

# **Fertility intentions in lowest-low fertility countries: the case of Italy and Bulgaria**

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## **Short abstract**

Despite the many differences that exist between Italy and Bulgaria, the two countries share with each other both one of the lowest fertility rates in Europe and very low levels of public support of the family. Consequently, in both countries informal supportive networks on the basis of family relationships and kinship have a strong tradition and a high relevance for getting things done. Our purpose is to understand how fertility intentions are formed in these two countries under the consideration that social support seems to be crucial for individuals to reach their fertility goals. Moreover, we aim at evaluating whether the embeddedness in supportive networks exert gender as well as parity-specific influences on fertility intentions. The paper is, therefore, focusing on comparisons of the characteristics of supportive networks in Italy and Bulgaria and their implications on fertility intentions. We use data from the “Gender and Generation Project”, a new comparative survey that was conducted recently in both countries.

## **Extended abstract**

### **Introduction**

Despite the many differences that exist between Italy and Bulgaria concerning the economic system, the historical, religious and cultural background, the two countries share with each other one of the lowest fertility rates in Europe. In Italy, the decline in fertility started long time ago: since the second half of the 1970s - when it reached for the first time the below replacement level - it declined steadily and during the first half of the 1990s it went down to a level of 1,3 children per woman without recovering subsequently. A sharper decline of fertility took place in Bulgaria about 20 years later. Here the Total Fertility Rate declined from 1.9 in 1989 to 1.2 children per woman in 2002.

Fertility is in most cases the outcome of purposeful behavior, i.e. it rests on the formulation of particular fertility-related intentions and situational forces that promote or impede the realization of these intentions by means of proceptive or contraceptive activities (Miller 1994). Therefore the question arises how much the low levels of fertility in Italy and Bulgaria rest on intentions to have small families and/or on intervening situational forces that hinder individuals to have their desired numbers of children. From this point of view the study of fertility intentions in countries with lowest-low fertility, as Italy and Bulgaria, is of importance to understand the determinants of this phenomenon.

The decision to have a first or another child is a decision with long-term consequences that can hardly be known at the period the decision has to be made. Social structures that provide help and support, either by public institutions or by informal networks, may reduce this uncertainty. These structures are stable over a longer period of time and therefore individuals consider future help and support from these institutions or networks in their fertility-related decisions. Consequently, when support from the state is missing, social network play a crucial role. In Italy the lack of a welfare system that supports young families is compensated by strong intergenerational assistance from the family of origin in all the phases of the individual life-course (Dalla Zuanna and Micheli, 2004). Bulgaria is a country under transition. Since the breakdown of the socialist regime in 1989 the Bulgarian society has to face dramatic changes: the introduction of a market economy instead of a centralized one, the change in the political system from one dominant party to a multi-party democracy, dramatic economic crises, a significant raise of inequality, and the fall of the welfare system, which had a universal character at the time of Socialism (UNECE and UNFPA, 2001). However, Bulgaria has a strong tradition of supportive relationships between individuals and households that helped to overcome the permanent shortage of goods and services during socialism and that support individuals in handling the increasing costs and uncertainties in daily life after 1989.

A variety of studies already described the significance of supportive networks in Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary and Russia (Bühler and Philipov 2005, Bühler and Fraczak 2005, Philipov et al. 2004, Philipov and Shkolnikov 2001). However, these studies lead to the question whether network influences on fertility intentions are a local and temporary phenomenon of Central and Eastern European countries or whether their influence is a general one. As in Italy informal supportive networks also play a crucial role in individuals' daily life, a comparative analysis between Bulgaria and Italy can provide a first answer to this question.

### **Theoretical focus**

Intentions are a central part in theories of purposeful reproductive behavior. People act in a goal-oriented manner and these goals are formulated by intentions and cause particular proceptive or contraceptive activities in order to reach the desired goal (Miller, 1994). However, the execution of these instrumental activities is influenced by intervening unexpected factors, such as unintended pregnancies, child mortality, infertility, changing opportunity costs (Bongaarts 2001), which may produce a weak match between fertility intentions and reproductive behavior at the individual level. Consequently, observed levels of fertility are not a random quantity. They are an expression of reproductive intentions and of events that hinder, slow down, or promote their implementation (Quesnel-Vallée and Morgan 2003, Schoen *et al.* 1999). From an analytical point of view, it is therefore sensible to look at the determinants of intentions and of fertility outcomes separately.

Recent studies on Russia, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria show the positive significance of supportive resources located in social networks on fertility intentions (Buehler and Philipov, 2005, Buehler and Fraczak, 2005, Philipov et al. 2004, Philipov and Shkolnikov, 2001). The introduction of the structural perspective of social networks into the study of the influence of cultural and economic factors on fertility decisions in Central and Eastern Europe on the individual level offers new insights. Informal economic help and supportive relationships are viewed as strategies to cope with economic difficulties and to stabilize the economic situation of a house-

hold, which has again positive impacts on household-members' fertility-related intentions. In Italy analyses based on large representative samples about the effect of network support on fertility intentions are still missing. However, we can imagine that the simultaneous presence of strong personal ties to family members and kin (Dalla Zuanna and Micheli, 2004) and the lack of support from the state create the conditions that make the existence of a supportive social network a crucial factor in shaping fertility intentions of the individuals.

As fertility decisions have a prospective character, they involve the evaluation of having access to supportive resources in future. Personal networks are one long-term structural source of supportive resources. This secure or expected future access to resources through personal relationships constitutes an individual's social capital (Bourdieu, 1983). The accessible resources can be of various nature: goods, information, money, influence, power, or active help. However, only resources that support an individual in reaching his/her goals, i.e. that help him/her to meet the costs of particular courses of action, build personal social capital. This applies also to reproductive decision-making. Fertility-related social capital consists of resources that can reduce particular costs of having a child, like child care arrangements, active help in rearing children, or advice and support in the case of problems and conflict. However, also universally utilizable resources, like money, influence, or time, build fertility-related social capital as these resources help to stabilize or to improve an individual's social or economic situation, which has again an impact on his/her fertility related decisions. The latter dimension is of special importance in periods of rapid social and economic as they occurred in Bulgaria as well as in other Central and Eastern European countries.

The goals of the study are the following. First, to understand how fertility intentions are formed in Bulgaria and Italy, two countries that share only the current fertility level and the absence of (or very low) state support to the family. Second, to evaluate whether social capital is a relevant determinant of fertility intentions in both countries. Third, to explore whether the declared intentions to have a first or another child are more consistent with a stabilization of the current levels of fertility in Bulgaria and Italy or whether they indicate a further decline.

## **Data and Research methods**

The data come from the Italian multipurpose household survey on "Family and Social Subjects", carried out in 2003, and from the study "Inquiry on Generations and Genders" for Bulgaria, conducted in 2004. Both surveys are part of the international Gender and Generation project, which aims at a cross-national, comparative, and longitudinal study of the dynamics of the family and family relationships in industrialized countries. Data from both surveys rest on samples that are representative for the particular national populations. The Italian survey provides information about 49,451 respondents of all age groups and the Bulgarian study covers 12,824 individuals aged 18-79.

Both surveys provide in depth information about the compositions of the respondents' social networks, about the exchange relationships of monetary and non-monetary support they are embedded in, and about the respondents' intentions to have a first or another child within the next two years.

The empirical analyses concentrate on gender-specific and parity-specific fertility intentions, i.e. we study the intentions of male and female respondents to have a first

child, second, or third child within the next three years. The explanatory variables consider characteristics of the respondents (age, marital status, education, job condition, characteristics of the job), characteristics of the couple (marriage duration, place of residence, common income) and the size and composition of fertility related social capital in the form of supportive exchange relationships (for example, economic help, child assistance, house work). The analysis will be conducted separately for the two countries.

## Expected findings

Both countries have a weak welfare system, even if due to different reasons. Historically, Italy has received little support from state institutions and has relied more on family support. Bulgaria has quickly passed from a socialist regime to a democratic society; the previous generalized state support to families has collapsed and people had to rely on themselves to cope with their everyday life.

In our view we expect that the differences in family support may also concern the size and the kind of the support. For Italy, non-monetary support, such as child care from people that do not live in the household, can be crucial in fertility related decisions or, perhaps, more influent than monetary support. Despite the cultural changes in the younger generations towards lower fertility rates, reproductive intentions in Bulgaria may be more influenced by the availability of an economic support from the social network.

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