

Attitudes towards unmarried cohabitation in Europe

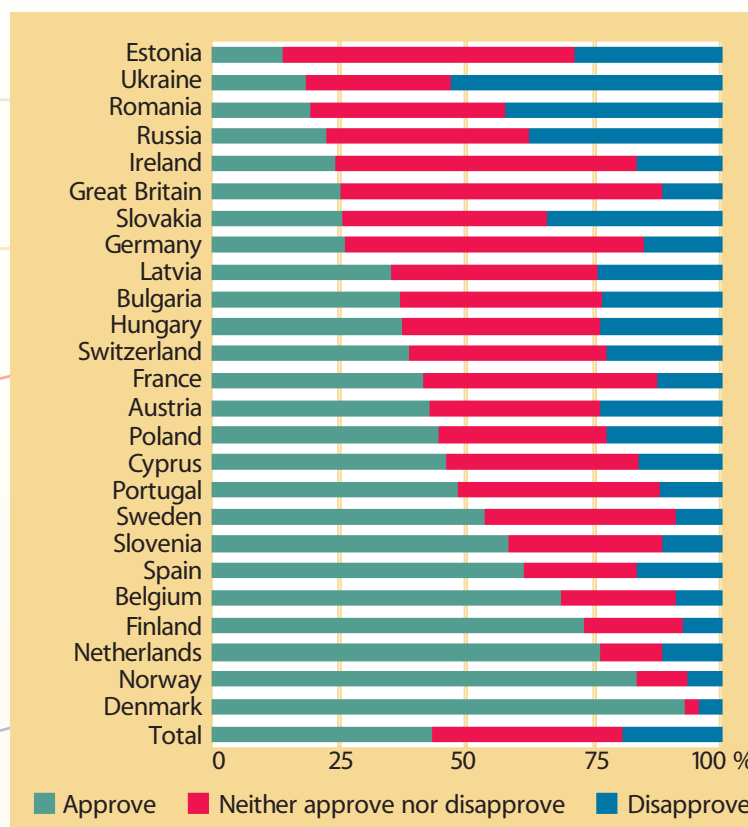
A significant decrease of marriage propensity and a gradual spread of unmarried cohabitation belong to the key changes that have taken place in partnership behaviour in the past few decades. European countries differ not only in the dispersion, the average duration and the outcome of cohabitation but also in how much this alternative partnership form is accepted in different parts of the continent.

European Social Survey contains data on 25 European countries. Respondents were asked about how much they approve or disapprove if a woman or a man lives with a partner without being married to him or her.

All in all, respondents are more positive than negative towards unmarried unions: twice as many people are approving (43%) than disapproving (20%). Every third person has a neutral viewpoint: they neither approve nor disapprove of non-marital cohabitation. This group may include people who do not prefer any relationship form over the others and people who do not have a strong opinion.

In countries where unmarried cohabitation is relatively widespread this partnership type is also more approved of: at least three out of four respondents are in favour of it in Northern Europe and the Benelux countries and the majority is approving in Spain and Slovenia as well. There is only one country among the 25 examined states where the majority disapproves of unmarried cohabitation: Ukraine. The level of disapproval is also relatively high in some other Eastern and Central European countries like Russia, Romania and Slovakia, while in other countries of the region (in Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria) either the approving or the neutral respondents are the majority. If we take a look at Southern Europe, Portugal and Cyprus can be positioned in the middle of the range, while Spaniards are clearly in favour of non-marital unions. Interestingly the majority belongs to the neutral middle category in some countries like Great Britain, Ireland, Germany and Estonia. It may either indicate a high level of tolerance or the transformation of the value system in these states.

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Source: authors' calculations based on European Social Survey 2006 (representative sample of 18-85 year old population, N = 44,647)



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