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Generational Patterns of Transitions into Adulthood across Europe – It's Complicated

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GENERATIONAL PATTERNS OF TRANSITIONS INTO ADULTHOOD ACROSS EUROPE – IT’S COMPLICATED

DISCUSSION PAPER

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Abstract

It is claimed almost unanimously in international youth research that patterns of the status passage from youth to adulthood have become more de-standardized over time. The aim of this paper is to provide a nuanced look at the transitional patterns from youth to adulthood. The main question is: How do life courses change across different generations? For this purpose, changes in the timing, ordering, (de)coupling and interquartile ranges of social, spatial and economic transition markers are described. We investigate, whether the patterns of these transitions into adulthood and their interrelations have changed across cohorts born up to 1935 until the mid-1960s for men and women. Using the SHARELIFE data collected in waves 3 (2009) and 7 (2017) as part of the SHARE study we are able to compare life courses of about 90,000 individuals aged 50+ all across Europe. For the analyses, we use event history analysis. The results of our paper indicate that social changes are different for the European country groups (Nordic countries, Baltic States, the Balkans, Western, Eastern and Southern Europe). There is no consistent pattern found for the whole of Europe. Therefore, the common practice to use the Western standard male biography as a comparative baseline—deviations from which would be labeled as ‘de-standardization’—falls short. We find a large heterogeneity in transition patterns from youth to adulthood across European regions, which needs to be considered in further discussions of ‘de-standardization’ processes.

Keywords SHARELIFE · life course research · de-standardization · transition markers · holistic view · European comparison · several birth cohorts

1 Introduction

Youth, as it is generally understood, should not be taken solely as an intermediate step between childhood and adulthood, but rather as an independent phase of life in its own right (see Zinnecker, 1991). Main characteristics for this period essentially include moments of trying out new things, identity development, becoming independent and decreasing reliance on the parents' generation. In this context, an understanding of youth as a 'moratorium' was established in the sense of a time during which young people are not yet subject to the obligations of adulthood (such as starting a family or entry into employment, see Erikson (1988) for 'psychosocial moratorium', see Zinnecker (1991) for '(educational) moratorium'). Therefore, youth is a life phase that has its very own characteristics. At the same time, growing up or becoming an adult has a processual character. Young people go through several interrelated transitions from youth to adulthood.

From a life course perspective, the classical biographical steps during that passage are usually school-to-work transitions like school graduation, vocational training or university studies, entering (full-time) employment, housing transitions like leaving the parental home as well as steps to family formation like cohabitation with a partner, marriage and childbirth (e.g. Shanahan, 2000; Konietzka, 2010). The initial experience of these transitions are considered as important 'milestones' and are the main focus of life-course research. The aggregation of these 'first time' transitions generally defines 'being an adult' (e.g. Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011).

Shifts in the age at which these milestones are usually experienced among young people in a population are often used as indicators for the empirical analysis of social change: How do life courses change across different generations? Are young people today growing up later than generations before?

Experiences which are made for the first time in life are particularly suitable for this type of analysis as they have a very profound impact: they are unique, emotionally meaningful and often prove to be formative for the further life course. These status transitions indicate developmental steps and role changes in a young person's life, which is why they are usually well remembered, even after a long time (e.g. Pohl, 2007, p. 62; Reimer, 2001, pp. 44).

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It is claimed almost unanimously in international youth research that the duration of the status passage from youth to adulthood has extended over time, that young people would increasingly grow up later, that steps into adulthood would have been postponed in younger generations as compared to the older ones. Usually with the assumption of the postponement of the adolescence phase, the prolongation of steps to adulthood means that it takes young people longer to reach a number of transition markers that collectively would signify ‘being an adult’.

The aim of our paper is to provide a more nuanced look at the transitional patterns from youth to adulthood. We analyze the patterns of transition to adulthood across different European regions as well as different birth cohorts among women and men. We like to further our understanding of how popular concepts like the prolongation of adolescence and—more generally—the ‘de-standardization’ of life courses of adolescents and young adults are applicable for different regions and historical periods.

In this context, we look at several first transition markers, usually considered to characterize the transition from youth to adulthood: first cohabitation with a partner, first marriage, first childbirth, first own household, and entering the labour market for the first time. We investigate, whether the patterns of these transitions into adulthood and their interrelations have changed across cohorts born up to 1935 until the mid-1960s. Using the SHARELIFE data collected in waves 3 (2009) and 7 (2017) as part of the SHARE study we are able to compare life courses of about 90,000 individuals aged 50+ all across Europe.

In our empirical analysis we will compare timing, ordering and linkage of several social, spatial and economic transition markers across European countries as well as across birth cohorts and gender employing a holistic perspective on the patterns of these life course events. Using SHARELIFE we are also able to include an important social transition marker that has been neglected in much of the current research literature due to data availability issues: the timing of the first (important) long-term relationship.

Although there has been an increasing number of research papers regarding European comparisons of the process of becoming an adult, research on the patterns of the transition from youth to adulthood specifically across older cohorts in Europe is still scarce. SHARE provides a harmonized database which allows for proper country comparisons for these age groups.

1.1 Transitions from youth to adulthood from a life course perspective

The life course perspective takes a specific view of the process of growing up. It is particularly useful for analyzing the transition from youth to adulthood as well as changes over time and thus for mapping possible social changes across several birth cohorts, since it is in this age phase that central transitions occur for the first time in life (see e.g. Konietzka, 2010, pp. 25). As transitions can be dated, it is also possible to show in a long-term comparison over several cohorts to what extent the youth phase was delayed or rather accelerated.

A classic goal of life course research is to map social patterns in the timing, duration, order of and distance between individual life events¹ (Elder, 1978, p. 21). In particular, it focuses on the description of when certain biographical events take place in life, in which order they occur and how long they last. Events in life can also be linked and can influence each other. The space between events can give information about whether they are interrelated. At what point in time and in what order events in life take place, for example, says something about the normative framework of a society (Neugarten et al., 1965, p. 711).

Over the course of the last century, social conditions under which young people in Europe grow up have changed radically. European history shows a multitude of social-structural, political, cultural, and economic events as well as technological innovations (see e.g. Liefbroer, 2009, pp. 320). Some of them are critical and devastating like wars and revolutions, others less obvious, but not less influential like social, technological, and economic change. Many of the major political, cultural and economic events during the 20th century have affected European countries differently and thus can be hypothesized to influence young people's life courses in different ways. Economic recessions, for example, can lead to later economic and spatial independence from the parents as training and job insecurities like higher fixed-term contracts can lead to a higher youth unemployment rate and therefore a higher planning insecurity, to a prolonged timing of housing transitions or more reversible transitions like returns back to the parental home again.

A fundamental change which influenced all European countries since the 1950s and 1960s was a general expansion of education. Meaning that more young people have been and still are aiming for higher levels of education (especially secondary and tertiary education) and thus higher educational certificates (for an overview of the expansion among several birth cohorts in European regions see Ballarino et al., 2013). This usually leads to a prolonged stay of young people in the educational system.

Changes in patterns of status transitions during the life course across several birth cohorts are usually described as a 'de-standardization' process (e.g. Brückner & Mayer, 2005)—with the general meaning that compared to 'the past' a greater variety in young people's patterns of transition are seen, and former standard patterns—like first starting a job, then moving out, subsequently finding a spouse, and finally forming a family, have lost much of their normative power. A general understanding of 'de-standardization' in youth research is that the life course is more complex, expanded and diverse today than it used to be in older generations (e.g. Biggart & Walther, 2006, p. 42).

The de-standardization of the life course is often taken as a given fact in youth research, but is also discussed critically at times. There are a number of empirical findings and discussions, covering change across generations, which indicate a far less de-standardized process in the transition to adulthood than usually assumed (e.g. Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Brückner & Mayer, 2005; Nico 2014).

¹In addition to the term 'life events', other alternative terms exist in life course research for the same object, such as 'transitions', 'markers' or 'milestones'. The term 'transition' is suitable to characterize biographical life events, since the changes often cover a certain period.

Beyond that, there are also debates about the assumption of an increasing ‘standardization’ of the life course. Hofäcker and Chaloupková (2014, p. 559), for example, talk about an ‘increasing restandardisation of family lives’. As the changes of patterns of transitions to adulthood are oriented to the dominant pattern of the Western European male standard biography in the 1950s and 1960s, which are often used as a reference for the example of an ‘early, contracted, and simple’ life course, a new ideal-typical pattern is discussed: the ‘late, protracted, and complex’ pattern (Billari & Liefbroer 2010, p. 60). In their definition, ‘late’ means that transitions occur quite late in the status passage of young adulthood, they define ‘protracted’ as the duration between the first and last transition which is relatively long, and ‘complex’ is understood as a high number of transitions in young adulthood and the repetitiveness of some of them (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010, p. 60).

Regardless of what kind of social change is assumed across birth cohorts, considering the different economic situation, welfare systems, educational systems, socio-cultures as well as age-related informal and legal norms in European countries, it should come as no surprise that a general orientation on the Western standard male biography, as is employed in much of life course research, may fall short. A more differentiated view of the European regions across cohorts and between women and men should be very beneficial.

1.2 State of research

There is already a substantial body of previous research on the comparison of European countries on the ‘de-standardization’ process, most of which focuses on single transition domains, though. Common research themes are family formation patterns like cohabitation, marriage and childbirth (e.g. Elzinga & Liefbroer, 2007; Hofäcker & Chaloupková, 2014; van Winkle, 2018; Zimmermann & Konietzka, 2018), as well as school-to-work transitions (e.g. van Winkle & Fasang, 2017, Möhring, 2016). Another line of research, which became increasingly relevant over the last years, considers the spatial detachment through leaving the parental home (e.g. Angelini & Lafferrère, 2013). Recently, there is also some research using a more holistic view of the transition into adulthood referring to European comparisons (e.g. Nico, 2014; Lesnard et al., 2016; Schwanitz, 2017).

While Buchmann and Kriesi (2011, p. 495) note that Eastern European or post-communist countries are not systematically included in comparative research, meanwhile significantly more studies have looked at Central and Eastern or post-socialist European countries (e.g. Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Lesnard et al., 2016; Möhring, 2016). Nevertheless, studies that consider the Balkan countries and Baltic countries separately are widely lacking.

With regard to gender-specific differences in status transitions, Brückner and Mayer (2005, p. 48) point out that the life courses of women and men in Germany increasingly converge, since transitions from school to work are strongly institutionalized. In this context, the authors speak of a ‘homogenization’ of the life courses of women and men. Nevertheless, young women and men today still differ in terms of spatial and social transitions: women leave home earlier and also take steps towards starting a family earlier than men (e.g. Berngruber, 2013; Brückner & Mayer, 2005; Konietzka & Tatjes, 2014). These differences can be seen all across Europe (Eurostat, 2020).

Usually, researchers use several birth cohorts for their comparisons. Less studied are cohorts older than the 1940s and younger cohorts born later than the 1960s (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011, p. 484), although the number of studies focussing on older cohorts is increasing as well (e.g. Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Lesnard et al., 2016).

Several studies find evidence that cross-country differences are more important than differences across cohorts (e.g. Nico, 2014; van Winkle, 2018; van Winkle & Fasang, 2017). Billari and Liefbroer (2010) analyze for Europe if a convergence of pathways to adulthood can be seen. Their analyses come to the conclusion that most transitions occur later, but not leaving the parental home. They find that a new European pattern of the transition to adulthood is emerging in most regions of Europe, but that there is no convergence of trends yet (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010, p. 73f.).

With a view to examining social steps into adulthood, studies mainly focus on key transitions towards starting a family, such as moving in with a partner, marriage and the birth of the first child. While recent youth studies consider the time of the first (important) relationship as a further step from youth to adulthood (e.g. Berngruber et al., 2020), this transition is missing in European cohort studies on patterns of the transition to adulthood so far.

2 Data and methods

2.1 Study design

The following analyses are based on the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). SHARE is a cross-national panel database of micro data on health, socio-economic status and social and family networks. In total, about 140,000 individuals aged 50 or older were interviewed, yielding a total of about 530,000 interviews across all panel waves. The data were collected in 28 European countries and Israel. The interviews have taken place every two years since 2004 and were conducted face-to-face using a CAPI instrument. We use the SHARELIFE modules collecting life history data in wave 3 (2009) and wave 7 (2017) through retrospective questions addressing numerous aspects of the life course (Bergmann et al., 2019; Börsch-Supan, 2020a, 2020b; Börsch-Supan et al., 2011; Börsch-Supan et al., 2013; Schröder, 2011).

2.2 Sample

After selecting only interviews with valid SHARELIFE data in one of the waves the pooled analysis sample comprises a total of 88,776 cases. We categorized our sample into four birth cohorts: ≤ 1935 as the prewar generation, from 1936 to 1945 as the Second World War generation, from 1946 to 1955 as the postwar generation and from 1956 to 1967 as the babyboomer generation in most European countries.

The countries are grouped according to their geographical region into Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland), Western Europe (Austria, Germany, Netherlands, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg), Eastern Europe (Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia), Southern Europe (Spain, Italy, Portugal, Malta, Greece, Cyprus), Balkans (Slovenia, Croatia) and Baltic States (Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia). We leave Israel out of the

analysis as we want to focus on European regions. The benefit of grouping countries is to have more cases in each group and birth cohort and to have more precise estimates, which we tried to balance against the risks of combining heterogeneous countries.

Our focus is on first transition markers in life. From a holistic view, we select the first important relationship (for at least 6 months), the first cohabitation with a partner, marriage and childbirth as ‘social’ transition markers, the first own household as a ‘spatial’ transition marker and the first start of employment as an ‘economic’ transition marker. These transitions mark steps to more financial independence, steps to living on their own and steps to starting an own family. These are characteristics of becoming an adult by taking greater responsibility for themselves and others.

The total cases per country group, cohort and gender are shown in table 1 in the appendix.

2.3 Method

The timing of the different transition markers is analyzed using event history analysis (also known as survival analysis in some disciplines, see e.g. Blossfeld, Golsch, & Rohwer 2007). In most of the analyses we compare Kaplan-Meier (KM) estimates as a measure of central tendency for the age at which these markers are experienced. KM estimates can be considered a generalisation of median estimates which are robust to right censoring of the data. It should be noted that the age is given in full years and is thus discrete in time. Also, all estimates were calculated using the survey weights provided in the data release.

In general, right censoring is not a major cause of bias in our dataset since all respondents are already over 50 years of age and will most likely have already experienced all transition markers before that age. This is not true in all cases, though. Most notably a substantial number of female respondents in Southern Europe and the Balkans have reported to never have entered the labour market (see table 2 in the appendix).

The time at risk of experiencing the events is generally set as starting at age 12 to lower the measurement error by using a somewhat plausible default value. The age at event was set to the age at which the respondent was interviewed (right-censored) whenever the event occurred at age 50 or above.

In addition we estimated interquartile ranges for all events and all subgroups as a measure of heterogeneity of the age of transition within each subgroup. A small value would mean, that within a particular subgroup most individuals would experience the event around the same age. Conversely, a high value would indicate that the experience is spread out over a longer time frame between the individuals, some being younger and some being older.

3 Descriptive results

In the following sections we will describe our findings on different aspects of transitional patterns from youth to adulthood, namely the timing, ordering, (de)coupling and interquartile ranges of spatial, economic and social transitions markers. We will differentiate the analysis for women and

men, across several birth cohorts and along several European regions: Nordic countries, Baltic states, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Southern Europe.

3.1 General timing, ordering and (de)coupling of transition markers

In a first step, we will give a general overview of the timing, ordering and (de)coupling of six transition markers by European regions and gender (see figure 1). This procedure gives the opportunity to show at what median age the SHARE 50+ population experienced several transition markers from youth to adulthood.

We will investigate six distinct markers in an individual's life-course indicating the age at which steps in the transition from youth to adulthood were taken. The first one would be entry into the labour market or taking up gainful employment for the first time, irrespective of the working hours. This will be depicted by a little hammer in our plots. A heart will indicate the beginning of the first long-term relationship that is considered important by the respondent. Moving out of the parental home and into a first own household is depicted by a house. The green couple indicates the age at which the respondent cohabitated with a partner for the first time, whereas the orange couple indicates marriage, not necessarily to the same partner. Lastly a baby bottle is the symbol for the birth or adoption of the first own child.

It should be noted that due to complexity, we will not go into every single detail in the following explanations and will rather describe only the broad lines here. However, details can be taken from the figures themselves.

When we look at figure 1 and focus on the differences between men and women across all European regions in general, a conspicuous characteristic is that the transitions in their total seem more dense for women than for men, where they are spread over a wider period of time.

With a view to the ordering of the transitions, it is particularly noticeable that across all European regions the earliest transition marker for men is the start of employment. It happens at a median age of between 18 and 20 and in most regions with a substantial gap before the next transition. For women this is only true for the Baltic states, Western and Eastern Europe, where this transition happens around the age of 18 or 19, rather shortly before the next marker.

For men in most European regions the first important relationship follows the entry into the labour market—with a considerable time-lag—around age 22 to 24. The most pronounced lag is found for men in Southern Europe where about six years lie between both transition markers.

For both men and women, moving out of the parents' household and starting their own household often occurs several years after the start of employment (except for the Nordic countries). The start of an own household lies close to social transition markers. In Eastern Europe and the Balkans it is also connected to moving in with a partner and marriage.

Looking at it from the perspective of social transition markers, the ordering—and sometimes concurrence—found across all country groups and gender is: First moving in with a partner, second marriage and third childbirth. The transitions of cohabitation and marriage for men in Western Europe often happen concurrently as the orange couple is overlapping the green couple in the figure.



Figure 1: Median age at different transition markers by European region and gender (Kaplan-Meier estimates; SHARE Release 7.1.0; weighted data)

The last transition marker for men as well as for women across all European regions is the birth of the first child. This transition occurs in most country groups several years after the timing of marriage.

The dense pattern of transitions to adulthood that is observed for women can be explained with the earlier occurrence of social and spatial transition markers in women’s life courses. As starting first employment happens for women around a similar age as for men, all other transition markers—like first important relationship, starting an own household, cohabitation, marriage and childbirth—happen significantly earlier for women than for men. The widest distance seen between the first and last transition marker is for men in Southern Europe with 13 years from the start of employment (median age 18 years) to childbirth (median age 31 years). The shortest distance of four years is found for women in the Balkans and Eastern Europe from the first transition (median age 19 years) to the last one (median age 23 years).

While the general transitional patterns with regard to the ordering are somewhat similar across regions and gender, there are more pronounced differences regarding timing of and gaps between the transition markers along these lines. The most salient aspect of gender differences is the more compressed transition process for women which can be observed in all of the European regions.

3.2 Changes in transitional patterns across birth cohorts

In the following we will dive deeper into societal change and investigate e.g. whether transition markers became more postponed across cohorts or, on the contrary, occurred earlier in life. Figure 2 shows for men and women across European regions the timing of the six transition markers for four birth cohorts (≤ 1935 , from 1936 to 1945, from 1946 to 1955 and from 1956 to 1967).

For giving a more detailed overview of the results which are rather complex, the findings are described for each country group separately. For some European regions a meaningful social change is found, for others not so much.

3.2.1 Nordic countries

Financial independence from the parents by the start of employment was gradually postponed from the oldest birth cohorts to the 1946–55 birth cohort for both men and women in the Nordic countries. Additionally, a slight shift to a younger age for the timing of moving out of the parental home, first important relationship and cohabitation is seen. The timing of leaving the parental home got closer to the timing of financial independence. At the same time, a significant postponement of the timing of marriage and childbirth is found. While for men born 1956–67 marriage and birth of the first child happened at a median age of 31, childbirth and marriage switched (childbirth: 27 years, marriage: 28 years). It is conspicuous, that in the 1956–67 birth cohort a large time-lag of six to seven years is found for start of first employment, moving out of the parental home, first important relationship and cohabitation on the one side (for men: in the age range of 20 and 24 years, for women: 19 to 21 years) and starting their own family by marriage and childbirth on the other side (men: both 31 years, women: 27 for childbirth and 28 for marriage).

3.2.2 Baltic States

For men and women in the Baltic States, a very similar pattern of important transition markers in the life course is found. The ordering of the transitions was start of employment, important relationship, own household, moving in with a partner and marriage at the same time and then childbirth. Compared to women who experience the start of employment across all cohorts at the same age of 19, financial independence became slightly postponed for men. Across all birth cohorts, a salient finding is that there seems to be a tendency towards an earlier occurrence of social and spatial transition markers. Besides, all transition markers happened earlier for women than for men. The age range from the first to the last transition is very dense (men: 6 years, women: 4 years) and became denser across cohorts.

3.2.3 Western Europe

The life course of men in Western Europe in the 1950s and 1960s is usually understood as the standard biography and therefore is often used as kind of a reference category for mapping de-standardization processes in younger cohorts. The men's birth cohort of 1956–67 can be seen as this male standard biography. All steps to adulthood happened separately from each other in a particular ordering. In this birth cohort of the so called babyboomer generation, the first



Figure 2: Median age at different transition markers by European region, birth cohort and gender (Kaplan-Meier estimates; SHARE Release 7.1.0; weighted data)

transition was the start of employment to become financially independent from the parents (at the age of 19). After that, the first important relationship was experienced (with 21 years). The median age for moving into their own household was 22. The timing of moving in with a partner was 24. Steps to start their own family occurred after that: marriage at the age of 27 and childbirth at the age of 31.

Compared to the older birth cohorts of men, some social change is found. A slight postponement of financial independence is found (18 years in the older cohorts to 19 years in both younger cohorts). The timing of marriage and childbirth is also later in the younger cohorts compared to the older ones. But there are also transition markers which occurred increasingly earlier in the life course than they used to be: the first important relationship, moving out of the parents' home and cohabitation.

The life course of women in Western Europe in these birth cohorts is in some aspects different from those of men: First of all, social transitions happen earlier for women than for men. In both oldest cohorts, leaving the parental home, moving in with a partner and marriage took place at the same time (birth cohort ≤ 1935 : 23 years, 1936–45: 22 years). Over time, these social transition markers separated more from each other. In the birth cohort 1956–67, moving out of the parental home happened at the age of 20, moving in with a partner with 21 and marriage with 23.

3.2.4 Eastern Europe

Men and women in Eastern Europe have quite similar transition patterns across all birth cohorts. A significant social change is not found across cohorts. Starting employment is the first transition marker which occurs. Young men experience it one year earlier than women (birth cohorts 1936–45 to 1956–67: 18 for men, 19 for women). The first important relationship happens at the age of 20 for women and 23 for men (birth cohorts 1936–45 to 1956–67). Starting one's own household, moving in together with a partner and marriage are linked to each other and occur earlier for women (21 in the birth cohorts 1936–45 to 1956–67) than for men (24 in the birth cohorts 1936–45 to 1946–55 and 25 in the birth cohort 1956–67). The birth of a first child is for women 23 and for men 27 in the birth cohorts 1936–45 to 1956–67).

3.2.5 Balkans

A conspicuous finding for men and women at the Balkans is that the median age of first employment is in the youngest cohorts 20 years for both. But in contrast to men, for whom the age has remained about the same across cohorts, for women it increasingly happened earlier (cohort ≤ 1935 : 34 years). This is at least partially due to a relatively high number of women who never entered the labour market in the older cohorts. The first transition named by women was the first important relationship. For men and women in the Balkans, moving out of the parents' household, cohabitation and marriage are closely linked to each other—more so for women than for men. The age range between the first and last transition was eight years for men in the cohort 1956–67 and considerably shorter for women with only four years.

3.2.6 Southern Europe

For men in the south of Europe the first employment was taken up comparatively early at age 17 or 18 in all cohorts. Similar to the situation in the Balkans, a significant number of women in the older cohorts did not work at all. This changed in the younger cohorts, leading to a somewhat drastic preponement of the median age of the start of first employment. For men the start of employment was followed by the first important relationship at the age of 23 in the youngest cohort, leaving the parental home happened at 26. For both men and women, setting up their own household is closely connected to cohabitation and marriage, followed by childbirth several years later. Especially for men, moving out of the parental household occurred several years after becoming employed.

3.2.7 General conclusion

Contrary to general assumptions that the timing of leaving the parental home becomes increasingly prolonged, this marker takes place increasingly earlier in the life course across the birth cohorts from ≤ 1935 to 1956–1967. Moving out of the parental household and setting up one's own household is in many European regions (not that much in the Nordic countries, the Baltic states and Western Europe) closely linked to social transition markers like cohabitation and marriage in these birth cohorts. For men, financial independence from the parents occurs much earlier than the timing of spatial independence.

Differences between men and women can be seen across all country groups: From the Nordic countries to Southern Europe women pass through all social and spatial transition markers (first relationship, leaving the parental home, cohabitation, marriage and childbirth) earlier than men. The distance from the first transition to the last one is smaller for women than for men.

The timing of first employment is quite similar between men and women in all country groups, except for Southern Europe and the Balkans where a significant number of women in the oldest cohorts did not work at all.

3.2.8 Interquartile ranges for age at transition markers

For describing possible de-standardization processes across several birth cohorts, the interquartile ranges of several transition markers for men and women in various European regions are shown in figure 3 (see also Brückner & Mayer 2005). The inter-quartile range is the spacing between the age when 25% of persons of a cohort have experienced a certain transition and the age when this has happened for 75% of the respondents. In statistical terms, we are looking at the difference between the 25%-quartile and the 75%-quartile of the age at transitions. Figure 3 can be read as follows: The fewer years lie between the 25%-quartile and the 75%-quartile, the more homogeneous is the passing through a certain transition in a birth cohort. On the contrary, the larger the interquartile range, the more heterogeneous is the age at the transition in a population. A higher dispersion of age across birth cohorts indicates an increasingly de-standardized transition process.

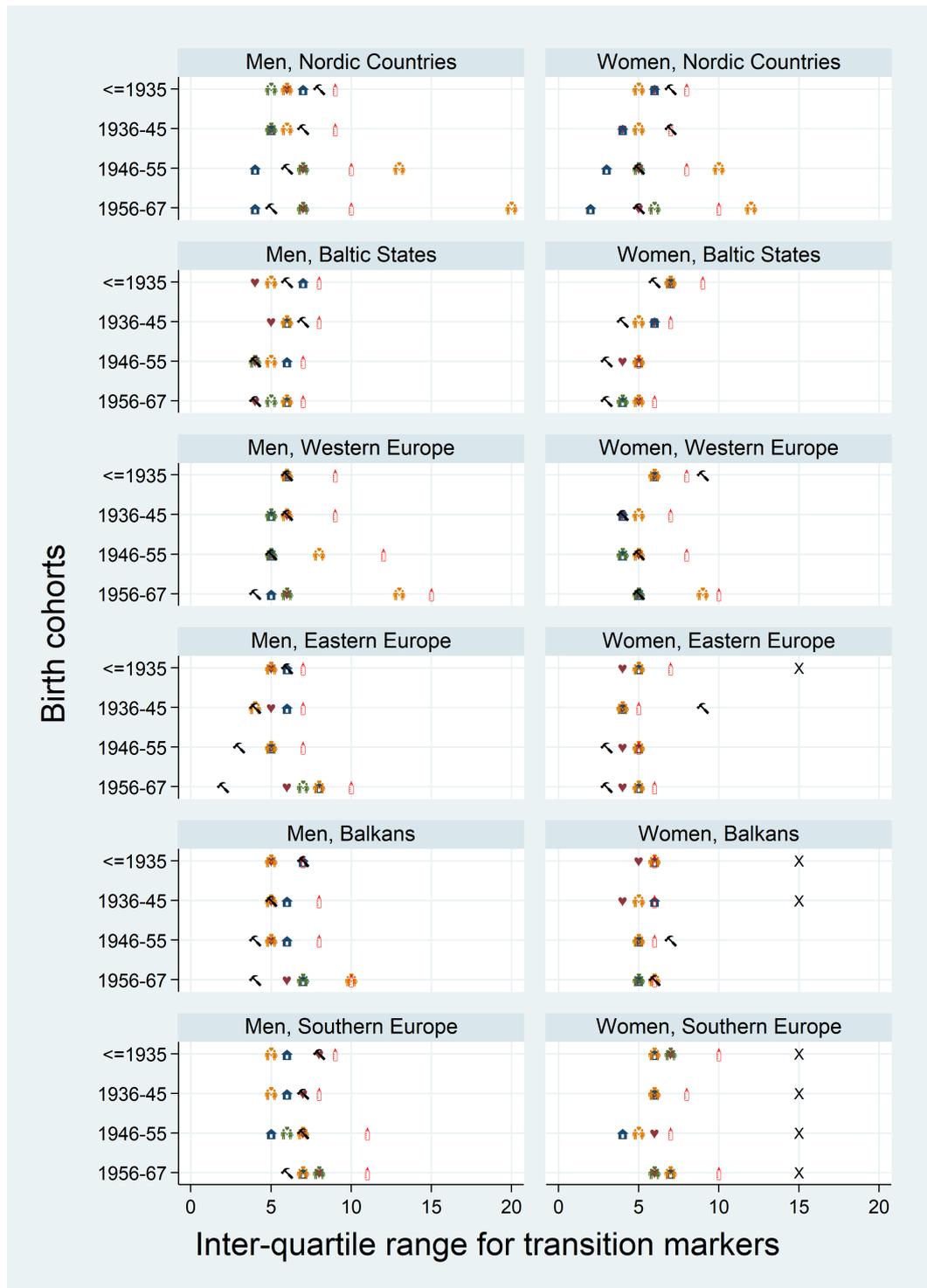


Figure 3: Difference between the 25%-quartile and the 75%-quartile for different transition markers by European region, birth cohort and gender (Kaplan-Meier estimates; SHARE Release 7.1.0; weighted data)

A general observation across all European regions and across men and women is that the age of the first start of employment becomes more homogeneous and therefore more standardized across birth cohorts. This means that in these cohorts more people experience this transition at about the same age. In this context, it must be noted that the “X” which marks the age of first employment for women in several cohorts in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Southern Europe in figure 3 shows that the inter-quartile range cannot be displayed as not enough women were employed in these birth cohorts.

Regarding spatial independence from the parents by starting an own household also shows for men and women in the Nordic countries, the Baltic states and Western Europe a slightly more standardized transition. For Eastern Europeans, the Balkans and Southern Europe no clear trend is visible.

An approximately constant age across birth cohorts is found for the first important relationship. Only slight fluctuations to one side and to the other between the cohorts are seen for all European regions. This finding indicates that there is neither a trend to de-standardization nor to standardization. The same result is found for cohabitation with a partner.

Partly opposite results can be found in the transitions to marriage and childbirth. In the Nordic countries and Western Europe, marriage and childbirth have become more de-standardized from the older cohorts to the younger cohorts. A conspicuous result has to be pointed out especially for men in the Nordic countries: The timing of marriage has a strikingly high variance. This means that the age when people were getting married was very heterogeneous in the population for men. In the Baltic states, the dispersion for the timing of marriage and childbirth became smaller for women, but was quite the same for men. Regarding the dispersion for the timing of marriage and childbirth in the Balkans, Eastern Europe and Southern Europe, a similar pattern is found—differentiated to men and women. For men, the dispersion became larger across cohorts. But for women, it was about the same with small variations across cohorts.

In general, it must be noted that across most European regions some transitions are very homogeneous and therefore standardized, while some are not. But especially for women in the youngest cohort (1956–67) of the Balkans, the Baltic states and Eastern Europe, growing up and the occurrence of spatial, social and economic transitions in a whole was a very homogeneous status passage.

If we want to talk about de-standardization in the patterns of transitions from youth to adulthood on the basis of homogeneity of the age at transition, we have to conclude that a clear trend towards de-standardization can only be found for marriage and child birth and only within Western Europe and the Nordic countries (maybe also for men in Eastern Europe and the Balkans). Other than that we can not find obvious trends towards de-standardization for any of the other transition markers.

4 Conclusions and discussion

The aim of this paper was to give a more holistic and nuanced view of the status passage from youth to adulthood in Europe. In the focus of our analyses were the timing of several transition

markers which occurred for the first time in life. Of special interest were social transitions like the first important relationship, cohabitation with a partner, marriage and childbirth. The first time living in an own household away from the parents' home was used as a spatial transition. Economic independence from the parents was indicated by the start of the first employment. What makes these first steps on the way to adulthood particularly useful for the analysis and comparison of patterns of growing up is that they are usually well remembered—even years after they have happened—in retrospective interviews.

With the SHARELIFE data of waves 3 and 7, the life histories of 88,776 men and women aged 50 and older from 28 European countries are retrospectively available. The analyses shown here describe life course patterns, i.e. at what median age in life, in what order and in what temporal distance to each other transitions take place. De-standardization processes in youth and young adulthood were analyzed for several birth cohorts (≤ 1935 , 1936–45, 1946–55, 1956–67) and European regions.

The main question we were interested in was: How do life courses change across different generations? For this purpose, changes in the timing, ordering, (de)coupling and interquartile ranges of the aforementioned transition markers across these four birth cohorts were described—separately for women and men (see figures 1 to 3).

The results of our paper indicate that the social changes we focused on are different for the European country groups. There is no consistent pattern found for the whole of Europe. Therefore, the common practice to use the Western standard male biography as a comparative baseline—deviations from which would be labeled as 'de-standardization'—falls short. We find a large heterogeneity in transition patterns from youth to adulthood across European regions, which needs to be considered in the discussion of 'de-standardization' processes.

As a general finding, the transition patterns are more dense for women than for men. Which means that they happen in a shorter time span in the life course. Women across all European regions experience social and spatial transition markers earlier than men. For men, in these birth cohorts, financial independence measured via entry into the labour market is commonly the first transition marker. Looking at the different birth cohorts in our analyses, we conclude that separate analyses are justified even in younger cohorts, as these gender differences largely persist.

In some aspects a higher standardization of transitions in the status passage from youth to adulthood is observed and in some aspects de-standardization processes across birth cohorts. Indications for a higher standardization shows the age of the first employment which became more homogeneous across birth cohorts for men and women. As the results show, the general assumption of a general de-standardization of the life course over generations must be questioned. This holds true even for men in Western Europe, where we can find a trend towards de-standardization only for marriage and child birth, but not for any of the other transition markers.

Regarding the analyses above, some limitations must be noted. Although, a more holistic perspective on the transition to adulthood was aimed by regarding several economic, social and spatial transition markers in total, it must be noted that it is just a selection of transitions. Additionally, school-to-work transitions like starting and finishing school, vocational (educational) training or studying at university are missing to complete these life course patterns.

A special feature of this study is the consideration of countries from the Baltic States, from Eastern Europe, and the Balkans which are not that often taken into account in former studies. Nevertheless, observation problems in single countries has led to the necessity of the grouping of countries into several European regions which would maybe also have allowed a different classification.

For future research, the heterogeneity of life courses in different regions of Europe as well as for women and men is still large. Therefore, differences in these factors are still existent and should be taken into consideration. Using data which considerate younger birth cohorts could be helpful to describe these patterns in the longer run. In this article, patterns on an aggregate level are analysed, analyses on the individual level might be of further interest.

It should also be mentioned that for the spatial transition the timing of the first own household is used. For younger cohorts the timing of leaving the parental home might be of more interest as the reasons why young people move out of the parents' household are in some European countries different than having an own household.

Overall we are well aware that our contribution is only descriptive in nature and omits any proper explanation of the existence—or absence—of certain transitional patterns. We are still confident that we pointed novel and interesting facts which will hopefully inspire future research to take a closer look at change across birth cohorts in the transition from youth to adulthood, as well as the indispensable dimension of European comparisons.

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Appendix

Table 1: Cases per country group, cohort and gender

	Birth cohorts								Total
	<=1935		1936–1945		1946–1955		1956–1967		
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
Nordic Countries	732	885	1,345	1,451	1,667	1,843	945	1,264	10,132
Baltic States	341	793	797	1,504	1,091	1,605	1,091	1,543	8,753
Western Europe	2,047	2,712	3,306	3,793	4,409	5,178	2,089	3,147	26,681
Eastern Europe	802	1,122	1,742	2,298	3,114	3,839	2,159	2,988	18,057
Balkans	218	388	655	814	1,100	1,250	633	1,002	6,059
Southern Europe	1,563	1,981	2,334	2,548	2,903	3,350	1,325	2,318	19,094
Total	5,734	7,925	10,292	12,525	14,425	17,232	8,285	12,358	88,776

Table 2: Percentage of right censored cases for first employment (weighted)

	Birth cohorts								Average
	<=1935		1936–1945		1946–1955		1956–1967		
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
Nordic Countries	0.43	2.99	0.32	1.25	0.5	0.51	0.29	1.35	0.9
Baltic States	0.07	1.43	0.3	1.66	0.76	0.36	1.45	0.35	0.86
Western Europe	1.24	15.68	0.31	5.65	0.46	2.32	1.25	2.53	3.66
Eastern Europe	4.15	17.31	1.59	11.34	1.52	5.33	2.06	5.43	5.61
Balkans	5.73	48.02	5.73	29.58	3.03	12.28	2.7	10.56	12.41
Southern Europe	1.9	45.02	2.05	34.79	1.71	22.06	1.62	18.83	16.99
Average	1.76	25.11	1.03	15.36	1.03	8.49	1.49	8.11	7.93