

## The Bulgarian family in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century

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### Abstract

**Objectives.** The research examines some major trends in the development of the Bulgarian family in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of these trends is characteristic for all the industrial societies – the increase of the number of people who do not want to start a family. On the other hand, there is a switch from the typical model of a family with two children to the family model with one child or without children. These general trends in Bulgaria are reinforced by a number of factors specific for the period of transition. The study is focused on the development of alternative forms of family life – their distribution, the development of the legal framework for their regulation and the public opinion towards them. From the beginning of the Bulgarian transition period, the influence of the characteristics of the family on the education system, the demographic crisis and the moral values of society has qualitatively changed. The analysis shows that the political elites are mainly improvising in shaping their social policy regarding family, and sexual education.

**Material and methods.** The methods of testing are as follows: analysis of data from sociological and other empirical researches; bibliographic analysis; deep monitoring of real social processes during the transition.

**Results.** Bulgarian family undergoes a noticeable degradation. The dissolution of traditional family is consistent with the increased number of unhappy individuals who cannot find fulfillment in starting a family and raising children.

**Conclusions.** On one hand, in Bulgarian social policy, there are measures that are up to date. On the other hand, there are many legislative gaps and inconsistencies. Moreover, Bulgarian citizens seem to realize lately that the rush to embrace alternative forms of family life and the postponement of the right decisions regarding family planning are harmful to them and rethink their behavior.

**Keywords:** family; demographic crisis; education system; family social policy.

### Introduction

The study of the Bulgarian family is of great importance for the development of the whole society because its condition affects all other social trends - economic development, demographic problems, educational system, morality, etc. The article examines the main trends in the development of the Bulgarian family since the beginning of the transitional period in 1989 to the present day.

## Material and methods

Methods of research include: analysis of data from sociological and other research, bibliographic analysis and social observation.

## Findings and discussions

The most basic trend is the degradation of the Bulgarian family and the sharp decline in birth rates. The reasons are of a various nature. Some of them are characteristic of industrial societies in general. The common, trait of this type of society is a deepening globalization process. And in the former so-called 'socialist' countries there are additional factors that contribute to the degradation of the family. As a result, the negative impacts on families in this type of countries are multiplied, and the degradation of this major social unit is faster and worse in comparison to more developed countries.

At the end of *state capitalism*, in 1989, the population of Bulgaria was nearly 9 million people. Now it is under 7 million people, including about two million of living abroad. In the public sphere, many voices deplore this phenomenon by calling it a "genocide of Bulgarian nation, carried out and stimulated by external and internal factors exceeding the number of oppressed people by the communist regime until 1989". (Ханджиев/Handjuev, 2016)

The result of the impact of these factors is, on the one hand, an increase in the number of people who do not intend to start and do not start a family. "Two-thirds of the adult population in Bulgaria are fond of the institution of marriage", according to a survey by Gallup International from 2011 (quoted by website [www.klassa.bg](http://www.klassa.bg)). Only 19% of them believe it is outdated. However, this percentage among young people is much higher (about 50%). Even fewer are those who actually marry or consider living together.

On the other hand, there is a transition from a mass model of a family with two children to a family model with one child or without any children and, consequently, there is a sharp decrease in the birth rate, especially among the ethnic majority (Bulgarian). In 1988, the living births numbered 117,000, and 10 years later they were about 65,000. The number of underaged to give birth has increased as well. This is also the reason for the increase of the abandonment of children, not only by mothers of Roma origin but also by mothers from the Bulgarian ethnic group.

Thirdly, the number of unmarried cohabitants, lonely parenthood, and homosexual cohabitation has dramatically increased, although formal marriage is preserved as the dominant pattern. The quantity of marriages in the year 2000 is the lowest in the history of Bulgarian statistics. The decline in marriages leads to a decline in marital birth rates. The birth rate decreased, the number of extramarital births increased. The children born within marriage are outnumbered by the children born out of wedlock (Ячкова/Iashkova, 2002). In 1999, two-thirds of the children were born of parents not legally married to each other.

The number of divorces has grown, as well as the number of spouses that live separated (due to internal and external migration or other reasons).

There has been a sharp increase in family violence. It is part of the general trend of the increase in crime in the country. Before 1989, Bulgaria was among the countries with the lowest crime rate in the world but, during the transition, it had come to rank among those with the highest increase in crime rate (Айдаров/Aidarov, 1998, p.165). This can be seen in the area of family violence and that of crimes among family members.

On the one hand, there is an obvious return and widespread of physical and psychological violence of the parents towards the children – expanding of physical punishment of the children

when it comes to upbringing, forcing prostitution, begging, increase of sexual offenses within the family. The sexual exploitation of children has grown, as well as their sale - due to low parental control, poverty, the technology development, the development of the mafia, and so on (Бояджиева/Boiadjyeva, 2004). Bulgaria occupies a leading place in the EU in terms of the number of suicides among children and young adults (Ячкова/Iashkova, 2002), which is a direct result of the increased violence. Violence and poor upbringing in the family have also affected relations in schools. Due to other factors, aggressiveness and deviant behavior in school and among young people in general have exploded (Михова/Mihova, 2017).

On the other hand, there is the opposite tendency of children's violence against their parents and grandparents. This reverse trend is a new phenomenon. It is related to the increased problems of the children combined with the uniquely decreasing authority of the adults, of the parents. Although difficult to prove with rigorous scientific data, this kind of aggression seems unprecedented in the history of Bulgaria. No other recollection of children displaying such disrespect and acting so violently and cruelly in relation to their parents and grandparents exists.

Violence among partners is also growing. In some cases, there is an increase in family violence ending in the murder of the partner and even of the children. Such cases were unknown during the communist regime. Nowadays, this type of news is regularly published in the media. It seems we witness a record number of crimes (including killings) in the family (for example, by jealousy), with a record number of murders and suicides of parents and their children.

Another reason for the increase of family violence, along with other more well-known and traditional reasons, is the growing role of alternative forms of marriage. All of them create a lower level of security and equilibrium for the partners, especially for the woman (Ячкова/Iashkova, 2002, p.38), compared to the members of the married family (without trying to idealize the marital status). Greater irresponsibility of partners, especially of men, stimulates violence between spouses as well as between parents and children, for example, in case of cohabitation. This form of family stimulates a more frequent change of partners, weakens the role of the biological tie between parents and children, and increases the conditions for violence - for example, sexual abuse by the mother's partner in relation to her children.

The increase of psychological and physical violence in the family as well as in the environment also affected the psychic status of the population. The number of people with mental health problems has sharply risen. This situation, coupled with the lack of adequate, institutionalized, permanent care for these people, generates another source of risks since patients are walking freely in the streets, allowed to commit acts of violence (sometimes even murders) against unknown citizens and their relatives as well.

During the early exercise of democracy, the political partisanship or simply the strong political opinions and beliefs have often divided the family members into adverse camps. Gradually, the political emotions ceased to be such an incentive for scandals, conflicts, and divisions. Most people understood that there was no significant difference in the policy of the main parliamentary parties during the transition and this negative pressure for the family unity has diminished considerably. But the influence of other negative factors has increased.

The most serious factor for degradation of family relations was the change in the professional, economic and health status of population. Throughout the whole period, the level of social security has been decreasing for a large part of their families as a result of the restructuring and degradation of the economy, of the legitimate and illegitimate redistributive relations and processes within it. Due to the strong deterioration of their economic status, some of them further abstained from the family formation and childbirth or separated.

After November 10<sup>th</sup>, economic insecurity and lack of work or income, especially in the case male family head, played a very detrimental family role. The Bulgarian middle class did not offer jobs, so the minority groups and women dropped out of the labor market. The concept of 'the two worlds' – the male and the female – has been revived in order to explain to women who dropped out of the labor market that the model "working man - housewife" is the most wonderful one, so as not to try to compete with the already diminished number of jobs for men. Some men tend to return to the patriarchal type of thinking – especially among young ones. Some of them are waiting to get rich because they feel obliged to provide everything before they get married. And since they do not get rich, they do not marry. In movies, this is expressed by the imposed model – the woman eagerly waits for the man to give her a ring with a marriage proposal.

Some factors usually spoil family relationships. In other situation, the same factors, combined with other, can stimulate them – for example, the crisis, poverty, and so on. These factors usually create tensions in the family, shatter it, but sometimes can also strengthen it - as a means of salvation, finding peace and comfort, support.

The decrease in significance of traditional family enhances the number of people who do not see themselves fulfilled in starting a family and raising children. However, more unmarried people are feeling a huge dissatisfaction with life, though they often try to conceal it. Some of them find an alternative in overworking and burn themselves out. They help greedy employers benefiting from their dedication to work. Another part of them comes to hate people, their work, and their lives. In some cases, they lead to deviant behavior, and to crimes.

Changes in the social environment have led to the emergence of tolerance for alternative forms of family life – their dissemination, the development of the legal framework for their regulation, the development of excessive, unnecessary 'democratic' attitudes towards them from the side of public opinion. But despite the liberalization of the attitude of public opinion towards marriage, it remains a preferred form of family life (Ячкова/Iashkova, 2002, p.39).

Family conflicts and the difficulty in finding an intimate, spouse to be partner were reinforced by the mobility of many people, caused by the social development – both internally and externally. Thousands of people moved. Most of the population was concentrated in Sofia and several other big cities. They were looking for livelihood, housing, security. While looking to meet these needs, they did not have time to think about family and children.

At the time of state capitalism from 1944 to 1989, the nomenclature pursued a policy of more even distribution of different types of infrastructure - industrial, human, social, of their balancing. There was a policy of more even development of the various regions in the country to make better use of their resources for the modernization of the country. Productions, education, health and culture were developed in smaller settlements, and there was welfare, more children were born, and people did not need migration as they do now.

During the transition, part of the population was superfluous for the new Bulgarian bourgeoisie and the economic elite. And, of course, politics was to allow the migration of many people from smaller settlements to the larger ones, and especially to the major cities. Any such migration has a detrimental effect on birth rates and families. It is a factor in family breakdown and birth rate degradation.

Even more negative was the external migration, especially when the one parent migrates. And the worst option is the more and more widespread variant of migration – of the mother - looking for work and income outside the country. Splitting naturally hampers the lives of families and the birth of children. It hinders the normal upbringing and socialization of the children already born as well. The Bulgarian reality has confirmed the truth that the education of children from such family and unmarried cohabitation is very problematic. They are educated by grandparents who

have a diminishing ability to meet all the children's needs due to physical, health and generational features.

The idea of a good family for such children is questioned. They witness rather bad family relationships, problematic relationships that distort the image of a family. And this, in turn, worsens the perception and desire of starting their own families in future. Among such families, the number of children who have been disqualified to study and work has increased. Their parents send them funds that make them feel better than many other children, which spoils them, those around them spare them because of their social status, and they are unmotivated to serious activity and self-improvement. Some of them are recruited by drug dealers/become victims of drug addiction, alcohol, and indiscriminate sex.

Throughout the whole transition period, the importance of consumerist thinking has rapidly increased (Пачкова/Pachkova, 2009). Consumerism was entirely deliberately and purposefully formed in the younger generation. The rights were emphasized, the obligations were underestimated. This is in complete harmony with the main trend in the development of our civilization (Фукуяма/Fukuyama, 2002), the Western type of capitalism.

In this line, there was a criticism to the time before 1989, with its lesser tendency towards consumerism, the cultivation of collectivist feelings and behavior, the cultivation of responsibility for the whole of society, and the lesser consideration of material values. During the transition, aggressively and consistently young people were educated to consume more and more material values, to resist everything that leads to limiting pleasures and material fulfillment, to lower the degree of their tolerance to the flaws of the partners (Мирчев/Mirchev, 2009, pp.79-80). And the creation and maintenance of a good family, the birth and the raising of children is related to a certain self-restraint, to the devotion to others, to greater tension and pain, with the desire to make compromises.

The number of young women who think they can live well without children is growing. And the growth of this view of life among young men is even greater (\*\*\*НПИ/National Representative Survey, 2006). An increasing number of women adopt a compromise behavior – they do not get married to avoid having to attend a husband's needs but have at least one child in order to satisfy their maternal instinct (Рашевич/Rashevich, 2007, pp.69-75).

It went so far as to women learn to be afraid of giving birth due to the fact that it is accompanied by pain. And they are being pushed into the hands of physicians who have turned the Cesarean birth into an inhumane and lucrative business.

Unlike nowadays, the time of *state capitalism*, young people have been educated to think that it is normal for them to get married, to give birth to at least two children, to endure the pain of childbirth. Labor-pains, difficulties of childcare and attending for the partner needs were not an issue of debate. They were portrayed as the most natural thing in the world.

Nowadays, family formation, childbirth and their raising are presented not as a commitment to society, to the nation and country, but as a matter of completely free and democratic personal choice. The lack of patriotic upbringing, the promotion of cosmopolitan feelings contributes to the massification of such perception and behavior.

Worsen health, widespread smoking (including among women), alcoholism, drug abuse, unhealthy eating, indiscriminate sex, unreasonable abortion, increased levels of stress in the nation have affected the reproductive capacity of families. The number of families with reproductive problems has sharply risen (\*\*\*Национална стратегия.../ National strategy, 2007).

In times of crisis, transition, a major social transformation, such as the Bulgarian one, the circumstances that lead to 'generation conflict', qualitatively different ways of life, the

transformation of values, of assessments of the past and the future, are increasing (Мирчев/Mirchev, 2009, p.52). And these further lead youngsters away from the patterns of behavior of the elderly.

*Laissez-faire* democracy in this situation is detrimental to the future of society. Lack of natality worsens economic performance, reduces the well-being of people – working ones, unemployed and retired. In short, societies are degrading. Some salvation would be to change politics, promote accountability and patriotic thinking. However, this is not in the interest of the economic actors who profit from alternative forms of family life. Lonely, unmarried people go on excursions more frequently – the change in their family model will damage the tourist business. Unmarried people more often make use of services of a prostitute, as well as more frequently enjoy the services of the porn industry, and so on. If they become exemplary spouses, the profits of a huge number of people who benefit from these economic sectors will be reduced. Alcoholised and stoned people are convenient customers of major sectors of the informal economy, the tourism industry. If emigration from the poorer to the richer societies is not allowed and even stimulated, the economies and prosperity of rich societies will worsen, etc. Too much harm to too many well-settled strata of people.

Another policy to be considered by decision-makers in Bulgaria would allow immigrants from even poorer or failed countries to rejuvenate the society. This means, on one hand, to look for workers from other countries, and, on the other hand, to allow mixed couples.

But this is also an outcome with many unknown risks due to the collision of global interests and policies of influential geopolitical players, due to the clash of religions, cultures, and so on.

The most likely outcome is societies such as ours will continue to support the development of other richer societies and will maintain the development of their negative trends at the expense of allowing these tendencies to deepen in Bulgaria.

Since the beginning of the Bulgarian transition period, the influence of family characteristics on the educational system, the demographic crisis and the moral values of society has qualitatively changed. The effect is largely negative. Family degradation and insufficient birth rates are among the main factors for the degradation of the education system and negative changes in the moral values taught at school and in society as a whole.

The analysis shows that the political elite is inconsistent in its efforts of shaping the social policy regarding the Bulgarian family, its reproductive behavior and its educational functions. On the one hand, it is guided by the interests of the economic elites, on the other hand, it is vulnerable to the external factors which are interested in the degradation of the Bulgarian nation and family. On the third hand, in order to have someone to rule, it is necessary to care for the population.

The ruling elite, on the one hand, supports a number of mechanisms to sustain the family, developed and practiced during the period of *state capitalism* until 1989. On the other hand, it introduced some new mechanisms. But most of them do not have the same level of quality and do not achieve the desired effect. There are world-class measures (such as the length of maternity leave), along with mistrust and frank de-stimulation of normal marital cohabitation and fertility.

But the worst thing is that the elite does not create the conditions to strengthen the positive influence of the main determinant factor in family planning – the good economic situation of the population, especially young people. Thus, the complex of incentives for family development is too contradictory and therefore ineffective. Most factors facilitate the degradation rather than the strengthening of the Bulgarian family.

## Conclusion

The influence of the tendencies in the development of the Bulgarian family described above continues to exist. But lately, some Bulgarians realize that rushing into alternative forms of family life or postponing the decisions to start a family is detrimental to them and are beginning to rethink their behavior. The instinct for self-preservation of individuals seems to reclaim its rights – albeit with little rates, but fertility increases, the desire for marital co-existence begins to recover, the explosive increase in cohabitation seems to have slowed down. The euphoria of the possibility of practicing alternative forms of family life has diminished. Many people have been scared by the specter of a childless, married life, of single parenthood, of unmarried life, and so on.

But the hope for a solid family strengthening and a substantial increase in birth rates in the near future is unlikely to be fostered. Very objective trends in public life, which can hardly be overcome even with good political decisions, continue to undermine family and birth rates. According to some studies, by 2030 the population in Bulgaria will decrease, as well as in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Romania and other countries (Атанасов/Atanasov, 2007, p.33).

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