For the wellbeing of families in Europe, today and tomorrow

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EDITORIAL

This is the first volume of the FAMILYPLATFORM Online Journal.

The overall objective of the FAMILYPLATFORM project is to elaborate a research agenda that addresses fundamental research issues and key policy questions for future research and family policies in Europe. The aim of the project is to improve the well-being of families by understanding future challenges families in Europe will face. FAMILYPLATFORM is not a research project: it addresses research issues and policy questions by reviewing existing research, identifying significant trends and differences between countries, and by exposing research gaps and problems relating to methodology.

This volume, being the first, focuses on broad - but nevertheless - important issues relating to research on families.

The first paper addresses the difficulties of trying to define the family. In everyday life “family” is a commonly used word and everyone seems to understand what the word means. However, the second half of the twentieth century has witnessed major changes in family formation and family behaviour that have resulted in a diversification of family forms. Because of this, it has become more and more difficult to use a general and universally acceptable definition of the family. Concepts and definitions of the family have changed over time, and are used differently in policy formation and in academic literature. The article by Leeni Hansson Toward a Definition of the Family traces changes in the definition of the family both in academic literature as well as in policy formation.

The other purpose of this first volume of the journal, is to give an overview of the major trends in family behaviour in different European countries. In the article Major Trends in Family Behaviour in European Countries, Leeni Hansson addresses issues such as the child leaving the parental home, the choice between marriage and cohabitation, having children, family break-up and “living apart together”. Based on those developments three visions for the future of families are highlighted.
Leeni’s article is followed by short insights on family issues in four European countries that represent different paths and outcomes in the development of the family – Finland, Germany, Italy and Hungary. The article by Marjo Kuronen, Teppo Kröger and Kimmo Jokinen from Finland centres mainly on the drawbacks of the allegedly woman-friendly welfare state, where extensive public day-care is provided, offering possibilities to combine family life and paid work. Ursula Adam, Loreen Beier, Dirk Hofaecker, Elisa Marchese and Marina Rupp describe the incidence of the so-called “middle-class nuclear family”, and the developments leading to this concept in Germany. Carmen Leccardi and Miriam Perego from Italy write about changes in the prevalence of marriage and within the couple itself towards a more equal relationship of women and men. Last but not least, developments in the Hungarian family are described by Zsuzsa Blaskó with reference to other European countries.

We hope that the contributions presented in the first volume of our journal bring to your attention the complexity of issues related to families, and provide you with a better understanding of the similarities and differences in the developments in the institution of the family in different parts of Europe, which is ultimately the aim of our project.

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TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF THE FAMILY?

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The family is one of the basic social institutions, or, as Goode (1964: 4) put it “the only social institution which is formally developed in all societies”. In western culture, the family was traditionally defined in terms of a married couple with children, who shared a common home and divided family related tasks and responsibilities along gender lines (Strong & DeVault, 1993). Despite major changes in many societies that have had a significant impact on family formation and family behaviour, the institution of the family retains its social importance. However, due to these changes in patterns of family formation and the diversification of family forms, it has become increasingly difficult to find a general and universally accepted definition of the family.

In everyday life “family” is a commonly used word and everyone seems to understand what the word means. However, John Peters (1999: 55) has stated that “the term ‘family’ is one of the most misused concepts in the English language” because the word reflects a wide variety of social relationships. Furthermore, concepts and definitions of the family have changed over time.

The goal of this paper is to trace how the definition of the family has changed during the course of the second half of the twentieth century, both in academic literature and in terms of policy formation.

Structure and functions of the family

According to Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (1993), the word “family” derives from the Latin word “familia” that originally meant household, and included the householder and his family members as well as kin and servants. In contemporary usage, the word “family” is most often used to refer to at least two different types of relationships: (1) to related people who live together in the same household - most often a husband, his wife and their child(ren) -, or (2) to a larger circle of
persons – a network of relatives and kin not necessarily confined to one household.

Sociologists focus on two key issues when dealing with the family – the structure of the family, and its functions. The structure refers to the composition of family, i.e. to family members, their positions in the family, such as mother, father, son, daughter, grandfather, grandmother, and to family organisation, i.e. the set of rules that govern patterns of interaction within the family. We can differentiate two main structural types of families: nuclear families and extended families. A nuclear family is composed of two generations, parents and their offspring, while different extended family types are composed of at least three generations, for example parents, their children, grandparents, etc.

The functions of the family refer to the common and essential responsibilities that families fulfil both for society as well as for individual family members. For example, a family universally provides food and shelter, nurture and intimacy, and strategies for managing conflicts for its members. One of the most important functions of the family is the socialisation of children. This process includes raising and educating children, and familiarising them with the traditions and value systems of the community and culture they belong to.

Each society assigns specific roles to the family members. For example, up until the middle of the twentieth century, western countries were characterised by stereotypical attitudes towards family roles: it was assumed that the father was the main provider and instrumental task leader, and the mother was the main carer and homemaker (Scanzoni, 2001). Even today we can find unwritten social norms regarding the ‘proper’ roles of family members.

**Definitions of the family used by social scientists**

The definition of the family in western countries relied on three cornerstones - marriage, sex, and childbearing - up till the 1950s (Allan, Hawker & Crow, 2001). Marriage between a man and a woman was considered the foundation of the family and the only acceptable way of forming a new family. The ideal family type was a nuclear family headed by a man who was permanently married to his wife with the couple living with their common children. Another essential element of the family was a common dwelling place.
The best known definition of the family used in the mid-twentieth century was presented by American anthropologist George Peter Murdock in his study on social structure (Murdock, 1949). Murdock studied a sample of 250 different societies. Based on the results of his study, Murdock came to the conclusion that some forms of family existed in every society, and there was a common pattern that made it possible to formulate a definition of the family. According to Murdock’s definition the family was as follows:

“a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults” (Murdock, 1949: 1-2).

Thus, the definition of the family formulated by Murdock was heteronormative, and characteristic first of all of the marriage based nuclear family. According to Murdock's definition, a single mother with her children or a cohabiting couple, whose sexual relationship was not socially approved in the late 1940s, did not fit into the concept of the family. Murdock also identified what he believed to be the four main functions of the family: sexual, economic, reproductive and educational. These functions were supposed to reproduce the values and norms of the culture and community, and pass these values onto the next generation.

Talcott Parsons (1955) viewed the family as a sub-system within society, with its nature determined by its functions. Similar to Murdock, Parsons defined the family as a unit consisting of a married couple who co-operate in rearing children and who share a common place of residence. Parsons identified two essential functions of the family – socialisation of children and ‘stabilisation of adult personalities’. Parsons also differentiated between gendered parental roles – the father's instrumental role on one side, and the mother's expressive role in the family on the other. Although there are debates as to how prevalent this family type actually was, it was given the label of ‘traditional’ family (Popenoe, 1987) and later the 'standard' family (Scanzoni, 2001).

In the 1960s, Europe experienced far reaching demographic changes, mostly interpreted as responses to major economic developments, changes in the labour market and increasing female employment, and changes in attitudes towards gender roles. Across Europe, fertility and
marriage rates declined and divorce, remarriage and unmarried cohabitation became accepted elements of family life. However, the definitions of the family used in the first half of the 1960s remained ‘traditional’. For example, similar to Parsons, Coser (1964, cited in Peters, 1999) presents a definition of the traditional family as

“A group manifesting the following organizational attributes: It finds its origin in marriage; it consists of husband, wife, and children born in their wedlock, though other relatives may find their place close to this nuclear group, and the group is united by moral, legal, economic, religious and social rights and obligations (including sexual rights and prohibitions as well as such socially patterned feelings as, attraction, piety, and awe)” (Coser, 1964: xvi cited in Peters, 1999: 56).

Besides changes in demographic behaviour, the 1960s were also characterised by increasing tolerance and permissiveness in family life (Jallinoja, 1994). The cornerstones of the family of the 1950s - marriage and sex - were replaced by permissive attitudes towards interpersonal relationships and sex. As a result, marriage was no longer considered a lifelong commitment, and the 1960s were characterised by a considerable increase in rates of divorce and remarriage. Increased permissiveness brought about alternative lifestyle choices like non-marital cohabitation and extra-marital births. These radical changes in family behaviour made it increasingly difficult to define the family using the old touchstones that had formed the foundation of definitions in the 1950s. The model of the traditional family was no longer the only socially acceptable model because of the existence of a great variety of patterns ‘hidden’ behind this one concept (Liljestöm, 2002).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the share of couples characterised by alternative lifestyle choices, i.e. non-married cohabiting couples with or without children, cohabiting homosexual couples, group marriages, communes, etc., increased in many western countries. However, even in the 1970s and 1980s, many family researchers still preferred to use traditional definitions of the family. For example in 1987 Eleanor Macklin still used the traditional definition of the family, similar to those used in the 1950s:

“a legal, lifelong, sexually exclusive marriage between one man and one woman, with children, where the male is primary provider and ultimate authority” (Macklin, 1987: 317).
Soviet family sociology used a definition of the “proper” family, which was based on legal marriage, till the late 1980s; for example, the Dictionary of Sociology defined the family as

“a social institution characterized by whole complex of social norms, sanctions, and modes of behaviour which regulate the relationship between the spouses and among parents and children’ and ‘a small group, founded on marriage or blood relationships, members of which are united by a common household” (Kratkii slovar…, 1988: 301 in Narusk, 1992).

Thus, according to the definitions used by social scientists in the late 1980s, it was still assumed that the family should be based on heterosexual marriage, children, and a common place of residence. A divorced single mother with her children, cohabiting couples with or without children, married couples living in separate households because of geographically separate jobs, and homosexual couples did not qualify as families.

In the 1980s, alternative living arrangements increased in popularity in the majority of European countries. However, these new family forms and living arrangements were still perceived as non-standard or deviant compared to the traditional normative family, or not even families at all by policy makers (Scanzoni, 2001; Jallinoja, 1994).

However, while there were researchers who stuck to the definition of the normative family, there were also others who began to show a growing interest in the plurality of family forms and alternative lifestyle choices. General acceptance of diversity of family forms made it obvious that the definition of the family would expand. In the following statement, Rapoport and his colleagues characterised the changes that had taken place in the family:

“families of today are in a transition from coping in a society in which there was a single overriding norm of what family life should be like to a society in which a plurality of norms are recognized as legitimate and, indeed, desirable” (Rapoport, Fogarty & Rapoport, 1982).

American sociologist Judith Stacey (1996) also described the changes that had taken place in the family as drifting away from the single dominant family model towards an increasing variety of family relationships. Stacey was among the first to state that gay and lesbian families - extremely diverse themselves - had a great role in developing the postmodern family. According to Stacey, it was high-time to start
speaking of the western family as the “postmodern family”. Contrasted to the “traditional family”, the postmodern family was characterised as ambivalent in terms of its gender and kinship arrangements.

By the 1980s, sociologists began to speak of a loosening of the strong marital bonds between husband and wife, and of its diminishing significance as the primary family bond. Instead of marital bond, parent-child relationships became the backbone of the family. Accordingly, based on the new family ideology, James White defined the family as

“an intergenerational social group organized and governed by social norms regarding descent and affinity, reproduction of the young” (White, 1991: 37).

If the common home of a married couple was one of the essential elements of definitions of the family in the 1950s, by the 1980s and 1990s it was not excluded even if family relations were dispersed over several households, and even over several cities or countries.

In European countries, the demographic changes that had had significant effects on the family took place at different times and at different rates (Hantrais & Letablier, 1996; Gauthier, 1996; Hantrais, 2005): there were countries where marriage was no longer a necessary precondition for setting up a family, and there were countries where divorce was not even acceptable in the 1990s. Whether cohabitation was considered a proper setting in which couples could have children or not also varied across countries. In Nordic countries, for example, cohabitation acquired an equal footing with marriage (Liljeström, 2002). Accordingly, it is not a surprise that the definitions of the family provided by Nordic sociologists give a considerably broader picture of the family than traditional definitions, as demonstrated by Norwegian family sociologist Arnlaug Leira:

“Usually, the term ‘family’ refers to at least two persons, either two adults who share bed and table, as a Norwegian expression goes, or one or more adults who take parental responsibility for one or more children. It may also refer to one or more adult child(ren) who share(s) a household with his/her parent(s)” (Leira, 1996).

Thus, according to Leira’s definition, different family forms can include males and females regardless of whether they are married or have children, and they can include women or men cohabiting with a partner
of the same sex regardless of whether they have children or not, and even include people who live with siblings or non-related others.

In the 1990s, there was increasing recognition that the definition of the family needed to be more inclusive and less restrictive. Theresa Rothausen defined the family as

“a group of people who are interested in one another due to dependence, obligations or duty, love, caring, or cooperation” (Rothausen, 1999: 819).

Thus, in Rothausen’s definition, the concept of the family is expanded to include individuals who are not necessarily tied by marriage and reproduction, but also those who are tied by love and caring functions.

In 1990, Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein published a book titled *What is Family?* that was deeply critical of traditional family sociology. The main point of the book was to reject the concept of “the family” and to begin to develop a concept of the process associated with ‘being a family’. Gubrium and Holstein’s ideas were later supported by several family sociologists. Diana Gittins (1993) suggested that due to major changes in family structure, it would be more appropriate to use the term “families” than “the family”. Even today there are different opinions as to what the family is or should be. The majority of definitions coming out of the late 1990s had one thing in common – concepts of the family were no longer strictly related to marriage. Indeed, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) pointed out that few institutions changed in the last decades of the twentieth century more than the family.

**Definitions of the family in official use**

The way the family is defined by the state determines what rights and responsibilities are recognised and expected by legal and other social institutions (Skolnick, 1981). European countries recognise the family as an important social institution and the majority of countries have adopted different policy measures designed to protect and support the family. However, whether these measures are targeted at one particular type of family or to all families depends on how the family is defined by the policy makers. For example, in countries with strong Roman Catholic beliefs and where marriage is still considered a defining feature of the family some of the policies could easily be targeted at the ‘standard’ family only (Hantrais & Letablier, 1996).
Besides family policies and different social policies, official definitions of the family are needed to conduct population censuses. Over the course of the last few decades, definitions of the family used in censuses have also changed. For example, the definition of the family proposed by the United Nations in 1974 for use in population and housing censuses was based on marriage as the main defining criterion for the family (Hantrais, 2005). In UN recommendations for population and housing censuses published twenty years later, reference to marriage as a defining characteristic of a family was replaced by reference to ‘cohabiting partners’ (UNECE, 1998: 191).

Whilst acknowledging that significant changes have taken place in the institution of the family, it is easier for policy makers to target measures at the traditional marriage based family. In only a few countries are non-marital cohabiting couples legally registered and considered to be families. Accordingly, Moen and Schorr (1987) proposed that rather than using a universal definition of the family, it would be more appropriate to define the family according to the particular issues involved. They suggested that when dealing with issues of child support the use of a definition including households with children is most appropriate, and when dealing with property settlements of cohabiting adults the use of a definition that includes intimate primary relationships would be more useful. Thus, in designing new policy measures, policymakers have to adjust to a diversity of the family forms.

In 2002, the European Commission Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs published a research report from 15 EU member states, plus Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway (Family Benefits..., 2002), which revealed two categories of countries. First, there were countries which made a clear distinction between the concept of ‘family’ and ‘household’. In these countries a sociological and legal value was attributed to the term ‘family’, and an economic value to the term ‘household’. The group of countries with clear distinction between the two concepts consisted of southern European countries plus the United Kingdom. The other group of countries either made no distinction between the concepts of ‘family’ and ‘household’, or used only the term ‘household’. However, definition of the family - where it was used - was not universally the same. In some countries like Italy it was linked with marriage and in some others it was not. Finally, there was the extreme case of Norway, where even an unmarried person living alone was considered to be a family (Family Benefits..., 2002). The study revealed that in answer to the question on
the role of the term ‘family’ in family benefits there were differences between countries that had used a precise definition of the term and those that had not. For example Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and the United Kingdom frequently used the term ‘child’ instead of ‘family’ when defining family benefits (*ibid.*).

In a majority of European countries, new forms of family (cohabiting couples, re-married couples, single-parent families, step-families, etc.) are entitled to benefits on equal basis with marriage-based families. In this respect homosexual couples might be an exception. By the time the above mentioned report was published (2002), homosexual couples were legally recognised in France, the Netherlands, Norway, Finland and Sweden (*ibid.*). Today, debates on the issue of homosexual families are in progress in several countries.

**Conclusion**

Arlene Skolnick has stressed that defining the family is not just an academic exercise because the way it is defined determines which kind of families are considered normal and which are considered deviant (Skolnick, 1981). Although families continue to play a very important role in society and the nuclear family is still a normative ideal of family in many European countries, during the last few decades family structures have become highly diverse. New definitions of the family reveal that it is practically impossible to define the family using the touchstones of the family that characterised definitions used in the 1950s or 1960s.

When carrying out comparative studies on changes in family behaviour, and in the course of comparing family policies across governments, it is important to bear in mind that the definitions used may well not be the same. At the same time, these different definitions not only highlight different realities but also act as a window on the different values held by people across Europe towards the family.
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MAJOR TRENDS IN FAMILY BEHAVIOUR IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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In the majority of western countries, the second half of the twentieth century was characterised by significant changes in the family as an institution and an increasing plurality of family forms. The new form of family formation alongside families based on registered marriage - unregistered cohabitation - became an alternative to marriage based families. Besides cohabitation, the share of other novel family structures – single-parent families, reconstituted families, living apart together (LAT), living together apart (LTA), etc., has also increased. Family sociologists attribute changes in the institution of family to a process of individualisation and de-institutionalisation of the family (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) that is reflected in increasing variability of individual choices concerning the timing of family formation and the form of the union itself.

The aim of this article is to provide an overview of the major changes that have occurred in the family in different EU countries.

Changes in family formation

Leaving parental home

Although there are differences in cultural attitudes and family policies, there is a trend for young people across Europe to remain in their parental home for longer than young people did some decades ago (Cherlin et al., 1997; Corijn & Klijzing, 2001). According to a Eurobarometer survey carried out in 2005 (Mobility in..., 2006), young Europeans leave their parental home at the average age of 21, though this differs considerably across European countries. According to this survey, young people leave the parental home at a younger age in
Nordic and Baltic countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), than in southern Europe (ibid.). On average in 2008, half of the female population had left parental home by the age of 23, and half of male population by the age of 26 (The Social Situation…, 2010). It is characteristic of all the EU countries that women leave the parental home at a younger age than men. The general trend of remaining in the parental home for longer can be explained first of all by the increasing number of years spent in education and by postponement of marriage. Geographical differences in turn are mainly explained by the differences in opportunities to participate in the labour and housing markets.

Marriage based families

Marriage was considered the primary foundation for family formation and a socially normative precondition for having children in western countries until the 1960s. In the second half of the twentieth century however, the situation changed, and since the 1970s the crude marriage rate, i.e. number of marriages per 1000 population in the year, has decreased significantly in the majority of European countries (Kalmijn, 2007). According to Eurostat population data (Europe in…. 2010; The Social Situation…., 2010), in 1960 the crude rate of marriage was considerably lower in the ‘old’ EU countries (7.9) than in the ‘new’ member states (such as Latvia 11.0, Romania 10.7, Lithuania 10.1, and Estonia 10.0). The marriage rate was below the EU average in Nordic countries, but lowest in Ireland – 5.5 marriages per 1000 population. According to population statistics (ibid.), during the period between 1960–2007 the differences in marriage rates levelled, and in the countries where marriage rates had been high in the 1960s the decline was steepest. The steepest decline in marriage rates took place in the Baltic countries, which in the 1960s were characterised by relatively high marriage rates. For example, compared to Sweden where the crude marriage rate was already low in the 1960s, the decrease was from 6.7 in 1960 to 5.2 in 2007, whereas in Estonia the decrease was from 10.0 in 1960 to 5.2 in 2007, and in Latvia from 11.0 in 1960 to 6.8 respectively (The Social Situation…., 2010).
One explanatory factor for the declining marriage rate is that family formation has increasingly become connected to alternative living arrangements, i.e. increase in the share of cohabiting unions as an alternative to a marriage based family (Kalmijn, 2007). The other explanatory factor is postponement of marriage. It is a general trend in the majority of European countries that the mean age of women at first marriage is increasing. In Northern Europe it has increased by almost four years during the past few decades. While in the EU15 the average age of women at marriage is 27.5 years, in northern countries it is close to 30 years. In Sweden a woman’s average age at marriage increased from 24 years in 1960 to 30.2 years in 2000, in Denmark it increased from 22.8 to 29.5 years, and in Finland it increased from 23.8 to 28 years (Population Statistics, 2006).

It was characteristic of the former socialist countries, that women got married on average two years earlier than women in western European countries. Although in both groups of countries the mean age of women at first marriage increased, by the turn of the century the differences between the EU15 and the 12 new member states remained about the same. Among new member states, the mean age of women at first marriage is highest in Slovenia (26.7), Malta (26.7) and Cyprus (26.4) –
but they are all lagging behind the EU15 average. The only “old” EU country where the average age of women at first marriage is similar to the average of the new member states is Portugal (25.7); among the countries of EU15, it is the lowest age of a woman at first marriage.

Cohabiting unions

The crude rate of marriage is a statistical measure that takes into account only officially registered marriages and disregards other forms of partnerships. Accordingly, in many countries, there are no relevant statistics concerning cohabitation available. Based on data contained in different surveys (e.g. European Social Survey, Eurobarometer Survey, Fertility and Family Surveys, etc.,) we can conclude that since the 1970s the popularity of living together without getting married has increased in the majority of European countries but the rapidity of increase of cohabitation differs according to country (Brown & Booth, 1996). On the basis of these differences, several typologies of cohabitation have been constructed (Kasearu, 2007).

First, on the basis of the proportion of cohabiting unions, Kasearu (ibid.) divides European countries into three broad groups. In the first group are countries with a high proportion of cohabitating unions. The share of cohabitating unions among 26-35 year old men and women is highest in Sweden, where 43% of people in that particular age group are cohabiting. Finland, Denmark, Norway and France are also characterised by relatively high levels of cohabiting unions, with around one in three individuals aged 26-35 in a cohabiting union. In the second group we find the United Kingdom, Belgium, Luxembourg and Estonia. In these countries, cohabitations constitute one in four unions; Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and Slovenia have cohabitation level of about 20 per cent. The third group is characterised by the lowest levels of cohabitations, and these are seen in Greece, Portugal, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Spain, Italy and Ireland, where the share of people in cohabiting unions is under 10%. The two EU countries that were not included in Kasearu’s analysis - Bulgaria and Romania - appear to belong to the group of countries with low level of cohabitation (see Hoem et al., 2007). Therefore, it can be concluded that in many European countries marriage is losing its former popularity and cohabitation is increasing.

However, knowing the proportion of cohabiting couples does not provide us with a thorough overview of union-formation patterns and
their causes in European countries. For example, in Portugal and Greece, the cohabitation level is low because the marriage rate is high: around two-thirds of women in their late twenties are already married, a fact that considerably lowers the proportion of cohabiting couples. The situation is different in Spain and Italy where women in their twenties are neither cohabiting nor married. This suggests that in some cases we cannot describe cohabitation as a substitute for marriage; however, in some other countries this explanation can be statistically proven (Kiernan, 2002).

In most countries, the share of cohabitation is age-dependent. This means that cohabitation is most popular among people in their twenties, and that the proportion of cohabiting unions declines with age (Kiernan, 2002). Cohabitation may have different meanings to different age groups. While for young people, living together without marriage may constitute a test period before marriage rather than an alternative to marriage, in older age groups cohabitation is often justified by external factors (people awaiting a divorce, adult children disapproving of the remarriage of their parents, reasons related to property, etc.).

Kiernan (ibid.) provides her own typology, which is constructed on the basis of the social acceptance of cohabitation. Acceptance is determined by childbearing outside marriage on the one hand, and through increases in the number of cohabiting couples on the other. A number of stages can be identified and are drawn from the experience of Swedish population because Sweden has a long-standing tradition of non-marital cohabitation as a family form.

According to Kiernan, in the first stage cohabitation is chosen by only a small subgroup of a population as an alternative lifestyle choice; marriage is still overwhelmingly considered the foundation of the family. In the second stage, cohabitation becomes popular as a test period before marriage, though it is usually followed by marriage; this means that cohabitation is a short time period during which the quality of the relationship and the partner’s personality is tested. Cohabiting partners usually have no children during this test period. In the third stage, cohabitation is a socially acceptable alternative to marriage and children are not rare in these relationships. Finally, cohabitation becomes an alternative form of family formation, cohabitation and marriage become equal, and the only thing that makes a difference is the existence or non-existence of the marriage certificate. According to Kiernan, Nordic countries have reached the fourth stage and recent
trends in eastern European countries suggest that some of the new member states, for example Estonia, are also making a transition to the fourth stage.

_Families with children_

The rapid decline in rates of birth caused concern throughout Europe in the early 1990s. Generally the countries with the most marked decrease in the birth rate were those where they used to be high, such as southern European and Baltic countries. Although the rate of decline was influenced to a certain extent by differences in population age composition, the real rate of decline was clear (Recent Demographic…, 2002).

According to Eurostat data (The Social Situation…, 2010), in the EU27 in 2007 the total fertility rate, i.e. the average number of children born to a woman, was 1.55, with the highest being found in Ireland (2.01). Rates above 1.8 children per woman were registered in France, Sweden, Denmark and United Kingdom. Although in these countries the total fertility rate was considerably higher than the average in EU countries, it was still below replacement level (2.1). Countries with a critical level of births were Slovakia, where the total fertility rate was as low as 1.25, but also Romania (1.3), Poland (1.31), Portugal (1.33) and Italy (1.35). However, compared to the significant fall in fertility rates that took place in many countries in the first half of the 1990s, we can today speak of a certain recovery.

Several population surveys have revealed an interesting fact: in most European countries the actual number of children in the family is below the desired number of children (Cliquet & Avramov, 1998). Socio-economic factors (education, work, income), relational factors (age at start childbearing, marital status), and biological-reproductive factors have been seen to influence the discrepancy between actual and intended number of children (ibid.).

A recent, statistically important development in some countries with very low fertility levels is a substantial increase in the number of childless couples. According to the OECD family database (OECD Family Database, 2008, SF 7) in 2007 in the age group 30-34, the share of women without children was the highest in Luxembourg (42.9%) and lowest in Slovakia (9.2%). Part of the reason for the differences in the rates of childlessness is postponement of having
children – characteristic of many EU countries. In 1960 in EU15 countries the mean age of a woman giving birth to her first child was 25.2. By 2007, the mean age was highest in Ireland (31.1) and lowest in Bulgaria (26.7) and Romania (27.9) (The Social Situation..., 2010). This trend of postponement of birth of the first child and a longer period of childlessness leaves young people more time for individual choices between the family and career, and can be seen as a sign of the de-institutionalisation of the family.

An increase in extra-marital births is one of the most characteristic changes in Europe in the decades analysed. In the EU15, the share of extra-marital births has increased from 5% in 1960 to 36% in 2007 (Population Statistics, 2008). The rate of extra-marital births has increased approximately evenly both in the ‘old’ and ‘new’ EU countries. However, there is a wide gap between the rates of extra-marital births in the different geographic regions, and this gap has widened over the decades. In northern countries the increase in the share of extra-marital births has increased considerably (in Sweden from 11% in 1960 to 55% in 2007; in Denmark from 8% to 46%, and in Finland from 4% to 41% respectively) though this increase has been much less marked in southern Europe, e.g. Greece (4.9), Italy and Spain, all three remaining below 10% in 2000.

Figure 2. Births outside of marriage in 2007 (%) * Ireland and Spain, data of 2006.
Source: Eurostat – Demographic statistics
The ‘new’ EU countries reveal similar geographical patterns of extra-marital births: the rates are highest in Estonia (59%) and Latvia (43%) and lowest in Cyprus (The Social Situation..., 2010). It is worth mentioning that in Iceland, a non-EU country, 64% of all births were extra-marital in 2007 (ibid.); the proportion of extra-marital births is also high in France (51%). The majority of extra-marital births are accounted to cohabiting couples, i.e. most children born outside marriage have a cohabiting mother and father (Lanciery, 2008).

Family break-up

The crude divorce rate\(^1\) has increased over the past decades in most EU countries, except for Estonia and Latvia, where divorce rates were already high in the 1960s (The Social Situation..., 2010). In the 1960s, divorce rates were generally significantly higher in socialist block countries than in the western countries, but divorce rates increased faster in the ‘old’ EU countries, and differences between the country groups had levelled by 2000. According to Eurostat data (Europe in Figures, 2009), in 2007 among EU15 countries the crude divorce rate was high in Finland (2.5), Denmark (2.6), Spain (2.8) and Belgium (2.9). Among the new member states Lithuania (3.4) and Latvia (3.3) were characterised by the highest divorce rates followed by the Czech Republic (3.0) and Estonia (2.8). In contrast, Poland (1.7) and Slovenia (1.3) had the lowest number of divorces per 1000 inhabitants among the new member states. There is no data for Malta as divorce is not legal there. Among the EU15, Greece (1.2) and Italy (0.8) had the lowest divorce rates in 2007 (ibid.).

\(^1\) Calculation based on the number of divorces in a given year per 1000 inhabitants.
Because the dissolution of cohabiting relationships is not registered, and non-marital cohabitation is increasing in the majority of European countries, it is very difficult to account for the real level of family break-ups.

Post-divorce families

In the 1960s, divorces were not widespread in western European countries but the proportion of divorcees who re-married was considerably higher than today. While in the 1960s, 60-70% of divorcees (in Nordic countries 55%) re-married, by the end of the twentieth century this share had fallen to about 20%. Thus, today many divorced persons prefer not to remarry, and new permanent relationships are established as cohabiting unions instead.

Marital instability and an increase in separation and divorce have resulted in an increasing proportion of single parent families (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). According to the OECD (OECD Family database 2008, SF 2), in 2007 the share of children aged 0-14 living in single-parent families was highest in United Kingdom (24%), followed by Estonia (18%) and Latvia (15%). The share of single-parent families was lowest in Romania (3%), Greece (4%), Italy and Malta (both 5%).
Living Apart Together (LAT)

The phenomenon of ‘living apart together’ (LAT) - where partners share common living arrangement for some periods of time, but have also separate residences (Trost, 1998) - is a relatively new living arrangement. LAT relationships are more common in Finland and Germany (for more detail, see OECD Family database 2008, SF 9). However, categorisation of the people involved as either single or partnered is problematic, because the situation can vary across countries and individual cases, and accordingly needs further study (Speder, 2007).

The future of the family

The increasing variety of family forms in recent years is the basis for several hypotheses regarding the future of the family (Cliquet & Avramov, 1998). In general, there are three main visions of the future of the family: (1) disappearance of the family; (2) restoration of the traditional family; (3) further increase of family variation.

The first scenario – disappearance of the family

Recent trends of various demographic indicators of family life, such as the decreasing popularity of marriage, instability of the family, decreasing fertility, different alternative living arrangements, and voluntary childlessness, have led some researchers to suggest that the traditional family is about to vanish (Cooper, 1986). However, evidence from a variety of studies (e.g. Kiernan, 2002) reveals that most people still establish a permanent relationship and continue to have children. Although the popularity of marriage is decreasing, studies have shown that cohabiting couples resemble married couples in many ways (Brown & Booth, 1996) and are able to fulfil one of the main functions of the family – socialisation of children.

An increase in divorce rates in the majority of western countries may also be interpreted as a threat to the existence of the traditional family. However, research shows (Kalmijn, 2007; Kiernan, 2002) that most divorced people are ready to establish new and enduring relationships. Some concerns about the future of the family are also related to low fertility levels. However, some fertility surveys have revealed that in the absence of extreme environmental pressures against having children,
the vast majority of married and cohabiting couples want to have at least one child.

Thus, the thesis of ‘the death of the family’ based on a quick reading of population statistics is most probably not the most likely scenario for the future of the family. Beck has considered family a “zombie category – dead but still alive” (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

The second scenario – back to the traditional family?

This scenario speaks of restoration of the traditional family, but it is unclear what is meant by ‘traditional family’. If it is the traditional economic family with the father as the sole breadwinner and the mother as homemaker, then in twenty-first century Europe with highly educated women and changing attitudes towards gender roles, it seems quite unrealistic to return to a family model with a stay-at-home mother. Alternatively, does the traditional family mean a family that excludes premarital sex and non-marital cohabitation? At least in Europe both are widespread and it seems to be unrealistic that present sexual ‘permissiveness’ will be replaced by the strict sexual norms attributed to the first half of the twentieth century.

The third scenario – further increases in variation of family forms

Family sociology has demonstrated increasing variation in household types and more complex family life courses in recent decades (Jallinoja, 1994). Modernisation has led to acceptance of a variety of family forms based on the individual choice (Hoffmann-Nowotny, 1987; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). It gives reason to expect that the diversity of family types, including families based on same-sex relationships, will continue to increase in the future.

Increased geographical mobility and career opportunities offer the possibility or even facilitate the increase of a LAT relationship (living apart together). LAT relationships may be entered into for a variety of reasons or circumstances (employment location, mobility requirements, family phase, financial position, etc.). Due to psychological burdens and also economic problems, it is likely that LAT relationships will remain a minority among partnership choices (Trost, 1998).

In conclusion, we can say that the changes taking place in European family behaviour and in the family in the western world in general are
extremely interesting and sometimes even unexpected, requiring further exploration and analysis. The future of the family is one of the issues that will provoke serious discussions among the researchers involved in FAMILYPLATFORM.
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CHANGES IN FINNISH FAMILIES: TOWARDS FULL-TIME MOTHERHOOD AND A NEW FAMILIALISM?

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Finland has become known internationally as one of the Nordic woman-friendly welfare states where extensive public day care provision for young children has given women an “exit out of family responsibilities”, thereby offering possibilities to combine family life and paid work. This interpretation has probably always been too ideal. Raija Julkunen (1992: 47) reminded us back in the early 1990s that the woman-friendliness of the Finnish welfare state needed to be critically analysed, because even the “best reforms for women in the whole world” might cause unintended consequences.

Finnish women have been described as working mothers. Traditionally, Finnish women have worked full-time, including mothers with young children. What has also been typical for Finland is that the employment rate of lone mothers has been even higher than for married or cohabiting mothers: in the mid-1980s, 90% of all lone mothers were in paid work. The dual-earner family model was also strongest at that time in Finland (Haataja, 2004).

However, the situation has changed quite dramatically during the last 20 years. Full-time motherhood has become more popular and youngest children are taken care of at home, mostly by their mothers. Even if family policy actively encourages men’s involvement in parenting, it is only very slowly changing gendered practices of child care. In the early 2000s, the maternal employment rate of mothers of children under the age of 3 was unambiguously low in Finland (32%) compared to the European, not to even mention the Nordic level (Lister et al., 2007: 126). In this respect, Finland is moving in the opposite direction to most of the other countries of Europe. The reasons for this are a complex mixture of political decisions, changes in economic
situation and in the working life, gender relations, and ideological changes in society.

In Finland, ever since the 1980s, there have been two simultaneous but contradictory trends in child care policy: gradual expansion of public day care provision, and financial support for parental child care. This has very much been a political compromise. In 2005, the take-up rate of publicly financed day care for children was much lower in Finland than in the other Nordic countries. For children aged 1-2 years old, it was 37% in Finland compared with 54-85% in the other Nordic countries, which can be explained by the extensive use of home care allowance schemes. Even in the older age group (3-5 years), the rate is clearly lower in Finland, at 69% and 91-95% respectively (Eydal & Kröger, 2010: 25). However, it should be mentioned that for Finnish women full-time motherhood represents a temporary phase in life. The vast majority of mothers return to paid employment at the latest when their youngest child turns three, that is, when their eligibility for child home care allowance ends. Financial support for home care is a controversial issue: on the one hand, it is an important right for families with young children and an official recognition for unpaid care work; on the other it maintains gender inequality and weakens the position of women at the labour market (Repo, 2009).

Financial support for home care does not alone explain the rapid change: a deep economic recession in the early 1990s strongly influenced the employment rate and left lasting consequences on the Finnish labour market. Its influence has been remarkable especially among lone mothers, whose poverty risk has dramatically increased since the early 1990s mainly because of growing unemployment but also because of cuts in family benefits. For some of them full-time motherhood has offered a more positive identity than unemployment even if it has also meant financial struggle in daily life (Krok, 2009). There are also full-time mothers to whom it has offered an option to exit working life, which is increasingly characterised by a hardening of demands and a worsening of conditions. Since the 1990s, career options for even academically trained women have been increasingly insecure and fragmented.

Attitudinal changes have also taken place. Many feminist researchers talk about a new familialism, where families instead of the state - and especially women in families - are expected to take more responsibility for caring (Mahon, 2002: 150-3). Even a turn towards a new kind full-
time mother society (Anttonen, 2003: 178-9) can be recognised, where the rhetoric of “the best interest of the child” and “parental choice” has made the general attitudes towards paid work of mothers with young children more negative than before. This is rather new and unique phenomenon in Finnish society. This example from Finland shows not only that welfare state models are not everlasting, but also that there can be unintended backlashes against them.

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SHORT ACCOUNT OF CHANGES IN THE FAMILY IN ITALY

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In Italy, as in the majority of western countries, the family has undergone considerable change and taken on a range of new forms, especially since the 1960s. In fact, in the course of the last thirty years the variety of new family models have become more and more common – from the unmarried couple, to the single-parent family, to the reconstituted or recomposed family, to the “mixed” family (the family or couple made up of an Italian and a foreigner).

Quite apart from the degree to which each of these family forms has spread, it is important to point out is that it is highly likely that each of us in the course of our lives will come into contact with this new multiplicity of forms of family life. Thus, analysing the principle forms of transformation that the family is going through means getting to grips directly with the actual life experiences of the individuals involved such young people, women and men.

Official ISTAT statistics confirm that like other countries Italy is also characterised by a progressive increase in the presence of unmarried couples or free unions. Moreover, although the overall number of such unions is still relatively low compared with the figures for the rest of Europe (in 2006, 637,000 out of a total of 14 million couples), the rate of growth has increased starting out from the 1990s – in the period between 1994 and 2006, from 1.6% to 4.5% of all couples (ISTAT, 2005). Notwithstanding this, for the majority of unmarried couples in Italy today living together still constitutes a kind of “preparation” for marriage and is regarded as a transitory phase of life (Sabbadini, 1997; Buzzi et al., 2008). Compared with the rest of Europe, Italy continues to show a clear preference for the model of the traditional family (marriage with children generated within it), even though as stated above, gradually increasing numbers of people (in particular among the younger generations) are choosing to live together.
It is interesting to focus attention in particular on the postponement by young people, men and women, of their exit from their family of origin and subsequent formation of a new family. Indeed, of the 27 European countries, Italy (together with other Mediterranean countries) is the country in which children leave their families of origin the oldest. In 2003 for example, the number of unmarried young people between 18 and 34 - male and female - who lived with at least one of their parents numbered 7,600,000 (60.2% of the total). The tendency to continue to live in the parental home even after having achieved economic independence has been called the “long family”\(^2\), and it is also accompanied by new ways of creating families on the part of young men and women.

On a general level, it must be stated that in Italy the incidence of marriage has also fallen noticeably. In 2006 for example, the ratio of the number of marriages to the number of residents was 4.1 marriages for every 1,000 inhabitants, with a contraction between 2001 and 2006 of 7.8%. Also the birth rate is in our country particularly low, 1.17%, while the European mean is about 1.5%.

The nature of relations within the couple and their conduct are also changing, above all as a consequence of the emergence of a more equal relationship between the genders. This, at least within the private sphere, is contributing to making women more independent, furnishing them with a greater degree of liberty and decision-making power. In fact, in the case of unions that are no longer considered satisfactory, women often decide to cut the tie rather than maintain the relationship. Nevertheless, the frequency of divorce is in Italy still very low, lower not only than in northern European countries (50-55 per 100), but also if compared to other southern European countries (9 divorces per 100 in Italy, 18 per 100 in Greece).

Italy’s territorial divide also finds expression in terms of marital breakdown. While the regions of central and northern Italy are closer to European norms - hence characterised by a more marked tendency to resort to separation and divorce - those of southern Italy are more traditionalist. In fact, southern couples are on average less inclined to resort to a definitive dissolution of the marital tie, even though the evidence shows that over recent years in this region too there has been an increase in the incidence of divorce (De Sandre et al., 1999). In any case, the increased tendency of couples to decide to separate and

\(^2\) In Italy the expression refers to the prolonged presence of parents and children under the same roof.
divorce is producing forms of the family in Italy that are more articulated and complex than was the case a few decades ago.

Another phenomenon that it is worth focusing attention on is that of single-parent families. Although the number of such families in Italy - in contrast to other European countries - is relatively limited, there has nonetheless been a significant increase. In particular, there has been a noticeable shift from the old form of the single-parent family, which was the outcome of unavoidable or unsolicited events (the death of a spouse, abandonment, etc.), to a new form of single parenthood: the fruit of a deliberate choice (Barbagli et al., 2003). Figures for the years 2006-2007, for example, indicate that in Italy single-parent families - in line with the rest of Mediterranean Europe - constituted 5% to 10% of the total number of nuclear families. In Belgium, France and Holland, by contrast, the incidence of single-parent families is greater: between 11% and 15%, while in northern Europe, in particular in Great Britain and Germany, single-parent families make up a fifth of the total (Zanatta, 2008).

Finally, there is yet another type of family that is gradually assuming greater proportions in Italy just as elsewhere: the so-called “mixed family”. In a period of ten years or so the number of marriages between Italians and foreigners has quadrupled, passing from 58,000 in 1991 to 200,000 in 2005 (ISTAT, 2004). This has been also accompanied by a 22% increase in the number of children born into mixed couples (ISTAT, 2004).
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TRENDS IN THE GERMAN FAMILY MODEL: PLURALISATION OF LIVING ARRANGEMENTS, AND DECREASE IN THE MIDDLE-CLASS NUCLEAR FAMILY

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As in a number of other European countries, family arrangements in Germany in recent decades have become more diverse. Especially the incidence of the 'middle-class nuclear family' (a household with married parents and the biological children of both spouses) has decreased. This trend is driven by developments common to a lot of western countries: an overall decrease and postponement of marriages, more divorces, low and delayed fertility, and a rising number of children born outside marriage.

A decline in marital unions, that are being entered into at ever higher ages has led to an increase of the mean first marriage age that has shifted from 25.6 in 1970\(^3\) to 33 years in 2008 for men, and from 23 to 30 years for women, respectively. In the new Länder (the former German Democratic Republic) the first marriage age in 2000 was somewhat lower; however its increase was sharper than in the old Länder\(^4\) since 1990, which points to a convergence between East and West Germany. This trend is complemented by an increasing divorce rate: while in 1970 there were 0.51 divorces for every 100 marriages, the number of divorces more than doubled by 2007 (in 2007 it stood at 1.03). However, the incidence of divorce is lower in the new\(^5\) than in the old Länder\(^6\) (0.84 vs. 1.07 in 2007). (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2009c)

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\(^3\) Data for Germany in 1970: territory of the federal republic of Germany before 1990.

\(^4\) Excluding the federal state of Berlin.

\(^5\) Excluding East-Berlin.

\(^6\) Includes East-Berlin.
Following the trend for delaying marriage, family formation shifted likewise: the mean age of married mothers at first childbirth has increased by 5.8 years since 1970, up to 30.1 years in 2008 (ibid.). At the same time the share of births outside marriage has risen significantly from 5.5% in 1970 to 32% in 2008. Especially in the new Länder the share of births outside marriage in 2008 was more than double the share of that in the old Länder (57.8% vs. 25.8%). Taken together with the trends in divorce, these trends point to a generally lower significance of the institution of marriage in the eastern part of Germany.

Following the delay in family formation, total (period) fertility rates (average number of children of all women between the age of 15 and 49) in Germany also show a long-term decrease: while in 1970 it was 2.02 (Heß-Meining/Tölke, 2005: 231), by 1990 it fell significantly to 1.45, with a less dramatic reduction by 2007 (to 1.37). The development in the new Länder, however, is unique as far as fertility decreased sharply following the unification with West Germany from 1.5 (1991) to a record-low value of 0.8 in 1994, but it has been gradually converging to the level of the old Länder since then (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2009c).

These trends are accompanied by notable changes in household structure, especially a decreasing number of people living in family households (with single children of any age in household). The share of those living in family households relative the whole population in Germany dropped from 67.2% in 1970 to 50.9% in 2008 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2009b). The composition of family households also changed dramatically, especially the incidence of larger families with three or more children has declined (1970 22% of families, in 2008 11.8%; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2010). Furthermore, there was a striking change in the importance of living arrangements: whilst in 1996 a distinct majority (84.4%) of children under the age of 18 were living in one household with their married parents, and only 4% lived in a cohabitation (couples, living together without being married) or same-sex household and 12% in a single parent household, these numbers had changed to 77%, 7% and 16% (respectively) by 2008 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2009b, ifb-calculations).

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7 Up until 2008 the German „Mikrozensus“ (annually population census based on a sample of 1% of German households) only collected data on the age of mothers at the first birth of a child born in a marriage.
8 Including the state of Berlin.
9 Findings of the 1970 population census.
As a result, there has been a decrease of the so called ‘middle-class nuclear family’: In 1996 about 81% of family households consisted of married parents with their minor children; however, by 2008 this figure had dropped to 73%. Accordingly the share of single parent households\(^{10}\) increased from about 14% to 19% during the same period of time. Taking a longer-term perspective, the share of divorced and separated as well as of single parents has increased sharply while the share of widowed persons has decreased correspondingly (since 1970\(^{11}\)). An increasing number of these single parent households\(^{12}\) are composed of mainly sole-parent mothers (87%) (\textit{ibid}., ifb-calculations).

Next to the decrease of family households with married parents with their minor children and the increase of single parent households, Germany displays a moderate increase in cohabiting parents from 5% of family households with minor children in 1996 to 8% in 2008. This share of cohabiting parents is about three times higher in the new \textit{Länder}\(^{13}\) than in the old \textit{Länder} (\textit{ibid}.).

Finally, according to data from the Generation and Gender Survey\(^{14}\), in 2005 about 14% of family households in Germany were \textit{stepfamilies} with minor children: 9% families with children of one partner and 5% with at least two children not directly related (Steinbach, 2009: 165f). The majority (about 69%) were stepfamilies with stepfathers, a third (about 27%) stepfamilies with stepmothers and a small minority (about 4%) with stepfathers- and mothers (GGS, 2005; Steinbach, 2009: 167). Overall, stepfamilies are more common in the new than in the old \textit{Länder} (\textit{ibid}.).

The described trend towards a pluralisation of living arrangements and the simultaneous decrease of the middle-class nuclear family in Germany resembles the experience of most European societies. However the different development of family models between the new and the old German \textit{Länder} appears to be unique in Europe: the end of the “Golden Age of Marriage” with its high fertility rates, an almost

\(^{10}\) With minor children without age limit.

\(^{11}\) Findings of the 1970 population census.

\(^{12}\) Inclusive cohabiting parents until 2002.

\(^{13}\) Includes the state of Berlin.

\(^{14}\) The Gender and Generation Survey is a panel survey of a nationally representative sample of 18-79 year-old resident population in each participating country (Bulgaria, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Romania, Russian Federation). The program coordination at the UNECE (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe) is carried out with support from the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission. For more information see http://www.unece.org/pau/ggp/Welcome.html.
completely married generation, low divorce rates and an early start to
the building up a family, has in the old Länder accompanied by the
pluralisation of family forms since the 1960s. In contrast, in the new
Länder the model of the “nuclear family” was more stable until the
1970s. However, nearly simultaneous to the reunion of East and West
Germany were dramatic changes in family factors in the new Länder,
reflected in the sharp decline of fertility and marriage and a steep rise in
divorce rates. One reason was the discontinuation of political support
for the model of the “nuclear family”, as well as the rising insecurity
throughout the political transformation. Since the middle of the 1990s,
however, the situation has become more stable and fertility as well as
marriage and divorce rates have started to increase again, though they
have not reached the same level as in the old Länder (see Peukert,
2008: 341ff).
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Families in Hungary

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Although the timing, pace, and characteristics of family trends are national in nature in all countries, the main trends seen in families in Hungary are similar to those seen in other European countries. These include an aging society, an increasing popularity of cohabitation without marriage, a decreasing number of births, together with a growing proportion of births out of wedlock, as well as increasing fragility of relationships.

Two third of Hungarian private households were a family-type household in 2005. More than half of them were based on a married or cohabiting couple with or without children; the rest of the families (10% of all the households) consisted of a single parent with one child or more. Sole-person households counted for almost 30% of all the households. Multiple families or multiple generations living together were rare (Hungarian Central Office).

Typically, there are one or at most two children in a Hungarian family today. In more than 50% of the families with children there is one child only and there are two in another 35%. At the same time 10% of families are a “large family” with more than three children. Comparing the 2005 ratios to data from previous years shows a slow decrease in the percentage of the couple-based households together with an increasing number of sole-person households. These tendencies are partly attributable to an aging of the population, which is at least partially associated in turn by a growing number of widowed persons living on their own – in most of these cases these widowed people are women. Single persons at younger ages are also a significant and slowly growing subgroup of those living by themselves, although it is not usually an affordable option for young people in Hungary.
With just over 10% of households consisting of a sole-parent family, Hungary was at about the middle of the European ranking list in 2001, in between Spain (9.9%), and Ireland (11.7%). In Hungary – just like in most of the European countries, sole-parent families are typically headed by the mother rather than the father.

The proportion of sole-parent households has remained relatively stable since 1990 – though the divorce rate has increased and the proportion of births to unmarried women has also increased. At the same time however, there have been a higher share of childless marriages among those breaking up in 2005 than in 1990, and in 2005 the majority (two third) of births to unmarried women took place in a cohabiting partnership – rather than to a single mother.

Indeed, cohabitation as a form of living has spread rapidly as a form of living in the last two decades. In 1990 only 4% of families were based on cohabitation, but this number had tripled by 2005. Not only has the number been changing: while previously it was very often the widowed or divorced elderly who chose not to marry, today this form of family-formation is much more popular among younger generations. In fact, cohabitation is a transitory form of living for many people today that will either be turned into marriage after a testing period or ended. Nevertheless, seven out of ten first cohabiting relationships starting between 2000 and 2004 was cohabitation without marriage. This tendency took place in parallel to increased social acceptance of cohabitation, although this form of partnership is still considered a kind of testing period prior to the marriage itself, which would ideally follow the success of the testing period. Statistics from the Hungarian Central Office show however that cohabiting partners remain childless more often than married couples do, and they are also more likely to have one child rather than more.
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Zsuzsa Blaskó studied Economics and Sociology and did her PhD in Sociology. She has been a research fellow at DRI since 2002. Her research interests include social inequalities, gender issues and family policy – with a special attention to families with young children.

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Consortium

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