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**RECENT TRENDS IN FIRST PARTNERSHIP IN RUSSIA: MARRIAGE OR
COHABITATION?**

In Russia, marriage remained early and universal over the 20th century. By the 1990s, mean age at first marriage was the same as in the second half of the 19th century. The traditional marriage pattern continued to persist despite the drastic political and economic changes that took place over the last 100 years since the collapse of the Russian Empire through the breakdown of the empire of the Soviet Union. However Russian cohorts born in the 1970s and more recently, whose socialization has already been proceeding in the post-soviet Russia tend to differ from their parents and grandparents. They marry and become parents at more mature ages. They increasingly prefer to begin a partnership with cohabitation rather than legal marriage: no less than 25% of women by the age of 20, and no less than 45% by age 25 do not register a marriage with their first partner.

RECENT TRENDS IN FIRST PARTNERSHIP IN RUSSIA: MARRIAGE OR COHABITATION?

In Russia, marriage remained early and universal over the 20th century. By the 1990s, mean age at first marriage was the same as in the second half of the 19th century (less than 22 for women, and 24 for men). The traditional marriage pattern continued to persist despite the drastic political and economic changes that took place over the last 100 years since the collapse of the Russian Empire through the breakdown of the empire of the Soviet Union. Only did the Second World War bring short-lived interruptions in age patterns of first marriage. In the mid-1990s, the age at first marriage began to increase, while the first birth is delayed. The proportion of non-marital births has reached 32% of all births. Obviously, Russia is leaving the traditional marriage pattern for a new one.

The Russian cohorts born in the 1970s and more recently, whose socialization has already been proceeding in the “new, post-soviet Russia,” tend to differ from their parents. They marry and become parents at more mature ages. They delay the first and the second birth. They increasingly prefer to begin a partnership with cohabitation rather than legal marriage. Family planning becomes more effective: contraception replaces abortion, which provides instrumental base not only for birth timing but also for cohabitation, of a shorter or longer duration.

Data from the civil registration of marriages and births, results of the 2002 Population Census and research carried out within the UN ECE Generations and Gender Programme (Russia’s representative Generations and Gender Survey was conducted in 2004, sample size of 11,260) convincingly demonstrate that in Russia over the past two decades a “quiet revolution” has taken place with respect to the institution of legal marriage: cohorts of Russians born in the first half of the 1960s and later increasingly begin living together with a partner outside a legal marriage; cohabitation is gradually crowding out the traditional form of marriage.

It cannot be said that cohabitation before marriage was not widespread in Russia. On the contrary, in the generations of Russians born before the war and thus establishing their families in the 1950s, no less than 20% of men and women under the age of 30 began their first partner union with a juridically informal relationship. Moreover, the tendency for an earlier start to sexual life and partnership relations was accompanied by a steady if slow growth of informal unions among youth. Meanwhile it is very probably that the family policy interventions in 1981-1990 are responsible for the drop in proportion of those who began a first partnership with cohabitation in the 1955-1965 female cohorts. A legal marriage tended to bring more rewards in that period.

However, among representatives of the cohorts born after 1960, the spread of informal unions take on an explosive character. Today no less than 25% of women by the age of 20, and no less than 45% by age 25, do not register a marriage with their first partner. Data for men confirm these figures – 40 to 45% of first unions are today informal unions (fig.1).

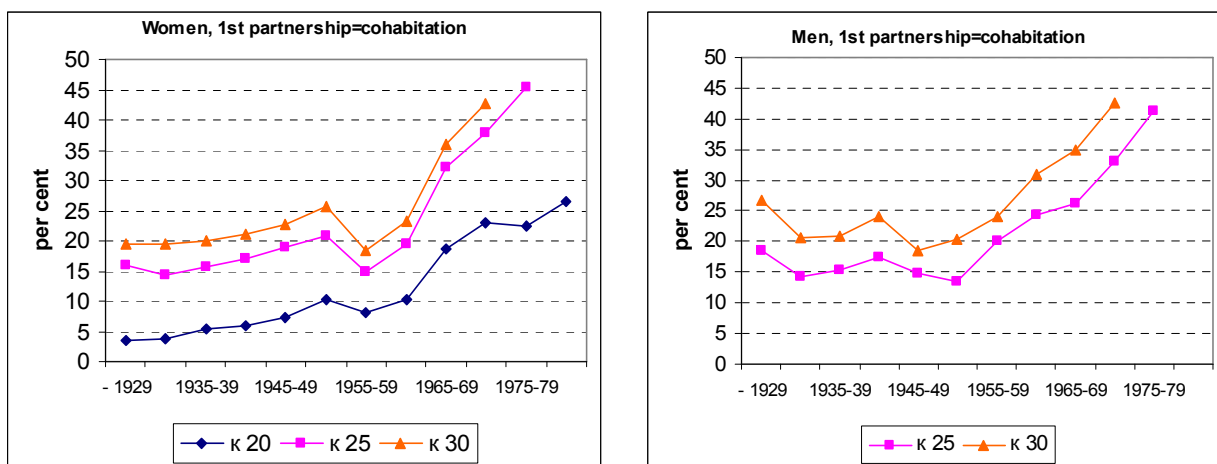


Figure 1: Cumulative percentage of women who had, by the specified age, entered a first partnership which was a consensual union: Russia, birth cohorts

Source: Author's estimates based on Russian GGS (2004).

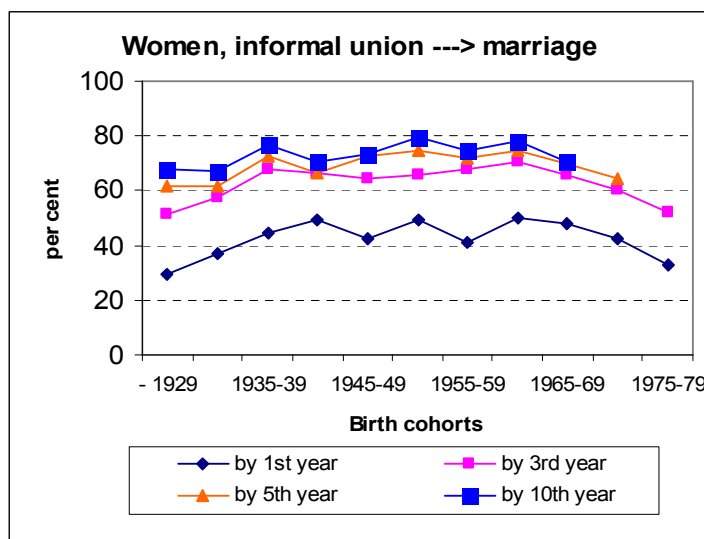


Figure 2. Cumulative percentage of women whose first partnership was a consensual union later converted into marriage, by the time since start of first partnership: Russia, birth cohorts.

Source: Author's estimates based on Russian GGS (2004).

Informal relations (consensual union) at the start of living together has the temporary character of a trial marriage for the majority. After some period of time for many couples the relationship becomes fully respectable, juridically formalized in a marriage. At the same time the RusGGS data indicate that registration of marriage in Russia is increasingly not simply postponed to a time when the stability of the relationship is proven, but does not happen at all. (Fig. 2). If in the cohorts born in the 1950s 50% had already registered a marriage with their partner less than a year from the start of a consensual union, then in the cohorts born in the second half of the 1970s this figure is 30%. The indicator also declines for those who live together a long time. Not long ago 70% of partners registered their marriage by the third year of a consensual union, today it is 50%. By the fifth year of family life the reduction is more than 10 percentage points. We note that if the relationship is not formalized within 3-5 years of living together, the changes of marriage will be registered at some time in this partnership are minimal: there is virtually no difference in the percentage of registered marriages by the fifth and the tenth year from the start of relations.

The paper also provides a glance at sociodemographic groups of Russian population where cohabitation is becoming more popular, and discuss possible factors laying behind the different behaviors.

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