


Marriage rates of the population in Bulgaria: features and trends of change

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ABSTRACT

Key words:

historical analysis, marital structure, reproductive attitudes, reproductive behavior

The paper studies the past and contemporary marriage rates in Bulgaria. The analysis starts with the marriage patterns after the Liberation, when high marriage rates were observed, especially after the war periods. During socialism, the family was perceived as the main functioning cell of society and the marriage rates continued to be relatively high. In the 1990s and the beginning of the new century, a change in the marital behavior was observed – a significant postponement of entry into marriage and motherhood led to a family model that had not been common in the past. The authors also conclude that there are different stages in the marriage patterns in Bulgaria – both historically and spatially. The different factors affecting these processes are also studied and discussed in the paper.

Article processing

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1. Introduction and theoretical framework

The marriage rate is one of the main indicators characterizing the natural reproduction of the population. Together with birth rates, divorce rates, mortality rates and natural increase rates, marriage rates determine the dynamics and the specifics of the so-called natural movement of the population within a certain country or region. Marriage itself has been defined by the Statistical Commission of the United Nations as an act, ceremony or process by which the legal relationship of husband and wife is constituted. This union may be established by civil, religious or other means, as recognized by the laws of the given country. There are different aspects of studying marriages. A change of marital status may also have an influence on mortality and migration (Cox, 1976). As a demographic process associated with the formation of married couples, marriage has the strongest influence on fertility. Marriages, together with the processes of widowhood and divorce, are crucial in shaping the marital structure of the population.

The main research question of the current study is what the chronological and spatial trends related to the marriage processes in Bulgaria during the twentieth century, and particularly the two decades in the twenty-first century, are. What happened after the transition? What is the nature of the new trends? According to Borisov (1985), marriage is a social phenomenon. Each marriage is formed in accordance with the individual requirements of the partners for education, profession, upbringing, morals, specific character traits, mental and physical dignity, residence, as well as material security, income, material well-being and so forth. The main purpose of marriage in the past was the reproduction of generations, because back then the majority of children (about and over 90%) were born in a family environment. Therefore, in the past and to a lesser extent nowadays, marriage was seen as a demographic factor for the birth rate. In her study “Introduction to Demography”, Sugareva (2004) defines marriage as a demographic process whose

elementary units are marriages. Statistically, legal marriages are most often reported, i.e. those that are officialised by an official state (municipal) registration. However, this registration in many cases does not overlap with the social concept of marriage, as the latter also includes common-law marriages (cohabitation between partners without an official marriage). That type of marriages has been a prevalent model in West European countries for decades (van de Kaa, 2003).

In a broader sense, marriage can be defined as a complex socio-demographic process, which can be considered in various aspects – legal, social, economic, demographic, etc. There are several factors that help us understand particular behaviors (Fig. 1).

A particular behavior is influenced by a wide variety of factors – cultural, personal, and situational. Different social groups (young and old, educated and uneducated, men and women, Christian orthodox and Muslim, rich and poor, dominant and submissive, shy and outgoing) have different beliefs and thus – different social behavior.

Based on his research in England and Wales, Cox (1976) makes some observations in terms of marriage:

- first marriages occur mainly at ages 20-29;
- spinsters marry earlier in life than bachelors;
- the rate of second marriage is greater than that of first marriage;
- the rate of divorced people is higher than the rate of widowed people.

In a purely demographic sense, marriage and the marital structure of the population are a significant factor which at the present stage continues to influence the overall course of population reproduction. The degree of that influence varies depending on the level of socio-economic development and the traditions of the individual countries and regions.

2. Materials and methods

The study area includes the national territory of Bulgaria and its 28 administrative districts (NUTS 3 level according to the Classification of Territorial Units for Statistics). Demographic statistics in Bulgaria provide comprehensive data characterizing the changes in the marriage patterns of the population. The data is based on the annual statistics, as well as census data obtained from the National Statistical Institute (NSI) of Bulgaria. In demography, individuals are typically grouped into four different marital status categories: never married, married, widowed, and divorced. “Never married” refers to individuals who are single and, as the term implies, have not been married.

The applied demographic methods in this study include the so-called cohort analysis, and spatial analysis (Thomas 2018). The cohort analysis is a method used to describe an aggregation of individuals having in common a significant event in their life histories. The concept of cohort is useful because the occurrence rates of various forms of behavior are often influenced by the length of time elapsed since the event defining the cohort (Thomas 2018). In addition, spatial analysis is used for analyzing marriage rates data for all 28 administrative districts (NUTS 3 regions) of the country. The distribution of marriage rates data throughout the geographic space is used to analyze the spatial patterns. Subsequent data processing includes analysis in ArcGIS for Desktop ver. 10.2. The resulting maps are made in ArcMap 10.2.

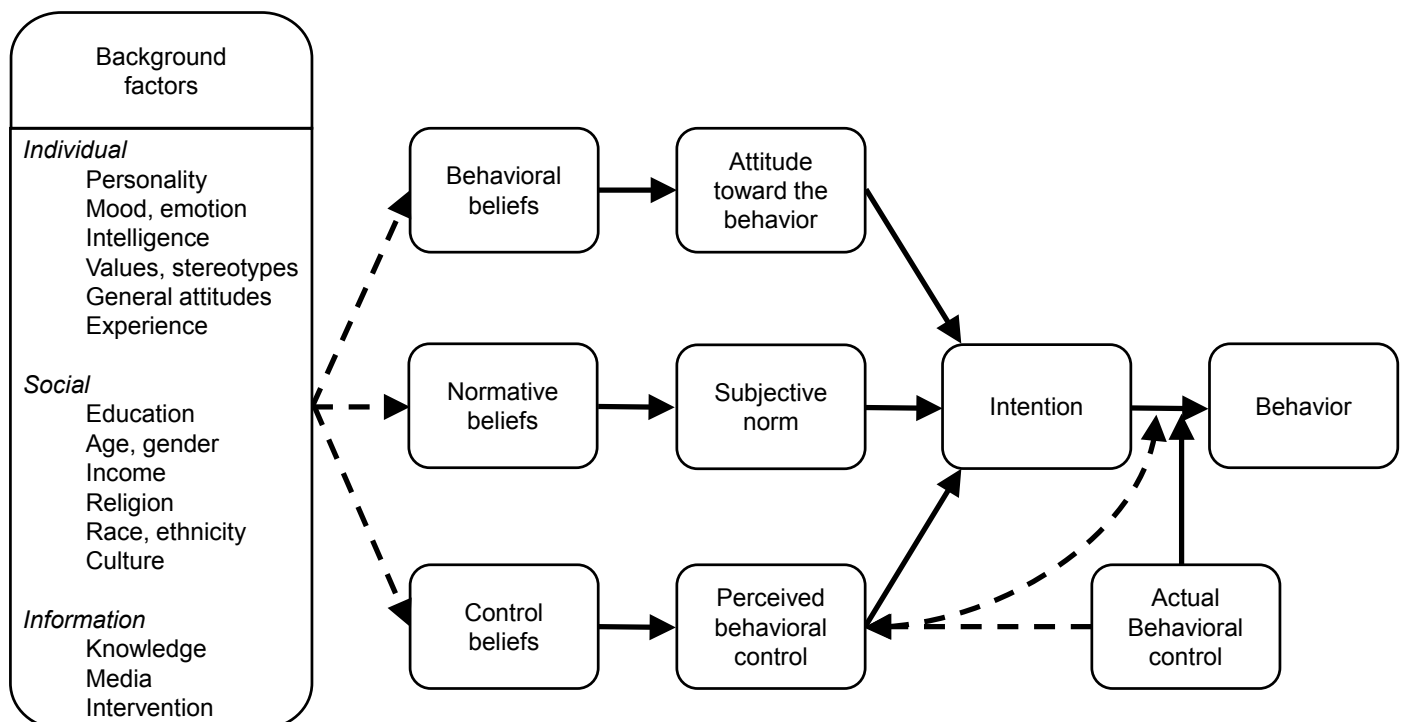


Figure 1. The theories of reasoned action and planned behavior. Source: Ajzen and Fishbein (2005)

3. Results

3.1. Marriage and marriage-related demographic trends in Bulgaria in the 1878 – 1950s period

After the Liberation of Bulgaria in 1878 and at the beginning of the last century, the total marriage rate was high – about 10 ‰. During the wars (1912-1918) it decreased sharply and in 1916 it was just 2.2 ‰. After the end of the First World War, as a result of the demographic compensation phenomenon, marriage rates reached 15-16 ‰. Then, a period of gradual decline followed, which was more noticeable during World War II, when several sets of the reserve army were mobilized at the same time, which affected the number of marriages. After the end of the war, in the second half of 1945, the number of marriages increased rapidly, reaching 82,826 for the whole year. This was about 20 thousand more than in 1944, and the largest number of marriages in the demographic history of Bulgaria. That kind of record was the result of the realization of marriages scheduled for earlier periods. The trend towards a higher number of marriages persisted throughout the so-called demographic compensation period, which lasted until 1950. During that period, the marriage rate increased as a result of a large number of postponed marriages. In the years between 1946 and 1950, there were between 75 and 80 thousand marriages in Bulgaria annually. The increased number of marriages led to an increase of marriage rates, which during that period were about 10.5 - 11.0 ‰. In addition to the so-called postponed marriages, an important demographic factor for the increase of the number of marriages was the entry into marriage age of significant contingents of young people born during the previous demographic compensation period – after the end of World War I.

Following the post-war demographic compensation period, a gradual process of decline in the number of marriages began. In the early 1950s the number of marriages had already decreased as the main reason for that were the lower birth rates in Bulgaria in the second half of the 1930s.

3.2. Dynamics of the marriage rates in Bulgaria after 1960

In the 1950-1965 period, an average of about 65,000 marriages was registered annually. This also led to a reduction of the marriage rate to levels around 8.0 - 9.0 ‰. The gradual aging of the population can be pointed out as a demographic factor during that period, which primarily affected the rural population.

Another period in the dynamics of the marriage rates in Bulgaria worth pointing out is the period between 1965 and 1970, when an increase of the number of marriages was registered, reaching about 70 thousand per year on the average. That increase was especially typical for the 1965-1968 period. The main factor for that was the growing number of the population at an age suitable for marriage, as a result of the post-WWII compensation period.

After 1970, a period of retention of marriage rate values began, followed by a decrease of marriage rates after 1975. As a result of that decrease, the marriage rate was averaged at levels around 7.5 ‰ by 1980. Based on statistical data, Minkov (1999) defines the levels of marriage rates as stable, having a favorable impact on the overall demographic development of the country until the 1970s and 1980s.

After 1980, when Bulgaria was entering the so-called “mature socialism period”, there was a steady trend of declining number of marriages in the country. For the 1980-1985 period, the average annual number reached about 66 thousand, while the marriage rate was about 7.0 ‰. The main reasons for that decrease were the changes in the demographic structures of the population – as a

result of the general population aging, affecting mostly villages and small towns, the contingents of young population (20-29 years) were decreasing – the population cohorts most suitable for marriage. The gradual increase of the average age of the population at the same time was combined with the desire for some delay in marriage. Among the reasons for that behavior was the desire to provide better education and professional realization, as well as better material conditions for the future family (Carlson and Stinson 1982).

The emergence of cohabitation of partners at a younger age was a relatively new phenomenon for Bulgaria in the 1980s. A similar type of cohabitation without a formal marriage was observed among some older couples as well. Partners in such couples usually choose this type of cohabitation after experiencing divorce or widowhood. Unmarried cohabitations eventually lead to a reduction of the marriage rate. According to the demographic statistics, in the mid-1980s about 60-65 thousand people in Bulgaria lived in cohabitation, out of marriage. With the gradual liberalization of public understandings, the number of such couples began to increase and included more representatives of the older generations. The measures for legislative restrictions on the number of divorces in the country definitely had an influence in that aspect. Despite those restrictions and the attempts to regulate family and marital relations during socialism, as early as the 1980s, partners' cohabitation emerged as a real alternative to the common official marriages.

Nevertheless, during socialism, the family was perceived as the main functioning cell of society. In that period fertility trends in Bulgaria were stable and were characterized by a nearly universal entry into parenthood. Other typical features of that period were the dominance of a two-child family model, an early start and early end of childbearing, stable mean ages of entry into childbearing and marriage, and low percentages of non-marital births (Koytcheva, Philipov, 2008). In the years of transition to market economy, changes in the attitude towards family occurred – its economic and redistributive functions had been given a dominant role at the expense of others, such as the reproductive and the educational ones (Chengelova, 2011).

3.3. Transition to market economy

The transition to market economy in Bulgaria at the end of the 1980s coincided with the trend of delayed marriages in many West European countries. In that period the rise of cohabitations was gaining importance, along with the increase of non-marital births. The economic crisis in Bulgaria during the 1990s also contributed to the reduction of marriages – from 59.9 thousand in 1990, their number decreased to 35.7 thousand in 1996. During the same period, the marriage rate declined from 6.7 ‰ to 4.3 ‰. At the same time, the average age of first marriage increased – in 1996 it was 28.0 years for men and 24.6 years for women. Postponement of marriages for some young people can be seen as a kind of protective reaction against the crisis-induced decline of living standards (Traykov, 1998). A significant number of marriage candidates postponed their initial intentions until after the crisis. Others found a solution in choosing to live together without a formal marriage. In her study of marriage and births in Bulgaria, Zhekova (2011) reached certain conclusions about the marital attitudes and behavior of young people in Bulgaria: at the beginning of the twenty-first century, young people increasingly realized that plans for a joint partnership – whether it was a legal marriage or a free union – as well as the birth of a child, would seriously increase their economic difficulties and to a much lesser extent will improve their opportunities for higher education and professional careers.

3.4. Contemporary regional patterns in marriage rates

The dynamics in the marriage rates of the urban and the rural population are also important from a geographical standpoint. In the past, before World War II, the rural population of Bulgaria had always had a higher marriage rate. In accordance with the patriarchal traditions preserved in the villages until the middle of the last century, getting married and starting a family was perceived as normal behavior. As a result of those understandings, a very small proportion of the rural residents remained unmarried. The faster onset of aging among the rural population in the 1960s was the result of intensive emigration to the urban settlements. This process caused significant changes in the values of marriage rates – in the villages they were rapidly decreasing, whereas in the cities they were increasing as a result of the significant influx of young population. This increase was temporary and only lasted until the 1970s, when a period of decline followed, predetermined by the onset of aging of the urban population itself. The diversified development of the marriage rate in villages and towns continued with some fluctuations in the following decades. The marriage rate of the urban population decreased from 11.0 ‰ in 1969 to 7.4 ‰ in 1990. Fluctuations in the marriage rate of the rural population were significantly less pronounced – from 6.5 ‰ in the early 1970s, to 7.0 ‰ in the 1980s, and to 6.3 ‰ in 1990.

Simultaneously with the differences between the urban and the rural population at the end of the last century, regional differences in the values of marriage rates were formed. A number of municipalities in the districts of Kardzhali, Blagoevgrad, Smolyan, Silistra, Dobrich and Pazardzhik exhibited higher marriage rates corresponding to above the national average.

The crude marriage rates have been rising in the last decade (Fig. 2). In 2010, the average crude marriage rate for Bulgaria was 2.9 ‰ while in 2019 it grew up to 4.0 ‰.

The highest marriage rates in 2010 were observed in Sofia-Grad – 4.4 ‰, Kardzhali – 4.2 ‰ and Varna – 3.7 ‰. At the same time, the districts with the lowest rates were Lovech – 1.8 ‰, Vratsa –

2.1 ‰ and Vidin – 2.1 ‰ (Fig. 3).

In 2019, Razgrad district took the first place with 658 marriages per 110,789 of population, or a crude marriage rate of 5.9 ‰. Six districts had almost similar rates – Targovishte, Sliven and Burgas – 4.8 ‰, and Sofia, Dobrich and Kardzhali – 4.7 ‰. (Fig. 4).

The preserved family traditions are an important factor for higher marriage rates among the representatives of the Turkish ethnic group, as well as of the Bulgarian-Mohammedans (the Pomaks). This explanation is valid for districts such as Razgrad, Kardzhali and Targovishte. At the opposite pole are the districts in Northwestern Bulgaria – Lovech, Vidin, Vratsa, and also in rural areas with severely deteriorated age structure of the population. There are many municipalities located not only in Northwestern Bulgaria, but also in the central parts of the Balkan Mountains (Stara Planina), the Fore-Balkans region (Predbalkan), the Kraishte region, the Strandzha-Sakar region and parts of the Srednogorie region. A major factor for the low marriage rates in these areas is the very high levels of population aging. Generally speaking, higher crude marriage rates are observed in the eastern part of the country. (Figs 5-6).

The aging of the population in the rest of the country is moderate. Therefore, the marriage rate values occupy intermediate positions compared to the districts and municipalities of the first two groups. With the further widespread decline of marriage rates at the beginning of the twenty-first century, spatial disparities are diminishing. As a result of the overall deterioration of the demographic situation, there are now only individual municipalities with marriage rate values higher than the national average. Under these conditions, the importance of the still preserved traditions regarding marriage and family in some ethno-confessional communities increases.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, low levels of marriage rates (between 4.0-5.0 ‰) persisted due to the aging of the population as a result of the low birth rate and the continuing emigration of the population at a young reproductive age. At the same time, the differences in the marriage rates between the urban and the rural population persist (Figs 7-8).

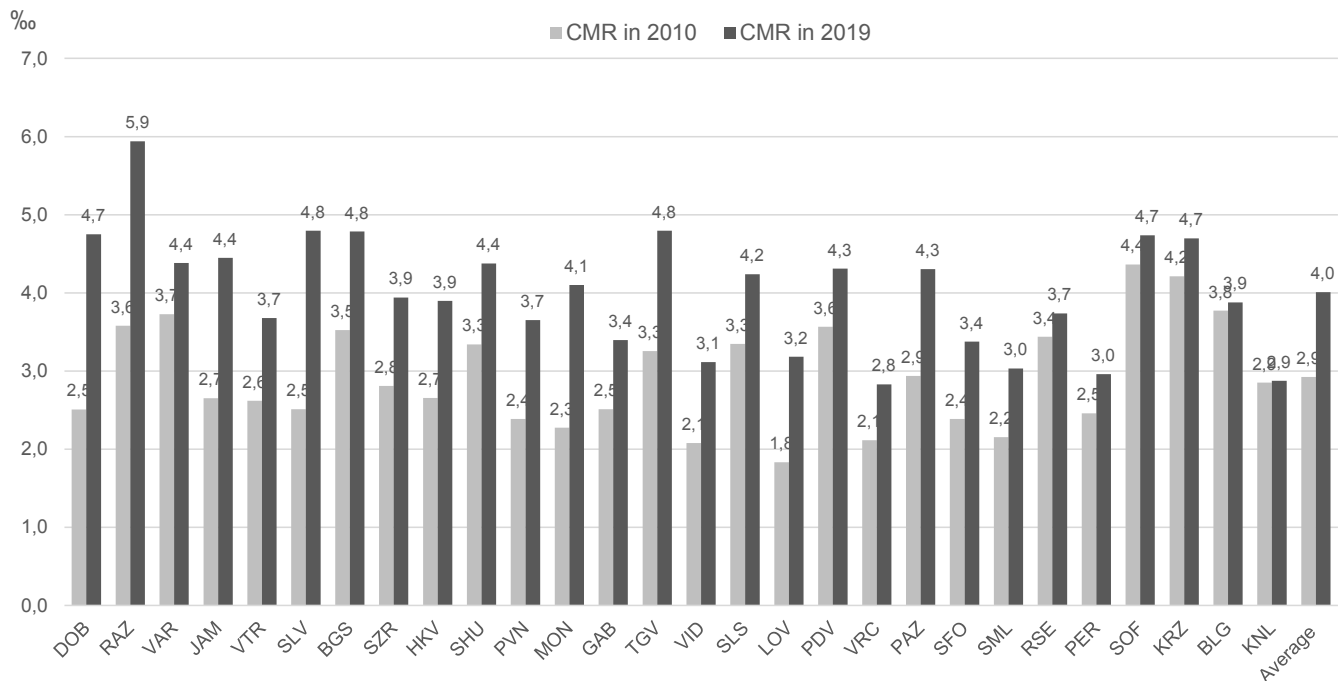


Figure 2. Crude marriage rate by districts in Bulgaria in 2010 and 2019.

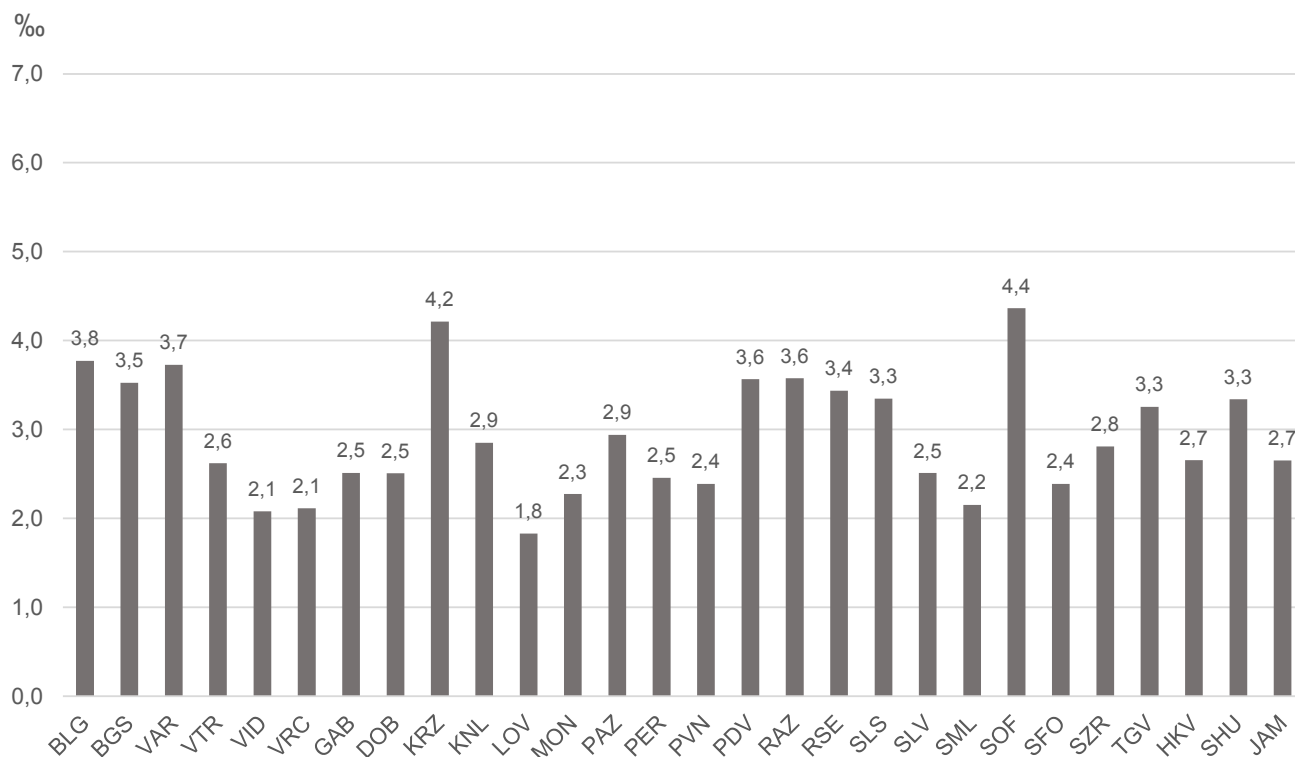


Figure 3. Crude marriage rate by districts in Bulgaria in 2010.

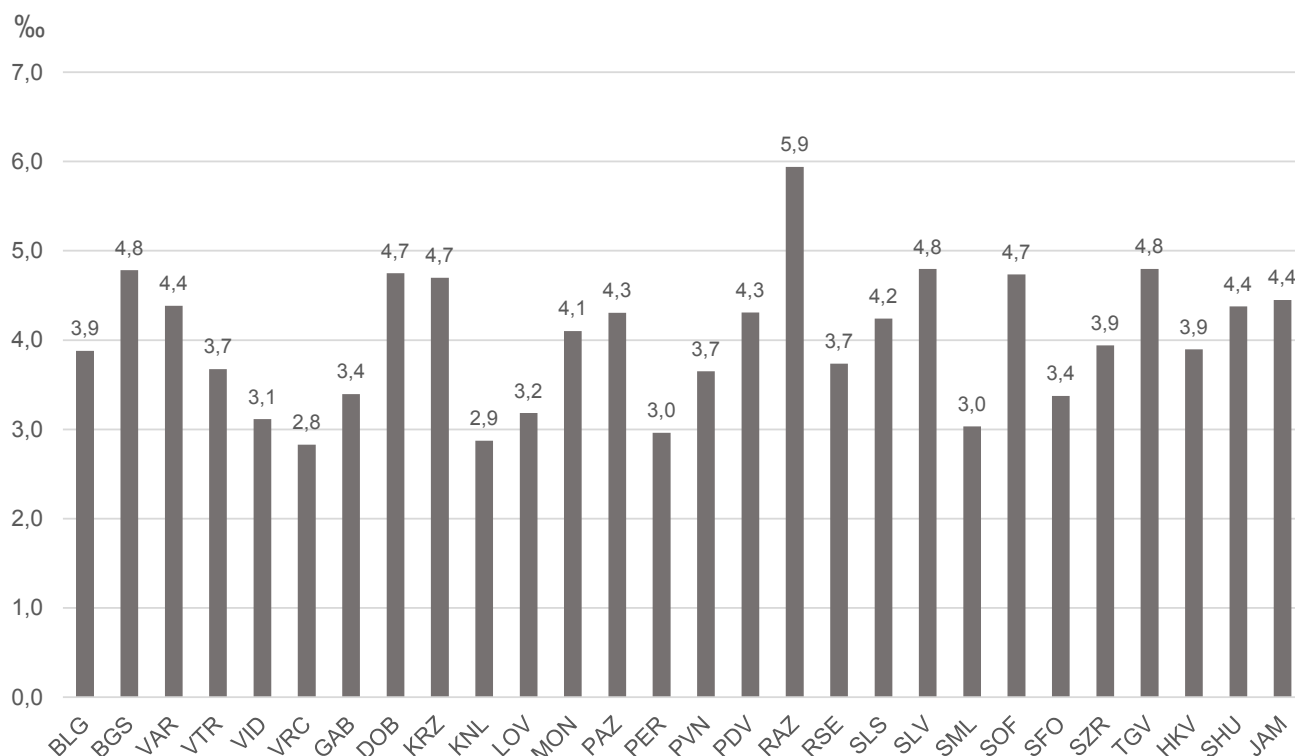


Figure 4. Crude marriage rate by districts in Bulgaria in 2019.

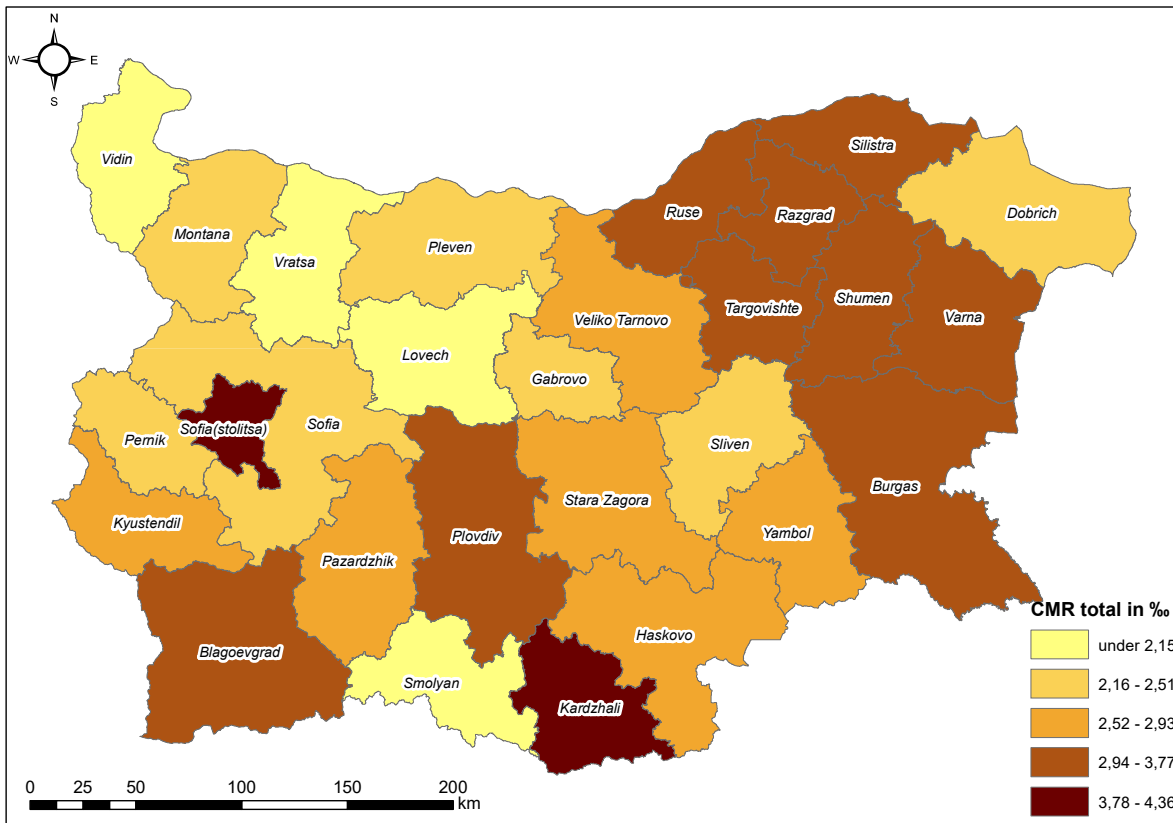


Figure 5. Crude marriage rate by districts in 2010.

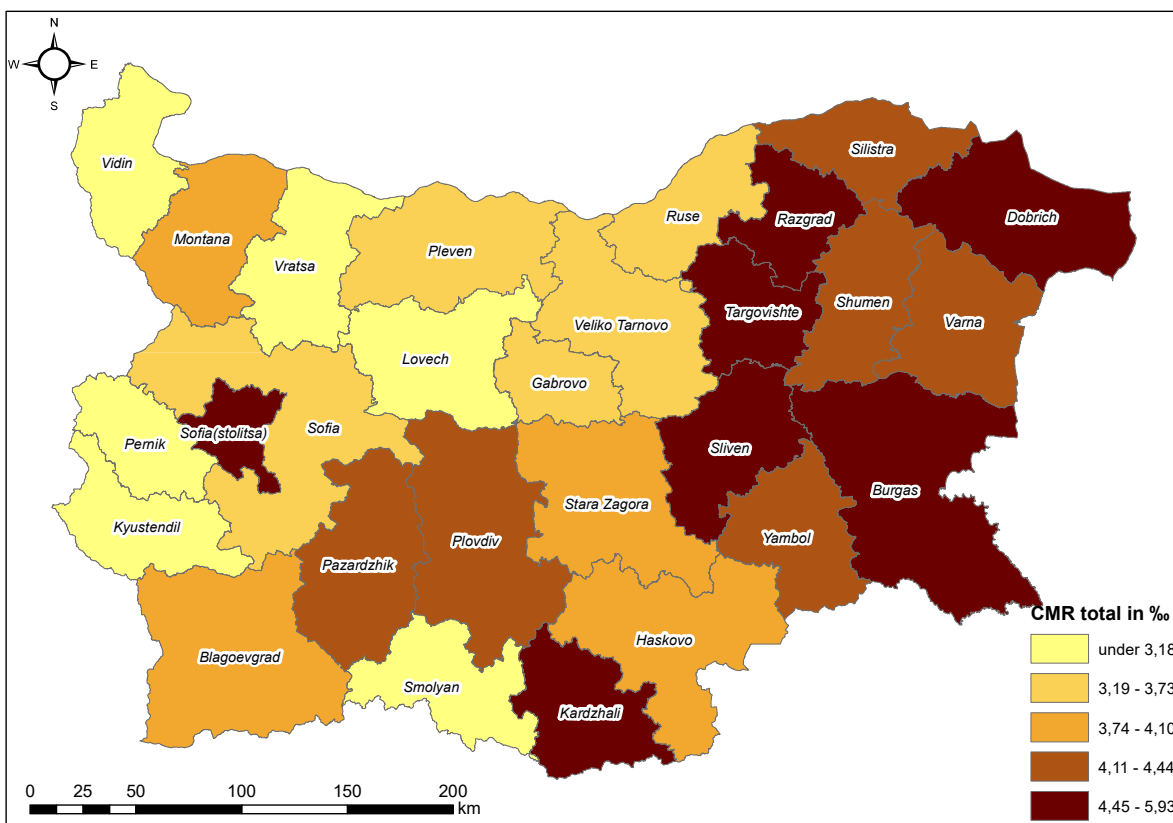


Figure 6. Crude marriage rate by districts in 2019.

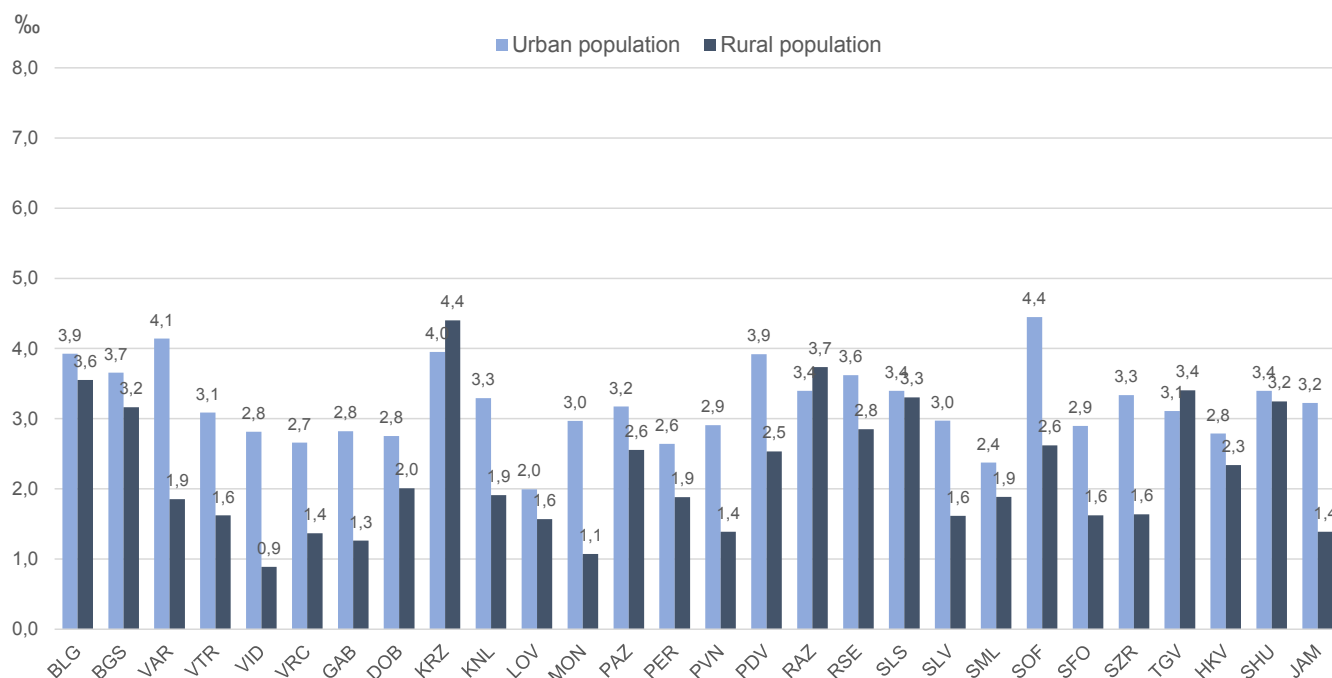


Figure 7. Crude marriage rate by districts for rural and urban population in 2010.

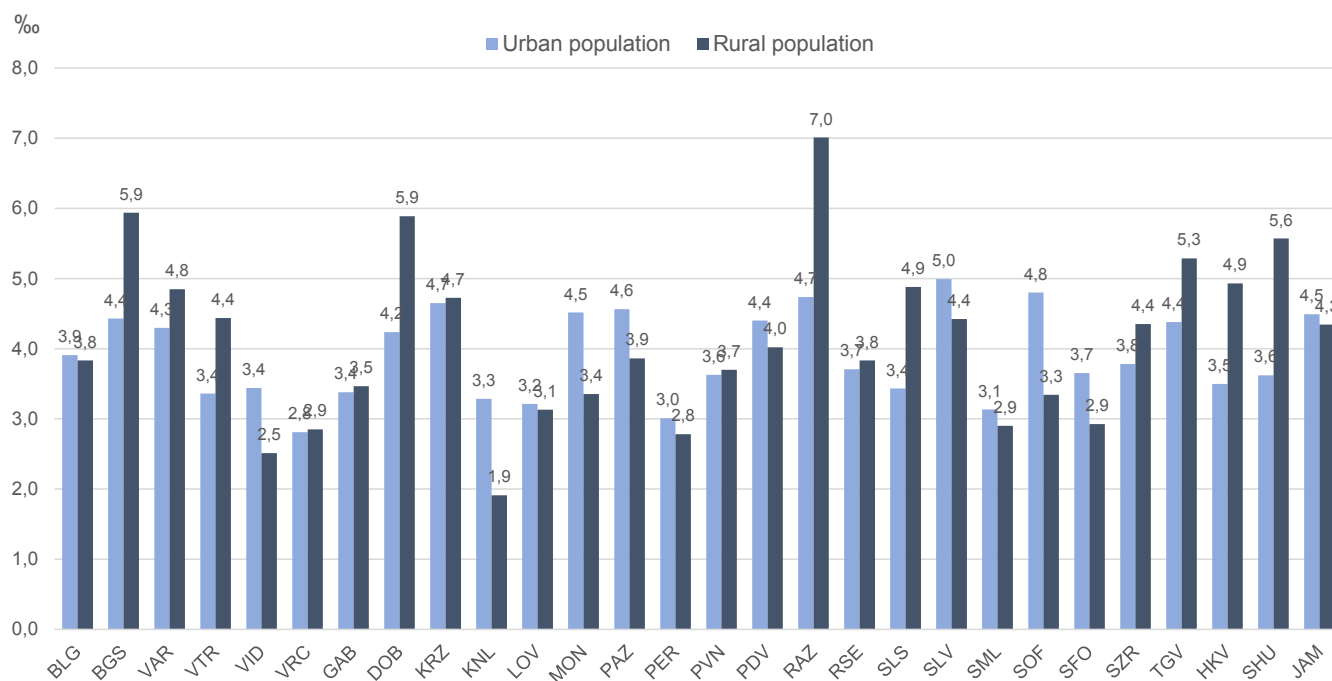


Figure 8. Crude marriage rate by districts for rural and urban population in 2019.

In 2006, 26 thousand marriages (4.8‰) were registered in the urban settlements of the country, while in the villages their number was only 7 thousand (2.9 ‰). The increased number of cases of couples' cohabitation without a legal marriage has a certain contribution to the declining marriage rates in Bulgaria during this last period. Data from the 2011 census shows that of all cohabitations, 70% were of young people, aged 16 to 39 years. With increasing age of

the partners, that share decreases to 16% for the population aged 40 to 49 years and to 14% for people over 50 years of age.

The data from the national statistics shows that despite the observed trend of decreasing number of marriages, there has been a certain increase in the last two years. For example, in 29,198 marriages were registered in 2019, which was 237 more than in 2018 and 4912 more than in 2010 (Table 1).

Table 1. Total number of marriages by districts and by place of residence (urban/rural) in 2010 and 2019.

Year	2010			2019		
	District	Total	Urban population	Rural population	Total	Urban population
Blagoevgrad	1229	755	474	1174	712	462
Burgas	1485	1133	352	1958	1387	571
Varna	1733	1576	157	2060	1696	364
Veliko Tarnovo	711	571	140	855	553	302
Vidin	220	184	36	258	185	73
Vratsa	409	297	112	451	264	187
Gabrovo	321	289	32	362	295	67
Dobrich	495	365	130	816	502	314
Kardzhali	647	255	392	743	297	446
Kyustendil	408	321	87	336	269	67
Lovech	271	183	88	390	248	142
Montana	348	288	60	521	369	152
Pazardzhik	846	568	278	1088	725	363
Pernik	331	270	61	353	285	68
Pleven	684	548	136	863	574	289
Plovdiv	2483	2034	449	2874	2224	650
Razgrad	466	205	261	658	247	411
Ruse	848	681	167	805	625	180
Silistra	421	193	228	458	164	294
Sliven	507	396	111	883	604	279
Smolyan	264	160	104	314	183	131
Sofia - Grad	5495	5343	152	6292	6096	196
Sofia - District	598	436	162	765	510	255
Stara Zagora	976	800	176	1235	859	376
Targovishte	416	203	213	532	263	269
Haskovo	672	496	176	878	569	309
Shumen	642	411	231	754	382	372
Yambol	360	301	59	522	373	149
Total	24286	19262	5024	29198	21460	7738

In reality, this minimal increase is not a reason to expect major changes. Moreover, during the years under review, there has been an increase of divorces, which reduces the effect of the higher number of marriages.

4. Conclusion

The observed trends in the marriage rates bring significant changes to the general characteristics of the population's marital structure. Under the influence of the changes in the socio-economic and demographic development of the country, the ratio between the categories of married and unmarried people changes too. At the 1900 census, more than half of the country's population was registered as

unmarried. The determining factor for that ratio was the high share of young population. With the gradual development of the aging process throughout the twentieth century, the percentage of unmarried people decreased and in 1992 it reached 34.0%. This decrease was primarily related to population aging, but in addition – to the changed marital behavior and the new models emerging in the society. The data from the next two censuses (2001 and 2011) showed a slight increase of the share of unmarried people (36% in 2001 and 40% in 2011). This was primarily due to the increase of cases of partners' cohabitation without an official marriage.

Opposite dynamics are observed in the category of married men and married women. At the 1900 census, their relative share was 40%.

In the first and the second half of the century the share of married persons increased and in 1992 it reached 55%. At the 2001 and the 2011 censuses, these values slightly decreased to 50.2% and 44.3% respectively. As in the category of the unmarried, the changes in the married group reflect the aging of the population and the spread of celibacy in Bulgaria.

Despite the observed trend of decreasing number of marriages in the last century, their number, as well as the crude marriage rate, increased over the last decade – the growth of the number of marriages was about 20% for the 2010 – 2019 period.

This brief retrospective of the changes in the marital structure of the population in Bulgaria shows a transition to a modern, more rational model of formation of family-marital relations. In this respect, Bulgaria is no exception to the general trends typical for most countries in Europe, North America, Australia and other parts of the world.

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