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# Changing Norms and Values Regarding Marriage and the Family in Post-Socialist Bulgaria: Towards a New Marital Transition

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## 1. Introduction

The period following the end of socialism in Bulgaria featured profound societal changes stemming from the transition to democracy and the market economy. The crisis-led social and economic transformations influenced individuals' demographic behavior, especially those who began the most intense part of their demographic lives in post-socialist times. The growing social and economic insecurity and the collapse of the social welfare system during the 1990s led to an intensification in transactions with the economic, material and emotional resources flowing through kin and family networks. Family and kin became the general providers of socio-economic protection and the main source for individual survival. As a result, there was a *re-colonization of Bulgarian post-socialist society by informal family networks* as a substitute for the mistrusted and malfunctioning state institutions.

During the transition period in Bulgaria, in parallel with its strengthened protective functions, the family underwent important transformations in its normatively established way of constitution and functioning. While during the former regime

the marital family was the only legitimate (and also the only tolerated) union for parenthood and partnership, during the following democratic period, this pattern was changed.

The former socialist regime in Bulgaria featured a “colonization of the state by the family clans”. As a reaction to their ideologically controlled and strictly supervised public lives, ordinary people considered the family to be the most authentic realm for personal existence. Growing alienation with public life made marriage and the family the only reasonable way for individuals to escape the absurdity of their official public life.<sup>1</sup> And the coercively pronatalist and pro-marriage oriented social policies of the Bulgarian socialist state helped strengthen this tendency. As a result, the period of socialist rule was marked by a familization of society, as manifested in early marriages and the universal character of marriage, disapproval of divorce, a strong preference for parenthood within marriage, and the unpopularity of voluntary childlessness and celibacy. These characteristics of individual familistic behavior were challenged and transformed in the new democratic times. However, at the same time, the valorization of the family as the most authentic place of personal existence, as well as a general source of social, economic and material sustenance, has continued.

In particular, since the beginning of the 1990s, *the institution of marriage has been challenged as a normatively established family form by the increasing number of cohabitations, single parent families and recomposed unions*. In terms of marriage and parenthood, individual lives were also profoundly reshaped. The postponement of entry into marriage and the transition to parenthood, the undermined sequence in the occurrence of these life events and the sharply increasing practice of extramarital childbearing all suggest that the institution of marriage has seen its value profoundly redefined

in combination with the limited social choices and opportunities for individuals in post-socialist Bulgarian society.

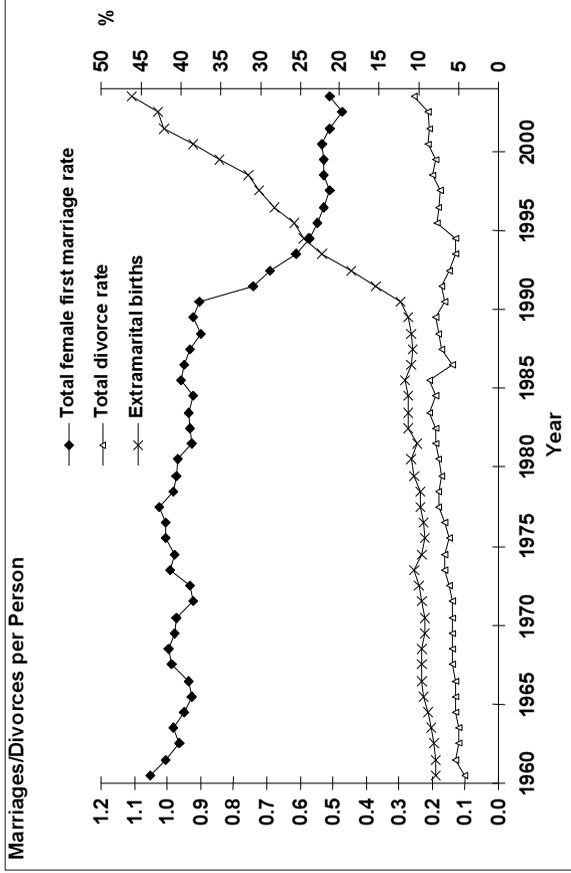
Along with the role in the recent transformations in marital tendencies played by social and economic deprivation, the challenges to the institution of marriage can also be seen as part of the more profound cultural shifts taking place in parallel with the process of democratization. The growing respect for personal autonomy and the removal of state control over private lives has facilitated a de-standardization of familistic behaviors. The spread of alternative family forms to marriage, such as cohabitation, and parenthood within these, has called into question the pattern of early marriage and childbearing within wedlock that dominated previously.

This paper will place special emphasis on *the subjective preconditions of the marital changes seen since the beginning of the 1990s in Bulgaria. The shifts in an individual's subjective orientation towards the family and marriage together with worsened socio-economic conditions will be investigated as being conducive to the continuity or diversification in the familistic behavioral patterns observed in the post-socialist period.*

## **2. Overview of family dynamics in Bulgaria**

An overview of the family dynamics over a longer period may shed considerable light on the changes in the behaviors, values and preferences towards marriage and the family in Bulgaria.

Graph 1  
 Total female first marriage rate, Total divorce rate, percentage of extramarital births in all live births,  
 Bulgaria, 1960-2003



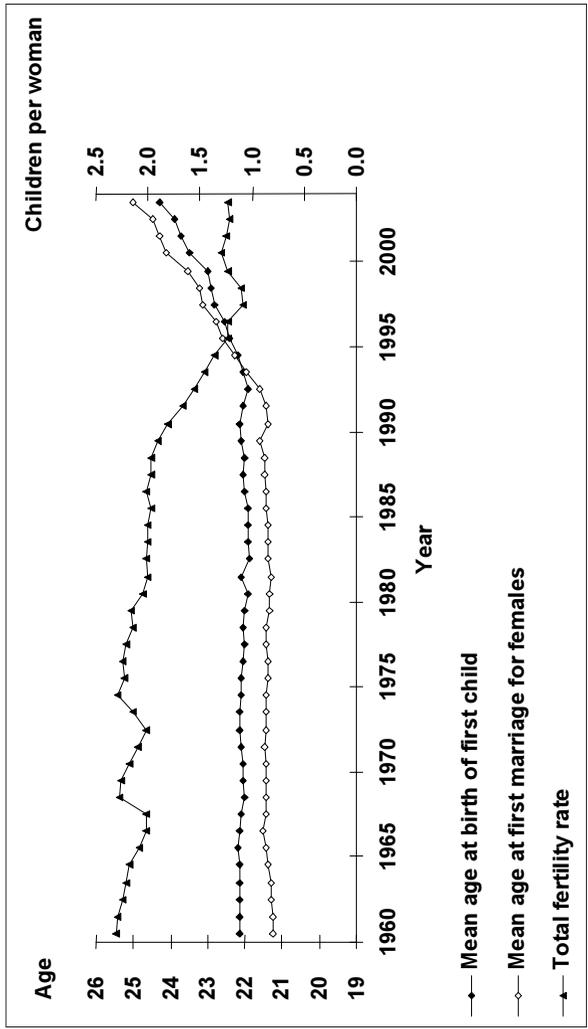
Source: Recent Demographic Developments in Europe, 2004

The total female first marriage rate fluctuated at around 0.90 up until the beginning of the 1990s. Such high levels correspond with the universal nature of marriage in socialist Bulgaria. However, a continuously falling trend in the indicator has been observed since beginning of the 1990s. As a result, the total female first marriage rate had fallen to 0.51 by 2003. (Recent Demographic Developments in Europe 2004)

As of the early 1990s, the mean age at first marriage has increased significantly. In 2003, the mean age at first marriage for women and men was 25.2 and 28.4 respectively (Recent Demographic Developments in Europe 2004). An increase in the divorce rate was also seen during the post-socialist period. In 2003, the total divorce rate reached 0.26, while at the very beginning of the 1990s it was 0.16. (Recent Demographic Developments in Europe 2004)

Although the level of divorce is still very low in comparison with some Central and Western-European countries, its rate of increase is sufficiently high to suggest a growing instability in marital unions in post-socialist Bulgaria.

Graph 2  
Mean age at birth of first child, mean age at first marriage for women, Total fertility rate, Bulgaria,  
1960-2003



Source: Recent Demographic Developments in Europe, 2004

The postponement or refraining from childbearing in the new democratic period has also changed the composition of the average Bulgarian family. The total fertility rate plummeted from 1.82 children per woman in 1990 to 1.23 in 2003 (Recent Demographic Developments in Europe 2004). The steep fall in the total fertility rate to the “lowest-low levels” (just over 1.3 children per woman) made one-child families the most frequent type of union in the country.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, new family forms gained relative popularity and acceptance in post-socialist Bulgarian society. According to the National Census data, in 2001 7.6% (157,370) of all families (2,369,100) in the country were consensual (Population. Families 2003). In the same year, single parent families increased to 12.4% (290,028) of all families in Bulgaria, up from 1992 when the figure was 5.6% (237,853). (Population. Families 2003)

The most significant changes, however, were seen in the levels of extramarital births. In 1990, the proportion of the children born out of marriage was 12.4% of all children born in the country. By 2003, extramarital births had jumped to 46.1% of all live births (Recent Demographic Developments in Europe 2004). The fast spread of lone parenthood and parenthood in cohabitation suggests that the social norms and traditional worldviews regarding the family and marriage have undergone profound changes in post-socialist Bulgaria.

### **3. Some theoretical explanations of the recent marital changes**

Researchers investigating the demographic development of Europe after the Second World War argue that western parts of the continent have already experienced similar

transformations in fertility and marital tendencies to those observed during the 1990s in post-socialist countries, including Bulgaria.<sup>3</sup> The earliest processes of pluralization of the familistic models and weakening of the norm on marital parenthood began at the end of the 1960s. The first societies to experience the new trends in family dynamics were those from the north-western part of the continent (Scandinavia and the Netherlands). The permanent character of the changes in the individuals' marital behavior inspired the idea proposed by R. Lesthaeghe and D. van de Kaa that 'second demographic transition' is taking place in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

The theory of the second demographic transition was introduced by R. Lesthaeghe and D. van de Kaa in mid 1980s as an umbrella concept for use in exploring the profound demographic shifts that had been occurring in Europe since the end of the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> The most important characteristic of this process is the *weakening of the strictest normative character of the full nuclear marital family*.<sup>6</sup> In particular, the new demographic transition put an end to the “golden age of marriage”,<sup>7</sup> replacing it with the age of pluralized family forms. Drawing on Inglehart's concept of post-modernization,<sup>8</sup> R. Lesthaeghe and D. van de Kaa argue that the changes in individuals' value orientations diverging into a post-materialist direction tend to be the most important preconditions of the advancing demographic transformations in late modern societies.<sup>9</sup> According to Inglehart's theory on post-modernization, the connection between economy, culture, values and personal behavior is recursive and empirically defined.<sup>10</sup> In conditions of economic scarcity and social insecurity the “values of survival” or “materialist” values come to dominate. Individuals holding materialist value orientations place a high value on economic growth and protection of the social order. Submission

to the collective authorities (state, church, public institutions) prevails over aspirations towards individual autonomy, self-realization and expressive lifestyles. Marriage, family and parenthood are highly appreciated by materialistically oriented individuals. Thus, in societies in which materialist value orientations prevail, marital and fertility rates tend to be relatively high.<sup>11</sup> According to Inglehart, when a certain stage of security and material wellbeing is achieved in a particular society, the individuals are apt to shift their subjective orientations in a post-materialist direction by adopting the values of self-expression and personal autonomy. Rejection of traditional authorities, rising tolerance of diversity and respect for personal autonomy constitute the core of the post-materialist worldview. The increased emphasis on an individual's wellbeing and the growing aspirations for personal self-expression call into question the sacred character of marriage and parenthood. Thus, a dominance of post-materialist values in a given society is associated with a decrease in birth rate, a pluralization of the family forms and growing union instability.<sup>12</sup>

R. Lesthaeghe and D. van de Kaa extend these ideas to the connection between value orientations and demographic behavior.<sup>13</sup> They argue that the pluralization of the methods of personal self-realization and the rising aspirations for consumption and expressive lifestyles seen in post-war Western Europe fostered the development of the second demographic transition. *The decrease in fertility and marital tendencies, the spread of non-marital family forms, the increasing union instability and the delayed occurrence of the basic life events (parenthood and marriage) in an individual's life are the most important features of the new transitional process.*<sup>14</sup> More detailed empirical investigations reveal that so far the second

demographic transition has occurred in three waves that, demographically speaking, cover the different parts of the continent. The Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries were the frontiers of the demographic changes. They were followed by the Mediterranean societies (Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece) in which similar tendencies began in 1980s. The third wave of the second demographic transition began in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 1990s.

At first glance, to claim that the second demographic transition is happening in post-socialist Eastern Europe seems to be unsustainable. It was to be expected that the socio-economic instability of the post-socialist societies would promote materialist values and strengthen the patterns of demographic behavior that prioritize the family and parenthood. In fact, *the demographic similarities observed in the different socio-political areas of the continent reveal that globalization is indeed accelerating social changes, including demographic ones. Moreover, the occurrence of the second demographic transition in conditions of socio-economic instability such as those dominant in former socialist societies reveals the path-dependant nature of the process and its contextual variability.*

Hence, if we conflate the theoretical considerations discussed above with the empirical observations of recent marital changes in Bulgaria, we can draw the assumption that the described shift in family dynamics is a constitutive part of an advancing second demographic transition. In respect of marriage and the family, the new transition precedes as a *demographic synchronization of the country's demographic development with the pan-European trends of pluralization of the family forms and de-standardization of individuals' familistic behaviors.*

## **4. Subjective preconditions of the recent marital transition in Bulgaria**

### **4.1. Data and methods**

An overview of the literature on the development of the second demographic transition in different societies leads us to the conclusion that this process does not cause an entire disappearance of local differences and peculiarities.<sup>15</sup> The second demographic transition is neither a universal nor a homogenizing process. Nevertheless, it does give rise to common features in the marital and fertility tendencies of those countries undergoing it. One of the factors that plays a decisive role in the “integration towards diversity”<sup>16</sup> in the family dynamics of societies that underwent the second demographic transition is the diffusion of familistic values diverging in a post-materialist direction.

*The main hypothesis of the empirical study which will be presented in the next part of this paper is that the recent marital transition in Bulgaria, which features a pluralization of family forms and a de-standardization of individuals’ familistic behavior, is caused by the emergence of post-materialist value orientations which call into question the superiority and the strictest normative character of the full nuclear marital family.*

The recent marital transition is spread unevenly between the different social groups in post-socialist Bulgarian society. The differences in familistic values these groups hold could be considered one of the factors of the variation and diversity in familistic behaviors. For this reason it is important to investigate the socio-demographic profiles of the groups holding either materialist or post-materialist familistic values and preferences. These groups can be thought of as facilitating the devolvement of the new marital transition or perpetuating the demographic status quo at times of profound social transformations in Bulgaria.

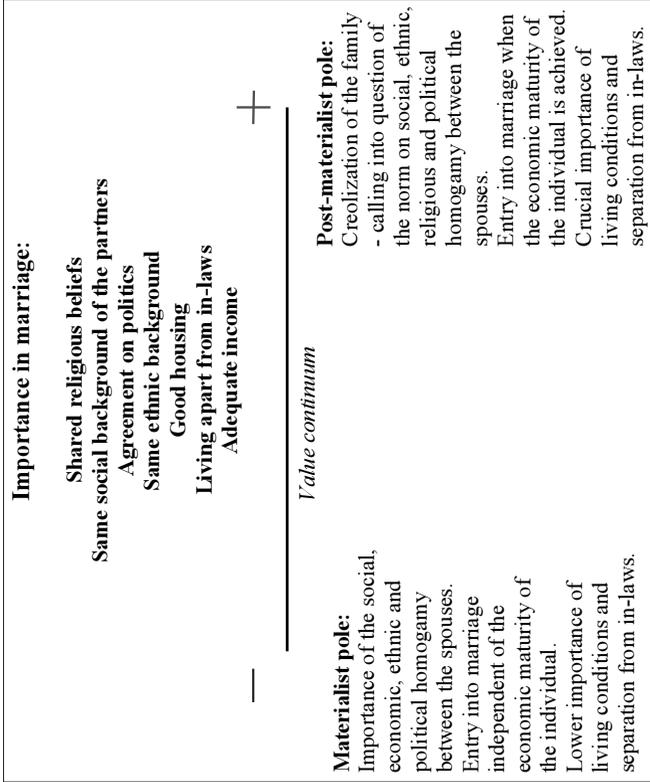
These assumptions were tested empirically by means of multivariate statistical analysis. The cross-sectional dataset of European Value Survey (1999), which is representative of the population over 18 years of age in Bulgaria, was used for the purposes of the investigation. A sample of variables reflecting various aspects of the individuals' values and preferences vis-à-vis marriage and the family was subjected to *exploratory factor analysis*. More precisely, the *principle components method* was chosen for extraction of the underlying value dimensions. *Varimax rotation* was applied to achieve better contracts among variable loading on the different dimensions. The *Regression method* was used for the assignment of individual factor scores to each of the revealed value continuums.

In the next step of the analysis the calculated factor scores were used for the classification of individuals in homogeneous value groups based on the proximity or distance of their values and preferences for family and marriage. In particular, *K-means cluster analysis*, based on sorting out the objects to the *Nearest Centroid*, was applied. The classification reveals the existing value groups of individuals that created the subjective environment for the occurrence of the new demographic transition in post-socialist Bulgaria.

#### **4.2. Results and discussion**

The factor analysis extracted two dimensions accounting for 50% of the total variation within the data. Each holds equal explanatory power (25%). The interpretations of the revealed value continuums are presented in Graphs 3 and 4.

Graph 3  
 Dimension 1 *Traditional marital pattern vs. Creolization of the family*



The first dimension is entitled *“Traditional marital pattern vs. Creolization of the family”*. The extraction of this continuum reveals that the material conditions, the economic wellbeing and the social/ethnic/religious homogeneity between spouses play a central role in the familistic value orientations of some groups of individuals in post-socialist Bulgaria.

The materialist pole clearly accentuates the importance of the social/ethnic/religious homogeneity between spouses. The transition to marriage is seen as being only slightly dependent on the individuals' economic maturity due to the high value attached to the marital status itself. The latter is thought of as a source of prestige and respect within the community. Hence, the pole reflects the mentality that fosters reproduction of the traditional pattern of familistic behavior in post-socialist Bulgaria. As mentioned earlier, this pattern features early transition to marriage in the course of an individual's life, disapproval of divorce and the unpopularity of pre- and post-marital cohabitation.

The presence of the described traditional values on the extracted continuum suggests that, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some features of the traditional familistic mentality are still present among segments of Bulgarian society. Hence, individuals sharing the traditional familistic values expressed by this pole contribute to the reproduction of the demographic status quo. As we will see later, these segments are formed by the older generations, those who spent the most intense part of their demographic lives in a social environment of strong pro-marital and pronatalist policies implemented by the socialist regime in Bulgaria.

The post-materialist pole reflects the emergence of value orientations that facilitate the process of “creolization of the family”. According to D. van de Kaa, the creolization (or

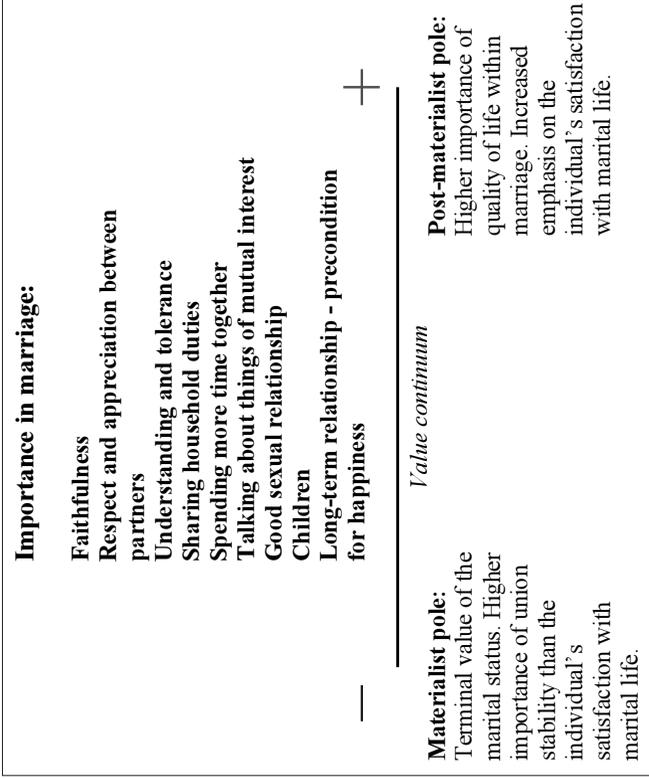
pluralization) of family forms is a phenomenon observed in societies that have been through the second demographic transition. It stems from the weakening of the traditional norm about the social/ethnic/religious homogamy between partners during the recent period of intensified transnational movements.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, the post-materialist pole of the extracted value continuum reveals the view that economic independence and the establishment of an independent household by newly-wed couples constitute important preconditions for the success of marriage.

Hence, the post-materialist pole reveals the emergence of important elements in the late modern familistic worldview which facilitate the recent marital transition in Bulgaria. *Individuals whose subjective preferences tend towards the post-materialist pole of the extracted continuum facilitate the demographic synchronization of Bulgaria with the pan-European trends of de-standardization and pluralization of family forms.*

Graph 4

Dimension 2 Value of marital status vs. Quality of life within marriage



The second dimension is entitled “*Value of marital status vs. Quality of life within marriage*”. It explores at an equal percentage (25%) of the total variation within the data as the above discussed continuum.

*The materialist pole* is associated with the value priority attributed to marital status itself. Marital life is perceived as something highly appreciated in an individual’s existence. The stability and endurance of the union is thought to be a more important issue than an individual’s private experience and the satisfaction gained from the conjugal relationships. In this light, it would be expected that the individuals whose familistic preferences gravitate towards this pole would be less permissive of marriage dissolution. *Hence, the pole reflects the mentality that supports reproduction of the traditional marital pattern in post-socialist Bulgaria.*

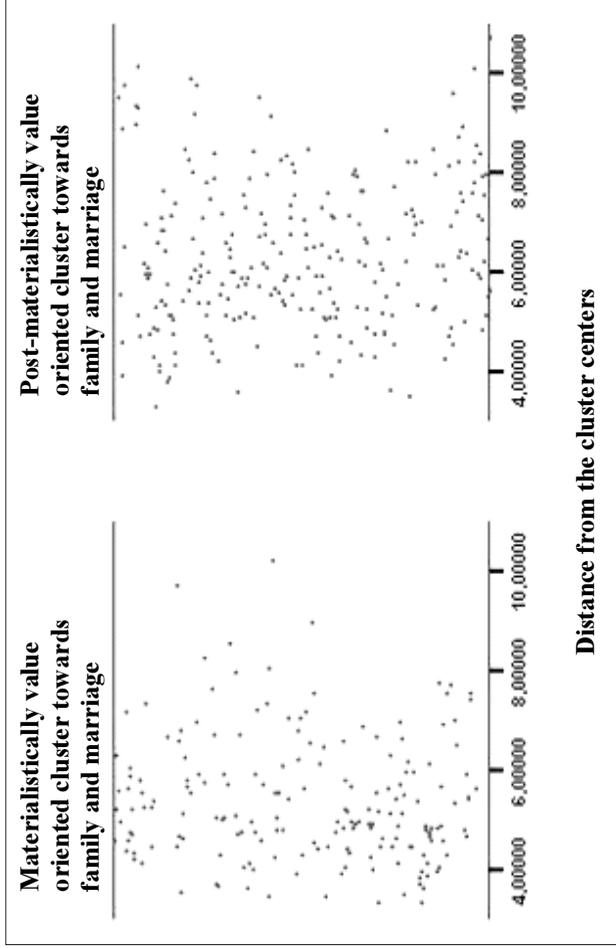
*The post-materialist pole* reflects the late modern value orientations in which the quality of life and individual satisfaction in marriage are strongly emphasized as factors conducive of union stability. The ultimate and superior character of the marital family as an end state in life as well as a sacred institution that imposes life-long commitment between partners is thus called into question. The pole reflects the late modern mentality that creates a permissive subjective environment for the diffusion and increasing popularity of practices such as marriage disruption and cohabitation. It also reveals the emergence of the “open and experimental character” of the partner relationships.<sup>18</sup> The changing concept of partnership, which brings forth the personal experience and satisfaction of the relationships in a union, facilitates flexibility and lessens the predictability of the individual’s life. Recursive transitions towards different states become possible in an individual’s life due to the strengthened association between

the endurance of a union and personal satisfaction. Increased emphasis on the emotional experience and the open nature of partner relationships are the constitutive elements of the late modern familistic worldview as reflected in the post-materialist pole of the analyzed dimension.

The emergence of adverse value orientations supporting either traditional or post-materialist family values means that post-socialist Bulgarian society is internally heterogeneous. Some social groups could be considered carriers of the new values that facilitate the development of the new marital transition through their subjective permissiveness towards new behavioral phenomena. Other groups appear to be supporters of the demographic status quo due to the more traditional familistic values they hold.

The next stage in the analysis consists of a classification of individuals in terms of their subjective preferences expressed with regard to each of the revealed value dimensions. The K-means cluster analysis revealed two groups that differ significantly in terms of values and preferences for marriage and the family at the end of the 1990s in Bulgaria.

Graph 5  
*Clustering of individuals on the basis of proximity or distance between their views and values regarding family and marriage*



The first group shares stronger *materialist value orientations* towards family and marriage. It consists of people whose reproductive lives were over at the time of the study (aged above 50). The materialistically oriented cluster is formed by individuals belonging to the older generation who hold stronger traditional pro-marital values. Their opinions regarding divorce, parenthood in non-marital settings and lone parenthood are predominantly conservative. Religious, ethnic, and social homogamy between spouses is strongly supported as part of the groups' materialist worldview in which the partners' belonging to the same community oriented networks (social, ethnic and religious) is a constitutive feature.

The cluster reveals how several important features of traditional value orientations are challenged by generations entering reproductive life during the 1990s in Bulgaria. One of these features is the issue of divorce. Marriage dissolution is subject to disapproval by members of the materialistically oriented group. Children are seen as an unquestionable fundament of the union's success and stability.

The institution of marriage did not lose its ultimate value priority among the older generations during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Bulgaria. Moreover, marriage, sexuality and reproduction continued to overlap meaningfully in the perceptions of the traditionally oriented group.

The second cluster contains *individuals with stronger post-materialist value orientations* towards marriage and the family. Group members are of active reproductive age (below the age of 45), are more highly educated, and live in the larger cities of the country.

The full nuclear family has not lost its ultimate value contents in the familistic views of the individuals belonging to this group. However, group members are far more permissive

of divorces and single motherhood than the previously analyzed materialist cluster. Quality of life within marriage and individuals' satisfaction from it are strongly emphasized by post-materialistically oriented individuals. Single motherhood is tolerated among the group members. These peculiarities of the subjective orientations that dominate in the group are concomitant with the observed shifts in demographic behaviors in society. The religious and political similarities between the marital spouses are rejected as a precondition of marriage success but the norm on ethnic and social homogamy is still influential.

This cluster represents the agents of the demographic innovations that took place during the 1990s in Bulgaria. The younger generations not only created the subjective preconditions for the diffusion of the new demographic phenomena, they also directly participated in advancing the new demographic transition through the de-standardization of their own demographic behaviors.

*Hence, this analysis has confirmed the assumption that a new type of subjective orientation facilitating the creolization of the family and pluralization of its forms took place during the 1990s in Bulgaria. The revealed group of individuals who are post-materialistically oriented towards family and marriage facilitates the diffusion of the new behavioral phenomena such as cohabitation and parenthood within it, single parenting, marriage dissolution – all of which are relatively new to Bulgarian society. Moreover, the correspondence revealed between social practice and the shifts in value orientations proves the important role played by cultural changes in the new demographic transition in post-socialist Bulgarian society.*

## **5. Conclusion**

The shifts revealed in the views and values on marriage and the family correspond to the changes seen in demographic behaviors in Bulgaria during the 1990s. In this way the connection between subjective views, perceptions and attitudes, and social practice is fully established. This correspondence between both levels of the subjective and behavioral transformation proves the occurrence of a second demographic transition in the country.

Multivariate statistical analysis revealed the mixed value structure of post-socialist Bulgarian society in which the traditional and late modern familistic values coexist. The more traditionally oriented value group consists of people belonging to older generations, and this contributes to the continuity of the demographic status quo established in Bulgaria during the socialist era. The higher evaluation of marital status and dominant perceptions of formal union as a life-long commitment between partners establish early marriage, the unpopularity of divorce, cohabitation and extramarital childbearing as particular characteristics shared among the older generations in the country.

Individuals from the post-materialistically oriented value group appear as subjective supporters of new familistic values and behaviors related to the pluralization of family forms and the de-standardization of the individual's marital behavior. The dominant permissiveness towards divorce, cohabitation and single motherhood in the post-materialistically oriented groups facilitated the rapid diffusion of the new marital and reproductive patterns during the 1990s. Therefore, this value segment of the young generation created a permissive subjective environment for the occurrence of the recent marital transition in Bulgaria.

The family dynamics characterized by the coexistence of traditional and post-materialist familistic preferences were influenced by growing social and economic insecurity during the transitional period. The heterogeneity of post-socialist Bulgarian society in terms of values modifies the recent marital transition. Marriage continues today to be a highly valued family form, despite the clear evidence of postponement. This stems from the feeling of security, stronger interpersonal commitment and institutionally guaranteed care and mutual responsibility marriage is thought to provide in times of impoverishment, deteriorating living standards and the collapse of the welfare system.

Marital status is thought to be a source of positive self-esteem faced with the limited opportunities for individual self-realization in the public sphere of post-socialist Bulgarian society. Thus, entry into marriage is still thought of by some people as a coping strategy that helps reduce feelings of insecurity in times of social and economic crisis. It is also perceived by these individuals as a space within which warm and stable interpersonal relationships and networks are built through which support, care and help are distributed. This means that the relative stability of pro-marital values in the period of crisis-led social restructuring in Bulgaria stems from the meaning marriage gains as a protective space of individual survival.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, stronger pro-marital values are not unconditionally shared by all the people of post-socialist Bulgarian society. The emergence of a value group consisting of young and well-educated individuals who represent the 'transitional' generation that was only slightly influenced by life under socialism is an undeniable empirical fact as revealed through the multivariate analysis. This group popularizes the

extended concept of partnership based on the emotional experience and the “open character” of the partner relationship. The new familistic preferences of this group are characterized by an increased emphasis on equality, mutual respect and personal satisfaction from life in a union.

In this way, the heterogeneity of society with respect to values and marital patterns leads us to the conclusion that the new marital transition in Bulgaria has the tendency to be a *path-dependant synchronization* of the country with the familistic trends of Western European societies. However, the synchronization does not mean homogenization, but rather “convergence towards diversity”<sup>20</sup> and variance in the trajectories of the socio-demographic development of a particular social context. In our case, the variance and peculiarities are fostered by the interplay between the changing values towards marriage and the family and the recent conditions of growing social and economic insecurity in post-socialist Bulgaria.

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