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Is cohabitation an alternative to marriage in Russia?

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Key words

Life course, marriage, cohabitation, Russia, Event History Analysis

Abstract

Declining marriage rates and increasing cohabitation rates in modern Russia have become a trend that many scholars have observed and tried to explain through the perspective of the Second Demographic Transition. Our research is another attempt to understand these changes and to answer the question on the nature of cohabitation in Russia.

We aimed to find the difference between some patterns of matrimonial events and to define the nature of cohabitations in Russia. For these purposes, we applied descriptive statistics and Event History Analysis. We also suggested a logical scheme of the ways of development of the first cohabitations. We observed the opposite trends of matrimonial behavior: the younger Russian people are, the higher their probability of starting of the first cohabitation and the lower their risk to have the first marriage. Our analysis showed that a cohabitation is not yet a complete alternative to marriage, but it has a possibility of becoming it for younger generations.

Introduction

Cohabitation is an aspect of living arrangements that has considerably changed in the recent decades. In Russia, as well as in many European countries, marriage has been evolving substantially for a long time. Since the 1990s, a couple can be created not only by marriage but also by cohabitation and a union cannot be dissolved solely through divorce but also through separation(Avdeev and Monnier, 2000). Gerber (2009) understands, that non-marital unions as a substitute for the institution of legal marriage to some extent. Mills (2004) clamed that before becoming a substitute, a cohabitation had to endure a long evolutional process away from a 'deviant' relationship to a legal 'alternative' to marriage, or a selection process to filter weak unions. Taking this complexity of matrimonial behavior into consideration, we decided to trace the transformation of unions in Russia, investigate changes in the matrimonial behavior of the Russians based on generational differences.

The major goal of this paper is to find out whether the cohabitation is an independent social institution or just the first step on the path to marriage.

This research[1] was made in the context of the Life Course concept. The experts in this sphere of knowledge investigate the order and the interrelations between different socio-demographic events using the most current methods of analysis. Since the concept of the

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life course is only appearing in Russia today, there are not many empirical studies conducted with cutting-edge methods. Therefore, another important aim of our paper is to explore the distinctive features of the matrimonial behavior of the modern Russian generations and to fulfill the existing gap in the usage of cutting-edge methods of analysis by Russian social scientists. It is also important to analyze the first matrimonial events (mainly because most people usually have at least one of such event, which also accompanies a coming-of-age) from the perspective of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT). We analyzed retrospective marital histories from the Russian part of the Generations and Gender Survey. While prior studies based only on the first and second waves data, we introduce data of all three waves for the analysis of the topic.

The paper is organized into several sections. The literature review reveals what other authors conclude about matrimonial behavior of Russian people. The second section describes the data we have used. In the consequent section, we give an idea of the methods and models. In the final sections, we attempt to answer the question about the nature of cohabitations in Russia.

Union Formation in Russia and the Second Demographic Transition

For many centuries, Russia, much in contrast to Western European countries, was characterized by an early and universal marriage (Avdeev and Monnier, 2000; Puur et al., n.d.; Scherbov and van Vianen, 2004; Zakharov, 2008). In the 1960s, when Western Europe began to experience the new wave of the aging of marriage, the opposite process developed in Russia: the age at the first marriage started to decrease (Philipov and Jasilioniene, 2008). The rejuvenation process in union formation was constant until the early 1990s. For more than 30 years, between 1960 and 1993, the mean age at the first marriage decreased. At the beginning of the period, the age was 26.5 years for males) and 24.7 years for females, but in 1993, the ages were 23.9 and 21.8 years respectively. The demographers claimed that the average ages of marriage have been rising since then. In 1999 and 2004 years, for instance, they consisted 25.0 and 26.1 years for men, and 23.1 and 23.3 years for women (Avdeev and Monnier, 2000).

Russian demographers consider mentioned unions trends as the evidence of the late Second Demographic Transition coming to Russia (Puur et al., n.d.; Vishnevsky, 2009, 1998; Zakharov, 2008; Mitrofanova, 2013). They explain the emerged demographic behavior as the result of the broad and long-term changes in norms and values that many other countries faced between the mid-1960s and the end of the 1980s. During these years, as many authors notice, northern and western Europe, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and following southern Europe and Japan experienced declining marriage rates, increasing age at first marriage, and widespread of non-marital cohabitations (Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 1995; Qian and Preston, 1993).

According to scholars who have analyzed the notion of the Second Demographic Transition, the changes in norms and value orientations cause these trends in demographic behavior. Mayer (Mayer, 2004) claimed that since the 1960s the societies have embraced so-called "hedonistic individualism", which includes alternative lifestyles, emphasizing individual fulfillment and self-expression rather than sacrifices to the family, traditional values and altruistic orientations regarding children, and the collective good. Instead of being under the pressure of the tradition to marry, young people realize their personal goals for self-expression and enjoyment (Gerber, 2009). Researchers consider these changes rooted in post-War economic prosperity, longer-term secularization, rising education levels, and the feminist movement (Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 1995; Qian and Preston, 1993). Gerber (Gerber, 2009, p.11), reflecting on the new values associated with the Second Demographic Transition, said: "*Whatever their origin, ideational shifts in the direction of this rather diverse*

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set of norms make marriage and childbearing, associated with responsibility to others and sacrifices of individual freedom, less attractive".

In spite of the fact that Russian demographers adhere to the theory of Second Demographic Transition, there is an alternative worthwhile noticing. The declining rates of marriage and fertility in the socialist countries can be explained by the economic crises that happened to the countries following the collapse of state socialism. In these conditions, without good economic prospects, people avoid marriages (Gerber, 2009). At the same time, Gerber and Berman (Gerber and Berman, 2010), based on the results of their study, proved that in Russia, the relationship between cohabitation and marriage entry mostly confirm the ''transition'' perspective rather than a demographic response to economic shocks (Gerber and Berman, 2010, p.28): "*the recent decline of marriage in Russia is not a short-term response to the crises and uncertainty accompanying the Soviet collapse*". Both the decline in marriage and the increase in cohabitation are the part of a longer-term transition due to secular changes in norms that probably gained impetus from the cultural opening of Russia to the West in the mid-1980s or earlier. We tend to support this opinion.

The "transition" perspective predicts that cohabitees are less likely to enter marriage than single individuals. The Second Demographic Transition theory posits that cohabitation as a symbol of a new freedom of thinking and behaving comes to represent a legitimate alternative to marriage rather than just a trial marriage or the first step to marital union. People gained an opportunity to protest against authority, conformity, an opinion of others. The great weight is attached to individual self-realization, recognition, and expressive work values nowadays, when populations become wealthier and more educated. As a result, people need more time to choose an appropriate partner. The separation of the matrimonial, reproductive and sexual behaviors as one of the key characteristics of the Second Demographic transition lets them stay at each of these stages as long as they need and makes their approach to the process of family formation more conscious.

Data description

We used the panel data of the Russian part of Generations and Gender Survey (GGS-panel: 2004, 2007, and 2011). The work is essentially based on unpublished data the cleaning process of which has been done by the members of the research and educational group for Fertility, Family Formation and Dissolution organized with support of HSE Scientific Found (Research grant №14-05-0054). Consequently, it is the first research carried out on the matrimonial biographies of the full three-wave panel consisted of 5451 cases: generations born between the 1930 and the 1986; 32% of males and 68% of females. The uneven distribution of the respondents by sex is a consequence of working with a panel. We are unable to create the proper weights for panel because the weights of the respondents have been changed from wave to wave.

There are some reasons why we chose GGS. First, it is an international survey with strong theoretical and methodological background. The GGS includes panel design, multidisciplinarity, comparability between countries, context-sensitivity. The design of the survey applies the Life Course approach, which tends to understand different types of demographic events as a chain of the interconnected processes. The questions about life course events were asked in a very accurate and detailed way. For example, most of the dates contain not only years but also months of starts and ends of events.

The second reason why we use GGS is that this survey was designed to improve the understanding of demographic changes and the factors that influence the transformations discussed in previous parts of this paper. The survey explicitly addresses the new living arrangements like non-marital cohabitations, stepfamilies, one-person households, single parenthood, and partners living apart from each other, the so-called living apart together

relationships that have become increasingly common (Vikat et al., 2008). The long time-span of the histories, richness of information, and statistical power of the GGS make it appropriate for identifying the key features of matrimonial behavior of the Russians.

The following part of this paragraph is devoted to the main features of the questions about matrimonial history. The questionnaire distinguishes two types of unions: marriages and cohabitations. Marriages are legally registered and cohabitations are not registered cohabitations. As Vikat with co-authors emphasized in the paper "Generations and Gender Survey (GGS): towards a better understanding of relationships and processes in the life course", the retrospective data collection on unions that have ended was restricted to the ones where the partners were married or lived in the same household for at least three months. The three-month period leaves shortest casual relationships out of data collection. Determining the start of cohabitations relied on the respondent's judgment on when he or she actually started to live in the same household with the partner. This question was asked separately from the date of marriage, which may occur both later and earlier than the actual start of a cohabitation. In the same way, it is important to distinguish dissolutions and divorces. The question about the time when a cohabitation ended refers to the break-up of the cohabitation (or partner's death).

The specificity of these questions asking order is worth emphasizing. At first, it was asked whether a respondent had a partner and then whether that union was legally registered. As a result, in many cases, the real marriages were counted as the both types of unions instead of being only marriages. Therefore, we deleted cohabitations started simultaneously with marriages and dissolutions of such cohabitations. Excluding these cohabitations and dissolutions from the analysis, we "moved" the chain of cohabitations and dissolutions: the following cohabitations and dissolutions have become the events of the previous order, so the amount of all cohabitations and dissolutions was reduced. The *Table 1* illustrates the information about these changes.

Table 1. The amount of cohabitations and dissolutions before and after the data cleaning

An order of unions	Before the cleaning	After the cleaning
Cohabitation		
1	5138	2151
2	1130	482
3	175	90
4	26	15
5	6	4
Dissolutions		
1	2375	1085
2	527	244
3	86	41
4	11	8
5	3	3

The aim of our research is to illuminate the difference between marriages and cohabitations. To answer this question successfully, we should define several boundaries, which exclude the noise and unimportant information from our analysis.

The first restriction concerns the unimportance of the events of the second and higher orders. The *Table 2* represents the numbers and the shares of panel respondents who have the unions of different types and orders. 38% of Russian people had the first cohabitation and 84% had the first marriage in their lives. Less than 10% had the second events and less than 2% experienced the events of other orders. These shares demonstrate that the most typical model of matrimonial behavior is to have only one union of both types or one type. Thus, in our further analysis, we will pay the most of attention to the first unions.

Table 2. The numbers and shares of unions of different types and orders

An order of unions	An absolute number of unions in the panel	The percentage of respondents of the panel who have a union
Cohabitations		
1	2151	38,1%
2	482	8,5%
3	90	1,6%
4	15	0,3%
5	4	0,1%
Marriages		
1	4737	84,0%
2	560	9,9%
3	28	0,5%
4	1	0,0%

The second restriction of our analysis concerns the age of occurring of the first matrimonial events. As we mentioned before, the marriages in Russia were early and universal for a long time, and almost all representatives of the Soviet generations started their unions until the age of 25 years. We suppose that younger generations demonstrate the delay in the start of the first unions in comparison with the Soviet ones. That is why, if we want to trace the change in the age of the first union formation, we should analyze the wide range of ages. However, the representatives of the older generations have lived a longer life than the youth, and some unique cases of the first unions at ages older 40 years can shift the average age. Moreover, it is not correct to compare the full matrimonial biographies of people who reached the age of final celibacy and people who only started their union histories. Taking into account all these arguments, we decided to impose a limit on the age of the first matrimonial events occurring. At the *Table 3,* we show three possible variants of limit of this age: 25, 30, and 35 years.

Table 3. The numbers and shares of unions started under the age of 25, 30, 35 years

An order of unions	The unions started before the age of 25		The unions started before the age of 30		The unions started before the age of 35	
	Number of unions	Share of unions	Number of unions	Share of unions	Number of unions	Share of unions
Cohabitations						
1	1395	65%	1708	79%	1859	86%

2	387	80%	450	93%	471	98%
3	79	88%	88	98%	89	99%
4	15	100%	15	100%	15	100%
5	4	100%	4	100%	4	100%
Marriages						
1	3944	83%	4517	95%	4737	100%
2	515	92%	549	98%	560	100%
3	28	100%	28	100%	28	100%
4	1	100%	1	100%	1	100%

We decided to choose the age of 30 as the second restriction of our analysis because it satisfies the arguments listed above better than other limits. This restriction lets observe a significant portion of cases and gives an opportunity to fix the usual models of behavior of the Soviet Union generations and people who were socialized in the post-Soviet period.

In order to find out the differences between cohabitations and marriages in Russia, we analyze their features of the interaction. For this purpose, we used the cases when a respondent entered to both first cohabitation and the first marriage under the age of 30 years or did not have one or both of these events. Considering all the restrictions, we deal with 4880 cases.

Analysis

This part of the paper is devoted to the verification of our hypotheses about the interrelations between cohabitations and marriages. We compare the features of these unions in the perspective of gender and generations and define the nature of the first cohabitation in Russia via the type of the following event.

At *Figures 1, 2, 3*, and *4*, we present the share of the first matrimonial events in the total number of people of the same gender and generation without and with the age of occurring the first unions restriction. *Figures 1* and *2* contain information about cohabitations, while *Figures 3* and *4* illustrate the situation with marriages.

The distribution of the respondents who have the first matrimonial events shows that the restriction we chose did not distort the main trends of transformations, which are:

- the share of cohabitations is increasing from older generations to younger ones;
- the share of marriages is declining;
- females of all generations are starting the first cohabitation more actively than males;
- females of the younger generations are more actively entering the first marriages in comparison with males whereas, at previous generations, males were more active.

Figure 1. The share of the first cohabitation in the number of people of the same gender and generation (without the age restriction)

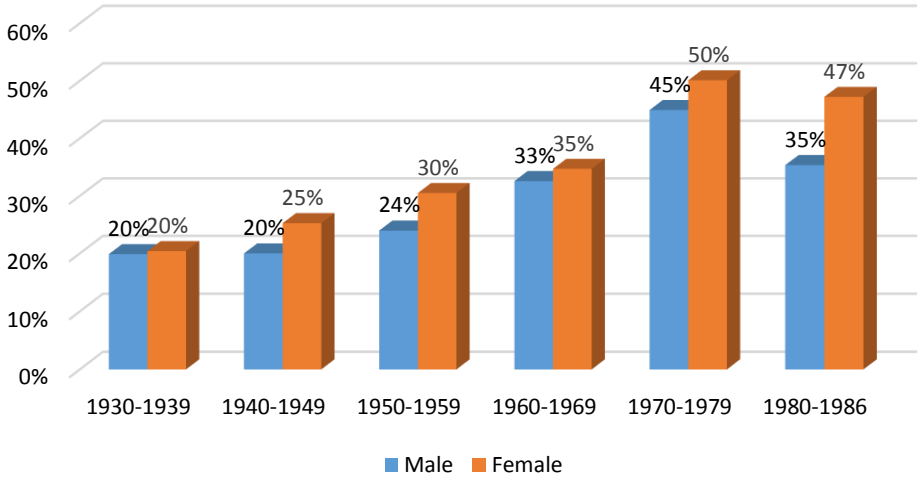


Figure 2. The share of the first cohabitation in the number of people of the same gender and generation (only events occurring under the age of 30)

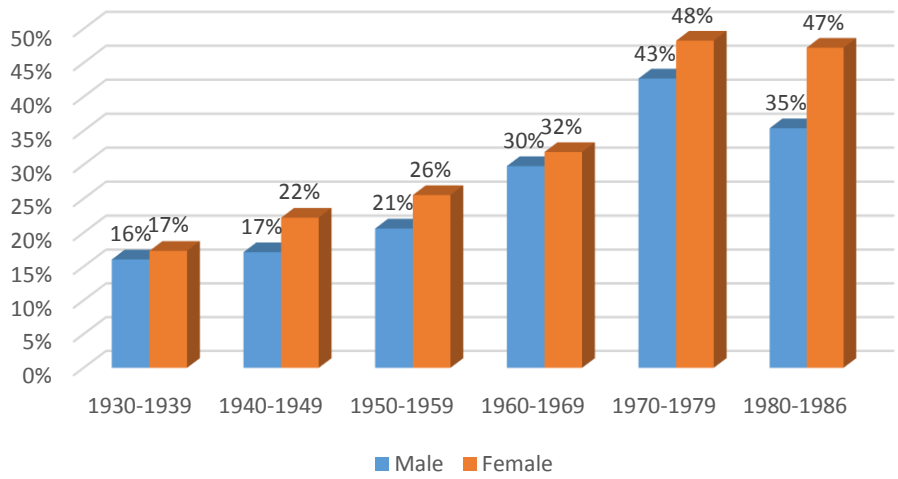


Figure 3. The share of the first marriage in the number of people of the same gender and generation (without the age restriction)

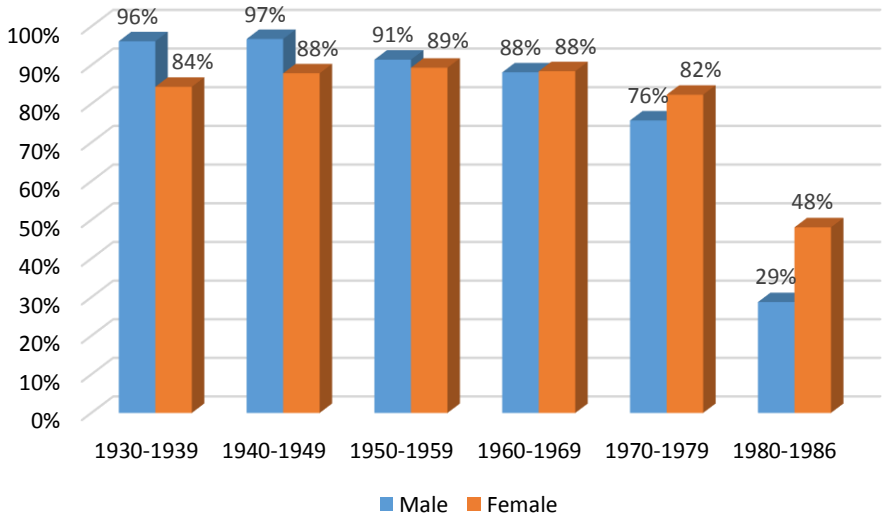


Figure 4. The share of the first marriage in the number of people of the same gender and generation (only events occurring under the age of 30)

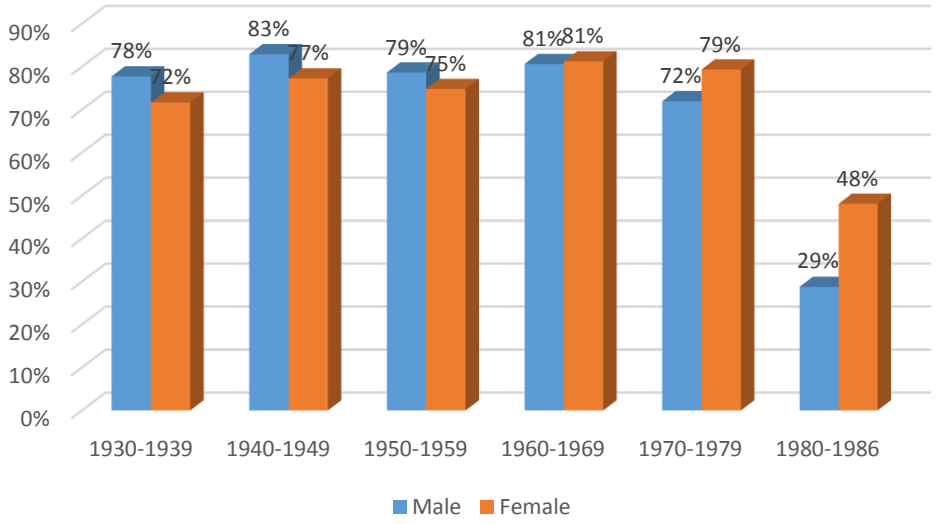


Table 4 contains the average ages of the first unions. The total difference between the first cohabitation and the first marriage is very small: marriage are occurring only several month later than cohabitation. The gender and generational difference is much noticeable. Females start their first marriages a month earlier than cohabitations. Males start their both events later than females and in a different order: their marriages are occurring 6 months later than their first cohabitations.

There are three generations who, in average, firstly started cohabitation and then marriage: the oldest one and the youngest two. The generation of the 1930s have a small difference between matrimonial events, and their behavior was influenced by the unstable wartime. The youth has a year of difference between these events, and their behavior is the result of changing norms about family formation and sexuality.

Table 4. The average ages of the first unions in the perspective of gender and generations

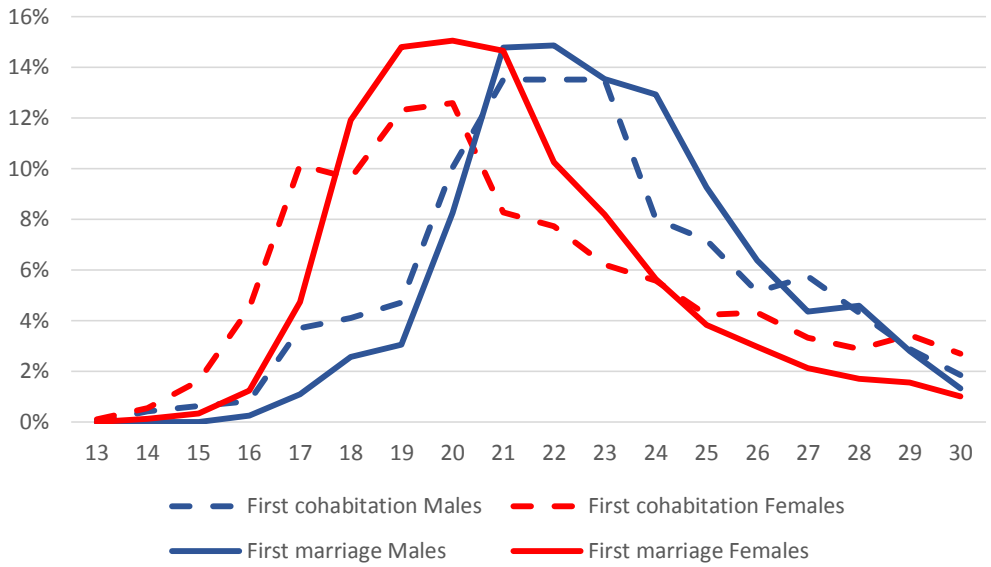
Categiries	1st cohabitation	1st marriage
Gender		
male	22.66	23.15
female	21.24	21.12
Generations		
1930-1939	22.45	22.63
1940-1949	22.32	22.00
1950-1959	22.16	21.85
1960-1969	21.97	21.67
1970-1979	21.20	21.01
1980-1986	20.10	21.11
Total	21.67	21.76

Figures 5, 6, and *7* are devoted to the ages of the first matrimonial events. Analyzing this parameter, we use the restriction of these ages by 30 years. First graph shows the

distribution of the age in perspective of gender. The second and the third graphs represent the generational differences.

Figure 5 gives an idea of the typical ages of entry to the first unions. Female prefer to start the first cohabitation and the first marriage in the age of 19 and 20 respectively. The most frequent starting matrimonial biographies age is higher for men than for women. They are about 21,5 years for both types of unions.

Figure 5. The age of the first unions in the perspective of gender



Figures 6 and *7* show the difference between unions: ages of the first cohabitations are fluctuating more than ages of the first marriages. It means that there are more generally accepted norms concerning the age of the entrance at married life, which guide the real behavior of people.

Despite all the fluctuations of the ages of the first cohabitations, there are some common trends for all generations. There are several peaks at each curve. The main peak of high intensity of union formation is the age of 20. For the modern generations, this peak is earlier: the generation born in the 1970s reached 40 years at the moment of the survey, so we can conclude that the age of 17, they demonstrate as the most frequent, will remain this position. We have the same assumptions for the youngest generation. They reached only 25 years, but the age of the first cohabitation has been steadily declining from the age of 21.

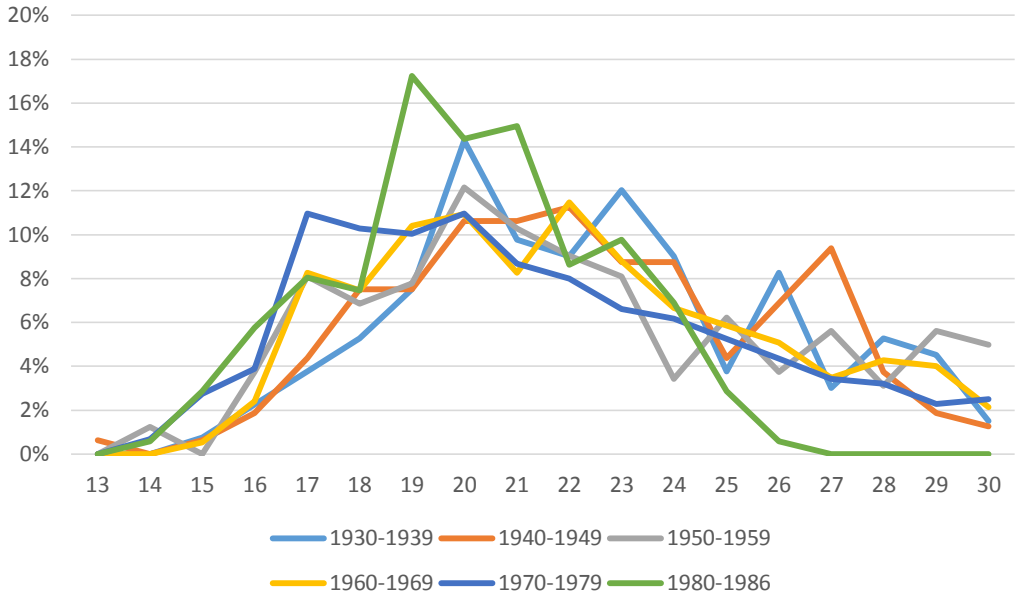
Other peaks of frequent ages differ from generation to generation.

For first two cohorts, these peaks are concentrating around the age of 26-27. These respondents were socialized at post-war time when was the univocal public discourse restricted extramarital relationships.

For second two cohorts, the first less frequent age is 17 and the second are 22 and 25. These people were the first post-war Russians who massively tasted still forbidden fruit of unmarried unions.

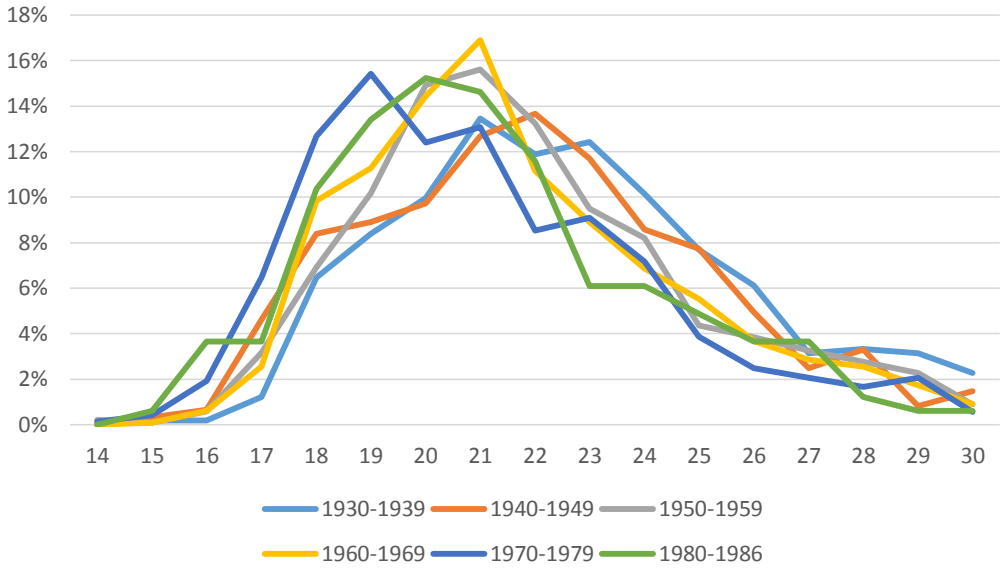
For the youngest two generations, the second popular age is 20-21. The youth started to live in extramarital couples as early as the previous two generations did, but a bit more actively. They did not hear constant judgments of cohabitations from an outside world during their childhood. They always knew that it is one of the legitimate ways of living together, so, when they have grown up, they started to choose this easier and simpler than marriage way.

Figure 6. The age of the first cohabitation in the perspective of generations



The curves of the ages of the first marriages are more smoothed than the curves for cohabitations. There are not as many peaks as it was in the case of cohabitations. More often, there is only one vivid peak around the age of 21. The ages of the youngest generations are lower. More often, people of the 1980s started their first marriage at 19. It is a phenomenon we do not know how to explain by now.

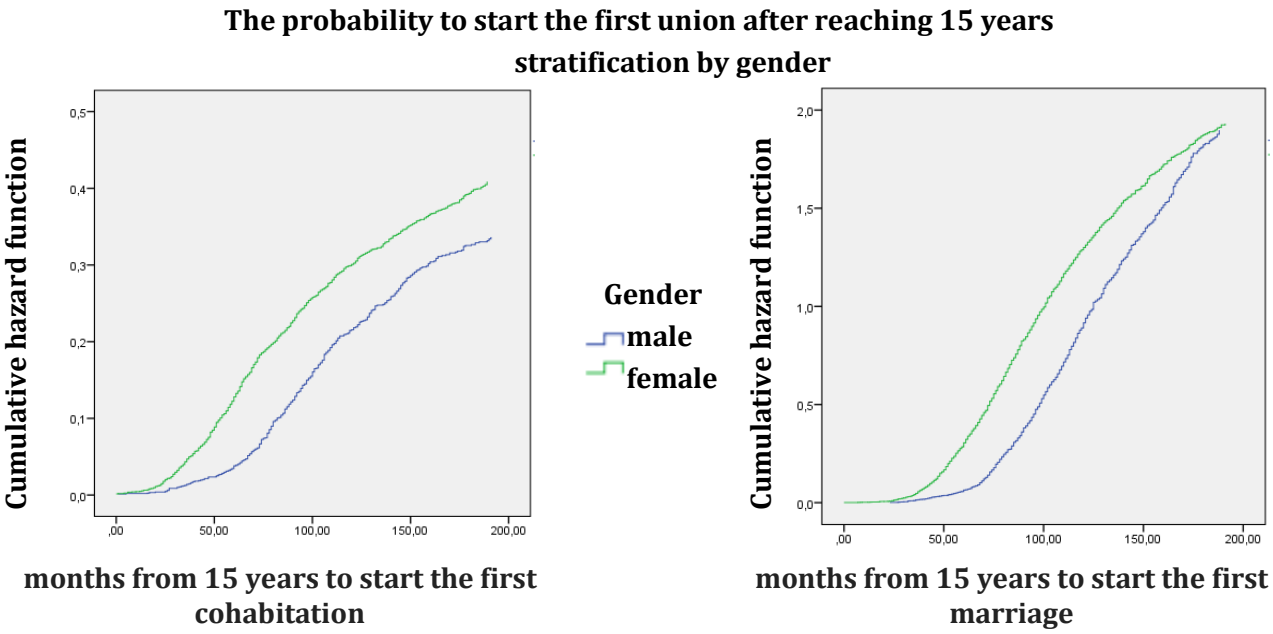
Figure 7. The age of the first marriage in the perspective of generations



In order to show the difference in the risk of occurring of matrimonial events, we built four Event History models (*Figure 8* and *Figure 9*).

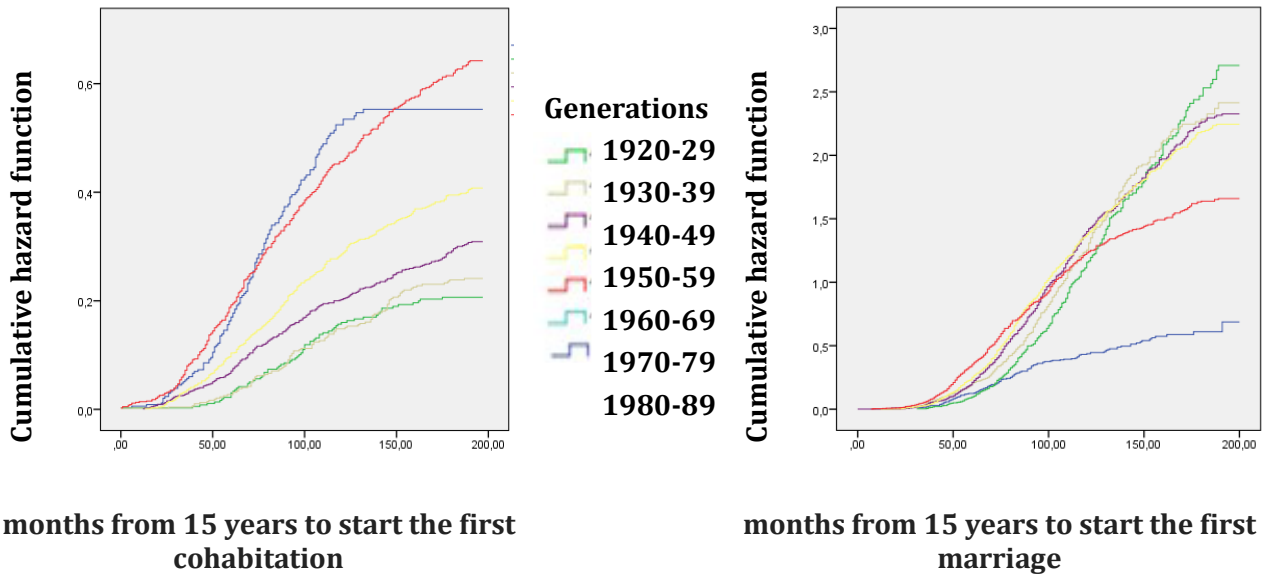
The first pair of the hazard models (Cox regressions) was made for marriages and cohabitations started between the age of 15 and 30 years with stratification by gender. The gender distinctions are the same for both cohabitations and marriages: women have a higher probability to experience the first union. However, in the case of marriage, the probabilities of two genders are almost equal in the age of 30.

Figure 8. Hazard curves for the first unions (stratification by gender)



The second pair of the hazard models was made for the both types of unions with the stratification by generations. We observe the opposite trends of behaviors in cohabitation and marriage: the younger the representatives, the higher their probability to start the first cohabitation and the lower their risk to have a marriage.

Figure 9. Hazard curves for the first unions (stratification by generations)



The covariates of our models were gender, generations, educational level and place of living. Almost all regression coefficients of our models are statistically significant that is a complement to the models. Russians with the higher education are less likely to start their matrimonial biographies (both cohabitations and marriages) than people with a college degree or secondary vocational education. The probability to enter to the first cohabitation is higher for those who live in big cities, while the residents of rural areas are likely to

legalize their partnerships. We consider it a result of the new way of thinking connected with the changes of values that we described in the literature review to this paper.

The last part of our analysis concerns the key question of our research: what is the nature of cohabitation in Russia? Is it an independent social institution or just a trial marriage?

To answer this question, we used all the first cohabitations in the sample without the limit at age. *Figure* 10 demonstrates all the possible ways of development of the first cohabitation. The first embranchment is whether the cohabitation ends or not. As we can see, 90% of the first cohabitations were finished at the moment of the survey.

There are two cases when the first cohabitation was finished with the simultaneous occurring of the disruption of the union and the start of the first marriage.

Other cases have green and blue colors and have very certain and important meaning. The green path means that cohabitations, finished in this ways, have patterns of an independent social institution because they did not develop into a marriage. They started and finished as cohabitations. The blue path means that cohabitation was just a first step to the marriage.

Figure 10. The ways of development of the first cohabitations

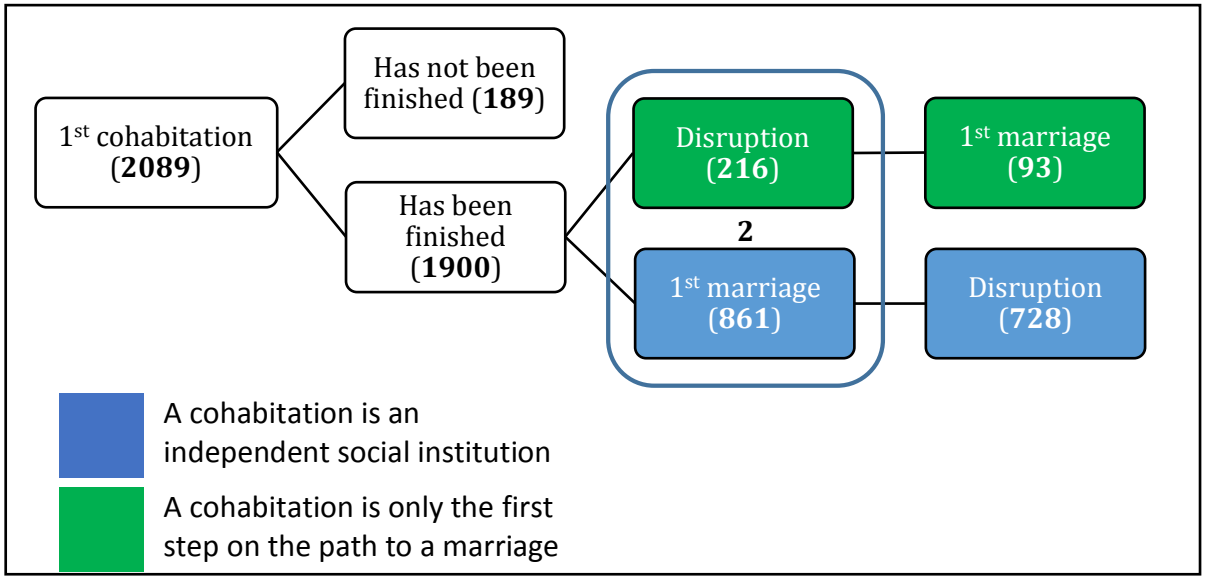


Figure 10 shows that 83% of the first finished cohabitations were just a ”trial marriage” while only 16% had the patterns of an independent social institution.

There are 11% of cases when cohabitation was finished with the dissolution (any other events did not follow) and 4% of cases when there was the first marriage after the disruption.

At 45% of cases, cohabitation was finished with the start of the first marriage (without following events). At 38% of cases, there was a disruption after the first marriage. We do not have an information whether such marriages were registered with the same person. Nevertheless, the fact is the same that cohabitation was a try. If this try was successful, people entered a marriage. If it was not, they found the “right” person and started marriage with him or her.

The presented scheme clearly shows that the first cohabitation is not independent in Russia, but we assumed that the perception of cohabitations is changing from Soviet generations to modern ones. To verify this hypothesis, we counted all the variants when cohabitation was an independent institution and a trial marriage and distributed these numbers by gender and generations (*Figures 11* and *12*). All the changes are more significant for women than for men.

Figure 11. The patterns of matrimonial behavior proved that cohabitation is a "trial marriage"

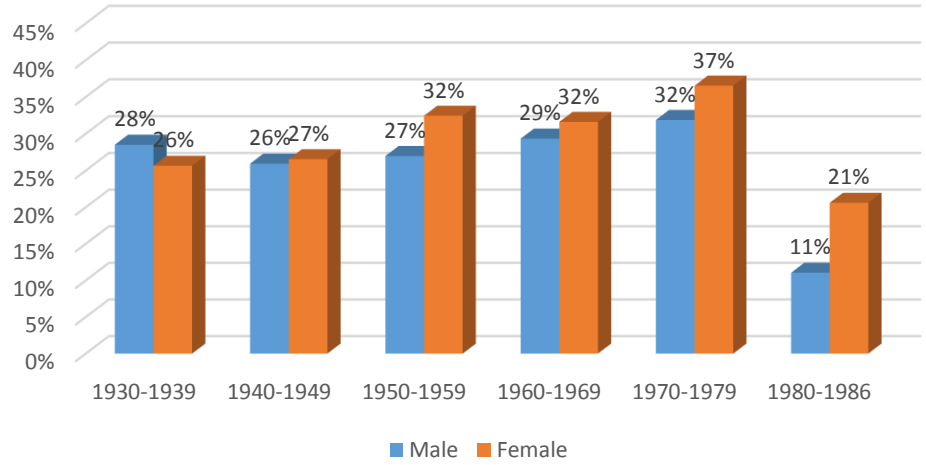
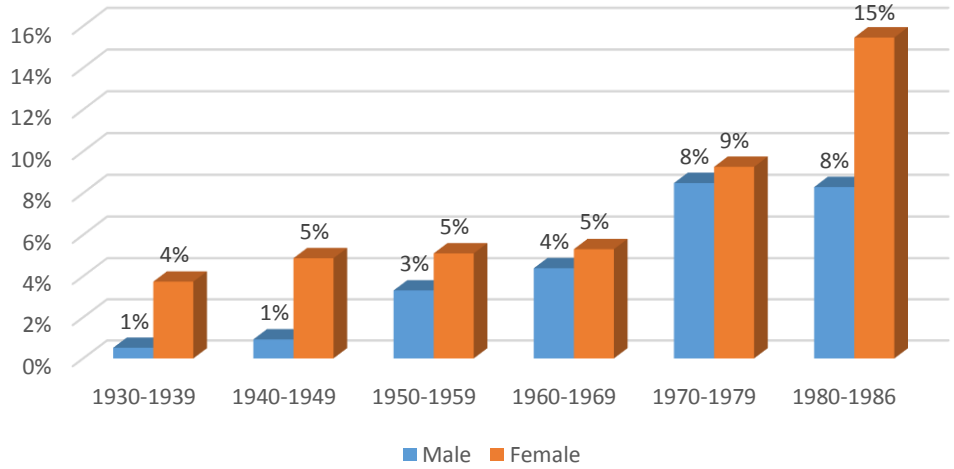


Figure 12. The patterns of matrimonial behavior proved that cohabitation is an independent social institution



At *Figure 11*, we observe an upward trend: the proportion of people who started their matrimonial biographies from a cohabitation that grows into a marriage does not decrease. The youngest generation of GGS panel is an exception. However, it is worth keeping in mind that the representatives of the youngest generation are only at the beginning of their adult life. In other words, they just started to incarnate their intentions and the situation can change in the future.

As we saw before, for the greater part of Russians, a cohabitation is a "trial marriage" but *Figure 12* demonstrates that the proportion of those for whom this type of unions does not turn out a marriage increases for the representatives of the generations born from the 1970s to the 1980s.

Conclusions

This paper has examined the differences between marriages and cohabitations in Russia. We used three-wave panel of the Russian part of GGS for this aim. We harmonized the matrimonial biographies of the respondents and made several alterations at initial database. First, we decided to analyze only first unions because the majority of Russians experience only first matrimonial events in their lifetime. Second, we deleted the first cohabitations (and corresponding disruptions), which occurred simultaneously with

marriages, because we perceived these unions as different events, and marriage has more legislative power and social status than cohabitation. Third, in most cases, we analyzed only unions occurred under the age of 30. This restriction intended to equalize the chances of different generations to have the first union.

Our analysis consisted of two parts: comparison of patterns of marriages and cohabitations in the perspective of gender and generations and defining the nature of the first cohabitation in Russia via the type of the following event.

The first pattern was the number of unions. The analysis revealed the increase in cohabitations and decrease in marriages for modern generations in comparison with the Soviet ones. Females of all generations are starting the first cohabitation more actively than males, but young females are more actively entering the first marriages in comparison with males whereas, at previous generations, males were more active.

The second pattern was the age of the first cohabitation and marriage. In average, females start their first marriages only a month earlier than cohabitations. Males start their both events later than females and in a different order: their marriages are occurring 6 months later than their first cohabitations. The youngest generations start cohabitations a year earlier than marriages. The distributions of these ages are fluctuating more in case of cohabitations than marriages. It means that there are more generally accepted norms concerning the age of the entrance at married life, which guide the real behavior of people.

The third pattern was the risk to have the first union after the age of 15. Women have a higher probability to experience the first union. However, in the case of marriage, the probabilities of two genders are almost equal in the age of 30. Young people are starting cohabitations with higher probability than previous generations, but the youth is not in a hurry to register their relationships.

To define the nature of cohabitations, we used all the first cohabitations in the sample without the age restrictions. The analysis revealed that 83% of the first finished cohabitations were just a “trial marriage” while only 16% had the characteristics of an independent social institution. Thus, we are not able to assert that a cohabitation is an independent institution in Russia but the perception of cohabitations is likely to transform from Soviet generations to modern ones. The fact that the proportion of Russians for whom cohabitation does not grow into a marriage rises for the representatives of the generations born from the 1970s to the 1980s proves this idea.

In conclusion, the analysis illuminates the increasing difference between matrimonial behavior of Soviet and modern Russian generations. Cohabitations are becoming widespread among young people and slowly but surely becoming more distant from marriages.

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