

Marriage Formation under Institutional and Regional Contexts: Evidence from Poland

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Abstract: This article examines long-term changes in marriage formation in Poland between 2010 and 2023, with particular emphasis on religious (predominantly Catholic) marriages. From an economic and management perspective, marriage is treated as a long-term household decision shaped by institutional arrangements, economic uncertainty, and cultural norms. The study combines a national-level analysis with a regional case study of Podkarpackie Voivodeship (NUTS-2), a south-eastern region characterised by relatively high levels of religiosity and traditional family norms. The empirical analysis is based on official annual statistics retrieved from the Local Data Bank of Statistics Poland (GUS). Descriptive time-series analysis and dynamic indices are used to quantify changes in the number and structure of marriages, and an exploratory exponential-trend projection is applied to illustrate possible continuation of observed tendencies, with the COVID-19 period treated as a short-term institutional shock. The results show a persistent decline in the number of marriages in Poland over the analysed period, with a pronounced drop in 2020 and only partial recovery afterwards. Religious marriages decrease in absolute terms and as a share of all marriages, although the pace of change varies across years. Similar directions are observed in Podkarpackie Voivodeship, yet changes are less dynamic than at the national level and the relative importance of religious marriage remains higher, pointing to the moderating role of region-specific institutional and cultural contexts. Overall, the findings contribute to research on demographic change by showing how household marriage decisions respond to institutional transformation and economic uncertainty within a single country marked by pronounced regional heterogeneity. The findings should be interpreted in light of the study's reliance on aggregated data and the exploratory nature of trend projections. The study is explicitly descriptive; trend projections are illustrative rather than predictive.

Keywords: household decision-making; religious marriage; institutional change; regional differentiation; economic uncertainty

JEL Classification: J12; D10; D02

1. Introduction

Marriage formation is a core demographic and economic process with direct implications for labour-market behaviour, household finances, housing decisions, and long-term welfare outcomes, particularly in contexts where households bear substantial responsibility for social risk management. In many European countries, marriage has become less universal and

increasingly postponed, reflecting changing economic conditions, institutional arrangements, and shifting cultural norms.

Poland provides an informative case because aggregate trends resemble those in Western Europe, yet the underlying mechanisms operate within the distinct institutional trajectory of Central and Eastern Europe. In addition, substantial regional heterogeneity persists, particularly in religiosity and family norms. The Podkarpackie Voivodeship, located in south-eastern Poland and characterised by persistently high levels of religiosity and traditional family norms, represents a context of strong institutional continuity. This makes it a valuable case for examining how locally embedded institutional structures interact with broader demographic and economic trends.

Despite extensive research on the Second Demographic Transition and marriage decline in Europe, far less is known about how macroeconomic uncertainty interacts with regionally embedded institutional structures to shape household marriage decisions within a single Central and Eastern European country.

The article addresses three research questions: (1) How have marriage and religious marriage trends evolved in Poland during 2010–2023? (2) How do these patterns differ between Poland and Podkarpackie Voivodeship? (3) How can the observed patterns be interpreted through the lens of household decision-making under uncertainty and institutional change?

This study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it bridges demographic analysis with an institutional-economic framework by conceptualising marriage formation as a long-term household risk-management decision shaped by labour-market uncertainty, macroeconomic volatility, and evolving welfare-state arrangements in Central and Eastern Europe. Second, it advances research on regional heterogeneity by introducing a within-country institutional comparison, showing how locally embedded religious and normative structures moderate the pace (though not the direction) of demographic adaptation to structural economic change. Third, it provides transparent and replicable longitudinal evidence for 2010–2023, treating the COVID-19 period as an exogenous institutional shock and offering an updated empirical baseline for future causal and micro-level analyses.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Marriage as an Institutional and Economic Decision

Marriage is a core social institution structuring household formation through formal and informal rules that coordinate behaviour and stabilise expectations surrounding long-term commitments (Giddens, 2007; Marody & Giza-Poleszczuk, 2004). In economics and management research, marriage is conceptualised as a forward-looking household decision involving resource allocation, labour division and risk-sharing (Becker, 1981; Cherlin, 2020). Empirical research shows that employment instability and early-career uncertainty tend to delay long-term commitments, prompting households to adopt postponement strategies under risk (Alderotti et al., 2021; Comolli, 2017).

2.2. The Second Demographic Transition and West–East differentiation

Changes in marriage behaviour are most commonly interpreted within the framework of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT). According to this perspective, advanced societies are moving away from a model in which marriage and the nuclear family constituted the dominant form of private life organisation towards more diversified life-course trajectories characterised by delayed commitments and pluralised family forms (Lesthaeghe, 2014; Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002). The SDT framework links declining marriage rates and postponement of family formation to broader processes of value change, individual autonomy, and redefined life priorities.

A central mechanism underlying the SDT is individualisation, understood as the growing dominance of individual preferences and self-realisation over traditional social norms. As a result, marriage increasingly competes with alternative life strategies, such as extended education, career development, and economic stabilisation, which are often prioritised before formal family formation (Giddens, 2007). From an economic perspective, this implies a reordering of life-course decisions, in which labour market integration and financial security precede long-term household commitments.

Importantly, the pace and manifestation of the SDT vary across regions. While many demographic outcomes observed in Central and Eastern Europe resemble those in Western Europe, the underlying mechanisms may differ due to distinct institutional trajectories following the post-socialist transformation (Lesthaeghe, 2014; Szukalski, 2020). This suggests that convergence in observed marriage trends does not necessarily imply convergence in the socio-economic processes that generate them.

2.3. Religion as an Institution and Regional Heterogeneity in Marriage Behaviour

In this study, religion is conceptualised as a social institution rather than as a system of individual beliefs. From an institutional perspective, religion consists of formal and informal rules, normative expectations, and organisational structures that shape behaviour by coordinating socially accepted life-course patterns and stabilising collective expectations (Norris & Inglehart, 2011; Voas & Chaves, 2016). In this sense, religious institutions may reduce uncertainty associated with long-term commitments and contribute to the persistence of specific marriage norms, particularly in regions where their institutional embeddedness remains relatively strong.

The Podkarpackie Voivodeship represents a regional context characterised by a comparatively high institutional presence of religion, reflected in a higher proportion of religious marriages than the national average (GUS, 2023; CBOS, 2022). A regional perspective therefore allows for examining how locally embedded institutional arrangements interact with broader demographic trends. While the general direction of change in marriage behaviour remains consistent with nationwide patterns, regional differences suggest varying capacities of institutions to moderate the timing and form of household decisions.

Religious institutions can influence marriage patterns not only by shaping normative frameworks but also by providing social coordination mechanisms that support formal union formation. However, their stabilising role is not immune to broader institutional changes.

Periods of heightened uncertainty, including economic shocks and administrative constraints, may temporarily weaken institutional coordination and delay marriage formation, even in regions characterised by strong institutional continuity. The COVID-19 period illustrates how exogenous shocks can disrupt established patterns of marriage behaviour without necessarily implying a structural decline in the institutional role of religion.

While previous studies have examined marriage decline in Europe, less attention has been paid to how regional institutional contexts within a single country moderate household responses to economic and institutional uncertainty.

3. Research Methodology

The analysis is based on annual aggregate demographic data obtained from Statistics Poland (GUS), Local Data Bank, covering the period 2010–2023. The study uses data on the total number of marriages and the number of religious (Catholic) marriages at both the national level and the regional level of the Podkarpackie Voivodeship (NUTS-2). All variables were extracted from publicly available statistical reports and databases, ensuring full transparency and replicability of the analysis. The study relies exclusively on secondary, aggregate data and does not involve individual-level information.

In Polish vital statistics, religious marriages refer to church-registered unions; in practice this category is predominantly Catholic. Accordingly, we use “religious marriages” as the operational label throughout.

Descriptive time-series analysis was applied to identify long-term trends and short-term fluctuations in marriage formation. To assess year-to-year changes, dynamic indices with a variable base and fixed base were calculated. Variable-base indices were used to capture annual fluctuations, while fixed-base indices allowed for the assessment of cumulative changes over the analysed period. This approach facilitates the identification of periods characterised by increased volatility and heightened sensitivity to external disruptions.

In order to explore long-term tendencies, linear and exponential trend models were estimated for the analysed time series. These trend models were used solely for exploratory purposes to illustrate the direction and persistence of observed changes. The resulting projections do not account for potential future institutional, economic, or policy-related shocks and should therefore not be interpreted as predictive forecasts. Model fit was assessed using R^2 and RMSE statistics (Table A1), supplemented by graphical inspection.

Due to the aggregated nature of the dataset, the analysis does not allow for the identification of individual-level motivations or causal mechanisms underlying marriage decisions. Nevertheless, the applied methodology is appropriate for documenting structural trends and regional differentiation in marriage formation over time. The analysis is descriptive and does not estimate causal effects. Given the structural disruption in 2020, projections should be interpreted cautiously.

4. Results

The first stage of the analysis examines changes in the total number of marriages in Poland (Figure 1). The national-level perspective provides a reference point for subsequent regional analyses and allows for the identification of periods characterised by significant disruptions to observed trends.

Figure 1 presents the total number of marriages in Poland over the period 2010–2023. The results indicate a clear and persistent downward trend, interrupted by short-term fluctuations that did not result in a lasting reversal in any of the analysed years. A particularly sharp decline is observed in 2020, corresponding to the period of exceptional institutional and administrative constraints. In subsequent years, only a partial rebound can be observed, which does not offset the scale of the earlier decline.

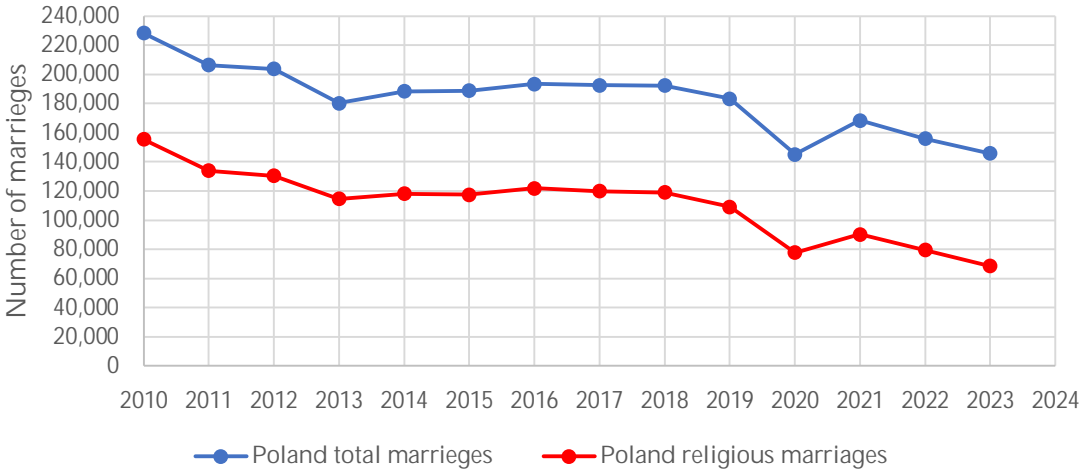


Figure 1. Number of marriages (count), Poland, total and religious, 2010–2023

The next stage of the analysis focuses on changes in the number of marriages in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship, which – due to its specific cultural and institutional context – constitutes an informative regional case when compared to nationwide demographic trends (Figure 2).

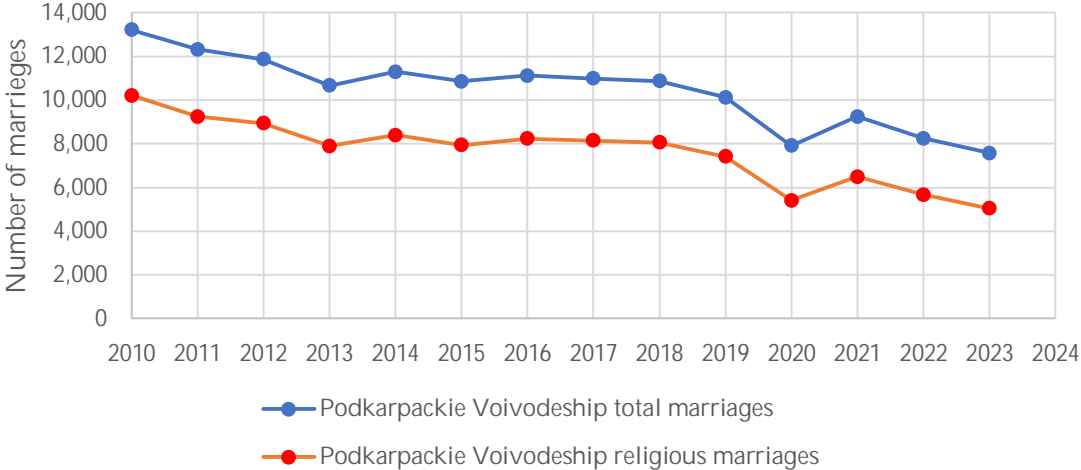


Figure 2. Number of marriages (count) in Podkarpackie Voivodeship, total and religious, 2010–2023

Despite the distinct social characteristics of the region, the observed changes follow the same general direction as those identified at the national level. The number of marriages in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship also exhibits a downward trend, although the pace of decline appears slightly less pronounced than in Poland as a whole.

To assess the pace and variability of changes across consecutive years, year-to-year dynamic indices with a variable base were calculated (Table 1).

Table 1. Year-to-year dynamic indices ($t/t-1 \times 100$) of the number of marriages (count) in Poland and Podkarpackie Voivodeship, total and religious, 2010–2023.

Year	Poland marriages in general	Podkarpackie Voivodeship marriages in general	Poland religious marriages	Podkarpackie Voivodeship religious marriages
2010	-	-	-	-
2011	90.42	93.26	86.20	90.48
2012	98.73	96.23	97.27	96.73
2013	88.49	89.86	87.88	88.30
2014	104.49	105.91	103.17	106.40
2015	100.18	96.15	99.35	94.58
2016	102.45	102.41	103.77	103.68
2017	99.55	98.87	98.43	98.86
2018	99.93	98.96	99.25	98.94
2019	95.29	93.09	91.72	91.94
2020	79.10	78.16	71.22	73.08
2021	116.05	116.91	116.11	119.82
2022	92.57	89.11	87.93	87.40
2023	93.63	91.94	86.17	88.85

Note: 2010 is not defined for a variable-base index.

The results indicate increased volatility in the number of marriages during periods of heightened uncertainty, suggesting the sensitivity of marriage decisions to external disruptions. At the same time, similarities in the direction and magnitude of changes observed at the national and regional levels suggest the presence of shared structural conditions influencing household behaviour across spatial scales.

The analysis is complemented by fixed-base indices (Table 2), which allow for the assessment of cumulative changes over the longer term.

Subsequent analysis focuses on the structure of religious marriages, with particular emphasis on Catholic marriages, which have historically played a significant role in the Polish family model. For transparency, we also decompose religious marriages into their dominant denomination and show annual counts for Catholic and all religious marriages.

Table 2. Fixed-base indices (2010 = 100) of the number of marriages (count) in Poland and Podkarpackie Voivodeship, total and religious, 2010–2023

Year	Poland marriages in general	Podkarpackie Voivodeship marriages in general	Poland religious marriages	Podkarpackie Voivodeship religious marriages
2010	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
2011	90.58	93.26	86.20	90.48
2012	87.63	89.75	83.85	87.53
2013	77.40	80.66	73.69	77.29
2014	82.30	85.42	76.02	82.23
2015	77.88	82.13	75.53	77.78
2016	80.63	84.11	78.38	80.63
2017	79.78	83.16	77.15	79.71
2018	78.93	82.30	76.57	78.87
2019	72.59	76.61	70.23	72.52
2020	53.01	59.88	50.02	53.00
2021	53.58	70.01	58.08	63.50
2022	55.53	62.39	51.07	55.50
2023	49.30	57.36	44.00	49.31

Figure 3 compares the annual counts of Catholic marriages and total religious marriages in Poland, 2010–2023.

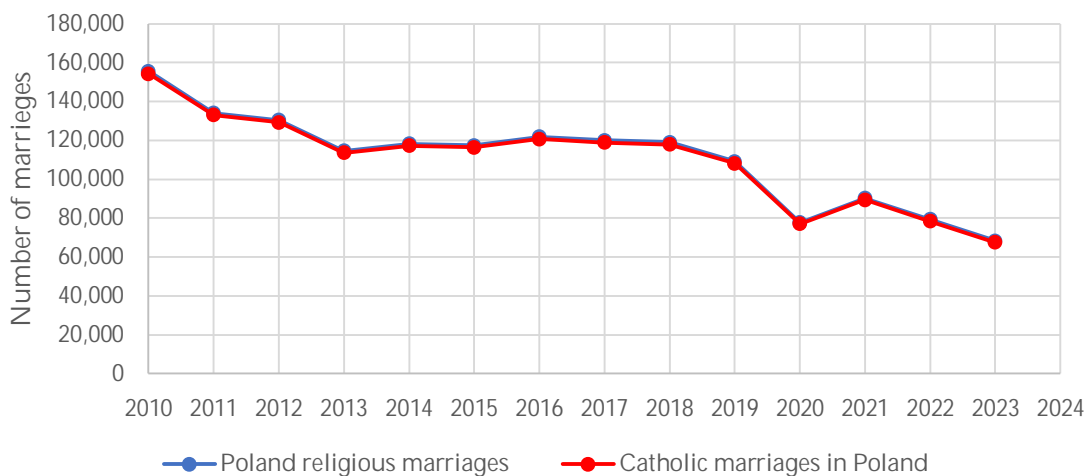


Figure 3. Catholic and religious marriages (count) in Poland, 2010–2023

The results indicate the continued dominance of Catholic marriages within the structure of religious unions. However, similarly to overall marriage trends, a gradual decline in their absolute number is observed. The gradual nature of these changes suggests institutional adaptation rather than abrupt structural shifts in marriage behaviour.

Regional analysis (Figure 4) demonstrates that the share of Catholic marriages in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship remains relatively high compared to the national average. Nevertheless, a downward trend is also evident in this region. These findings indicate that even in areas characterised by strong institutional continuity, adaptive processes consistent with broader national patterns are observable.

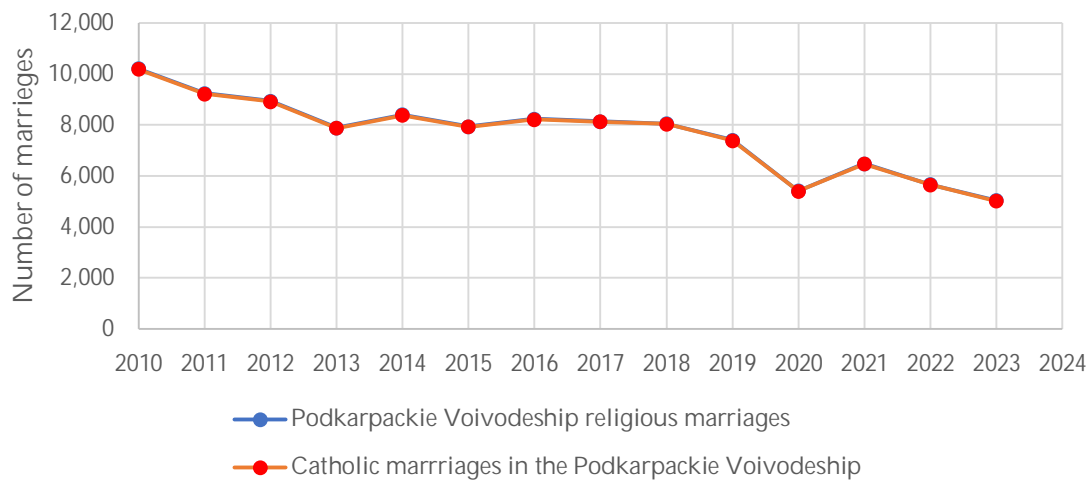


Figure 4. Catholic and religious marriages (count) in Podkarpackie Voivodeship, 2010–2023.

The final stage of the empirical analysis involves estimating future changes in the number of marriages in order to extend the interpretation of results with an exploratory dimension. Extrapolations are illustrative across the 2020 structural break; model fit statistics are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Exponential trend model fit (2010–2023)

Series	R ²	RMSE	N
Poland – total marriages	0.75	12,210.24	14
Poland – religious marriages	0.83	10,439.61	14
Podkarpackie – total marriages	0.85	677.50	14
Podkarpackie – religious marriages	0.85	606.82	14

Models estimated on 2010–2023; projections are illustrative across the 2020 disruption.

Model fit is moderate at the national level but stronger for regional series, reflecting the structural disruption observed in 2020. The exponential specification provides satisfactory fit for regional series ($R^2 > 0.85$), while fit at the national level is moderate due to the structural disruption in 2020.

Table 4 presents exponential trend projections for 2024–2026.

Table 4. Exponential trend projection of marriages (2024–2026)

YEAR	Exponential trend projection			
	Poland – total (count)	Poland – religious (count)	Podkarpackie – total (count)	Podkarpackie – religious (count)
2024	149,093	74,443	7,859	5,331
2025	145,136	70,799	7,579	5,094
2026	141,283	67,332	7,309	4,867

Note: Based on exponential trend models estimated for 2010–2023. The 2020 disruption limits structural stability; projections are illustrative only.

The projections suggest a continuation of the downward trend in subsequent years, with a possible gradual deceleration in the rate of decline. It should be emphasised that these projections are illustrative in nature and should not be interpreted as predictive forecasts, as they do not account for potential future institutional, economic, or policy-related changes.

The projected trajectories do not indicate a short-term reversal of the observed downward trend.

5. Discussion

The analysis confirms a long-term decline in marriage formation in Poland, observable both at the national level and in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship. This decline should not be interpreted as a short-term fluctuation but rather as a manifestation of structural changes in household decision-making. Marriage formation may be understood as a strategic household decision made under conditions of uncertainty, where households weigh long-term commitments against economic stability and institutional predictability. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that heightened economic uncertainty and unstable early-career trajectories tend to delay long-term family commitments, as households adopt postponement strategies under risk (Alderotti et al., 2021; Comolli, 2017). In the Polish context, the decline observed after 2010 coincided with periods of labour-market volatility affecting younger cohorts, tightening housing affordability conditions, and, in the early 2020s, a sharp inflationary episode that reduced household purchasing power (Hick et al., 2025; Amores et al., 2025). While the present study does not estimate causal effects, the temporal alignment between macroeconomic instability and intensified fluctuations in marriage formation supports an uncertainty-based interpretation of household behaviour.

While the overall direction of change remains consistent across spatial levels, the regional analysis reveals clear differences in the pace of adjustment. The Podkarpackie Voivodeship, characterised by a relatively strong institutional presence of religion and persistent family norms, exhibits a slower decline in marriage formation compared to the national average. This finding supports the interpretation that local institutional arrangements may moderate but not reverse broader demographic trends. Rather than preventing change, strong institutions appear to shape the timing and form of household adaptation. This moderating effect can be interpreted within an institutional framework. Where religious and normative structures remain strongly embedded, they may stabilise expectations surrounding marriage and reduce behavioural volatility, thereby slowing the speed of demographic adjustment. At the same time, the persistence of a downward trajectory indicates that local institutional continuity delays, rather than reverses, broader structural change (Śleszyński et al., 2023; Rejowska, 2021).

The structure of religious marriages further illustrates this mechanism. Despite the continued dominance of Catholic marriages within the category of religious unions, their absolute number has been gradually decreasing. This pattern suggests an evolutionary adjustment of institutional practices rather than abrupt structural disruption. Religious institutions continue to function as coordination mechanisms that stabilise expectations and

provide normative frameworks for marriage formation, even as households increasingly postpone formal commitments.

The sharp decline observed during the COVID-19 period illustrates how sensitive marriage decisions are to sudden institutional disruptions. Administrative restrictions, heightened uncertainty, and disruptions to social coordination temporarily weakened the capacity of institutions — both civil and religious—to facilitate marriage formation. Beyond formal restrictions, the pandemic intensified perceived income risk and planning uncertainty, particularly among younger individuals at transitional stages of labour-market entry. Under such conditions, postponement of marriage may be understood as a rational sequencing strategy in the face of increased volatility, consistent with evidence on union formation under uncertainty (Guetto et al., 2021).

However, the partial rebound observed after the pandemic suggests that such shocks may delay rather than permanently suppress marriage decisions. A similar pattern of sharp decline in 2020 followed by partial recovery has been documented in several European countries, suggesting that the pandemic operated through common institutional and behavioural channels (Cantalini et al., 2024; Recaño, 2024). The distinctive contribution of the present study lies in demonstrating how these macro-level tendencies unfold within a single country marked by pronounced regional institutional heterogeneity.

The overall direction of change remains consistent with the Second Demographic Transition, particularly the postponement and declining prevalence of formal unions (Lesthaeghe, 2014), suggesting differentiated temporal adaptation within a common structural direction of demographic change. However, the regional differentiation suggests that the speed of adaptation is shaped by institutional embeddedness rather than solely by value change. The present findings do not allow for disentangling economic and cultural mechanisms, but rather indicate their potential interaction at the macro level. From an economics-of-the-family perspective, the sensitivity of marriage timing to macroeconomic volatility reflects its forward-looking, resource-dependent nature (Comolli, 2017; Alderotti et al., 2021).

From a public policy and regional governance perspective, these findings emphasise the importance of accounting for institutional heterogeneity across regions when designing demographic and family-related policies. Uniform policy instruments may yield differentiated outcomes depending on local institutional capacity and social embeddedness. Consequently, regional governance structures and institutional coordination mechanisms should be considered key elements in managing demographic change.

Finally, while the exploratory projections indicate a continuation of the downward trend in marriage formation, they should not be interpreted as forecasts. Future trajectories will depend on the interaction between economic conditions, institutional adaptation, and policy interventions. This highlights the need for further research integrating micro-level data on household decision-making with regional institutional analyses.

6. Conclusions

This study shows that marriage formation in Poland has experienced substantial structural change since 2010, with a persistent decline and a marked, temporary disruption during the COVID-19 period.

Compared to the national level, changes in Podkarpackie Voivodeship are less dynamic and the relative importance of religious marriage remains higher, pointing to the moderating role of regional institutional and cultural contexts.

Overall, the study contributes to research on demographic change by linking aggregate marriage patterns with household decision-making under conditions of economic uncertainty and ongoing institutional transformation in Central and Eastern Europe.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the analysis relies on aggregated administrative data, which does not allow for the identification of individual-level motivations or causal mechanisms underlying marriage decisions. The findings therefore document structural patterns and temporal dynamics rather than behavioural determinants.

The study focuses exclusively on formal marriages; trends in cohabitation may follow different dynamics and require separate analysis.

Second, the empirical scope is intentionally limited to selected demographic indicators and does not explicitly incorporate economic variables such as income, employment stability, housing conditions, or family policy instruments. While these factors are likely to influence marriage formation, the descriptive approach adopted here aims to capture institutional and contextual regularities rather than estimate multivariate causal effects.

Finally, the trend projections presented in the Results section are exploratory and should not be interpreted as forecasts, as they do not account for potential future institutional, economic, or policy-related shocks. Future research should integrate micro-level demographic data with labour-market and housing information in order to examine the mechanisms underlying household decision-making. Comparative analyses across regions with differing institutional contexts would further enhance understanding of how local structures moderate broader demographic trends.

Structural-break specifications could further refine the interpretation of post-2020 dynamics.

Conflict of interest: none

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