

Dilemmas for young people in Bulgaria

**VALUE ORIENTATIONS AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCES
IN THE ATTITUDES TOWARD VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS
AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN BULGARIA**

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Abstract: The aim of the study is to explore the dynamics of social-demographic differences between young adults in Bulgaria who have negative attitudes, remain neutral toward or accept voluntary childlessness. The analysis is based on data from the European Social Survey (Bulgarian dataset) conducted in 2006 and 2018. A descriptive trend analysis is applied to reveal the dynamics of the attitudes toward male or female voluntary childlessness among different socio-demographic groups. The analysis reveals an increasing trend of neutrality and a slight increase in the affirmative attitudes toward VC among different socio-demographic groups. Applied correlation analysis shows a significant association between the attitudes toward voluntary childlessness, non-marital unions and parenthood in such unions, divorce of parents with small children and mothers' early return to work. The present study also outlines the differences in the general value orientations of the individuals who reject, remain neutral or accept voluntary childlessness. Young adults with neutral or affirmative attitudes support to a lesser degree the traditional norms related to modesty, obedience, and respect for the traditional authorities, and strongly emphasize freedom of self-expression, independence, joy and excitement in life, and trust in others.

Keywords: voluntary childlessness, parenthood, young adults, value orientations; European Social Survey

1. Introduction

The recent situation in Bulgaria is characterized by substantial changes in the socio-demographic profile of the young generations who have entered reproductive life since 1990. These changes are associated with decreasing fertility, postponement of life course transitions, including parenthood and family formation. The trend of postponement of family formation is reflected in the increasing mean age at birth of first child, which reached 27.8 years in 2019¹ as well as the increasing mean age of first marriage, which, in that year, was 27.8 years for women and 31 years for men². In parallel with these trends, non-marital cohabitation became an alternative family form for growing proportions of young people. In 2019 58.4% of the newborn

children in the country were born outside marriage, and prevailing shares of children were raised in non-marital unions³.

Studies find a clash between traditionalism and post-modern value orientations in the recent young generations in the Central and Eastern European countries (Leccardi et al., 2012). A 2018 study on the perception of young people in Bulgaria regarding marriage and parenthood reveals that, for 75% of the surveyed young men and for 87% of women, the perception of a happy life includes having a family and children (Mitev et al., 2019). Yet, on a behavioral level the recent young generations are postponing family formation because of their higher educational and professional aspirations, the difficulties they have in establishing an independent household, higher emigration intentions and higher appreciation of leisure activities (Tomev & Daskalova, 2004; Mitev & Kovatcheva, 2014, Leccardi et al., 2011). A study conducted by Mitev and Kovatcheva reveals that in the perception of young people, voluntary childlessness (VC) has been very rarely considered a personal choice (Mitev & Kovatcheva, 2014: 92). In the perception of young people, parenthood is associated with financial stability and the ability to provide for family and children even when these expectations lead to a postponement of parenthood at a later than the “socially desirable” age (ibid.: 93). Similar to other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, the ambiguity and the discrepancies in the perceptions and reproductive behaviors of young people in Bulgaria suggest deep transformations in their values and preferences, associated with a higher appreciation of freedom, independence, self-realization, rejection of authorities, as post-materialist value orientations, and a simultaneous stability of fundamental values such as family and parenthood which make the “child-free lifestyle”, as a deliberate denial of parenthood, a very rarely chosen life strategy. The observed ambiguities in young adults’ familistic values and the behavioral discrepancies reiterate the question, posed by Szalma and Takács in their paper from 2018, whether voluntary childlessness occurs in Bulgaria, what the socio-demographic differences are among young adults who reject, remain neutral or accept VC, and what their value orientations are on key aspects of life (Szalma & Takács, 2018). The present study aims to reflect on these questions and provide an overview of the dynamics of the attitudes of different social groups of young adults in this country towards VC. Following Levinson’s theory of adult development (Levinson, 1978), young adulthood is defined as the age range 17–45 years.

2. Data and methods

The empirical analysis is based on the Bulgarian sub-sample of the European Social Survey (ESS), round 3 (2006)⁴ and round 9 (2018)⁵, and includes 1,179 respondents aged 15–45 years. The share of women was 57% in ESS-2006 and 52% in ESS-2018. The respondents were almost equally distributed by ten-year age groups in both waves. Of all respondents, 41% had no children in ESS-2006 vs. 50% in ESS-2018. The question that registers the attitudes towards female or male VC is “How much do you approve or disapprove if a woman/a man chooses never to have children?”. The respondents were randomly selected in two groups. The first group responded to a set of questions on women’s life cycle, including the issue of VC, and the second group responded to similar questions about men’s life course.

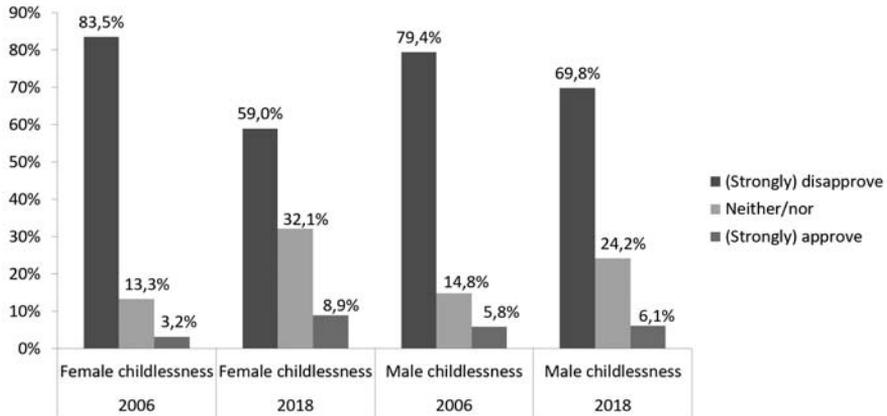
In order to study the dynamics of the attitudes toward male or female VC among different social groups of young adults, we apply descriptive trend analysis. The differentiating effect of various socio-demographic characteristics on these attitudes is studied by means of regression analysis. The association between the attitudes regarding male or female VC and other family-related views (such as the attitudes toward consensual unions, non-marital fertility, divorce and labor market participation of women and men with small children) is explored by the means of correlation analysis. In the final part of the study, we use variance analysis in order to focus on the differences in the perceptions of trust in society and some general values of the individuals who support, remain neutral, or disapprove of male or female VC.

3. Results

3.1. Trends in the attitudes toward male or female VC among young adults in Bulgaria

The comparison between the two waves of ESS (2006 and 2018) outlines a clear shift in the attitudes toward male or female VC in a direction of increasing neutrality, which is mainly related to a decline of the prevailing negative attitudes (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Attitudes toward voluntary childlessness of the respondents aged 15–45 years*



Source: Bulgarian data from the European Social Survey (2006 and 2018)

The dynamics of the affirmative attitudes is more pronounced with respect to female VC. In 2006 13.3% of the respondents aged 15–45 years expressed neutral attitudes regarding the decision of a woman not to have children, while in 2018 the share of the neutral respondents increased to 32.1%. A similar trend is observed in regard to male VC. In 2006 14.8% of the survey participants expressed neutral attitudes, while in 2018 their share increased to 24.2%.

Regarding the dynamics of attitudes toward VC, we see that, while affirmative attitudes are rarely expressed by the younger generations in Bulgaria, an increasing trend is observed, mainly with respect to female VC. In 2006 3.2% of the respondents claimed they would approve a woman’s decision not to have children, while in 2018 this share almost tripled (8.9%). The dynamics of the affirmative attitudes toward male VC is less pronounced, yet observable: this attitude was shared by 5.8% in 2006 vs. 6.1% in 2018.

Descriptive trend analysis reveals strong **gender** differences in the attitudes toward male or female VC. Changes in the attitudes toward female VC are greater among women; they consist in a growing percentage of women who express affirmative attitudes toward female VC across the waves of ESS (4.7% in 2006 and 9.6% in 2018 (table 1)).

Table 1. Attitudes toward voluntary childlessness of respondents aged 15–45 years, by gender, age and education. (%)

		Female childlessness				Male childlessness			
Year	Gender of respondent								
		(Strongly) disapprove	Neither/nor	(Strongly) approve	Total	(Strongly) disapprove	Neither/nor	(Strongly) approve	Total
2006	Man	82.4%	16.5%	11.0%	100%	77.9%	16.3%	5.8%	100%
2018	Man	58.8%	33.1%	8.1%	100%	58.5%	33.8%	7.7%	100%
2006	Woman	84.3%	11.0%	4.7%	100%	80.4%	13.7%	5.9%	100%
2018	Woman	59.3%	31.1%	9.6%	100%	79.4%	14.8%	5.8%	100%
		Age group							
2006	15–25 years	87.1%	11.3%	1.6%	100%	80.8%	15.4%	3.8%	100%
2018	15–25 years	57.1%	34.5%	8.3%	100%	65.3%	29.3%	5.3%	100%
2006	26–35 years	87.7%	11.0%	1.4%	100%	78.3%	13.3%	8.4%	100%
2018	26–35 years	61.7%	30.9%	7.4%	100%	64.0%	32.0%	4.0%	100%
2006	36–45 years	77.1%	16.9%	6.0%	100%	79.2%	15.6%	5.2%	100%
2018	36–45 years	58.7%	31.3%	10.0%	100%	58.6%	33.6%	7.9%	100%
		Education of respondent							
2006	Primary or lower	90.0%	10.0%	0.0%	100%	74.0%	18.0%	8.0%	100%
2018	Primary or lower	65.1%	26.7%	8.1%	100%	62.1%	30.3%	7.6%	100%
2006	Secondary	85.6%	10.6%	3.8%	100%	80.8%	13.6%	5.6%	100%
2018	Secondary	59.2%	32.5%	8.3%	100%	55.5%	36.8%	7.7%	100%
2006	Tertiary	74.5%	23.4%	2.1%	100%	77.8%	22.2%	0.0%	100%
2018	Tertiary	51.4%	37.5%	11.1%	100%	72.8%	24.7%	2.5%	100%

Source: Bulgarian data from the European Social Survey (2006 and 2018)

As for male VC, the increase of affirmative attitudes is stronger among men, while among women the share of those who approved male VC remains similar across the two ESS waves. In 2006 5.8% of the male respondents reported that they would approve if a man decides not to have children. In 2018 their share increased to 7.7%. Almost 6.0% of women had similar attitudes in the two waves of the survey. A strong shift over time is observed among the men with a neutral attitude toward male VC.

Across **age groups**, the dynamics in the attitudes toward female VC is stronger among the people aged 15–25 and 26–35 years and slightly less pronounced among the people aged 36–45 years. A strong decline is observed in the denial of female VC

among the respondents in the most active demographic ages (up to 35 years). Among the age groups 15–25 and 26–35 years the shares of the respondents with neutral attitudes increased from 11% to 31–35% across the two waves of ESS. The percentage of respondents with affirmative attitudes increased from 1–2% in 2006 to 7–8% in 2018. Similar trends occurred in the attitudes of the individuals aged 36–45 years. The share of the people with neutral attitudes doubled from 16.9% in 2006 to 31.3% in 2018, as well as the percentage of respondents with affirmative attitudes (from 6.0% to 10.0%).

In regard to male VC, an increase in the shares of respondents with affirmative attitudes occurs among the people aged 15–25 and 36–45 years. In these age groups, the percentage slightly increased from 3.8% to 5.3% (15–25 years old) and from 5.2% to 7.9% (36–45 years old). In all age groups the prevailing trend is related to a substantial increase in the shares of people with neutral attitudes, which reached almost one third of the respondents in all age groups in the last wave of the ESS survey.

The descriptive trend analysis reveals also that the highest acceptance of female VC is observed among the respondents with **tertiary education**. In this educational group, the percentage of the individuals who had negative attitudes declined from 74.5% to 51.4% between the two waves of ESS. The share of people with neutral attitudes also decreased to 37.5% in 2018. Strong dynamics is observed also in the share of people with affirmative attitudes toward female VC. Among people with tertiary education, 2.1% in 2006 and 11.1% in 2018 had affirmative attitudes. Among the individuals with lower than secondary education the acceptance grew from 0% in 2006 to 8.1% in 2018.

In regard to male VC, stronger changes over time were observed in the attitudes of the people with tertiary and secondary education. The share of the respondents with tertiary education who had neutral attitudes toward male VC increased from 18.0% to 30.3% between the two waves of ESS. Among the highly educated respondents there were no changes in the share of people with affirmative attitudes (8.0% in 2006 and 7.6% in 2018). Among the respondents with secondary education a strong increase over time was observed among those with neutral attitudes whose share increased from 13.6% in 2006 to 36.8% in 2018.

Dynamics is observed also in the attitudes about female VC by **marital status** of the respondents (table 2). In the group of the married respondents the attitudinal neutrality about female VC increased from 8.6% in 2006 to 29.3% in 2018, while the percentage of people with affirmative attitudes remained approximately 6% across the two waves of ESS. Strong changes were also recorded in the groups of never married individuals and those who had lost a partner (separated, divorced or widowed). In the group of single respondents, the percentage of the people with neutral attitudes doubled from 16.1% in 2006 to 34.7% in 2018. The share of people with affirmative attitudes also increased – from 1.1% in 2006 to 10.6% in 2018.

Table 2. Attitudes toward voluntary childlessness of the respondents aged 15–45 years by marital status, place of residence, ethnic minority status and religiosity

		Female childlessness				Male childlessness			
Legal marital status of the respondent									
2006	Married	85.7%	8.6%	5.7%	100%	83.7%	13.8%	2.4%	100%
2018	Married	64.6%	29.3%	6.1%	100%	66.9%	27.1%	5.9%	100%
2006	Divorced/separated/ widowed	76.5%	23.5%	0.0%	100%	75.5%	20.3%	4.1%	100%
2018	Divorced/separated/ widowed	75.0%	18.8%	6.3%	100%	72.7%	13.6%	13.6%	100%
2006	Never married	82.8%	16.1%	1.1%	100%	62.5%	31.3%	6.3%	100%
2018	Never married	54.8%	34.7%	10.6%	100%	68.4%	21.1%	10.5%	100%
Number of children									
2006	No children	77.6%	21.2%	1.2%	100%	75.0%	16.3%	8.7%	100%
2018	No children	53.0%	36.7%	10.2%	100%	54.0%	38.1%	7.9%	100%
2006	One child	61.4%	31.5%	7.2%	100%	63.5%	28.3%	8.3%	100%
2018	One child	79.3%	13.8%	6.9%	100%	79.1%	17.9%	3.0%	100%
2006	Two or more children	92.9%	4.3%	2.9%	100%	86.6%	8.5%	4.9%	100%
2018	Two or more children	66.2%	27.3%	6.5%	100%	71.0%	25.8%	3.2%	100%
Place of residence									
2006	Big city	78.2%	18.2%	3.6%	100%	76.8%	16.2%	7.0%	100%
2018	Big city	59.5%	33.6%	6.9%	100%	50.0%	44.9%	5.1%	100%
2006	Town	87.7%	12.3%	0.0%	100%	73.7%	17.5%	8.8%	100%
2018	Town	55.4%	32.7%	11.9%	100%	70.5%	21.6%	8.0%	100%
2006	Village	90.2%	3.9%	5.9%	100%	91.4%	8.6%	0.0%	100%
2018	Village	62.2%	29.6%	8.2%	100%	67.7%	26.0%	6.3%	100%
Ethnic minority status									
2006	Bulgarian ethnicity	97.4%	0.0%	2.6%	100%	86.0%	12.3%	1.8%	100%
2018	Bulgarian ethnicity	70.8%	23.1%	6.2%	100%	78.0%	18.0%	4.0%	100%
2006	Non-Bulgarian ethnicity	80.5%	16.1%	3.4%	100%	77.3%	15.5%	7.2%	100%
2018	Non-Bulgarian ethnicity	55.7%	34.6%	9.8%	100%	58.1%	35.1%	6.9%	100%
Religiosity									
2006	Not religious	82.7%	14.7%	2.6%	100%	82.0%	13.2%	4.8%	100%
2018	Not religious	55.3%	34.5%	10.2%	100%	59.8%	32.1%	8.1%	100%
2006	Religious	86.2%	8.6%	5.2%	100%	71.6%	19.4%	9.0%	100%
2018	Religious	71.2%	24.7%	4.1%	100%	68.8%	31.3%	0.0%	100%

Source: Bulgarian data from the European Social Survey (2006 and 2018)

In regard to male VC, the results reveal an increase in the share of married respondents with neutral and affirmative attitudes, who became 27.1% (people with neutral attitudes) and 5.9% (people with affirmative attitudes) in 2018. Among the respondents who had lost a partner and the singles, the percentages of people with affirmative attitudes increased to 13.6% (lost partner) and 10.5% (singles) in 2018.

Dynamic changes in the attitudes toward female VC are observed also among people of different parity status (**number of children**). The strongest changes occurred in the group of childless respondents, who increasingly became more neutral or affirmative toward female VC. The group of childless respondents with neutral attitudes increased from 21.2% in 2006 to 36.7% in 2018. Those with affirmative attitudes increased from 1.2% to 10.2% in 2018. In regard to male VC in the group of people without children neutrality increased from 16.3% to 38.1%, while the share of people with affirmative attitudes remained 8–9% in both waves of ESS.

The results reveal dynamic changes in the attitudes toward female VC among people of different **ethnic minority status**. In 2006 the disapproval of female VC was observed among 97.4% of the respondents of Bulgarian ethnicity. In the same group 2.6% expressed affirmative attitudes in the same year. In 2018, neutrality increased to 23.1% and acceptance doubled from 2.6% to 6.2%. Neutrality among people from ethnic minorities increased from 16.1% to 34.6%; the share of respondents with affirmative attitudes also grew – from 3.4% in 2006 to 9.8% in 2018.

In 2006 the highest percentage of people who disapproved of male VC (86.0%) was observed among the ethnic Bulgarians; the number declined to 78.0% in 2018. Neutrality increased among people both of Bulgarian and non-Bulgarian ethnic background.

The dynamics of the attitudes regarding female VC shows also strong changes according to the **place of residence** of the respondents. The most dynamic changes occurred among people living in small towns and villages. Among the residents of small towns the shares of people with neutral attitudes increased from 12.3% to 32.7% in 2018, while the share of those with affirmative attitudes increased from 0% in 2006 to 11.9% in 2018.

Strong dynamics related to the place of residence is present also in the attitudes toward male VC. In the big cities the shares of people with neutral attitudes increased from 16.2% in 2006 to 44.9% in 2018, while the percentages of the respondents with affirmative attitudes declined from 7.0% to 5.1%. In the small towns changes in the attitudes were present mainly in the group of people with neutral attitudes who increased from 17.5% in 2006 to 21.6% in 2018.

Among the **religious people** the shares of those with negative attitudes toward female VC decreased from 86.2% in 2006 to 71.2% in 2018. The changes were mainly due to an increase of attitudinal neutrality toward female VC within this group (8.6% in 2006 and 24.7% in 2018) and a slight decrease in acceptance (from 5.2% to 4.1%).

With regard to male VC in 2006, the percentage of people who disapproved of male VC was highest among non-religious people (82.0%). It decreased to 59.8% in 2018. This change was mainly related to a strong increase in the group of people with neutral attitudes (13.2% in 2006 and 32.1% in 2018).

The results obtained from the multinomial regression model presented in table 3 reveal a significant change in the attitudes toward VC between the two ESS waves (Table 3).

Table 3. *Multinomial logistic regression of the attitudes toward voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria.*

Factors	A model with main effects			
	Disapprove vs. Neutral (ref.)		Approve vs. Neutral (ref.)	
	RRR	Sig.	RRR	Sig.
Split ballot				
Woman's voluntary childlessness (ref.)	1		1	
Man's voluntary childlessness	0.95		0.96	
Year				
2006 (ref.)	1		1	
2018	0.35	***	0.68	
Gender				
Man (ref.)	1		1	
Woman	1.08		1.64	
Age of respondent				
15–25 y.o. (ref.)	1		1	
26–35 y.o.	0.66		1.24	
36–45 y.o.	0.40	***	1.69	
Marital status				
Never married (ref.)	1		1	
Divorced/separated/widowed	1.31		0.87	
Married	1.41		0.80	

Number of children				
No children (ref.)	1		1	
One child	1.57	*	0.92	
Two or more children	2.22	**	0.77	
Education				
Tertiary (ref.)	1		1	
Secondary	1.16		1.11	
Primary or lower	1.28		0.91	
Economic status				
In paid work (ref.)	1		1	
Unemployed	1.07		0.70	
Economically inactive	0.79		0.91	
Ethnicity				
Bulgarian (ref.)	1		1	
Non-Bulgarian	1.80	**	1.33	
Religiosity	0.97		0.90	*
Constant	5.42	***	0.33	*

Notes: Only respondents aged 15–45 years are included in the analysis. The number of observations is 1,040. Log likelihood is -744.62.; Sig.: *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$
Source: European Social Survey, round 3 (2006) and round 9 (2018).

Compared with 2006 (the reference year), in 2018 the respondents were less likely to disapprove of VC than to be neutral (reference category). People aged 36–45 years were also less likely to disapprove of voluntary childlessness than to be neutral, compared with the youngest age group (15–25 years – reference category). The older age group includes individuals that have already experienced parenthood, and their general orientations with regard to reproduction can become more relaxed as concerns other people’s reproduction decisions, including the decision to remain childless. Increasing acceptance among older age groups can also be interpreted as a response to the recently growing socio-economic instability and uncertainty of life in Bulgarian society. The results obtained from the model show also that being a parent is associated with a higher likelihood of disapproval of VC. The personal experience of parenthood reaffirms the value of children and the parenting status of an individual. Belonging to an ethnic minority group is associated with significantly higher likelihood of disapproval of VC. Higher religiosity is negatively associated with the acceptance of VC.

3.2. Association between attitudes toward male or female voluntary childlessness and other family-related values

As a next step in the study, correlation analysis is applied to reveal the association between the attitudes toward male or female VC and other family-related values such as dis/approval of cohabitations, childbearing in non-marital unions, dis/approval if a woman/man works and has a fulltime job when the child is below 3 years of age as well as dis/approval if a woman/man gets divorced when children are aged under 12 years (table 4 and 5).

Table 4. Pearson correlations of the attitudes toward female voluntary childlessness, parenthood and marriage.

	Approve if a woman chooses never to have children	
	2006	2018
Approve if a woman chooses never to have children	1	1
Approve if a woman lives with a partner she is not married to	0.029	0.111
Approve if a woman has a child with a partner she is not married to	0.043	0.105
Approve if a woman has a full-time job when children are aged under 3	0.195**	0.197**
Approve if a woman gets divorced when children are aged under 12	0.204**	0.399**

Note: Only respondents aged 15–45 years are included in the analysis. Sig. : *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$

Source: European Social Survey, round 3 (2006) and round 9 (2018)

The responses regarding female VC presented in table 4 reveal a significant positive correlation between female VC attitudes and the acceptance of a woman's decision to have a full-time job when the child is aged below 3 years, or to get a divorce when children are aged below 12 years. The strength of the correlation increases over time, especially with regard to the acceptance of divorce of a woman with small children.

The attitudes toward male VC are positively correlated with the acceptance of a man's non-marital cohabitation, parenthood in non-marital union and the attitudes towards a man with children aged under 12, to get divorced (Table 5).

Table 5. *Pearson correlations of the attitudes toward male voluntary childlessness, parenthood and marriage.*

	Approve if a man chooses never to have children	
	2006	2018
Approve if a man chooses never to have children	1	1
Approve if a man lives with a partner he is not married to	0.146*	0.179**
Approve if a man has a child with a partner he is not married to	0.136*	0.114*
Approve if a man has a full-time job when children are aged under 3	-0.067	0.027
Approve if a man gets divorced when children are aged under 12	0.180**	0.312**

Notes: (1) Only respondents aged 15–45 years are included in the analysis. Sig. : *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$

Source: Bulgarian dataset of European Social Survey, round 3 (2006) and round 9 (2018)

The correlations strengthen over time, except the correlation with non-marital parenthood, which slightly decreases but still remains significant. In the case of the return to a full-time job when the child is aged below 3 years, the correlation is not statistically significant, because taking paternity leave has been rarely practiced in Bulgaria (Dimitrova et al., 2021). This result shows also the opinion that a man should be the main financial provider of the family, especially when a couple has a small child, is recently very strongly supported in Bulgarian society.

3.3. General value orientations and perceptions of trust in society among people with negative, neutral or affirmative attitudes toward male or female voluntary childlessness

As a next step of the analysis, we apply analysis of variance to outline the differences between the general value orientations of young adults in Bulgaria who have negative, neutral or affirmative attitudes toward male or female VC. People who disapproved of female VC expressed significantly higher support for the statement that the government has to be strong and ensure safety (table 6 and 7).

Table 6. ANOVA test of differences in the general value orientations of respondents aged 15–45 years who disapprove, are neutral towards, or approve female voluntary childlessness.

	Female VC - ESS 2006	Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)
Important that government is strong and ensures safety	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-0.023
		Approve	-1.282**
	Neither/ nor	Disapprove	0.023
		Approve	-1.259
	Approve	Disapprove	1.282**
		Neither/ nor	1.259*
Important to get respect from others	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	0.863*
		Approve	0.478
	Neither/ nor	Disapprove	-0.863*
		Approve	-0.385
	Approve	Disapprove	-0.478
		Neither/ nor	0.385
Most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-1.978*
		Approve	1.164
	Neither/ nor	Disapprove	1.978*
		Approve	3.143**
	Approve	Disapprove	-1.164
		Neither/ nor	-3.143**
Most people try to take advantage of you or try to be fair	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-2.014**
		Approve	0.093
	Neither/ nor	Disapprove	2.014**
		Approve	2.107
	Approve	Disapprove	-0.093
		Neither/ nor	-2.107
Most of the time people are helpful or mostly looking out for themselves	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-2.238**
		Approve	1.227
	Neither/ nor	Disapprove	2.238**
		Approve	3.464**
	Approve	Disapprove	-1.227
		Neither/ nor	-3.464**

Notes: (Only respondents aged 15–45 years are included in the analysis. Sig. : *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$)

Source: Bulgarian dataset of European Social Survey (2006)

Table 7. ANOVA test of differences in the general value orientations of respondents who disapprove, are neutral toward, or approve female voluntary childlessness.

	Female VC - ESS 2018	Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)
Important that government is strong and ensures safety	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-0.371**
		Approve	-0.686**
	Neither, nor	Disapprove	0.371**
		Approve	-0.315
	Approve	Disapprove	0.686**
Important to live in secure and safe surroundings	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-0.423**
		Approve	-0.465
	Neither, nor	Disapprove	0.423**
		Approve	-0.043
	Approve	Disapprove	0.465
Important to do what is told and follow rules		Neither, nor	0.043
	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-0.414**
		Approve	-0.51
	Neither, nor	Disapprove	0.414**
		Approve	-0.096
Important to be humble and modest, not draw attention	Approve	Disapprove	0.510
		Neither/ nor	0.096
	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-0.417**
		Approve	-0.441
	Neither, nor	Disapprove	0.417**
	Approve	-0.024	
	Approve	Disapprove	0.441
	Neither/ nor	0.024	

Notes: Only respondents aged 15–45 years are included in the analysis. Sig. : *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$

Source: Bulgarian dataset of European Social Survey (2018)

The people with negative attitudes toward female VC appreciate more frequently obedience to the rules. They also support the statement that one has to do what is told compared to the respondents with neutral attitudes. They appreciate also humbleness and modesty and support more frequently the statement that it is important to live in a secure and safe surrounding. The respondents, who have neutral attitudes to female VC, express higher support to the statement that it is important to get respect from others compared to the people who disapprove of it.

In regard to trust in society, the respondents who disapprove female VC show lower trust and support less often the statement that one cannot be too careful, than people with neutral attitudes. The individuals who disapprove of female VC share more frequently the opinion that most people try to take advantage of someone, compared with the people who are neutral. More frequently than the respondents with neutral attitudes, they also emphasize that most people look out for themselves.

Table 8. ANOVA test of differences in the general value orientations of the respondents who approve, are neutral or disapprove of male voluntary childlessness.

	Male VC – ESS 2006	Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)
Important to show abilities and be admired	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-0.467*
		Approve	0.367
	Neither/ nor	Disapprove	0.467*
		Approve	0.835*
	Approve	Disapprove	-0.367
		Neither/ nor	-0.835*
Important to try new and different things in life	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	0.115
		Approve	1.094**
	Neither/ nor	Disapprove	-0.115
		Approve	0.979**
	Approve	Disapprove	-1.094**
		Neither/ nor	-0.979*
Important to have a good time	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-0.058
		Approve	0.769*
	Neither/ nor	Disapprove	0.058
		Approve	0.827
	Approve	Disapprove	-0.769*
		Neither/ nor	-0.827
Most people can be trusted, or you can't be too careful	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-1.206**
		Approve	-0.795
	Neither/ nor	Disapprove	1.206**
		Approve	0.411
	Approve	Disapprove	0.795
		Neither/ nor	-0.411
Most of the time people are helpful, or are mostly looking out for themselves	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-1.065**
		Approve	1.862**
	Neither/ nor	Disapprove	1.065**
		Approve	-0.796
	Approve	Disapprove	1.862**
		Neither/ nor	0.796

Notes: (1) Only respondents aged 15–45 years are included in the analysis. (2) Sig. : *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$

Source: Bulgarian dataset of European Social Survey (2006)

Table 9. ANOVA test of differences in the general value orientations of the respondents who approve, are neutral or disapprove of male voluntary childlessness

	Male VC – ESS 2018	Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)
Important to be humble and modest, not draw attention	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-0.357*
		Approve	-0.476
	Neither, nor	Disapprove	0.357*
		Approve	-0.118
	Approve	Disapprove	0.476
		Neither/ nor	0.118
Important to have a good time	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	0.520**
		Approve	0.399
	Neither, nor	Disapprove	-0.520**
		Approve	-0.121
	Approve	Disapprove	-0.399
		Neither/ nor	0.121
Important to make own decisions and be free	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	0.386**
		Approve	0.495
	Neither, nor	Disapprove	-0.386**
		Approve	0.109
	Approve	Disapprove	-0.495
		Neither/ nor	-0.109
Important that government is strong and ensures safety	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-0.026
		Approve	-0.823**
	Neither, nor	Disapprove	0.026
		Approve	-0.797**
	Approve	Disapprove	0.823**
		Neither/ nor	0.797**
Important to seek adventures and have an exciting life	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	0.492**
		Approve	0.627
	Neither, nor	Disapprove	-0.492**
		Approve	0.135
	Approve	Disapprove	-0.627
		Neither/ nor	-0.135
Important to seek fun and things that give pleasure	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	0.432**
		Approve	0.188
	Neither, nor	Disapprove	-0.432**
		Approve	-0.244
	Approve	Disapprove	-0.188
		Neither/ nor	0.244

Most people can be trusted, or you can't be too careful	Disapprove	Neither, nor	-0.887**
		Approve	-0.885
	Neither, nor	Disapprove	0.887**
		Approve	0.002
	Approve	Disapprove	0.885
		Neither/ nor	-0.002
Most people try to take advantage of you, or try to be fair	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-0.822**
		Approve	-0.652
	Neither, nor	Disapprove	0.822**
		Approve	0.170
	Approve	Disapprove	0.652
		Neither/ nor	-0.170
Most of the time people are helpful, or are mostly looking out for themselves	Disapprove	Neither/ nor	-0.802**
		Approve	-0.928
	Neither, nor	Disapprove	0.802**
		Approve	-0.126
	Approve	Disapprove	0.928
		Neither/ nor	0.126

Notes: (1) Only respondents aged 15–45 years are included in the analysis.

(2) Sig. : *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$

Source: Bulgarian dataset of European Social Survey (2018)

The respondents who have neutral attitudes toward male VC express higher support for the statement that it is important to show abilities and be admired than people who disapprove it (tables 7 and 8). They mention less frequently that it is important to try new and different things in life and to have a good time, than people who approve male VC. Those respondents who disapprove male VC more often state that it is important to be humble and modest, and not draw attention to oneself, than people with neutral attitudes. They less frequently emphasize the importance of making their own decisions and being free, seeking adventures and having an exciting life, having fun and seeking things that give pleasure, than respondents with neutral attitudes. The young adults who disapprove of male VC more frequently emphasize the importance of the government being strong and ensuring safety, than people with affirmative attitudes.

In regard to trust in society, the respondents who disapprove of male VC show lower support for the statement that one cannot be too careful. They emphasize more often that most people try to take advantage of someone else and that most of the

time people look out for themselves, than individuals who are neutral toward male VC.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The results of the present study reveal a clear shift in the attitudes of young adults in Bulgaria toward male and female VC, a shift going in the direction of growing neutrality and a slight increase of affirmative attitudes. In parallel with the spread of a one-child family model in the group of people with one child, the disapproval of male or female VC is strongest. This result may indicate an attitudinal acceptance of the trend of postponement of parenthood and, to a lesser extent, of ultimate childlessness.

The present study also reveals strong gender differences in the attitudes toward VC. The attitudinal changes with respect to male or female VC are stronger within the same gender groups, i.e., women express higher support for a woman's decision not to have children and men more often support the decision of a man not to become a parent. However, the study reveals also that, in general, women express higher tolerance for VC. In line with the existing studies, these results suggest the co-existence of traditional gender norms with more egalitarian orientations in the sphere of family relations and parenthood; the latter are recently more frequently expressed by women in Bulgarian society (Nenova, 2017; Stoilova & Kotzeva, 2020).

In line with a study based on ESS 2006, regarding the perceptions of VC in European countries, in Bulgaria, the advancement of age is associated with increasing neutrality regarding VC (Merz & Liefbroer, 2012). These generational differences are explained by the higher sensitivity of young people about family and parenthood. Young people are in the most active phase of their reproductive lives when family formation and childbearing occur. The expectations or the actual experience of parenthood strengthen their affirmative attitudes.

Marital and parity status also differentiate young adults' attitudes toward VC. Having a partner and being a parent is associated with lower acceptance of VC. Higher tolerance is present among the singles and the individuals who have lost their partners. The lack of stable partnership is an important cause of higher tolerance to people who choose not to be parents (Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008).

Education confirms its explanatory potential. People with higher education more often express neutral or affirmative attitudes toward VC, a trend that has been revealed in other studies as well (Hoem et al., 2006)

The study reveals important changes in the perceptions of VC among the young adults in different ethnic groups in Bulgaria. Ethnic minority status is associated with lower support to VC, but the prevailing trend among people of non-Bulgarian ethnicity is related to increasing neutrality and even acceptance. These results reveal that postponement of childbirth and the decrease of fertility among the younger adults with non-Bulgarian ethnicity are followed by an attitudinal change and acceptance of lower fertility.

Religiosity is a proxy of more traditional value orientations with regard to family and parenthood. In the group of religious young adults, neutrality toward VC increases over time; but in general, the acceptance in this group is lower than among non-religious people.

The present study highlights a strong association between the attitudes toward VC and other behavioral phenomena in Bulgarian society. The acceptance of VC is associated with higher tolerance for non-marital cohabitations, childbearing in consensual unions, early return to work of a woman with small children and higher tolerance for divorce of parents with small children. These new family-related attitudes are part of the post-materialist values that are widespread in the countries where the rate of childlessness is higher (Miettinen et al., 2015). These results indicate parallel changes in the reproductive and family attitudes and the behaviors of the recent young generations in Bulgaria (Dimitrova, 2011; Kotzeva, 2020). Interestingly, the wider use of paternity leave and the prevailing attitude that a man should be the main financial provider of the family make the association between the employment of fathers with young children and the acceptance of VC insignificant. As regards women's early return to work, the prevailing perceptions in the Bulgarian society that a woman should stay as long as possible at home and care for the small children are negatively associated with the acceptance of VC (Kotzeva et al., 2017). The prevailing traditional familistic culture in the recent Bulgarian society has important implications for the parental leave policies and the (in)formal childcare practices in this country.

The present study uncovers divergence between the general value orientations of the people who disapprove, remain neutral or accept VC. They emphasize more frequently that it is important to follow the rules, to be humble and modest and not to draw attention. They agree more often that most people try to take advantage of someone and that people mostly look out for themselves. Lower trust among people with negative attitudes toward VC may be explained by stronger materialist value orientations emphasizing strongly security and safety in society (Inglehart, 1990).

The respondents who disapprove of VC appreciate more traditional values like modesty, obedience, and respect for authorities (government) as well as safety in

society. People with neutral or affirmative attitudes more often emphasize freedom, excitement in life, fun and things that give pleasure. They express higher trust in others and emphasize less frequently safety and respect for rules and authorities. The roots of the prevailing culture of (mis)trust in the Bulgarian society are explored by Luleva (2021), who reveals that the culture of political oppression that existed in the former regime in Bulgaria has had long-lasting consequences that shape the social relationships in different spheres of the recent Bulgarian society.

In conclusion, the present study highlights that VC is a less supported reproductive choice in the views and values of the younger generations in Bulgaria, although there is a strong shift of increasing neutrality and a slight increase of the affirmative attitude. Further research is needed to reveal the degree of coincidence of the personal reproductive choices of today's younger generations in Bulgaria and the consequent development of their life course. The attitudes toward VC are associated with multiple meanings attached to this decision, i.e., as a special form of "social inability" (Berrington, 2017) to become a parent due to difficult life circumstances and an expression of higher tolerance and respect for personal reproductive choice. The present study reveals an emergence of "childfree styles" and increasing public tolerance to them. However, a comprehensive longitudinal study that combines information on reproductive behaviors and attitudes toward parenthood among the recent young generations is highly needed in order to reveal the dynamics and the interdependence between attitudes and behaviors as well as the consequence of the increasing trends of VC in Bulgaria.

Notes

- 1 Eurostat. Mean age of women at childbirth and at birth of first child: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00017/default/table?lang=en>; accessed on 13 April 2022.
- 2 Eurostat. Mean age at first marriage by sex: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-demography/demography-population-stock-balance/database>; accessed on 13 April 2022.
- 3 Eurostat. Share of live births outside marriage: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00018/default/table?lang=en>; accessed on 13 April 2022.
- 4 The survey was conducted by the Agency of Social Analyses (ASA) by Assoc. Prof. Lilia Dimiova.
- 5 This round of the survey was conducted within the national infrastructure ESS ERIC-Bulgaria, financed by the Ministry of Education and Science, as financial coordinator of the National Roadmap of Research Infrastructure 2017–2023. Bulgaria is represented in the ESS consortium by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Lilia Dimova, Director of the think tank organization Social Analysis Agency (ASA). The Bulgarian participation in ESS was ensured by the ESS ERIC-Bulgaria Consortium led by Prof. DSc. Elka Todorova and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Venelin Boshnakov. The consortium includes University of National and World Economy (UNWE), Institute of Philosophy and Sociology (IFS) at BAS, Agency for Social Analysis (ASA), Union for Economy of Bulgaria (UEB), Bulgarian Sociological Association (BSA) and National Statistical Institute (NSI).

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