

CHANGING FERTILITY PATTERNS IN EUROPEAN POSTCOMMUNIST COUNTRIES

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Abstract: During last ten years there occurred rapid changes in the character of fertility in Central and Eastern European countries. The principal features of these changes were drop in the fertility level, changes in the fertility structure according to age of mother and increase in the extra-marital fertility. There emerged many explanations for current changes in the reproductive behaviour of population, which can be basically divided into two main categories: the effects of the free choice and the effects of economic and social crisis. Although the level of fertility in all European postcommunist countries dropped, the more detailed data indicate increasing heterogeneity in fertility patterns between Central and Eastern European countries as the fertility patterns in many Central European countries are drawing closer to the Western European patterns.

Keywords: fertility, demographic development, Central Europe, Eastern Europe

1. INTRODUCTION

Dissolution of communist regimes in Central and Eastern European countries brought not only deep political, social and economic changes but also changes in basic components of population development, in mortality, nuptiality, fertility and migration. The intensity of changes in fertility patterns, especially in the fertility level, was surprising for all demographers. At the end of the 1980's, even the most "visionary" population projection-makers did not expect such steep and sudden fall of the fertility level as occurred through European postcommunist countries during the 1990's. As in 1985 Central and Eastern European countries were those with the relatively high level of fertility compared to Western Europe, since 1995 these are together with Spain and Italy the countries with the lowest level of fertility in the world. This unexpected situation

sometimes even called a "demographic crisis" or "demographic shock" (Eberstadt 1996, Dorbritz 1994) erased many questions, which I will try at least briefly deal with: What are the causes and consequences of current fertility changes? Are these changes similar to those in Western Europe after mid 1960's? Is the division of Europe's fertility patterns to the East and the West fertility patterns disappearing or only being somewhat modified?

2. REGIONAL DIVISION AND DATA APPROACH

For the purpose of the study of fertility change, I divided postcommunist countries into four regions, excluding the republics of former Yugoslavia (except Slovenia), where the demographic development was influenced by the war and for which we do not have accurate data. Although this division is little simplifying, it allows us to analyse development of fertility in all former "Eastern bloc" countries. The group of Central European countries is the most heterogeneous group including the Czech Republic, former GDR (East Germany), Hungary, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia. The other group of "South-eastern" European countries includes Bulgaria and Romania and the third group called "Baltic Republics" stresses Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The last group, called "Postsoviet republics" includes Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. The synthetic indicators for these countries or for the whole Central and Eastern Europe are arithmetic means of corresponding demographic rates or indicators. The values for the Western Europe are calculated for the all members of European Union except Greece, Ireland and Luxembourg and for Switzerland. Most data used for fertility analysis come from the publication 'Recent demographic developments' (1993, 1997, 1998).

3. FERTILITY PATTERNS IN THE 1980'S

After the World War Two, there were no uniform patterns of fertility in Central and Eastern Europe. The existence of almost identical political regimes with similar laws concerning abortions, family and social policy brought increasing homogeneity of fertility patterns. Liberalisation of induced abortions in the second half of the 1950's, increasing pressure on women participation in the so-called "labour process", establishing of similar social and family policies and occasional pronatalist measures, especially in 1970's, were alongside urbanisation, modernisation and secularisation, the most important causes of fertility changes in European communist countries. So we can identify typical East European fertility pattern in the mid-1980: the total fertility rate was close to 2,0 children per woman, being only slightly below the population replacement

level. Most women had their first child at relatively young age between 19 and 24 years and usually shortly after the first child followed the birth of the second child. Some countries, i.e. Bulgaria and Hungary experienced very high fertility rates of teenage women. An ideal family size was family with two children. Only a small proportion of women remained childless, few women had only one child and decreasing number of women gave birth to more than two children, although state population policy was often intended for encouraging the third order births. Large families remained more common only in countries with high proportion of rural population (Poland, Moldova) or in Romania, where the strict prohibition of abortions together with the ban of contraceptives forced women to have at least four or five children. As the availability and the choice of modern contraceptives were low in most communist countries, induced abortions often served as a drastic form of ex-post contraception.

The proportion of the extramarital births was lower than in Western Europe, being between 5 and 15 percent, with the exception of former GDR (German Democratic Republic) and Estonia, where it exceeded 20 percent. The extra-marital births usually occurred to women without stable partnership as housing and social policy favoured traditional family against consensual unions (again with the exception of the East Germany and Estonia).

4. THE FALL IN THE FERTILITY LEVEL DURING THE 1990'S

The persistent decrease of the total fertility in Western Europe, which began at the end of the 1960's continued until the mid 1980's, when the average level of the total fertility rate (TFR) was stabilised around 1,6 children per one woman in the reproductive age. The fertility of women in Eastern Europe stayed relatively high and stable till 1988, when the average TFR was still slightly above 2,0 children per one woman. Only in some Central European countries - Hungary, Slovenia and the former GDR, the total fertility rate decreased already in the mid-1980. Since the end of the 1980's was the level of fertility in all European postcommunist countries dropping intensively. In 1992, the average TFR in the Central and Eastern Europe was already the same as in the Western Europe (1,64) and in 1996 the previous situation was inverted: Central and Eastern Europe experienced distinctively lower level of the TFR (1,31 in the average) than Western Europe (1,55), as is shown in the Fig. 1. Unexpected fall in the fertility level was the most intensive in the former GDR, where the TFR reached in 1994 extremely low value of 0,77. Such an abrupt and precipitous drop in fertility is unprecedented for an industrialised society during peacetime. In the past, human population has on occasion experienced sudden and dramatic reductions of childbearing of comparable proportion, but only during times of catastrophe, desperate privation, and widespread loss of life (Eberstadt 1994). In 1996 and 1997 the European postcommunist countries together with Spain had the lowest levels of fertility in the world, especially the former GDR (TFR 1,02 in 1997) Bulgaria (1,09 in 1997), Latvia (1,11 in 1997) and

the Czech Republic (1,17 in 1997). The highest level of the TFR in Eastern Europe, 1,60 in Moldova (1996) was almost equal to the average TFR in Western Europe. Such low levels of fertility already evoked need for studying the "lowest low fertility" while in the past only high fertility was concerning interest of many demographers.

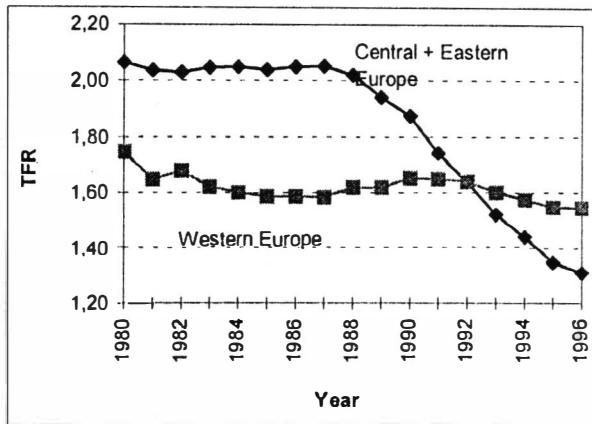


Fig. 1 Development of total fertility rate in Eastern and Western Europe 1980-1996

Source: Recent Demographic Developments in Europe 1993, 1998

5. CHANGES IN THE MEAN AGE OF MOTHER AT CHILDBEARING

The low age at childbearing alongside the higher total fertility was the most important factor dividing "East" and "West" fertility patterns. In Western Europe the average age of mothers began to rise during the 1970's, while in the Eastern European countries remained stabilised between 24 and 26 years till the end of the 1980's. The difference between communist countries and Western European countries thus increased. Eastern European mothers were in average by 1,8 years younger than those in Western Europe in 1980, and already by 2,9 years younger in 1990, when the mean age of mother at childbearing in the Western Europe rose to 28,3 years, while in Eastern Europe it was 25,4 years. The development in the mean age of mother at childbearing during the 1990's was different in individual Central and Eastern European regions. In Central Europe (with exclusion of the Slovak Republic), women started to postpone childbearing as did their Western European counterparts 20 years ago and the average age at childbearing between 1989 and 1997 increased especially in the former GDR, in Slovenia (by 2,0 years) and in the Czech Republic (by 1,7 years). On the other hand in

Romania and in the republics of the former Soviet Union (except the Baltic region) the average age of mothers somewhat decreased. Differentiation in the average age of mothers resulted in the increased heterogeneity of the birth timing in the Central and Eastern Europe (see Fig. 2). In 1996, the average age of mothers at childbearing in the Central Europe, 26,3 years, was still almost 3 years lower than in Western Europe, but mothers in the post-soviet republics were in average even by 4,3 year younger (24,9 years).

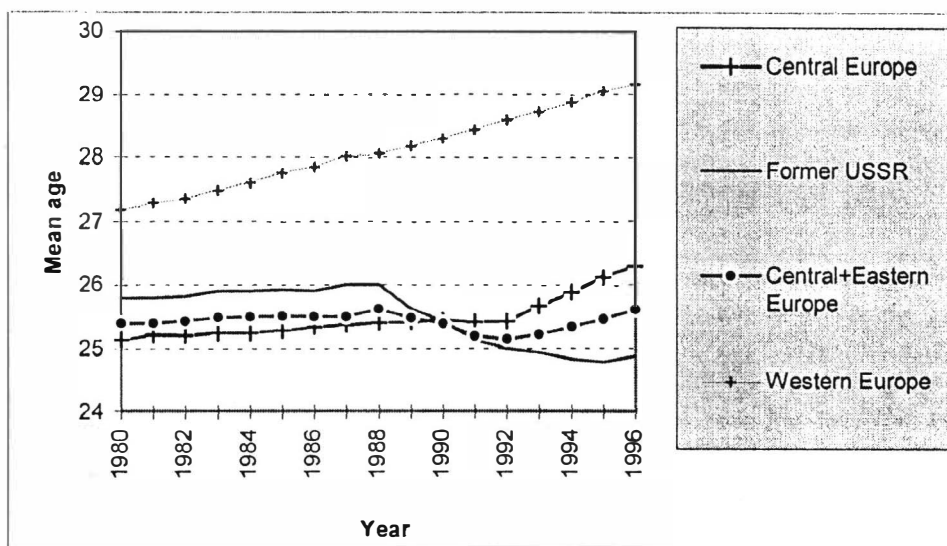


Fig. 2 The mean age of mother at childbearing 1980-1996

Slight decrease in the childbearing age of mothers in some countries was mostly result of changes in the shares of particular birth orders on the total number of children. Due to changed social situation and partly due to economic crisis women in some countries limited especially births of second, third and subsequent children. The share of the first births, given mostly by youngest women, rose and thus caused decrease in the mean age of mother. More accurate analysis of the mean age of woman at birth of the first child indicates often different development than the corresponding figures for all mothers without consideration of the birth rank. In Russia or Moldova the mean age of mother of the first child remained almost unchanged till 1996 (22,8 and 22,2 years), while the mean age of all mothers decreased. In Romania the mean age of mother of the first child increased from 22,4 to 22,9 years between 1990 and 1996, although the mean age of all mothers decreased from 25,5 to 25,2 years in the same period. The accurate data of the mean age of women at the first (biological) birth order are available only for some European countries. These available data indicate mentioned increase in differences between Central and Eastern European countries and persistent differences

between the "East" and the "West" of Europe. While in Western European countries the process of the "fertility ageing" still continues and the mean age of first-time mothers reached 27,5 years in 1995, in Central European countries (appropriate data are only for the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia) it was only 24,3 years in 1997, although by 1,6 years more than in 1990. These countries thus began to follow Western European U-time pattern of change in the mean age of mothers. Women in Baltic states had their first children in average at the age of 23,5 years, in Romania and Bulgaria around 23 years and first-child mothers in Moldova remained youngest, being in average 22,2 years old in 1996.

6. THE INCREASE IN THE PROPORTION OF EXTRA-MARITAL BIRTHS

There was fast growth in the proportion of non-marital births in all postcommunist countries since the end of the 1980's. In some central and east European countries with legislation which did not favour traditional families (especially East Germany, where legislation even favoured women with children living without husband and in Estonia) this proportion was high already in 1980 and then it was rising steadily. Although the role of the traditional family was (and still is) perceived to be rather high in Eastern Europe, atheistic secularisation, pragmatic approach to life and lack of traditional conservative values paved way to rise in the proportion of extra-marital births. As in the past usually only women without steady partner had their children born outside marriage, new family forms became quite common during the past decade. Cohabitation became acceptable not only as a "trial" before the marriage, but also as a substitution of traditional family. The fertility decrease during the 1990's was due to decrease in marital fertility, while nonmarital fertility rose in most countries. As in the Western Europe, current high differentiation of postcommunist countries in the level of extra-marital fertility (Fig. 4) can be explained by different cultural and religious tradition. Countries with high influence of the Catholic Church - Poland, Lithuania and the Slovak Republic, currently have the lowest proportion of non-marital births, between 10 and 15 per cent, similar to Italy, Spain or Switzerland.

On the other hand the former GDR and Estonia with the share of 44 and 52 per cent children being born outside marriage in 1997 are among the countries with the highest share of extra-marital children in Europe (especially all Scandinavian countries). Several other postcommunist countries, Bulgaria, Latvia and Slovenia, reached values of over 30 % of non-marital births in 1997. Although there are only few surveys concerning cohabitation, partnership formation and attitudes towards various family forms, such high values of illegitimate births clearly indicate spreading of cohabitation and alternative family forms.

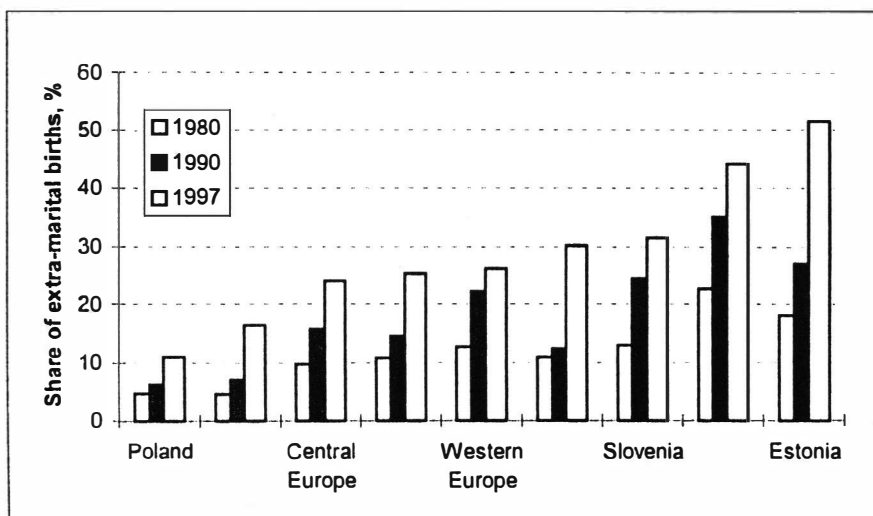


Fig. 3 Proportion of extra-marital births in selected countries and regions 1980, 1990 and 1997

7. CHANGES OF FERTILITY ACCORDING TO BIRTH ORDERS

During the transitional period, two different patterns of birth spacing emerged. In most central European countries, there was postponement of births put across by women without children. From various reasons, they often decided to postpone both their entries into the marriage or steady partnership and the childbearing. Women who already had one children usually continued their "fertility career" having soon the second one. The share of children of the first rank stayed well below 50 % and the total fertility rate of the first rank fell almost to 0,5, while the second-order TFR declined by a much slower shape (see Czech Republic in the Fig. 4). In Southeast European countries (Romania and Bulgaria) and in the successive states of the USSR women reduced more the births of the second children than the first. As the explanation can serve bad economic conditions and widespread poverty in these countries: under these circumstances, women decided to have only one child and to postpone or to not realise the birth of the second. In these countries rose the share of the first births up to 60 percent. While the first-order TFR remained relatively high, the second-order TFR dropped (Romania in Fig. 4).

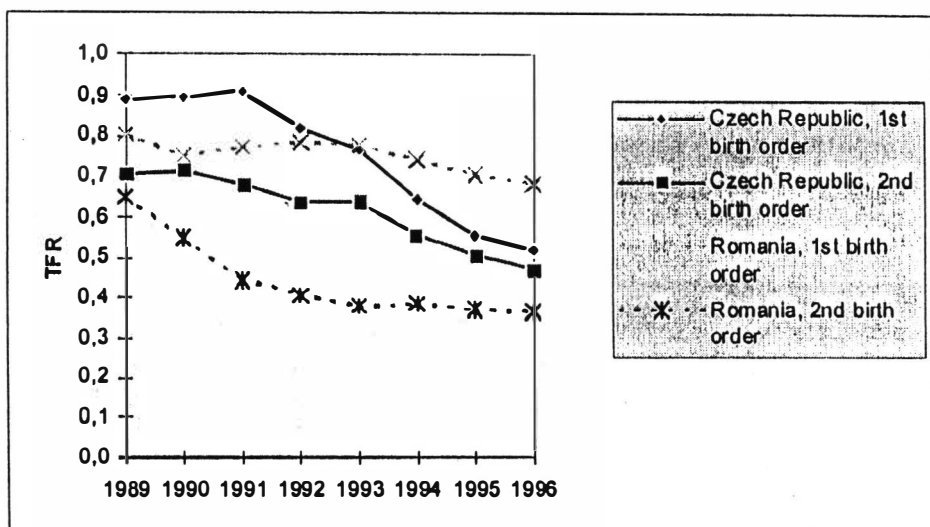


Fig. 4 Total fertility rate of the 1st and the 2nd birth order, Czech Republic and Romania 1990-1996
Sources: Pohyb obyvatelstva 1990-1996, Nascui-vii 1990-1996

8. THE DISCUSSION ON THE CAUSES OF THE FERTILITY CHANGES

Many professionals are divided in explanations of current fertility changes into two streams. Basically, we can divide these streams into the "free choice factor" explanation and the "economic and social crisis" explanation. As the influence of poverty and economic crisis on fertility behaviour in the former Soviet Union and partly also in Romania, Bulgaria and Baltic Republic is without doubt, the discussion is going on in Central Europe. The arguments of the Czech and East German demographers can serve as a good example of this debate.

Firstly the arguments for "the factor of the free choice": the Czech Republic entered the phase of the Second demographic transition, characterised by the long-term reduction of fertility below the replacement level, pluralism of life-styles which leads to the spread of the alternative family forms and the postponement of births to the higher age. New situations created new challenges especially for young people. Differently from the past they can travel where they want, make a career or study at the university. The "escape inside the family" from the outside 'non-free' world is no more needed and the role of the traditional family depreciates. "Creation of democratic space for freedom of individual choice and lifestyle I consider to be the principal reason for demographic changes in our country (Czech Republic)", suggests Rabušic (1997). "The changes in the

character of the Czech demographic reproduction . are results of cultural changes, which crystallised within the young cohorts of population born at the beginning of the 1970's."

The opposite arguments present Rychtaříková (1998): "The abrupt changes in demographic indicators of fertility, but also of nuptiality, indicate the crisis behaviour of inhabitants under conditions which ceased to favour family". She also stresses the importance of housing support for young families.

The influence of both mentioned factors on demographic behaviour is accepted by many demographers. D. Kutsar from Estonia (1999) writes: "New social problems, e.g. unemployment, poverty, social exclusion acquired shape and started to touch numbers of people and households". And on the other hand "Pluralistic attitudes paved the way to alternative family forms, spreading unregistered cohabitation and the relative increase of births out of wedlock as a result. The postponement of marriage turned into norm, similarly to postponement of giving birth of the first child". Conrad et al (1996) writing about the East Germany made remark about "crises, despair over present and the lack of confidence in the future, which can be even perceived as a "pathology of the transformation process"" (Eberstadt 1994) on the one side, and about "increasing range of choices and adaptation to the newly experienced circumstances of the consumer society" on the other side. They mention the "Westernisation" of the fertility behaviour in the East Germany and consider current situation to be a "freezing" - a temporary abstinence from marriage and childbearing as a rational response to sudden change of social environment.

9. SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

As it is not possible to identify single explanatory factor for the shift in fertility behaviour, I consider important to make several remarks. Firstly, the changes in fertility and nuptiality patterns in the Czech Republic, East Germany, Slovenia and partly in Hungary, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Baltic states really show the signs of the Second demographic transition, which began in the Western Europe after 1965. This does not mean, that unemployment, housing shortage, poverty or social stress did not influence reproductive behaviour of population - especially in the republics of the former USSR their influence on the fertility behaviour was dominant.

It is also important to mention the nature of the period data, which are used for the fertility analysis. These indicators overestimate changes in the fertility level in times of parallel changes in the timing of births. When there occurs the postponement of births, the period total fertility rate shows significantly lower level of fertility than will be really reached by particular birth cohorts. The value of the TFR around 1,2 does not mean that the final completed fertility of corresponding birth cohorts will be so low (for the relations between period and cohort fertility see paper of Bongaarts and Feeney, 1998). The period of fertility changes is still so short, that we can not analyse the influence of

these changes on cohort fertility. The study taken in the East Germany (Conrad et al 1996) shows surprisingly fast approximation of the fertility behaviour of the young birth cohorts to West German fertility structures. The 1975 birth cohort could be the first cohort in the East Germany with fertility behaviour similar to their counterparts in the West Germany. When women, who began to postpone the births of their children will start to bear children, the period TFR is likely to get closer to current Western European values, it means at least to the level of 1,5 children per woman.

Some population researchers call for the implementation of pronatalist or at least social and economic measures, which could stimulate the rise of the birth rates. These measures were partly effective under the conditions of socialist greenhouse economy, although they usually created only the short-time "population waves". But in democratic society, no measure can force its members to have more children than they want. (Rabušić 1996).

The extreme low birth rates caused the fear of depopulation in many Eastern European countries. Although all Central and Eastern European countries except Poland and the Slovak republic are currently facing depopulation, this fear is really actual only in countries where the fertility drop occurred at the same time as the worsening of the mortality conditions (especially in the former Soviet Union) and (or) the high emigration rate (Bulgaria, East Germany and Baltic republics). Combination of these two or three factors contributed to the population loss between 6 and 8 percent of total population size since 1989 in Bulgaria (-6,4 % till 1997), East Germany (-7,0 %), Estonia (-7,1 %) and Latvia (-7,5 %), in other countries being the total population decrease less than 3 percent.

10. CONCLUSIONS

The expected effects of current fertility changes on births cohorts of women born since the beginning of the 1970's are following: long-term decrease of fertility under the replacement level, the ageing of fertility, the increasing heterogeneity in the timing of births and also in the ultimate family size - much more women than in the past will be definitely childless or will have only one child.

Although especially Central European countries are in their fertility character approaching to the Western European fertility patterns, there is still persisting difference between the "East" and the "West". While in the past the higher level of fertility reached at much lower age of women was characteristic for the East, now there is lower level of fertility still reached at relatively low age of women.

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Resume

Změny charakteru plodnosti v postkomunistických zemích Evropy

Do konce osmdesátých let byla úroveň plodnosti v zemích střední a východní Evropy vyšší než v západní Evropě, úhrnná plodnost se pohybovala kolem dvou dětí na jednu ženu v reprodukčním věku. Reprodukce se účastnila naprostá většina žen a podíl celoživotně bezdětných žen byl velmi nízký. Jako ideální model rodiny se prosadil model dvoudětné rodiny, jen málo žen se spokojilo s jedním dítětem a stále méně žen chtělo mít více než dvě děti. Plodnost byla realizována převážně ženami ve věku mezi 18ti a 25ti lety, průměrný věk matek při narození dítěte byl o několik let nižší než v západoevropských zemích.

Zatímco v západní Evropě docházelo ke změnám charakteru plodnosti žen již od poloviny 60. let, k výraznějším změnám plodnosti ve východní Evropě dochází až v letech devadesátých, po rozpadu skleníkového prostředí komunistických režimů. Dříve poměrně podobný charakter plodnosti žen se začíná rozrůžňovat, avšak výrazný pokles intenzity plodnosti je charakteristický pro všechny země střední a východní Evropy. Hlavní příčiny změn charakteru plodnosti jsou v různých regionech střední a východní

Evropy odlišné, zároveň se však liší i interpretace těchto změn odborníky v jednotlivých zemích. Jde spíše o důsledek ekonomické krize a ztráty sociálních jistot, nebo je v pozadí změn plodnosti žen spíše změna životního stylu a rozšířené možnosti sebe-realizace mladých lidí?

Přestože stále přetrvává demografické rozdělení Evropy na "východ" a "západ", které se v současnosti projevuje nižší úhrnnou plodností a nižším průměrným věkem matek, především středoevropské země, zčásti však i Pobaltí, Rumunsko a Bulharsko, se začaly charakterem plodnosti přibližovat západní Evropě.