

## **POPULATION DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL EUROPEAN COUNTRIES**

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### **Introduction**

There are two significant milestones in the post-war population development in Slovakia as well as in the former Central European socialist countries. The first corresponds to the second half of the Sixties, when significant differences between the population development of the West European advanced countries and the so-called East block first occurred. The second corresponds to the beginning of the Nineties when the demographic development in the post-communist countries strongly reacted to the political and social changes.

These break points are both related to the process called "second demographic transition". In Western democracies, the second demographic transition had a natural course and changes resulting from it were carried out step-by-step for more than 20 years. In unfree, closed and isolated societies within the former East block, the second demographic transition had a different course.

If we return back to the period after the World War II, we shall find out that the demographic development was similar in the whole Europe and its most characteristic feature was the post-war compensation. The mortality fell and the marriage rate and fertility increased. This period lasted until the half of the Sixties. The period of significant changes in the reproduction behaviour started in Western Europe in the second half of the Sixties. The marriage rate and fertility fell, the forms of partner coexistence changed, the number of births outside the marriage and the divorce rate increased, the mortality fell and the life expectancy increased.

There were no such significant changes in the demographic development in the countries of the former East block. On the contrary, the development from the post-war period was rather reinforced. The marriage rate and fertility continuously increased, the mortality stagnated and for some age groups, in particular for men, it even increased. Apart from other factors, the orientation to the traditional family was mirrored in the lower share of births outside the marriage. The forty-year isolation of the East block countries was also reflected in the population development. The consequence was the different reproductive behaviour of the population, which resulted, apart from other issues, into big imbalances in the age structure.

The transformation period after the changes in the socio-economic system in all post-communist countries is also characterised by changes in the reproduction behaviour of the population. The changes in the marriage rate and in fertility are more significant than the changes in other characteristics for which either a higher rate of inertia occurred or greater non-demographic impacts appeared. The demographic trends in all Central European

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transition countries are the same; a characteristic feature is also the diminishing of differences between demographic developments in the different countries.

Let's focus in some details on the main demographic processes. The Eurostat's data regarding the fifteen states of the European Union and data from the statistical offices of the Slovak Republic, Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary will serve us for comparison purposes.

### **Fertility**

Since the second half of the Sixties, a period of persistent decrease in fertility has occurred in Western Europe, lasting until nowadays. On the contrary, fertility significantly increased in Eastern Europe in the first half of the Seventies. Since the half of the Seventies, the decrease in fertility has also occurred in the East part of Europe. The fertility decrease in the Central European transition countries accelerated in the first half of the Nineties and they significantly approached the West European average values.

The main reasons of the different fertility development in the past, which might be summarised under the heading "open and closed society", have rapidly gone after the change in the socio-economic system. The new possibilities of self-realisation of the young generation and the changed life conditions have made very quick the adjustment of the fertility levels between the West and East.

In Slovakia, the fertility development has had a decreasing tendency since 1976. After the very sharp decrease in fertility in the first half of the Nineties, currently the decrease has significantly slowed-down. It might be assumed that this slow-down in the mentioned decrease is mainly a result of the birth postponement from the beginning of the transformation period.

### **Mortality**

High mortality is one of the most unfavourable phenomena in the current demographic as well as social development of the transition countries. Without being embarrassed, we can call it as a heritage of the past. The problems in health care, blighted environment and, above all, unhealthy life style are the main causes of this unpleasant status. The unfavourable development of mortality in the transition countries is also confirmed by the slowness of the decrease of infant mortality, the very high mortality at the central and old ages (especially in case of men), as well as by the trend of the life expectancy.

The beginning of the unfavourable mortality development in the whole East block goes back to the early Sixties. After the period of significant decrease in mortality following the World War II, the slow-down of this favourable trend occurred in most of the European countries. While in East Europe this stagnation became a persistent phenomenon, in the EU countries it was only a short time period.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a significant threshold in the mortality development occurred in Europe. It cannot be expected that the causes for the different mortality development will be removed from day to day. In the Nineties we have so far recorded a slight improvement in mortality which has been reflected in the increase of life expectancy in all Central European transition countries. In the Slovak Republic, the life expectancy is currently 68.9 years for men and 76.7 years for women (as compared to 1990, it increased by 2.3 years for men and by 1.3 years for women).

### **Marriages**

In the Sixties, the experts assumed that the married couple would have been the dominant type of partner coexistence in advanced countries. A more significant change was not expected. The marriage was very

widespread, the divorce rate was not high and was stable; if the marriage broke up, a new marriage would have mostly occurred, the childlessness was not frequent and mainly due to physiological reasons, the ratio of children born outside the marriage was low.

At the turn of the Sixties and Seventies, an unexpected change occurred. Together with the significant and long-term decrease in fertility, the divorce rate increased and consequently fell the marriage rate. The decrease in the marriage rate was accompanied by the increase of the mean age at marriage and by the ratio of children born outside the marriage. These changes brought also other, until those days not very frequent, phenomena e.g. the cohabitation, incomplete families, planned childlessness etc. All these changes were related mainly to the Western and North Europe and appeared only negligibly in Eastern Europe. In Slovakia and also in other East block countries, the marriage rate was until the end of the Eighties substantially higher than in the EU countries.

In the Nineties, however, a change in the trend of the marriage rate occurred also in East European countries. The marriage rate (similarly as fertility) reacted very quickly to the changed social relations. During several years the marriage rate in Central European transition countries fell to the level of the EU countries. The causes of the decrease in marriage rate are the same as in the case of the fertility decrease: economic and housing problems and higher opportunity of self-realisation especially regarding education and employment. The future will show to what extent the postponement of marriages to the older age is in question. Nevertheless, by increasing the mean age at marriage, one of anomalies of our population development started to be removed when too young people, who were not prepared for such an important life's milestone, entered into the marriage. Nowadays in the SR, the age of entering into the first marriage, for both men and women, is still lower by 4 - 5 years than in EU countries.

Today, it is hard to estimate the further developments of the partner coexistence. It is likely that the mean age at marriage will be still growing and step-by-step will reach the level of advanced West European countries. With regard to a quite strong tradition, it can be assumed that the alternative forms of coexistence will be enforced only slowly.

## **Divorces**

The international comparison of divorces is limited by the variety of legal rules in particular countries. Despite this fact, we can say that until the end of the Sixties the divorce rate was stable in Europe around the level of 10% (divorce index) in most of the countries. Later, the divorce rate started to increase, mainly in West and North European countries. The trend of the divorce rate is probably the least homogenous demographic characteristic in Europe. This might be evidenced for instance by the divorce rate being six times lower in Italy than in Denmark or by the divorce rate in the Czech Republic being twice the rate in Slovakia and in Poland. In addition, in countries with a relatively low divorce rate (Slovakia may be included into this group), the trend of the divorce rate cannot be judged as a favourable one. In these countries also, the divorce rate has had a constant tendency to increase, growing during the last 30 years two-three times.

It might be assumed that also in the transition countries of Central Europe, the divorce rate approached the peak and in the future we can expect a stagnation period and maybe even a period of slow decrease. As it has been already mentioned, the mean age at marriage is increasing and the number of marriages entered at young age is decreasing. Exactly these marriages (often entered under the pressure of the woman's pregnancy) were very often the source of marital crises and consequently divorces. In addition, the cases of so called "trial partnership" often occur, where the eventual separation before entering the marriage does not have any influence on the increase in divorces.

## **Population age structure**

If we compare the age structure of the population in the Central European transition countries with that of the EU countries, there are two basic differences obvious at the first glance.

The age pyramid is more balanced and less progressive in the EU countries. Due to the higher fertility and higher mortality, in the countries of the former East block the proportion of the young population is higher and the proportion of the older population is lower. This unbalanced population age structure is the result of an unfavourable population development in the past. The age pyramid of the EU countries, on the contrary, is balanced and the only significant imbalance is caused by a break point in the fertility trend at the break up of the Sixties and the Seventies. The age pyramids of transition countries contain substantially more irregularities. The carrying of imbalances, which occur within the age structure from the past, was often accompanied by subjective factors which made these imbalances even stronger.

The current age structure in the transition countries of the Central Europe might be considered as very unbalanced. Not only the mentioned deformations act negatively from the demographic point of view, but they also cause difficulties in other areas of the development of the society. Especially their long-term character is very unpleasant.

In addition to the unbalanced age structure, another characteristic feature is often present: the ageing of population. It is a process that has stepped forward in advanced countries. However, it appears also in the former East block countries, where it is caused rather by the decrease in fertility than by the prolongation of life. The share of old people in the population has increased mainly because of the decreasing share of children.

As a consequence of the decreasing share of children in the total population (resulting from the decreasing fertility), the population in Slovakia loses the title of "young" and quite quickly reaches the features of the West European populations.

## **Projection of the population development in the SR until 2015**

The assumptions that we mentioned until now were also the basis for the calculation of the last projection of the population of the SR, which was elaborated in 1996 by SOSR in co-operation with Infostat. The projection horizon was the year 2015 and the projection was calculated in two variants (high and low). According to the development up to now, the low version seems to be more realistic. Thus, the results of the projection that are presented in this paper refer only to this version.

## **Conclusion**

A forty-year isolation of the East block was also reflected in the demographic development, mainly in the time period after 1970. The differences are, in particular, the result of different social and political development. However, we cannot exclude the influence of factors like tradition or mentality. The future will show to what extent these subjective factors are independent from the entire social climate.

Until now, it is quite evident that the change in the political system mirrored very quickly also in the demographic development of the post-communist countries. The result is a step-by-step mutual closeness of the population development in particular transition countries as well as the entire approaching of the developments that run in the advanced countries of Western Europe for quite a long time. It might be assumed, that this closeness will be ongoing. Its intensity will, however, depend on the further course of the transformation of the society.

