

## **Single-person households in Bulgaria**

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**Abstract.** This article studies the distribution of single-person households in Bulgaria emphasizing both on the dynamics of this process in time and the main factors that have been inducing it. The main point of this article is the analysis of the structure of such single-person households by main demographic attributes such as sex, age, marital status, etc. It has attempted to find out which are the population strata generating single-person households most often and what would be the relation of the phenomenon of this type of families' large-scale occurrence to some other demographic and socio-economic parameters of modern lifestyle, which would include an international comparison with some other states in Europe and worldwide, *inter alia*. This study has used official data retrieved from the national statistics in Bulgaria and some other countries, both from censuses and specialized surveys (EU-SILC).

**Keywords:** single-person households, family models, second demographic transition, Bulgaria

### **Introduction**

The interest to single-person households has been given rise to by a number of factors. First, they have been occupying an ever-expanding share of all households in the country, and this is essential in the correct assessment of how population is managing its housing situation and its way of life. A number of economic processes, including incomes, consumption, supply of basic goods, transport, as well as demographic processes, family relations, social policy and others, are interdependent with the structure of households and with the dynamics of single-person households in particular. This is an issue, in the matter of which scientific research is still insufficient; some merely partial analyses scrutinising the share of the “single households” in the European Union (EU) have been published by Eurostat over the last decade, covering over the period 2006-2016 (Eurostat 2018; Eurostat. Statistics Explained 2018; Eurostat. Statistics Explained 2022).

At the same time, a number of studies and surveys published abroad over the last few years (Klinenberg 2013; Esteve et al. 2020; Cohen 2021), show

that living in a single-person household is already the preferred choice of a large percentage of people in developed countries, with the share of this type of household reaching nearly 50% of all households in some of the Nordic countries (Cohen 2021). This is a primordial driver of the necessity to explore the development of this process in Bulgaria in the context of the respective processes in some other states both in Europe and overseas.

A leading hypothesis of this study is that there are two fundamental reasons for such a large-scale occurrence of single-person households in modern world. On the one hand, what we see is a transition to the so-called **new family behaviour** (and, respectively, emergence and occurrence of the “new family models”<sup>1</sup>). These terms, which arose in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly mean the process of gradual transition to new forms of family other than traditional marriage. The latter is a socially regulated institution supported by a corresponding state or church (in the past<sup>2</sup>) document certifying that the couple constitutes a family and that each of the spouses acquires respective hereditary and possibly parental rights and obligations.

On the other hand, one can speak of a “new economic behaviour” of individuals, which finds expression in an increase in economic activity among them and especially among women<sup>3</sup>. This process intensified and unfolded after the 1960s and provided greater economic security, self-reliance and independence for individuals. It allows fulfilling the individual’s increased desire for financial and social autonomy. One of its results is the increasing number of women who have children but are economically active (Ortiz-Ospina, Tzvetkova 2017). In addition, professional employment is not just a means of personal expression - it is also a way of obtaining individual and social evaluation. And last but not least, it is a type of insurance against the risks of family life or cohabitation, such as widowhood, divorce, separation or unemployment of the spouse/partner (Borissova-Marinova 2011, 48-49).

The second hypothesis expressed in this study is that with the modern way of life, living in a single-person household is no longer an exception (as in traditional society), but is becoming a typical phenomenon for an increasing number of people of different ages of both sexes in Bulgaria, as in many other developed countries.

We will make an attempt to highlight certain specific features of this phenomenon in our country in connection with the spread of new, non-traditional models of family behaviour, as well as in connection with the economic prerequisites for any individual decisions in the area under consideration.

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<sup>1</sup> “The new family models” are the subject of research by a number of modern demographers and sociologists, including: D. van de Kaa - the author of the theory of the “second demographic transition” (*Europe’s second demographic transition*) (van de Kaa 1987), L. Rousset - author of the book *The uncertain family (La famille incertaine)* (Rousset 1989), M. Sugareva - author of *Mass contraception - cause or consequence of new family behaviour* (Sugareva 1993), etc.

<sup>2</sup> Before September 9, 1944, marriage was officially legalized by the Church (Dimitrova 2014; *Zakon za litsata i semeystvoto (English: Law on Persons and Family, Translator’s Note)*).

<sup>3</sup> For more details, see Borissova-Marinova 2011, 23-51.

It would be essential to go into the dynamics of those processes that have been responsible for such a rapid growth in the number of single-person households: improving life expectancy, women's emancipation, increasing number of divorces, etc. All these processes take place in different ways and at different times in different countries and cultural communities. A detailed and in-depth study of the different life paths that led to the observed phenomenon implies the development of a classification of family behaviour patterns, which is, however, beyond the scope of the present study.

**The main goal** of the research is to summarize the results of the study relative to the occurrence of single-person households in Bulgaria: i.e., how this process develops over time and what the main factors for the observed dynamics are. We will also consider the structure of single-person households according to basic demographic and socio-economic characteristics - sex, age, marital status, level of education, economic activity, etc.

### **Categories of persons living in a single-person household**

In the traditional model of family behaviour in Bulgaria, single-person households are, as a rule, mainly made up of elderly people, after retirement, remaining to live in the family home **after widowhood**. Due to the longer life expectancy of women compared to men, this group of single-person households consists mostly of women.

Another category of persons falling into a single-person household are **single parents** whose children leave the parental home. These are again mostly women. As a result of the increase in the number of single-parent families in recent years and decades (in connection with the dynamics of divorces, separations and the birth of a child by single mothers), this type of family occupies an increasingly large relative share. This group also includes fathers raising their children without a spouse (partner), who also fall into the category of single-person households once the grown-up child(ren) has left the parental family.

In the young and middle ages, single-person households are the most numerous, consisting of **persons who have left their parents** and live in an independent dwelling. These are mostly students or working young people, among whom the number of women is increasing in connection with the emancipation of women. In the past, and even today, in traditionally oriented circles of society, a woman would leave the parental family only when she gets married. In the strata of society that have adopted a more modern way of life, we increasingly see young girls and women wishing to live independently even before starting a family of their own.

Another reason for the formation of single-person households can be **the break-up of marriages** and also of cohabitations. In a sense, this type of household is a sign of a certain economic well-being and availability of financial capabilities, allowing the given person to live in a separate household.

As we have already indicated, all these possible transitions from the life path of people cannot be studied within the framework of the present study.

What we are going to show here is just one fragment of these complex processes, and it is the dynamics of single-person households. We will make an attempt to establish in which strata of the population they occur most often and how the phenomenon of their mass distribution is related to other demographic and socio-economic parameters of the modern way of life. Comparing the data with other countries in Europe and worldwide will help us to find answers to these questions.

This study used official data from the national statistics in Bulgaria and in other countries - from population censuses and specialized surveys<sup>4</sup>.

### **Families and households. The historical context**

In the past, what was typical of Bulgaria (as it is today in the countries where a family is traditional), the concepts for “family” and “household” seem not very different.

Basically, in theory, the family is defined by the so-called family relations. The latter are of two types:

- parent-child relationships;
- relations between family partners (married couple). A married couple as well as a cohabiting couple are types of married couples, the latter having to meet certain criteria.

It is possible in a family that the partners do not share a common residence, but define themselves as family partners or spouses.

The statistics in Bulgaria and in Europe do make a distinction between a *family* and a *household* according to the following criteria:

1) A family can consist of no less than two members, while a household can consist of only one person, which is a single-person household.

2) The family consists of persons who have a kinship or marriage (partnership) relationship. “Family partners” are persons who meet the definitional features adopted when defining the concept of “family”. In each country and in each census, these signs may vary more or less. For example, in our country, in the 2011 census, the members of a “family” included adult children who live together with their parents (in a joint household). In the previous census (2001), such persons were excluded from the family as a statistical unit, and counted only within the corresponding “household”.

The United Nations (UN) provides guidance and definitions on the issue of family and household types and the relationship between these concepts<sup>5</sup>, which can be used in national population censuses.

A household may consist of one or more families (*Family nuclei*) and may occasionally include persons who are not related to each other through family ties. The concept of “household” is based on common “living” (common housing and common budget), while in the case of “family”, its members must necessarily have

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<sup>4</sup> European Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC).

<sup>5</sup> For more details, please refer to UN. Demographic and Social Statistics.

relatives or marital relationships with each other (including partners - in the sense of a sexual partnership and assuming joint responsibility at birth or adoption of children). Sharing a common home is usually a distinctive feature of any family, except in cases of “split families” - owed to political, economic or other reasons.

What may also be specific of modern urbanized society is that the separation of grown-up children from their parents does not always coincide with setting-up a new family, as it used to be in the past (i.e., in the traditional society). The “new models” of family behaviour suggest that leaving the parental family nowadays takes place for reasons other than marriage. Such reasons are usually: education in another settlement (or another country); the emergence of a desire and an economic opportunity for the young person to live in his/her own home (starting a job and obtaining an independent income); the parents’ desire and ability to “separate” the grown-up son or daughter in order to make him/her independent; for other reasons.

In the history of the transition to the “new family behaviour”, young girls, if compared to boys, generally are awarded the “right” to be independent, i.e., to live in independent housing, somewhat later. If looked upon from a different angle, the increased opportunities of families in our country and their desire to give to their children opportunities to take a tertiary qualification certificate/diploma in combination with the early emancipation of women (an early increase in the economic activity of women in Bulgaria before 1989)<sup>6</sup> would boost the probability that a girl would leave her parental family after completing secondary education, with this being particularly the case of residents of smaller settlements where there are no universities.

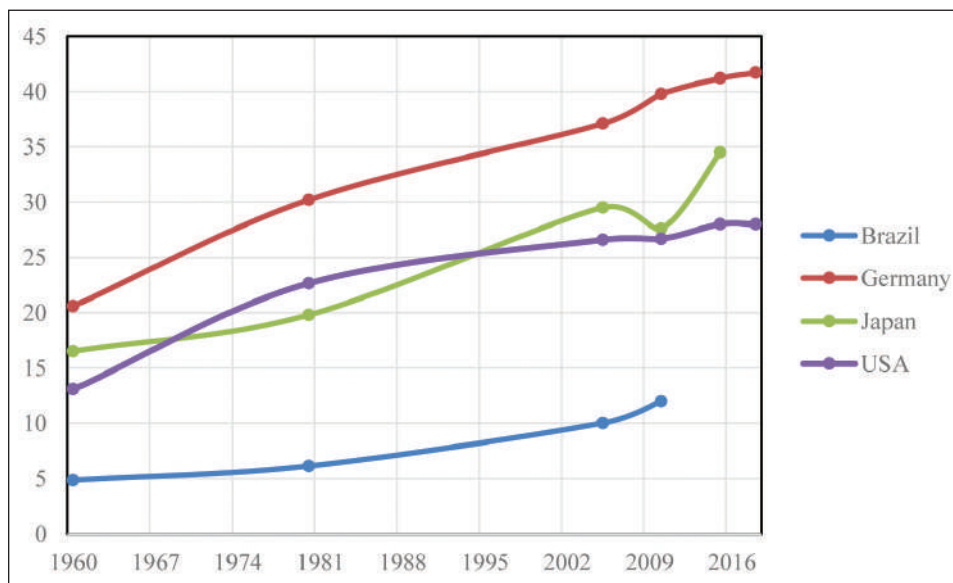
### **Dynamics of single-person households in Europe and in the world**

In the course of society’s development, the number of single-person households is starting to gradually increase, initially at a slower rate, and later - at a faster rate<sup>7</sup>. After the middle of the last century, the share of single-person households in the total number of households in industrialized nations increased and in 1960 it eventually got to as much as 20.6% in Germany and 13.1% in the USA (Fig. 1). The rate increased rapidly over the next 20 years in both nations, and in 1980 its levels were already 1.5 times higher than in 1960. By 2000, the rate of increase slowed slightly in Germany and that was until 2005, when it started to increase again, so in 2018 its value was 41.7%. After 1980, the increase in the same indicator in the USA continued at a much lower rate, but at the end of the period its value was 28.0%. In other words, for the last nearly 60 years, the indicator has doubled in Germany and the USA.

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<sup>6</sup> Here, a further factor (or an element) ought to be added, and this is the early emancipation of women and the early liberalization of abortion on demand. Eastern European women gained legal access to abortion about 20 years earlier than Western European women (see Sugareva 1993).

<sup>7</sup> A long time series for the indicator “share of single-person households in the total number of households” for individual countries in the world before 2000 can be compiled for only a few countries from the statistical data published in international databases. Such data are



**Fig. 1.** Relative share of single-person households in selected countries of the world in the period 1960-2018

Source: Ortiz-Ospina 2019.

In Japan, the indicator grew slightly in the first 20 years: from 16.5% in 1960 to 19.8% in 1980, after which the growth rate increased and in 2015 its value was also more than 2 times compared to the level of 1960 (34.5 %). The dynamics of the share of single-person households in Brazil is very similar to that described for Japan. There, however, the value of the indicator was the lowest in 1960 (4.8%) and despite the two-fold increase until 2010 (12.0%), the indicator remained at a much lower level towards the end of the period compared to the other countries under consideration. As three of the countries under consideration are in the group of developed countries (with a developed economy and social system, high income per head of the population and demographic transition completed a long time ago), and Brazil is in the group of developing countries, it can be assumed from the results obtained, that these characteristics are related to the share of single-person households and its dynamics over the last 70 years.

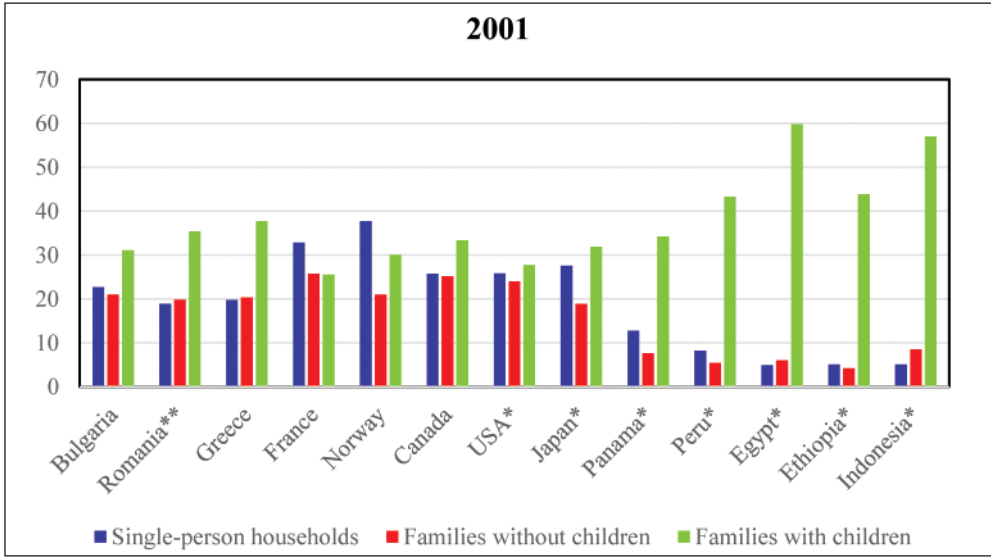
The dynamics of shares of three different types of households - single-person, families without children<sup>8</sup> and married couples with children<sup>9</sup>, in different

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available from the population censuses in Bulgaria and will be analysed in the following presentation.

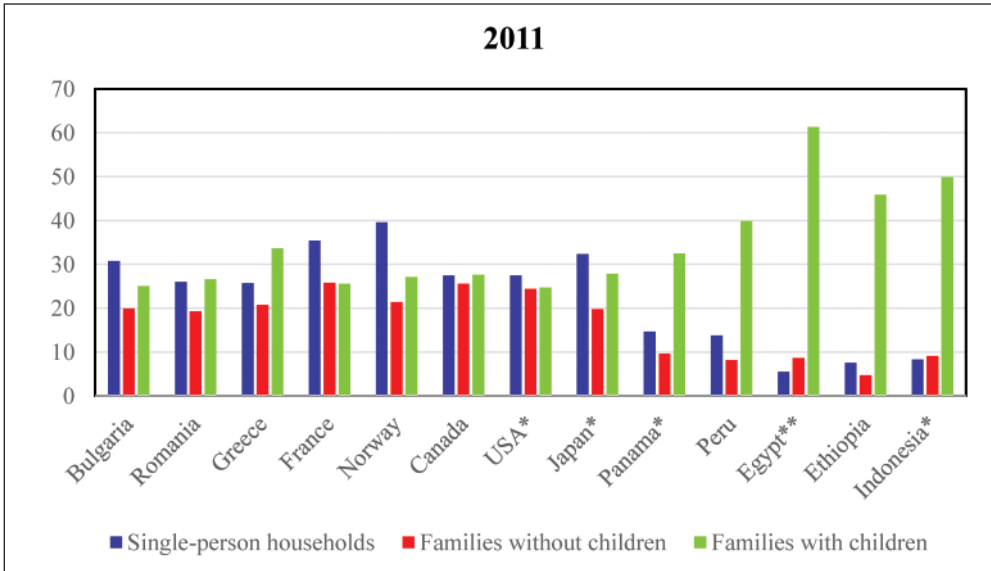
<sup>8</sup> A married couple (legally married or cohabiting) without children forming a separate household.

<sup>9</sup> A married couple (legally married or cohabiting) with their children (biological, step, adopted or foster), regardless of the children's ages.



\* Data refer to 2000.

\*\* Data refer to 2002.



\* Data refer to 2010.

\*\* Data refer to 2008.

**Fig. 2.** Relative share of single-person households, families without children and married couples with children in selected countries of the world in 2001 and 2011

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022): Database on Household Size and Composition 2022.

countries of the world is presented in Fig. 2. The international comparison includes five countries from Europe and two countries each from the other major continents and was carried out for the period 2001-2011<sup>10</sup>.

The results of the analysis can be summarized in the following conclusions. First of all, the shares of single-person households and families living alone without children are much higher in countries in Europe, North America and Japan than in selected countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America as early as 2001. The difference is more than twice in favour of the first named group. This finding remained true until the end of the first decade of the century, regardless of the growth in the share of single-person households during this period in all the countries selected for comparison. The share of families living without children has remained virtually unchanged in developed countries until 2011 and has increased slightly in other countries (from 0.5 pp in Ethiopia to 2.7 pp in Peru and Egypt).

Secondly, the proportion of married couples living with their children is much higher in Asia and Africa than in developed countries. In Panama, its value approaches that of some European countries, such as Greece (respectively 34.2 in 2001 and 32.5% in 2011 in Panama and 37.7 in 2001 and 33.7% in 2011 in Greece). In the other selected Latin American country, Peru, the indicator remains higher (43.3 and 40.0%) compared to developed countries, where its values are about 1/3 of the total number of households except for France and the US, where the indicator had fallen to about 1/4 as early as in 2001. In the rest of the studied countries of Europe and in Japan, the share of families living with their children is decreasing, and in 2011 its value in the selected developed countries was already about 1/4 of all households (excluding Greece, as already indicated).

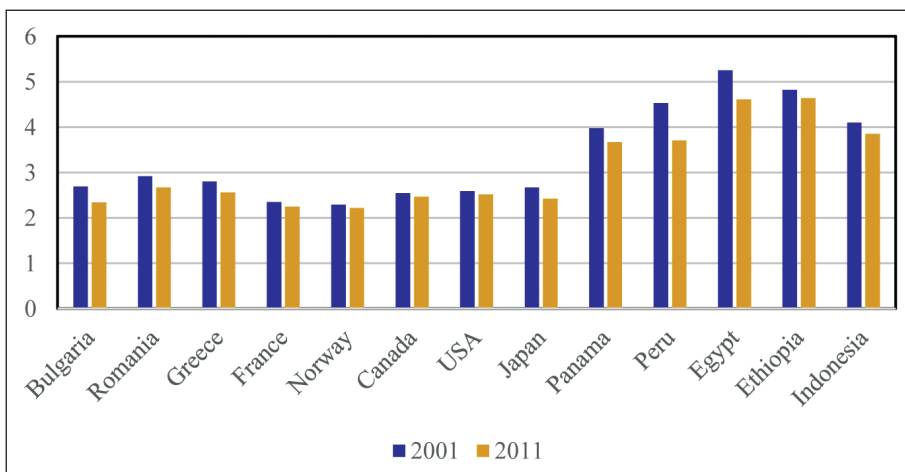
Thirdly, it should be noted that single-person households and families living without children account for about half of all types of households in the developed countries of Europe, North America and Japan. The total share of the two mentioned categories had already exceeded 40% as early as in 2001 and increased to around 50% in 2011 (in Norway, its value in 2011 was 60%, while in Romania and Greece it was 46%). In contrast, in developing countries married couples with children prevail - for example, their share in Egypt was 61.3% in 2011, and in the other selected countries it was below 50%: Indonesia: 49.9%, Ethiopia: 46%, and Peru: 40%. The share of families living with children decreased during the considered period in almost all compared countries, except for Egypt and Ethiopia, where it slightly increased (by 1.6 and 2.1 pp, respectively).

And finally, we will point out that behind the observed changes in the share of single-person households are significant movements in the structure of households in individual countries. Part of these changes are expressed in the continuously decreasing household size in all compared countries (Fig. 3).

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<sup>10</sup> The UN database provides information on the relative share of different types of households in the countries of the world in the census years since the beginning of the present century (with few exceptions). Therefore, it still lacks data from the last population census carried out around 2021.





**Fig. 3.** Average size of a household in selected countries of the world in 2001 and 2011

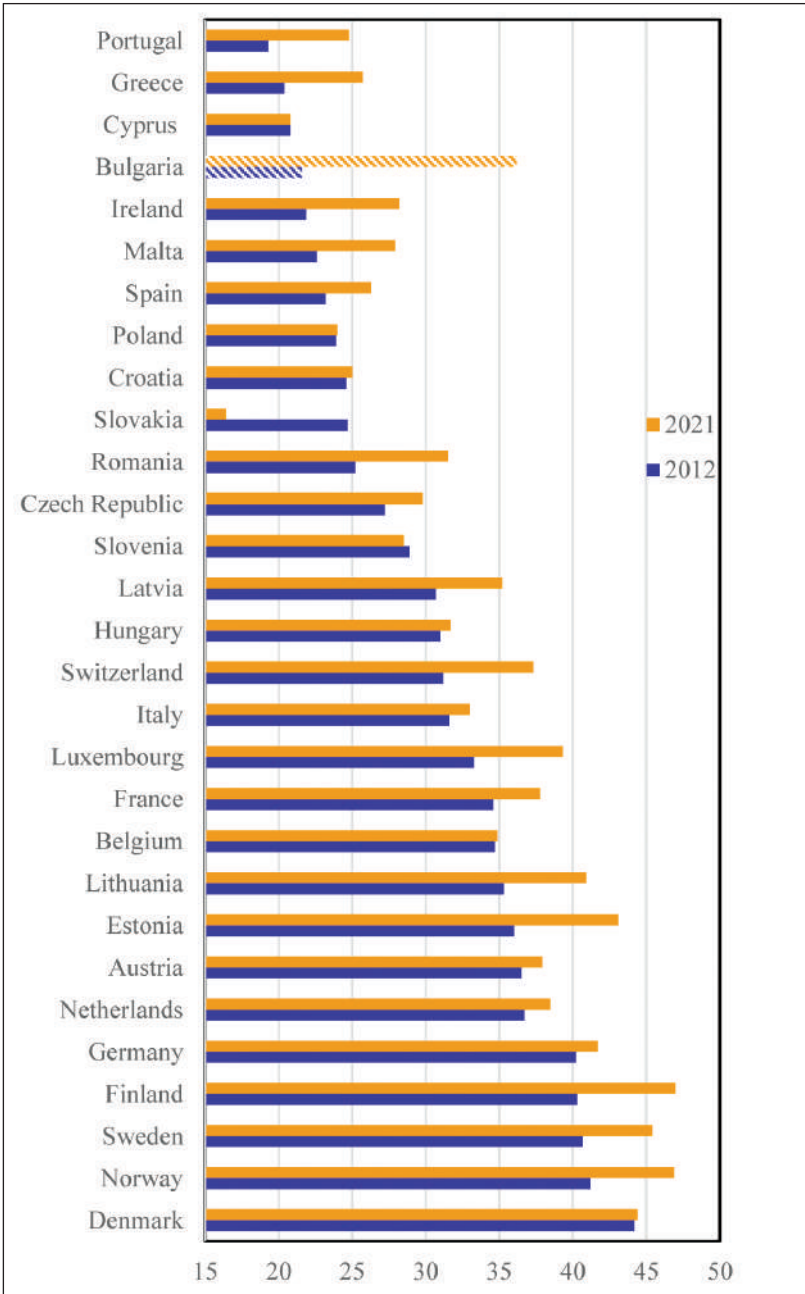
*Source:* United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022): Database on Household Size and Composition 2022.

At the same time, there are significant differences in this indicator between the developed countries (Europe, US, Canada and Japan), on the one hand, and on the other - in the selected countries from the other continents: below 2.9 people on average per household in the first group of countries and above 3.7 in the second group in 2011.

The share of single-person households continued to increase in the European countries even over the last decade (Fig. 4<sup>11</sup>), the only exceptions being Slovakia and Slovenia. These two nations have featured a reduction in this indicator, and its fall has been significant in Slovakia and minimal in Slovenia (8.3 and 0.4 pp, respectively).

Depending on this indicator's growth rate, the countries can be positioned into five groups. The first group covers five countries where the increase in the share of single-person households was minimal (below 1 pp): Cyprus (0.0), Poland (0.1), Denmark and Belgium (0.2) and Croatia (0.4). The second group includes five countries with a slight increase in the indicator, anywhere between 1.4 and 2.0 pp. This group encompasses Italy and Austria (1.4 pp), Germany (1.5), and the Netherlands (1.8). A third group may consist of Czechia, Spain and France, each of them showing medium increase of the indicator over the period 2012-2021 (2.6, 3.1 and 3.2 pp, respectively). The fourth group covers seven countries where this indicator's growth has been high (i.e., from 4.5 to

<sup>11</sup> This figure shows a ranking where the countries are arranged according to the values of this indicator in 2012.



**Fig. 4.** Relative share of single-person households in European countries in 2012 and 2021 (in %)

Source: Eurostat. Distribution of households by household size 2023.

5.9 pp) - Latvia (4.5), Sweden (4.7), Malta and Greece (5.3), Portugal (5.5), Lithuania (5.6) and Norway (5.7). The last group also includes seven countries where the growth during the period exceeded 6.0 pp: Luxembourg (6.0), Switzerland (6.1), Romania and Ireland (6.3), Finland (6.7), Estonia (7.1) and Bulgaria (14.6).

Bulgaria stands out among all other European countries with the highest growth rate of the indicator: in one decade, the share of single-person households in it increased from 21.6 to 36.2%. As a result, the country has moved from the group of European countries with a relatively low value of the indicator in 2012 (fourth place) to the group of 15 European countries in which in 2021 the share of single-person households exceeds 1/3 (ranking 13th among them).

As a summary of what has been stated so far, it can be said categorically that the share of single-person households has been increasing in recent decades in the countries of the world, albeit at different rates. Half of the analysed European countries are characterized by a significant increase in the share of single-person households in the last decade, and among them, Bulgaria stands out with the very high rate of growth of the indicator.

### **Modern trends and problems faced by Bulgaria**

The past century is a period in which Bulgaria entered and completed its demographic transition (Chesnais 1986). The growth of the population, which accompanied it during the transition from the second to the fourth phase of the transition (Pressat, Wilson 1985), was one of the reasons for the significant increase in the number of households in the country during this period (Table 1). On the other hand, household sizes have also been decreasing significantly, with the average number of members in a household having more than twice reduced between 1900 and 2011<sup>12</sup>. The demographic determinants of this process in recent decades are also related to the strong decrease in the birth rate, the increase, albeit slowly, in life expectancy, population ageing, significant internal migration and intensive emigration of young and middle-aged persons (Moraliyska-Nikolova 2021, 163-212; Borissova-Marinova, Moraliyska-Nikolova 2011, 41-93; Borissova-Marinova 2007, 87-113; Kalchev 2019).

Within the considered period of 110 years, the number of single-person households in the country increased more than 36 times, and their share grew by more than 8 times. However, the greatest absolute and relative growth of the indicator was observed in the period 2001-2011, when their number increased by almost 300,000 and in 2011 it already exceeded 900,000 (39.8% of all households in the country).

According to Kiril Popov, single-person households “*characterize urban life and in general the disintegration of family cohesion and patriarchy under the pressure of modern production*” (Popov 1916, 16) [in Bulgarian]. This thought, expressed at the beginning of the 20th century, remains valid for the entire period under

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<sup>12</sup> If in 1900 63.7% was the share of households with 5 or more members, their share fell to 1/4 in 1956, and in 2011 almost 60% were households with one or two members. In 2011, the

**Table 1.** Dynamics of the number and share of single-person households in Bulgaria during the period 1900 - 2011

Years	Number of population	Total number of households	Average number of members in one household	Single-person households	
				Number	Rel. share
1900	3,744,293	663.978	5.6	25.110	3.8
1905	4,035,575	707.501	5.7	31.511	4.5
1910	4,337,513	773.544	5.5	44.676	5.8
1920	4,846,971	916.113	5.3	48.378	4.9
1926	5,478,741	1,098,364	5.0	78.623	7.2
1934	6,077,939	1,284,993	4.7	94.855	7.4
1946	7,029,349	1,750,679	3.9	182.384	10.4
1956	7,613,709	2,237,895	3.4	396.422	17.7
1965	8,227,866	2,542,480	3.2	432.153	17.0
1975	8,727,771	2,755,022	3.1	461.896	16.8
1985	8,948,649	3,030,303	3.0	552.238	18.2
1992	8,487,317	2,964,577	2.8	583.348	19.7
2001	7,928,901	2,921,887	2.7	662.853	22.7
2011	7,364,570	3,005,589	2.4	925.385	30.8

Source: NSI 2012, 24-26.

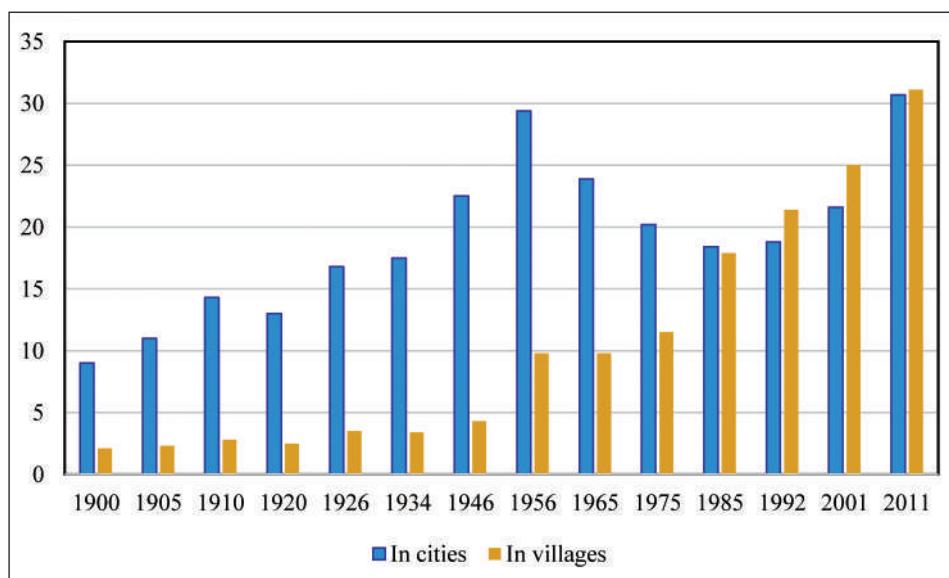
consideration, during which intensive urbanization also took place in Bulgaria. Until 1975, the share of single-person households in cities was significantly higher than the corresponding indicator for villages (Fig. 5). In 1985, the two indicators levelled off and their growth until the end of the period proceeded at a slightly higher rate in the villages. As a result of this process, at the end of the period over 30% of all households in both cities and villages were already single-person households.

The evolution of several processes is intertwined behind the described dynamics of single-person households in cities and villages. On the one hand, until 1975, the urban population in the country was smaller than the rural population, both absolutely and relatively<sup>13</sup>. Its growth was very rapid over the period

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share of households with more than five members was already 7.2% (Source: calculations based on: NSI 2012, 26-27.)

<sup>13</sup> In 1975, the share of urban population was already significantly larger than the indicator for the rural population in the country: the values were 58% and 42%, respectively. (Source: NSI 2012, 42-43.)



**Fig. 5.** Share of single-person households in cities, towns and villages in the period 1900-2011

*Source:* NSI 1989, 16; NSI 2012, 27-28.

1946-1975<sup>14</sup>, after which the increase continued, albeit at quite a slowed-down rate, with 2011 seeing the value of this indicator reaching 72.5%. On the other hand, the traditional model of family behaviour in the villages was preserved longer, and new family forms entered at a slower pace. Thirdly, the average life expectancy in villages is slightly lower than in cities: while in 2021, the indicator for men was 70.7 years in cities and 68.5 years in villages, the same indicator for women was 77.9 and 75.9 years, respectively<sup>15</sup>. This gap was larger in the second half of 20th century.

The share of single-person households has increased in all types of cities in recent decades, but two distinct trends are observed (Table 2). While the growth rate of the indicator is higher in medium-sized and large cities compared to small towns and villages, especially in the period 2001-2011, the same indicator's highest values were registered in the largest cities, too. In Sofia (the last column of the table), the share of single-person households in 2011 already exceeded 200,000, which was over 1/3 of the total number of households in the capital and was about 7 pp ahead of the average indicator for the country.

The dynamics of the distribution of households according to the number of members in them shows that, in the last few decades, single-person households

<sup>14</sup> In 1946, the share of urban population in the country was 24.7%. (Source: NSI 2012, 42-43.)

<sup>15</sup> After NSI data. Mortality and life expectancy by sex and place of residence.

**Table 2.** Share of single-person households by type of settlement in 1985, 2001 and 2011 (%)

Years	Type of settlement					
	Villages	Towns under 5,000 inhabitants	Towns 5,000-10,000 inhabitants	Towns 10,000-100,000 inhabitants	Towns 100,000-499,999 inhabitants	Towns over 500,000 inhabitants
1985	17.9	18.4	14.7	16.1	19.1	22.8
2001	25.0	21.5	18.2	19.2	21.1	27.7
2011	31.1	27.5	25.8	28.4	30.1	37.2

Source: NSI 1989, 190; NSI 2002, 186; NSI 2012, 172-173.

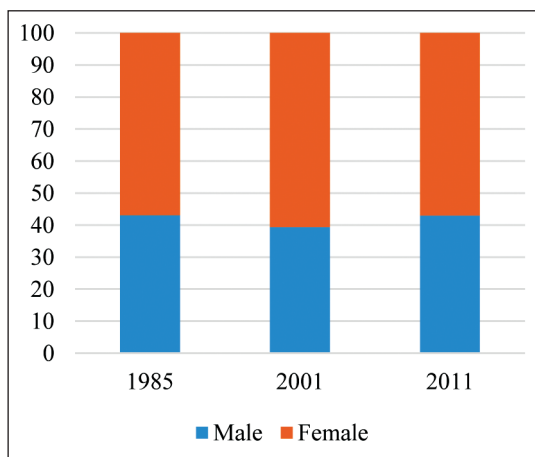
are the only type of households whose relative share is growing consistently and stably (Table 3). While in 1985, the share of two-member households was the highest, followed by the indicators for households with four and three members, in 2011, the highest share was already held by single-person households. The total share of households with four or more members decreased to 20.6% in 2011, while the corresponding indicator for one-person and two-person households was already approaching 60%. At the same time, a process of steady increase in the relative share of persons living in small households was observed: from about 1/4 in 1985 to over 1/3 in 2011. What could be observed during the same period was the likewise increase of the share of persons living in three-member households, albeit weaker (by 3 pp), while the shares of persons in larger households were falling. These results testify to the ongoing intensive processes affecting the direction of a strong reduction in the size of households in the country and leading to the predominance of small households.

**Table 3.** Distribution of households by the number of household members in Bulgaria in 1985, 2001 and 2011 (%)

Years	Households by number of members						Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6 and more	
1985	18.2	26.6	20.3	21.5	7.3	6.1	100.0
2001	22.7	28.4	21.6	18.0	5.8	3.5	100.0
2011	30.8	28.4	20.2	13.4	4.4	2.8	100.0

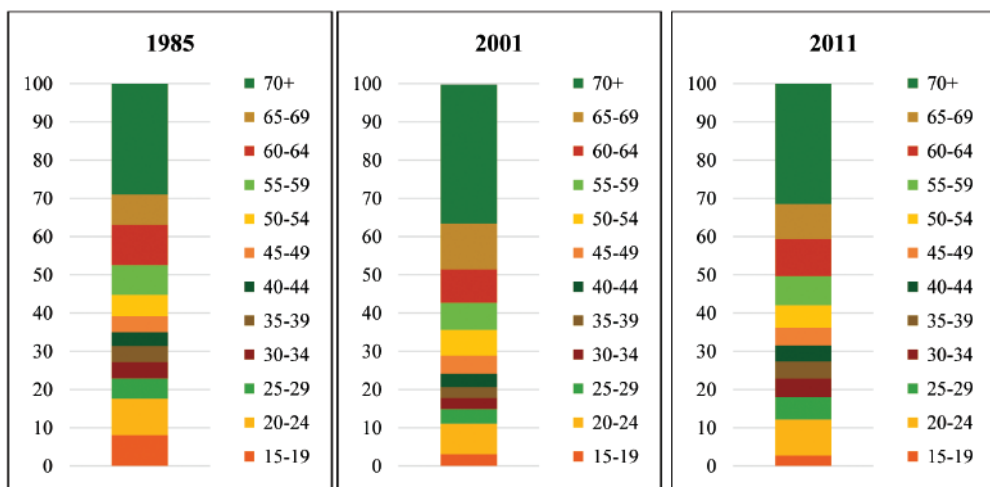
Source: NSI 1989, 27; NSI 2002, 42; NSI 2012, 56.

The dynamics of the distribution of single-person households by sex in the period 1985-2011 (Fig. 6) clearly testifies to an unchanged and significant preponderance of women, and the development of their distribution by age groups (Fig. 7) - to a predominant share of persons beyond working age<sup>16</sup>.



**Fig. 6.** Structure of single-person households by sex in Bulgaria in 1985, 2001 and 2011

Source: NSI 1989, 76-79; NSI 2002, 64-70; NSI 2012, 75-78.



**Fig. 7.** Structure of single-person households by 5-year age groups in Bulgaria in 1985, 2001 and 2011

Source: NSI 1989, 76; NSI 2002, 64; NSI 2012, 75.

<sup>16</sup> Due to the lack of comparable data for the considered period, the two main demographic characteristics were analysed separately.

The share of persons over the age of 65 living alone is gradually increasing and in 2011 already exceeded 40% (Fig. 7). The share of persons from the young age groups who live in single-person households is much lower, and it also decreases during the considered period. The relative share of single-person households of persons under 25 years of age decreased from 17.6% in 1985 to 12.2% in 2011, and the share of single-person households of persons under 34 years of age - from 27.1 to 22.9%, respectively, during the same period. Therefore, it can be said that among single-person households, what would typically predominate would be households consisting of women and those of elderly persons, i.e., aged over 65. Among the main reasons for such an evolution of the process in the country is the deepening and acceleration of the demographic ageing of Bulgaria's population (Borissova-Marinova 2007, 87-112).

The distributions of single-person households by legal marital status underwent certain changes during the considered period, which were different for both sexes (Table 4).

In the distribution by legal marital status, the share of unmarried men is the highest among men. The rate was twice that of unmarried women as early as 1985, and continued to rise to the point in 2011 when half of male-headed households were unmarried. The reason probably lies in the lower life expectancy of men, something that leads to a higher percentage of widowed women in female-headed households. Table 4 shows that the share of widows among single-person households is the highest for women. While this share decreased within the considered period, it still remained predominant in 2011 as well (54.8%). The share of widowed men was more than twice lower than that of women in 1985. The indicator continued to decline until 2011, when the gap between the two sexes widened to almost threefold. The main demographic factor for such a difference is the significantly higher life expectancy for women compared to men (77.4 years at birth for women and 70.1 for men in 2021, respectively<sup>17</sup>).

**Table 4.** Structure by legal marital status and sex of single-person households in Bulgaria in 1985, 2001 and 2011

(%)

Marital status	Men			Women		
	1985	2001	2011	1985	2001	2011
Single	42.3	42.6	49.1	23.9	19.1	23.6
Married	10.9	10.5	13.6	3.7	3.2	8.6
Divorced	19.0	18.3	19.1	11.0	10.6	13.0
Widowed	27.8	28.7	18.1	61.4	67.0	54.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: NSI 1989, 77-80; NSI 2002, 66-72; NSI 2012, 76-79.

<sup>17</sup> After NSI data. Mortality and life expectancy by sex and place of residence.



The outcome of this is that at older ages the balance between the two sexes is disturbed and a significant preponderance of women remains. The proportion of legally married persons living in single-person households was higher for men in 1985, and although it increased for both sexes by the end of the period, this difference persisted. The relative share of the divorced remains unchanged for both sexes, while the indicator remains higher for men.

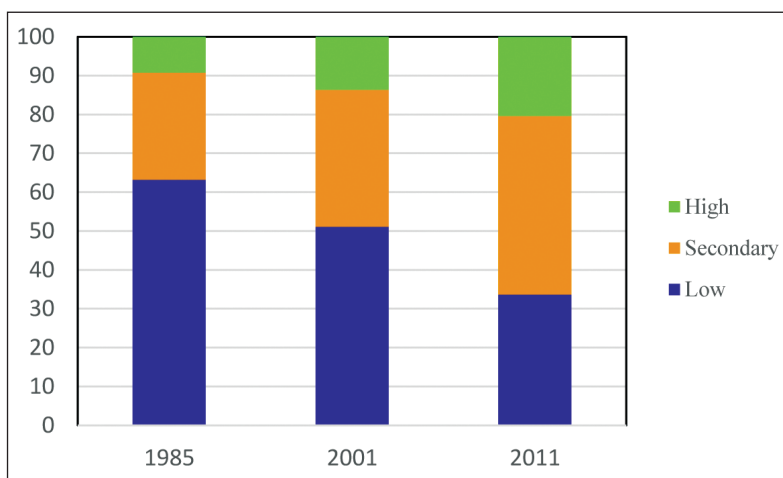
To complement the characteristics of single-person households in Bulgaria in recent decades, the analysis includes two more characteristics: economic activity and level of education. The share of economically inactive persons prevailed throughout the period and exceeded half of the persons living as single-person households as early as 1985. Their share in villages was significantly higher than the corresponding indicator in cities: in 2011, four out of five single-person households in the villages were households of economically inactive persons, while in the cities this was the case of every second one-person household. Single-person households of economically active persons are mainly of employed persons, but their share decreases until the end of the period. In cities, it remained over 1/3 in 2011, while in villages the value of the indicator dropped to 17%. Comparatively small is the share of single-person households of unemployed both in cities and in villages (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Distribution of single-person households by economic activity and place of residence in Bulgaria in 1985, 1992, 2001 and 2011

(%)

Years	Economically active		Economically inactive	Total
	Employed	Unemployed		
Total				
1985	40.4	0.0	59.6	100.0
1992	24.8	3.1	72.1	100.0
2001	20.7	8.0	71.3	100.0
2011	33.0	4.0	63.0	100.0
In cities				
1985	47.3	0.0	52.7	100.0
1992	30.6	3.6	65.8	100.0
2001	25.0	8.4	66.5	100.0
2011	38.9	4.2	56.9	100.0
In villages				
1985	26.7	0.0	73.3	100.0
1992	14.4	2.3	83.4	100.0
2001	12.8	7.2	80.1	100.0
2011	17.1	3.3	79.5	100.0

Source: NSI 2012, 32-33.



**Fig 8.** Distribution of single-person households by level of education in 1985, 2001 and 2011

Source: NSI 1989, 184; NSI 2002, 163; NSI 2012, 152.

Over the reference period, the structure by education<sup>18</sup> in single-person families altered significantly (Fig. 8). In the beginning of the period, the individuals with primary or lower levels of education prevailed significantly, with their proportion being close to two thirds. This proportion gradually declined to one third in 2011 at the account of the pronouncedly increasing share of the individuals with secondary education (from 26.7% in 1985 up to 46.0% in 2011). In addition, the same period saw the share of people with higher education degrees living alone double. What can be said as a whole is that the changes observed in this attribute were following the trends of changes in the educational level of the whole population (Borissova-Marinova 2021; Borissova-Marinova et al. 2018, 73-80; Hristova 2020, 102-130; Borissova-Marinova, 2015).

## Conclusion

The results of the study carried out can be summarized in the several conclusions. Both the number of single-person households and their share have been rising in most countries over the world, yet the pace of this process has varied from country to country: it has been lower in the countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America in comparison with the pace in the European countries, the US, Canada and Japan, where the process started earlier and is already reaching high values.

<sup>18</sup> For the purposes of clearer highlighting of the trends, the educational levels were grouped as follows: high level includes the individuals with Master's/Bachelor's degrees or higher; secondary level encompasses the individuals with secondary general or secondary special education; low level would refer to the individuals with either primary or lower levels of education.

Over the last decade, a number of European countries have seen a rapid growth in the proportion of single-person households, with this share in 15 European countries exceeding 34% of all households by the end of this period. Bulgaria also falls within this subgroup and stands out among the remaining countries with its very high pace of increase in this indicator.

Over the period 1900-2011, there was a significant rise (both absolute and relative) in the number of single-person households in Bulgaria advancing hand in hand with a pronounced reduction in the average number of members of one household. This process gained pace in the first decade of 21st century.

As a result of the ongoing urbanization, until the mid-1970s, the share of single-person households in towns and cities rose significantly. In the 1980s and until the end of the period, the two indicators got even; in 2011, almost a third of the households in cities and villages was single-person. The highest was this indicator in the largest cities (Sofia with its 37.2%).

Over the last few decades, the share of larger household saw a strong reduction and this came at the account of the smaller households (with three members or fewer) and in 2011, the single-person households in the country were already prevailing.

What can be said regarding the general demographic characteristics of single-person households is that there is a constant and significant preponderance of women, a prevailing share of individuals aged 65+ and a varied structure by legal marital status. This features a prevailing share of singles among men and widowed among women.

Over the half of all single-person households are economically inactive individuals, with its share having been rising until 2011. In villages, it got to very high values (around 80% of single-person households there consists of economically inactive persons, while in cities, the percentage of inactive individuals is in the region of 60).

The structure by levels of education of single-person households undergoes significant changes, with the rising of share with higher levels of education. In 2011, almost half of the single-person households belonged to individuals with secondary level of education, with a mere one third of those households being of persons with low education levels. (In 1985 it was the other way round: the share of persons with low levels of education was almost double to the share of individuals with secondary education.)

This work reveals a strong rise of the share of single-person households in Bulgaria, with this rise over the period 2012-2021 having been the highest if compared to the respective process in all European States. This showed that the Bulgarian society is going through deep changes in its way of life and family structure.

The results obtained in the course of this study confirm the leading hypothesis. The Bulgarian family is suffering significant changes that are typical for the so-called second demographic transition, with such changes being much more pronounced in cities than in villages. In the case of the women living in single-person households, there has been a rise in the proportion of those divorced at the account of those widowed; meanwhile, between 2001 and 2011, rose the share of single females. As a result of the ongoing urbanization and

the much ampler and larger opportunities to find jobs in the cities, there has been a significant rise of the share of urban population. The share of single-person households in the large cities (with more than 100,000 inhabitants) has been rising, with the highest values being reached in the capital city: 37% of all households there are single-person. Smaller towns and villages have also seen a rise in the proportion of the single-person households, albeit not as high. While in 2011, the share of economically active persons in the country, living in single-person households, was at one-third, in the cities it exceeded 43%. The share of economically inactive persons (nearly 80%) in the villages is prevailing, and this is related to both the much more aged structure of the rural population in Bulgaria and with the less developed structure of the rural economy.

What may be suggested is that the process under consideration is most probably associated with a multitude of changes, which have occurred over the last half a century in the socio-economic life of the societies and in the countries alike. What is considered, on the one hand, are changes in the structure of the economy, in the systems of social security, health care and education, and hence - in the standard of living of individuals. On the other hand, declining birth rates, increasing life expectancy, including life in good health, and increasing mobility also affect household and family structures in individual countries. Of no less importance are the ongoing processes of emancipation of individuals and changes in traditional family and other values, the influence of which also acts in the direction of reducing the size of families and households and increasing the number and share of single-person households. The study of these relationships and dependencies obviously requires a separate independent study.

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