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Article

Exploring Older Men’s Pathways to Childlessness in Hungary: Did the Change of Policy Regime Matter?

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Abstract

In many post-socialist countries, there is a strong social ideal that, in order to live a fulfilled life, men and women should have children; thus “childfree” lifestyles are much less popular than in North-Western Europe. In this article, we explore factors leading to childlessness among men who were mostly socialized under state-socialist conditions and in the subsequent transition period by analysing 30 in-depth interviews conducted with heterosexual childless men over 50 in Hungary. Older interviewees who grew up in state socialism followed a standardized life-course and went through the same life-course events—including school, work, and, in some cases, childless marriages. However, the political change of 1989–1990 interrupted these standardized life-courses. Our results show that, besides individual-level factors, macro-level factors connected to the political-economic transition in the early 1990s influenced our interviewees’ pathways to childlessness. In this sense, we can say that the change of policy regime influenced these men’s choices, as in most cases there was a strong interplay between the individual- and the macro-level factors.

Keywords

Hungary; male childlessness; Merton’s anomie theory; pathways to childlessness; post-transition effect

Issue

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1. Introduction

Many studies have examined fertility puzzles in Europe, including in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries (Billingsley, 2010; Sobotka, 2011, 2017; Spéder & Kapitány, 2014), and focused on factors revealing the pathways to childlessness among men and women (Hašková, 2010; Miettinen et al., 2015); however, only a few have examined the path towards childlessness through the prism of the change in the political system of 1989–1990 (Philipov et al., 2006). The question is relevant because so many changes occurred in partnership formation and fertility-related behaviours after 1989. Radical changes were brought about by the collapse of

state socialism and the subsequent period of economic transformation, including the privatization of state companies, the end of job security guaranteed by the state, and the ensuing rise of mass unemployment. These economic changes affected life-course events linked with partnership formation and fertility behaviour for many people in Hungary too, where first births and first marriages were postponed to higher (reproductive) ages. An increasing number of people started living in cohabitation instead of marrying and the link between marriage and childbearing became weaker between 1990 and 2009 (Kapitány, 2021).

The childlessness rate was very low in the former state-socialist countries but, after the political transition,

profound changes occurred in cohort reproductive patterns, especially among the cohorts born in the 1970s in Hungary (Spéder, 2021). In 2011 the voluntary childlessness rate differed from that of the EU15 countries, where 6% of men and 4% of women preferred childlessness, while in many post-socialist countries it remained below 3% for both genders (Miettinen & Szalma, 2014). The initially relatively low childlessness levels started rising among the cohorts of women born in the late 1960s, approaching or surpassing 10% in the post-socialist region (Sobotka, 2017).

This rapid increase is noteworthy since men and women aged 18–40 continued to attach a high importance to parenthood in a re-emerging pronatalist social climate, where having children is perceived as a common cultural goal, characteristic of most CEE countries (Sobotka, 2011).

Many studies examined the consequences of the transition on demographic phenomena such as mortality, divorce, delayed fertility, and the decline in higher-order births, but the link between childlessness and the political and economic transition from state socialism to capitalism remained much less explored (Billingsley, 2010; Philipov et al., 2006; Sobotka, 2011). A focus on childless men in Hungary is pertinent because both the predominant standardized life-courses in the state-socialist era and the more destandardized life-courses afterwards were gendered, and social expectations, emphasizing different roles for men and women, re-emerged after the transition (Nagy et al., 2016). These processes gradually turned re-familisation into the widely accepted norm in CEE countries (Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2006). Therefore, we decided to investigate the connection between the transition and not having children from the perspective of men, which is still an under-researched topic in Hungary.

Our goal is to contribute to a better understanding of the social and historical embeddedness of pathways to male childlessness in a pronatalist context. If we under-

stand the phenomenon of childlessness from men’s perspectives better, we can propose more acceptable and well-founded family policy measures. We want to examine how different individual-level factors that can lead to not having children are linked to macro-level factors. For example, lack of partnership can have different fertility outcomes in liberal societies striving for gender equality than in traditional societies insisting on traditional gender role models. Similarly, labour market insecurity in social democratic welfare states can have different effects than in more conservative settings, and the availability of affordable institutional care for young children and elderly people can also affect childbearing decisions.

2. A Theoretical Explanation for the Post-Transition Fertility Decline

In Table 1 we present the main theoretical starting points that may explain fertility decline in post-socialist countries, including Billingsley’s approaches (2010): the economic crisis explanation, the postponement–transition argument, and the second demographic transition (SDT) approach. Additionally, following in the footsteps of Philipov et al. (2006), who already highlighted the post-transition effects of anomie on the level and timing of fertility intentions in Bulgaria and Hungary, we also want to apply Merton’s (1938) anomie theory stating that anomie develops when access to culturally approved goals by institutionalized means is blocked. Having a child is a culturally strongly approved goal in Hungary (Szalma, 2021), and its institutionalized form was within marriage, especially before the transition period. We argue that since then, among men whose life-course developed without children during the transition period, an increasing discrepancy between cultural goals and institutionalized means can be observed that cannot be properly elucidated on the basis of Billingsley’s categories. Thus, our theoretical framework combines Billingsley’s approaches with Merton’s anomie theory.

Table 1. Overview of theoretical explanations of (different forms of) childlessness in post-socialist societies.

	Economic crisis	Postponement due to the transition	SDT	Post-transition anomie
Socioeconomic context	Crisis	Transition/stability	Stability	Democratic transition
Process leading to childlessness	Interrupted behaviour	Postponement, risking running out of time	Choosing a childfree lifestyle (at least for a while)	Choosing to be childfree or not being able to achieve parenthood
Motivation behind childlessness	Prioritizing material needs	Uncertainty, instability	Individual self-realization	Discrepancy between cultural goals and institutional means
Type of childlessness	Involuntary	Involuntary	Voluntary	Involuntary as well as voluntary

Source: Developed by the authors after Billingsley (2010) and Merton (1938).

2.1. Economic Crisis Aftereffects

When securing material needs has a higher priority than having (more) children, individuals may subjectively feel that they cannot provide the appropriate financial background for raising children and may therefore choose not to have any (or more) children.

The economic crisis resulting from the transition not only saw an increasing unemployment rate but also led to a reduction in government revenues and spending: “A variety of public transfers to families have been scaled down or completely phased out. In particular, the various family policy benefits, for example, childcare benefits and child allowances have declined” (Macura, 2000, p. 203). As a consequence, having children restricted the economic welfare of parents in the transition period so those who had no children prevented their living standards from falling even further (Macura, 2000). For example, in Hungary, during the state-socialist era, family allowance was a universal benefit and parental leave was 75% of previous income (Aassve et al., 2006). In 1995, dramatic changes took place with the introduction of a new set of policy reforms, the Bokros Package: The wage-indexed childcare benefit was eliminated and means-testing for family allowances was introduced. Besides the reduction in cash benefits for families, childcare services were also reduced. An important consequence of the Bokros Package was that “many [people, including potential and actual parents] lost trust in state provision of family allowances, and thus experienced another level of uncertainty” (Aassve et al., 2006, p. 136). The Bokros Package gave a signal that family policies would not necessarily be as predictable in the future as before. In 1998, the new government made family allowances once again universal. After 2010 new family policy—more precisely, political demography policy—elements were introduced, with their selective pronatalist nature becoming more pronounced by supporting only the select better-off, white, heterosexual families.

2.2. Postponement Due to the Transition

Like the increasing number of those who fell into unemployment, many left the labour market by taking advantage of early retirement or disability pensions. The dynamics of the labour market changed: A shortage of labour gave way to a lack of (well-paid) jobs. In such an oversupplied labour market, competition for jobs was fierce (Spéder & Kapitány, 2014), while precarious forms of employment appeared, such as temporary work, fixed-(short)-term contracts, bogus self-employment (i.e., a form of self-employment, where the entrepreneur is de facto employed by the largest or only customer of the firm) and untaxed work in the grey economy with which employers evade paying social premiums as well (Cseres-Gergely, 2007). These new characteristics of the labour market caused changes in family life, including the postponement of important decisions

awaiting more stable work and career trajectories. Hence many women and men chose cohabitation over marriage or postponed their marriage and childbearing in the face of these uncertainties. It should be noted that partnership formation changes started in Hungary already in the 1980s—but while more than half of young people chose marriage as their first long-term relationship between the mid-1980s and the first half of the 1990s, this trend reversed after the mid-1990s, when the majority of young people preferred to have cohabitation as a first long-term relationship. Between 2000 and 2004, 70% of young people started their first long-term partnership in cohabitation (Spéder & Kapitány, 2007). Besides these changes in the form of first partnership, postponement could be observed in the mean ages of first marriages as well as at first births.

The postponement–transition argument was examined in Hungary using data from the first and second waves of the Hungarian Generation and Gender Survey (GGS), confirming that the timing of childbearing at a later age can lead to an increase in the childlessness rate because those who plan to have a child at a later age might have given up those plans or have run out of time (Szalma & Takács, 2015).

2.3. Second Demographic Transition

The SDT framework explains demographic changes based on changes in value systems, such as individualisation and declining religiosity (Lesthaeghe, 2010), where childbearing is no longer seen mainly as a duty towards society. In CEE countries, the SDT started after the political and economic transition of 1989–1990. In the context of value shifts towards increasing individualisation associated with SDT, the perception of family formation not being compatible with other goals in life has been reinforced by a delayed post-socialist version of late modern commodification also in Hungary (Takács, 2013), where the increased opportunities for self-realization were often prioritized over having children.

Previous empirical studies have found some evidence for the role of value changes in the increasing rates of childlessness (Keizer, 2010). In Hungary, the link between SDT and childlessness could not be confirmed by analysing GGS data as, for example, the inability to establish a partnership appeared to be more important than value preferences in the question of whether to have children or not (Szalma & Takács, 2015).

2.4. The Spread of Anomie

Previous empirical research found that rapid social change, such as democratic transition, can elevate the level of anomie, where anomie is defined as “the delegitimation of social norms with an emphasis on the goals-means discrepancy” (Zhao & Cao, 2010, p. 1225). Merton (1938) saw democracy as a precondition for the prevalence of anomie and, at the same time,

interpreted limited anomie as “a normal state that is a permanent part of a democratic society” (Zhao & Cao, 2010, p. 1213).

In Table 2 we apply Merton’s categories describing different modes of adaptation to anomie matched with various types of childlessness. In this framework, “conformists” follow the most common mode of adaptation: They accept both the culturally approved goals and the institutionalized means for achieving them. Those involuntarily childless belong to the category of those who would like to have children within marriage or a steady relationship but cannot achieve this goal either because of (reproductive) health-related problems or lack of partnership.

The “innovators” accept the goals but they do not want to (or cannot) follow the culturally prescribed means to achieve them, thus they innovate their own means. Those involuntarily childless who would like to have children but not in the culturally approved ways belong here: For instance, later in life or without a stable partnership. Persons with same-sex orientation who wish to have children can also be “forced to innovate,” when they are denied access to institutionalized means available to others.

The “ritualists” are those who reject the culturally prescribed goals while accepting the institutionalized means: These can be voluntarily childless steady couples. The “retreatists”—who can be, for instance, drug users or alcoholics—give up both the culturally approved goals and means. Finally, the “rebels” do not only reject the existing goals and means, but they also (try to) create new goals and means through protest or revolutionary activities: They can join, for instance, a religious or a queer community and establish a “family of choice” (Weston, 1991) without having their biological children.

3. Data and Methods

The research presented here is exploratory and novel because older men’s childlessness patterns have not been examined in Hungary until now, even though childlessness rate among men is higher than among women. For example, in 2016 more than 20% of men aged 45–54 were childless in Hungary, while this proportion was 17.9% among women (Makay et al., 2019). To gain more insight into these issues, we used semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in 2015–2016 with 30 childless men living in different regions of Hungary. Individual interviewees were recruited through online community groups, in printed and social media advertisements, with the help of NGOs, and by snowballing when possible. Before starting the interview, all interviewees provided informed consent after having had the details of the applied data collection procedures, based on confidentiality and voluntary participation, explained to them. They also chose a pseudonym, which, together with an indication of their age, was used to identify them throughout the study.

Our selection criteria included age over 50, not having any biological children, and not living together with children under 18 in their household at the time of the interview. We used this age limit because, according to Hungarian census data, becoming a father is very rare over the age of 50 in Hungary (Makay & Spéder, 2018; Szalma & Takács, 2018). Applying this age limit also makes it possible to focus on those childless men who grew up and were in their (main) fertile phase under state-socialist conditions and during the transition period.

Our sample included interviewees from different geographical areas within Hungary: 17 were from Budapest, the capital, four were from smaller towns, and nine

Table 2. Categories of childlessness based on Merton’s anomie theory.

Mode of adaptation	Cultural goals	Institutionalized means	Type of childlessness
Conformist	accept	accept	Involuntarily childless (due to health-related problems or lack of partnership)
Innovator	accept	reject	Temporarily (in/voluntarily) childless: Those who want to have children later in life or without a stable (heterosexual) partnership
Ritualist	reject	accept	Voluntarily childfree: Those who live in a stable partnership but do not want to have any children
Retreatist	reject	reject	In/voluntarily childless: Those who do not (want to) marry or have children (e.g., because of drug use)
Rebel	Rejecting existing goals and means, while creating new ones		Voluntarily childless: Those who want to achieve different goals by different means (for example, by joining a religious or queer community)

Source: Developed by the authors after Merton (1938).

were from small villages of about 3000 residents. There were three educational subgroups among them: 10 with low levels of education (lower than completed secondary school), eight with medium level education (having gained a secondary school leaving certificate), and 12 were highly educated men (with a university degree). Regarding marital status, most of them (23) were single, one was married, three were divorced, one had a cohabiting partner, and two lived in a LAT (living-apart-together) relationship. As for age, the youngest interviewee was 50 years old and the oldest was 77. Eighteen interviewees belonged to the 50–60 age group and 12 interviewees were older than 60.

We interviewed only heterosexual men who did not have—and/or whose partners did not have—health conditions that make a successful pregnancy difficult or impossible. In our view, childlessness among men with a same-sex orientation is a specific theme that should be examined by taking into consideration those discriminative policies that push (most of) them into a state of “heteronormatively prescribed childlessness” (Takács, 2018, p. 68) in many countries, including Hungary; and childlessness related to reproductive health problems also require a different approach. To filter out non-heterosexual men and those with reproductive health problems we used a post-interview self-administered questionnaire with questions about reproductive health and sexual practices.

Most interviews lasted about one-and-a-half to two hours. The interviews were tape-recorded and the recorded interview material was transcribed verbatim. The interview guide included topics related one’s perception of their own family and family practices, employment and partnership history, and plans for the future. Through the interviews we gained rich retrospective biographical narratives with a focus on the interviewees’ private and family life, including their experiences, desires, and intentions regarding having children. Using these narratives, we applied structural coding to identify all passages related to the earlier discussed theoretical approaches. The richness of the textual data allowed us to study the relationship between men with different backgrounds and their fertility choices in detail, and enabled us to reconstruct various mechanisms leading to their childless lifestyles.

4. Empirical Results

In our interviews, we were able to identify different factors potentially affecting our interviewees’ pathways to childlessness according to the theoretical approaches presented in Table 1.

4.1. Economic Crisis-Related Factors

Precariousness, describing non-standard or temporary employment forms that may be poorly paid, insecure, unprotected, and insufficient to support a household,

was a central feature of the new labour market that emerged after the political regime change. In the early 1990s, we saw such a great deal of change in people’s lives that must have had a significant effect on many life events. The large numbers of people who permanently or periodically left the labour market because of unemployment or early retirement were considered the “losers” of the regime change from an economic perspective. Educational background and regional disparities were important factors in producing inequalities: The relative position of highly educated people and those living in a larger city or a regional centre improved, while those with lower levels of education and living in smaller towns or villages worsened (Kolosi & Tóth, 2008). This duality was clear from our interviews too. Those who lived in the capital and had a university degree did not report any negative career breaks. Some, including Alfred (50), a divorced, highly educated man from Budapest, even experienced that possibilities opened up for them: “[At the beginning of the] the 1990s I had my doubts about whether my business would succeed [but] actually it went very well and I went ahead like a goat in an amusement park.” Other well-educated interviewees also reported that, while they had a relatively good financial situation during and after the transition period, they faced previously unknown threatening uncertainties. For example, highly educated and single, Anthony (62) from Budapest reported that:

No one knows what’s going to happen in two, three, five, or ten years...[even now] I can only hope that I will more or less be able to keep this standard of life. But there is no guarantee for that because the predictability of the great [economic] processes has significantly decreased [after the political system change].

The emerging financial uncertainties had a direct effect on childbearing plans among highly educated men. Since they used to have very stable positions during state socialism, they did not learn how to handle these uncertain conditions. Single and highly educated, Chris (50) from Budapest described the link between the uncertainties and childbearing plans: “[People often say that] we will start having children when all existential conditions are favourable.” Alfred (50) also mentioned that they did not dare to have children because of a lack of financial stability. However, for those with fewer resources (lower levels of education, living in smaller settlements), the transition period required more strenuous efforts to survive. They often had to find escape routes from the labour market, for example, by becoming bogus entrepreneurs or working in the grey economy, and most of them had to face financial difficulties related to their everyday lives. Peter (60), who is single, has a low level of education, and lives in a village, mentioned how he first became a bogus entrepreneur in the agricultural sector and then escaped from the labour market in his early forties with a disability pension:

We didn't earn much money [during state socialism], but at least we had more free time [to work in our own backyard in the greenhouses]. Privatizations started around 1987 and the risk of layoffs was visible. Thus, I decided to leave this company because sooner or later I would have been dismissed anyhow. I [remained] an agricultural entrepreneur until 1996 when I had some health problems and claimed a disability pension.

His income was so low that he could not move out of his parent's house and could not start his own family. Thus, he was not just involuntary childless but also involuntary single until his parents passed away because his parents did not allow him to bring any girlfriends into their house. The other typical pathway was working in the grey economy. For example, low-educated and living in a LAT relationship in a village, Simon (60) recalled this period in the following way:

I was a driver for 40 years. But some years I spent in the informal sector [as an undeclared employee] and those years, unfortunately, do not count towards my pension because I was paid cash-in-hand. Of course, I also had a market gardening side-job, because being a driver was a low-paid job.

Having two jobs was a typical case in the countryside where nearly 20% of the rural working-age population worked in agriculture after the change of regime. Frequently, two jobs were necessary because those who worked in the agricultural sector were extremely underpaid. Similarly to Simon, Valentin (55), who lives in cohabitation in a village, admitted that he "also worked in the informal sector" and "did not have an official permit." The precariousness of their jobs was not independent of their family situation: Unstable jobs usually came with unstable partnerships. For example, Simon (60) lived in a LAT relationship, Peter (60) did not have any kind of partnership until the age of 45, and Valentin (55) started a relationship at the age of 49 with an older woman.

People had to face uncertainties (in employment and otherwise) not just directly after the transition but also after the 2008 global economic crisis hit. For example, the highly educated Anthony (62) reported that, during the crisis, he had to concentrate all of his energy on making his business survive. Steven (59), who is low educated, said that he was able to set up a small business as a painter in 2002 and for a couple of years everything went well. However, in 2008, "it was this economic crisis [and] there was less and less work and fewer commissions. People had less money...and they didn't want to spend it on painting [so I gave up my business] and went to work for someone else as an employee."

While the 2008 economic crisis hit the low and highly educated people similarly among our interviewees, the post-transition economic crisis affected these two categories of men differently. Many low-educated men living

in the countryside did not have sufficient financial means to start a stable partnership, the lack of which is likely to lead to childlessness. Meanwhile, highly educated men living in a large city had stable partnerships, but the subjective feeling of financial uncertainties prevented them from having children.

4.2. Postponement Factors

The mean age of first marriage and first birth extended significantly between 1990 and 2001 in Hungary. Our interviewees were 25 years old or older in 1990. If their life-courses had followed the statistics, then they would already have been married at the time of the transition and would probably already have had children also, since there was a strong link between marriage and childbearing in that period (Kapitány, 2021).

Those who did not choose to be childless in their twenties went through some form of postponement which led to involuntary childlessness in most of our cases, although some of them still planned to become fathers. This postponement feature can be found among most of our highly educated interviewees living in large cities. For example, Henrik (55), a well-educated married man from Budapest, said:

The idea of creating a family nest was greatly pushed into the distant future. Even when we started planning a wedding...we didn't start considering having a child together, let alone thinking about it properly.

In Henrik's case, the postponement only concerned childbearing, as marriage was among his plans. His argument was that an intellectual career model requires time to reach the stage when one is financially secure. Alfred (50) got married when he was 22 (in the late 1980s) and did not want to have children straight away: but the couple did plan to have children when his wife finished university. Cedric (53), a well-educated single man from Budapest, also reported he had married in his twenties and that the couple had been together for five years, yet avoided having children because they were not financially independent from their parents. By the time the issue of childbearing could have come up, they had just divorced.

In our sample, nine men lived together with one or more elderly family members, typically with their mother. Seven of them cared for their relatives at least on a part-time basis because they wanted to avoid sending their parent(s) to a care home, either for emotional or financial reasons. According to the traditional familiasitic care model prevailing in Hungary, younger and especially female family members are expected to provide care for older relatives—but in the absence of suitable female family members, and due to the lack of sufficient state services, men can also face care provision tasks. For example, Oscar (50), a highly educated single man from Budapest, explained that he "was trained...to take responsibility for [his] grandparents, especially for [his

grandma who was ill,” and so it wouldn’t occur to him #not to take part in her care.”

Peter (60), a low-educated single man from a village, did not have enough money to move away from the parental home but his mother forbade him from bringing home any girlfriends, so he could not date anybody until the age of 45, when his parents died. By then he considered himself too old for parenthood. In the context of the Hungarian post-transition “super homeownership regime” (Murinkó, 2019), characterized by a very high (over 90%) rate of owner-occupation and a very limited private rental sector, Imago (54), a highly educated single man living at his mother’s place in Budapest, saw the ownership of an apartment as a precondition, not just for having children, but also for having a stable partnership: “Sometimes I felt that women didn’t go out with me because I didn’t have my own apartment.” Pinki (53) on the other hand, a highly educated single man living in a rented apartment in Budapest, did not refer to women rejecting him on account of him now owning an apartment, but also emphasized: “I do not want to raise a child in a rented flat.”

In these cases, the postponement feature of child-bearing was linked to the precariousness of their situation, deriving from unfinished education, caring for older relatives, and lack of financial independence. However, while highly educated men living in larger cities had steady partnerships and chose to postpone only having children, their lower educated counterparts living in villages could not even establish a proper partnership, let alone have children.

While postponement seemed a conscious decision among highly educated men, most of them did not anticipate its possible consequences such as remaining childless permanently. For example, Joseph (50), from Budapest, was married for more than 17 years and planned to have children together with his wife, but they kept failing to conceive and waited instead of seeking medical help: “We somehow trusted that time wouldn’t run out....We might still be confident, but we may still be wrong.” On the other hand, running out of time caused Aron (53), a highly educated divorced man from Budapest, to give up his plans to have children:

It seemed utterly absurd to me to start a family now when my peers’ children were already leaving their parental homes....Should I start having children now, while my strength is declining with age, to make up for something that didn’t happen in my life because I took a completely different path?

He felt that too long a postponement made it impossible to follow the “natural order” of life events.

4.3. *Self-Realization Factors*

Some aspects of increasing individualization associated with SDT were also reflected in our interview material.

About every third interviewee did not want to have children at all, and about half of the interviewees wanted to focus on self-realization and resolved that fatherhood was not part of their personal fulfilment. For example, Bernard (50), a well-educated single man from Budapest, clearly had other goals in his life than having children: “My main ambition was to be able to get to exotic places [instead of getting settled].” Due to state-socialist travel restrictions, travelling, especially to Western countries, was a newfound leisure activity for many Hungarians from the 1990s onward. The goal of travelling instead of having children was not a unique feature in our sample: Henrik (55) also mentioned that there was a period when he and his partner told each other that “travelling is our children to some degree.” Maříková (2021) had similar findings of highly educated Czech men having new opportunities opening up for them after 1989, opportunities that their parents’ generation did not have, steering their lives in directions other than parenthood.

In our sample, effects of SDT appeared not only among highly educated men but also among men with lower education. For example, Steven (59), a man with low education from the countryside, who remained single until his mid 40s, went to work in several settlements in Hungary and spent two years abroad as a painter because he wanted to travel and get to know new places and people, instead of settling down and starting a family. He was 45 when he met an older woman and first had the idea of adopting a child with his partner (the age of whom did not allow them to have biological children together). In the end, he didn’t even mention the idea of adoption to his partner, as he thought they would no longer be physically able to raise a child. Another low educated interviewee, Simon (60), also reported that he chose to work as a truck driver specifically to have the opportunity to travel in Hungary and Europe. However, later, both Steven and Simon regretted their lifestyle choices leading to childlessness, while this was not the case among the highly educated interviewees, some of whom still wanted to have children in the future. These differences might be explained by the significantly different perceptions about the socially acceptable ages of becoming a father according to socioeconomic status. Those with a higher level of education and better financial resources can still imagine becoming a father even in their fifties or sixties, while their lower-educated peers would no longer attempt to start a family in their fifties or even in their forties.

4.4. *Adaptation to Anomie*

When trying to interpret our interviewees’ different pathways to childlessness in the framework of Merton’s anomie theory, we could see that these routes can include different modes of adaptation to post-transition anomie, sometimes even within one person’s life-course.

Some of our childless interviewees, especially single men with lower education living in the countryside,

could be considered “failing conformists.” They accepted both the culturally approved goal of having children and the institutionalized means of achieving this goal within marriage, but they remained childless mainly because of their inability to establish a stable partnership due to economic factors, preventing them from conforming. While we found many examples of childless marriages among highly educated men living in the capital (who can be categorized as “ritualists” in the sense that they chose to remain childless within a steady relationship), none of the lower educated men in the countryside was married, which can indicate their lack of institutionalized means to reach their goals. Some highly educated men living in the capital can also be seen as “failing conformists” who became “retreatists” in their fifties (or even earlier) when—after realizing their limited access to socially approved means—they gave up parenthood and marriage plans for good.

More classic—alcohol and drug use related—cases of retreatism, characterized by giving up both the culturally approved goals and means, also emerged in our interviews. For example, Jonas (55), a low-educated man living with his partner in a small town, reported how the serious alcohol problems he had during the first decade of his adult life (during the 1990s) negatively affected his relationship and family formation attempts: “I have ruined my whole life, I admit it....In those years I wasn’t sober at all.” Due to his alcohol problems, his girlfriend left him and, by the time his alcohol addiction was over, he considered himself too old to have children. Nicholas (50), a single man with medium-level education living in a small town, had drug problems for many years in his twenties in the early 1990s. He reported that taking drugs changed the way he thought about life, to the extent that, even when he was not using for long periods of time, he was not content with what many people would consider a decent life: “I believed that happiness can be achieved by working hard, having a house and children. I have worked hard, and I had a house, but I felt like a droid.”

Jonas and Nicholas were not alone with their problems: During and after the transition period, both drug use and alcohol-related problems were rapidly increasing in the CEE countries, including Hungary (Lehto, 1995), while global awareness of the negative effects of alcohol and drug addiction on male fertility also intensified (Sansone et al., 2018).

We could also identify “innovators” who wanted to have children but not in the culturally approved ways: For instance, Falcon (52), a highly educated single man from Budapest, did not reject parenthood in itself, but only its links to a long-term partnership:

I wanted to have a child and a family, but I didn’t want to be together with the same woman for years....I knew that I would probably not be a very fit husband, and it wouldn’t be a very good option for the women I love.

His was not a unique case in our sample: Three other highly educated men also reported that, due to their choice of avoiding long-term partnerships, they opted for not (yet) having children, although they might want to have children later in life.

Finally, in our sample, we found two examples of “childless rebels” who did not just reject the existing goals and means, but also created new ones for themselves, in this case by joining a religious community. After his divorce, Aron (53) joined a Catholic community in the early 1990s because he wanted to have some direction in his life and feel like he belonged somewhere: “I met these young people, and we became friends. I was very attracted to what they were doing. They lived together. And without knowing exactly who or what they were...I joined them.”

Gedeon (50), a highly educated single man living in the countryside, also joined a religious group in the early 1990s, which he described as a transformative experience:

It was the first weekend retreat in December 1990, and it was like coming out of hell...out of my own chaos, unsolved problems, fixed ideas, flying pieces of my ego. One comes up and sees the blue sky for the first time.

In both cases joining a religious community helped these young adult men to reorganize their lives just after the change of regime. As opposed to the state-socialist period, religious groups and institutions, going through a revival after the political system change, could convey new values and goals to people from the 1990s onwards. Aron and Gedeon thus represent those who did not want to have children, nor marriage or a stable partnership, but instead chose the goal of community building and wished to achieve this goal by becoming a member of a religious group.

5. Conclusion

Our results showed that besides individual-level factors (including partnership failure, alcohol-related problems, etc.) macro-level factors connected to the political-economic transition in the 1990s (such as increasing levels of unemployment and uncertainty, the lack of institutional care provision for older people, etc.) influenced the childlessness patterns of our interviewees. In this sense, we can say that the change of policy regime did matter, as in most cases there was a strong interplay between the individual- and the macro-level factors.

Because of the qualitative nature of our study, it was perhaps easier to highlight that the actors of the political and economic transitions are flesh-and-blood people for whom the time since the system change has also brought changes in their life-course. We focused on how the change of regime influenced the reproductive careers of childless men who were in their twenties or early thirties

during the change of regime, which was the most common age for men to have children at that time.

The combination of Merton's anomie theory (seeing democracy as a normal state of normlessness) and Billingsley's (economic crisis, postponement, and SDT-related) approaches regarding the transition period and fertility changes was useful to identify various factors potentially affecting our interviewees' pathways to childlessness. This way we were able to highlight different—although sometimes overlapping—categories, contexts, and interpretations of male childlessness in Hungary.

We found that the economic crisis induced by the transition had a clear effect on the life events of the interviewees. We can distinguish between the subjective effects of the economy, which are caused by the emerging uncertainties after the transition, and objective effects such as exiting the labour market, for instance, due to unemployment. These effects are distributed unequally among people with different socioeconomic backgrounds. Highly educated men living in the capital experienced the subjective effects, while lower educated men living in the countryside frequently faced financial difficulties that prevented them not just from having children, but also from forming stable partnerships.

Regarding SDT, similarly to a recent Czech study (Maříková, 2021), we also found that the political and economic system change provided our interviewees with more choices and individualized options to follow diversified life paths, especially in the case of men with a higher socioeconomic status. At the same time, barriers to starting a family were experienced more heavily by the less educated men living in the countryside.

Postponement can be regarded as a consequence of the economic crisis and SDT. However, it seemed to be a relevant approach mainly in the case of highly educated men as their lower educated counterparts did not even reach the stage of having a stable partnership, in which they could consider having children. Among the highly educated interviewees, we found different outcomes of postponement: Some of them cancelled their plans to have children because they felt that, at the present stage of their life, they should focus on something else rather than having children, while others still hoped that they would become fathers later in their lives.

By applying the different anomie-related adaptation categories to our sample of childless men, we were able to identify examples of "failing conformists" turning into "retreatists," as well as "innovators" and "ritualists" according to their specific goals-means discrepancy settings. We also found some "rebels" who did not just reject the culturally approved goal of having children, and the institutionalized means of achieving this goal, but also set new goals (of community building) and means (by joining a religious community). Our findings also reflect that not everyone has equal access to the institutionalized means to attain their goals: We could find a pattern across different socio-demographic groups and different categories of adaptation. For example, low

educated men living in the countryside were more likely to belong to the failed conformist category because of insufficient access to institutionalized means. At the same time, highly educated men living in the capital were more likely to belong to the innovator and the rebel categories who could more easily deviate from the social norms or choose new goals and means for their lives.

Based on our results, the Hungarian pronatalist family policy could be amended to remove barriers facing involuntarily childless men. For example, some men wish to have children outside of marriage or a stable partnership. Thus, it is a poor policy that single men cannot adopt children. Financial security is very important for men in a pronatalist society where gender roles are strongly separated, so policies should support everybody if they find themselves in a vulnerable situation, with longer unemployment benefits and higher family allowances. Even men with higher education display a knowledge deficit about fertility, as some of them want to become a father in their 60s. It would be important to inform them that they also have to face age-related fertility problems such as the decreasing quality of sperm with age.

There are several limitations to this exploratory study. For example, our qualitative results cannot be generalized even to the population of Hungarian childless men over 50, and we have not examined heteronormatively prescribed and reproductive health problems related to childlessness either. However, we believe that the presented findings can highlight previously under-researched aspects of male childlessness in a post-socialist context.

We also believe that we can contribute to the study of at least certain aspects of pronatalist societies, where having children is a widely accepted cultural goal, and non-parenthood—especially in the case of women—can be considered as deviating from the norm. Previous research showed that social attitudes towards childless women were quite negative, and they were often considered abnormal and deviant (McCutcheon, 2018). By applying Merton's anomie theory, we were able to highlight that childless men can similarly be considered deviant in certain contexts. Our aim was to look at how childless men's life-courses can be linked to a specific period in Hungary in the era when the pronatalist features were increasing, forcing men to become breadwinners, although this role eroded a lot in the examined period due to the political-economic transformations.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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