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The Age Parameters of the Starting Demographic Events Across Russian Generations

This article presents comparisons of the ages and facts of starting demographic events in Russia based on the findings of three large-scale surveys: the European Social Survey, 2006; the Generations and Gender Survey, 2004, 2007, and 2011; and Person, Family, Society, 2013. This study focuses on the intergenerational and gender differences in the age of sexual debut, first partnership, first marriage, and birth of the first child. Analysis of the data shows that the maximum number of starting demographic events takes place before age 35. In the average biography, the first event is sexual debut, the following events are matrimonial (marriage and partnership/cohabitation), and the last event is the birth of the first child. The greatest gender and generational differences are observed in matrimonial behavior: the popularity of unregistered unions is much greater among younger generations than among their predecessors, and young people's interest in marriage is

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much lower. Men begin partnership and marriage about a year or two later than women. In reproductive behavior, there are greater gender differences than generational: men are more inclined to postpone the birth of the first child. This is because women wish to give birth to their first child at a reproductively healthy age, and men prefer to postpone both having their first child and entering their first marriage.

Societies develop across various dimensions, including economics, politics, and technology. Changes in these areas often occur rapidly and abruptly. However, transformations in the demographic sphere occur more slowly. It is often necessary to wait until a whole generation passes its reproductive and marriageable age span or reaches the end of life entirely before researchers can summarize the results. It is quite difficult to assess changes that occur over the lifetimes of a reproductively and matrimonially active cohort. The generalization and systematization of other countries' experience can help. Theories that are grounded in this experience can help us understand and predict changes and how demographic trends will develop in the future. The leading modern theory of this kind in demography is the theory of the second demographic transition [1; 2].

Changes in the demographic behavior of Russians have been tracked for several decades, and they are consistent with the main features of the second demographic transition:

—Reduced number of marriages and childbirths [3]
—Growth in the number of unregistered relationships (partnerships and cohabitations) [4–6]
—Growth in the number of out-of-wedlock births [7, pp. 121–31; 8. pp. 94–101] and divorces [9, pp. 245–56]
—Postponement of demographic events to later ages [7, pp. 65–71; 9, pp. 231–45 and 291–99; 10; 11]
—Transformations in the perception of marriage and parenthood [12; 13].

Ample evidence attests to these trends, but as the generation that represents a departure from the past is still in the process of marrying and starting families, debates continue over whether

Russia is transitioning to new behavioral models or what we are seeing are only temporary fluctuations.

This study does not aim to resolve these disputes. Our analysis is intended only to collect accurate empirical data about one aspect of demographic behavior: the age parameters of the initial demographic events across generations. Moreover, these data are most revealing when it comes to comparisons between generations: people of different ages have different likelihoods of experiencing events. For example, an elderly man who has lived a lifetime has experienced a whole range of types and sequences of events. When working with such a biography, it is possible to tally up the final results of that person's initial events, because the potential for new ones has been almost exhausted in most cases.

In analyzing the biographies of young people, often the most that a researcher has access to are the initial events. When analyzing, however, we should be careful about providing estimates, because a younger generation will, for example, encounter demographic events much more slowly, and a large number of individuals are at risk of (i.e. have a high likelihood of) experiencing them over a long period of time.

In this study, demographic events are understood to mean the following: sexual debut, first partnership (unregistered union, cohabitation), first marriage, and birth of the first child. In this study, first partnership and first marriage comprise matrimonial events.

The study was conducted using the datasets of three major surveys that are representative of Russia:

—European Social Survey (ESS), 2006[1]
—The Russian part of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), panel of 2004, 2007, and 2011[2]
—Person, Family, Society (PFS), 2013 [14][3].

Each of these surveys includes a set of questions about initial demographic events, permitting a comparison of the biographies of Russians obtained at different times.

The first available sample year is 2006 (ESS). The next survey chronologically is the GGS three-wave panel, whose results were summarized in 2011. The latest survey (PFS) was carried out in 2013.

The difference between the years when the surveys were conducted is not very great, which allows us to compare the results and identify discrepancies in the empirical evidence. However, the surveys cover the cohorts slightly differently, and this makes it possible to supplement the data of some of the studies with other data.

As the three surveys were conducted independently of each other, a lot of preparatory work was needed to make the results more reliable and comparable.

First, the generational boundaries were selected. The optimal length of a generation was empirically established as five years, enabling us to capture the cohort most completely and make maximum use of the strengths of each survey.

The divisions between the birth years of respondents for each survey are as follows:

—ESS: birth years between 1930 and 1989 (between 17 and 76 years of age at the time of the survey)
—GGS: birth years between 1930 and 1984 (between 27 and 81 years of age at the time of the survey)
—PFS: birth years between 1970 and 1994 (between 19 and 43 years of age at the time of the survey).

The generational structure of each survey is shown in Figure 1.

The study sought to answer a question that does not have a clear answer: if we assume that the collapse of the Soviet Union had an impact not only on macro-level processes, but also on demographic behavior, what is the year after which people began to behave differently from Soviet times? It has been proposed that those who were about 15 years old at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union were the first who had the opportunity to exhibit new patterns of behavior. The empirical part of this study confirms this claim. This is the age when the behavioral models

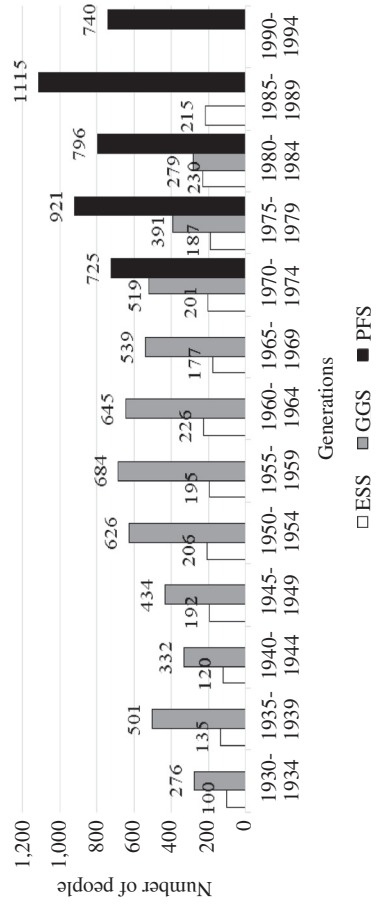

Figure 1. **Generational Structure of the ESS, GGS and PFS Surveys**

associated with reproduction, sexuality, and marriage begin to take concrete form and outward expression. Therefore, the birth year 1975 was chosen as a conditional point to divide the sample into representatives of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

In order to determine as precisely as possible the ages when demographic events are experienced, we excluded respondents whose biographies were compromised by an initial event experienced at too young an age. It is quite difficult to select a boundary beyond which marriage and family behavior would be considered marginal. The age of sexual consent and the age of marriage in Russia have changed more than once.

It would certainly be a mistake to use today's standards (16–18 years of age) to analyze the history of marriage and partnership cohorts since 1930. Moreover, people's actual behavior always deviates from established norms, and this fact is supported by the distributions between ages when initial events are reported in the surveys.

For example, according to PFS data, 164 people reported their sexual debut as occurring between the ages of 7 and 14; 73 people reported entering into their first partnership during this same time in their lives; 17 people gave birth to their first child between the ages of 10 and 14; and 15 people indicated that they entered into marriage between 11 and 14.

The earliest reported age in the GGS survey when a demographic event occurred was 13, and in the ESS it was 14. Of course, the early ages for an initial event reported by the PFS data may be attributable to errors in how the questionnaire was filled out or digitized, but other reported events in the biographies of these people have an internal coherence with these early events, indicating that they really occurred.

The conventional boundaries of the initial events were determined on the basis of the distribution of actual ages: 12 for sexual debut and first partnership, 13 for birth of the first child, and 14 for first marriage. Respondents who reported initial events as occurring before the specified ages were excluded from the database.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the years of birth and, consequently, the ages of respondents at the time of the surveys vary

significantly. The marital and family biographies of those who are only 17 could hardly compete in number of events with those over 70. Russian researchers often indicate 30 as the age of completion of the transition to adulthood [15; 16], but we have shifted the upper limit to 35 in order to provide sufficient time for modernized behavior to be exhibited.

After performing all the transformations, we obtained the following subsample size and gender composition (shown in Figure 1 above; the generational structure is current for the generated arrays):

—ESS: 2,185 people, of whom 54.7 percent are women
—GGS: 5,224 people, of whom 68.3 percent are women
—PFS: 4,279 people, of whom 51 percent are women.

According to the 2010 Russian Population Census, women account for 54 percent of the population. The sex ratio of the ESS matches the census data more closely than other surveys, as the data array was weighted ("pspwght" is a post-stratification weight, including the design weights).

The PFS array was not weighted, as the divergence from the general population is low and the range of generations encompasses all 24 years. The GGS panel has a rather strong bias toward women (they are represented 14 percent more here than in the census), but it was impossible to weight the combined array of three waves, since the corrective weights were available only for each wave separately.

Let us clarify a number of technical details relating to how the respondents were asked about when they experienced demographic events in their lives. Each of the three surveys asked questions about the date of the respondent's first partnership, first marriage, and first childbirth. The GGS and the PFS surveys requested both the month and year, whereas the ESS requested just the year.

Partnerships are subject to the greatest variability of meaning among the surveys. The surveys defined a partnership as a relationship that was not registered with the civil registry office

(ZAGS) and where the partners had been living together for at least three months. All the surveys requested the date when the partners or spouses started living together and the date when the marriage was registered. The largest number of coincidences of these two dates occurred in the ESS due to the fact that on this survey these dates were specified only in terms of years. If, for example, the partnership began in January but the marriage took place in December of the same year, then the event would be classified as a marriage. Therefore, ESS recorded fewer partnerships than GGS, for example. However, it was decided to leave them in the dataset, since excluding the partnerships would make the arrays less comparable, and the general trend toward partnerships can be observed on the basis of evidence consisting of a small number of events.

The last technical detail is an additional event in the PFS array. Although there is evidence about a sexual debut for only five generations, the data were included in our study because of their uniqueness among the major Russian sample surveys.

Let us first analyze the percentage of debut demographic events reported as happening before and after the age of 35. To understand the number of events that fall outside the basic analysis, let us turn to Figures 2 and 3. The three youngest generations are not represented, since at the time of the survey they were under age 33.

As can be seen in the figures, fluctuations depending on gender and generation are quite strong due to the small number of events and the variability of reported behavior after age 35. In absolute terms, 94 events in ESS, 438 in GGS, and 80 in PFS fall outside the scope of analysis, representing 2.4 percent, 3.8 percent, and 0.7 percent, respectively, of the total number of events. These are usually the first partnerships in the oldest generations. According to the GGS, the percentage of first partnerships after 35 for the generations born between 1930 and 1955 was about four times greater than the percentage of other events. The ESS, where the number of partnerships was initially strongly underestimated,

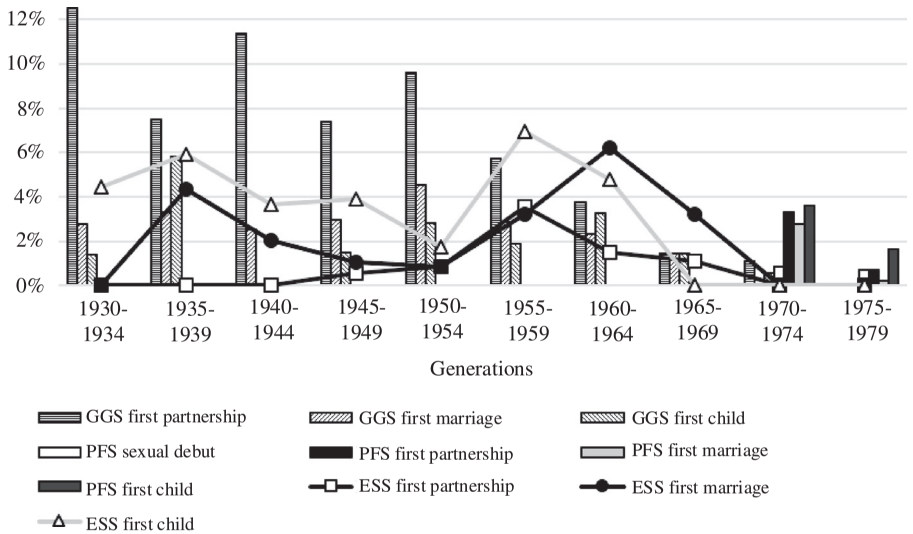

Figure 2. **Share of Men Who Reported Demographic Events as Occurring After Age 35**

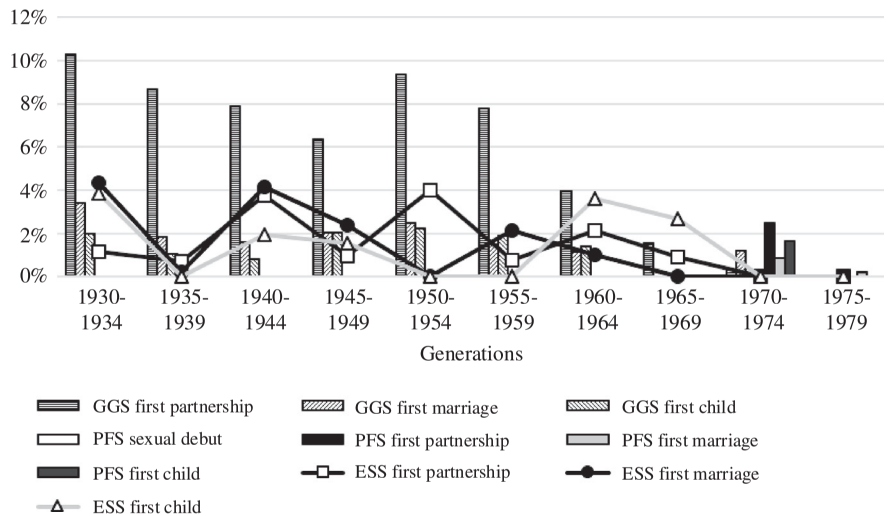

Figure 3. **Share of Women Who Reported Demographic Events as Occurring After Age 35**

does not report such rapid growth, but for women the share of partnerships is practically the same as the share of marriages.

Men report on average 1.5 times more initial demographic events after age 35 than women do, and, according to the ESS, they report far more first children after age 35. Men tend to postpone initial demographic events to later ages. The overwhelming majority of initial demographic events occur before the age of 35 for both men and women (Figures 4 and 5).

As noted above, not all respondents were 35 years old at the time of the survey. This should be considered when analyzing demographic behavior, because here we observe so-called right censoring, which refers to the people whose exposure to a debut event is about to occur, but who have not yet reached a particular age threshold. Four generations in the ESS (born between 1971 and 1989), two generations in GGS (born between 1976 and 1984), and three generations in PFS (born between 1978 and 1994) were under age 35.

The vast majority of the respondents within the youngest sample of PFS reported their first experience of sexual intercourse before age 35. More than 96 percent of the older respondents who were between 39 and 43 at the time of the survey reported this experience. Sixty percent of men and 57 percent of women among the youngest respondents (19 to 23 years old) reported being sexually active. The main increase in the number of respondents who have had their sexual debut can be observed among those under the age of 30.

The ESS and GGS surveys do not report any data about sexual debuts. However, those surveys include many more generations, which makes it possible to compare the demographic behavior of respondents who were socialized during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods (born before and after 1975).

For the generations born between 1930 and 1974, the most common events (according to the ESS and GGS) were marriage and birth of the first child. Among men, the percentage of those who entered into their first marriage before 35 was greater than the percentage of those reporting their first child by this age. The opposite is true of women. The differences in the number of

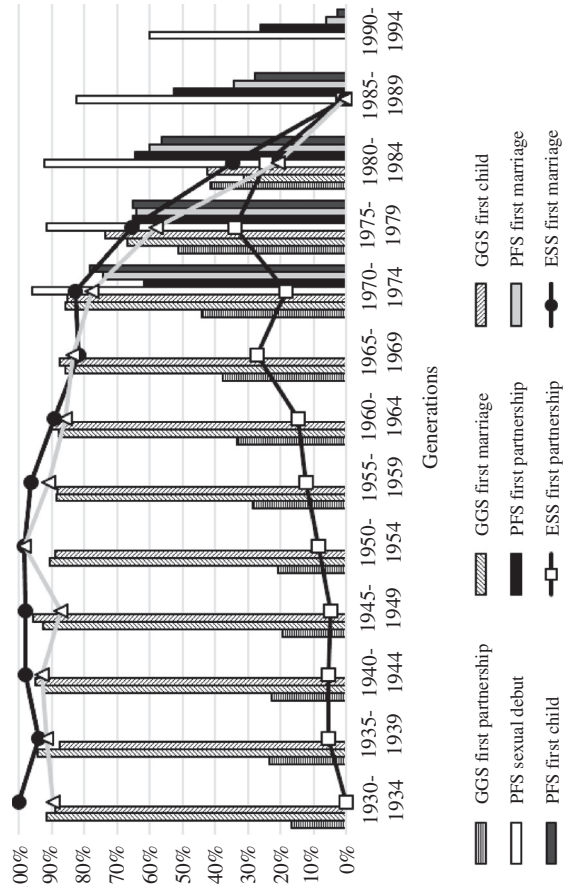

Figure 4. **Share of Men Who Reported Demographic Events as Occurring Before Age 35**

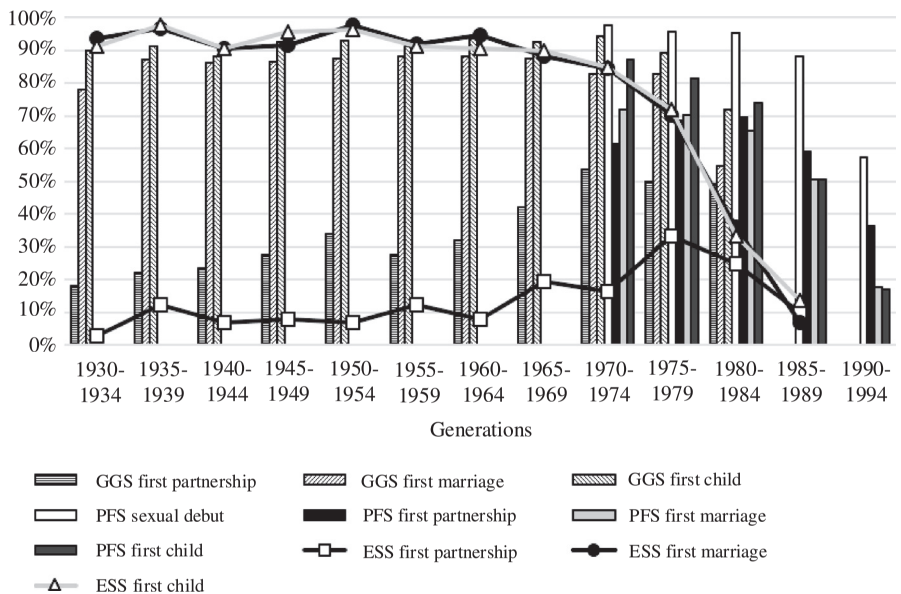

Figure 5. **Share of Women Who Reported Demographic Events as Occurring Before Age 35**

respondents who experienced these events are minimal: a few percentage points. There is also a slight difference in the responses of representatives of the same generations depending on the survey in which they participated, but this difference is also only a few percentage points.

Given these reservations, both men and women respondents who were socialized in the Soviet era reported almost universal marriage and the presence of at least one child.

"Soviet" respondents rarely reported partnerships: of the generations born before 1965, a maximum of one-third reported a partnership under the age of 35. Partnership is the main event more recently pursued by respondents in the older age groups (see Figures 2 and 3). If you compare them to the number of marriages, it can be assumed that the first partnerships occurred later than the first marriages and thus do not represent a common way of starting life together for these generations. The younger generations, including those that were socialized in Soviet times, reported many more first partnerships and somewhat fewer marriages.

Regarding young people, many have not yet experienced possible events, so the evidence that has been collected exhibits not only a generational effect, but also that of the age and life stage. By the time they reach 50, today's young people will probably also report virtually universal marriage and having at least one child. These are initial events, so even in an advanced society it is natural for them to occur widely in people's lives. Our study is interested in something else: revealing the features that characterize how these experiences were acquired, how they are spread over time, and in what sequence they occur.

The start of sex life occurs significantly earlier than other events: for the youngest group the percentage of first partnerships exceeds the percentage of first marriages and births, and starting with women born between 1980 and 1984 and men born between 1970 and 1974 the percentage of first births exceeds the percentage of marriages (see Figures 4 and 5). In other words, events in the sexual, reproductive, and matrimonial areas occur at different intervals and not in a clearly determined sequence that would

demonstrate their relatedness to each other. It is impossible to reliably tell how Soviet generations behaved without statistical data, but it is clear that the behavior of young people does not exhibit strong traditional links between the three types of reproductive behavior.

Another marked trend is a steadily growing popularity of first partnerships. In the younger generations, these have begun to compete with marriage as a valid form of beginning life together. There is a stark gender divide: men tend to prefer partnership to marriage.

According to PFS, in the generation born between 1975 and 1979 an equal proportion of men report either a marriage or a partnership with a child (65 percent). During the previous, so-called Soviet generation, partnerships were less common (62 percent) and births more common (78 percent). However, in the succeeding, so-called post-Soviet generation, the situation is reversed: more partnerships (64 percent) than births (56 percent) were reported. This indicates not only that partnerships were less popular in the Soviet era, but also that for younger age groups the first partnership is reported more frequently than marriage and childbirth. The GGS data do not include information about generations born between 1985 and 1994, but for the generation born between 1980 and 1984 there are more partnerships than marriages, which is not typical of any previous generation.

Young women are more conservative in their demographic behavior. First, according to the data from all the three surveys, women are much more likely than men of the same age to enter into a first marriage, which demonstrates their greater loyalty to this institution.

Second, these women are more likely to report having their first child than men of the same age. This can probably be explained by the fact that women take greater responsibility for childbirth, their own health, and the health of their babies: women try not to postpone childbirth, since doctors maintain that women risk complications if they attempt pregnancy after age 35.

Third, according to the GGS data, in no previous generation was the share of first partnerships greater than the share of first

marriages. However, according to PFS, an increase was observed for the generations born between 1985 and 1994. Though smaller than the share for men, this increase was undeniably present. Thus, the trend is the same, but with a 10-year delay.

Let us now analyze the ages when initial events occur before the age of 35 (Tables 1 and 2). According to an analysis of variance, the differences in age of initial demographic events are significant across both gender and generation. Only the differences between the ages of sexual debut by gender (PFS) and the ages of first partnership by gender reported by the ESS (due to the small number of events) are quasi-significant.

The average age of the beginning of sex life for men and women is 18.7. The average age of the start of the first partnership varies depending on the survey: the first partnerships reported in GGS occur at an older age, and the first ones reported by PFS, at a younger age. This is due to the fact that only GGS thoroughly reports partnerships of mature respondents. The fairly similar ages of first partnership among younger respondents further attest to this argument: for ladies it is 20, and for men it is 20.6, according to the ESS and PFS, and 22, according to GGS. Soviet generations entered into their first partnerships at later ages: at 22.4 (ESS) and 23 (GGS) for ladies and at 23.2 (ESS) and 24.4 (GGS) for men. On average, men enter into their first partnership a year later than women, whereas Soviet generations did so three years later on average than post-Soviet ones.

The marriages of young people occur later than partnerships, whereas the marriages reported by older generations occur earlier than reported partnerships. Young women marry at 20.4 according to the ESS and GGS and at 21.3 according to PFS.

Recall that the ESS and GGS were conducted before the PFS. Thus, the young people referred to in the PFS represent generations younger than those in the other two studies, and their age of first marriage is higher.

According to the ESS (2006), young men reported 22 as the average age of the start of their first partnership, but by 2011–2013 it had increased to 23.

Table 1

Average Age When Men Experienced Demographic Events

	Sexual debut	First partnership			First marriage			First child		
Generations	PFS	ESS	GGS	PFS	ESS	GGS	PFS	ESS	GGS	PFS
1930–34			26.2		24.5	24.5		25.7	25.5	
1935–39		21.6	23.8		25.1	24.8		25.9	25.8	
1940–44		21.5	24.6		23.8	24.2		25.2	25.5	
1945–49		23.8	24.9		23.5	23.3		24.9	24.3	
1950–54		23.1	24.4		23.0	23.1		24.8	24.4	
1955–59		23.7	23.6		23.5	23.2		24.6	24.5	
1960–64		23.9	24.1		23.8	23.4		24.3	24.7	
1965–69		24.7	24.5		23.4	23.4		25.0	24.6	
1970–74	19.6	23.0	23.7	22.1	23.6	23.0	23.9	24.1	24.2	25.1
1975–79	19.3	22.4	22.5	22.6	23.7	22.9	24.8	24.1	24.3	25.6
1980–84	18.9	21.4	21.7	21.4	21.9	23.1	23.9	22.9	24.2	24.7
1985–89	18.2	18.0		20.5	20.0		22.6	21.0		23.0
1990–94	17.0			17.9			20.1			20.4
“Soviet generations” 1930–1974		23.2	24.4		23.8	23.7		24.9	24.8	
“Post-Soviet generations” 1975–94	18.3	20.6	22.1	20.6	21.9	23.0	22.9	22.7	24.3	23.4
Average	18.6	22.5	24.0	20.9	23.3	23.5	23.1	24.4	24.7	23.8

Table 2

Average Age When Women Experienced Demographic Events

	Sexual debut	First partnership			First marriage			First child		
Generations	PFS	ESS	GGS	PFS	ESS	GGS	PFS	ESS	GGS	PFS
1930–34		21.2	24.2		22.9	22.6		24.4	23.7	
1935–39		24.2	23.1		22.5	22.2		24.7	23.4	
1940–44		22.5	23.6		22.1	21.9		23.1	23.5	
1945–49		21.0	22.5		22.1	21.4		23.3	22.6	
1950–54		22.8	22.6		22.1	21.9		23.2	23.1	
1955–59		22.5	24.2		21.7	21.5		23.4	22.8	
1960–64		21.6	23.2		21.4	21.4		22.5	22.7	
1965–69		22.0	22.0		21.6	20.7		22.5	21.6	
1970–74	19.6	23.5	21.6	21.0	21.6	20.2	21.5	22.2	21.5	23.0
1975–79	19.6	22.1	20.6	21.6	22.0	20.3	22.6	22.9	21.5	24.1
1980–84	19.0	19.8	19.6	20.7	21.0	20.5	21.8	21.3	21.6	23.2
1985–89	18.4	18.0		19.4	18.4		21.3	18.4		21.7
1990–94	17.6			18.1			19.4			19.5
“Soviet generations” 1930–74		22.4	23.0		22.0	21.5		23.3	22.8	
“Post–Soviet generations” 1975–94	18.7	20.0	20.1	20.0	20.4	20.4	21.3	20.9	21.5	22.1
Average	18.8	21.8	22.5	20.2	21.6	21.3	21.3	22.7	22.5	22.3

On average, men of all generations marry about two years later than women, that is, the gender difference in marital behavior is greater than for partnerships. But there are fewer generational differences in marital behavior. Older generations report having entered their first marriage on average one year later than younger generations.

The data reported by the surveys differ most regarding reproductive behavior. Women in the younger sample of PFS reported an average age of maternity of 22.3. The ESS (with a more adult sample) reported a slightly older average age: 22.7. PFS reported the youngest age of the man's first child as 23.8, whereas GGS reported the oldest such age as 24.7.

The birth of the first child is the latest of all initial demographic events. Soviet men had a child approximately one year after the start of a marriage or partnership, whereas women reported having a child one year after the start of the marriage and four months after the start of the first partnership. As noted above, judging from the average age, the first partnerships of Soviet people tend to be reported later than marriages. Therefore, women could be characterized by the following sequence of events: marriage concluded after the beginning of pregnancy and then a change of partner. The girl is not in a rush to register her relationship with the new person. This can explain such a small interval between the beginning of the partnership and the birth of the child.

For young people, partnerships tend to occur before marriage, so the data look more logical: the average interval between the registration of the marriage and the birth of the child is about 10 months for both men and women, and the interval between the start of the partnership and the birth of the child is 1.5 years for women and 2.5 years for men.

In general, demographic behavioral patterns differ depending on gender and generation, but on average both Soviet and post-Soviet men had their first child two years later than women, regardless of other events. Regardless of gender, older generations report having their first child on average 1.5 years later.

Conclusions

An analysis of the age parameters of sexual, marital, and reproductive behaviors revealed that most of the initial events occurred before the age of 35. Men tend to postpone initial demographic events to later ages. While both men and women tend to start their sex lives at around the same age (18.7), men report that the event entailing the most responsibilities (the birth of a child) occurs about two years later than it does for women.

The maximum difference in the behavior of the generations is manifested in an institution that is relatively new in Russia (as a mass phenomenon): partnership or cohabitation. Respondents who were socialized in Soviet times tended to enter partnerships passively and at fairly late ages. Young people in the early stages of life prefer partnerships to marriages. Therefore, the difference between the average ages of the start of cohabitation by members of the Soviet and post-Soviet generations is very large: younger generations tend to start cohabitation almost three years earlier.

The average age of first marriages among members of the Soviet generation is only a year later than what was reported among the post-Soviet generation.

Given that slightly more than half of young respondents and more than 90 percent of Soviet respondents reported a first marriage, it can be tentatively concluded that the true average age of marriage of today's youth will be ultimately higher than the reported age of marriage among Soviet people.

The share of young women who reported having a first child is higher than the share of those who have a first marriage, and the average age of giving birth to a first child is only 1.5 years higher for older women than for younger women. Therefore, we should not expect any sharp increase in the age at which women report having their first child.

To summarize, we can say that the marriage behavior of Russians has changed the most. The rise in the popularity of partnership has in turn made marriage less popular; when people do get married, it is later in life. However, parenthood has not yet become less popular among today's youth. At the very least,

ladies continue to strive to have their first child during the prime (in terms of reproductive health) childbearing years.

Notes

1. The third wave of the ESS international survey was conducted in Russia by the Institute for Comparative Social Research. The project's website is: http://www.ess-ru.ru/.

2. The three waves of the GGS study were conducted in Russia by the Independent Institute for Social Policy and form part of the international Generations and Gender program. The project's website is: http://www.socpol.ru/gender/RIDMIZ.shtml.

3. The first wave of the PFS survey was conducted by the Institute of Social Analysis and Forecasting of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration.

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