Loneliness in post-socialist countries in Eurasia: partners and children save millennials from daunting desolation?

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Abstract

In modern societies, loneliness is assumed to be a challenge that is faced mostly by the elderly. However, certain age groups experience the long lasting impact of loneliness more than others. The rise of social media, living alone, and the unprecedented isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has left millennials lonelier than ever. Relying on partners and/or children to socialise has been often portrayed as one of the pathways in avoiding (or reducing) loneliness, yet in a generation that is less partnered and has fewer children than the previous one these channels may not be working the same way. Being lonely in post-socialist countries in Eurasia may exacerbate the loneliness millennials suffer from as these societies are often characterised by higher levels of loneliness than Western democracies. That is why in this paper we seek to identify a connection between loneliness and partnership and parenthood statuses and compare the connection between the regions (Commonwealth of Independent States and Baltic States) in the sample. To do so we employ the Generations and Gender Survey round 2 data collected in Belarus, Estonia, Moldova, Latvia and Kazakhstan as well as the Families and Inequalities Survey 2021 in Lithuania. We use multinomial logistic regression analysis to conclude that partnership rather than parenthood makes millennials less lonely.

Background

"Millennials are the loneliest generation" (Ballard, 2019). The statement comes from a representative survey carried out in the US among adults older than 18. Factors such as increased use of social media (Hunt et al., 2018), more and more people living alone, rising geographic mobility (Baarck et al., 2021) as well as the COVID-19 pandemic related lockdowns, distancing and other measures limiting social interaction are argued to have exacerbated the loneliness epidemic in the US and Europe (Weissbourd et al., 2021; Baarck et al., 2021).

The risk loneliness entails to an individual's health has frequently been compared to smoking or obesity (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008). The health challenges loneliness poses extend to both the physical and psychological by increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease and inflammation as well as depressive symptoms (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008). In a world that is more and more connected tangibly and virtually, lonely individuals take an excessive toll on their health.

Research investigating factors linked to loneliness has often stressed the importance of partnership in relation to loneliness. Unsurprisingly, people who share their lives with a partner indicate lower levels of loneliness despite their age (Schmitz et al., 2021; van Tilburg et al., 2015). However, fewer millennials in comparison to previous generations of the same age live with a partner and children (Barroso et al. 2020). This is expected to contribute to millennial loneliness. On the other hand, later generations in comparison to previous ones (e.g. millennials versus generation X) are found to be less lonely and more satisfied with their singlehood making the relationship between loneliness and partnership more obscure (Böger and Huxhold, 2020). This also holds for divorced individuals (van Tilburg et al., 2015). Having children is not necessarily associated with a single loneliness related outcome. While mothers with young children may experience spells of pronounced loneliness (in comparison to fathers), later in

life children may also provide companionship (Nowland et al., 2021; Bessaha et al., 2020). The previous research indicates that loneliness differential exists not only between partnership and parenthood statuses, but also between the genders. Among certain groups of individuals from post-Soviet states distress and loneliness have been found to be more pronounced among women (Aroian et al., 2003).

Arguably, understanding the relationship between loneliness, partnership and family statuses among millennials will shed light on whether the title of millennials as the loneliest generation is justified and what could be driving those associations if any. In addition, previous research has found that post-totalitarian (including post-socialist) societies are lonelier in comparison to societies having longer democratic history (Rapolienė and Aartsen, 2022). The combination of generational loneliness in on average lonely societies may contribute to amplifying negative outcomes facilitated by loneliness. Therefore, focus on millennials in post-socialist societies of Belarus, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania and Moldova may expand the existing knowledge on the subject. Literature, even if limited, also suggests that loneliness is expected to be higher among the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Belarus and Moldova (with an exception of Kazakhstan) rather than in the Baltic States of Estonia. Latvia and Lithuania (Rapolienė and Aartsen, 2022; Stickley et al., 2013).

Research Question

In connection to previous comparative research on loneliness, this paper asks the following questions:

What are the inter-regional differences of loneliness in Eurasia?
What are the determinants of loneliness in post-socialist countries in Eurasia?
What is the gendered difference in loneliness in post-socialist countries in Eurasia?

Data

Our analyses are based on data from the Generations and Gender Survey round 2 (GGSII) collected in Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Moldova and Kazakhstan as well as Families and Inequalities Survey 2021 in Lithuania (VMU, 2021). The GGS is a panel survey of an 18-79 year-old resident population, which is held in a number of countries. It aims to survey nationally representative samples of the population. The GGS has information on the most important societal aspects of demographic choices in contemporary, developed societies, focusing on the processes of family dynamics and contextual factors. The GGS has been carried out in Belarus, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Latvia and Moldova in 2017, 2021, 2018, 2018 and 2020 respectively following around 10,000 respondents per country with an exception of Estonia and Latvia datasets which sample size is 2000 each. The Families and Inequalities Survey carried out in Lithuania is a representative dataset covering the cohort born between 1985 and 1989 (n = 1000). The survey is highly comparable with the GGS as a share of variables can be harmonised with the GGS due to the survey question framing and answer categories. Following the aim of the paper to examine determinants of loneliness among millennials, we restricted the sample to respondents who indicated their degree of experiencing loneliness and are aged 31 to 36 (to also exploit the data availability). Our final analytical sample consists of 5,765 cases.

Research Methods

Logistic regression model with robust standard errors is employed to answer the research question. The dependent variable in the analysis is the loneliness index constructed from the six-item De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (coded 0-no loneliness; 6-severe loneliness) (Gierveld and Tilburg 2006). Focal independent variables used in the analyses are the number of co-resident children (0, 1, 2, 3 and more) and having a co-resident partner or spouse (1-partner or spouse with whom relationship lasts longer than 3 months). We include standard control variables to address unobserved heterogeneity that are age (in years), gender (coded 1-male), education (1 – low (unfinished high school) , 2 – middle (high school education or vocational training), 3 – high (university or college degree)) (Michalos 2008; Witter et al. 1984). We also control for total household net yearly income (harmonised categories across countries), and subjective health (1-very good; 5-very bad) that are important contextual variables of well-being (Steptoe et al. 2015; Diener et al. 1993).

Preliminary Findings and Discussion

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics

	Commonwealth of Independent States (3)						Baltic States (3)						Total (6)	
	Belarus		Kazakhstan		Moldova		Estonia		Latvia		Lithuania			
	Men (n=608)	Women (n=623)	Men (n=792)	Women (n=1198)	Men (n=332)	Women (n=644)	Men (n=160)	Women (n=332)	Men (n=107)	Women (n=136)	Men (n=520)	Women (n=480)	Men (n=2519)	Women (n=3413)
	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)
Focal independent variables														
Number of co-resident children	1.52 (0.9)	1.02 (0.92)	1.49 (1.13)	1.78 (1.09)	1.18 (1.05)	1.85 (0.92)	0.72 (1.01)	0.98 (1.06)	0.61 (0.87)	1.44 (1.01)	0.8 (0.9)	1.06(0.89)	1.26 (1.05)	1.46 (1.07)
Co-resident partner or spouse	0.72 (0.44)	0.7 (0.45)	0.78 (0.41)	0.74 (0.43)	0.73 (0.44)	0.81 (0.38)	0.63 (0.48)	0.71 (0.45)	0.64 (0.48)	0.77 (0.42)	0.64 (0.47)	0.71 (0.45)	0.72 (0.44)	0.74 (0.43)
Covariates														
Age	33.51 (1.7)	33.37 (1.71)	33.35 (1.7)	33.41 (1.69)	33.67 (1.65)	33.54 (1.68)	33.57 (1.78)	33.48 (1.67)	33.07 (1.68)	33.34 (1.77)	33.62 (1.64)	33.56 (1.66)	33.51 (1.69)	33.46 (1.69)
Education	2.35 (0.69)	2.25 (0.71)	2.08 (0.81)	2.24 (0.82)	2.29 (0.51)	2.38 (0.52)	2.22 (0.72)	2.59 (0.62)	2.13 (0.72)	2.41 (0.64)	2.32 (0.61)	2.53 (0.56)	2.40 (0.7)	2.35 (0.7)
Total household net yearly income (categories)	4.70 (1.67)	4.92 (1.69)	2.63 (2.25)	2.65 (2.32)	4.91 (2.36)	5.3 (2.45)	3.44 (1.33)	3.68 (1.35)	3.53 (1.60)	3.23 (1.59)	5.04 (2.2)	5.12 (2.2)	4.54 (2.19)	4.66 (2.31)
Subjective health	2.13 (0.6)	2.05 (0.61)	1.86 (0.57)	1.97 (0.56)	2.25 (0.68)	2.24 (0.67)	2.15 (0.76)	1.92 (0.75)	n.a.	n.a.	2.05 (0.85)	2.19 (0.99)	2.03 (0.69)	2.07 (0.7)

Source: GGSII, Families and Inequalities Survey 2021

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for the working sample that consists of 5,765 cases and is divided into working sub-samples in terms of countries and genders.

Figures 1 and 2 depict the descriptive differences between loneliness measured in de Jong Gierveld scale. The difference lies in a larger share of individuals corresponding to 3 and above points of loneliness in the case of the Baltic States rather than the CIS countries.

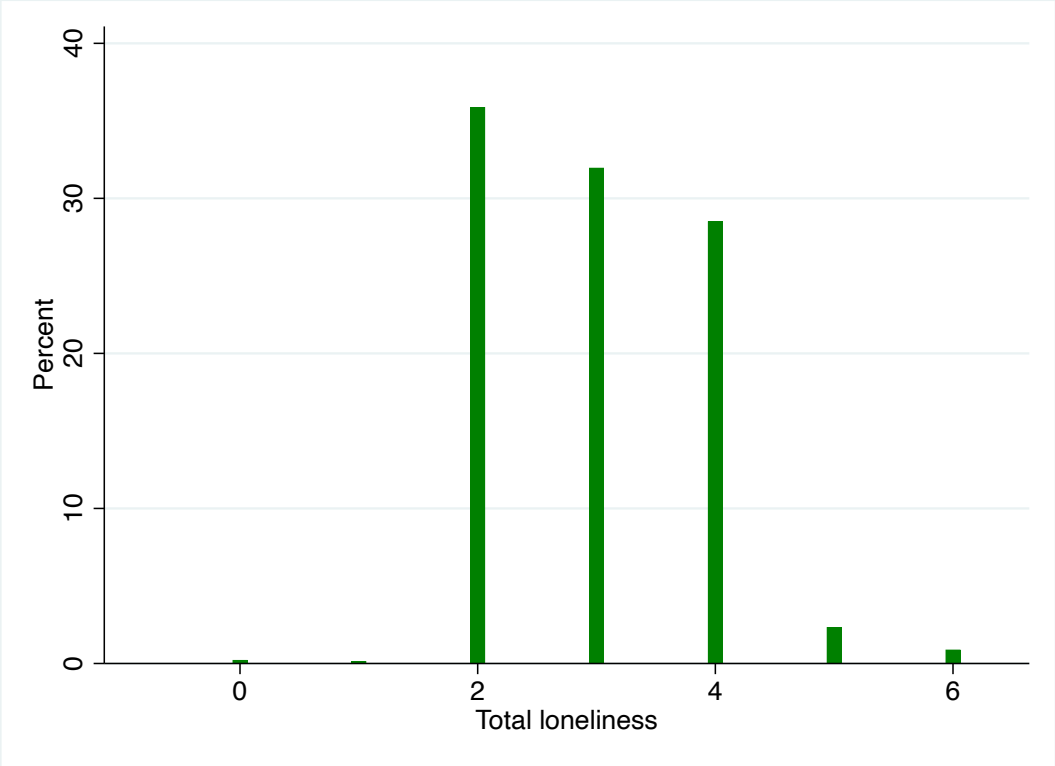


Figure 1 – Incidence of loneliness in Commonwealth of Independent States among 31 to 36 year olds measured in de Jong Gierveld scale.

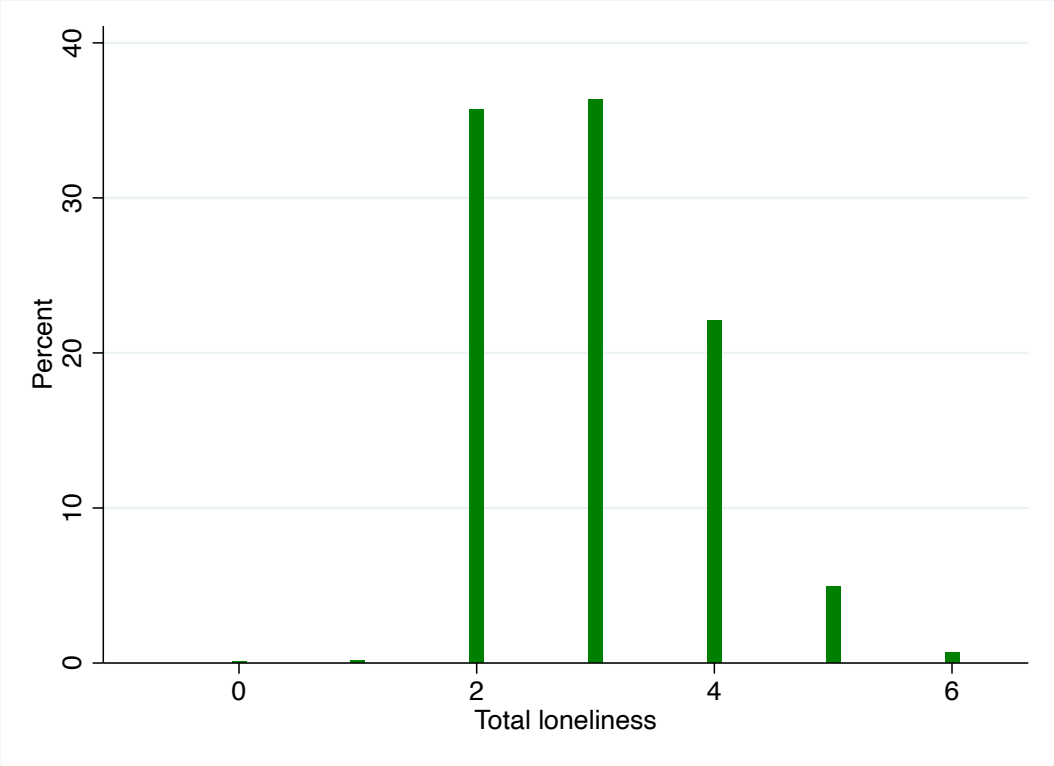
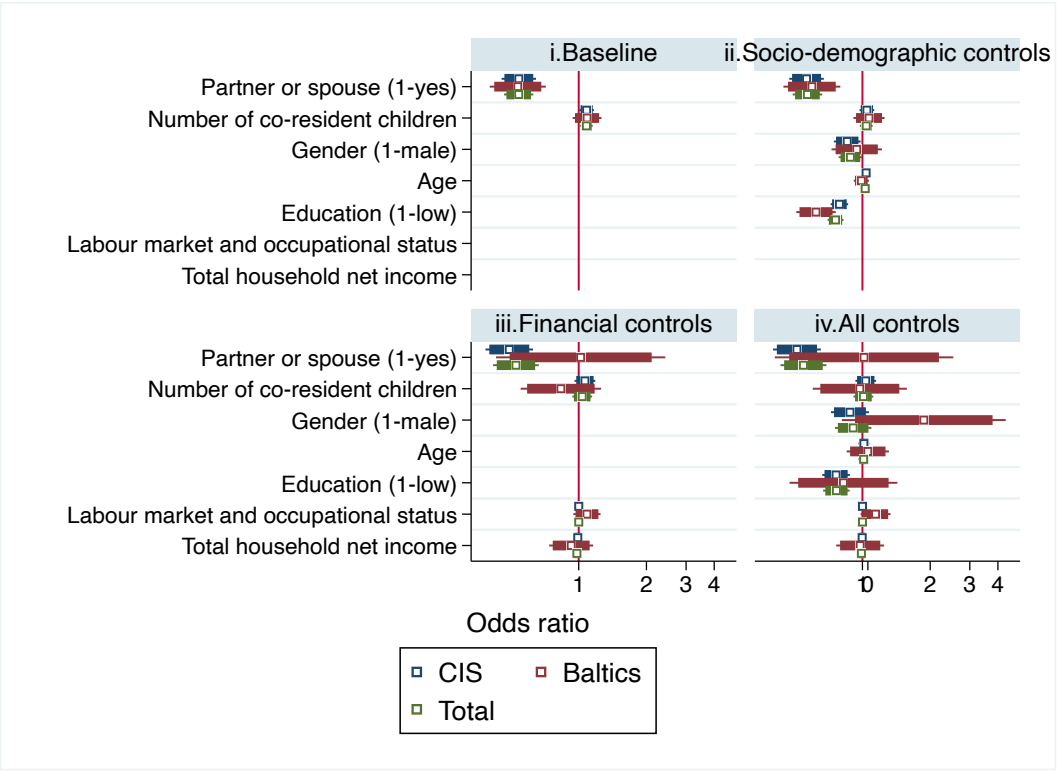


Figure 2 – Incidence of loneliness in the Baltic States among 31 to 36 year olds measured in de Jong Gierveld scale.

Figure 3 shows the preliminary results of the multinomial logistic regression analysis. The results are presented in odds ratios with 90% and 95% confidence intervals. Each estimation predicts loneliness by a set of predictors. Model i. reports the baseline estimation with measures of having a coresident spouse or partner and coresident children. The results suggest that having a partner is significantly associated to lower levels of loneliness in the CIS and Baltics States as well as in the total sample. Inclusion of the socio-demographic controls (age, education and gender) in model ii. has confirmed the association.

Models iii. and iv. report the estimation of loneliness based on financial controls (total household net income categories and labour market and occupational status) and all the controls respectively. Models iii. indicates an association between lesser loneliness and having a partner in the CIS countries while no association in the Baltic States. Including all controls in model iv. re-affirms the association in the CIS, no meaningful connection is found between loneliness and having coresident children. This relationship is sensitive to educational level. In a nutshell, partners not children prevent millennials from experiencing loneliness in some post-socialist countries.



Note: Logistic regression model with robust standard errors, estimates are presented with 90% and 95%, confidence intervals.

Figure 3 – Estimation of change in loneliness due to selected covariates

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