

MARITAL STATUS AND HOUSEHOLDS

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Family is the primary community in which a person matures and develops as a human being. It influences our daily lives and constitutes the basic institution of social reproduction [1]. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the defining processes and events in family life – marriage, divorce, moving in together, widowhood – are the subject of keen interest in many disciplines, including demography, sociology, law, economics, and political science. The composition of the population according to marital status and family structure reveals both a transformation of the framework of our everyday lives and changes in the process of population reproduction. It is worth noting that the composition of the population by marital status in the first three quarters of the 20th century reflected the main trends in family relations. However, since the mid-1970s and the spread of cohabitation and single-parent families, it has become less feasible to interpret the familial status and relationships of women, men and their children solely on the basis of marital status.

20th century: the heyday of marriage, then the decline of its popularity and the rise of single-person households

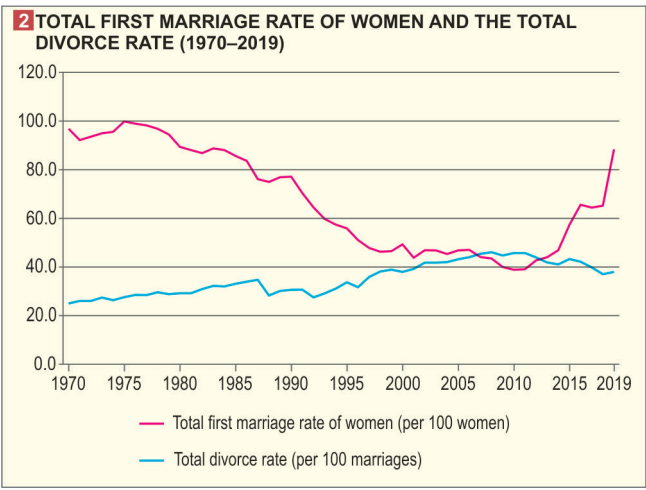
Until of the late 1970s and early 1980s, most people wanted and were able to get married. The propensity of unmarried people to marry increased steadily until 1960, thereafter stabilising at a high level. Indeed, the share of married people in the population aged 15 and over increased to two thirds by 1960 and remained at this high level for two decades [VI.2.1]. The proportion of women who were married or who had been married peaked in 1980 at more than 85%. Subsequently, the proportion of people living in marriage began to decline rapidly. This development was mainly due to an increase in the number of people cohabitating and, latterly, to an increase in the number of young people remaining in the parental home for longer periods. However, a questioning of the ‘universal nature’ of marriage began earlier, as the number of divorces increased and remarriage became less common. Although divorces already occurred in the early 20th century and their number generally increased after the wars, their growing prevalence can be attributed to extensive industrialisation, the flow of labour into cities, and wom-



1 Families are the foundation of society

en’s employment. Remarriage at the beginning of the century mostly followed widowhood, and until the 1960s remarriage was common, subsequently becoming rarer. Divorced people no longer looked for new bonds; they mostly lived together without marriage. Cohabitation started to become widespread as a post-marital relationship. Since the late 1980s, however, more and more people have lived together in cohabitation. Although these relationships are lasting ones and often lead to marriage, they are still relatively fragile. Consequently, an increase in the instability of relationships can be observed.

In addition to the above processes, changes in family and household structure are also related to changes in life prospects. On the one hand, the expansion of employment and growing prosperity create an opportunity for younger people to move out and start a family away from their parents. On the other hand, an increase in life expectancy also increases the proportion of those who live long enough to see all their



1 NUMBER AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AGED 15 AND OVER ACCORDING TO MARITAL STATUS (1910–2021)									
Year	Unmarried	Married	Widows	Divorced	Total	Unmarried	Married	Widows	Divorced
	Number				Total	Proportion (%)			
1910	1,430,782	3,067,101	449,927	18,818	4,966,628	28.8	61.8	9.1	0.4
1920	1,710,202	3,239,457	561,753	29,154	5,540,566	30.9	58.5	10.1	0.5
1930	1,895,443	3,738,476	601,885	57,060	6,292,864	30.1	59.4	9.6	0.9
1941	1,963,548	4,195,034	660,386	76,705	6,895,673	28.5	60.8	9.6	1.1
1949	1,825,967	4,264,765	736,423	87,554	6,914,709	26.4	61.7	10.7	1.3
1960	1,507,418	5,037,514	737,145	149,514	7,431,591	20.3	67.8	9.9	2.0
1970	1,692,100	5,432,347	773,517	247,628	8,145,592	20.8	66.7	9.5	3.0
1980	1,478,789	5,637,611	856,420	395,470	8,368,290	17.7	67.4	10.2	4.7
1990	1,671,462	5,041,676	923,920	607,216	8,244,274	20.3	61.2	11.2	7.4
2001	2,306,929	4,459,438	989,407	752,527	8,508,301	27.1	52.4	11.6	8.8
2011	2,809,413	3,837,264	953,029	928,806	8,528,512	32.9	45.0	11.2	10.9
2021	2,919,000	3,525,000	861,000	1,009,000	8,314,000	35.1	42.4	10.4	12.1

children leave home. Many later remain alone as widows. Therefore, the 20th century brought an increase in the number of single-person households for a variety of reasons. Due to the growing instability of relationships – divorces and the break-up of cohabitations – more and more children experience a single-parent family situation for longer or shorter periods of time.

Marriages and divorces recently and today

The most accurate impression of people’s propensity to marry and to divorce can be obtained by examining the *total first marriage rate* (TFMR) and the *total divorce rate* (TDR). These rates show, in simple terms, the chances of getting married and of marriages ending in divorce. The TFMR in Hungary declined sharply from the 1980s until 2010 (i.e. the probability of a woman marrying during her life decreased). By 2010, this rate declined to a minimum value [VI.2.2]. It then started to increase, reflecting an increasing propensity to marry. Since 2016, its value (calculated for one hundred women) has been over 60 [2]. The probability of divorce increased until 2008, when the total divorce rate (related to one hundred marriages) was 46 (i.e. almost one in two marriages could be expected to fail). Since 2011, there has been a significant decline in this index.

The negative trends affecting marriage rates stemming from a decline in the propensity to marry and an increase in the number of divorces were accentuated by a decrease in the number of *remarriages*. In the past, only widows remarried, reflecting the unfavourable mortality conditions. Following World War II, it was less common, and from the 1950s, the remarriage of those divorced became more common due to the increasing number of divorces. In the first half of the 1960s, three-quarters of divorced men, and more than two-thirds of divorced women, could hope to remarry within 20 years of their divorce. By the 1970s, however, the first signs of a reluctance to remarry were already evident, especially among divorced men. The main reason for a decline in the number of remarriages was the spread of cohabitations.

There have also been significant changes in the average age of women and men at the time of marriage. In 2018, the *average age of women at first marriage* was 30.1, while among men the average age was 32.8. Twenty-five years earlier, however, these values were nearly



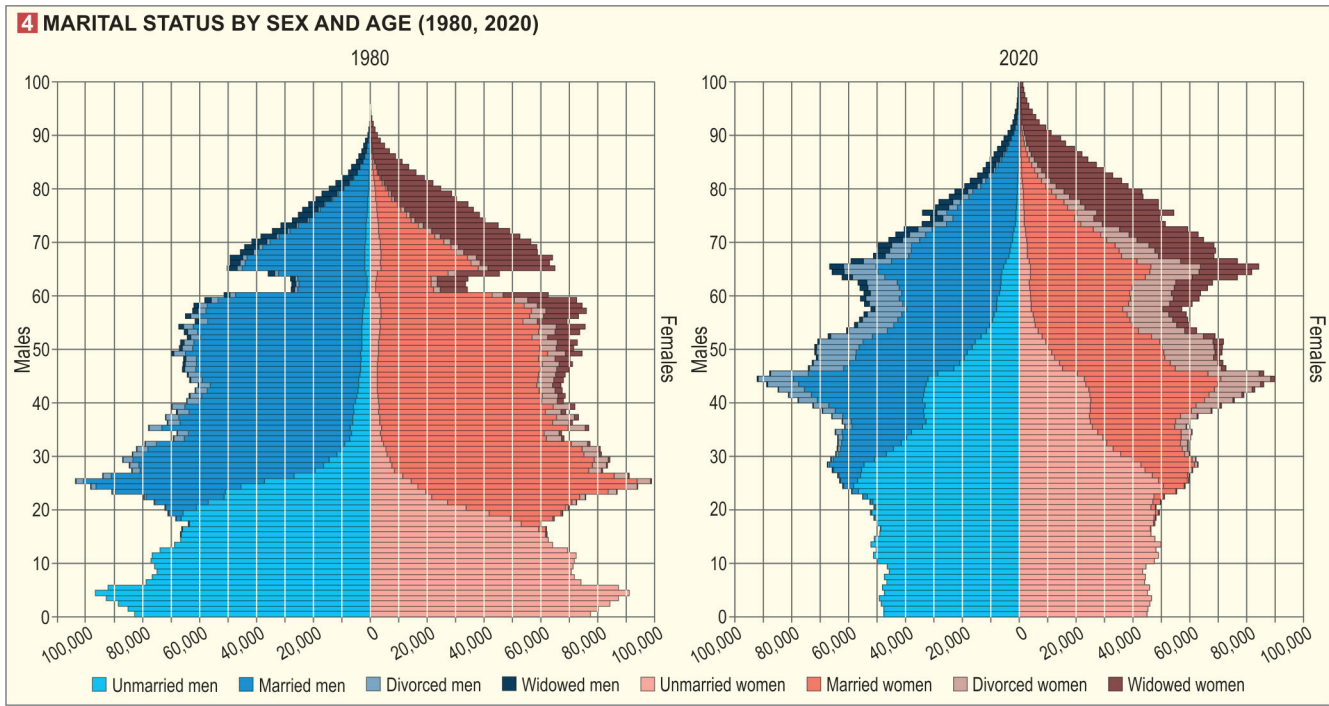
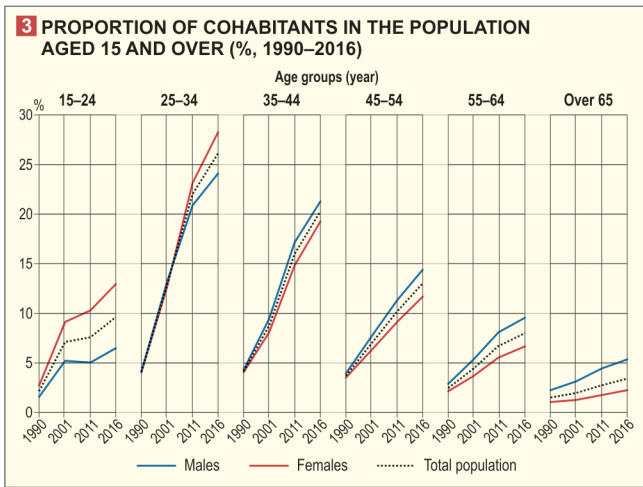
2 The number of marriages almost doubled in Hungary in the past decade

Total first marriage rate (TFMR) shows the proportion of people over the age of 15 who will marry by the age of 50 if all age groups of the generation married in the future at the same rate as they did in the considered year.
Total divorce rate (TDR) shows the percentage of marriages that shall end in divorce if the probabilities observed in a given year for each marriage cohort remain unchanged.

8 years lower. Indeed, in 1993, women entered their first marriage at the average age of 22.2, while men did so at the average age of 24.9. Between the two dates, the average age at marriage increased by about 3.5-4 months each year. Therefore, the age structure of those getting married changed significantly. After more than two decades of increase, the average age at first marriage essentially stagnated between 2014 and 2017. Since 2017, however, a further increase has been observed.

Emergence of new types of relationships

In Hungary, *cohabitation* spread initially among those who had been married (i.e. widows and divorced people). In 1984, for example, 60% of women in cohabitations had once been married and had then divorced. In the late 1980s, new trends emerged in cohabitation: the proportion of people living in cohabitations increased dramatically among the younger age groups. One type of cohabitation entails the first relationship, while another follows the dissolution of marriage. Cohabitation, in the form of an alternative to marriage as a first partnership, appeared only in the second half of the 1980s; however, it soon gained widespread popularity. It became a feature of life in many former communist countries, including Hungary. The proportion of people in cohabitation multiplied among young adults and young middle-aged people between 1990 and 2016 [VI.2.3]. Today, nine-tenths of first relationships start as cohabitations, and only in the case of one in ten of first relationships do those involved move in together at the time of marriage. The first cohabitation is mostly temporary, but there are lasting ones that can also be interpreted as an alternative to marriage. Their transience is indicated by the fact that this life situation is most common among those aged 25–34 and 35–44. While in the 1990s an increase in cohabitation was dominant, after the turn of the millennium the growing proportion of *single people without a permanent relationship* was the most typical trend. This life situation may occur at any age; some singles have never had a permanent relationship, while others are divorced or widowed. Some of them cannot be considered literally single, as they can have a permanent partner with



whom they do not cohabit. They live in the form of a *visiting partnership*. This type of separation can be voluntary or forced, and it may also be temporary or permanent. Several reasons can be behind this: a higher proportion of young people study in higher education, complete their studies at an older age, enter the labour market later and, consequently, move out of their parents’ home at an older age. Often shown in the media but numerically a small group are the ‘singles’ who consciously chose a lifestyle free from family obligations.

All these processes shape the distribution of the population of a given area according to marital status at a given time. While this is mainly reported in the censuses, civil registers also play an important role in recording life events (marriages, divorces, deaths). Such records can be used to track changes in the marital status of the population between two censuses. The classification of the population by marital status reflects the legal situation at the time of the censuses.

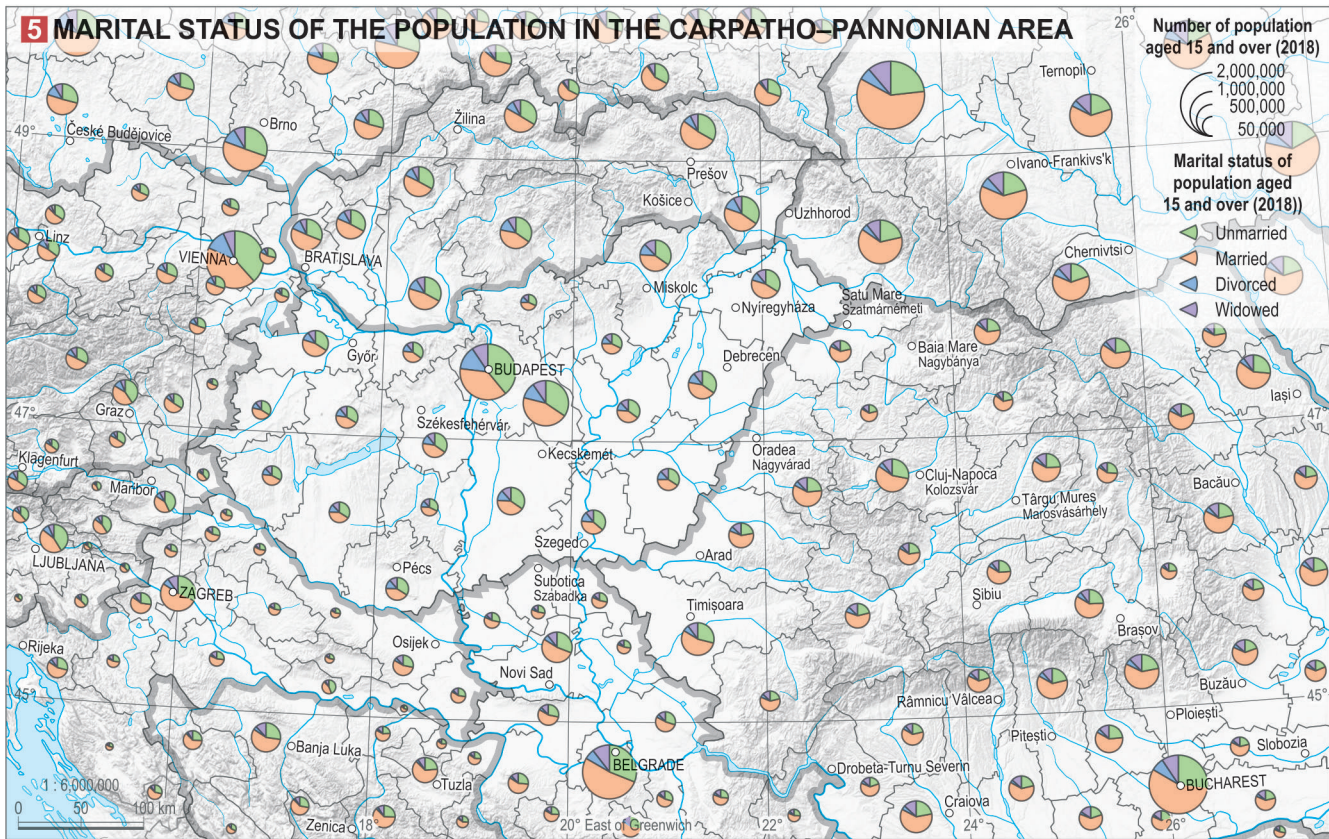
Several conclusions can be gleaned from a comparison of the population age structures for 1980 and 2020 showing the marital status of the population by sex and age [VI.2.4]. On the one hand, we see that married people constitute the majority in both time periods. It can also be seen that the proportion of married men decreased more than that of married women during the period under review. The rise of unmarried people is also striking. While in 1980 their number and proportion decreased significantly from the age of 25, in 2020 they account for a significant share even among

An unmarried person has not yet married. A married person is in a marriage that has not been dissolved legally, regardless of whether the person is living with his/her spouse. A widow is a person who has not remarried after the death of his/her spouse. Finally, a divorced person is someone whose marriage has been legally dissolved and has not remarried. The marital status of those living in cohabitation is also determined on the basis of the legal situation. On 1 July 2009, a new category of marital status was introduced in Hungary, namely the registered partnership.

40-year-olds. Another striking change is that in 2020, more men are unmarried at an older age than was the case in 1980; however, this trend is less evident among women. The number of widows has hardly changed, but the number of divorcees all the more so: their number in 2020 among both sexes is much higher than it was in 1980. More detailed analyses have shown that divorced men are more likely to find a new partner than women, but more than half of women live with a new partner within a relatively short period of time.

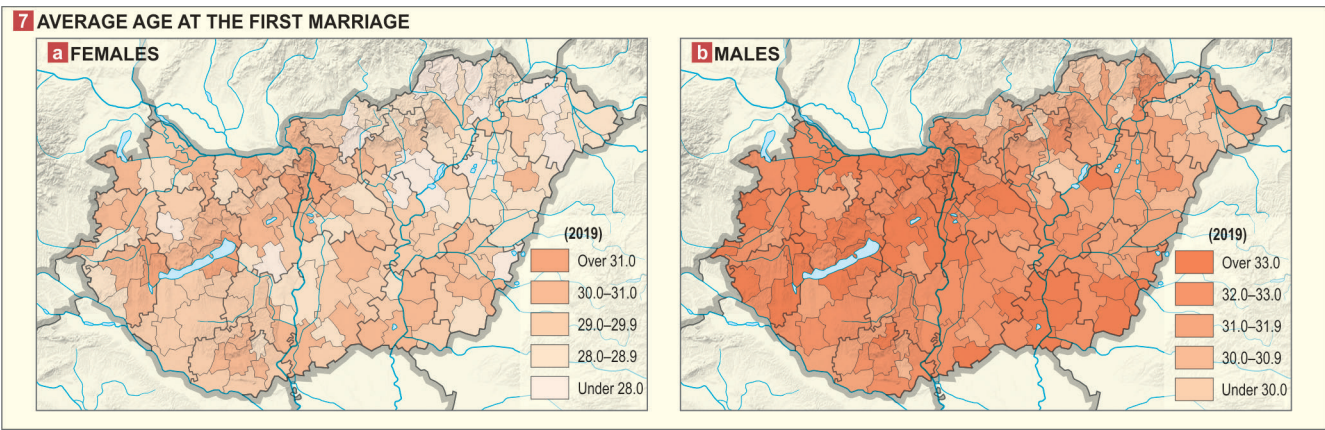
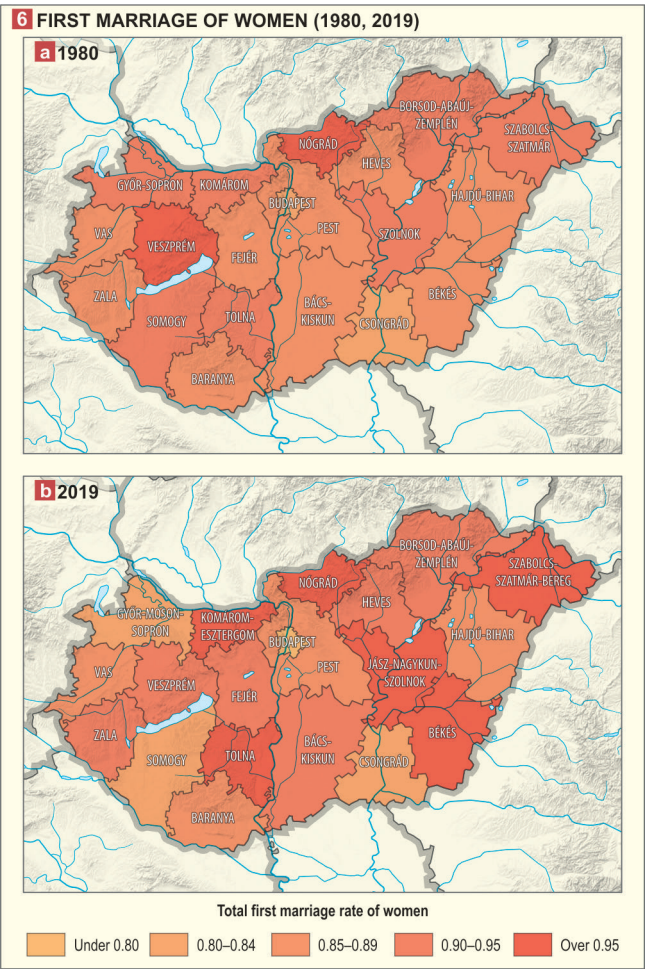
Spatial differences of marriage habits

In his study of the marriage habits of the European population, John Hajnal, an English demographer of



Hungarian descent, divided Europe into two distinct areas, separated by a line (1965). What became known as the *Hajnal Line* runs from Trieste to Saint Petersburg. Marital behaviours to the west and east of the line differ. Hajnal characterised the Western European pattern as a tendency towards a late (first) marriage with a high proportion of people who never marry. In contrast, to the east of the Hajnal Line, people typically marry at a young age and in high proportions; unmarried people are relatively few. Hungary lies just to the east of the Hajnal Line. The country has long been characterised by people having a family at a younger age than is typical for the Western European countries and by a higher rate of marriage. In many areas east of the line, however, this trend was even more explicit than in Hungary. However, the historical picture has undergone a significant change with the spread of marriage and relationship patterns in Western Europe in recent decades, thus redrawing the map of Europe. All this is well illustrated by the maps depicting the population of the Carpatho-Pannonian Area according to marital status. Among the categories describing marital status, the predominance of *married* people in the Carpathian Basin is striking. With few exceptions, married people outnumber other groups, with their proportion of the population ranging from 40% to 63% **VI.2.5.** Only in Hungary and in most of Slovakia do married people form less than half of the population. In both countries the proportion of unmarried people is particularly high. The share of divorced people and widows does not show as much variability as that of married and unmarried people. Their respective proportions in the Carpathian Basin are 7% and 11% on average. Overall, it can be stated that the composition of the population according to marital status depends, on the one hand, on the local historical acceptance of different forms of relationships and, on the other hand, on the age structure of the population. The proportion of unmarried people is naturally higher among populations with a young age structure, that of widows is higher in the case of an ageing population, and that of divorced people is higher in urbanised areas.

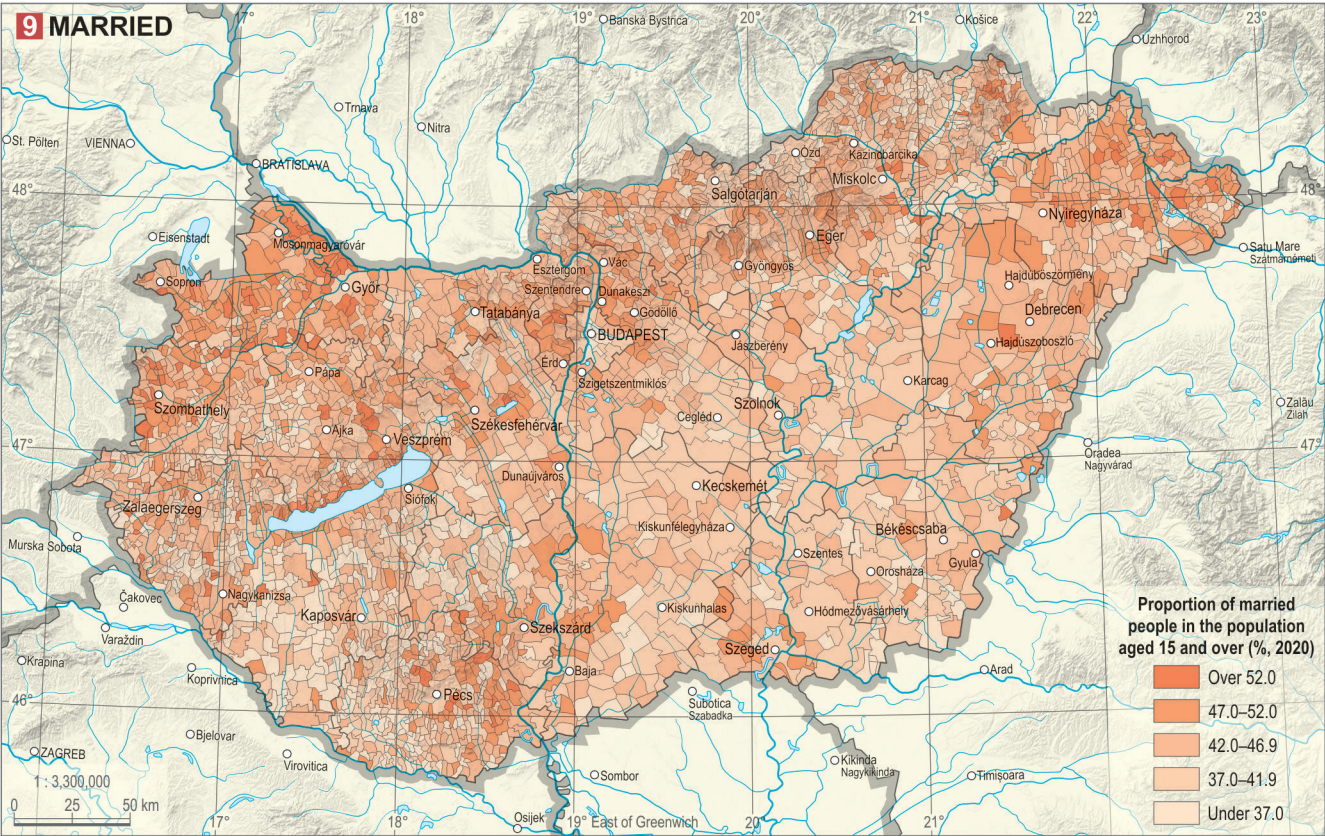
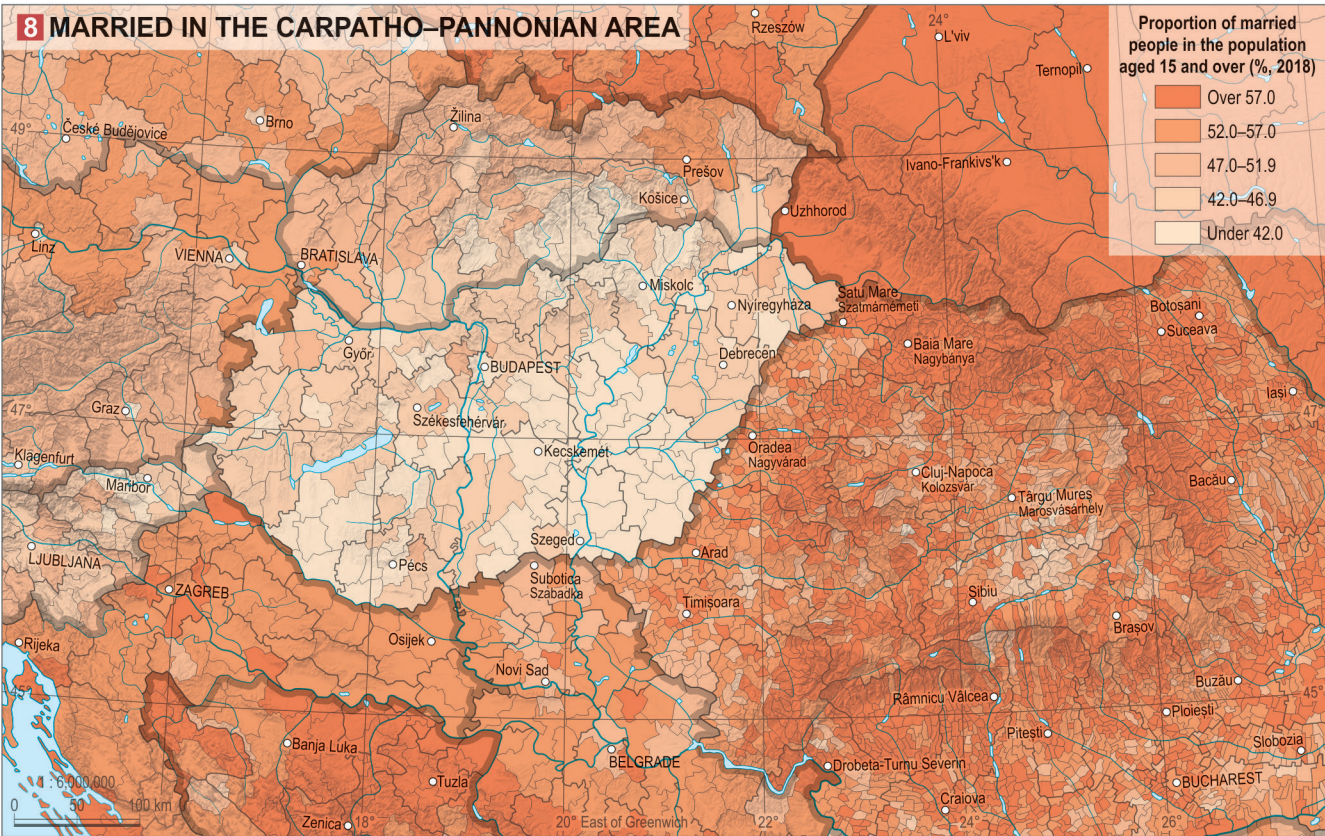
Marriage habits having a significant impact on the composition of the population by marital status (especially its past composition) differ significantly in terms of territory. The first marriage rate of women is



particularly high in the northern and northeastern peripheries of Hungary, in the Central Tisza Region and in some parts of Southern Transdanubia **VI.2.6.** The lowest average age of married people is also found here **VI.2.7.** These areas coincide with a high concentration of disadvantaged and poorly educated people with low incomes including many Roma. The first marriage rate of women is low, and marriages also take place at an older age, in the most developed, central and western parts of Hungary. In 2017, in some parts of Budapest (mainly in the elite districts of Buda), women married for the first time at an average age of 32, while the corresponding average figure for men was as high as 34.1.

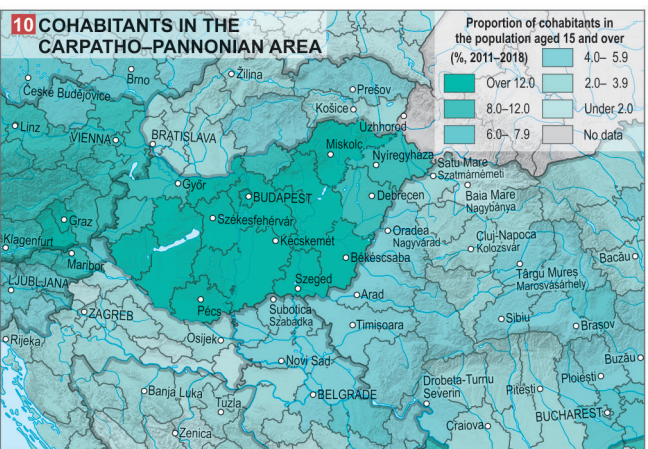
The majority of the population is married in the *Carpathian Basin* **VI.2.8.** Compared to the neighbouring

Croatian, Serbian, Romanian and Ukrainian regions, the *proportion of married* people is, however, relatively low in Hungary and most of Slovakia. Within Slovakia, the proportion of married people is relatively high in the most religious northern and northeastern peripheral regions **VI.4.6.** As a large number of families with children have moved to the agglomeration belt of Bratislava, the proportion of people living in marriage is relatively high there, too. Transylvania is generally characterised by a high proportion of married people, but there are also significant areas where their proportion is below average, including the region at the intersection of the counties of Sibiu, Braşov, Harghita/Hargita and Mureş/Maros, where the proportion of the young Roma population (and consequently that of unmarried people) is particularly high **VI.3.9.** How-



ever, the phenomenon may also be explained by the ageing non-Roma populations living in this area, with a significant number of elderly widows. For similar reasons, areas can be found in Hungary (e.g. in the northern peripheries, the Central Tisza Region, and southwestern parts of Transdanubia) where – even compared to the Hungarian average – the proportion of married people is particularly low. At the same time, there are other areas in the country where the proportion of people living in marriage is remarkably high **VI.4.7.** Explanatory factors may include the greater degree of religious attachment of the local population and greater societal esteem for the institution of marriage. Such areas include northwestern Transdanubia, the vicinity of Lake Balaton, eastern Baranya, southern Tolna, the Kalocsa region, and the northern and northeastern peripheral regions **VI.2.9.**

The regional distribution of the *proportion of unmarried people* is the opposite of that of married people **VI.2.10.** Spatial variance is due not only to differences in the prestige of marriage as a form of partnership and in the relative acceptance of cohabitation **VI.2.11.** but also to discrepancies in the demographic and age



structure. The proportion of unmarried people is higher in areas inhabited by more fertile and youthful (often Roma) populations (e.g. the southwestern parts of Somogy and Baranya, the peripheries of Nógrád, Gömör and Abaúj, the Bodrogszék, Szatmár and the Central Tisza Region) **VI.2.12.** Examining the proportion of unmarried people by gender, we find that the ratio of men among them is higher than that of women in all counties. Nationwide, 1.4 times more men remain unmarried than women.

The *proportion of divorced people* in the Carpathian Basin is the highest in the Hungarian, Slovak and Austrian areas and – in terms of settlement type – in the cities **VI.2.13.** The differences between the countries reflect such factors as the religiosity of the local population, social acceptance of divorce and the legal regulation of divorce. In Hungary, the proportion of divorced people is particularly low in the northeastern areas and in western Transdanubia with their relatively religious populations. Meanwhile, it is high in the capital and in some parts of the southern Alföld

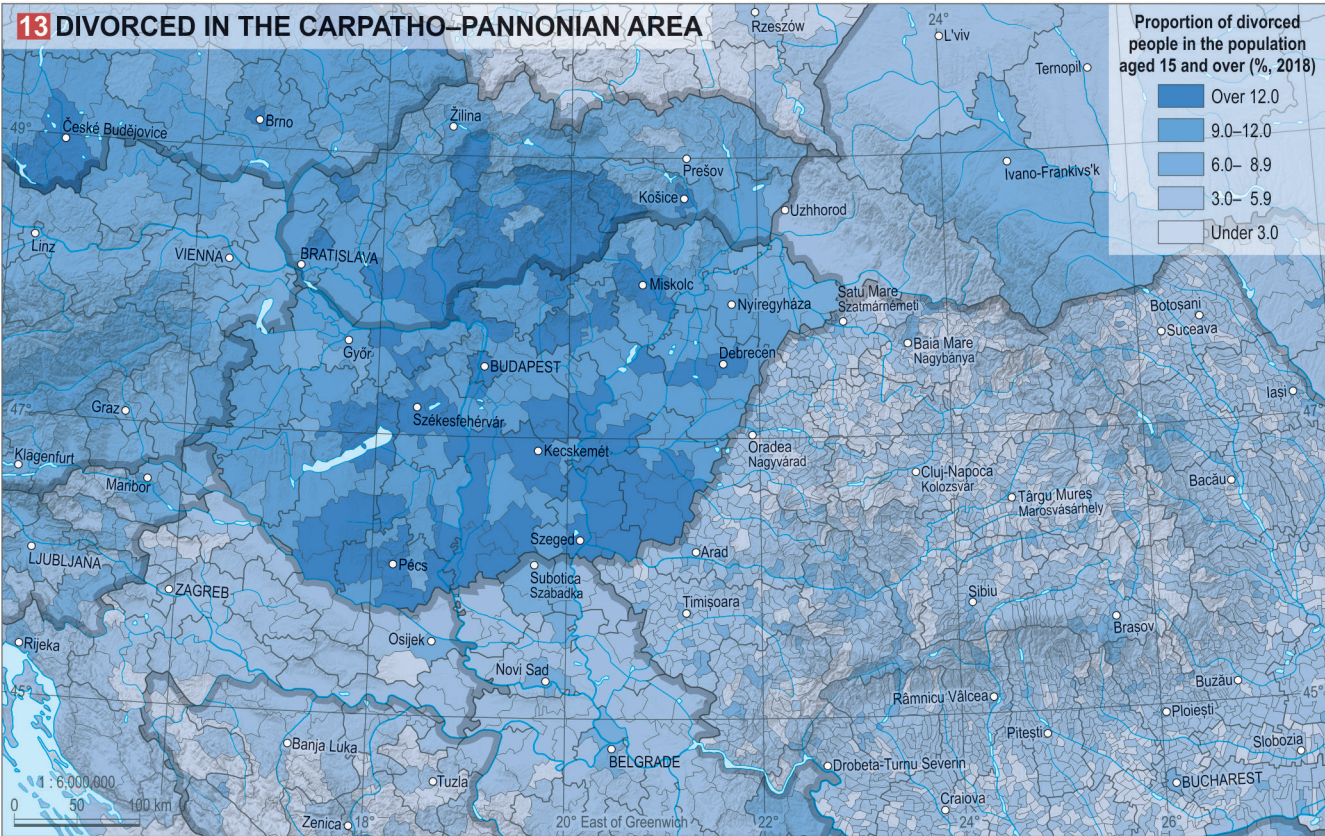
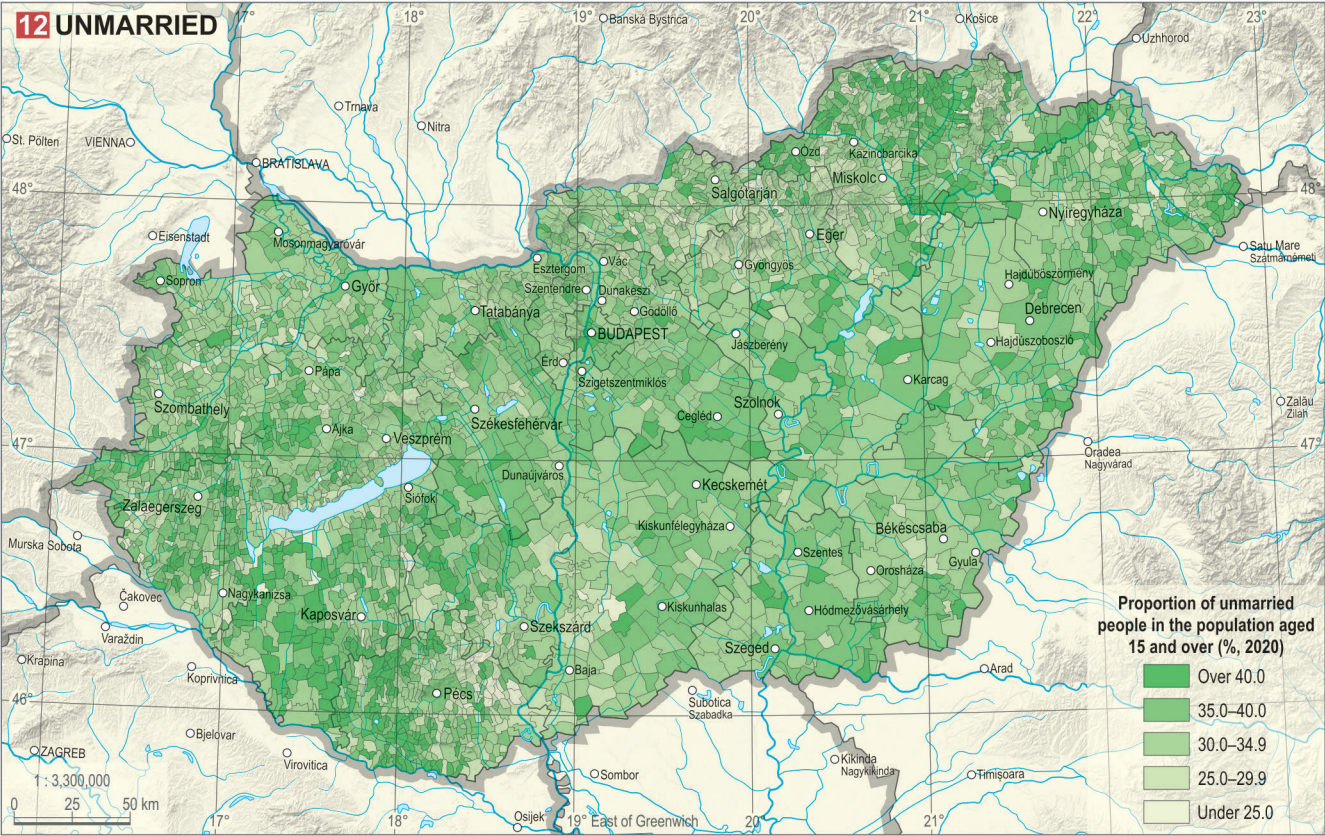
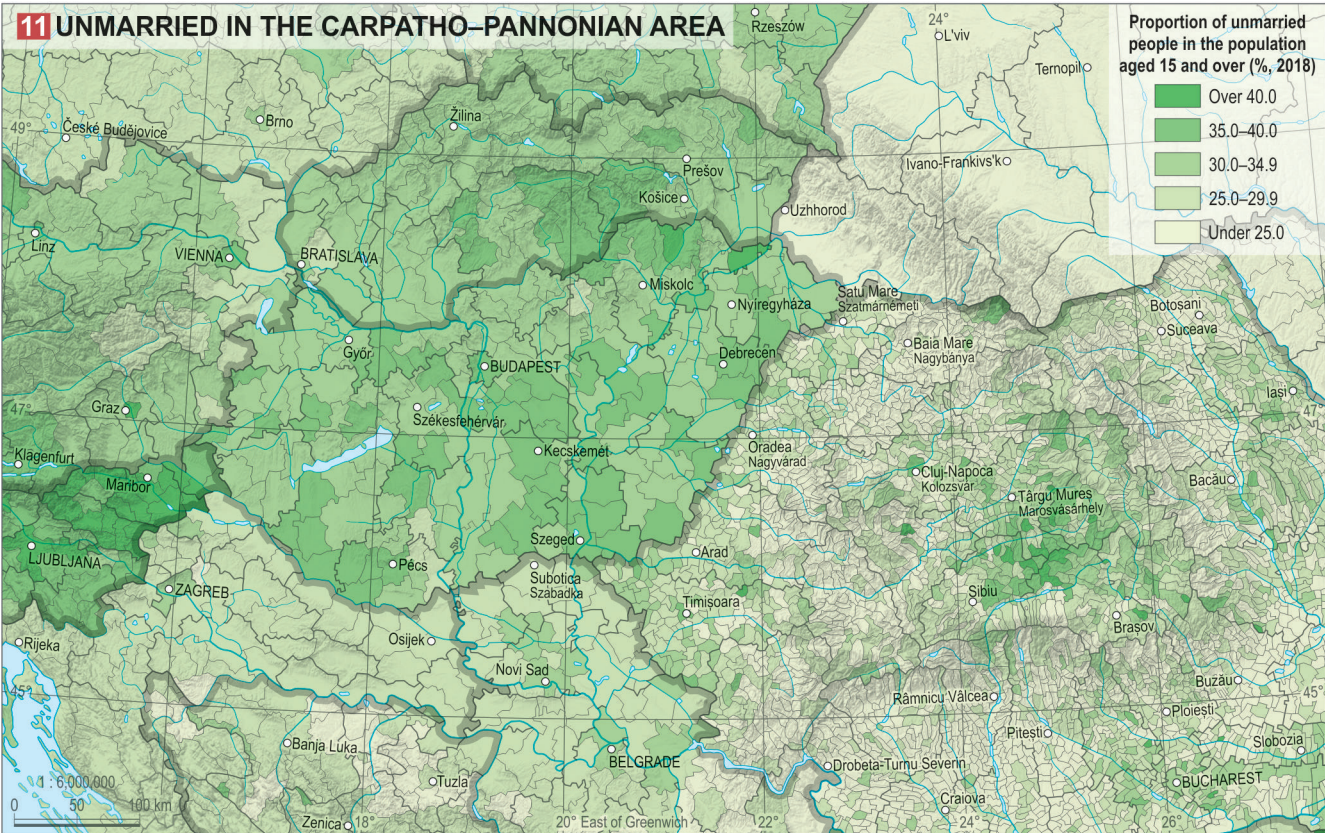


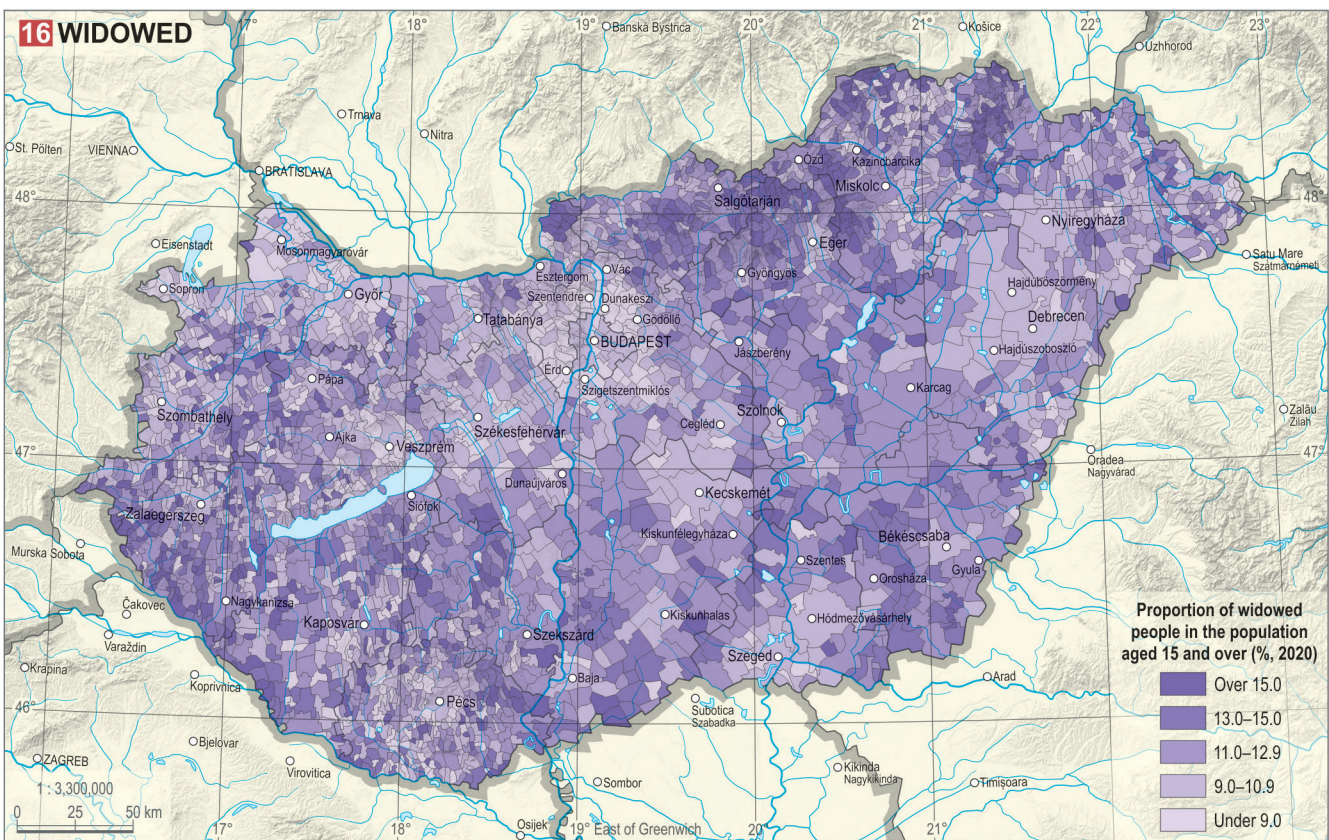
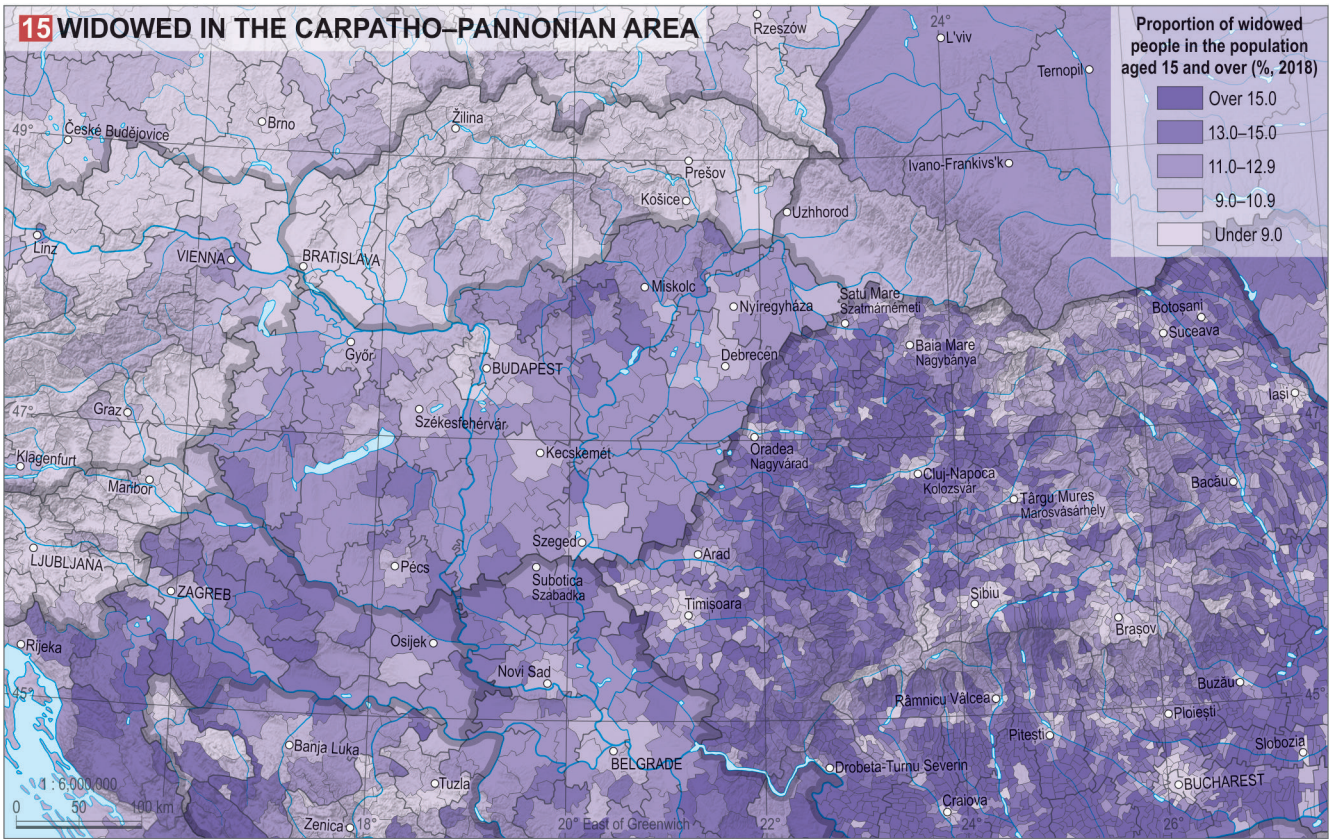
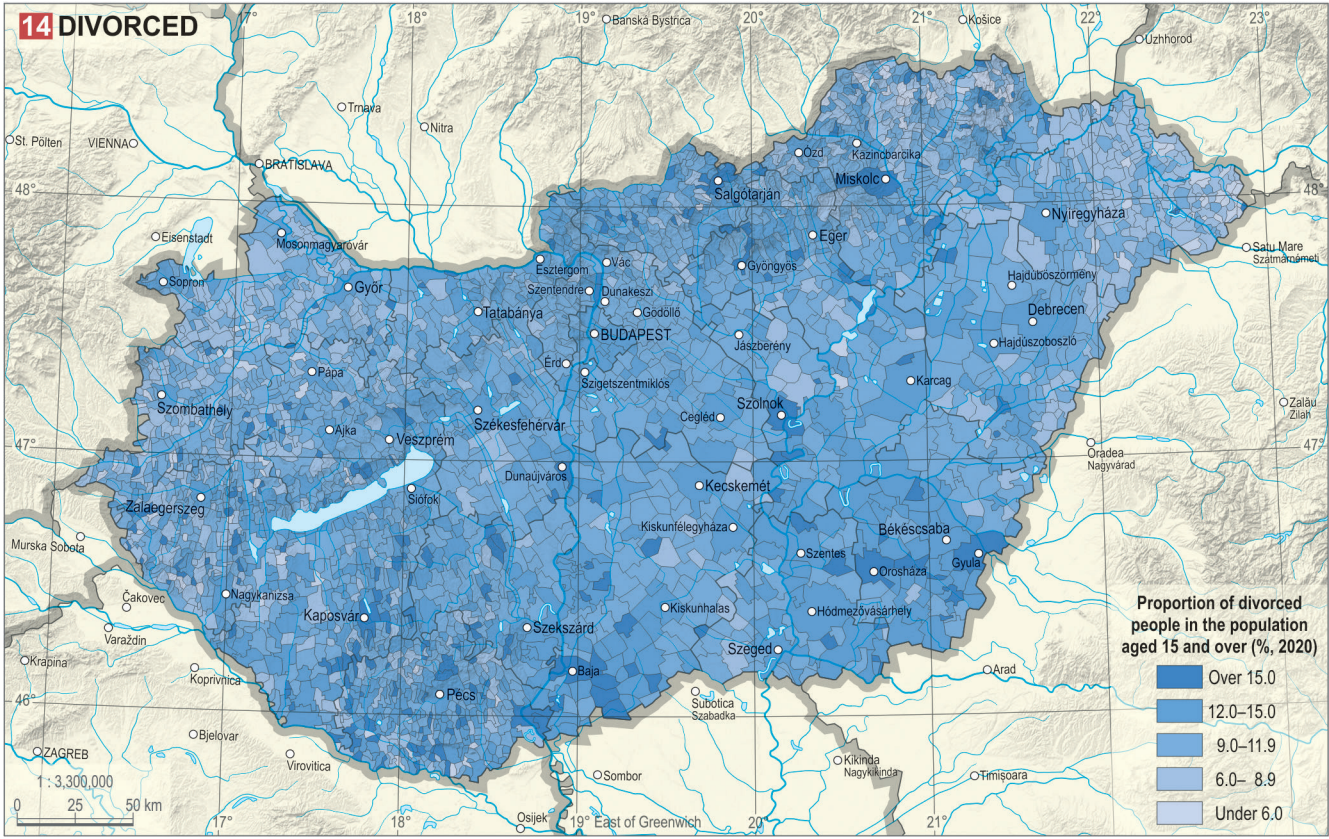
3 A divorced mother and her child

VI.2.14. The proportion of divorced people is particularly high (above 15%) in industrial cities such as Dunaujváros, Komló, Tiszaújváros, Salgótarján, Miskolc, Tatabánya, and districts X, XV and XX of Budapest. The proportion of divorced women is slightly higher than that of men in all counties, which can

largely be explained by the more frequent remarriage of the latter **3.**

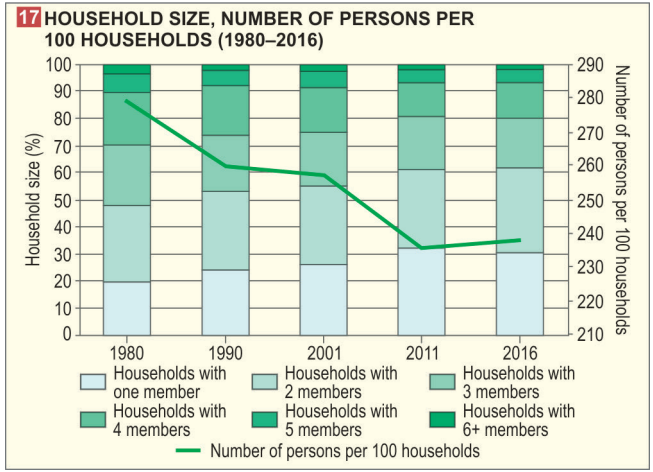
Among certain categories of marital status, the *proportion of widows* shows the smallest spatial differences in the Carpathian Basin **VI.2.15.** Nevertheless, there are areas where the proportion of widows is





well above average due to the ageing of the local population and high mortality (e.g. Apuseni Mountains, Someşan Plateau, Banat Mountains, Western Slavonia, Dinarides and Northern Hungary). The number and proportion of widows is influenced by mortality and age structure, which vary from country to country

and from gender to gender. In countries with higher life expectancy, the gender gap is smaller, so the proportion of widows is somewhat lower [18](#) [VI. 2. 15](#). However, it should not be forgotten that while *cohabitation* can also be an alternative to remarriage after both widowhood and divorce, it does not affect the legal



category of marital status. Acceptance of cohabitation is high in Austria, Hungary and Slovenia but significantly lower in Croatia, Romania, Ukraine and Slovakia.

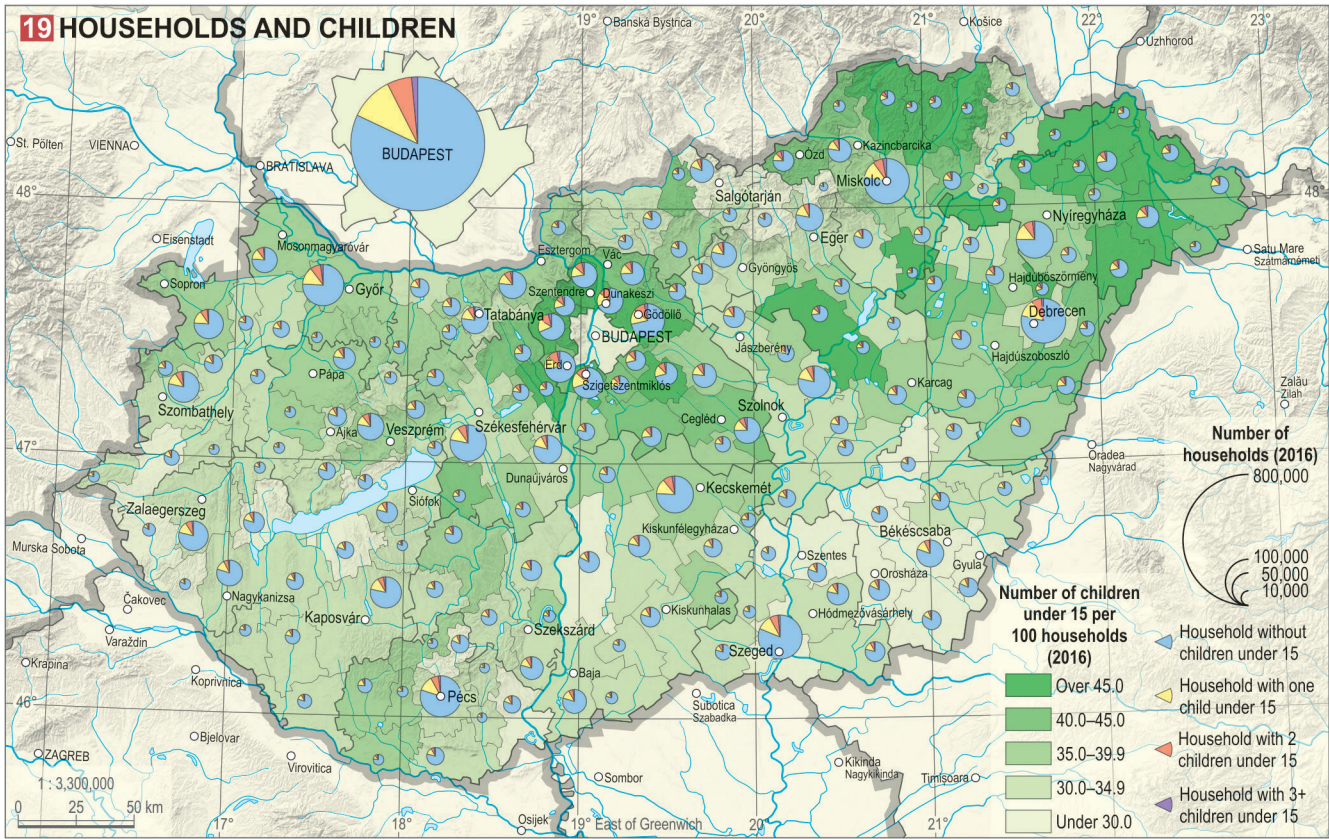
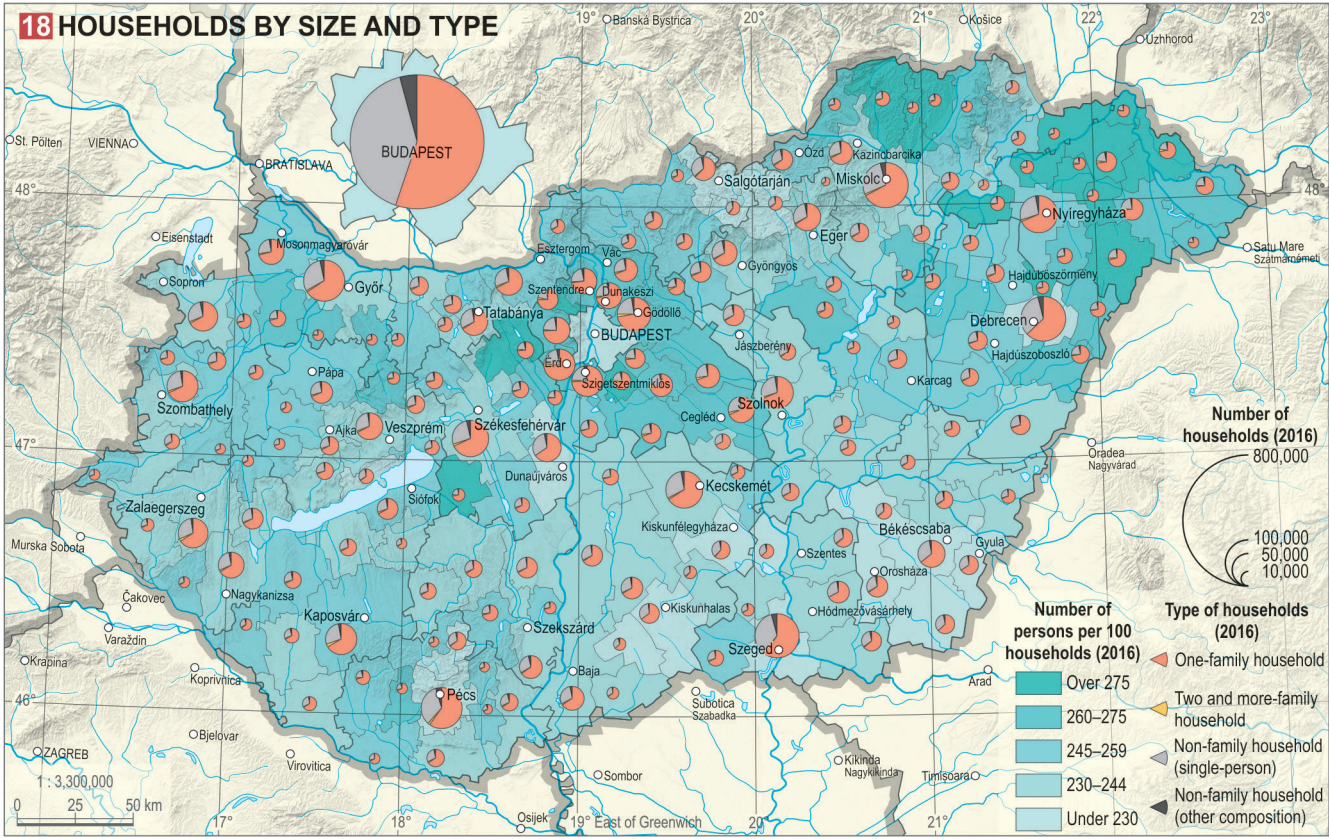
In Hungary, the proportion of widows is also high, especially in regions with ageing populations, including rural areas in the North Hungarian Range, the Southern Alföld and the Transdanubian Hills [VI. 2. 16](#).

The difference among the genders is very marked: the proportion of widows among women is more than 4.5 times that of the proportion among men. The main reason for this is the shorter life expectancy of men. In general, counties with high proportions of widowed women (e.g. Nógrád) also exhibit the largest differences in life expectancy between the two sexes.

Structure of households

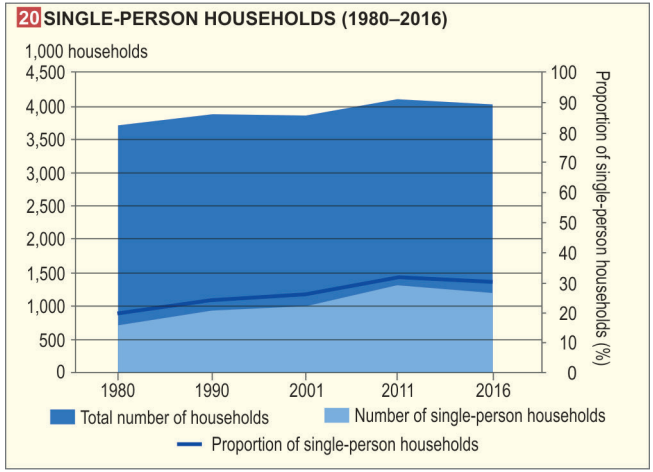
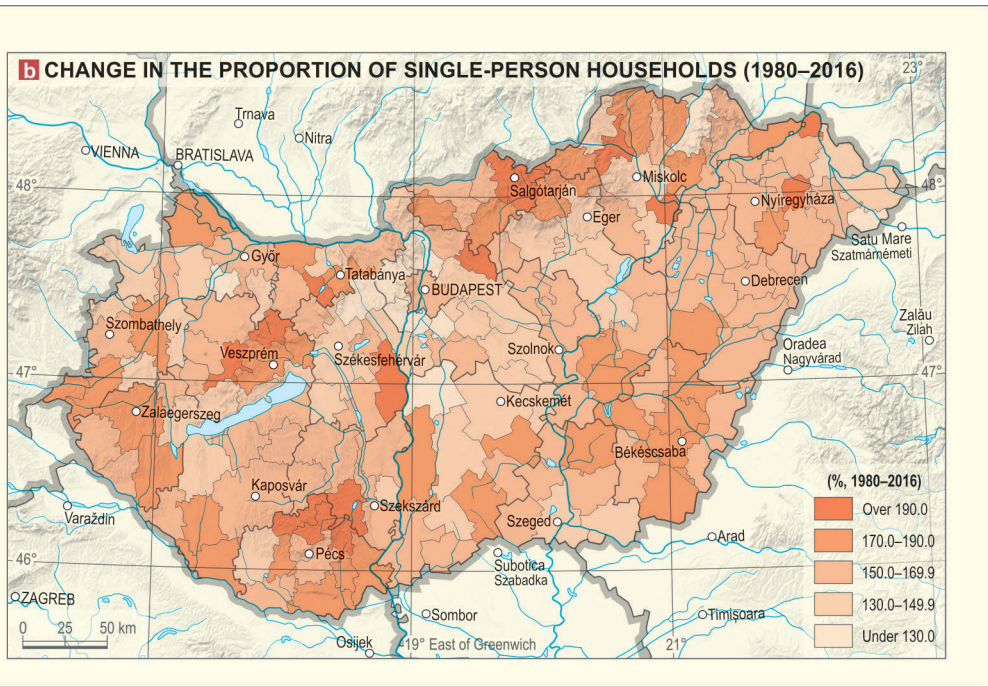
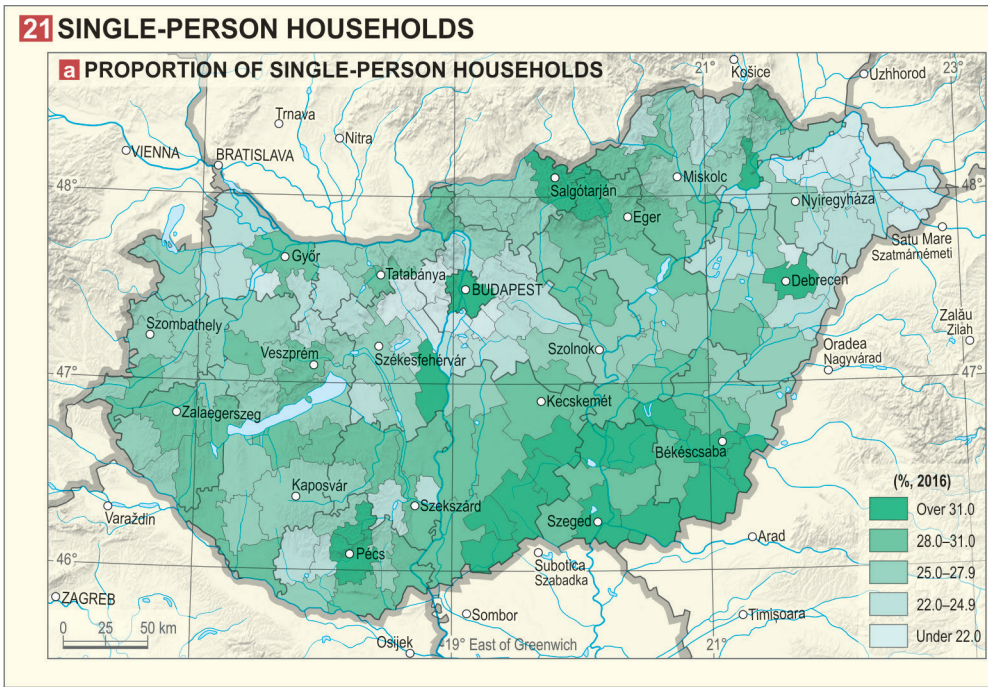
As much as 98% of the population in Hungary lives in private households. While the population has been steadily declining since 1981, the number of households has tended to grow. This also means that households have become gradually smaller in recent decades. In 1980, the *average household size* was 2.79 people, yet in 2016 it was only 2.38 [VI. 2. 17](#). This process can be traced back to several factors. One is the ageing of the population, which contributes significantly to an increase in the proportion of *one-* and *two-person households*, as the elderly typically live in such households. The decrease in the average household size also reflects the fact that the proportion of households without children has been steadily increasing, and there are fewer children in families with children. Another factor in the reduction of household size is the decrease in the number of people living in three- or multi-generational households, where grandparents, parents and children form a cohabiting community. In recent years, however, there have been only small changes in the number and size of households. This suggests that past trends are reversing or not continuing at the same pace as before. Between 2011 and 2016, the average household size increased slightly. This was due to a slight decline in the number of one-person households and an increase in the proportion of households with two or, to a lesser extent, 4-5 people.

In the areas with the most ageing population, such as Budapest and many major cities (e.g. Szeged, Békéscsaba, Pécs and Debrecen), the average household size (2.06–2.26) is significantly below the national value (2.38 persons/household) [VI. 2. 18](#). At the same time, in the Budapest and other metropolitan agglomerations, as well as in the regions with multiple disadvantages inhabited by populations (often Roma) with typically high fertility and a young age structure, the size of households is particularly large (exceeding 2.75). The cohabitation of three- or multi-generational families is also more common in these areas.



One of the most important social phenomena of recent decades has been the decline in fertility, which has also led to a decline in the proportion of *families and households with children*. The younger the age group of the children, the stronger the decline will be. This is explained by the fact that children remain in their parents' home for longer periods, with some doing so until the end of their 20s or even into their 30s. Consequently, the proportion of people living in a household with their older offspring has not de-

creased as much as that of people with young children. In 1980, 46% of families were raising children under 15 years of age, while in 2016 the corresponding figure was just 32%. The decline in fertility has resulted not only in a decline in the proportion of families raising children but also in lower numbers of children. The consequences of this can be seen in changes in family structure. In 1980, the proportion of single-child families was 51% among those raising children under the age of 15, while in 2016 it was



57%. Spatial differences in fertility also determine differences in cohabitation forms. Areas where the size of households is above average also have a particularly high proportion of families with many children [VI. 2. 19](#).

The increase in the number of *one-person households* is a decades-long process that seems to have stalled in recent years, although it is not yet clear whether a lasting decline can be detected in the proportion of people living alone. Around 30% of the population lived in a single-person household in 2016 [VI. 2. 20](#). However, people living alone cannot be regarded as a homogeneous group: they are at different stages of their lives, their social-demographic situations vary, and they also differ in terms of the reasons for living alone and in how long they have been living alone (whether this status is temporary or permanent). The largest group of one-person households comes from the older generations. Among the elderly living alone, women are significantly overrepresented, as their male companions typically die first. This is because male life expectancy is lower than that for women and because men are typically a few years older in relationships. In recent years, the proportion of divorced people among the elderly living alone has also risen, following the breakdown of even decades-old relationships. As relationships become more fragile, such fragility will certainly play an increasingly important role in the changing forms of coexistence among older age groups.

The proportion of one-person households is highest in Budapest (50.4%) where population ageing is particularly acute, but such households are also remarkably common (33%-35%) in many other major cities (e.g. Szeged, Pécs, Salgótarján and Debrecen) [VI. 2. 21](#). In several inner districts of Budapest (I, V, VI, VII) the proportion of single-person households is well above 50%, but in many districts of the Southern Alföld and in Northern Hungary a high proportion of single people and the associated problems are noteworthy as well.

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