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Ideations and Intentions in the Transition to Adulthood: A Cross-European Comparison*

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Abstract: Ideations and intentions are important precursors of actual behaviour but are still understudied in the literature on the transition to adulthood. This article provides a descriptive overview of ideations and intentions about the timing of four key events in the transition to adulthood – exit from the parental home, cohabitation, marriage, and parenthood – using cross-national representative data for 33 European countries from the Generations and Gender Survey and European Social Survey. Results show that ideations and intentions about the transition to adulthood are, like behaviours, gendered and display distinctive country differences. The analysis of age-graded ideations and intentions suggests a mismatch between the ideal and actual ages at which key events occur during the transition to adulthood. Young people aged 18 to 34 in Europe consider it ideal to start a non-marital cohabitation, marry, and become parents during their 20s but, on average, experience these events later than their ideal timeline. This mismatch is particularly pronounced among men and for the events of marriage and parenthood.

Keywords: Europe · Gender · Ideal age · Intentions · Transition to adulthood · Youth

1 Introduction

Ideations and intentions are at the centre of an established line of family demographic research (*Billari et al.* 2009, 2019; *Billari/Liefbroer* 2007; *Dommermuth et al.* 2015; *Mencarini et al.* 2015; *Schwanitz et al.* 2021). The key premise is that demographic phenomena cannot be fully understood through an examination of actual behaviour alone. Attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and expectations underlying people's decision-making contribute to determining whether, how, and when demographic events occur during one's life course. Subjective views on the organisation of the

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life course are often shaped by normative beliefs (such as perceived expectations and social pressures; *Ajzen* 1991) or cultural scripts (such as the so-called age norms; *Billari/Liefbroer* 2007; *Liefbroer/Billari* 2010), which tend to differ across contexts and genders. While the concept of intention is well established in the literature – capturing the extent to which an individual is motivated to engage in a certain behaviour and has a plan for implementing this decision (*Ajzen* 1991) – ideations have primarily been referred to as age norms in prior research and are typically measured through ideal ages or age deadlines for experiencing certain life events (e.g., *Aassve et al.* 2013a; *Billari et al.* 2011; *Billari/Liefbroer* 2007). Hence, ideations refer to individuals' opinions about when an event should be experienced, and, as such, reflect a societal norm (*Lazzari et al.* 2024; *Liefbroer/Billari* 2010). We argue that especially during the transition to adulthood – a period replete with demographic milestones – cross-national comparisons of intentions and ideations provide insight into the contemporary context of demographic decision-making for European young adults. Despite the common trend of a late, protracted, and complex transition to adulthood (*Billari/Liefbroer* 2010; *Sobotka/Toulemon* 2008; *Lesthaeghe* 2020), significant cross-national and gender differences persist across Europe. Patterns in the transition to adulthood often follow a north-south gradient (*Reher* 1998), marked by "earliest-early" behaviour in Northern Europe and "latest-late" behaviour in Southern Europe (*Billari* 2004). Gender also matters for the age stratification of key transitions like entering partnership and parenthood, with women typically experiencing these events earlier than men (*Billari/Liefbroer* 2010; *Ferraretto/Vitali* 2024; *Sobotka/Toulemon* 2008). According to life course theory, institutional environments such as labour markets, welfare systems, policy environments, and long-term cultural factors (*Elder et al.* 2003) shape opportunity structures in which the transition to adulthood takes place. The idea developed in this paper is that institutional and cultural environments also specifically impose age schedules according to which the transition to adulthood should unfold: ideal ages and intentions about key events are thus expected to vary substantially across European countries.

In the literature, intentions and age norms are investigated almost exclusively within studies of fertility (*Beaujouan/Berghammer* 2019; *Billari et al.* 2009, 2011; *Dommermuth et al.* 2015; *Lazzari et al.* 2024; *Mencarini et al.* 2015; *Toulemon/Testa* 2005; *Vignoli et al.* 2013), with few exceptions related to leaving the parental home (*Billari/Liefbroer* 2007; *Ferrari et al.* 2014; *Schwanitz et al.* 2021; *Tosi* 2017). Most of these studies are based on single countries and address either the determinants of intentions, the realisation of intentions, or the association between age norms and behaviours. Subjective views on the timing of life-course events, specifically during the transition to adulthood, have rarely been studied in comparative perspective (for an exception: *Spéder et al.* 2014). Little is known about young adults' age ideations and intentions regarding the unfolding of the transition to adulthood, particularly in relation to actual behaviour and cross-national gender comparisons. Our contribution aims at closing these research gaps by providing a descriptive overview of ideal ages, age-graded intentions, and behaviours related to four key events in the transition to adulthood – first exit from the parental home, first cohabitation, first marriage, and parenthood – for women and men across European countries.

2 Theoretical background and state of research

2.1 Conceptualising the transition to adulthood

The transition to adulthood has been a core concept in family demography since the late 1970s, defined as a process encompassing the following life events: completing education, entering the labour market, leaving the parental home, forming stable unions, and becoming a parent (*Modell et al.* 1976; *Hogan/Astone* 1986; *Furstenberg et al.* 2005). These transitions, tied to psychological development, autonomy, and independence, serve as a heuristic framework of socially constructed markers of adulthood that vary across contexts (*Furstenberg et al. 2005*; *Spéder et al.* 2014). In Europe, adulthood is loosely defined as occurring between ages 18 and 34, though its timing has become increasingly diverse and protracted in recent decades (*Billari/Liefbroer* 2010; *Sobotka/Toulemon* 2008; *Lesthaeghe* 2020). Some scholars suggest this transition may extend further, potentially up to age 40, due to the postponement of key milestones such as union formation and parenthood (*Ferraretto/Vitali* 2024), though this remains speculative.

2.2 The role of ideations and intentions in the transition to adulthood

Ideations and intentions in the transition to adulthood are closely related (*Hogan/Astone* 1986; *Ajzen* 1991; *Elder et al.* 2003). Ideations provide the framework through which young people conceptualise their transition to adulthood in relation to societal norms and ideal timetables. They encompass expectations, norms, and beliefs about what adulthood means and the timing and sequence of key milestones, shaping decision-making regarding life course events (*Neugarten et al.* 1965; *Hogan/Astone* 1986; *Heckhausen* 1999; *Elder et al.* 2003). In demographic research, ideations are primarily studied through age norms and measured via ideal ages or age deadlines for experiencing certain events (*Liefbroer/Billari* 2010). In this way, ideations represent normative timetables reflecting individuals' opinions about when a transition should occur and, as such, mirror broader societal norms (*Neugarten et al.* 1965; *Lazzari et al.* 2024; *Liefbroer/Billari* 2010). Conversely, intentions represent strategic planning and decision-making regarding demographic milestones. In the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; *Ajzen* 1991), intentions serve as immediate determinants of behaviour and are shaped by three factors: behavioural beliefs (perceived positive or negative consequences of the transition), normative beliefs (perceived social expectations and pressures), and perceived behavioural control (factors influencing one's ability to complete the transition). The idea that individuals engage in planful actions within a time frame aligns with key principles of life course theory such as "agency" and "timing of transitions" (*Elder et al.* 2003). These principles emphasize how people shape their life trajectories while navigating the constraints and opportunities of their historical and social contexts.

2.3 Research gaps and study contributions

Ideations and intentions play a crucial role in shaping the transition to adulthood, influencing both when and whether individuals experience key life course events (e.g., *Billari et al.* 2009, 2011; 2019; *Dommermuth et al.* 2015; *Hofäcker/Chaloupková* 2014; *Lazzari et al.* 2024; *Mencarini et al.* 2015; *Schwanitz et al.* 2021; *Toulemon/Testa* 2005; *Vignoli et al.* 2013). Existing studies also tend to emphasize gender differences in ideations and intentions (e.g., *Spéder et al.* 2014). Ideal ages and age deadlines for parenthood have increased over recent decades, but they remain lower for women than for men (*Lazzari et al.* 2024). This pattern reflects observed behaviours, as women typically enter partnership and parenthood earlier than men (*Billari/Liefbroer* 2010; *Sobotka/Toulemon* 2008). While the link between intentions and their realisation in behaviour concerning union formation, marriage, and parenthood differs little by gender (*Billari et al.* 2019), intentions to leave the parental home are more strongly shaped by gendered subjective norms (*Schwanitz et al.* 2021). Despite strong empirical support for their role as precursors of demographic behaviour, large-scale comparative research on how ideations and intentions vary by gender and age across multiple life course dimensions in European countries remains scarce. Examining these patterns across diverse national contexts is a necessary step toward better understanding cross-country differences in the degree to which young adults can translate their ideations and intentions into actual life-course transitions.

Cross-national differences in the transition to adulthood reflect variations in welfare regimes, economic conditions, labour markets, cultural factors, and policy support (*Buchmann/Kriesi* 2011; Table A1). These, in turn, shape country-specific opportunity structures and influence the timing of life course transitions. These differences often follow a north-south gradient: transitions occur earlier in Northern and Western Europe – where youth support is more generous – and later in Southern and Eastern Europe, where such support is weaker (*Reher* 1998; *Billari* 2004; *Buchmann/Kriesi* 2011). Despite a general postponement of key life transitions across Europe, this behavioural gradient has remained relatively stable over the past 60 years (*Billari/Liefbroer* 2010; *Ferraretto/Vitali* 2024; *Sobotka/Toulemon* 2008; *Lesthaeghe* 2020). This stability strongly suggests that intentions and ideations follow a similar cross-national pattern. A related issue that warrants deeper empirical investigation across multiple life course dimensions is whether structural barriers – such as financial constraints, job insecurity, and insufficient policy support – prevent young adults from acting on their intentions and ideations. These barriers may delay or even hinder the attainment of key life milestones.

To frame our analysis, we focus on four traditional markers of the transition to adulthood: first exit from the parental home, first cohabitation, first marriage, and parenthood. We examine these by gender to understand diverging patterns in ideal ages, intentions, and behaviours across a large number of European countries. From a life-course perspective, the four milestones are central to family formation, a key area of demographic research. We acknowledge excluding two other markers – finishing education and entering the labour market – due to data limitations (see section 3). However, finishing education and entering employment are often

subject to additional, institutionalised age timetables (e.g., compulsory schooling age), making them less self-directed compared to transitions like leaving home, cohabiting, marrying, or becoming a parent.

3 Data

We draw on data from two large-scale social surveys, the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS, Wave 1; *Generations and Gender Programme* 2019) and the European Social Survey (ESS; *ESS* 2006, 2018). The GGS collects information on family demographic topics, including the transition to adulthood (*Gauthier et al.* 2018). Importantly, it includes questions on short-term (i.e., in the next three years) intentions to live independently from parents, to cohabit with a partner, to marry, and to have a child.[1] The ESS biannually collects information on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Rounds 3 and 9 feature a rotating module on the "timing of life" that includes questions about ideal ages to start living with a partner, to get married, and to become a parent and also about age deadlines, i.e., the age considered to be too old to experience certain transitions (*Billari et al.* 2021). These questions were administered using a split-ballot design, meaning that respondents are randomly assigned to answer questions about ideal ages and age deadlines for either women or men, regardless of their own gender. Respondents can indicate that they have no ideal age for a given event or are of the opinion that the event – such as cohabitation or marriage – should not be experienced at all. They can also choose the option "don't know". Together, the two surveys cover 33 European countries (31 in the ESS and up to 17 in the GGS; see Table 1).

From both surveys, we first select respondents aged 18-34. For each domain in the transition to adulthood – leaving the parental home, cohabitation, marriage, and parenthood – we describe intentions and ideations by gender and country. We then focus on the ESS data to compare ideations with the actual ages at which these events were experienced. These ages are reported retrospectively and measured in years, and we analyse them by gender and country. Since not all respondents aged 18-34 have experienced each event by the time of the interview (i.e., right-censoring), we estimate the age at event using Kaplan-Meier survival curves. In this analysis, respondents are considered at risk of experiencing each event starting at age 18. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the selection criteria for each sub-sample and measurement indicator. Our goal in all operationalisations is ensuring cross-national comparability. All empirical analyses apply weights as provided by the GGS and ESS to adjust for differential selection probabilities and population sizes across countries.

[1] Finishing education and entering the labour market (incl. gaining financial independence) are other standard markers of adulthood. We do not include them because intentions and ideal ages about these key events were not consistently covered in both surveys.

Tab. 1: Descriptive information of the study sub-samples

	Selection criteria to compute…		Details
Intention to…	… the percentage who have the intention	… the percentage who have not experienced the transition	
… leave the parental home for the 1st time	Rs who have never left the parental home N Countries = 13 N Individuals = 12,216	Rs who live with parents (and have never left home before) N Countries = 13 N Individuals = 12,519	We consider Rs who currently live with their parent(s) and who have never left (and returned to) the parental home before. In four countries (Sweden, Netherlands, Estonia, and Hungary) the intention question for leaving the parental home for the first time was not asked to Rs.
… cohabit for the 1st time	Rs who have never cohabited N Countries = 9 N Individuals = 9,766	Rs who do not cohabit (and have never cohabited with a partner before) N Countries = 9 N Individuals = 10,428	We consider Rs who do not currently live with a partner or spouse (and have never done so before). In six countries (Germany, Hungary, Norway, Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland) the intention question was only asked to Rs with a non-resident partner; in Italy the intention question was only asked to Rs without any partner; and in the Czech Republic the intention question was not asked at all. Hence, we exclude these eight countries because the intention question was not asked to all Rs without a co-resident partner.
… marry for the 1st time	Rs who have never been married N Countries = 7 N Individuals = 11,731	Rs who are not married (and have never been married before) N Countries = 7 N Individuals = 13,157	We consider Rs who are not currently married (and have never been before). In three countries (Germany, France, and Lithuania) the intention question was only asked to Rs with a partner; in five countries (Norway, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, and Poland) the intention question was only asked to Rs with a co-resident partner; and in Belgium the intention question was only asked to Rs with a non-resident partner. Hence, we exclude these nine countries because the intention question was not asked to all Rs with and without a partner.

Tab. 1: Continuation

	Selection criteria to compute…		Details
Intention to…	… the percentage who have the intention	… the percentage who have not experienced the transition	
… have a child for the 1st time	Childless Rs with a partner N Countries = 17 N Individuals = 12,416	Childless Rs with a partner N Countries = 17 N Individuals = 13,366	We consider partnered Rs who do not have any (biological or adopted) children and where either of the partners is not currently pregnant. In all countries the intention question was only asked to Rs with a partner.
Ideal age to …	… the mean ideal age	… survival curves	
… leave the parental home for the 1st time	Rs aged 18-34 who indicate a numeric age N Countries = 31 N Individuals = 17,631		The ESS actually asks about an age deadline: "After what age would you say a woman/man is generally too old to still be living with her/his parents?". We only consider numeric answers – i.e., a specific age value – and do not include answers as "never too old". In the calculation of mean age deadlines, gender refers to gender of the split ballot, not of Rs. This also applies to the calculation of mean ideal ages of the other events. We do not calculate survival curves to the event of leaving the parental home because they cannot be compared with age deadlines to experience the event.
… cohabit for the 1st time	Rs aged 18-34 who indicate a numeric age N Countries = 31 N Individuals = 17,369	All Rs aged 18-34 N Countries = 31 N Individuals =13,004	Non-numeric answers include "no ideal age" and "should never live with partner not married to". To calculate survival curves to the first cohabitation we only select Rs who cohabited with a partner without being married. This is to ensure

Tab. 1: Continuation

	Selection criteria to compute...		Details
Intention to...	... the percentage who have the intention	... the percentage who have not experienced the transition	
			comparability between the ideal age at nonmarital cohabitation and the actual behaviour. We thus exclude Rs who started to cohabit and got married in the same calendar year. Rs who experience the event before age 18 or with invalid answers to the question "Have you ever lived with a spouse or partner for three months or more" are excluded from the calculation of survival curves.
... marry for the 1st time	Rs aged 18-34 who indicate a numeric age N Countries = 31 N Individuals = 16,762	All Rs aged 18-34 N Countries = 31 N Individuals = 15,034	Non-numeric answers include "no ideal age" and "should never get married". Rs who experience the event before age 18 or with invalid answers to the question "Have you ever been married" are excluded from the calculation of survival curves.
... have the 1st child	Rs aged 18-34 who indicate a numeric age N Countries = 31 N Individuals = 18,450	All Rs aged 18-34 N Countries = 31 N Individuals = 15,046	Non-numeric answers include "no ideal age". Rs who experience the event before age 18 or with invalid answers to the question "Have you ever given birth to/fathered a child" are excluded from the calculation of survival curves.

Note: The GGS contributes information for up to 17 countries: Norway, Sweden, Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Netherlands, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Italy. The ESS contributes information for 31 countries: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Netherlands, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Ireland, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Ukraine, Cyprus, Montenegro, Italy, Portugal, and Spain.
Rs= respondents

Source: *GGS* wave 1 (2003–2010), *ESS* round 3 (2006) and 9 (2018). Own calculations.

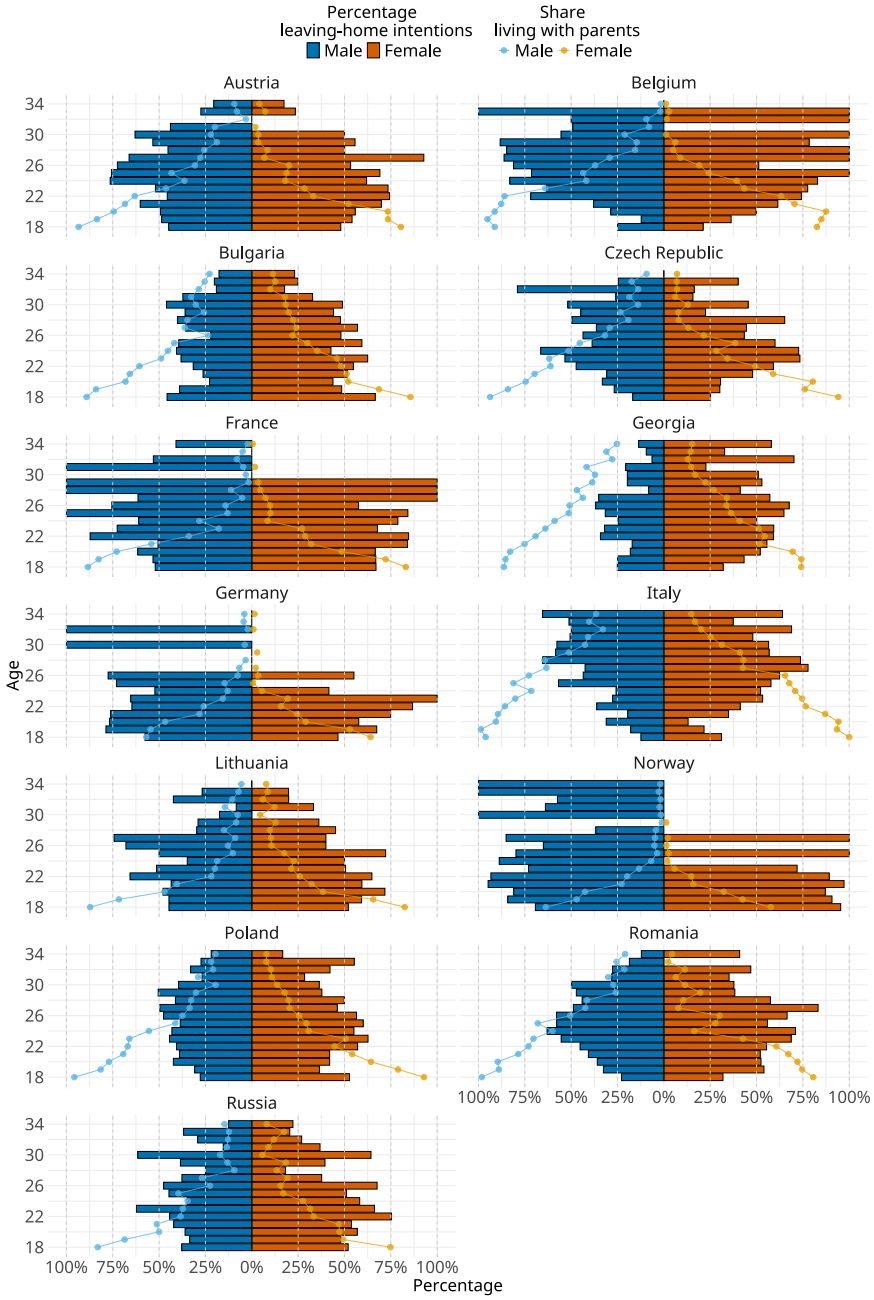
4 Results

4.1 Intentions to experience key transitions towards adulthood

Figure 1 compares the share of young adults intending to leave the parental home in the next three years by age, gender, and country with the corresponding share still living with parents using population pyramids. Our results align with the existing comparative literature on home-leaving intentions (*Schwanitz et al.* 2021) and behaviours (*Billari/Liefbroer* 2010). Everywhere, the share of young adults living with parents declines with age but remains sizeable at age 34, especially for men in Italy and Eastern European countries. In Norway, a large share of the few young adults still living with their parents past age 21 intend to leave home in the near future, and 100 percent of those aged 30+ (only men in our sample) plan to move out. Germany and France show similar trends. However, caution is needed – particularly in Norway and the Western European countries, where those who remain at home at older ages are likely a selective group (e.g., youth with stronger family ties, health conditions, economic constraints, or cultural preferences for extended co-residence). This could introduce bias in the percentage intending to leave home either because the fewer, selected stayers are less inclined to leave or because they tend to overreport their intentions to leave home to conform to social norms (*Aassve et al.* 2013a). In contrast, in countries such as Bulgaria, Italy, and Poland, the share of older youth intending to leave home is considerably lower. Here, explanations are found in a combination of cultural norms allowing extended co-residence with parents and of structural barriers such as "inhospitable" housing markets (*Aassve et al.* 2002: 263) making residential independence particularly difficult. The pyramids also confirm that, compared to men, women have lower shares of co-residence with parents and higher shares of leaving-home intentions at all ages and across countries (*Schwanitz et al.* 2021). Gender differences are especially visible in Georgia, followed by other Eastern European countries.

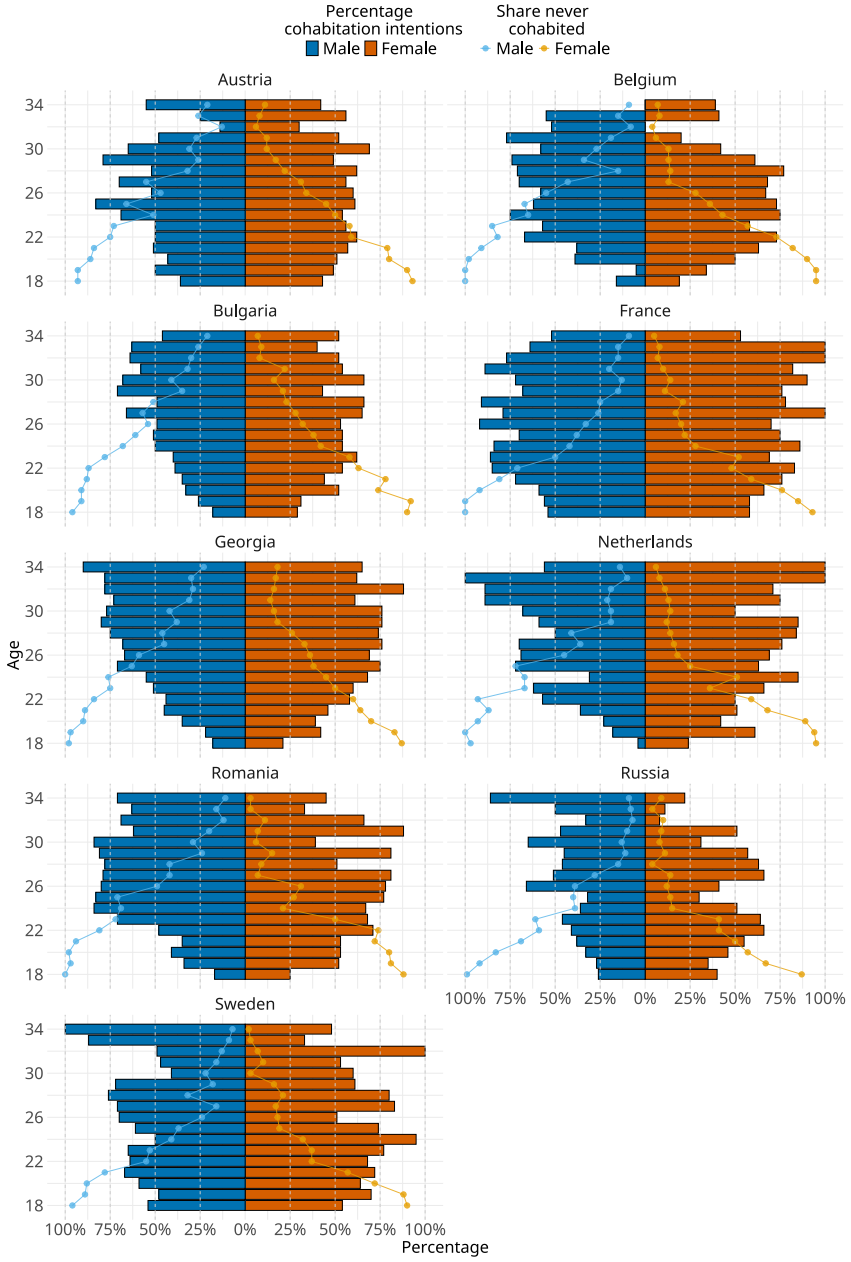
Figure 2 compares the share of young adults intending to cohabit in the next three years by age, gender, and country with the corresponding share of young adults who have never co-resided before (either with a spouse or in a non-marital cohabitation). Across countries, the percentage of men and women with short-term cohabiting intentions is generally lowest among the youngest youth aged 18 to 22. After age 22, countries broadly exhibit three distinct patterns in cohabitation intentions. First, in Georgia and the Netherlands – and to a lesser extent in Bulgaria and Romania – there is a positive age gradient, with intentions to cohabit increasing as age rises. Second, France shows a stable pattern, where at least 50 percent of young adults consistently express an intention to cohabit across all ages after 22. Third, in Sweden, Austria, and Belgium cohabitation intentions noticeably decrease after age 30. This decline in cohabitation intentions among older young adults could indicate selection effects: those who have never cohabited by age 30+ may be a socially selective group with stronger personal, cultural, or structural reasons for avoiding cohabitation – such as a preference for singlehood, religious beliefs, or difficulty finding a partner. By age 30, many individuals who are inclined to cohabit

Fig. 1: Population pyramids showing the percentage of youth living with parents (dotted line) and the percentage intending to leave the parental home in the next three years (solid bar), by gender and country



Note: Weighted percentages.
Source: *GGS* wave 1 (2003-2010). Own calculations.

Fig. 2: Population pyramids showing the percentage of youth who never cohabited with a spouse or partner (dotted line) and the percentage intending to cohabit in the next three years (solid bar), by gender and country



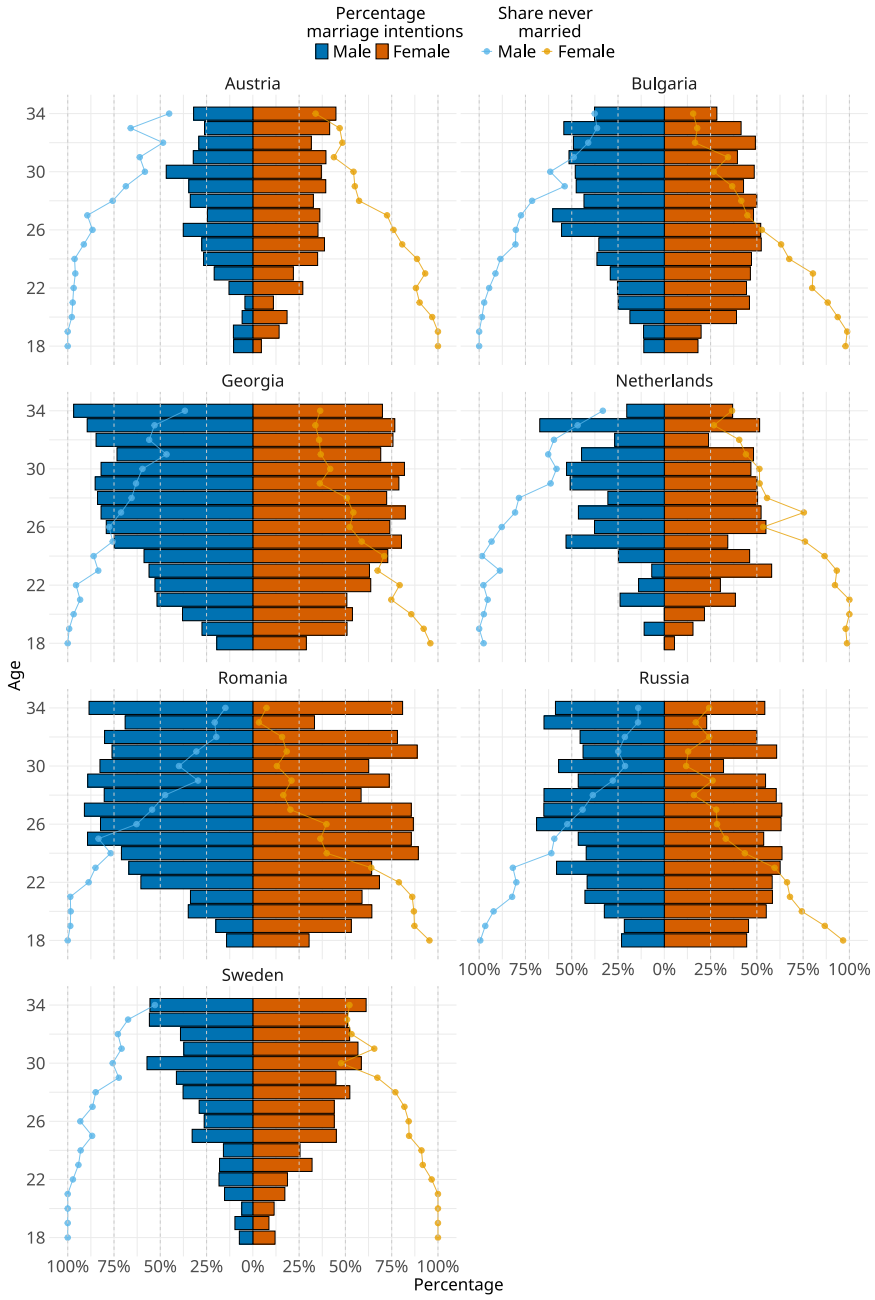
Note: Weighted percentages.
Source: *GGS* wave 1 (2003-2010). Own calculations.

have likely already done so. This is suggested by the negative age gradient in actual cohabitation behaviour, where cohabitation rates decrease with age among those who have never cohabited before – starting around age 25 or 26 in most countries. That most people (intend to) cohabit at some point in their lives confirms prior research (e.g., *Sobotka/Toulemon* 2008; *Billari/Liefbroer* 2010). Whilst no gender differences in cohabitation intentions emerge from the present analysis, women tend to experience their first cohabitation earlier than men (*Sobotka/Toulemon* 2008).

Figure 3 compares the share of young adults intending to marry in the next three years by age, gender, and country with the corresponding share of never-married single young adults. In all countries, the share of never-married youth decreases with age, while the intention to marry increases with age. However, cross-national differences stand out. In Sweden, Austria, and the Netherlands, the share of never-married single youth steadily decreases with age but remains as high as 50 percent by age 30+ for both men and women. In these countries, marriage intentions hardly exceed 50 percent, even among the older youth. By contrast, young adults in Eastern European countries report the highest levels of short-term marriage intentions in the sample, visible already in the mid-20s. Nearly 50 percent of respondents have marriage intentions in Bulgaria and Russia; this figure increases to around 75 percent in Georgia and Romania. In terms of actual marriage behaviour, the share of never-married single youth sharply decreases from age 25 onwards in all four Eastern European countries, reflecting an early marriage pattern (*Sobotka/Toulemon* 2008). By age 34, the share of never-married individuals is lowest in Romania and Russia. At all ages, the share of never-married men exceeds that of never-married women in Eastern European countries, whereas this gender difference is less pronounced in Western countries. Gender differences in marriage intentions are negligible in all countries.

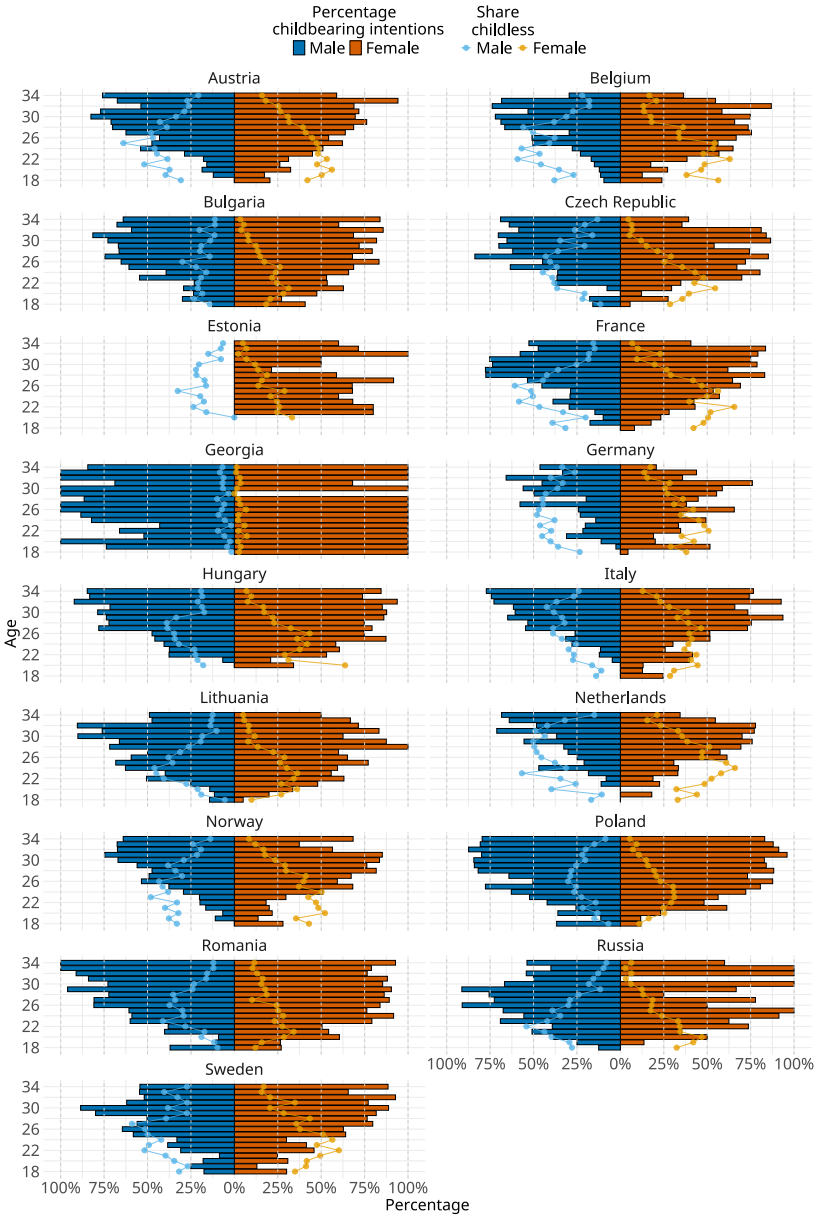
Figure 4 compares the share of (childless) partnered young adults intending to have a first child in the next three years by age, gender, and country with the corresponding total share of childless partnered youth. Across countries, the share of childless partnered youth is high until the early 20s and decreases with age: the few young people who are partnered at these young ages are a selected group, more likely to also be parents. The share of youth in partnership with no children between ages 32-34 is higher among women and men in Austria, Germany, Italy, and Belgium and lower in France and in Eastern European countries (see also *Beaujouan/Berghammer* 2019). There is an overall positive age gradient in the intention to have a first child. The increase in the share of young adults intending to have a child picks up around age 23-24 for women and somewhat later for men (roughly around age 25-27) in many, but not all, countries. After age 30, around 75 percent of childless young adults with a partner intend to have a child. Germany has the lowest and Georgia the highest shares of childless partnered youth intending to have a child.

Fig. 3: Population pyramids showing the percentage of never-married youth (dotted line) and the percentage intending to marry in the next three years (solid bar), by gender and country



Note: Weighted percentages.
Source: *GGS* wave 1 (2003-2010). Own calculations.

Fig. 4: Population pyramids showing the percentage of childless youth with a partner (dotted line) and the percentage partnered and intending to have a first child in the next three years (solid bar), by gender and country



Note: In Estonia, the question about the intention to have a child was only asked of women 20 years and older, which is why only bars for women are depicted in Figure 4. Weighted percentages.
Source: *GGS* wave 1 (2003-2010). Own calculations.

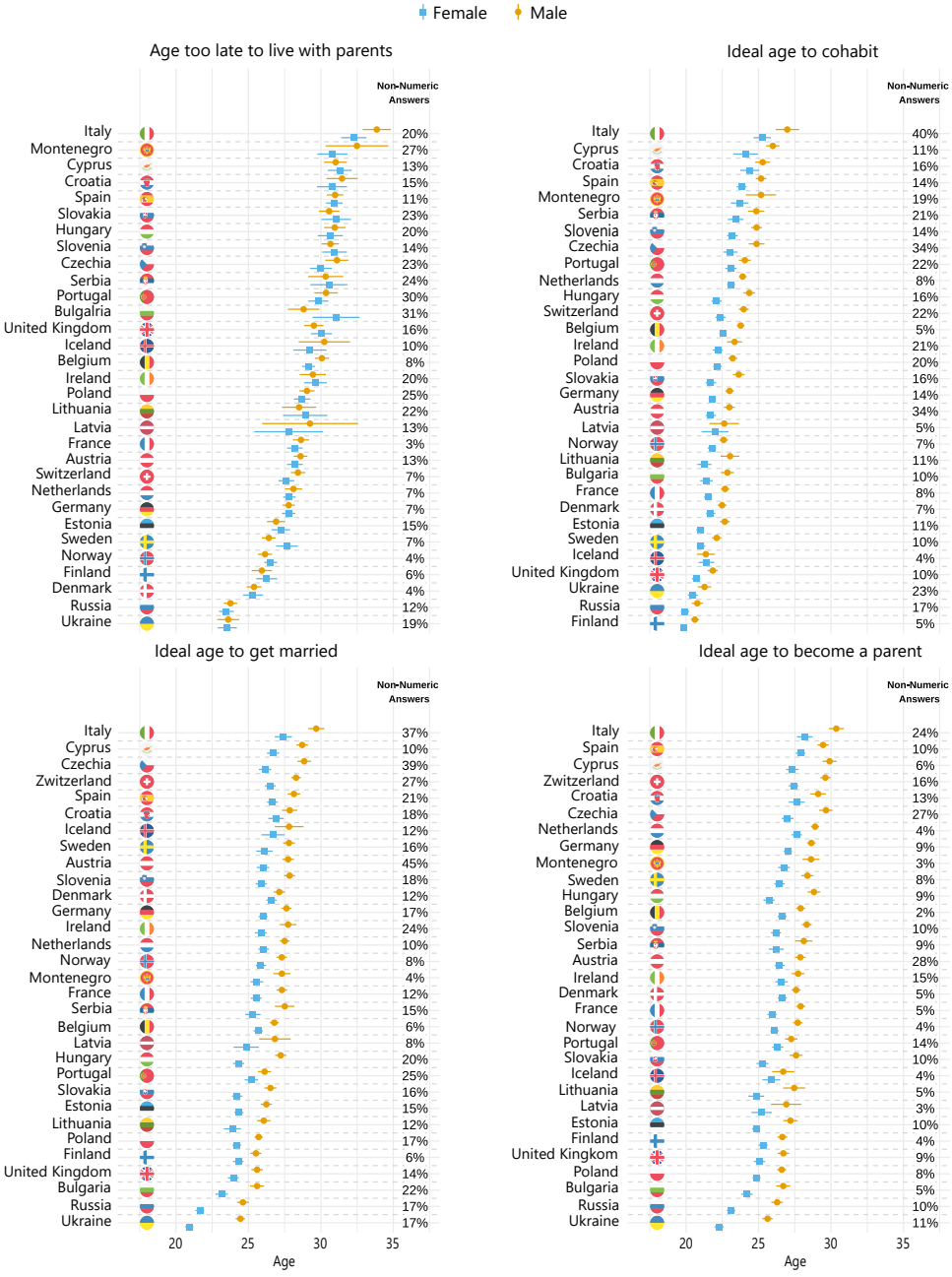
4.2 Ideal ages in the transition to adulthood

Figure 5 shows the age deadlines for leaving the parental home and ideal ages for the first cohabitation, marriage, and child, by gender of the split ballot and country. Age deadlines and ideal ages are expressed by respondents aged 18-34 in the two *ESS* rounds (2006 and 2018). Each panel separately indicates the percentage of respondents in each country reporting a non-numeric ideal age or age deadline (see Table 1). The top-left panel in Figure 5 on home-leaving age deadlines shows substantial cross-national variation. Overall, age deadlines are youngest – at age 25 for women and 26 for men – in Northern Europe (e.g., Finland, Norway, Sweden) and oldest – at age 32 and 34, respectively – in Southern Europe (e.g., Italy, Cyprus, Spain), reflecting the established "earliest-early" vs. "latest-late" behavioural pattern of the transition to adulthood (*Billari* 2004). Eastern Europe presents a mixed picture, with some countries mirroring Northern Europe (e.g., Ukraine, Russia) and others mirroring Southern Europe (e.g., Montenegro, Croatia, Slovakia). Gender differences in the perceived age deadline for leaving the parental home are negligible and do not align with actual behaviour, as women generally leave home earlier than men. In most Southern and Eastern European countries, relatively high shares of respondents, i.e., between 20 percent and 30 percent, say that one is never too old to co-reside with one's own parents. The share is considerably lower (between 3 percent and 16 percent) in the remaining countries.

The top-right panel in Figure 5 shows patterns by gender and country in the ideal age to cohabit with an unmarried partner. Again, the ideal age to cohabit is lowest – at age 19 for women and 20 for men – in Northern Europe (e.g., Finland), and highest at age 25 and 27, respectively, in Southern Europe. Similar to Northern Europe, some Eastern European countries, such as Russia and Ukraine, present very low ideal ages, while others such as Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia resemble Southern Europe. The United Kingdom shows young ideal ages to cohabit – perhaps reflecting that cohabitation at some point in the life course is a normative behaviour but also that cohabitation increasingly represents a prelude to marriage (and is thus experienced at younger ages) (*Beaujouan/Ní Bhrolcháin* 2011). Overall, ideal ages are higher for men compared to women. Interestingly, in Italy, Austria, and Czech Republic more than 30 percent of respondents do not indicate a numeric answer, mostly stating that no ideal age for cohabitation exists, while in Poland and Ukraine 5 percent to 7 percent of respondents do not approve nonmarital cohabitation.

The bottom-left panel in Figure 5 shows patterns by gender and country in the ideal age to marry. Unlike cohabitation ideations, Northern Europe does not constitute a homogenous group. Finland is among the countries with the lowest ideal age for marriage, with the remaining Nordic countries (Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Iceland) showing slightly higher ideal ages – around age 26 for women and 27 for men. Conversely, Southern Europe displays the oldest ideal ages for marriage –age 27 and 29, respectively – except for Portugal, where they are considerably younger. Eastern Europe is heterogeneous also when considering ideal ages for marriage, reflecting the fact that marriage has been postponed more in Czech Republic and Slovenia than in Russia and Ukraine (*Sobotka/Toulemon* 2008).

Fig. 5: Age deadlines and ideal ages (mean values) for experiencing transitions towards adulthood, by gender of the split ballot and country



Note: Weighted means and percentages. „Non-numeric answers" refers to the percentage of respondents in the sample reporting a non-numeric ideal age or age deadline by country. Source: *ESS* round 3 (2006) and 9 (2018). Own calculations.

In every country, ideal ages are higher for men compared to women. Respondents who have not indicated a specific ideal age to get married are not against marriage but rather declare that no ideal age exists: this view is, again, most common in Austria, Italy, and Czech Republic.

The bottom-right panel in Figure 5 illustrates gender and country patterns in the ideal age for parenthood. Except for Portugal, Southern Europe again records the highest ideal ages for parenthood. For example, in Italy, the ideal age is 28 for women and 30 for men. Northern European countries show more variation, with Finland reporting the lowest ideal age within this group. In Eastern Europe, the youngest ideal ages are found: 22 for women and 25 for men (in Ukraine). Gender differences follow the same pattern observed for cohabitation and marriage: in every country, it is considered ideal for women to become parents earlier than men. These differences are smaller in a few cases, such as Denmark, Iceland, and Portugal.

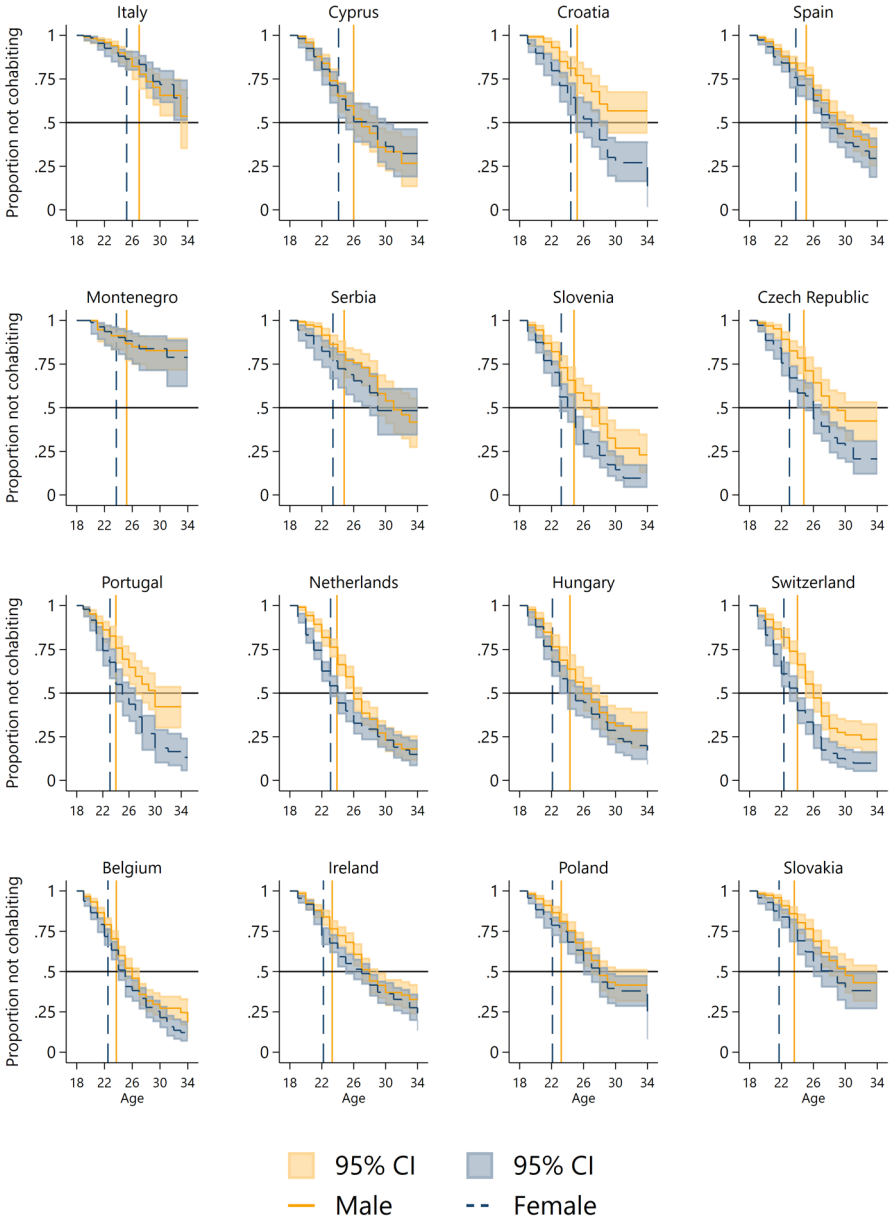
Figures 6a-6b, 7a-7b, and 8a-8b show Kaplan-Meier survival curves for each event, alongside vertical lines indicating the mean ideal ages, disaggregated by gender and country. The point at which the survival curve intersects the 0.5 horizontal line represents the estimated median age at the event, accounting for right-censored observations. A match occurs when the survival curve crosses the 0.5 horizontal line at the same age considered ideal for men/women. If the crossing point is to the right of the vertical line, the event tends to occur later than the ideal age; if it is to the left of the vertical line, the event tends to occur earlier than the ideal age.

For the event of leaving the parental home, information on age ideations is not available. We note, however, that age deadlines related to leaving the parental home always exceed estimated median ages at leaving home, although the (mis-)match between the two varies greatly across countries. For example, in Italy, the estimated median age at leaving home is 29, compared to deadlines of 32.2 for women and 33.8 for men. In Germany, the median ages are 21 and 22, while the deadline is much later at age 28.

Figures 6a and 6b show that young adults typically experience first cohabitation later than the age they consider ideal. The gap is especially pronounced in countries like Italy or Montenegro, where few individuals have cohabited by age 34, making it impossible to estimate a median age for this group. In Eastern Europe – e.g., Serbia, Poland, Slovakia, and Bulgaria – as well as in Ireland and the UK, the gap remains substantial at around 6 years. In the remaining countries, the delay is smaller: about two years in Switzerland and four years in Spain and Germany. The smallest mismatches between ideal and actual ages are found in the Nordic countries. Cohabitation patterns also vary: in Ukraine or Russia, confidence intervals are quite large due to the prevalence of direct marriage (see Table 1 on selection criteria), while in Western and Northern Europe, most respondents have cohabited by age 34.

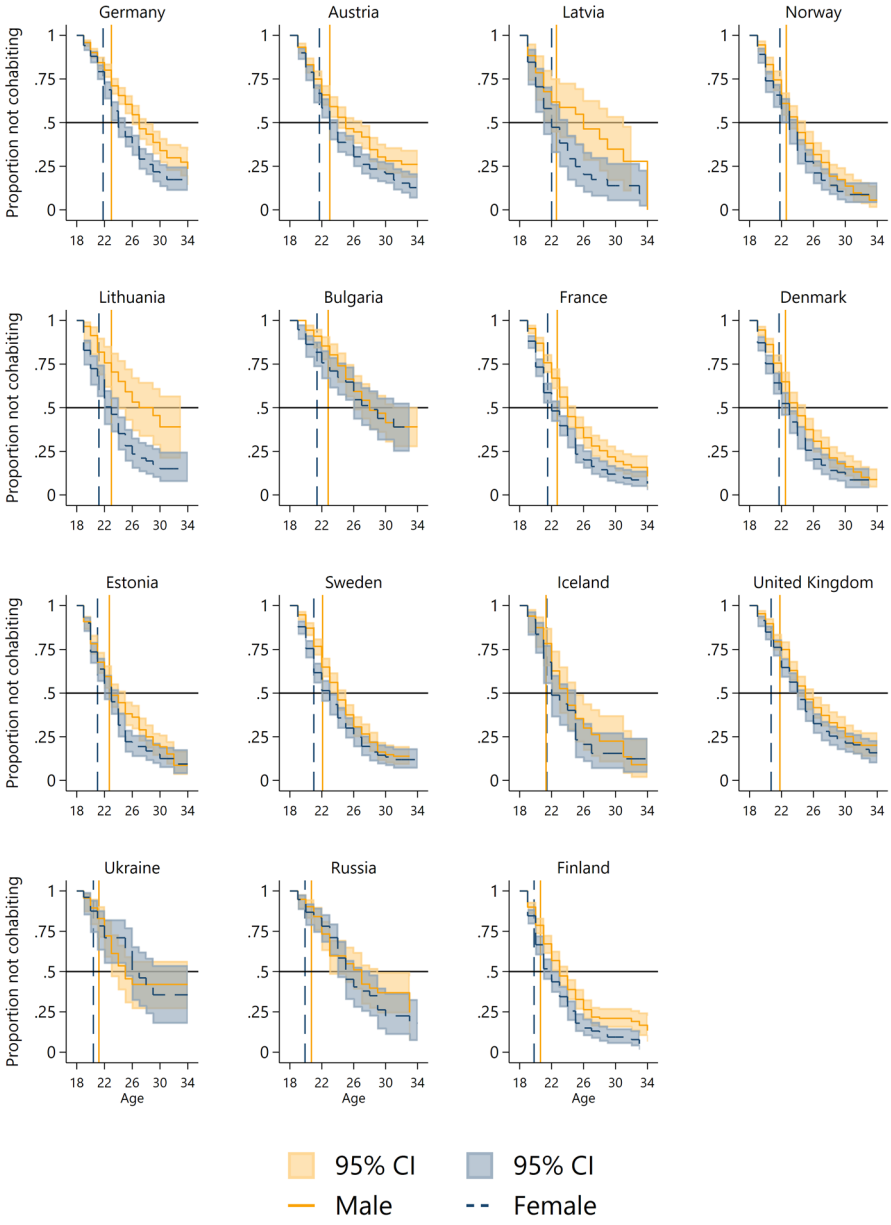
Figures 7a and 7b reveal a similar mismatch between ideal and actual timing of first marriage: in most countries, marriage occurs significantly later than considered ideal. Only Russia, Ukraine, and Cyprus show a close alignment – mostly among men – where a relatively large proportion of young adults has married by age 34, as also suggested by the GGS data. In many countries (e.g., Italy, Czech Republic, the Netherlands, France, Belgium), the proportion of young adults who are married by

Fig. 6a: Kaplan-Meier survival curves for the transition to cohabitation and ideal ages for cohabitation, by gender and country



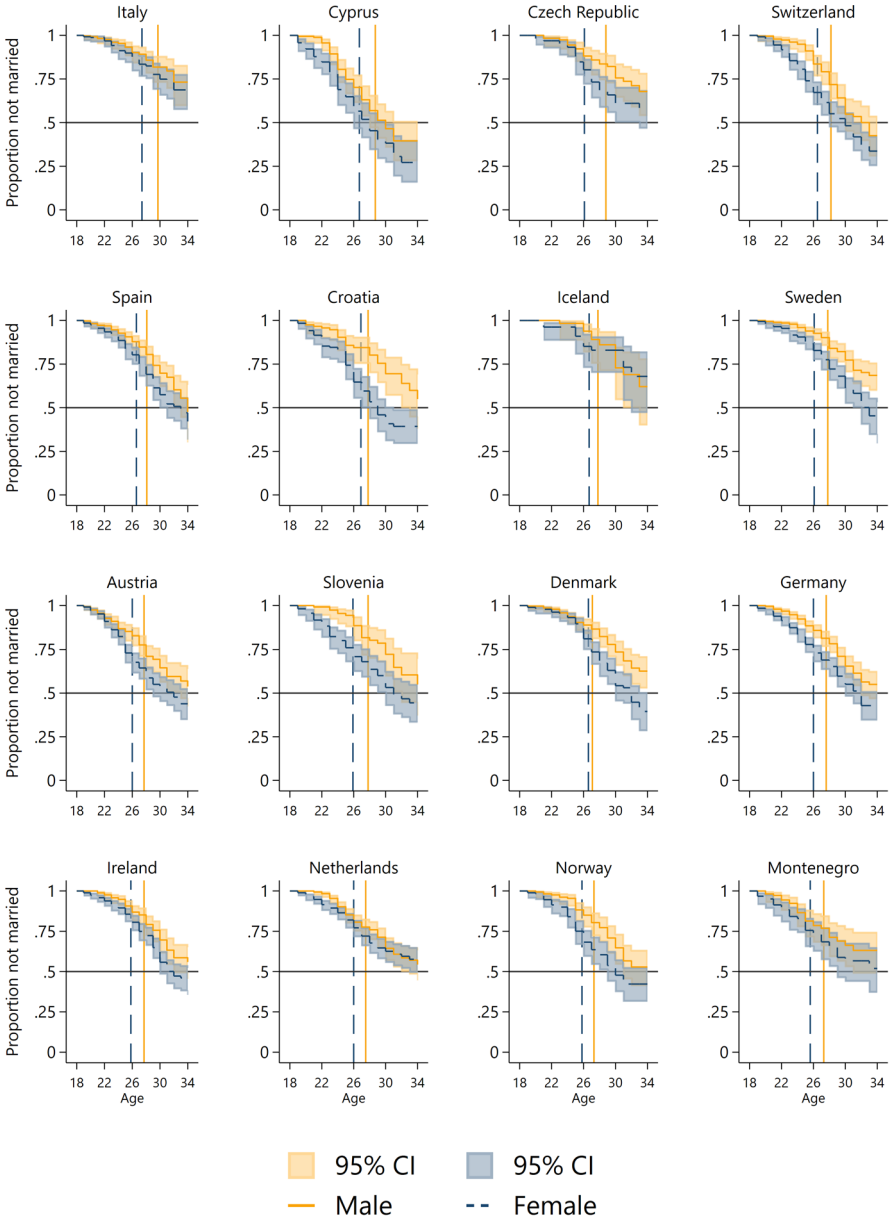
Note: The vertical lines represent mean ideal ages to experience the event: in blue (dashed) are ideal ages for women, in yellow ideal ages for men. Countries are ordered from the biggest ideal age at event to the lowest.
Source: *ESS* round 3 (2006) and 9 (2019). Own calculations.

Fig. 6b: Kaplan-Meier survival curves for the transition to cohabitation and ideal ages for cohabitation, by gender and country



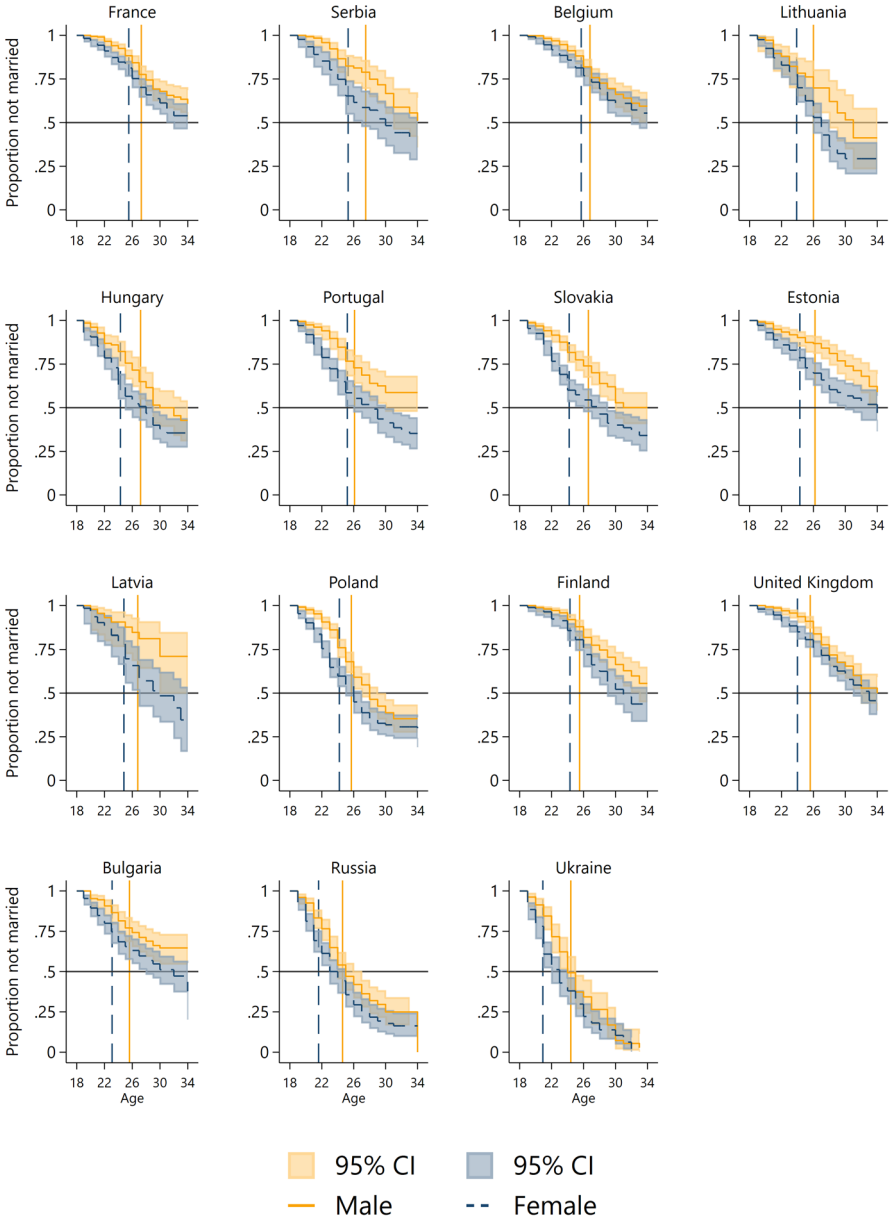
Source: *ESS* round 3 (2006) and 9 (2019). Own calculations.

Fig. 7a: Kaplan-Meier survival curves for the transition to marriage and ideal ages for marriage, by gender and country



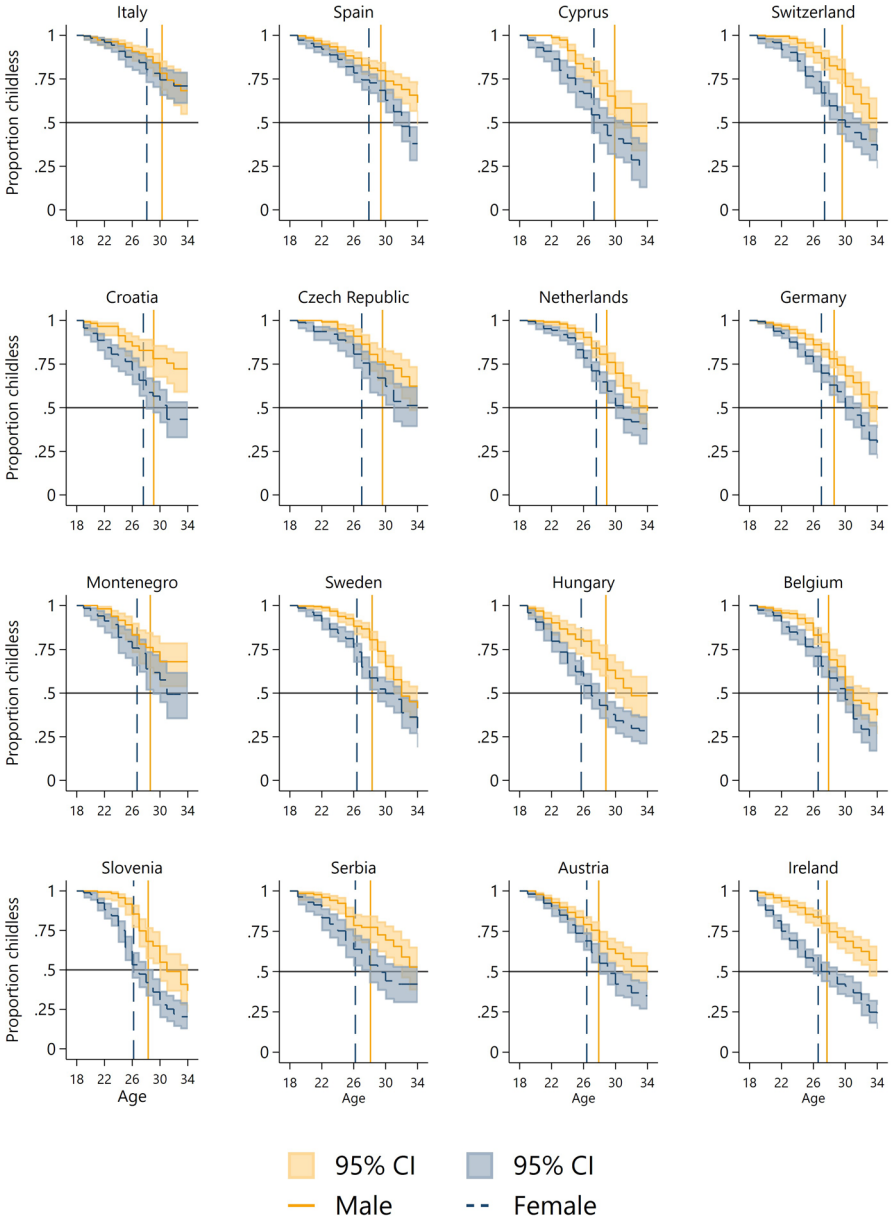
Source: *ESS* round 3 (2006) and 9 (2019). Own calculations.

Fig. 7b: Kaplan-Meier survival curves for the transition to marriage and ideal ages for marriage, by gender and country



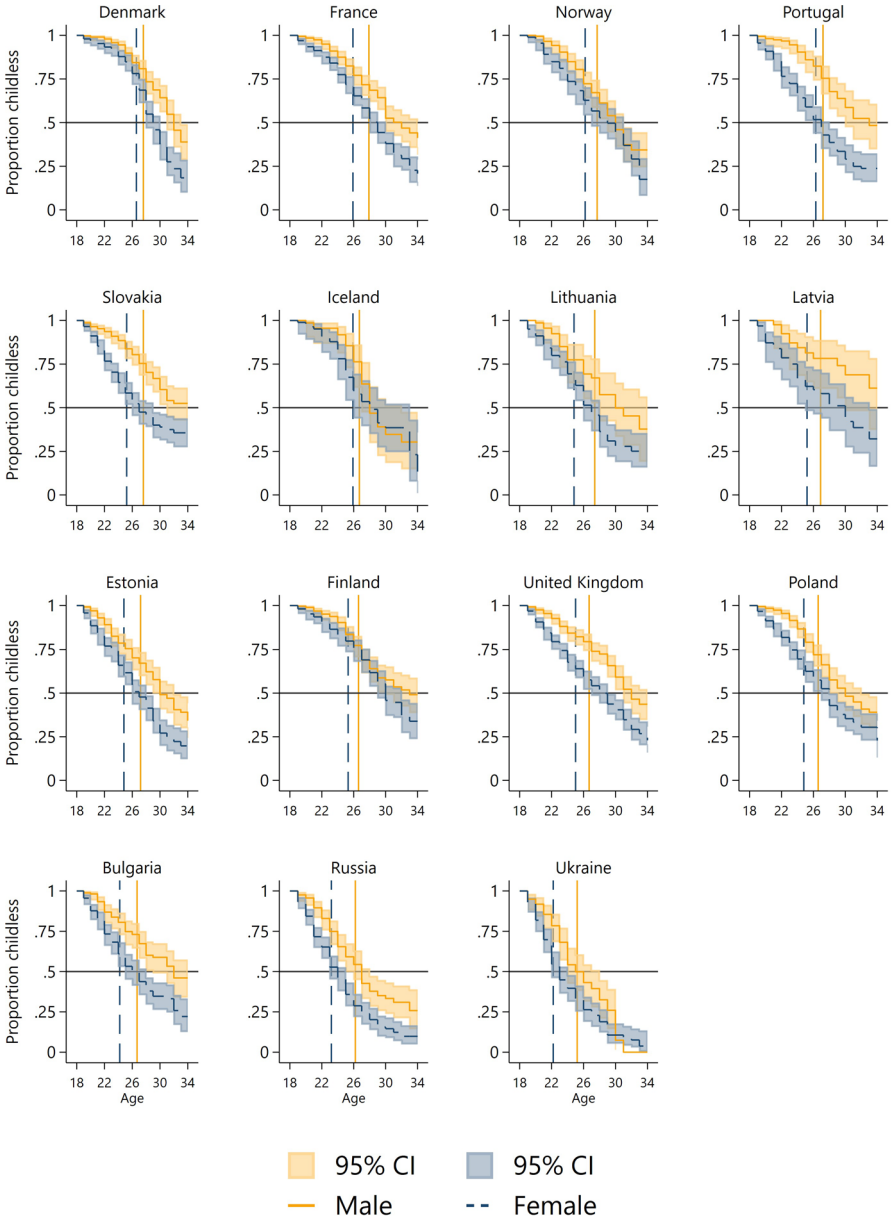
Source: *ESS* round 3 (2006) and 9 (2019). Own calculations.

Fig. 8a: Kaplan-Meier survival curves for the transition to the first child and ideal ages for first child, by gender and country



Source: *ESS* round 3 (2006) and 9 (2019). Own calculations.

Fig. 8b: Kaplan-Meier survival curves for the transition to the first child and ideal ages for first child, by gender and country



Source: *ESS* round 3 (2006) and 9 (2019). Own calculations.

age 34 hardly reaches 50 percent, making it impossible to quantify the mismatch between behaviours and ideations, especially for men. Among women, the mismatch varies: about four years in Switzerland, seven years in Sweden and Spain, and up to nine years in the United Kingdom.

Finally, the age at first birth generally exceeds the ideal age by a substantial amount, indicating that young women and men become parents much later than the age considered ideal to become mothers or fathers (Fig. 8a and 8b). In late-fertility contexts such as Italy, Spain, Croatia, and Montenegro (Fig. 8a), the proportion of young adults – especially men – who have had their first child by age 34 is below 50 percent. As a result, the survival curve does not cross the 0.5 line, making it impossible to assess the (mis-)match between behaviours and ideals for this age group. In a few countries – Slovenia, Ireland, Portugal, and Bulgaria – the ideal and actual ages to have first child align for women, though not for men. Only in Ukraine and Russia, there is no mismatch for either gender. Countries with lower ideal ages (Fig. 8b) also tend to have a higher proportion of young adults who become parents by age 34, as indicated by steeper survival curves approximating zero. However, even in a context like Finland, actual ages at first child exceed ideal ages: the median age at first child for women is 30, compared to an ideal age of 25.

5 Conclusion

The present study illustrates how ideal ages, age-graded intentions, and behaviours related to four key events in the transition to adulthood – first exit from the parental home, first cohabitation, first marriage, and parenthood – vary for women and men across European countries. It differs from previous studies in that we examine intentions to experience all four events and integrate the analysis of ideal ages with the analysis of actual ages at experiencing each event.

Consistent with prior research (e.g., *Aassve et al.* 2013b; *Billari/Liefbroer* 2010), our descriptive findings highlight the overall positive age gradient of leaving home intentions in many countries: the intention to leave home increases with age. We can add, however, that around age 25, this gradient diminishes particularly in Georgia, Russia, and Eastern European countries. Contrastingly, young adults in Norway, France, and Germany across the age range 18–34 consistently express an intention to leave the parental home – in line with the argument that societies in North–Western Europe are more individualistic, with a greater emphasis on privacy and/or autonomy (*Reher* 1998), and where institutional support for youth tends to be stronger (*Billari* 2004; *Buchmann/Kriesi* 2011). In terms of first cohabitation intentions, our findings indicate that cohabitation is an established part of young adults' life course, but the extent to which achieving this marker of the transition to adulthood is normative varies across countries. For instance, in Russia, Romania, and Georgia, young adults' life plans revolve (also) around marriage much more than in Belgium or Sweden. This is further underscored by the lower levels of acceptance of nonmarital cohabitation in some Eastern European countries. Linked to the wider demographic debate about the global spread of cohabitation (*Lesthaeghe* 2020),

our findings illustrate persistent traditional patterns in the transition to adulthood particularly in Eastern European countries. Finally, intentions to have a first child are still pervasive in young adults' life plans – contrasting, however, with the actual behaviour across countries.

Our findings on ideations demonstrate cross-national variation in ideal ages and age deadlines in the transition to adulthood, with Italy consistently displaying the highest values in the sample – i.e., the preference for the latest-late transition to adulthood – and Ukraine and Russia the lowest values – i.e., indicating a preference for the earliest-early transition. The rest of Eastern Europe presents a mixed picture with some countries, e.g., Croatia and Montenegro, showing more similarities with Southern Europe (*Sobotka/Toulemon* 2008). Nordic countries display a preference for earlier transitions, while German-speaking and Anglo-Saxon countries are in an intermediate position. Cross-national gradients in life-course events are thus evident not only in actual behaviours (*Billari/Liefbroer* 2010), but also in ideations.

Second, in all European countries young women and men experience a mismatch between the ages they consider ideal to start living with a partner and become parents and the ages at which these events are actually experienced: the age at experiencing each of these events generally exceeds the ideal age – in the case of marriage and parenthood by a substantial amount. Our results show that, while marriage and parenthood are now commonly experienced past age 30, young people in most European countries (except for Russia and Ukraine) consider it ideal to experience such transitions in the late 20s. The mismatch is largest in Southern Europe, particularly in Italy – where less than 50 percent of young adults have experienced such events by age 34. A mismatch between ideal and actual ages for marriage and parenthood appears even in Western and Northern European countries. Such ideation-realisation mismatches, well known in the fertility literature (e.g., *Beaujouan/Berghammer* 2019) but less studied for other markers of the transition to adulthood, suggest the existence of barriers and obstacles preventing youth to reach each milestone of the transition to adulthood at the age of their choosing. Current evidence suggests that financial strain is a major factor behind failed aspirations to leave the parental home (*Eurofound* 2024), while financial and housing constraints, unemployment or job insecurity, and the absence of a suitable partner contribute to underachieved fertility aspirations (*UNFPA* 2025). More research is needed on the mismatch between intentions or ideations and actual outcomes, particularly regarding the causes of these mismatches, to better inform policy.

Third, because of gender differences in the actual timing of life events, men have a greater probability than women of experiencing marriage and parenthood much later than the age considered ideal. A possible explanation for this gendered pattern in the misiming of marriage and parenthood is that societal expectations around financial stability before marriage weigh more heavily on men. If marriage – unlike non-marital cohabitation – is seen as requiring greater commitment and financial resources, and childbearing involves significant costs, men may be more inclined to delay family formation to pursue education or career goals. Meanwhile, cultural shifts also play a role: although marriage retains symbolic value among youth (*Perelli-*

Harris et al. 2014) and intended childlessness remains rare (*Miettinen/Szalma* 2014), the timing and sequencing of these life events have become increasingly flexible and gendered.

Ideal ages vary between young men and women: across all countries and for all events (apart from leaving home, for which we only have an age deadline) ideal ages are earlier for women compared to men. That men tend to experience family-related events later than women is of course well documented (e.g., *Sobotka/Toulemon* 2008); it can, at least partly, be traced back to differences in adolescent development among boys and girls (*Perry/Pauletti* 2011) and may be reinforced by age heterogamy in couple formation. Noteworthy, however, is how salient gender is as a structuring force for ideations also among young people, which contrasts somewhat with earlier conclusions about the universality of conceptions of adulthood (*Spéder et al.* 2014), but aligns with findings that intentions to leave the parental home are more strongly shaped by gendered subjective norms (*Schwanitz et al.* 2021).

Fourth, we note signs of ideal-age sequencing among the ideal ages on cohabitation, marriage, and first birth. Thus, despite the de-standardisation of the transition to adulthood (*Billari/Liefbroer* 2010) and the increased family complexity including e.g., nonmarital childbearing (*Thomson* 2014), "traditional" expectations about the ordering of family-domain events widely persist.

We acknowledge some limitations and suggest needs for additional research. We consider both data sources – the ESS and GGS – to have strong reliability and validity, making them valuable tools for cross-national comparisons. However, certain factors may still affect their precision and interpretation (*Poses et al.* 2021). For instance, some age ideals might not mean the same thing across European countries, as people in different countries may view life stages or societal expectations differently, which can impact validity. Another concern is potential bias in representativeness. Whilst our sample data were weighted – following recommendations for both the ESS and GGS to ensure that survey results reflect each participating country's population and enable reliable cross-national comparisons – we cannot entirely rule out potential representational biases for intentions or age ideals, as population benchmarks for these variables are unavailable (*Fokkema et al.* 2016). Furthermore, cross-country comparisons of intentions and behaviours were complicated by differences in the GGS data collection (see Table 1), resulting in varying country samples for each event. As a result, broader regional conclusions are based on selected "country representatives". While we acknowledge that countries within regions – such as Eastern Europe – can show considerable internal diversity, we believe that including more countries per region would likely have refined, but not fundamentally changed, the overall patterns observed across Northern, Western, Eastern, and Southern Europe.

Last, among respondents aged 18-34, ideations could be compared with actual behaviours only at the aggregate level, because a within-person comparison would have been biased by selection effects: union formation and parenthood have been postponed across birth cohorts (*Sobotka/Toulemon* 2008), leading to a small number of respondents having experienced the event by age 34 (hence providing information on the age at experiencing the event). While Kaplan-Meier estimates

allow to incorporate information on respondents who have not experienced the event by the time of the interview, future studies should use a larger age range to yield precise estimates of the age at union formation and parenthood (e.g., up to age 45, see *Ferraretto/Vitali* 2024). Disentangling the causal link between ideations/intentions and behaviour requires prospective panel data, which is currently unavailable. An alternative approach, as used by *Lazzari et al.* (2024), compares ideations with observed event ages from external sources. However, this limits the ability to examine all transition-to-adulthood events within a broad comparative framework like the ESS.

We prioritised cross-national and gender differences, but ideations and intentions for family-related transitions likely vary along other social dimensions (e.g., by cohort or educational level). For example, cohort differences might have influenced our results, as respondents' birth cohorts do not perfectly overlap across the two surveys. However, due to the relatively small sample of respondents aged 18-34 in both the ESS and GGS (see the Online Appendix), it was not possible to adequately represent cross-country, gender, and cohort differences among young adults. Our analyses therefore represent only a first step in understanding ideations and intentions as key determinants of demographic behaviour across Europe. We hope that future research will more directly exploit possible heterogeneity in ideations and intentions.

In sum, this paper provides a unique account of young adults' family demographic decision-making. Comparing intentions and ideations with actual behaviours is of paramount importance for understanding to what extent existing cross-national and gender differences in the timing of the transition to adulthood are driven by preferences and cultural norms, and to what extent they are instead linked to structural barriers that impede or postpone the realisation of one's intention. While further research is necessary to reveal the mechanisms behind the association between intentions and ideations and actual behaviour, our results clearly show that young people continue to perceive it ideal to experience residential independence, union formation, and parenthood during their 20s, yet, a series of barriers and obstacles prevent them from becoming adults at the time of their choosing.

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Appendix

Tab. A1: Policy indicators for the countries included in the study

Country	Welfare regime[a]	Public social protection expenditure (% of GDP)[b]	Government expenditure on education (% of GDP)[c]	Share living with parents or benefiting from the household income (% of youth aged 18-34)[d]	Upper age limit for child benefit that provides the family child allowances[e]	Minimum age for benefit from social assistance[f]	Share of NEET (% of youth population)[g]	Share unemployed (% of youth labour force)[h]
Norway	Social-democratic	21.6	7.2	20.3	-	-	5.8	9.5
Sweden	Social-democratic	25.9	7.1	23.8	Until finishing school	18	7.3	21.7
Denmark	Social-democratic	27.6	7.7	17.7	-	-	6.5	11.9
Finland	Social-democratic	27.7	6.4	20.3	-	15	8.6	20.1
Iceland	Social-democratic	15.8	7.3	35.7	-	-	5.8	9.8
Austria	Corporatist	26.4	5.4	44.0	25	18	10.9	10.1
Belgium	Corporatist	27.4	6.4	43.2	25	16	10.8	19.6
Germany	Corporatist	24.4	4.8	42.1	25	-	7.6	9.0
France	Corporatist	29.9	5.4	34.7	-	-	12.7	22.4
Netherlands	Corporatist	21.4	5.3	34.5	18	-	4.7	9.9
Switzerland	Corporatist	18.1	4.9	39.7	-	-	8.4	8.2
United Kingdom	Liberal	21.0	5.3	29.4	20	-	14.0	15.7
Ireland	Liberal	18.4	4.6	50.5	-	-	13.3	18.2
Bulgaria	Postcommunist European	15.6	4.0	60.4	20	-	18.7	18.6
Croatia	Postcommunist Conservative	19.4	4.1	45.9	21	-	15.1	31.0
Czechia	Postcommunist European	18.8	4.3	50.3	26	18	7.8	13.2
Estonia	Former-USSR	15.7	5.1	41.3	19	18	10.8	16.8
Georgia	Post-Soviet	8.7	3.1	-	-	-	29.4	34.8

Tab. A1: Continuation

Country	Welfare regime[a]	Public social protection expenditure (% of GDP)[b]	Government expenditure on education (% of GDP)[c]	Share living with parents or benefiting from the household income (% of youth aged 18-34)[d]	Upper age limit for child benefit that provides the family child allowances[e]	Minimum age for benefit from social assistance[f]	Share of NEET (% of youth population)[g]	Share unemployed (% of youth labour force)[h]
Hungary	Postcommunist European	21.1	4.7	56.6	20	-	12.3	18.8
Lithuania	Former-USSR	15.0	4.5	51.4	18	-	9.9	18.5
Latvia	Former-USSR	14.5	5.0	52.7	20	15	12.1	19.4
Poland	Postcommunist European	19.4	4.9	59.6	24	18	12.2	20.5
Romania	Postcommunist Conservative	14.5	3.4	45.3	Until finishing school	14	17.4	20.9
Russia	Post-Soviet	14.7	4.1	-	-	-	13.3	15.9
Serbia	Postcommunist Conservative	21.6	4.0	68.1	-	-	19.3	40.0
Slovenia	Postcommunist European	22.5	5.2	63.5	26	26	7.8	14.3
Slovakia	Postcommunist European	17.5	3.9	69.5	25	18	12.9	25.0
Ukraine	Post-Soviet	23.7	5.9	-	-	-	18.7	18.0
Cyprus	Mediterranean	19.3	6.3	54.3	21	-	13.6	20.7
Italy	Mediterranean	26.8	4.2	64.2	26	-	19.2	30.7
Montenegro	Postcommunist Conservative	-	-	69.9	-	-	18.4	37.4
Portugal	Mediterranean	23.4	5.0	61.5	24	-	10.8	24.6
Spain	Mediterranean	24.2	4.4	56.8	21	-	14.1	37.5

Tab. A1: Continuation

Note: '–' indicates no information is available for the respective measure.

Source:

[a] *Esping-Andersen* 1990; *Fenger* 2007; *Ferrera* 1996;

[b + c] Generations and Gender Contextual Database. Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (distributor). Retrieved from: https://www.ggp-i.org/data/ggp-contextual-database/ on 25/3/2025;

[d] Eurostat (ilc_lvps08), average 2005-2021;

[e + f] Eurofound. Retrieved from: https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2017/mapping-minimum-age-requirements-concerning-rights-child-eu; [g] World Bank (SL.UEM.NEET.ME.ZS), average 2005-2021; h World Bank (SL.UEM.1524.ZS), average 2005-2021

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