

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social differences in the attitudes towards the timing of parenthood in Bulgaria. Results from the European Social Survey

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the gendered nature and the influence of social positioning on of the attitudes towards the timing of motherhood and fatherhood among young adults in Bulgaria. The European Social Survey (ESS), conducted in 2018 with a sub-sample of respondents at age 15-45 years, was used in the analysis. We first studied the perceptions about the timing of motherhood and fatherhood in an international comparative perspective. Next, we ran multiple linear regression models on the ages, considered ideal, too young or old to become a mother/father. The international comparisons reveal the gendered nature of the attitudes of the timing of parenthood. The reproductive "youthfulness" of a woman is more strongly emphasised and shapes the attitudes towards the timing of motherhood in Eastern and Central European countries. The socioeconomic "maturity" of a man shapes the attitudes and the social expectations about the timing of fatherhood in Southern and Western European countries. The social positioning (social status) is associated with the differences in the attitudes towards the timing of motherhood and fatherhood. The attitudes supporting the model of "younger" parenthood prevail among the respondents with low education, living in small residential areas, and belonging to ethnic minorities. Highly educated respondents, the individuals, living in big cities and those from Bulgarian ethnicity have stronger preferences towards motherhood and fatherhood at later ages.

Keywords: parenthood; timing of motherhood; timing of fatherhood; young adults; life course; European Social Survey; Bulgaria

1. Introduction

The transition of parenthood is associated with social expectations and cultural norms attached to men and women's roles in the sphere of family and parenthood^[1]. The social expectations normatively prescribe the social conditions and the individual circumstances for taking the decision to become a parent^[2, 3]. The social expectations towards parenthood have an age-graded and gendered dimension related to the role models, normatively ascribed to men and women^[4]. The gender roles in family and parenthood shape men and women's identities and behaviours. In more traditional societies, the nurturing role of the woman as a mother and a caregiver was emphasised, while the leading role of a head of the households and a main financial provider for the family was attributed to men^[5]. In the recent times the gender-related attitudes about motherhood and fatherhood were changing in a more egalitarian direction in many countries. From a

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“quasi-natural standard” for men and women, parenthood became strongly connected to the individual life satisfaction and diversified the life course trajectories of the contemporary young men and women^[6]. The increasing participation of women in the sphere of education and paid work, the stronger career orientations and the striving for equality were followed by a process of postponement of family formation and parenthood^[7]. This trend was reflected by the increasing age of marriage and childbearing and delayed family formation and parenthood, which extended men and women’s reproductive lives to “exceptionally” high reproductive ages^[8]. The changing social expectations about family and reproduction were followed also by a process of de-standardisation of the individual life course and decoupling of the major life events^[9, 10]. The process of de-standardisation of the life course of the contemporary young generations is observed in many societies as a result of the processes of prolonged education of young people^[11], the instability of jobs on the labour market^[12], the increasing preferences for self-realisation beyond family formation and parenthood^[13], increased preferences for different leisure activities^[14] and increasing expectations towards the quality of partner relationships^[15], etc.

The individual life course is structured by different life events and transitions^[16, 17]. The transition to adulthood is shaped by identity and social status changes related to the fulfilment of new social roles of men and women^[18, 19]. The process of leaving parental home and establishment of an independent household, completion of education, finding a stable job, union formation (getting married or start living in cohabitation) and becoming a parent define the passage to adulthood. In the recent times of increasing uncertainty and economic instability, young people experience difficulties to achieve personal autonomy and economic independence. The difficulties to fulfil the role expectations related to adulthood influence young people’s (mental) health and wellbeing^[20] and postpone family formation and parenthood. The process of de-coupling of the life events reshaped the timing and diversified the sequence of the life course events in the school–training–work–union formation–parenthood nexus^[9, 19].

All these processes have their contextual specifics. Bulgaria is a country that underwent deep social transformation in the recent decades of transition to democracy and a market economy. The uncertainty of the transition period affected different spheres of young people’s lives and reshaped the established role models and life course transitions. In the recent period, the mean age of leaving parental home household increased to 30 years^[21] and the mean age of first marriage reached 28 years for women and 31 years for men in 2021^[22]. The structural discrepancies between the system of education and the changing labour market conditions have prolonged the process of finding a stable job among young people^[23]. This was paralleled with an increase in the share of NEETs, which became 19% of the age group 20-34 years in 2022^[24] and an increase in the youth unemployment that reached 8% in the same year^[25]. Many young people left the country in search for better opportunities for studies, work and life abroad^[26]. The growing socioeconomic inequalities negatively affected the educational trajectories, making young people with socially disadvantaged background (e.g. those belonging to ethnic minorities and from poor families) at higher risk of school drop-out, which reached 13% in 2020^[27]. The mean age at birth of first child increased to 27 years in 2022^[28], witnessing a process of postponement of parenthood among the young generations in the country.

The present study focuses on the attitudes towards the timing of motherhood and fatherhood among young adults in Bulgaria by focusing on the ideal age, the age perceived as too young to become a mother or a father and the age considered too old to have (more) children. The aim of the study is 1) to explore the gendered nature of the attitudes towards the timing of motherhood and fatherhood among young adults and 2) to reveal the association between social positioning, i.e. the social status differences, and the attitudes towards the timing of motherhood and fatherhood.

2. Materials and methods

The present analysis is based on the European Social Survey (ESS), conducted in 2018. The European Social Survey is an academically driven cross-national survey conducted across Europe every two years. The ESS, round 9 (2018) includes a special module on the attitudes towards the timing of life [29]. The initial sample of respondents was separated randomly in two groups that responded to questions about the timing of life of men and women. The questions about the ideal age of motherhood and fatherhood and the ages, perceived as too young or too old to become a parent are the following: “In your opinion, what is the ideal age for a girl/boy or woman/man to become a mother/father?”, “Before what age would you say a woman/man is generally too young to become a mother/father?”, “After what age would you say a woman/man is generally too old to consider having more children?”.

In the present analysis, we focus on the attitudes about the timing of motherhood and fatherhood among Bulgarian respondents at age 15-45 years. The procedures of the data preparation and the data analysis include inspecting the variables used in the present analysis for missing and out of range values, recoding the variables and running cross-tabulations and regression analyses. In this study we present first the variation in the attitudes towards the timing of motherhood and fatherhood in an international comparative perspective. As a next step, we run multiple linear regression models with independent variables, including the attitudes towards the ages considered ideal, too young or old to become a mother or a father. The software used for the data analysis is Stata Statistical Software: Release 17. College Station, TX: StataCorp LLC.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the timing of motherhood and fatherhood - Bulgarian sub-sample of respondents at age 15-45 years, participating in European Social Survey, 2018.

Ideal ages of parenthood		
Ideal age of to become a mother	Mean	24.6
	N. of observations	(287)
Age perceived as too young to become mother	Mean	18.6
	N. of observations	(308)
Age perceived too old for a woman to have (more) children	Mean	43.4
	N. of observations	(258)
Ideal age to become a father	Mean	26.9
	N. of observations	(262)
Age perceived too young to become a father	Mean	20.7
	N. of observations	(285)
Age perceived too old for a man to have (more) children	Mean	48.6
	N. of observations	(216)

The descriptive statistics of the Bulgarian sub-sample presented in **Table 1** show that the ideal mean age to become a mother is 24.6 years, which is slightly lower than the actual mean age at birth of first child at the time of the survey, - 26.2 in 2018^[28]. The age perceived as too young to become a mother is 18.6 years, while the limit of reproduction for women is reached at age 43.4 years. The ideal mean age of a man to become a father is 26.9 years and it is slightly higher than the ideal mean age of entry into motherhood. The mean age considered too young to become a father is 20.7 years, while the end of the male reproductive life is reached at 48.6 years. The data show that the perceived span of women’s reproductive life is more limited compared to men’s reproductive life and the mean ideal time for motherhood is reached in the early 20s.

According to the results, the ideal time for fatherhood is reached in the late 20s and the prevailing attitudes towards the end of men’s reproductive life covers more advanced ages.

The independent variables used in the regression analyses are gender; age (defined in three groups - 15-25, 26-35, 36-45 years); education (Primary or lower; Secondary; Tertiary); economic status of the respondent (In paid work; Unemployed/Economically inactive); legal marital status (Never married; Married or lost partner (Divorced, Separated or Widowed)); number of children (Childless; Having one child; Having two or more children); belonging to ethnic minority (Yes/No); place of residence (Living in the capital of the country or in a big city with more than 100 000 inhabitants; Living in small towns with less than 100 000 inhabitants; Living in a village); and religiosity. The question about religiosity is “Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are?” The response options are presented on a 10-point scale, which ranges from 0 to 10 (from “Not religious at all” to “Very religious”). The variable was dichotomised in two groups. The first includes nonreligious or slightly religious respondents (combined scores from 0 to 5) and the second includes the individuals who are (strongly) religious (combined scores from 6 to 10). The descriptive statistics of the independent variables are presented in **Table 2**. Men and women who participated in the study have an almost equal share. The prevailing share of the respondents includes the age group 36 – 45 years – appr. 50% of participants in the study who responded to questions about the timing of motherhood or fatherhood. The respondents with secondary education prevail in the sample - almost 50% in both groups. More than half of the respondents were employed - appr. 60% in both groups. The never married respondents were 64.3% in the group responding to questions about the timing of motherhood and 58.0% in the group responding to questions about the timing of fatherhood. The childless respondents prevail in both groups - 54.7% and 44.7%. The percentage of the people living in big cities is 35.8% and 39.0%, respectively, in both groups. The majority of the respondents have Bulgarian ethnicity - 80.4% in the group responding to questions about the timing of motherhood and 84.6% in the group responding to questions about the timing of fatherhood. Slightly above 75% of the respondents fall in the group of not religious or slightly religious people.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the Bulgarian sub-sample of respondents at age 15-45 years, participating in the European Social Survey, 2018.

Gender		Timing of motherhood	Timing of fatherhood
Man	Percent	47.9	47.7
	N. of observations	(167)	(157)
Woman	Percent	52.2	52.3
	N. of observations	(182)	(172)
Total	Percent	100	100
	N. of observations	(349)	(329)
Age			
15-25 yrs	Percent	28.7	27.7
	N. of observations	(100)	(91)
26-35 yrs	Percent	25.2	24.3
	N. of observations	(88)	(80)
36-45 yrs	Percent	46.1	48.0
	N. of observations	(161)	(158)
Total	Percent	100	100
	N. of observations	(349)	(329)

Table 2. (Continued)

Gender		Timing of motherhood	Timing of fatherhood
Education			
Primary or lower	Percent	32.4	30.4
	N. of observations	(113)	(100)
Secondary	Percent	46.7	49.5
	N. of observations	(163)	(163)
Tertiary	Percent	20.9	20.1
	N. of observations	(73)	(66)
Total	Percent	100	100
	N. of observations	(349)	(329)
Employment status			
In paid work	Percent	59.6	60.4
	N. of observations	(208)	(198)
Unemployed/Economically inactive	Percent	40.4	39.6
	N. of observations	(141)	(130)
Total	Percent	100	100
	N. of observations	(349)	(328)
Marital status			
Single	Percent	64.3	58.0
	N. of observations	(223)	(189)
Married/ Lost partner (separated, divorced, widowed)	Percent	35.7	42.0
	N. of observations	(124)	(137)
Total	Percent	100	100
	N. of observations	(347)	(326)
Number of children			
No children	Percent	54.7	44.7
	N. of observations	(191)	(147)
One child	Percent	21.8	26.1
	N. of observations	(76)	(86)
Two or more children	Percent	23.5	29.2
	N. of observations	(82)	(96)
Total	Percent	100	100
	N. of observations	(349)	(329)
Place of residence			
Big city	Percent	35.8	39.0
	N. of observations	(125)	(127)
Town	Percent	33.8	30.0
	N. of observations	(118)	(99)
Village	Percent	30.4	31.0
	N. of observations	(106)	(103)
Total	Percent	100	100
	N. of observations	(349)	(329)

Table 2. (Continued)

Gender		Timing of motherhood	Timing of fatherhood
Belong to ethnic minority			
No	Percent	80.4	84.6
	N. of observations	(275)	(274)
Yes	Percent	19.6	15.4
	N. of observations	(67)	(50)
Total	Percent	100	100
	N. of observations	(342)	(324)
Religiosity			
Not or slightly religious	Percent	76.3	78.4
	N. of observations	(254)	(251)
(Very) religious	Percent	23.7	21.6
	N. of observations	(79)	(69)
Total	Percent	100	100
	N. of observations	(333)	(320)

3. Results

3.1. Attitudes towards the timing of motherhood in European countries

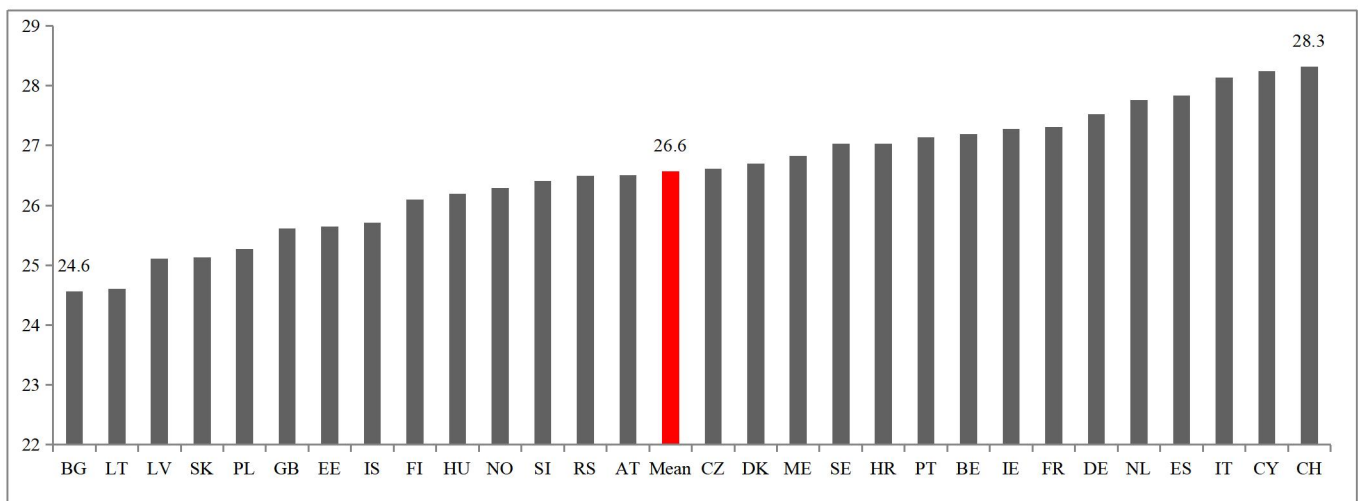


Figure 1. Ideal mean age to become a mother in European countries - sub-sample of respondents at age 15-45 participating in the European Social Survey, 2018.

The ideal mean age of motherhood for all countries participating in ESS-2018 is 26.6 years (Figure 1). The lowest ideal mean age was recorded in Bulgaria, 24.6 years, while the highest ideal mean age was observed in Switzerland – 28.3 years. Lower ideal mean ages of motherhood (in the mid-20s) were observed also in Central and Eastern European countries - Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia and Poland. The ideal time of becoming a mother is reached in the late 20s in Western and Southern European countries like Cyprus (28.3), Italy (28.1), Spain (27.8), the Netherlands (27.8), and Germany (27.5).

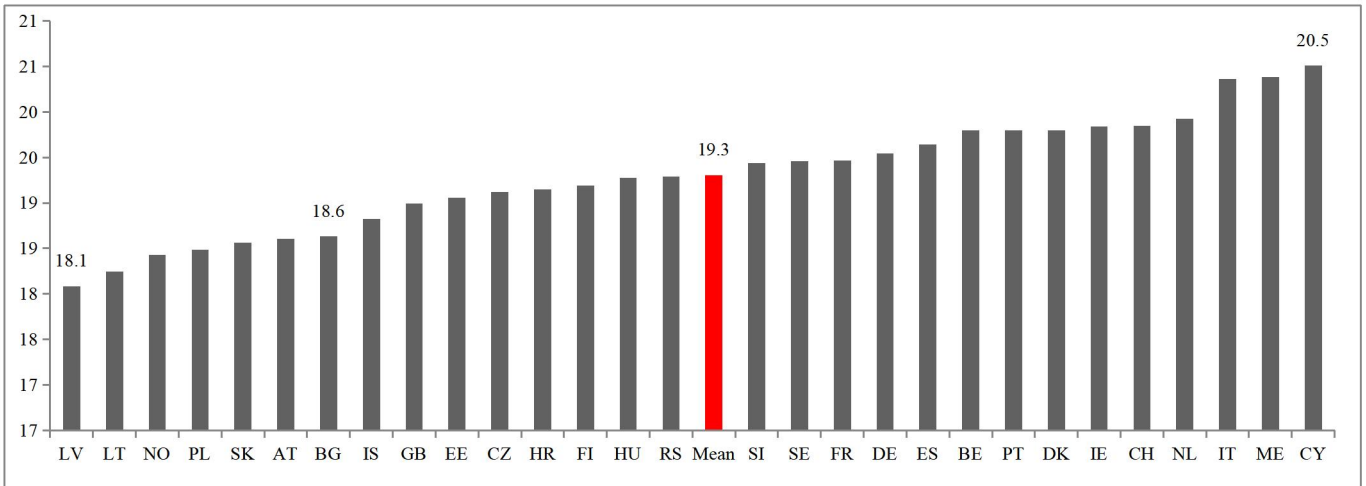


Figure 2. Mean age perceived as too early to become a mother in European countries - sub-sample of respondents at age 15-45 participating in the European Social Survey, 2018.

The mean age perceived as too early to become a mother is 19.3 years for all countries, participating in ESS-2018 (**Figure 2**). The lowest mean age is observed in Latvia, 18.1 years, and the highest is recorded among the respondents from Cyprus, 20.5 years. Central and Eastern European countries like Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Bulgaria have the lowest mean ages perceived as too young for a woman to become a mother, 18-19 years. The countries with the highest mean ages are Cyprus, Montenegro, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland, 20-21 years.

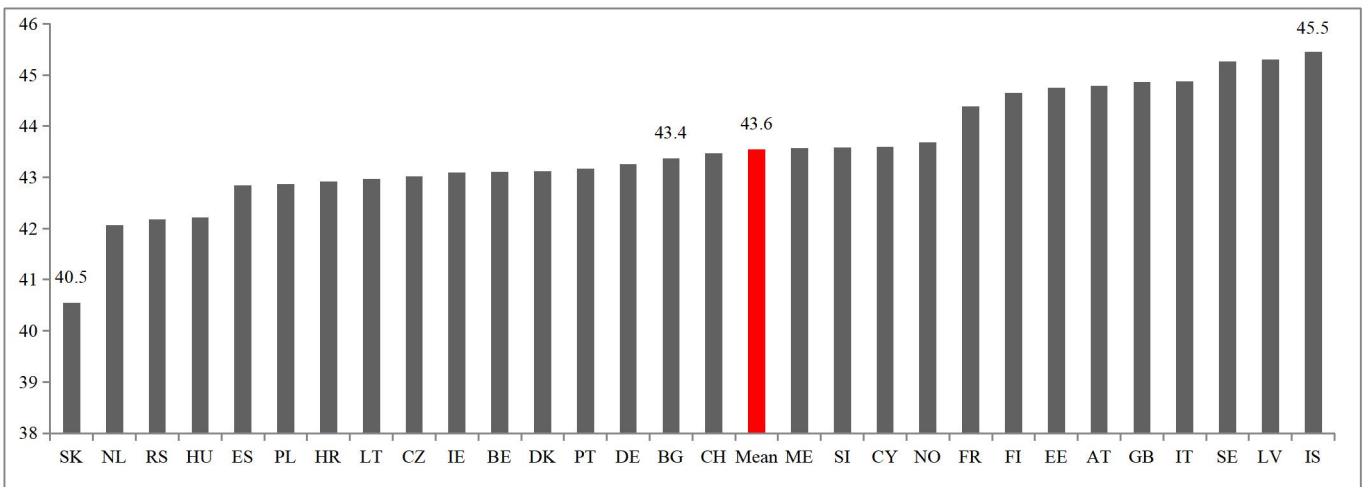


Figure 3. Mean age perceived as too old for a woman to have (more) children in European countries - sub-sample of respondents at age 15-45 participating in the European Social Survey, 2018.

The mean age perceived as too old for a woman to have (more) children among the European countries is 43.6 years (**Figure 3**). Slovakia is the country with the lowest mean age perceived as too old for a woman to have (more) children, 40.5 years. The highest age is observed in Iceland - 45.5 years. Bulgaria is positioned close to the mean for all countries, 43.4 years. The variation in the attitudes of the respondents from different countries is somewhat mixed. The respondents from Slovakia, the Netherlands, Serbia, Hungary and Spain perceive the end of the female reproductive life in the early 40s, while the individuals from countries like Iceland, Latvia, Sweden, Italy and Great Britain perceive the end of the reproductive life in the mid-40s.

3.2. Attitudes towards the timing of fatherhood in European countries

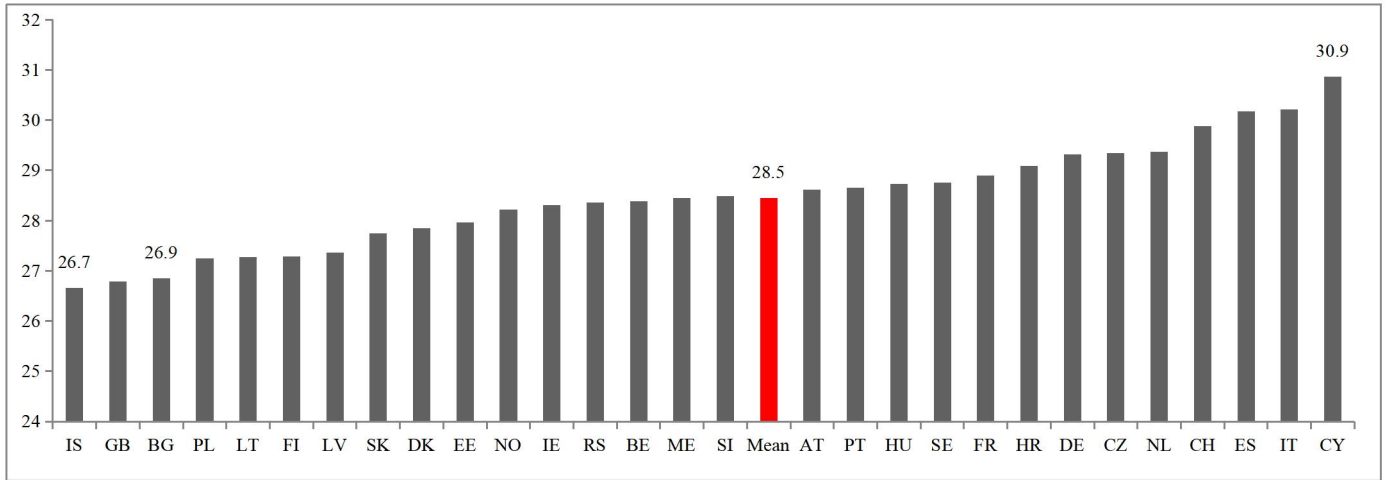


Figure 4. Ideal mean age to become a father in the European countries - sub-sample of respondents at age 15-45 participating in the European Social Survey, 2018.

The ideal ages for a man to become a father in the countries, participating in ESS-2018 are presented on **Figure 4**. The ideal age for all respondents is 28.5 years. The lowest ideal age is observed in Iceland - 26.7 years, while the highest age is recorded in Cyprus – 30.9 years. The countries with low ideal mean ages of fatherhood are also Great Britain (26.8), Bulgaria (26.9), Poland (27.2) and Lithuania (27.3). Together with Cyprus, the countries with highest ideal mean ages of fatherhood are Italy (30.2), Spain (30.2), Switzerland (29.9) and the Netherlands (29.4).

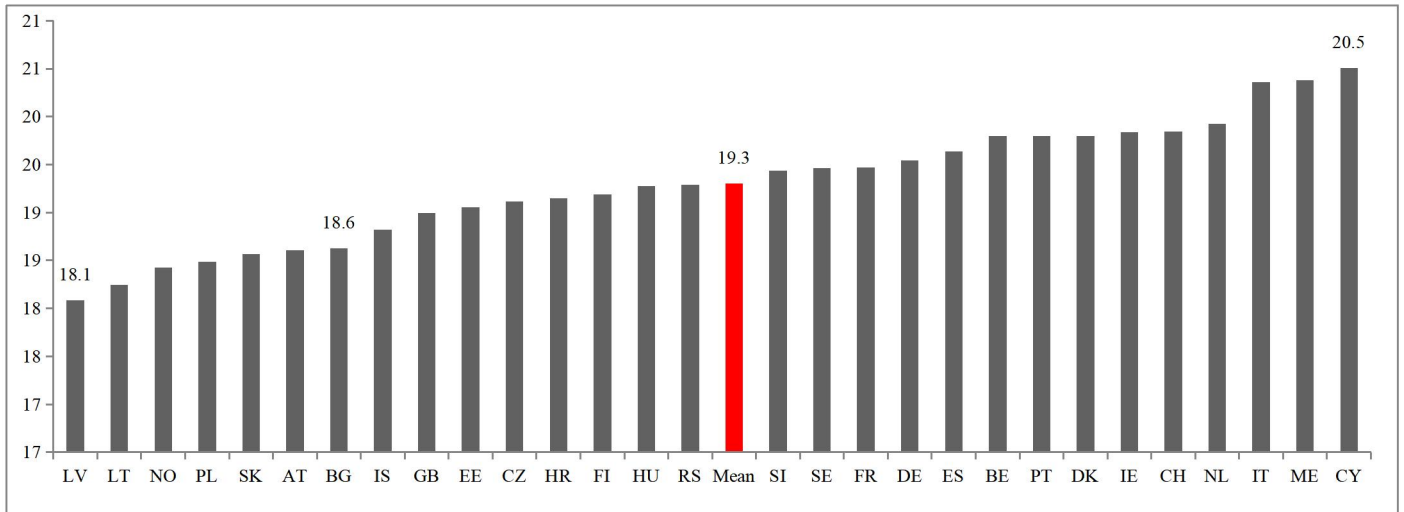


Figure 5. Mean age, perceived as too early to become a father in the European countries - sub-sample of respondents at age 15-45, participating in the European Social Survey, 2018.

Figure 5 presents the mean ages, perceived as too young for a men to become a father in the countries participating in ESS-2018. The mean for all countries is 19.3 years. Latvia is the country with the lowest mean age, considered too young for a man to become a father, 18.1 years, followed by Lithuania (18.2), Norway (18.4), Poland (18.5) and Slovakia (18.6). Bulgaria has a mean that is somewhat below the group mean for all countries, 18.6 years. The countries with the highest mean age perceived as too early for a man to become a father are Cyprus, Montenegro, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland, 19-20 years.

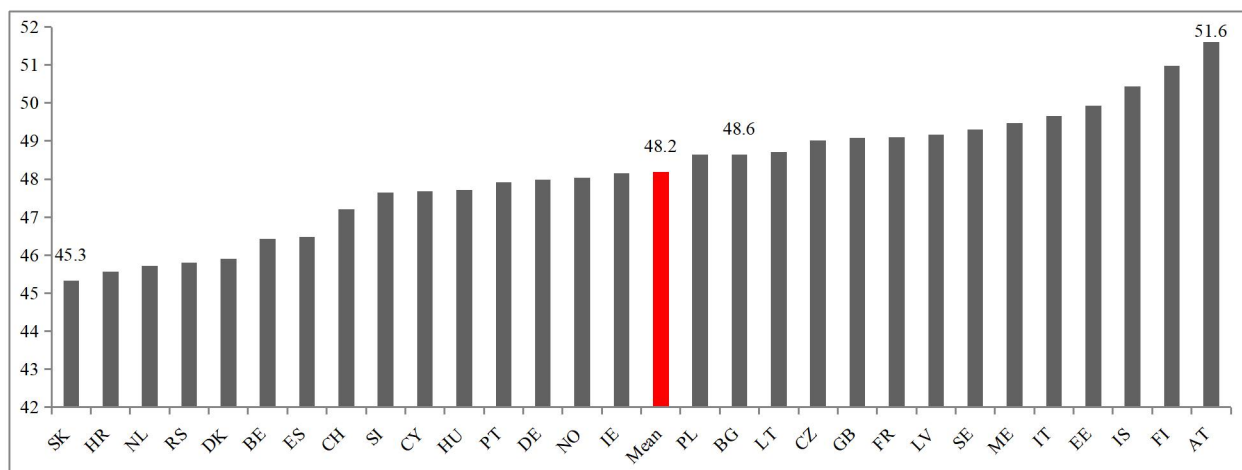


Figure 6. Mean age perceived as too old for a man to have (more) children in the European countries - sub-sample of respondents at age 15-45 participating in the European Social Survey, 2018.

Figure 6 shows the mean age perceived as too old for a man to have (more) children. The mean for all countries is 48.2 years. Bulgaria has a mean that is slightly higher than the group mean, 48.6 years. The country with lowest ages is Slovakia, 45.3 years, followed by Hungary, the Netherlands, Serbia and Denmark, 46 years. The country with the highest age perceived as too old for a man to have (more) children is Austria, 51.6 years, followed by Finland, Iceland, Estonia and Italy, 50-51 years.

3.2. Social differences in the attitudes towards the timing of motherhood in Bulgaria

In the next part of the study we focus on the social differences in the attitudes towards the timing of motherhood among the young adults in Bulgaria. The results from the multiple linear regression analysis are presented in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Multiple linear regression models of the ideal age to become a mother, the age perceived as too young and the age perceived as too old for a woman to have (more) children in the sub-sample of Bulgarian respondents at age 15-45 years participating in the European Social Survey, 2018.

	Ideal age to become a mother	Age perceived as too young to become a mother	Age perceived as too old for a woman to have (more) children
Gender			
Men (ref.)	1	1	1
Woman	0.55	0.95 **	1.30 **
Age			
15-25 yrs (ref.)	1	1	1
26-35 yrs	-0.26	0.58	1.19
36-45 yrs	-0.10	1.61 **	2.07 **
Education			
Primary or lower (ref.)	1	1	1
Secondary	0.21	1.04	0.71
Tertiary	1.73 **	1.34 *	1.87 *
Employment status			
In paid work (ref.)	1	1	1
Unemployed/Economically inactive	-0.43	0.80	-0.21
Marital status			

Table 3. (Continued)

	Ideal age to become a mother		Age perceived as too young to become a mother		Age perceived as too old for a woman to have (more) children	
Single (ref.)	1.00		1		1	
Married/Lost partner (separated, divorced, widowed)	-0.06		-0.58		-1.37	*
Number of children						
No children (ref.)	1		1		1	
One child	-1.57	**	-0.51		-0.76	
Two or more children	-1.68	**	-1.38	**	-0.96	
Place of residence						
Big city (ref.)	1		1		1	
Town	-0.87	**	-0.02		1.34	*
Village	-1.78	***	-0.17		0.60	
Belong to ethnic minority						
No (ref.)	1		1		1	
Yes	-2.15	***	-0.63		-0.79	
Religiosity						
Not or slightly religious (ref.)	1		1		1	
(Very) religious	0.04		-0.30		-0.53	
Constant	24.05	***	17.07	***	41.34	***
N of observations	273		299		248	
Adj R-squared	0.28		0.03		0.04	

Sig: ***: $p < 0.001$, **: $p < 0.01$ *: $p < 0.05$.

The results show that there is no statistically significant gender difference in the attitudes towards the ideal age of a woman to become a mother. However, women have attitudes about the onset and the end of female reproductive life related to significantly higher age compared to men (reference group).

There is no statistically significant age difference in the attitudes towards the ideal age of motherhood. The age differences are significant in the attitudes towards the beginning and the end of women's reproductive life. The respondents at the oldest age group (36-45 years) perceive the end of the female reproductive life at higher ages compared to the youngest age group of those at age 15-25 years (reference category).

The respondents with tertiary education (university or college degree) show stronger preferences to the ideal age of motherhood, the onset and the end of women's reproductive life associated with significantly higher ages compared to the respondents with primary education (reference group).

The economic status of the respondents is not significantly associated with the attitudes towards the ideal age of a woman to become a mother and the perceived age frame of women's reproductive life.

Married respondents and those who lost their partner (separated, divorced or widowed) perceive the end of women's reproductive life as happening at a significantly lower age compared to the never married respondents (reference group).

The respondents with children have attitudes about the ideal age of motherhood associated with younger age compared to the childless respondents (reference group). The respondents with three and more children

have attitudes related to an earlier end of female reproductive life compared to the childless respondents (reference group).

The respondents living in small towns and villages have stronger preferences towards younger ideal age of motherhood compared to those living in a big city (reference group). The individuals living in small towns perceive the end of female reproductive life as happening at significantly younger age compared to the respondents living in the capital or in a big city (reference group).

The respondents belonging to ethnic minority (Turkish or Roma) express preferences towards significantly lower ideal age of motherhood compared to the individuals with Bulgarian ethnicity (reference group).

Religiosity is not significantly associated with the ideal age of a woman to become a mother and the perceived age frames of the female reproductive life.

3.3. Social differences in the attitudes towards the timing of fatherhood in Bulgaria

Table 4. Multiple linear regression models of the ideal age to become a father, the age perceived as too young and the age perceived as too old for a man to have (more) children in the sub-sample of Bulgarian respondents at age 15-45 years participating in the European Social Survey, 2018.

	Ideal age to become a father		Age perceived as too young to become a father		Age perceived as too old for a man to have (more) children
Gender					
Men (ref.)	1		1		1
Woman	0.45		0.91		1.62
Age					
15-25 yrs (ref.)	1		1		1
26-35 yrs	0.26		-0.58		4.40 **
36-45 yrs	1.58 **		0.57		8.16 ***
Education					
Primary or lower (ref.)	1		1		1
Secondary	1.86 ***		0.13		2.38 *
Tertiary	2.65 ***		1.20		4.77 **
Employment status					
In paid work (ref.)	1		1		1
Unemployed/Economically inactive	0.27		-0.72		1.88
Marital status					
Single (ref.)	1		1		1
Married/Lost partner (separated, divorced, widowed)	1.01 *		1.16		-1.96
Number of children					
No children (ref.)	1		1		1
One child	-2.40 ***		-1.48		-3.95 **
Two or more children	-3.02 ***		-1.78 *		-1.57
Place of residence					
Big city (ref.)	1		1		1
Town	-1.19 **		-0.75		1.52
Village	-1.37 **		-0.41		-1.60
Belong to ethnic minority					

Table 4. (Continued)

	Ideal age to become a father		Age perceived as too young to become a father		Age perceived as too old for a man to have (more) children	
No (ref.)	1		1		1	
Yes	-2.15	***	-1.88	**	1.06	
Religiosity						
Not or slightly religious (ref.)	1		1		1	
(Very) religious	0.31		-0.57		-0.42	
Constant	26.53	***	21.34	***	42.44	***
N of observations	253		273		208	
Adj R-squared	0.35		0.06		0.13	

Sig: ***: $p < 0.001$, **: $p < 0.01$ *: $p < 0.05$.

There is no significant gender difference in the perceptions about the ideal age of fatherhood, the age perceived as too young to become a father and the age considered too old for a man to have (more) children (Table 4).

The respondents at the oldest age group (36-45 years) have attitudes about the ideal age of fatherhood that are significantly higher compared to the youngest age group (15-26 year-olds - reference group). The respondents at the oldest age group (36-45 years) perceive the end of the male reproductive life as happening at a higher age compared to the youngest age group of 15-25 year-old people (reference category).

Higher education is associated with significantly higher ideal age of fatherhood and the age perceived as too old for a man to have (more) children.

Married respondents and those who lost a partner (separated, divorced or widowed) expressed stronger preference towards higher ideal age of fatherhood compared to respondents who were never married (reference group).

The respondents with children have attitudes about the ideal age of fatherhood associated with younger age compared to the childless respondents (reference group). The individuals with two or more children have attitudes associated with lower age that frames the onset of fatherhood. Those with one child show preferences towards significantly lower age in ending the male reproductive life.

The respondents who live in small towns and villages have stronger preferences towards significantly younger age of fatherhood compared to the respondents living in a big city (reference group).

Belonging to ethnic minority is significantly associated with lower ideal age of fatherhood compared to the respondents with Bulgarian ethnicity (reference group).

The respondents belonging to an ethnic minority (Turkish or Roma) have preferences towards significantly lower ideal age of fatherhood compared to the individuals with Bulgarian ethnicity (reference group).

Religiosity is not significantly associated with the ideal age of fatherhood and the ages perceived as too young or too old for a man to become a father.

4. Discussion

The present study reveals the complexity of the attitudes towards the timing of parenthood. The international comparisons show that the onset of motherhood is associated with more defined age norms. The

time of the female reproductive life spans from the early 20s and peaks around 24-25 years in the Central and Eastern European countries or in the late 20s (i.e. at age 27-28) in the Southern and Western European countries. The perceptions about the end of the female reproductive life are more ambiguous. In the Central and Eastern European countries, the perceived end of the female reproductive life is reached in the early 40s, corresponding to the early onset of reproduction in these countries^[28]. In the Southern and Western countries, the perceived end of the female reproductive life is reached in the mid-40s in accordance with the later entry into motherhood among women in these countries^[28]. The attitudes about the ideal ages of motherhood and the perceived lower and upper age limits of women's reproductive life are shaped by the actual behavioural models of reproduction in the European countries. The results suggest that the reproductive maturity of a woman is more strongly emphasised and shapes the attitudes about and ideal age of motherhood in the Eastern and Central European countries, while the social maturity is more strongly emphasised in the Southern and Western European countries.

In the Eastern and Central European countries, not only motherhood but also fatherhood is expected to happen at younger ages, i.e. in the mid-20s. The respondents from the Southern and Western European countries show stronger preferences towards an ideal age of fatherhood that peaks in the early 30s. The group of countries with relatively lower ideal ages of fatherhood is somewhat heterogeneous, but the Eastern and Central European countries prevail in it. The grouping of the countries is also heterogeneous with respect to the attitudes about the end of the male reproductive life. In this regard the findings align to the observed process of "normalisation" of late fatherhood witnessed in European countries^[30]. The age span of the male reproductive life is perceived to be longer compared to that of women. These results suggest that the onset of fatherhood is assessed mainly through the social expectations that a man should be materially and financially stable in order to become a father, suggesting for less judgemental attitudes regarding "late" fatherhood unlike "late" motherhood^[31, 32]. The prevailing traditional attitudes and gender role expectations, esp. in the Eastern European countries, that a woman's main responsibility is to become a mother, make the age frames of motherhood more narrow and skewed to younger ages. In more gender egalitarian societies where individual independence, maturity and financial stability are strongly emphasised for both genders and where the social expectations about women's self-realisation are less focused of family and parenthood but appreciate also women's achievements in the sphere of education, employment and professional development, the perceptions about the timing of motherhood are shifted to later ages and the reproductive span is extended to more advanced ages^[33]. The same relationship is observed also with respect to fatherhood in these countries^[34]. Thus, the reproductive "youthfulness" of women and the socioeconomic "maturity" of men shape the attitudes and the social expectations about the timing of motherhood and fatherhood, which have a strong gender dimension. The end of the teenage years and the early 20s are considered by the European respondents as too young ages for reproduction of men and women, which could be related to stronger expectations for finishing education, finding a stable job and accumulation of social experience and economic stability that would help the young men and women to mature as adults and set up their own families^[35, 36].

The second part of the study focuses on an Eastern European country, showing that the social positioning (social status) is strongly associated with differences in the young adults' attitudes towards the timing of motherhood and fatherhood^[37, 38]. The results reveal that the respondents at age 15-45 years in Bulgaria share the view that motherhood should happen ideally in the mid-20s and fatherhood in the late 20s. In the recent period, the reproductive model in the country is still characterised by an early onset (i.e. relatively low mean age at birth of first child) and an early end of reproduction^[39]. The reproductive norms and attitudes in current Bulgarian society remain strongly influenced by the traditional perceptions that a

woman should become a mother at younger age^[40, 41]. These norms and attitudes are also negative with respect to the teenage motherhood and the “old age” childbearing. Teen motherhood is perceived in the society as an undesirable condition, which happens mostly among the ethnic minorities (Roma) and has strong negative consequences. In the case of the “old age childbearing” (after age of 35 years), it becomes increasingly accepted in the society but judgemental attitudes still exist, blaming the women for waiting too long to have children, focusing too much on education and work, having too strong career orientations, and enjoying too much leisure and social activities not focused on family^[42].

The Bulgarian women perceive the beginning and the end of the female reproductive life as happening at older age compared to men. On the one hand, this result may reflect the desires of women to advance in other social spheres such as education and professional life. On the other hand, it could be related to a role conflict experienced by women, which postpones motherhood to later ages. These results suggest also that the new pattern of actual reproductive behaviours, featured by delayed childbearing, was “normalised” in the public attitudes and internalised as a behavioural model by the young Bulgarian women.

The study uncovers significant age differences in the attitudes towards the timing of motherhood and fatherhood. The older respondents have ideals about the onset of reproduction as happening at older ages. They show also stronger preferences to higher age limits of motherhood and fatherhood. One of the explanations is that the older respondent may appreciate more the accumulated social experience and the achieved social maturity as preconditions for parenthood. In the case of fatherhood, the emphasis is put also on the achieved “socioeconomic maturity” of the men, which could delay the transition to fatherhood to more advanced (but socially more mature) reproductive ages^[43, 44, 45].

Highly educated respondents express attitudes supporting higher ideal ages of motherhood and fatherhood. They value more an onset of parenthood happening at older ages for both men and women and perceive the end of the male reproductive life as happening at later ages. The results suggest that the highly educated respondents may evaluate the timing of parenthood from the position of their own experience with education. On the other hand, the results affirm also the presence of a negative educational gradient in fertility and the reproductive norms of the recent young generations in Bulgaria^[39, 46].

Married respondents and those who lost a partner (separated, divorced and widowed) have stronger preferences to lower ideal ages of parenthood and younger age limits of reproduction compared to the never married respondents. The number of children that the respondents already have is significantly associated with lower ideal ages of motherhood and fatherhood. The respondents with two and more children show stronger preferences to an earlier end of reproduction of men and women. Stronger family values shared in these groups may explain the results, showing that the experience with marriage and parenthood strengthens fertility ideals of men and women and increases the preferences about parenthood at younger ages^[47].

In line with previous studies, the respondents from small towns and villages appreciate more an early onset of reproduction, which can be explained with more traditional values shared by the people from small residential places. The residents of the big cities tend to emphasise more alternative forms of individual self-realisation, which are not always compatible with earlier motherhood or fatherhood^[40, 41].

Belonging to ethnic minority (Turkish or Roma) is also associated with stronger preferences of younger motherhood and fatherhood. In current Bulgarian society, the model of early parenthood is still prevalent among the young people from the ethnic minorities (Roma minority, in particular). This result corresponds to the prevailing traditional reproductive values and norms in these communities^[39, 40].

Religiosity is not significantly associated with the perceptions about the timing of parenthood. This may be explained with the weak influence of the religion among the young generations in Bulgaria^[41] or with absence of more complex measures of religiosity in the survey.

The results from the multivariate analysis affirm that the social positioning and the social status differences shape the attitudes towards the timing of parenthood among the young adults. The traditional attitudes supporting the model of “younger” parenthood prevail among the individuals with lower education, living in small residential areas, and belonging to ethnic minorities. The new models of “delayed” parenthood are appreciated more by the highly educated respondents, the people living in big cities and the individuals from the Bulgarian ethnic group. Among these social groups, the timing of motherhood and fatherhood is evaluated against other social activities, which may lead to role conflicts, postponement of reproduction and prolongation of the men and women’s reproductive lives to more advanced ages.

The present study is not without limitations. The study focuses on the general public attitudes towards the timing of parenthood, which tend to be more ambiguous than the respondents’ personal preferences and their actual reproductive behaviours. The study has a cross-sectional design and does not allow for investigation of the changes in the respondents’ attitudes towards the timing of parenthood across individuals’ life course. The study does not include an analysis of the association between the perceived timing of parenthood and the perceptions about the ideal time of other life events such as leaving the educational system, establishment of an independent household, union formation, etc.

5. Conclusion

The present study reveals the complexity of the attitudes towards the timing of motherhood and fatherhood among young adults in an Eastern European country. These attitudes are shaped by normative beliefs and social expectations that have gendered nature and ascribe the roles of men and women in the family and parenthood. The attitudes about the timing of motherhood are influenced by social norms emphasising the nurturing role of women and the advantages of the younger ages in terms of lower reproductive (biomedical) risks. The attitudes about the timing of fatherhood emphasise more the “socioeconomic” maturity of the men, which corresponds to their traditional role of main financial providers for the family. The gendered nature of the attitudes towards the timing of motherhood and fatherhood and their association with the social positioning of the individual strongly influence the timing of life events, adult identity formation, mental health and wellbeing of the contemporary young generations. In the recent times of growing uncertainty and social risks, young adults have experienced a clash between normative expectations, personal desires and structural conditions that reconfigure and fragment their pathways to adulthood.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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