

Article

Contested Parenthood: Attitudes Toward Voluntary Childlessness as a Life Strategy in Post-Socialist Bulgaria

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Abstract

The article focuses on the social differences in the attitudes toward female and male voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria and their dynamics over time. The analysis is based on data from the European Social Survey conducted in 2006 and 2018 in Bulgaria. By the means of multinomial logistic regression, we test the effect of the period, gender, age, marital status, number of children, education, employment, minority status, and religiosity on attitudes toward childlessness. The results reveal a decrease in negative attitudes and a strong increase of neutral stances. However, higher age of respondents is still associated with an increase in negative attitudes toward voluntary childlessness rather than neutrality. Women are significantly more likely to accept voluntary childlessness than to be neutral compared to men. Respondents who are married, parents, lowly educated, jobless or economically inactive, people belonging to ethnic minority groups, and highly religious people are more likely to disapprove of voluntary childlessness. Perceptions on female or male voluntary childlessness are significantly correlated with attitudes toward extramarital fertility, cohabitation, divorces when children are under twelve years old, and full-time female employment when children are below the age of three. The analysis of variance reveals that the individuals who accept or are neutral to voluntary childlessness have stronger non-conformist attitudes emphasizing self-expression, the idea of “having a good time,” and rejection of traditional authorities compared to the respondents with negative attitudes.

Keywords

Bulgaria; European Social Survey; family values; non-conformist value orientations; parenthood; social differences; voluntary childlessness

Issue

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1. Introduction

Voluntary childlessness is not a new social phenomenon, but the freedom to choose not to have children and to express this choice certainly appears in post-modern societies where the child is no longer an (economic) necessity (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In this sense, the

concept of “childlessness” signifies the absence of a child (e.g., due to infertility or health-related problems), while the notion of a “child-free lifestyle” focuses on the conscious choice not to parent (Harrington, 2019). The denial of parenthood may not be a fixed life strategy but could be associated with a perpetual postponement of reproduction due to different reasons, including the

inability to find a partner or sustain a family, etc. (Clarke et al., 2018; Miettinen & Szalma, 2014).

Shapiro (2014, p. 1) delineates the multiple meanings associated with voluntary childlessness and points out that, “while childlessness describes a person or couple who does not have children for various personal, biomedical, or situational reasons, voluntary childlessness is characterized by an active choice, commitment, and permanence regarding the decision not to parent.” Discussing the differences in the definitions of this phenomenon, Berrington (2017) emphasizes the distinction between individuals who are involuntary childless due to different biomedical reasons and voluntary childlessness as a social inability to become a parent. The causes and consequences of “childlessness by circumstances” (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007) have been associated with an absence of a partner, discrepancies in fertility intentions in the couple, or other social and economic circumstances impeding parenthood. Authors emphasize the necessity to study childlessness as a continuum of personal decisions and behaviors taken across the life course and to distinguish between “child-less” and “child-free” status (Albertini & Arpino, 2018; Blackstone, 2014; Stahnke, 2020). Regarding the child-free status, Watling Neal and Neal (2021, p. 1) point out that “child-free individuals voluntarily choose not to have children, and therefore potentially are quite different from individuals who also do not have children but are not-yet-parents or childless.” Studies show that, among child-free individuals, life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and subjective wellbeing have been higher, suggesting that life without children may not be necessarily associated with negative emotional experiences (Dalphonse, 1997; Stahnke, 2020). Contrarily, individuals sharing more traditional values about family and parenthood experience the status of childlessness as a loss and failure that brings about unhappiness and regret (Chauhan et al., 2021).

This article aims to reveal if the rise of childlessness in Bulgaria has been accompanied by an increasing prevalence of more tolerant views concerning this phenomenon. With a focus on the attitudes toward female or male voluntary childlessness, the present study addresses the following research questions: Has there been a shift in public attitudes regarding voluntary childlessness from stigma to tolerance? What are the sociodemographic differences between individuals who disapprove, remain neutral, and have affirmative attitudes toward voluntary childlessness? Finally, is there an association between the attitudes toward voluntary childlessness and other general and family-related values? Under (general) value we understand a “conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action” (Kluckhohn, 1951, p. 395). The article provides insights into attitudes toward voluntary childlessness in the Bulgarian familistic context. Unlike Western European countries, where voluntary childlessness is more widespread and on which many

studies have already been conducted, in most of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including Bulgaria, it is an emerging social phenomenon and still an understudied research topic.

1.1. Trends of Childlessness in Europe

In the recent context of decreasing fertility in Europe, the phenomenon of childlessness has been studied from various research perspectives. The trend of increasing childlessness can be explained by macro-factors and individual life circumstances. Research shows that some structural factors influence reproductive decisions, such as the increased control of fertility through modern contraception (Chancey & Dumais, 2009), prolonged education of women, increased employment and more demanding and insecure jobs (Mills & Blossfeld, 2005), decreased dependence of the individual from the family due to protection from the welfare state (Park, 2005), and greater social mobility related to job opportunities (Meil, 2010). Studies point also to women’s overburden with unpaid domestic work, which affects negatively the reconciliation of parenthood and paid work (Thèvenon, 2009).

Ultimate childlessness in European societies has been associated with trends of increasing age of union formation and parenthood, especially among highly educated women, repetitive postponement of parenthood across the life course, increasing union instability, and relaxed social pressure on reproduction (Mills et al., 2011; Rybińska & Morgan, 2019). Kreyenfeld and Konietzka (2017) reveal that, in West Germany, ultimate childlessness increased from 10 to 20% in the cohorts of women born in the 1940–1964 span. Their study shows that the increase in childlessness has a strong educational and socioeconomic gradient, being higher among highly educated women and less educated men.

Recent studies show that, although increasing, voluntary childlessness remains relatively low in CEE countries, like Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Russia. In these countries, under 10% of women at age 40–44 are expected to remain childless (Miettinen et al., 2015). Präg et al. (2017) point out that, in CEE countries, especially in Bulgaria and Russia, the recent fertility regime is featured by low completed fertility (around 1.6 children per woman) and low but increasing levels of ultimate childlessness (around 8%). The increase in childlessness in CEE countries, especially among women born in the 1970s and the 1980s, could be related also to socioeconomic and cultural transformations that changed the attitudes of young adults about family and parenthood (Sobotka, 2017). There also seems to be a growing acceptance of childlessness in CEE countries (Sobotka, 2004).

1.2. The National Context

During the socialist period (from the 1950s until the beginning of the 1990s) Bulgaria was recognized as a

country where more than 90% of women had a child and the average age of first birth was around 22 years. It is supposed that, when the proportion of childless women is below 10%, childlessness is mainly due to involuntary reasons and the absence of a partner (Koytcheva & Philipov, 2008). Pronatalism as an ideology that “implies encouragement of all births as conducive to individual, family, and social well-being” (De Sandre, 1978, p. 145) has a long tradition in public discourses and public policies in Bulgaria. The pronatalist pressure was part of the socialist political regime in the country characterized by the strong support of parenthood and family formation at a young age, marital fertility, the two-child family model, prohibition of abortions and modern contraception, and lower tolerance for divorces and non-marital cohabitations (Brunnbauer & Kassabova, 2009).

Recent studies on Bulgaria reveal that the levels of ultimate childlessness began to increase in the cohorts of women born in the late 1960s (Moralyiska-Nikolova, 2021). It increased to 14.5% in the cohort of women born in 1978. The trend of voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria has also a strong ethnic and educational gradient (Dimitrova, 2020). The advancing process of stratification of reproduction was associated with faster fertility decrease and increasing rates of ultimate childlessness among women of Bulgarian ethnicity and also among highly educated women (Dimitrova, 2012). Studies on the values and perceptions of the recent young generations in Bulgaria reveal that family and children are strongly appreciated in their value orientations (Kotzeva, 2020a; Mitev et al., 2019). One of the explanations for these findings is that trust in family counterbalances the general mistrust in the public institutions in the country.

The negative implications of the demographic decline during the last three decades featured by rapid population aging, severe labor shortages, and strong pressure on the pension and health systems boosted the public concerns about the “demographic crisis,” the low birth rates, and revived the traditional stereotypes about childless women (Apostolova, 2021). High female employment was accompanied by gender inequalities in the hours spent on paid and unpaid work, identifying a discrepancy between structural conditions and cultural norms related to gender equality practices (Stoilova & Kotzeva, 2020). In recent years, the rise of nationalist parties and social movements awoke, in some segments of the society, the idea of the “traditional family” and the return to the “authentic” roles of women as mothers and caregivers. Disapproval of childlessness has also been followed by re-traditionalization of gender roles in certain spheres in the post-socialist transition period in Bulgaria (Luleva, 2016).

On the other hand, after 1990, the coercive pronatalist measures of the former regime were abolished. The processes of growing union instability, diffusion of new types of “unconventional” living arrangements like cohabitations, “living-apart-together,” homosexual unions, the increasing extramarital fertility, lone par-

enthood, and voluntary childlessness manifested cultural and ideational transformations associated with increased tolerance and acceptance of the new forms of family and parenthood. Studies show that these cultural changes were related to the diffusion of post-materialist family-related values in Bulgaria since 1990 as a manifestation of the unfolding second demographic transition (Dimitrova, 2006). The emerging pronatalist messages and the public concerns about the “demographic crisis” became a discursive political reaction to the actual demographic changes.

2. Data, Variables, and Methods

The empirical part of the analysis is based on the Bulgarian dataset of the European Social Survey (ESS) from 2006 (round 3) and 2018 (round 9). The ESS is an academically driven cross-national representative survey conducted in many European countries. The questionnaire includes topics of political participation, public policy, trust and wellbeing, human values, social inequalities, among others. The present analysis focuses on the dynamics of the attitudes toward female or male voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria. The analysis includes 3598 participants at the age of 15 and above (Table 16 in the Supplementary File). The respondents are equally distributed by gender in both waves. The people above 56 years compose the biggest age group—45% in 2006 and 53% in 2018, which may increase the share of respondents with more traditional views on family and parenthood. Respondents without children are 18% in 2006 and 20% in 2018. People with one child are 23% (2006) and 27% (2018). The respondents with two or more children are 57% (2006) and 53% (2018). The attitudes toward female or male voluntary childlessness are assessed by the question: “How much do you approve or disapprove if a woman/a man chooses never to have children?” Participants in the survey were randomly sorted into two groups. The first group responds to questions on women’s life cycle, including voluntary childlessness, and the second group responds to similar questions on men’s life cycle.

The differentiating effects of various socio-demographic characteristics on the attitudes toward voluntary childlessness are delineated by the means of multinomial logistic regression. The dependent variable in the model includes three groups of respondents with negative, neutral, or affirmative attitudes. The multiple outcomes of the dependent variable make the application of multinomial logistic regression an appropriate modeling strategy. In multinomial regression log odds of the dependent variable are modeled as a linear combination of the predictors (Long & Freese, 2006). The predictors in the model are the year of the survey, a variable that indicates if the question concerns male or female voluntary childlessness, gender and age of the respondent, marital status and number of children, education and economic status, ethnicity (Bulgarian vs.

non-Bulgarian), and religiosity. The question “how religious are you?” is measured on a 10-point scale. The group of non-religious or slightly religious respondents includes those people whose responses ranged from 0 to 4. Scores from five (5) to seven (7) create the group of moderately religious individuals and scores from eight (8) to ten (10) create the group of highly religious people. Religiosity taps the presence of more traditional or more secular and non-conformist value orientations about family and parenthood (Bein, 2021).

We use correlation analysis to explore the strength and significance of the association between the attitudes toward female or male voluntary childlessness and other parenthood and family-related values such as the acceptance of non-marital unions and childbearing in them, men/women’s labor force participation when children are under three years, and divorce of a man/woman when children are under 12 years of age.

By the means of an analysis of variance, we study also the differences in the general values of the respondents who disapprove, have neutral attitudes, or accept female or male voluntary childlessness. In the ESS, general values are assessed following the prompt: “Now I will briefly describe some people. Please, listen to each description and tell me how much each person is or is not like you?” The statements concerning general values are:

1. [It is important] to think new ideas and to be creative;
2. [It is important] to be rich and to have money and expensive things;
3. [It is important] to show abilities and to be admired;
4. [It is important] to live in secure and safe surroundings;
5. [It is important] to try new and different things in life;
6. [It is important] to do what is told and to follow rules;
7. [It is important] to understand different people;
8. [It is important] to be humble and modest, not to draw attention;
9. [It is important] to have a good time;
10. [It is important] to make own decisions and to be free;
11. [It is important] to help people and to care for others’ wellbeing;
12. [It is important] to be successful and that people recognize achievements;
13. [It is important] to seek adventures and to have an exciting life;
14. [It is important] to behave properly; to get respect from others;
15. [It is important] to be loyal to friends and to devote to close people;
16. [It is important] to care for nature and the environment;
17. [It is important] to follow traditions and customs;

18. [It is important] to seek fun and things that give pleasure;
19. [It is important that] people be treated equally and have equal opportunities;
20. [It is important that] the government is strong and ensures safety.

Response options are presented on a 6-point scale, ranging from “very much like me” to “not like me at all.” To study the differences in the general values of individuals with affirmative, neutral, or disapproving stances on voluntary childlessness, we use a one-way ANOVA test of differences (the results from the statistical analysis are presented in Tables 4–15 in the Supplementary File).

3. Results

3.1. Socio-Demographic Differences in the Attitudes Toward Voluntary Childlessness in Bulgaria

The trends in attitudes toward female or male voluntary childlessness are presented in Figure 1. In 2006, 83% of respondents expressed negative attitudes about the decision of a woman not to have children, while in 2018 their share declined to 70%. The same decreasing trend was observed in the attitudes toward male voluntary childlessness (82% in 2006 and 68% in 2018 had negative attitudes). The analysis reveals a strong increase in neutral stances. In 2018, the share of individuals with neutral attitudes increased to 25% for female voluntary childlessness and 28% for male voluntary childlessness. In 2006, 4% of respondents replied that they would approve the decision of a woman not to have children. In 2018, their share increased to 5.3%. With respect to male voluntary childlessness, the share of people with affirmative attitudes increased from 4% to 5%. These trends reveal a shift in the attitudes toward voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria today associated with growing neutrality and to less extent with increasing approval. The trend of strongly increasing neutrality suggests that the traditional family values and norms in which parenthood is strongly appreciated were partly challenged by the processes of postponement of family formation and parenthood in the recent period in Bulgaria. In an international comparative perspective, data from the ESS 2018 show that the percentage of people with strong affirmative attitudes is above 30% in north-western European countries like Iceland, Finland, Sweden, and even above 50% in the Netherlands, Norway, and Denmark; strong acceptance is 2–4% in CEE countries like Serbia, Lithuania, and Estonia, and around 1% in Bulgaria and Hungary.

In the next step of the analysis, using a multinomial logistic regression, we study the effect of different socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents on their attitudes toward voluntary childlessness.

The results from the multivariate analysis confirmed the significance of the changes in attitudes toward voluntary childlessness between the two waves of the

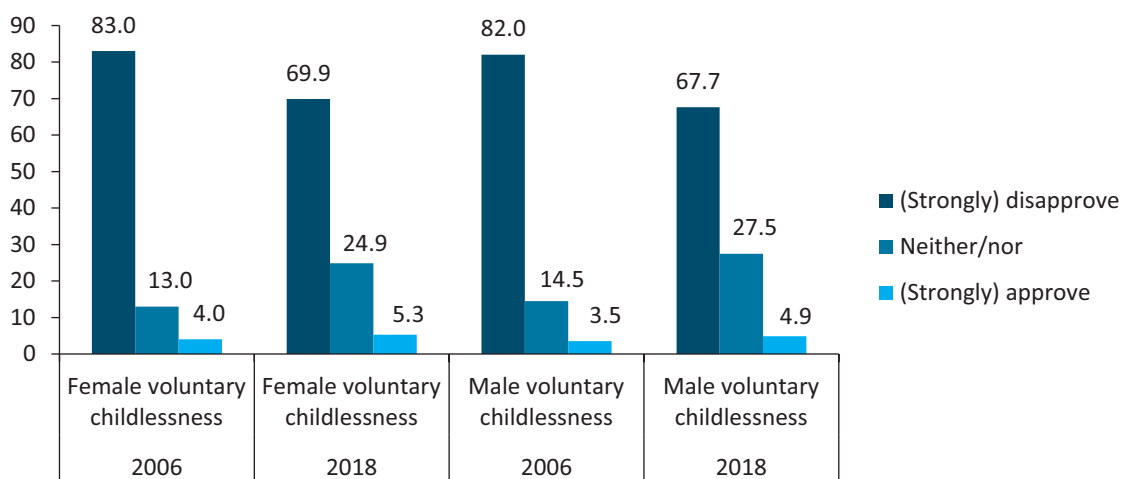


Figure 1. Attitudes toward female or male voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria. Source: ESS ERIC (2006, 2018).

ESS (see Table 1). Compared to 2006 (reference year), in 2018 the respondents were less likely to reject or approve of voluntary childlessness than to be neutral (reference category).

Compared to men (reference category) women are significantly more likely to have an affirmative attitude toward voluntary childlessness than to be neutral (reference category). This result reveals that, on an attitudinal level, women tend to reject more often the traditional normative expectations about the “motherhood mandate.”

Higher age is associated with an increase in negative attitudes toward voluntary childlessness rather than neutrality. This result reveals generational dynamics and the diffusion of more tolerant values and views among younger generations concerning family and parenthood.

Married respondents are significantly more likely to disapprove of voluntary childlessness than to be neutral (reference category). This result reveals the strong association between marriage and parenthood and the affirmative effect of marital experience on reproductive attitudes.

Respondents with children are significantly more likely to disapprove of voluntary childlessness than to express neutral attitudes (reference category). Individuals with two or more children are also less likely to approve of voluntary childlessness than to be neutral (reference category). These results confirm the strong association between a respondent’s parenthood status and reproductive attitudes.

Lowly educated people are significantly more likely to disapprove of voluntary childlessness compared to individuals with tertiary education (reference group). This result is in line with the observed strong educational differences in the reproductive behaviors of recent young generations in Bulgaria, according to which, among highly educated individuals, the postponement of fertility is stronger.

Unemployed or economically inactive respondents are more likely to disapprove of voluntary childless-

ness than to be neutral compared to the people who are employed (reference category). Joblessness and economic inactivity are associated with lower education and, in many cases, with a higher number of children, which may strengthen negative attitudes toward childlessness.

Respondents of non-Bulgarian origin are more likely to disapprove of voluntary childlessness than to be neutral compared to people of Bulgarian ethnic origin (reference group). The persisting differences in the reproductive behaviors and attitudes of the different ethnic groups in Bulgaria explain this result. Ethnic minorities (Turkish and Roma) have higher fertility rates and individuals in these communities share more traditional attitudes toward family and parenthood.

Religiosity has also a significant effect on the attitudes toward voluntary childlessness. Compared to the non-religious or slightly religious respondents (reference category), highly religious people are more likely to disapprove of voluntary childlessness than to be neutral (reference category). Family and parenthood are fundamental values in the worldview of strong believers, and voluntary childlessness is an object of strong disapproval. Moderately religious people have more relaxed attitudes toward voluntary childlessness and are significantly less likely to disapprove of it than to remain neutral (reference category). This may be explained by more ambiguous value orientations of the people with mixed secular and religious views.

3.2. Value Orientations and Attitudes Toward Voluntary Childlessness in Bulgaria

In both waves of the ESS, attitudes toward female voluntary childlessness are positively correlated with the acceptance of non-marital cohabitation and parenthood in consensual unions (Table 2). There is also a significant positive correlation between the acceptance of female labor force participation when an involved child is under three years and the acceptance of divorce when an involved child is under twelve years. The strength of the

Table 1. Multinomial logistic regression of the attitudes toward voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria.

Factors	Disapproving vs. neutral (ref.)		Approving vs. neutral (ref.)	
	RRR	Sig.	RRR	Sig.
Split ballot				
Female voluntary childlessness (ref.)	1		1	
Male voluntary childlessness	0.878		0.932	
Year				
2006 (ref.)	1		1	
2018	0.402	***	0.694	*
Gender				
Man (ref.)	1		1	
Woman	1.088		1.393	*
Age of R.	1.005	*	0.998	
Marital status				
Never married (ref.)	1		1	
Divorced/separated/widowed	1.232		0.935	
Married	1.361	*	0.851	
Number of children				
No children (ref.)	1		1	
One child	1.461	**	0.641	
Two or more children	1.737	***	0.577	*
Education				
Tertiary (ref.)	1		1	
Secondary	1.315	**	1.198	
Primary or lower	1.554	**	1.226	
Economic status				
In paid work (ref.)	1		1	
Unemployed	1.466	**	0.908	
Economically inactive	1.238	**	0.732	
Ethnicity				
Bulgarian (ref.)	1		1	
Non-Bulgarian	1.329	*	0.889	
Religiosity				
Non or slightly religious (ref.)	1		1	
Moderately religious	0.805	**	0.798	
Highly religious	1.456	**	0.910	
Constant	1.977	***	0.448	**

Notes: The analysis includes 3211 respondents; log likelihood is 2084.69; sig.: *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$. Source: ESS ERIC (2006, 2018).

Table 2. Pearson correlations of attitudes toward female voluntary childlessness, parenthood, marriage, and divorce in Bulgaria.

	Approve if a woman chooses never to have children	
	ESS 2006	ESS 2018
Approve if a woman lives with a partner not married to	0.151**	0.219**
Approve if a woman has a child with a partner not married to	0.141**	0.195**
Approve if a woman has a full-time job while children aged under three years	0.186**	0.236**
Approve if a woman gets divorced while children aged under twelve years	0.246**	0.379**

Notes: The analysis includes 647 respondents from the 2006 ESS and 1009 respondents from the 2018 ESS; sig.: *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$. Source: ESS ERIC (2006, 2018).

correlation between these attitudes increases over time. The increase of voluntary childlessness as a new behavioral phenomenon and the diffusion of new family forms such as cohabitations and parenthood in them reflect an unfolding shift in the family-related values in the recent Bulgarian society. The respondents who accept female voluntary childlessness have also more tolerant attitudes toward the early return to work of women with small children. This result suggests that the traditional perception of the primary caregiving role of women is challenged among people who show higher tolerance to the new forms of family and reproductive behaviors in recent Bulgarian society.

The correlation analysis of the attitudes toward male voluntary childlessness and other parenthood and family-related values reveals a positive correlation with the acceptance of cohabitations and parenthood in non-marital unions as well as with the acceptance of the divorce of a man when the children are below twelve years (Table 3). The strength of the correlations increases over time. The results show that the labor force participation of men with small children is not a source of divergence in the attitudes of the respondents and reflect the prevailing attitudes in the Bulgarian society that the mother needs to be involved as long as possible in the care for children, while the father needs to be the main provider for the family.

In the next step of the analysis, we focus on the differences in the general values of the respondents who disapprove, have neutral attitudes to, or accept female or male voluntary childlessness. The results from the ANOVA test of differences applied to the data from the 2006 ESS reveal that the people who approve of female voluntary childlessness appreciate more a life in secure and safe surroundings compared to individuals with negative or neutral attitudes (see Tables 4–6 and Figure 2 in the Supplementary File). They also share more frequently the view that people should be treated equally and have equal opportunities compared to respondents with negative or neutral attitudes. Respondents with

affirmative attitudes express higher support for the statement that it is important for them to help people and care for others' well-being compared to respondents with neutral attitudes.

The results from the ANOVA test of differences applied to the data from the 2018 ESS show that individuals who approve of women's voluntary childlessness more often agree with the statement that it is important to have new ideas, be rich, and have expensive things compared to the people with negative attitudes (see Tables 7–9 and Figure 3 in the Supplementary File). The respondents with affirmative attitudes emphasize more frequently that it is important for them to seek fun and things that give pleasure compared to the individuals with neutral or negative attitudes.

Respondents with negative attitudes to female voluntary childlessness appreciate more a life in secure and safe surroundings and it is more important for them to help people and care for others' well-being, to do what they are told and follow the rules, behave properly to follow customs and traditions compared to people with neutral attitudes. They emphasize less frequently the importance of having a good time in life compared to people with neutral attitudes. For the same group, it is also more important to be humble and modest, not to draw attention, and have a strong government that ensures safety compared to respondents with neutral or affirmative attitudes. Participants in the 2018 ESS who reject female voluntary childlessness report more frequently that it is important for them to care for nature and the environment compared to respondents with neutral attitudes. They also emphasize the importance of understanding different people more often in comparison to individuals with neutral attitudes. Recent studies on tolerance in the Balkans, based on the ESS data, uncover the need to study discrepancies between the declared values of tolerance to different minority groups (e.g., migrants, ethnic minorities, LGBT people) and actual discrimination practices (Dimova & Dimov, 2022). In the context of the present

Table 3. Pearson correlations of attitudes toward male voluntary childlessness, parenthood, marriage, and divorce in Bulgaria.

	Approve if a man chooses never to have children	
	ESS 2006	ESS 2018
Approve if a man lives with a partner not married to	0.176**	0.250**
Approve if a man has a child with a partner not married to	0.167**	0.198**
Approve if a man has a full-time job while children aged under three years	0.020	0.025
Approve if a man gets divorced while children aged under twelve years	0.255**	0.349**

Notes: The analysis includes 685 respondents from the 2006 ESS and 1045 respondents from the 2018 ESS; sig.: *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$. Source: ESS ERIC (2006, 2018).

study, these findings highlight the necessity to study personal value orientations in the context of actual behaviors and to explore the concordance between the declared discursive tolerance, shared universalistic values, and actual behaviors.

The ANOVA test of differences applied to the data from the 2006 ESS reveals that people who approve of male voluntary childlessness report more often that it is important for them to try new and different things and to have a good time in life compared to individuals with neutral or negative attitudes (see Tables 10–12 and Figure 4 in the Supplementary File). Respondents who approve of male voluntary childlessness state more often that it is important for them to “seek fun” and things that give pleasure compared to individuals with neutral attitudes. For the people with negative attitudes to male voluntary childlessness, it is more important to be loyal to friends and devote themselves to close people, to have a government that is strong and ensures safety, and to care for nature and the environment compared to respondents with neutral attitudes.

The ANOVA test of differences applied to the data from ESS 2018 reveals that for the individuals who approve of male voluntary childlessness, it is more important to “seek fun” and things that give pleasure compared to respondents with negative attitudes (see Tables 13–15 and Figure 5 in the Supplementary File). For the people who are neutral to male voluntary childlessness, it is more important to be rich and to have money and expensive things compared to the respondents with negative attitudes. For the individuals who disapprove of male voluntary childlessness, it is less important to try new and different things in life and more important to do what is told and to follow the rules compared to the respondents who are neutral. People who reject male voluntary childlessness appreciate more a life in secure and safe surroundings and emphasize a need to be humble and modest and not to draw attention compared to individuals with neutral or affirmative attitudes. The respondents with negative attitudes emphasize less frequently the importance of having a good time compared to the people with neutral or affirmative attitudes. For the same group, it is more important to help people and to care for others’ well-being as well as to understand different people compared to the individuals with neutral attitudes. For the people who reject male voluntary childlessness, it is more important to behave properly and follow traditions and customs, to have a government that is strong and ensures safety, compared to individuals with neutral and affirmative attitudes. For the group with negative attitudes, it is less important to seek adventures and have an exciting life; it is more important to be loyal to friends and devote themselves to close people compared to the respondents with neutral attitudes. People who disapprove of male voluntary childlessness show higher appreciation to care for nature and the environment compared to individuals with neutral or affirmative attitudes.

4. Discussion

The results from the present study reveal the dynamics and the social differences in the attitudes toward male or female voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria today. The trends suggest increasing neutrality and declining negative attitudes along with a slight increase in acceptance. The increase in acceptance patterns is less pronounced but still present. The uncovered attitudinal changes reveal that the traditional stigmatizing perceptions and pronatalist attitudes related to the “motherhood mandate” still exist in Bulgarian society, but they were also gradually challenged over time.

The increasing neutrality to voluntary childlessness relates to an evolving process of postponement of parenthood and increasing ultimate childlessness among the younger cohorts in Bulgaria and reveals cultural and demographic changes outlined in the theory of second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe, 2014; van de Kaa, 2002). The growing neutrality to voluntary childlessness reflects also perceived social risks and social barriers to parenthood as well as adverse life circumstances (such as the absence of a partner, financial difficulties, housing problems, marital conflicts, dissatisfaction with partnership, etc.) leading to social inability to have children. The increasing neutrality may reflect also an attitudinal adjustment to the economic uncertainty, poverty, and socioeconomic difficulties that the young generations have experienced in recent times in Bulgaria.

According to Shapiro (2014), voluntary childlessness has been stratified globally and within societies by encouraging fertility in some segments of the population and discouraging others. The present study reveals also the significant differentiating effect of gender, age, education, economic and ethnic minority status, parenthood, and marital status on attitudes toward voluntary childlessness. The uncovered social segmentation in the attitudes shows that breaking the stigma on voluntary childlessness is stronger among women, while men more often express more traditional attitudes toward family and reproduction. Few studies focus on the gendered aspects of voluntary childlessness and particularly on male voluntary childlessness (e.g., Chudnovskaya, 2019; Klímová & Hašková, 2020; Oláh, 2003). According to Park (2005), women who choose to remain childless are more stigmatized than men, especially in a pronatalist context. In more traditional societies voluntary childlessness conveys negative stereotypes about childless women who are perceived as less mature, selfish, less feminine, and spoiled (Gillespie, 2001).

Miettinen et al. (2015) observe a trend of polarization among childless men and women at age 40–44 years according to their education. In particular, men with lower education and women with very high and very low education have higher rates of ultimate childlessness. Bahtiyar-Saygan and Sakallı-Uğurlu (2019) uncover that higher education is associated with more permissive attitudes toward voluntary childlessness. The present

study reveals that, in the case of Bulgaria, socioeconomic resources (education and economic status) are also in a significant relationship with attitudes toward childlessness. Higher education is associated with higher acceptance of voluntary childlessness, while joblessness and economic inactivity, being associated with higher fertility in Bulgaria, are in a negative relationship with it.

In the recent Bulgarian society, people with more tolerant attitudes to voluntary childlessness express higher acceptance for cohabitation, childbearing in consensual unions, women's employment when involved children are small, and the divorce of a couple with small children. These findings are in line with other studies, revealing that more tolerant views of voluntary childlessness are associated with stronger post-materialist values and preferences that "desacralize" and "desacralize" parenthood (Noordhuizen et al., 2010; Tanturri et al., 2015). The present study also uncovers a shift in a post-materialist direction. The increasing tolerance facilitates the diffusion of the new behavioral phenomena and changes the familistic profile of the recent Bulgarian society as part of the advancing second demographic transition (Dimitrova, 2006).

Voluntary childlessness has been discussed within the shift to post-materialist values and increasing preferences of young people for self-fulfillment, freedom, independence, enjoyment, and spontaneous life experiences (Gillespie, 2001; Park, 2005). It has also been studied in the context of risk aversion to long-term investments and individual responsibility when parenthood and partnership are considered "social risks" (Lewis, 2006). Studies show that millennials suffer from a deficit of stable intimate relationships and lasting friendships due to their immersion in virtual communication, their reluctance to create stable relationships, or their stronger preferences for a professional career or leisure activities (Barroso et al., 2020). The acceptance of childlessness may be influenced also by new trends, emerging in the social media of "child-free" movements, growing ecological and overpopulation concerns, and diffusion of post-materialist values emphasizing the personal freedom of choice and the child-free status as an individual reproductive right (Kotzeva, 2020b; Shapiro, 2014). Studies reveal also an effect of ex-post rationalization of voluntary childlessness, i.e., ex-post acceptance of childlessness after a consecutive postponement of parenthood across an individual's reproductive life course (Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008).

The present study shows that the individuals with neutral and affirmative attitudes to voluntary childlessness express more often non-conformist and hedonistic values that emphasize personal freedom, self-expression, material well-being, independence in personal decisions, and rejection of the traditional norms. In contrast, the individuals with negative attitudes toward voluntary childlessness appreciate more the obedience and respect to the traditional authorities, customs and traditions, modesty and obedience to

the rules. These findings are in line with existing studies that show that voluntary childlessness is associated with a higher appreciation of self-fulfillment, independence, an exciting life and personal freedom, stronger career orientations, especially among women, higher/lower marital satisfaction, fears and doubts in the parenting skills, discrepancies with partner's reproductive intentions, singlehood, etc. (Archetti, 2020; Merz & Liefbroer, 2012; Szalma & Takács, 2015). Additionally, the results from the present study highlight the necessity to explore the correspondence between the declared universalistic values, acceptance of non-conformist behaviors and the actual behaviors and (non)discrimination practices.

The findings from the present study suggest that in future studies it is important to distinguish between voluntary childlessness as a personal decision concerning one's own reproduction and the general public attitudes to this phenomenon, which are more ambiguous and contradictory. The findings also suggest that, in future studies, it is necessary to distinguish between voluntary childlessness as a "temporary" stage in an individual's life course and the "ultimate childlessness" as an end state of one's reproductive life. The continual nature of voluntary childlessness (as a continuum of decisions not to parent taken over the life course) and the temporal dimension of this phenomenon should also be taken into account. The plurality of meanings attached to the status of "having no children," which may reflect a conscious denial of a reproduction-related preference for a child-free lifestyle, or a decision to remain childless due to various reasons and life circumstances (including a perceived social inability to become a parent), need also to be distinguished in the studies of this social phenomenon. Last but not least, the application of diverse research methods can provide a deeper understanding of the meanings, causes, and consequences of childlessness, as well as the behavioral patterns and life circumstances associated with it.

5. Conclusion

The main conclusion of the present study is about the dynamics observed in public attitudes in Bulgaria today, shifting from stigma and denial to a more tolerant view of voluntary childlessness. This change is stronger among women, highly educated people, childless and unmarried people, and individuals belonging to the Bulgarian ethnic group. In "recent times Bulgaria," reproduction and parenthood are, gradually, becoming accepted as private matters, involving private decisions, and negative judgmental attitudes have gradually changed toward neutrality and respect for personal choice. Despite a comparatively more relaxed pronatalist stance and a weakening normative control on reproduction in Bulgaria today, changes and differences to Bulgarian traditional reproductive norms are still an object of controversy, conflict, and ambiguity in public attitudes. The policy implications of the present study imply the necessity for more

effective measures focused on gender equality in the public and private sphere to provide Bulgarian citizens with more options to make reliable life choices and parenting decisions. This would pave the way to more tolerant and respectful views of an individual's reproductive decisions, including the choice not to parent. Studies on reproductive attitudes shed light on important aspects of the advancing changes in individuals' actual reproductive behaviors. In this regard, the present study on public attitudes to voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria can help academics and policymakers reflect on possible future developments of fertility trends and develop adequate policies as a response to them.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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