

# *The Macrotheme Review*

*A multidisciplinary journal of global macro trends*

---

---

## Demographic behaviour of Russians: family and fertility patterns across generations

Ekaterina Mitrofanova

National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia  
[emitrofanova@hse.ru](mailto:emitrofanova@hse.ru)

---

### Abstract

*After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the behaviour of Russians in all spheres of life began to change; the demographic dimension is not an exception. Nowadays youth born and raised in modern Russia have another vision of the sequence of demographic events than that held by Soviet generations. According to examples of other countries and the theory of the Second Demographic Transition, it is possible to assume that differences in norms, values, and views could lead to a shift in calendars and intensity of births and matrimonial events. Have these value transformations resulted in transformations of actual reproductive and matrimonial behaviour of Russians? If so, what is the direction of changes? We tried to answer these and accompanying questions in the paper. Using Event History Analysis (EHA) we revealed a relationship between matrimonial and reproductive behaviour across generations, defined zones of their basic distinctions, and made assumptions concerning the reasons and consequences of these transformations.*

Keywords: *partnership, marriage, fertility, nuptiality, generations, matrimonial, reproductive, demographic behaviour, event history analysis*

### 1. Introduction

Soviet legislation and social policy concerning marriage and a childbearing were the most courageous and progressive in the world in the 1920s. After 1918 women were completely equal in rights with men in all spheres of public and private life, including matrimonial relations. Women acquired the right to choose a surname, a residence, and a citizenship. The involvement in productive work had to guarantee them economic independence of men (Con 1997; The Demographic Argument... 1992).

However, the government was frightened that independent people can behave according to personal beliefs instead of the state purposes, and toughened control over the private life of citizens. The period from 1930 to 1956 was characterized by totalitarian measures; attempts to strengthen the institutes of marriage and family by administrative and legal methods; total control over the personality; denial and suppression of sexuality. Since 1956 totalitarianism was replaced by authoritarianism. Some individual freedoms began to appear; the family and marriage began to be protected by administrative and moral methods; the sphere of sexuality began to be

regulated by the state (Con 1997, Demographic modernization 2006). Since 1987 there was a weakening of the government and all forms of social and ideological control. The first steps were taken to revive sexual culture.

The Soviet Union strived for quantitative indices to the prejudice of the qualitative ones. Unmarried people were discriminated in employment and promotion, had limited access to various social benefits. Childbearing was obligatory. From 1941 till 1992 childless men from 20 to 50 years old and childless married women from 20 to 45 years old paid a tax to the state (about 6% of a salary). In such a way young people were forced to bear children right after marriage (non-married childbearing wasn't approved).

The breakup of the USSR brought many changes in the everyday life of Russians. All transformations which were ripening during the post-World-War-Two period became possible with the change of the political regime in Russia. After 1991, Russians felt much more freedom to realize their own plans in all spheres of life. It led to shifts in the timetable of life, the structure of reproductive and matrimonial calendars. People started to pay more attention to their career and other ways of self-actualization, postponing childbearing and family making. The desire for quality increased in all spheres, which affected the period for selecting partner (Demographic modernization 2006).

The investigations of leading Russian demographers show changes in reproductive, matrimonial, and sexual demographic behaviour.

### *1.1. Reproductive behaviour*

The decrease of fertility started in Russia in the 1960s. Russia's total period fertility rate (TPFR or TFR) was about 2 children per woman, which was one of the lowest indicators among 40 industrial countries in 1968 (Vishnevsky and Zakharov, 2009, p. 26-27). After a set of policy measures there was a short-term increase. It touched 2.23 in 1987. However, fertility decreased and reached a low in 1999 (1.16 children per woman). A new set of policy measures promoted the increase of TFPR from 1.30 to 1.57 births per woman between 2006 and 2010 (Frejka and Zakharov, 2012, p.4).

The real female cohort fertility (total cohort fertility rate, TCFR) measures not the common period trend for all population as TPFR does, but actual fertility trends for each cohort. Therefore, TCFR is much more accurate indicator of fertility than TPFR (Vishnevsky and Zakharov, 2009, p. 29-31). TCFR remained stable at around 1.85 children per woman for cohorts of the 1950s and a bit less for the next one. For the 1970s birth cohort and possibly for the 1980s one TCFR is around 1.6 (Frejka and Zakharov, 2012, p.4).

Using the TPFR measurement (period perspective), the birth rate has been stably lower the replacement level (2.1 children per woman) during the last 20 years. Using the TCFR measurement (cohort perspective), the birth rate has been no more than 1.9 children per woman during the last half century. These quantitative changes became a reason of qualitative transformations of people's views, aims, and values. Personal freedoms of people were extended, the relation to a childbearing changed. Childbearing ceased to be an ordered duty of a person and turned into one of personal choice.

### *1.2. Matrimonial behaviour*

With fluctuations of the Russian social and cultural environments, family and marriage institutions are becoming more differentiated; new forms of legitimate partnerships appear. The focus of the family unit was, in soviet times, subsumed into government aims. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union the family unit became a part of the social and psychological needs of individuals. In this new context a tolerant reaction to divorces is forming; the relationships between men and women become more egalitarian. Moreover, with the expansion of career, educational, and social opportunities, women no more perceive marriage as the only way of successful self-realization.

A new stage of marital relations started after the mid-1990s in Russia. The increase of the partner selection period led to a postponement of the first marriages along with a decrease of a total marriage intensity. Younger generations, born and socialized in modern Russia, prefer unofficial relationships (cohabitations, informal partnerships, “unregistered marriages”, and consensual unions) to the traditional registered marriages as the first unions. After the “trial” period of cohabitation couples usually get married (Vishnevsky and Zakharov, 2009, p. 39-41).

### *1.3. Sexual behaviour*

Between the 1960s and the 1990s the median age of the first sexual experience of Russians decreased and since the 1990s it has stabilized at around 16 years (Con 1997). Owing to changes in parental views, teenage sexuality has become more accepted. The tolerant relation of adults induces young men and women to assume responsibility for the consequences of their acts. Extending practice of cohabitations instead of marriages leads to growth of non-marital birth rate. The notion that mothers of extramarital children are single is not correct. The majority of these mothers have a shared household with the child's father. Furthermore, every third child, who was born in cohabitation, appeared in a repeat union (Vishnevsky and Zakharov, 2009, p. 44-48).

The proportion of women at the matrimonial peak (20-35 years old) with children who were unmarried has increased since the 1990s (Vishnevsky and Zakharov, 2009, p. 43). This change can be interpreted as a sign that an unplanned pregnancy has ceased to be a sufficient reason for registration a relationship. It means that the attitude to premarital sexual behaviour is changing.

The signs of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) in Russia are become apparent. It finds a reflection not only in changes of quantitative parameters of people's behaviour, but also in deep qualitative transformations of the relations between people. With the appearance of widely available contraception people have an opportunity to control the timetable. With changes of social discourse and environment they can use this opportunity and live in accordance with their own aims and values.

The key characteristic of modernization of the reproduction sphere is the separation of the matrimonial, reproductive and sexual behaviours. There are many investigations which provide many proofs of the Second Demographic Transition in Russia but there is now no empirical proof of separation of the reproductive, matrimonial, and sexual behaviour. In our research we will focus on this aspect of demographic change.

## 2. The background of the research

The background of the research was formed by the influence of socio-demographic theories of the Second Demographic Transition, life course, age, and generation. The theory of the Second Demographic Transition was put forward by Ron Lesthaeghe and Dirk Van de Kaa as the concept explaining the demographic development in Europe which started in the late 1960s (Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa, 1986; van de Kaa 1987, 1994; Lesthaeghe 1992). During the last half of 20<sup>th</sup> century the demographic behaviour in almost all developed countries changed in compliance with trends noticed and systematized by Lesthaeghe, Van de Kaa, and successors. The main shifts concerned the family formation and childbearing are (Puur et al. 2012):

- the first marriage and the birth of the first child is postponed;
- marriage and fertility rates decreased considerably;
- the transition from direct marriage to cohabitation became the dominant pathway to family building;
- a non-marital childbearing increased to unprecedented levels.

The concepts of life course, temporary trajectories of individuals, and age group dynamics are presented in papers by Blossfeld (2001), Glenn (1977), Elder (1995), Hareven (1978), Heinz (1991a, 1991b, 1992), Rosenmayer (1979), and Krecker (1984). Life course is a relatively new definition for Russian sociology and demography. This term incorporates status changing choices of individual which reflect all the variety, mobility, and dynamics of behaviour strategies typical for modern people.

Changes in the approach to studying generations during the last few decades is reflected in Mannheim's theory of generations (1952), as well as the studies by Mead (1970), and Ryder (1968). The concept of generation is quite well developed by scientists. There is a set of longitudinal research projects, biographical studies of the behaviour of generations in several countries. Studies of life course, actual behaviour, norms and values of different generations are only increasing in Russia.

Nowadays there are a few projects devoted to changing demographic behaviour of Russian generations. This paucity occurs because of a lack of a qualitative empirical material which can be processed by modern methods of statistical analysis. In our work we reduced this gap, analyzing the data of a large representative Russian survey by Event History Analysis.

## 3. Research methods and data

Marriage, cohabitation, and childbirth are processes developing in time. Investigations of processes and events depending on time have been carried out by modern statistical methods within several decades. The most widespread and convenient method for analysis of interconnected time spans is Event History Analysis (EHA). EHA is a non-parametric method, where the "risk" of experiencing an event at a certain time point is predicted with a set of covariates. In spite of standard regressions, EHA allows us to deal with censored observations (when observations contain only partial information on the timing of an event) and with time-variable covariates (Buchmann 1989; Lillard 1993; Blossfeld 2001). These advantages make possible to perform a truly dynamic analysis.

Our analysis of long-term changes in Russian family formation is based on empirical data from the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS)<sup>1</sup>. Using these data, we constructed matrimonial biographies for all respondents of the panel, then combined respondents into generations, and finally compared and analyzed the life paths of the obtained groups by EHA. In our research we analyzed only the first reproductive and matrimonial events, because this localization allows us to see the essential difference among family strategies of different generations. This analysis made it possible not only to understand the reasons for the distinctions between generations but also to predict trends and ways of further changes in the reproductive, matrimonial, and sexual spheres of current Russian generations.

#### 4. Results

Based on panel data of the Russian Generations and Gender Survey, we constructed 7,786 matrimonial biographies for respondents born between 1923 and 1987. We used a 10-year intergenerational lag; therefore, we analyzed 7 cohorts. Our generational and gender structures are congruent with the age and gender structures of the Russian population (see Figure 1). More than a half of our sample is presented by middle age generations. The ratio of women to men in the sample is 66%.

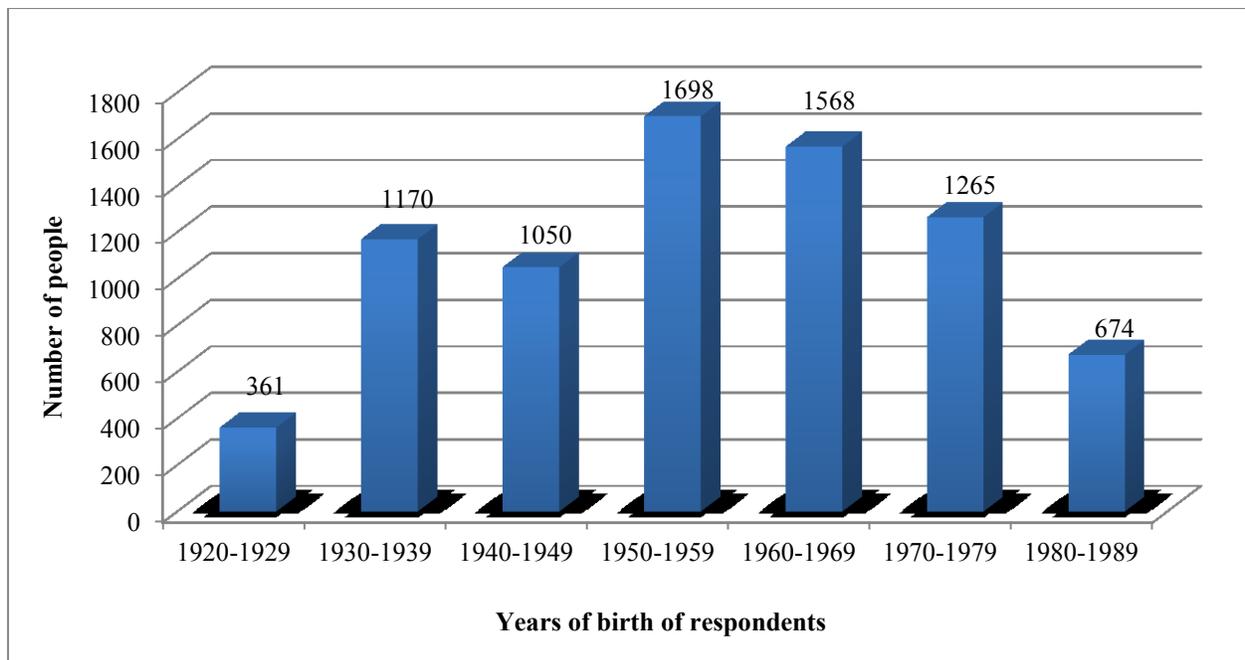


Figure 1. Generational structure of the sample.

Source: author's own data set drawn from the Russian GGS-1 and GGS-2.

<sup>1</sup> The Russian part of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) "Parents and Children, Men and Women in Family and in Society" is an all Russia representative panel sample survey. Two waves of Russian GGS were conducted by Independent Institute for Social Policy in 2004 and 2007.

For additional information see: <http://www.demographic-research.org/volumes/vol17/14/>

To investigate the probability of the birth of the first child, we have experimented with several regression models including Cox regressions and the Kaplan-Meier method. There are two Cox hazard models for situations of the birth of the first child after the formation of the first union (marriage and cohabitation). Premarital conceptions are excluded.

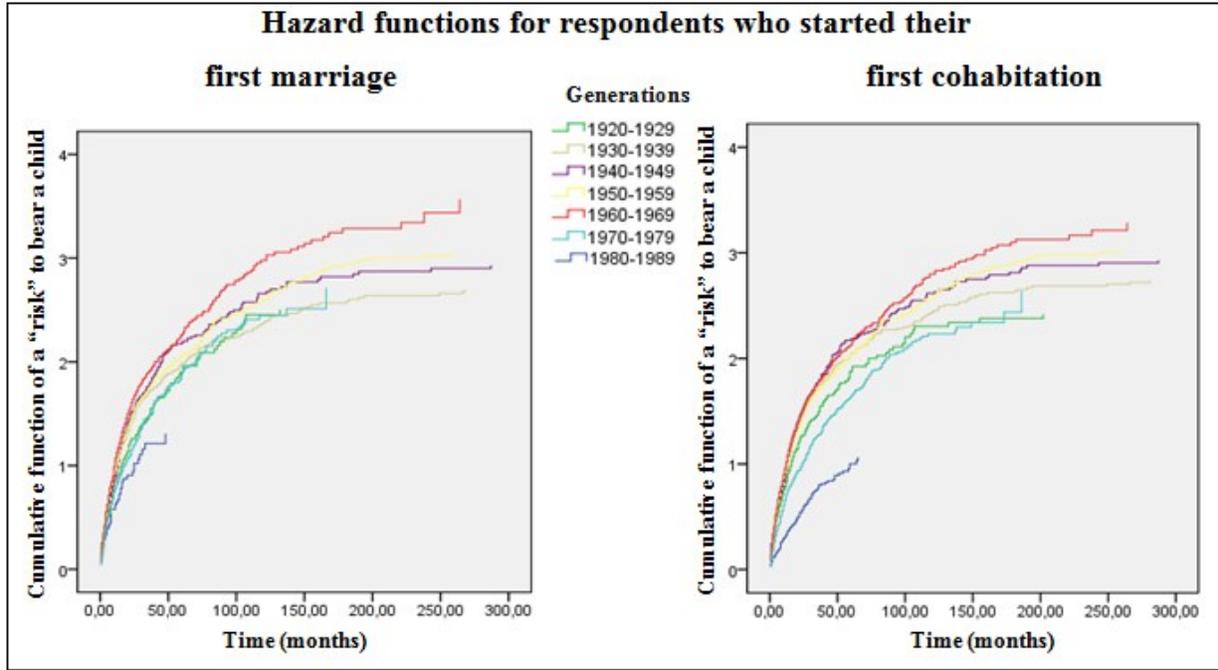


Figure 2. Intergenerational hazard rates of the birth of the first child after the first union formation.

Source: author’s own data set drawn from the Russian GGS-1 and GGS-2.

As we can see in Figure 2, probability of the birth of the first child increases with time for all generations. Nevertheless, hazard rates are different. Younger cohorts have less probability to bear the first child compared to all previous generations.

One of the reasons for these results is that not all representatives of the generations from 1970-1979 and 1980-1989 birth years have reached their conjugal and reproductive events. However, Cox regression allows us to work with censored data and to make some conclusions about common trends in demographic behaviour of people who grew up in post-soviet Russia.

We applied the Kaplan-Meier method and estimated intervals between the formation of the first matrimonial union and the conception of the first child for 50% of respondents (premarital conceptions are also excluded).

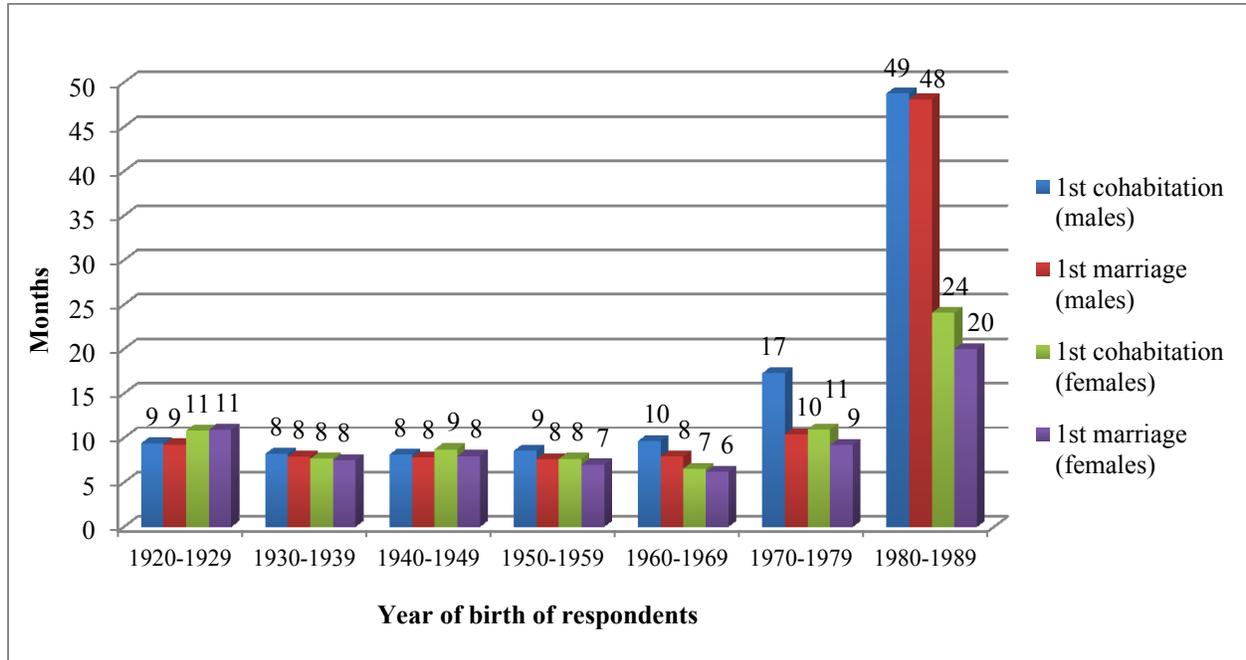


Figure 3. Average number of months from the formation of the first matrimonial union until the conception of the first child for 50% of respondents.

Source: author’s own data set drawn from the Russian GGS-1 and GGS-2.

As we can see in Figure 3, the reproductive behaviour of younger cohorts considerably differs from all previous generations. Young men of the 1980-1989 birth cohort exhibit a 4-year delay in fatherhood in their first matrimonial union. For comparison, their predecessors decided to have a child approximately in the 9 month period following the first marriage or cohabitation. The growth of this interval for young women is twice lower than for men. What are the reasons for these intra- and intergenerational discrepancies?

The matrimonial behaviour of the youngest generation is less connected with reproduction than it was during the previous 50 years. Youth perceive the first relationship as an interpersonal experience and, as we can see, do not hurry to have children. Moreover, men have less reproductive intentions than girls. It can be explained by the more conformist values of girls, who tend to be like their mothers, who have their own fully fledged family with children. Nevertheless, we observe the glaring postponement of childbearing during the first matrimonial union. It means that both genders’ demographic behaviours are changing. For extended analysis we included premarital conceptions and estimated protogenetic intervals for both cases: with and without premarital conceptions (see Figure 4).

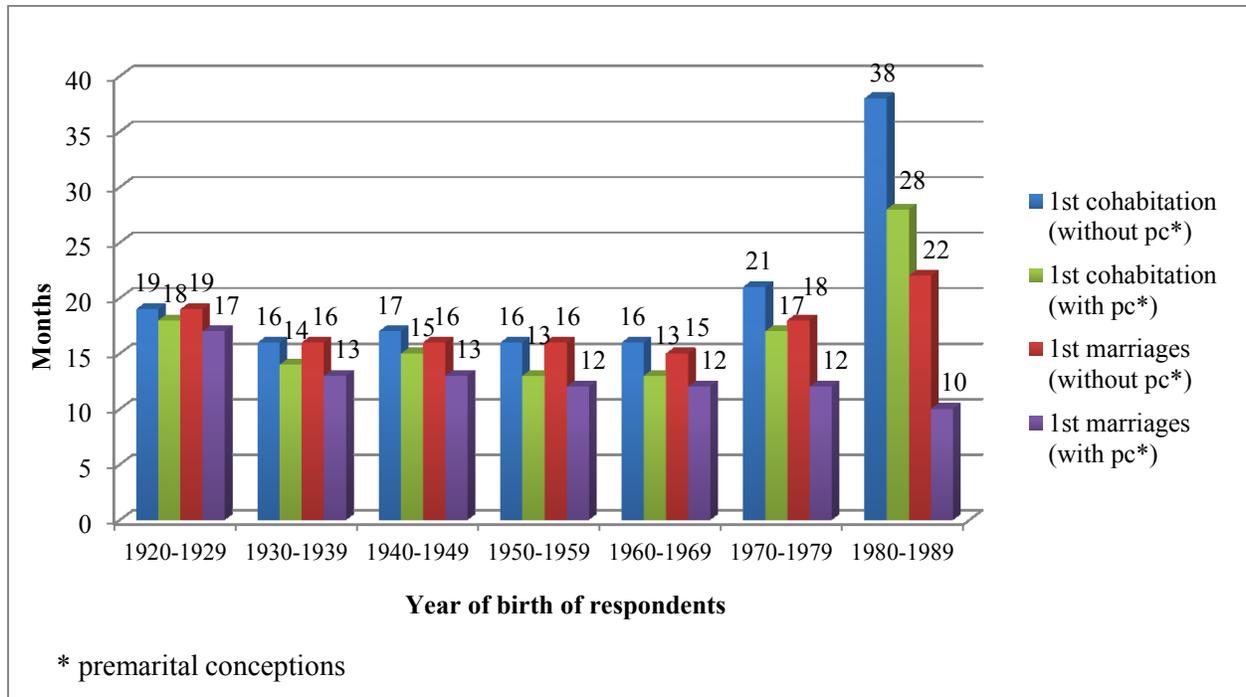


Figure 4. The average number of months from the formation of the first matrimonial union until the birth of the first child for 50% of respondents (with and without premarital conceptions). Source: author’s own data set drawn from the Russian GGS-1 and GGS-2.

The bar chart illuminates how strikingly the demographic behaviour of the youngest generations differs from their parents and grandparents. Cohorts from 1970-1989 birth years demonstrate a huge increase of protogenetic intervals in comparison with all other generations. However, there are not only intergenerational changes. Depending on the type of matrimonial union, young people also behave in different ways. Our results show that cohabitation is less connected with reproduction than marriage, and this tendency accrues over time.

Moreover, in Figure 4 we can clearly see the separation of the matrimonial, reproductive, and sexual behaviour. Cohabitation is not a marginal phenomenon in Russia anymore, as well as extramarital births. Births and marriages can occur independently from each other.

The meaning of the first matrimonial union is changing. More often it is not a marriage but cohabitation without children (especially for young men). Sometimes it is a “trial marriage”, if partners register their relationship after living together. However, modern people often have new cohabitations after the first one. It means that they perceive the first unions as an opportunity for getting experience in the sexual sphere, instead for reproduction or “family-making”.

One possible way of family formation is being replaced by a variety of strategies in the reproductive, matrimonial, and sexual spheres. Life course of young people became more flexible, diverse, and self-customizable. There are no more rigid norms, which were previously uniform for the whole population during a minimum of 50 years of the last century. Modern people are able to choose their own unique life path and fill it with events which correspond to their values and needs.

## 5. Practical implications

The precise information about values and behaviour of different generations is very important and useful when creating the state and corporate policy. If we understand the needs, motivations and plans of people, we can offer them more suitable goods and services.

Analysis of demographic behaviour lets us to specify demographic and family policy, to forecast the calendar and intensity of births, to target the marketing policy of companies, and to estimate and predict future demands and trends.

Results from this research show the transformation of demographic behaviour. The model of family formation is changing. The youth are more free and mobile than their parents were. They want and are able to travel, develop, look for their place in society and look for their one and only partner. Today the requirement for quality is raised in all spheres of life, as well as in private life. We have the whole world and an unlimited number of attempts to find the person we really want to be with.

All these features of the youngest generation form a new image of a customer and an actor. Young people prefer to get education and job experience before family formation. It provides a large amount of mobile, creative, easily trained, and highly educated specialists. They have different motivations than other employees and need not only monetary stimuli but also a strong intangible motivation as well.

As customers, the youth are not as pragmatic as their parents. They need fun and activity. Gadgets, travels, sport activity, “third places” are things really interesting for them. Young people are still too childish to make their own family. That is why protogenetic intervals are so high.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper investigates changes to first demographic events in the life course of Russian cohorts between the 1930s and the 1980s. We used advanced methodological tools and the most recent data: we constructed matrimonial biographies of Russian generations out of two waves of a representative Russian survey, and analyzed life paths by Event History Analysis.

We revealed an enormous shift in protogenetic intervals of the first order, which younger generations exhibit in comparison with previous ones. Our results correspond to the theory of the Second Demographic Transition and represent the first empirical proof of the separation of the matrimonial, reproductive, and sexual behaviour in post-soviet Russia.

All these changes became possible due to change of time, state purposes, values, and public discourse. The youngest cohort not only has prevalent and available contraception but also a wider range of possibilities to realize their intentions. There are no more strict rules prohibiting practices of living together or having children without an official registration of a relationship. This democratization of social norms has made it possible for modern people to build their own reproductive and matrimonial calendars. Thus, the demographic aspect of life courses has become more flexible, self-customized, and diverse.

## References

1. Blossfeld, H.-P., Rohvver, G. (2001). Techniques of event history modeling. New approaches to causal analysis. 2. Auflage. Mavvah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
2. Con, I.S. (1997). Sexual culture in Russia: Cheesecake on a birch. Moscow: O.G.I.

3. Demographic modernization of Russia, 1900-2000. (2006). Edited by A. Vishnevsky. Moscow: Novoye Izdatel'stvo.
4. Elder, G.H. (1995). (Ed.) Life course dynamics. Trajectories and transitions, 1968-1980. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
5. Frejka, T., Zakharov, S. (2012). Comprehensive Analyses of Fertility Trends in the Russian Federation during the Past Half Century. MPIDR WORKING PAPER WP 2012-027 SEPTEMBER 2012. Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research.
6. Glenn, N.D. (1977). Cohort Analysis. Newbury Park/London/New Delhi: Sage Publications.
7. Hareven, T.K. (1978). (Hrsg.) Transitions: The Family and the Life Course in Historical Perspective. New York: Academic Press.
8. Heinz, W.R. (1991a). (Hrsg.) The Life Course and Social Change: Comparative Perspectives. Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag.
9. Heinz, W.R. (1991b). (Hrsg.) Theoretical advances in life course research. Weinheim: Deutscher Studienverlag.
10. Heinz, W.R. (1992). Institutions and gatekeeping in the life course. Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag.
11. Kertzer, D.I., Keith, J. (1984). (eds.) Age and Anthropological Theory. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
12. Lesthaeghe, R. (1992). The Second Demographic Transition in Western Countries: an Interpretation.
13. Lesthaeghe, R., Van de Kaa, D. J. (1986). Twee Demografische Transitie's? In: R. Lesthaeghe and D. van de Kaa (eds.) Groei of Krimp. Deventer, Van Loghum-Slaterus.
14. Mannheim, K. (1952). The Problem of Generations. in: Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul LTD.
15. Mead, M. (1970). Culture and Commitment. A Study of Generation Gap. London: The Bodley Head.
16. Puur, A., Rahnu, L., Maslauskaitė, A., Stankuniene, V., Zakharov, S. (2012). Transformation of Partnership Formation in Eastern Europe: The Legacy of the Past Demographic Divide. Journal of Comparative Family Studies. Vol. 43 (3).
17. Rosenmayer, L. (1979). Age, Life Span and Biography. London, N-Y: Tavistock Publications.
18. Ryder, N.B. (1968). Cohort Analysis. The international Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. Vol. 2. Office of Population Research.
19. The Demographic Argument in Soviet Debates Over the Legalization of Abortion In the 1920s. (1992). Cahiers du Monde Russe et Sovietique. №7.
20. Van de Kaa, D. J. (1987). Europe's Second Demographic Transition. Population Bulletin. Washington, Vol. 42 (1).
21. Van de Kaa, D. J. (1994). The Second Demographic Transition revisited: theories and expectations. In G. C. N. Beets et al. (eds.) Population and Family in the Low Countries. Lisse, Swets and Zeitlinger.
22. Vishnevsky, A., Zakharov, S. (2009). Growth of Fertility: the Start of a Road with Distant Horizons. Russia Facing Demographic Challenges. National Human Development Report. Russian Federation 2008. Moscow: UNDP. Available at: [http://www.undp.ru/documents/NHDR\\_2008\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.undp.ru/documents/NHDR_2008_Eng.pdf)