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Low Fertility in East-Central Europe:

The Relative Roles of Values, Economics, and Religion

INTRODUCTION

A core theme among population studies has been the dramatic trend toward reduced fertility. While explanatory theories abound there is no clear consensus on the precise mechanism involved in such a shift. That these fertility declines have emerged as a global phenomenon, across diverse and disparate cultural, political, and economic contexts makes this phenomenon all the more puzzling.

A popular framework has been around beginning in the mid-eighties to explain the fertility declines as they emerged in Northwestern Europe. The Second Demographic Transition proposed that recent declines in childbearing had much to do with changing values and norms regarding family structure and personal ideals. In this rubric, fertility change was the product of the declining institution of marriage, rising ages at both marriage and childbirth, and increased contraceptive use. All of these were couched in a new increasingly post-materialist value orientation.

While this framework has had particular resonance, the question arises as to what extent this theory can lend explanatory value to areas outside of Western Europe. The case of East-Central Europe is one that begs analysis. The dramatic declines in fertility occurring in this region have been both sudden and striking. The role of the changing political structures and accompanying economic shifts has certainly played a complex role in this process.

Although many studies have addressed the declines in fertility, or the second demographic transition more specifically, in relation to specific countries, fewer have sought to make a comparative analysis across broader regions. Such broader analyses may inform this debate in a manner that more localized analysis cannot.

The goal of this analysis is to examine the relative role of specific factors in predicting within-country variance in fertility as it varies by region. The specific explanatory factors will be an index gauging child-specific values, both individual and country-level measures of economic well-being, and the dominant religions. By understanding which factors have the greatest salience in determining fertility, we can better understand which factors would be driving the fertility declines across regions.

Regions have been constructed for comparative analysis. There is a Northwestern region which should be representative of areas conforming to the SDT explanatory framework. For this area I have included the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Great Britain. Although much of East-Central Europe shares a common heritage in the sense of Soviet-era experience and a certain degree of economic difficulty relative to the west, we should expect that there also is a good deal of variation across this broad region regarding religious and cultural forces, their specific roles within the political and historical stage, and their relative positioning to resources as well as proximity to both friend and foe as international conflict played out over recent history. Thus I have created three regions to try and capture some of this differential experience. A Balkan region includes the countries of Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. A Northeast region has been constructed containing Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, and Belarus. Although both of these regions are relatively poor, we

might expect a number of cultural differences. Particularly, the Balkan region has a large Muslim population, while the Northeast offers a larger Catholic population. Another Central region offers a population that has closer similarity to Northwestern Europe. The countries of Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia have a wealthier population on average than their Eastern neighbors, as well as a more similar religious composition to that of Northwest Europe.

DATA AND METHODS

For this analysis I am using the 1999 round of the World Values Survey. This survey is designed to provide a standardized measure of human values and goals for cross-cultural analysis. The survey was administered in over 80 countries, with representative samples of generally about 1000 respondents in each. In addition to a large array of questions on values regarding religion, family, the economy, and politics, there is also a standard module on demographic characteristics of the respondent.

The measure of fertility used as our dependent variable is the total number of children. Value changes will be measured using an index of quality vs. quantity attributes valued in children that is intended to measure the degree to which the qualities desired in a child are of a high-quality and post-modern nature. Income measures include both the respondent's reported household income and a measure of GNI per capita (PPP) in US dollars. Religious indicators are constructed in the form of dummy variables to represent the dominant religions within each region. Additionally the individual income variable has been allowed to interact with the aggregate measures of GNI, and religious status with level of religious dominance. Controls for expected covariates of fertility are included, in particular a control for years of fecundity, since we

are dealing with non-completed fertility in many instances. Also of importance is a control for urban residence, since innovations in fertility patterns are often hypothesized to diffuse from urban to rural areas. OLS regressions will be run on each region separately.

EXPECTED FINDINGS

Preliminary findings suggest that a preference for “child quality” is significantly predictive of reduced fertility in the Balkan and Central regions only. Both Household income and GNI appear only to play a role in the Northeast such that household income is positively associated with fertility in the poorer countries, and negatively in the wealthier countries. Additionally, among the religions Catholicism alone appears as a factor in the Northwest only. Additionally, controls for urban residence are significant in the Balkan and Northeast only. Such findings could be interpreted to indicate that a second demographic transition of sorts is currently diffusing through the more Eastern regions, but has already settled into equilibrium in the Northwest. That urban residence and child quality preferences are more predictive in areas further East is suggestive of this. The apparently small role of income and religion suggests more secular or post-material value orientations may be already driving much of the fertility outcomes.