary people, then reinforced the fertility decline and, in the process, probably became the major driving force. Between these two extremes lie the other countries, where two or all three developments contributed to the fertility decline.

Economic decline has caused erosion of social policies, including family policies, which had often been used by the former socialist governments with the objective of raising fertility. The share of benefits to families with children, such as maternity and child allowances, in family income has generally declined; often this has been achieved by making the benefits income-tested. In some instances, generous child-raising leave has been reduced or completely eliminated. Thus, apart from falling real wages, the once relatively large family benefits have been greatly reduced. Furthermore, the transition to a market economy has involved enormous structural changes, both at the macro and micro levels, which have hit female employment disproportionately.<sup>602</sup> Thus, while those women who remained employed lost their social benefits and part of their wages in real terms, a large proportion of working women lost their jobs and wages altogether. "Feminization of poverty" became widespread in most of these countries. The recovery of output in many economies has mainly led to a reduction in male unemployment while most unemployed women have remained as long-term unemployed and some – in certain countries a large proportion – have left the labour market altogether. This phenomenon, sometimes called the "gender overhang", not only reduced family income but also negatively influenced decision-making against larger families. These economic effects of transition have not yet been fully documented and it is for this reason that the analysis in this chapter has not attempted to explore the link between the decline in fertility and the erosion of family support and the fall in women's participation in economic activity. This is yet another challenge for future research into the causes of the recent fertility decline in central and eastern Europe. When it is successfully met, a body of knowledge on which policies toward fertility and the family can rest may begin to emerge.

Explaining family and reproductive behaviour has, time and again, proven to be an extremely difficult task for social scientists, including population researchers. This is more true of behaviour in modern post-industrial societies than in those undergoing modernization and industrialization. Approaching the subject of the factors behind the rapid fertility decline in the European transition economies requires therefore a measure of

humility. In view of this, the above findings on the factors involved, and their relative contributions, should only be taken as tentative (although hopefully plausible) explanations requiring further scrutiny. The competing explanations offered in the case of Russia, particularly as they may also pertain to all of central and eastern Europe, will certainly continue to occupy researchers for years to come.

A major dilemma arising from the transition progress is that the need for social protection has increased considerably while the funds available to support it have been reduced sharply. Thus, fiscal policies need to be re-examined, including consideration of shifting part of these costs of rebuilding social infrastructure to the private sector but with the state still setting the rules and maintaining regulatory oversight. Only then is "reform" likely to mean "progress", not only for the female population but also for families at large.<sup>603</sup>

---

<sup>602</sup> See section 3.5(ii) where the effects of transition on the female labour force and employment are discussed in detail.

---

<sup>603</sup> For the rebuilding of social infrastructure and roles of different agents in it, see United Nations, *International Expert Meeting on Innovative Employment Initiatives, United Nations-European Regional Follow-Up to the World Summit for Social Development*, papers presented in Vienna (UNOV/VIC), 2-6 February 1998.