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Are Individualisation and Universalism in Decline? Exploring the Indicators of Modernisation in Europe and Anglosphere

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Abstract

The paper examines whether there has been a recent shift in the long-term trends of individualisation and universalism at both structural and cultural levels. Following Archer's morphogenetic approach, we treat the structural level as the set of material, economic, and institutional conditions and the cultural level as the system of ideas, values, and beliefs. Culture is thus analytically distinct from, though interacting with, structure. The scope of the research is limited to the EEA, Switzerland, and the Anglosphere countries. Using official statistics, KOF globalisation and V-Dem indices, and WVS/EVS survey data, we apply polynomial regression models to estimate the hypothetical breakpoints and linear models when no breakpoint can be identified. In structural terms, we confirm a slowdown in micro-level structural individualisation. At the macro level, the results are inconclusive, highlighting the discrepancy between the narrative of individualisation persistent in theoretical and political frameworks, and the actual change in structural terms. Nevertheless, most of our regression models suggest at least a deceleration of this process. Regarding universalism, both micro- and macro-level structural indicators provide persuasive support for the claim that, following its long-term rise, the growth of the trend has slowed. At the cultural level, the results indicate that, while individuals are responding to structural conditions characterised by declining universalism, the process itself remains contradictory and uneven.

Keywords: modernisation; individualisation; universalism; cultural trends; slow-down of trends; polynomial regression

1. Introduction

The article responds to considerable socio-political changes that are shaping global cooperation, and challenging ideas of linear progress to liberalism and democracy. Since the global financial crisis starting in 2008, trust in international political institutions and banking system has declined. According to the Democracy Report, the level of democracy enjoyed globally by the average person in 2022 had fallen to levels last seen in 1986, and continued to stagnate in the following year [1]. This implies a risk of reduced civil liberties, weaker rule of law, and greater risk of oppression. The Brexit referendum in 2016 and the first presidency of Donald Trump in the United States marked a considerable shift in political rhetoric towards prioritising national interests over global cooperation and well-being. At the same time, the extreme polarisation, significantly encouraged by the rise in technology-driven filter bubbles and algorithmic-driven connections [2] are dividing people, eroding solidarity and social cohesion [3,4].

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All those processes challenge the well-known Francis Fukuyama's [5] thesis of the 'End of the History', positing the superior position of Western liberal democracy and market economies. Within this line of thought, the future was imagined as a globally connected society, in which individuals are able to realise their potential, construct desired identities, and shape their life paths [6]. Even significant challenges to economic growth, recognised in terms of unsustainable practices that threaten the environment and human population, as well as challenges to democratic, just societies, manifesting in political tensions and conflicts, were long considered obstacles to be resolved through international political bodies and rational dialogue.

The recent societal challenges point to the need for systematic and comprehensive research on social change at both the structural and cultural level. In this article, we examine the trajectories of two major modernisation trends: individualisation and universalism and identify emerging social and cultural patterns that appear to be reconfiguring central aspects of modernisation since the Enlightenment, or the so-called Age of Reason.

For those purposes, we lean on some observations pointing to certain shifts in those trends, especially in terms of cultural practices. We also take into account the critics of existing studies primarily emphasising either the deterministic view of individuals' liberation of social structures or the neglect of local contexts yielding "multiple modernities" or hybrid forms blending global standards with local particularism [7–10]. Therefore, our study examines whether these trends actually exist and then, based on this, identifies potential shifts.

The central purpose of this paper is to test whether there has been a recent shift in the long-term modernisation trends, implying that the most modernised societies have reached a breaking point, at which the long-term trends of modernisation slow down and then even reverse. And if a clear break from the long-term trends can in fact be identified, how can we interpret it, especially in terms of what may be reasonably expected in the foreseeable future—as a viable alternative to modernisation as we have known it.

Based on our theoretical framework and research gap, we define the following research questions:

RQ1. *How have the trajectories of structural and cultural individualisation changed over the long run, and is there evidence of a recent slowdown or reversal in specific indicators?*

RQ2. *How are structural and cultural indicators of universalism changing over the long run and in recent decades?*

The scope of our research is limited to the countries of the European Economic Area and Switzerland, combined with the Anglosphere of the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The countries were selected based on the following criteria: (a) long, continuous historical exposure to the modernisation processes under study (industrialisation, democratisation, and welfare-state formation since at least the 19th century); (b) comparable liberal-democratic institutional frameworks enabling comparable operationalisation of structural indicators (e.g., V-Dem, OECD Family Database coverage); (c) sufficient longitudinal data coverage across all indicator categories in Table 1. These criteria exclude other early-modernising or partially modernised contexts (e.g., Japan) that could challenge generalisability. In doing so, we aim not only to avoid oversimplifying the modernisation process but also to examine these trends within their original context to better understand their trajectories as they appear through a broad variety of structural and cultural phenomena.

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Table 1. Overview of the indicators.

		Individualisation	Universalism
Structural	Micro	Divorces per marriage Birth rates outside marriage Mean household size Internal migration	Mixed marriages KOF Interpersonal Globalisation de facto KOF Cultural Globalisation de facto
	Macro	Government expenditure/GDP Tertiary education attainment	Equal rights protection Bureaucratic impartiality Egalitarian democracy Education GINI
Cultural		Independence as desired child's feature Choice and control over life	Treating women equally Treating immigrants equally Number of categories rejected as neighbours

We hypothesise that

H1a. *There is a break with the long-term structural individualisation trend.*

H1b. *There is a break with the long-term cultural individualisation trend.*

H2a. *There is a break with the long-term structural trend towards universalism.*

H2b. *There is a break with the long-term cultural trend towards universalism.*

We systematically test these hypotheses by applying: (a) a common estimation procedure (polynomial/linear regression with explicit breakpoint estimation) applied uniformly across all indicators, (b) the deliberate cross-level design pairing micro- and macro-structural indicators with cultural survey indicators for each concept, and (c) the use of the longest available time series for each indicator rather than single-wave snapshots.

2. Theoretical Framework of the Study

In the article, we examine long-term change in two specific dimensions broadly conceptualised in the sociological theories of modernisation: (1) individualisation broadly understood as increasing individual autonomy and (2) universalism understood in terms of expanding the scope of moral and legal inclusion. Several of these theories have also referred to other broadly defined trends, such as rationalisation (emphasising the most effective and efficient achievements of clearly defined goals instead of following traditional practices) and functional/structural differentiation (defined as the increased autonomy of different institutions, spheres, or subsystems of society).

These trends have been viewed as major shifts in establishing new socio-cultural settings and fundamentally transforming the predominant forms of social organisation, as well as ways of living, thinking, and believing. They have been understood as defining features of detraditionalised, rational, science-based society, allowing for greater autonomy and empowerment of individuals, as well as higher levels of meritocracy, democracy and universal rights, regardless of individuals' origin and social status [11].

Our study focuses on individualisation and universalism only—as the two aspects that define the shifting relationship between the individuals and their communities in terms of how autonomous an individuals may be in relation to their communities (individualisation) and how inclusive communities are towards the other individuals and communities (universalism).

We address modernisation trends as analytical categories enabling us to observe temporally bounded and observable patterns of directional change. Drawing on existing studies, we can define different sources from where trends can emerge. Vejlgaard's diffusion model of trend emergence and mainstreaming suggests that trends may be rooted in structural conditions seeing them as predictable structural social patterns [12]. In Powers' view of trends as commodified indicators of broader social influence, the cultural manifestations are crucial as they reframe how modernisation is experienced [13]. Trends can also be considered as developing through the interaction between values and their outward manifestations, as proposed in Dragt's forces-and-manifestations framework. In that regard, trends are observable manifestations of deeper value showing how structural forces lead to cultural manifestation [14]. For the purposes of this article, the idea of Higham's work also seems relevant as it bridges structural and cultural analysis and shows how these patterns can be systematically identified and tracked through proxy indicators before they become established as mainstream norms [15].

Our research builds on classical conceptualisations of modernisation, while also taking into account the critical observations that emphasise the linear evolutionary bias, and neglect of local contexts, leading to deformed or peripheral modernisation paths [9,10]. The most comprehensive classical synthesis of the theory of modernisation has been provided by Talcott Parsons: first in his classification of pattern variables (representing modernity through achievement, universalism, affective neutrality, specificity and self-orientation) [16] and then through his concept of modern evolutionary universals, namely bureaucracy, universal norms, democratic association and market economy [17]. A contemporary adaptation of Parsons' work can be found in the work of Nikolai Genov [18] whose four global trends include Upgrading the Rationality of Organisations, Individualisation, Spreading of Instrumental Activism and Universalisation of Value-Normative Systems.

The authors distinguishing between early (first) and late (second, reflexive) modernity have noted some discontinuities between the two but still emphasised the trends that are rooted in modernity in general, such as further individualisation and increased focus on managing human-induced risks [19] and globalisation [20,21]. A similar type of two-stage modernisation can also be noticed in the work of Ronald Inglehart who distinguishes between the shift from traditional to secular and from scarcity to expressive values.

Individualisation as a modernisation trend refers to the shift from community-based social structures of traditional society to more fluid, uncertain, and reflexive social realities. In this socio-structural process, individuals become progressively disembedded from traditional collective institutions, such as family, class, religion, stable occupational careers, and made formally responsible for constructing their own biographies [6]. This process, central to late modernity, also entails transformations in the market, legal, and welfare systems, with an increasing emphasis on individuals' uniqueness and autonomy [7].

Individualisation generally denotes increasing individual autonomy, implying greater diversity and unpredictability of individual life paths, individual social and spatial mobility, and detachment from the traditional bonds of the community and its strict norms. It has been highly praised as individual freedoms, ability to choose, and to take ones own's path, but it has also been criticised in terms of anomie, egoism, utilitarian individualism, atomisation, etc.

The concept of individualisation with its benefits and challenges is derived from classics of social theory, such as Ibn Khaldun (decline of "asabiyyah" with the rise of civilisation) [11]. The roots of individualisation in sociological theory can be traced back to Herbert Spencer's concept of industrial society based on contractual collaboration and competition between increasingly free individuals [22]. Émile Durkheim derives it from the increasing division of labour that provides the basis for organic solidarity but may also

result in anomie [23]. It is further elaborated by Talcott Parsons's [17] pattern variables of individual achievement and self-orientation. In the work of Max Weber and Georg Simmel [24,25], the changing relationship between the individual and society during the transition to modernity is also addressed in ways that imply individualisation processes. In this context, modernity is associated not only with individual freedom, but also with fragmentation and rational control, giving rise to both individual emancipation and the potential erosion of social cohesion.

The concept of individualisation gained further prominence in theories of late and reflexive modernisation, particularly in the work of Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Zygmunt Bauman. It has been identified as one of the most distinctive features of late modernity [19]. A central idea of individualisation is that it enables individuals to expand their personal freedom but simultaneously brings increasing responsibility and risk. With weakened traditional framework, individuals are required to make more life choices and take responsibility for both the success and failure. Individualisation in that context refers to structural, cultural, and biographical levels, reshaping both institutions and everyday life. It has remained fully consistent with postmodernist (Lyotard, Baurdillard) [26,27], post-industrial (Bell, Touraine) [28,29], postmaterialist (Inglehart) [30] and late/second/risk modernity turns (Beck, Giddens, Lash) [6,19]. Even more so, postmodernist diversity of perspectives, postmaterialist value-shifts and risk society in fact imply even further acceleration in individualisation. This is most explicit in the work of Beck [19] but also implied (or at least not contradicted by) the other key postmodernist and late-modernity authors.

Individualisation is a complex concept. Several authors distinguish between individualisation and individualism [31] or identify even more dimensions of the phenomenon [32]. In most studies [17–19], however, the difference between individualisation and individualism is not even addressed. For the purposes of this study, individualisation is understood in the broadest possible way. It denotes both processes and conditions of increased individual autonomy, regardless of whether this leads to harmonious cooperation or ruthless egoistic competition between them. Individualism is thus seen as an aspect of individualisation, not as a separate or even an opposite phenomenon.

There are also alternative perspectives, such as Ehrenberg's analysis, which emphasises the role of cultural narratives and frames individualisation less as a structural transformation than as a cultural myth that guides the affective actions [33].

Some critics on individualisation question the extent to which individuals can truly be disembedded from society, instead seeing individualisation as socially situated [34,35]. As argued by Kaiser et al., [8], collective forms of belonging, such as networks, identities, and communities, may not be disappearing but rather transforming. Individuals therefore remain socially embedded, though in more complex and fluid ways, requiring reflexive observations and actions.

This raises the question of whether we can observe shifts in collective forms that suggest a tentative decline of individualisation, or whether such forms remain stable throughout the modernisation process. Indication of new forms of collectivity, potentially signalling a reconfiguration rather than a decline of individualisation, can be observed in the proliferation of social networks, urban tribes, friendship groups, festivals, cosplay and gaming conventions, and other forms of group activity including dancing, choir singing, team games, and themed gatherings. This trend is what Foley [36] calls "new interconnectivity".

Quantitatively, a potential decline of individualisation in the Western world more broadly has been noted by Grant [37], who, using the Google Books Ngram Viewer, demonstrated that "individualism" has already passed its peak and that we may be shifting towards an age of collective purpose. More specifically, Sadowski's [38] study of Germany

and Poland suggests a possible "post-individualistic turn" in Central Europe, inferred from cross-generational social surveys.

Focusing on the history of the United States, Strauss and Howe's [39] generational theory of approximately 80-year-long secular cycles—each consisting of four turnings resulting from generational replacement—predicted a "crisis" turning beginning shortly after 2000, following a period of "unravelling." While unravelling represents the peak of individualisation, the crisis and subsequent "high" phases correspond to more collectivist and community-oriented attitudes. The 2007 financial crisis, social media echo chambers, various aspects of identity politics, and right-wing populism originated largely in the USA and subsequently diffused worldwide. Moreover, the recent crisis, which confirms Strauss and Howe's prediction, has weakened the USA's role in maintaining the global order, indirectly fuelling further crises such as the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. Wars and other crises typically increase individuals' sense of belonging to a collective rather than reinforcing independent individuality.

Universalism for the purposes of this study is defined as extending to others the same principles one claims for oneself to an ever-broader range of people and potentially other entities—leading to the expansion of inclusion. This involves both legal norms and practices by the authorities recognising and enforcing equal rights, as well as perceptions and practices of common people accepting, connecting and collaborating with an ever-broader range of "others". This understanding draws upon a rich theoretical tradition in sociology and social psychology.

This was implied in Weber's [25] ideal type of bureaucracy and its impersonal nature, which treats all individuals equally before the law and rejects privilege, discrimination, and arbitrariness. This idea became more explicit in Parsons's concepts of universalism (as opposed to particularism) and the evolutionary achievement of universal norms [17]. Partly expanding on the classical Parsons' concept, universalism can be defined as applying the same principles as we demand for "us" to the ever-growing numbers of others. It implies expanded identifications and/or broader compassion/solidarity (e.g., from tribe to nation, from nation to humanity, from humanity to all living beings and the whole planet). It is manifested in the struggle against discrimination, for equal treatment of everybody, human rights and beyond, involving animal rights and rights of other natural entities, such as rivers.

This implies that individuals are judged according to general rules and standards, and that institutions operate through impersonal and formalised criteria. In addition, it also implies that individuals are not bound to ascribed social status but can achieve certain social position based on their efforts and meritocratic standards.

Universalism can also be found as a core value in Schwartz's theory of basic human values defined as a value that emphasises understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature [40]. Though this perspective derives from social psychology, it substantially overlaps with the sociological definition proposed by Parsons and even Weber.

Universalism is therefore connected to the ideas of citizenship and human rights entailing equal legal status of individuals, enabling them to participate in political sphere regardless of their origin and social status. The most notable empirical manifestations of universalism include the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, more recently, the recognition of animal rights. Planet-centric values that transcend not only human tribalisms but also anthropocentrism could be seen as its ultimate form [41,42]. Therefore, universalism enhances social cohesion and connectivity in a complex, differentiated societies, and is seen as a key mechanism through which modern societies promote inclusion, equality, and social justice.

It can also be linked to the globalisation processes referring to the spread of abstract systems, such as expert knowledge, global markets and legal norms that transcend local contexts [6]. In this context, universalism can be considered in terms of spreading and diffusion of democratic norms; expansion of global governance institutions; standardisation of knowledge and practices; and growth of supranational, global identities and solidarities.

The significance of universalism for different developmental paths has also been contested. Studies that draw on the cross-national analyses challenge strict universalism–modernity links, showing modern (non-western) economies (e.g., Japan, Mexico) thriving with particularistic values—that arise from specific cultural, social, or community contexts, and emerge around local identity, cultural heritage, and community belonging—and thus questioning Parsons' typology. While there are universal preferences for foundational aims, such as trust and economy, one should not neglect culturally variable pathways for welfare and inclusion [9]. This kind of critique provides an additional rationale to limit our own study to the developed Europe and Anglosphere.

The key authors' late/second/risk modernity turns (Beck, Giddens, Lash) [6,19] have not implied any major turn in terms of rising universalism. However, there are severe threats towards such ideas, even in the context of Western societies. A recent turn towards collective purposes may reflect a growing challenge to universalism. The revival of in-group solidarity based on family, neighbourhood, ethnicity, political affiliation, or social media communities often occurs at the expense of out-groups, resulting in a shift from universalistic to more particularistic patterns. The prioritisation of a single group, single purpose, or an appeal to "the will of the people" (however defined) characterises the current global rise in populism and the erosion of democratic principles such as the separation of powers within the wider trend of autocratisation [43].

2.1. Towards the Empirical Research

Despite the theoretical prominence of these concepts, no systematic empirical study has yet subjected both trends simultaneously to rigorous, multi-indicator quantitative analysis spanning structural and cultural dimensions. There have been important single-country generations studies [39], but they are limited in scope [38] or use a single-proxy indicator from surveys or books [37]. Our attempt, however, is to deploy multi-indicator, multi-county, dual-level (micro–macro) design. To do so, we analyse time series capturing key indicators of these modernisation processes across social and cultural dimensions, with a particular focus on long-term developmental trajectories. We observe both trends separately on structural and cultural levels, as each level can be either reinforcing or reinventing each other, but only indirectly.

Following the morphogenetic approach developed by Archer [44,45], we consider both levels, including the actions of individuals and groups as ontologically and analytically distinct. As Archer said [44], social structure can be understood as a set of material, economic and institutional conditions, e.g., family formation, state spending, legal frameworks, while cultural system is a set of idea, values and beliefs. Culture is thus analytically distinct from, though interacting with, structure. In late modern societies both levels are becoming increasingly complex and distinct, with a higher level of autonomy from each other. Their interplay substantiates the interpretations and actions of individuals and is therefore important for the empirical research into the structural and cultural conditioning of modernisation trends.

We understand individualisation and universalism as societal processes and conditions that comprise both beliefs and behaviours. As we analyse social change as it appears on the aggregate level, we explore the structural and cultural settings that precondition and are the consequence of individuals' deliberations and behaviour.

We scrutinise the patterns of these trends in selected time series and suggest that they may be decelerating or even showing signs of reversal.

In this paper, we intend to address and contribute to the overcoming of three significant issues:

- Firstly, bridging the gap between theoretical claims and empirical evidence. Theoretical debates on modernisation typically belong to the domain of grand theories, providing consistent but also very broad, abstract and generalised claims. They tend to be consistent with some empirical observations and are well-illustrated by factual empirical findings. However, they usually lack systematic and rigorous empirical testing combining a multiplicity of indicators from a variety of sources. We do not claim that we can provide such complete tests in this paper, but we intend to be as comprehensive as possible in analysing the trajectories of individualisation and universalism through a variety of quantitative indicators.
  We differentiate between micro and macro levels of social reality approached as cultural orientations or value systems, and observable behaviour or its broader structural consequences. For instance, from a social-psychological perspective broadly expanding on such matter, values can influence behavioural intentions and, in turn, behaviour, but this relationship is neither automatic nor deterministic. For example, Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour conceptualises behaviour as shaped by intentions, which are themselves influenced by attitudes and values [46]. Similarly, Schwartz's work on human values establishes a connection between value priorities and behavioural intentions and choices, while recognising that contextual and situational factors also shape whether values are expressed in practice. Accordingly, the structural indicators used in this study should be interpreted as proxies for patterns of individualistic or universalistic behaviour and their aggregate consequences, rather than as direct measures of individualism or universalism as values. The distinction is particularly important because only the World Values Survey (WVS) and European Values Study (EVS) items used in this study provide measures that more directly approximate respondents' value orientations. The analysis therefore distinguishes between trends in individualistic and universalistic behaviour, captured primarily through structural indicators, and trends in individualism and universalism as values, captured through cultural and survey-based indicators.
- Secondly, distinguishing between structural and cultural indicators. Classical sociological modernisation theory seemed to have been more focused on structural change, or they conflated structural and cultural aspects, but often with little systematic empirical testing. Most of the recent research on the modernisation trends, especially individualisation, on the other hand, have been limited to the narrative aspects, to what people believe and tell. The conceptual debates and empirical observations have been typically focused on values and attitudes indicating individualisation/individualism through social surveys [31,32,38] or published books [37]. On the one hand, we draw upon these findings and include selected aggregates from WVS/EVS survey databases as a proxy indicator for cultural settings. On the other hand, this paper draws upon the structural indicators on the micro and macro level that show not what people believe or claim, but what actions of common individuals, their organisations and governments actually generate and are conditioned by in structural terms.
  The structural indicators enable us to track evidence of changes in individualistic or universalistic behaviour and their structural consequences, but they cannot, on their own, establish that underlying individualistic or universalistic values have changed. Behaviour can be shaped by a variety of social conditions, such as institutions, economic forces, demographic processes, policies etc. The findings should therefore be

understood as demonstrating potentially related trends between value orientations, behavioural patterns, and their structural manifestations, rather than assuming that changes in one necessarily imply changes in the others.

- Finally, providing a comprehensive interpretation of the hypothesised break from the long-term trends of individualisation and universalism. Even if the recent departure from the long-term modernisation trends is consistent and can be seen as more than just a temporary fluctuation, it does not necessarily imply some kind of re-traditionalisation. Through observing attitudes towards the natural environment, human diversity and human agency, some tentative hints can be provided about the future beyond the long-term trends of individualisation and with a new understanding of universalism.

2.2. Conceptualisation and Operationalisation of Individualisation and Universalism

Individualisation

For the purpose of our research, we rely on two crucial aspects of individualisation in structural terms: (1) detraditionalisation implying the erosion of traditional structures such as family, gender roles, and religion, and (2) the reorganisation of individuals within institutional frameworks—e.g., labour markets, welfare systems [47,48]. Therefore, in addition to values and attitudes, we seek observable features of social organisation that change independently of whether people report more individualistic behaviours, and that can be tracked over time across multiple national contexts.

In terms of structural indicators, we conceptualise them in the context of the following categories: (1) household and family formation showing the erosion of traditional family expectations and gender roles, (2) geographic and residential mobility showing disembedding from place or community of origin, (3) decline in the role of the state as a central authority over individuals' choices, and (4) systemic features that allow individuals to develop their own skills in specific ways and gain further empowerment through the system of formal education. Although there is some clear overlapping, the former two categories mostly refer to individuals' autonomy from the micro-level constraints within their communities, while the latter two categories refer mostly to the macro-level arrangements.

Individualisation of household and family formation can be observed in the departure from long-established norms and practices. The individuals' choices for cohabitation without formal marriage—with or without children—as well as the decision to divorce can be seen as classical indicators of their autonomy from traditional expectations. Traditionally, one would expect men and women to marry, children to be born within marriage, while divorces and births outside marriage would be a rare exception. The relative rise in divorces and births outside marriage can thus be seen as results of rising individual autonomy to depart from the traditional expectations. The same can be claimed for the shift away from extended families residing together towards smaller nuclear family units, single parents with children as well as individuals living alone. Regardless of whether this is seen as individual liberation and emancipation or as anomie, atomisation, fragmentation and collapse of social ties, it implies higher individual autonomy from community ties and tradition and thus indicates individualisation that can be observed through changing mean household size. Another aspect of individual autonomy as an aspect of detraditionalisation can be observed through increased spatial mobility as a detachment from the place and community of origin. This is why internal migration can be a relevant indicator.

Moving beyond micro-level kinship and local community interaction, we encounter individuals' abilities to enter the institutionalised spheres of work and employment conditioned by formal education. Higher educational levels typically imply further specialisation and corresponding diversity, individual social mobility and empowerment, more elab-

orated perspectives about the self and about the social and other environments. All of these can be seen as contributions to individuals' autonomy making the tertiary education attainment another relevant indicator of structural individualisation.

While supporting broad access to education requires substantial governments' expenditure, an alternative view should be addressed as well. From a classical liberal and neoliberal perspective that sees individual autonomy primarily in terms of utilitarian individualism, freedom from an extensive state footprint may also be seen as structural individualisation—with individuals obtaining more direct responsibility for their own welfare, risks and biography constructions. Consequently, we also observe the shifts in the state footprint (as inversely related to individualisation) through the government expenditure per GDP.

When it comes to the ideas, values and beliefs as the cultural aspects of individualisation, we conceptualise them through social survey data in terms of how important are (1) values of independence and (2) detachments to collective formations, emphasising one's own agency and choice. Attributing high value to one's independence as a crucial goal of socialisation encompasses multiple aspects of individual autonomy: from assuming responsibility for oneself instead of relying on others, to questioning various authorities and traditional norms and developing a critical and reflexive perspective about the society. Therefore, emphasising independence as the feature to be encouraged among children can be seen as a relevant indicator of cultural aspects of individualisation. This detachment from authority and collective formations can also be combined with the belief in one's own agency. A rough proxy measure of that was found through a survey question on individuals' belief in their free choice and control over their lives. Without some belief that one can have this kind of agency, one could hardly imagine the value of individual autonomy.

Universalism

Based on our conceptualisation of universalism, we should observe the structural disposition of societies to treat people equally regardless of group membership and to enable collaboration beyond community boundaries. This can be operationalised through a range of observable, structural indicators.

We conceptualise those indicators in the context of following categories: (1) legal and constitutional framework of equal treatment with the corresponding practices, which is the most foundational structural layer of universalism guaranteeing that rights apply equally to all persons regardless of their identity, origin, or group membership: we summarise these in the concepts of equal rights protection and bureaucratic impartiality; (2) electoral inclusion and political participation rights implying that the right to participate in collective decisions extends to all members of society, irrespective of class, gender, ethnicity, or origin: these are implied in the concept of egalitarian democracy (3) universal social protection and public services showing if those services and corresponding opportunities are accessible to all citizens regardless of social class or occupational group—we observe them not through measures but through results indicated by the education Gini Coefficient; and (4) Cross-National Collaboration and Transnational Connectivity. Categories 1 to 3 refer primarily to the macro-level, as they mostly depend on the actions of the central political authorities. Category 4, on the other hand, depends more directly on the micro-level decisions of individuals and their interactions, though the distinction is again not completely straightforward due to obvious interdependencies of different levels of social agency and structure. The micro-level aspects of this category of structural universalism are observed through three different indicators. We apply the share of mixed marriages indicate common people's inclusivity through the willingness to enter long-term intimate relationship with persons belonging to different nationalities. For the other two, we

use KOF measures of ("de facto") interpersonal and cultural globalisation as established measures of global connectivity, interactions and exchange of cultural goods and services.

In the sphere of beliefs and values, we conceptualise cultural universalism in terms of rejecting of the privilege of one category over the other when it comes to employment (1) of men compared to women, (2) of citizens compared to immigrants, and (3) accepting a broader variety of people as potential neighbours. The first two indicators assess universalism as the ability of inclusion by overcoming classical inequality and exclusion defined by gender and citizenship respectively. The third deals with allowing a broader diversity of people in one's vicinity—again indicating inclusion in informal, micro-level relationships. The combination of the three indicator shows the beliefs about whether individuals and groups should be treated equally as well as the willingness to connect and collaborate across the boundaries of one's gender affiliations, communities, ethnicities, religions, and national identities.

The indicators are summarised in Table 1.

3. Materials and Methods

We use data from various publicly accessible databases to provide the best available proxy indicators of the observed trends of structural and cultural individualisation and universalism.

We assess micro-level individualisation through three different indicators of micro-level structural individualisation: the ratio between divorces and marriages based on the OECD Family Database SF3., non-marital birth rates from OECD Family Database SF2.4 [49] and mean household sizes from Eurostat EU-SILC for the EU countries [50] and OECD Family Database SF1.1 [49] for non-EU countries. Although cross-national comparisons regarding approximate geographic and residential mobility may be limited due to different methodologies, combination of the US Census Bureau data and the compilation from OECD data by Alvarez M., Bernard A. & Lieske S.N. [51] allows consistent observation of trends within the countries.

The full historic dataset on the ratio between government expenditure and gross domestic product is based on Our World in Data and cross-referenced with IMF Fiscal Monitor, and OECD National Accounts [52,53]. Formal education is measured through tertiary education attainment—as the percentage of the population aged 25 or older with at least short-cycle tertiary education completed. Data were taken from the World Bank/UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) [54] and the study by Barro and Lee [55].

Regarding the indicators of universalism, data on mixed marriages is limited to the European countries with the data recorded from 2012 within Eurostat [50]. KOF Interpersonal globalisation de facto index by KOF Swiss Economic Institute [56,57] consists of international incoming and outgoing fixed and mobile telephone traffic in minutes, secondary income paid and received (gross inflows and outflows of goods, services, income or financial items without a quid pro quo), share of tourism exports as part of GDP, inbound and outbound number of tertiary students and number of foreign or foreign-born residents (both as percent of population). KOF cultural globalisation from the same source includes exports and imports of cultural goods, exports and imports of personal, cultural and recreational services, applications to register a trademark with a national or regional Intellectual Property (IP) office by non-residents in percent of all applications and the numbers of McDonald's restaurants and IKEA stores relative to population.

The major source of indicators of macro-level structural universalism is the collection of indices in the Varieties of Democracy database [58], namely Equal Protection Index ("How equal is the protection of rights and freedoms across social groups by the state?"), Egalitarian Democracy Index (which combines electoral democracy with the egalitarian

component that includes Equal Access Index, Equal Distribution of Resources Index and Equal Protection Index) and rigorous and impartial public administration ("Are public officials rigorous and impartial in the performance of their duties?"). Macro-level structural universalism in terms of inclusive access to opportunities is estimated by Education Gini Index according to Ziesemer, T.H.W. [59]. The overview of all structural indicators of individualisation and universalism together with their availability for the analysed countries is provided in the Appendix A, Table A5.

All cultural indicators are taken from the joint World Values Survey/European Values Study (WVS/EVS) combined dataset [60,61]. The directly relevant proxies for individualisation are the frequency of mentioning "independence" as a response to the question "Here is a list of qualities that children can be encouraged to learn at home. Which, if any, do you consider to be especially important?" and the intensity on the 1 to 10 Likert scale when responding to the statement: "Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, while other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Please use this scale where 1 means "no choice at all" and 10 means "a great deal of choice" to indicate how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out." More details with corresponding statistics used in our analysis are presented in the Appendix A, Tables A1 and A2.

Universalism in cultural terms is estimated through three different indicators from the same set of surveys. The first two of them are based on the responses to the statements "When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women" and "When jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to people of this country over immigrants". The third indicator was the number of categories rejected as potential neighbours when responding to the question "On this list are various groups of people. Could you please mention any that you would not like to have as neighbours?". To enable the longest possible time interval, we only include potential rejection of different race, immigrants/foreign workers, people who have aids and homosexuals, as these categories have been consistently included in almost all EVS and WVS waves. See Appendix A, Tables A3 and A4 for details.

As our hypotheses assume a breaking point when the long-term trend reverses or at least slows down, we analyse data using a polynomial (quadratic) regression model with time (t) as independent variable, namely:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \beta_1 t^2 + \beta_2 t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

When the assumption of the polynomial model is not confirmed (with either the model or the coefficients falling beyond the normal significance thresholds) or when a linear model provides a better fit for the analysed data, a linear model is used and reported as an alternative.

In the data collection, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI—through Perplexity AI Assistant) was only used to compile excel spreadsheet files from databases accessible online that we previously identified. We imported these files to Stata 14 statistical software and analysed them using statistical methods described above.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of the study can be in the limited availability and the selection of indicators. Available empirical indicators can never fully grasp the full complexity and broadness of individualisation and universalism that we intend to observe—we only see them as the best available approximation. For example, a narrowly defined indicator, such as household size, may only grasp a certain aspect of individualisation and depend on various other factors. Composite indices, such as those developed by KOF and Varieties of Democracy, on the other hand, provide a very broad set of data but may potentially obscure within-

indicator variation. We counter such limitations through selecting a broad and diverse range of indicators and avoiding drawing firm conclusions based on any single indicator. This is also crucial for addressing the other limitation deriving from the possibility that slowing down—but still no decline—of some trends may be a result of approaching some barriers that cannot be crossed. This could only apply for some specific indicators and when this can be the case, we add a note of caution against premature conclusions.

In addition, specific limitations should be noted for the cultural indicators, for which we rely on our analysis of the secondary data from WVS/EVS datasets. The survey responses can only be seen as rough proxies for the values, beliefs and idea that we need to observe through time. Each indicator can only be observed through a single survey question with all its potential limitations in terms of validity. Measurement invariance across countries/time could not be tested—as single survey items, rather than multi-item scales, are available in the surveys. As it is typical for large scale cross-national survey with several waves, item wording or translation cannot guarantee uniform meanings across countries and waves. The latter risks are at least partially mitigated by the fact that WVS/EVS is one of the worlds' most well-established, critically reflected and expertly supported surveys working with experienced national teams.

4. Results

4.1. Structural Indicators of Individualisation

Our selection of structural indicators at the micro level shows either consistent slowing down of the previous growth in individualisation or its outright decline as presented in Table 2. All show high levels of diversity that can not only be explained through national specifics, but also rather consistent long-term trajectories.

Table 2. Regression models for changes in micro-level structural indicators of individualisation.

	Divorces per Marriage	Births Outside Marriage	Mean Size of Household	Internal Migration
Number of observations	1897	1059	702	164
Number of countries	35	35	35	17
Time interval applied	1960–2022	1990–2025	1960–2024	1948–2023
Significance of the model (F)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Within-countries variance explained (R^2)	0.60	0.73	0.78	0.73
Coefficient for Year	0.3865	64.0166	−0.5840	−0.1246
Coefficient for Year^2	−0.0001	−0.01576	0.0001	/
Year coefficient significance	0.001	0.002	0.001	0.000
Year^2 coefficient significance	0.002	0.002	0.001	/
Estimated turning point (year)	2025	2031	2053	Linear model

Sources: Own calculations and as specified in Section 3.

The share of divorces per marriage has been increasing from 1960, but with a slowing down rate with the peak estimated for 2025. While we cannot confirm an outright reversal of the long-term trend on this basis, a slowdown is plausible interpretation (see Figure 1).

The mean size of the household has been decreasing at an ever-slower rate as well, but this shift seems much less persuasive—both because the estimated peak is placed quite far in the future and because it can be interpreted as a slowdown due to approaching an absolute minimum: the most recent mean is 2.4, while the extreme reached only recently is 1.9 people per household.

The rates of births outside marriage have been dramatically increasing in the long run from 1960 and can be presented through a linear model that explains 80% of within-

countries variance. However, while this confirms a long-term trend, a more nuanced observation of the more recent period suggests a shift from this pattern. When we focus solely on the period from 1990, a clear quadratic regression model can be confirmed explaining 73% of the within-countries variance and showing the recent slowing-down of the previous trend. Because the recent mean of approximately 42% is quite far from the extremes of more than 60% (present for several decades in some countries) of births taking place outside marriage one cannot simply refute the recent slow slowdown as approaching some natural barrier (see Table 2).

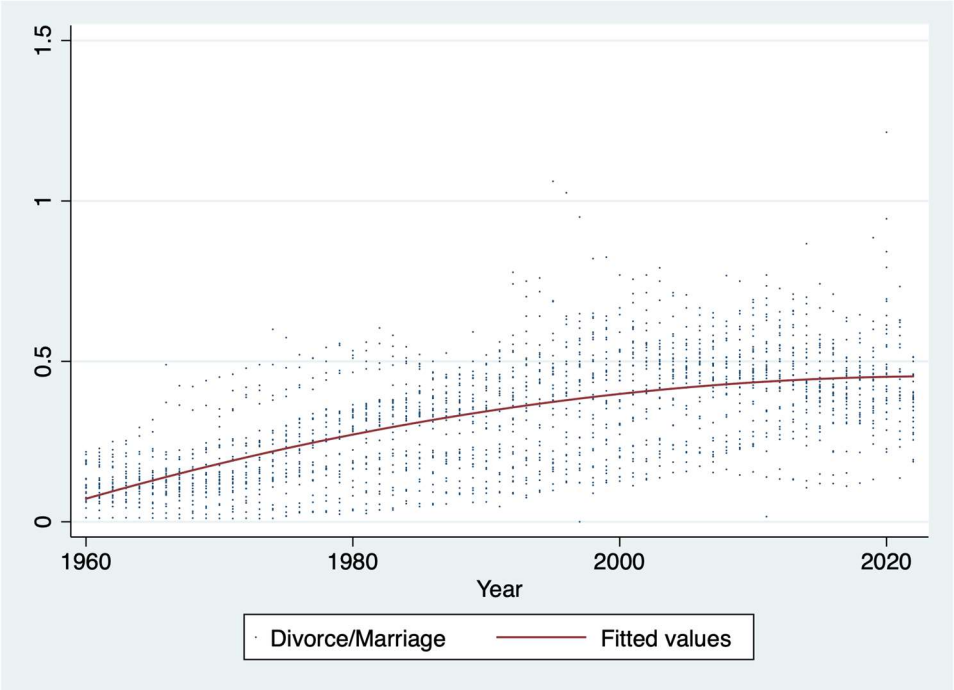

Figure 1. Changes in the divorce/marriage ratio.

If internal migration is taken as an indicator of individualisation, its peak for the observed societies must have been in the past—even before the observed period. The available data from 1948—though limited in the number of observations—in fact indicates its consistent linear decline with the model where time explains 73% of the within-countries variance.

Observing the two selected macro-level structural indicators of individualisation provides a much less straightforward result (see Table 3). There is no sign that "big government" would be withdrawing in favour of more individualistic principles—at least when measured in terms of spending. A broad range of observations reaching as far as to the beginning of the 19th century in fact reveals a U-curve quadratic model with the government expenditure increasingly rising from 1833. Despite some major fluctuations (most often due do wars) and enormous between-countries differences, no consistent slowing-down can be proven—neither with the 1980s neoliberal turn, nor with the subsequent period after 1990. Therefore, this indicator cannot show any turn away from individualisation because it never indicated individualisation at all.

The education attainment levels have also been exponentially increasing through the observed period (at least) from 1950 without any significant decelerations in the more recent decades. Our quadratic regression model explains 86% of the within-country variance with changes in time.

Table 3. Regression models for changes in macro-level structural indicators of individualisation.

	Government Expenditure/GDP	Tertiary Education Attainment
Number of observations	3511	993
Number of countries	33	36
Time interval applied	1800–2023	1950–2024
Significance of the model (F)	0.000	0.000
Within-countries variance explained (R^2)	0.77	0.86
Coefficient for Year	−5.0441	−20.8902
Coefficient for Year^2	0.0014	0.0054
Year coefficient significance	0.000	0.000
Year^2 coefficient significance	0.000	0.000
Estimated turning point (year)	1833	1945

Sources: Own calculations and as specified in Section 3.

4.2. Structural Indicators of Universalism

Micro-level structural indicators of universalism support the assumption of the slowdown or even gradual reversal of the trends towards accepting a broader variety of people. The available dataset on mixed marriages is rather limited in terms of number of observations (only 229 for 23 countries) and the observed period as it only starts with 2012. Consequently, it is not surprising that we cannot provide a statistically significant model (significance level equals 0.059) and coefficients (0.115) within the usual thresholds. However, the weakly indicated inverted-U curve is consistent with the KOF indices of interpersonal and cultural de facto globalisation—both a slowdown and the reversal of the globalisation trends respectively. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Regression models for changes in micro-level structural indicators of universalism.

	Mixed Marriages	KOF de Facto Interpersonal Globalisation	KOF de Facto Cultural Globalisation
Number of observations	229	1188	1741
Number of countries	23	36	35
Time interval applied	2012–2024	1990–2025	1970–2023
Significance of the model (F)	0.059	0.000	0.000
Within-countries variance explained (R^2)	0.04	0.68	0.16
Coefficient for Year	152.8707	35.3185	52.1824
Coefficient for Year^2	−0.0379	−0.0087	−0.0130
Year coefficient significance	0.115	0.000	0.000
Year^2 coefficient significance	0.115	0.000	0.000
Estimated turning point (year)	2019	2035	2004

Sources: Own calculations and as specified in Section 3.

The regression model for the KOF index of de facto interpersonal globalisation provides a statistically persuasive demonstration of its slowdown, explaining 68% of within-countries variance (see Figure 2). While the relevance of time in terms of explained variance is weaker for KOF de facto cultural globalisation index (16%), the model is still undisputably statistically significant—indicating the peak de facto cultural globalisation already achieved in 2004 and thus declining afterwards.

All selected macro level structural indicators of universalism typically demonstrate a significant linear increase in the universal implementation of rules and rights when the longest available timeframe is observed, i.e., from 1789 for bureaucratic impartiality, egalitarian democracy and equal protection of rights, and from 1950 for educational Gini

coefficient. For these broad periods, linear regression models seem as statistically most persuasive. However, when we focus on the more recent period, i.e., from 1990, a consistent reversal from the long-term trend can be noted—as shown in Table 5.

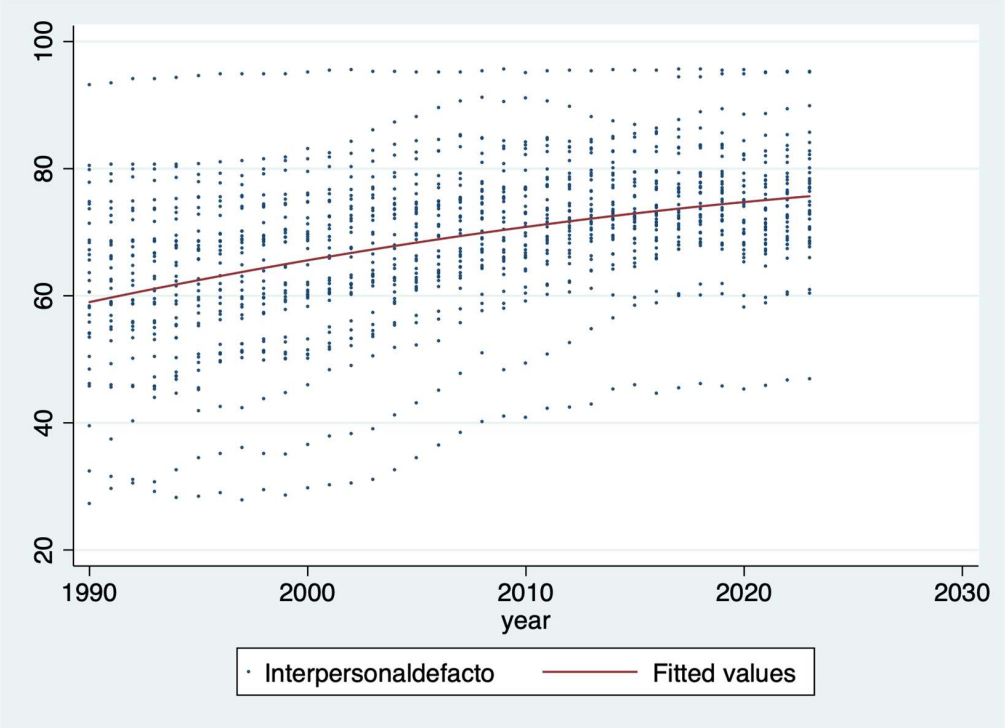

Figure 2. Changes in the KOF de facto interpersonal globalisation.

Table 5. Regression models for changes in macro-level structural indicators of universalism.

	Equal Rights Protection	Bureaucratic Impartiality	Egalitarian Democracy	Education Gini Coefficient
Number of observations	1259	1259	1259	210
Number of countries	35	35	35	35
Time interval applied	1990–2025	1990–2025	1990–2025	1990–2015
Significance of the model (F)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Within-countries variance explained (R^2)	0.11	0.07	0.16	0.53
Coefficient for Year	0.5032	4.000	0.8618	−0.3071
Coefficient for Year^2	−0.0001	−0.001	−0.0002	0.0001
Year coefficient significance	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.015
Year^2 coefficient significance	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.016
Estimated turning point (year)	2005	2006	2006	2021

Sources: Own calculations and as specified in Section 3.

Around 2005–2006, the regression models indicate the peaks in terms of equal rights protection, bureaucratic impartiality and egalitarian democracy (see Figure 3), suggesting their subsequent decline. Although the models explain a minor share of the within-countries variance (between 7 and 16%), they are, together with the respective coefficients, clearly statistically significant.

Education Gini coefficient is not available for the period after 2015. Available data for the period between 1990 and 2015, however, indicate a clear slowdown in the trend towards equality (i.e., a slower decrease in educational inequality) within a statistically significant quadratic regression model, explaining 53% of within-countries variance.



Figure 3. Changes in the equal rights protection after 1990.

4.3. Cultural Indicators of Individualisation

Drawing upon the results of the seven waves of the European Values Study and World Values Survey, we can observe the levels of individualisation in cultural terms through whether respondents mention independence as an important quality of a child and how much they believe in free choice and control over their lives. The results presented in Table 6 show a mixed picture.

Table 6. Regression models for changes in cultural indicators of individualisation.

	Mentioning Independence as Child's Quality	**Believing in Free Choice and Control over One's Life**
Number of observations	68	68
Number of countries	21	21
Time interval applied	7 EVS/WVS waves (1981–2022)	7 EVS/WVS waves (1981–2022)
Significance of the model (F)	0.000	0.019
Within-countries variance explained (R2)	0.46	0.20
Coefficient for Wave	17.2472	0.0826
Coefficient for Wave2	−1.6300	/
Wave coefficient significance	0.000	0.000
Wave2 coefficient significance	0.000	/
Estimated turning point (Wave)	5 (2005–2009)	Linear model

Sources: Own calculations and as specified in Section 3.

The share of respondents mentioning independence of a child was increasing initially, and reached its peak during the fifth wave of the surveys that took place between 2005 and 2009 and then started to decline (see Figure 4). The quadratic regression model with the reverse U-curve is statistically significant and accounts for 46% of the within-countries variance. On the other hand, no reversal of the upward trend can be noticed for the extend of belief in choice and control over one's life. In this case, a linear regression model provides a statistically significant solution.

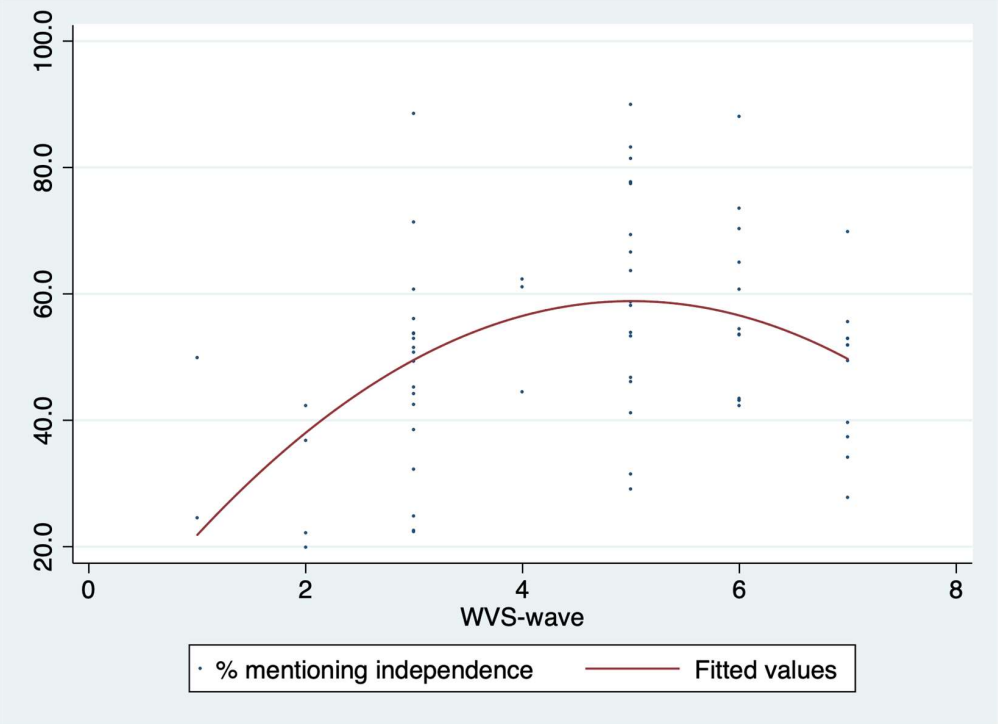

Figure 4. Changes in the percent of people that mention independence as important child's quality.

4.4. Cultural Indicators of Universalism

Universalism at the cultural level is observed through the belief in equal treatment of genders and different nationalities when it comes to employment and through the number of categories of people rejected as potential neighbours—choosing from people of different race, immigrants/foreign workers, people who have aids and homosexuals. The results presented in Table 7 are rather mixed.

Table 7. Regression models for changes in cultural indicators of universalism.

	Rejecting Priority for Men in Employment	Rejecting National Priority in Employment	Number of Categories Rejected as Neighbours
Number of observations	66	66	64
Number of countries	21	21	21
Time interval applied	7 EVS/WVS study waves (1981–2022)	7 EVS/WVS study waves (1981–2022)	7 EVS/WVS study waves (1981–2022)
Significance of the model (F)	0.000	0.918	−000
Within-countries variance explained (R2)	0.47	0.01	0.25
Coefficient for Wave	9.7418	/	−0.0673
Coefficient for Wave2	−0.7131	/	/
Wave coefficient significance	0.011	0.933	0.000
Wave2 coefficient significance	0.062	0.888	/
Estimated turning point (Wave)	6 (2010–2014)	No linear or non-linear model confirmed	Linear model

Sources: Own calculations and as specified in Section 3.

Small number of observations makes it more difficult to obtain statistically fully significant models and coefficients. Universal rights of women seemed increasingly supported till the sixth survey wave when the peak was reached, followed by a declining trend. The coefficient for the squared time variable has its significance level of 0.062 slightly

above the usual 5% threshold, but the overall significance of the model and the explained within-countries variance are still rather persuasive.

No statistically significant regression model, on the other hand, can be constructed when it comes to rejecting the national priority in employment. The change in that regard seems random or dependent on other factors, so neither linear nor polynomial trajectory can be assumed.

Finally, a hint towards persistent increase in cultural universalism can be identified from the steady decline in the mean number of categories that respondents would reject as potential neighbours (see Figure 5). A linear model with clear statistical significance explains 25% of within-countries variance.

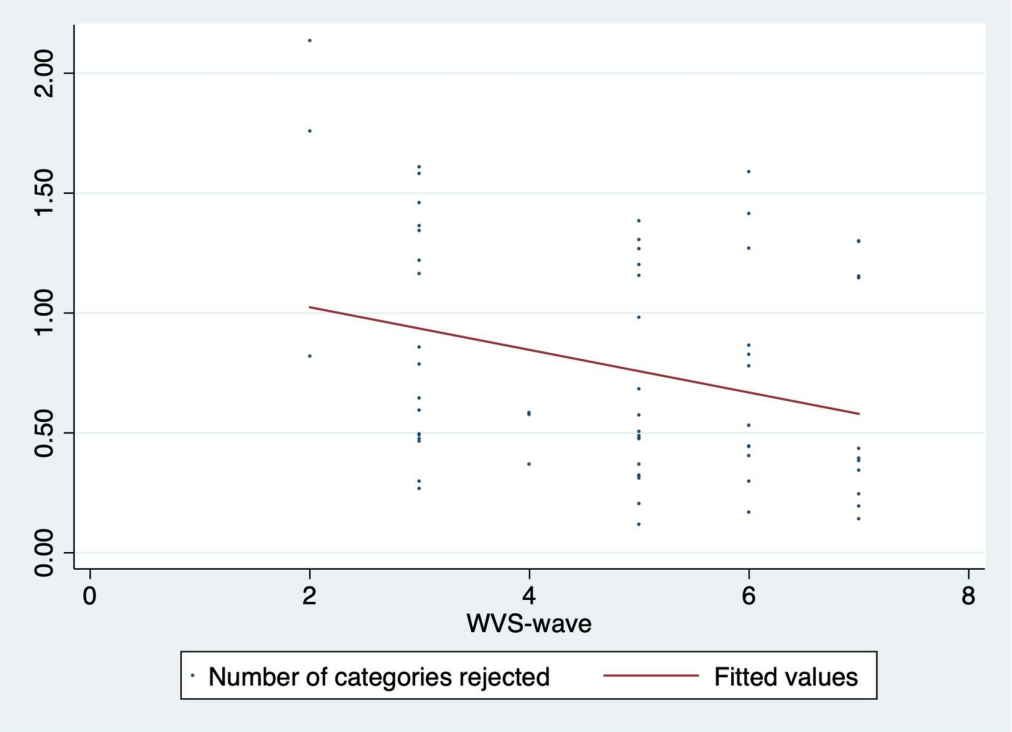

Figure 5. Decline in the mean number of categories rejected as neighbours.

4.5. Summarising the Results

In structural terms, we can confirm the slowdown in micro-level structural individualisation trends. At the macro-level the indicators we selected have not provided conclusive results—as the educational levels as an indicator of individualisation continue to grow, while the increased role of the state—understood as a departure from individualisation—has been consistently increasing anyway in terms of public spending.

Despite non-conclusive results at the macro-level, our regression models mostly suggest at least a slowdown in structural individualisation at least partly confirming hypothesis H1a. This potential shift towards more collective structures makes the issue of universalism, with the inclusivity of the communities, even more relevant.

Therefore, both micro- and macro-level structural indicators provide persuasive support to the claim that after the long-term rise in universalism, societies are again becoming less inclusive or—at least—the growth in universalism has decelerated. The peak universalism might have been reached between 2004 and late 2010s or might be reached in near future for some other indicators—confirming hypothesis H2a.

At the cultural level, the results are more mixed. A shift away from the emphasis on independence as child's quality during the recent two decades and a more timid rejection

of priority for men when it comes to employment seem to be consistent with the structural shifts away from both individualisation and universalism.

On the other hand, while being less persuaded about the need for individual's independence, respondents increasingly believe in agency—in terms of free choice and control over their lives and the acceptance for more diverse neighbourhoods has been persistently increasing. This indicates that universalism with corresponding inclusivity is not necessarily in decline when it comes to cultural values. Hypotheses H1b and H2b thus cannot be fully confirmed.

The results from our analyses are summarised in Table 8.

Table 8. Overview of the Results.

		Individualisation	**Universalism**
Structural	Micro	Recent slowdown or decline confirmed	Recent slowdown or decline confirmed
	Macro	Non-conclusive results	Recent slowdown or decline confirmed
Cultural		Mixed results	Mixed results

5. Discussion

Societies all over the world, throughout history, have never been static. Rather, they have been subject to constant change. Numerous communities, kingdoms, and states reached their peak before subsequently facing decline. Certainly, our study is not an attempt to proclaim the end of western civilisation (as Spengler notoriously argued), yet we cannot deny the ongoing structural and cultural transformations within the societies examined here that are breaking with the previous long-term trends, which our study has also mostly confirmed in empirical terms.

While we may sketch the potential trajectories of two modernisation trends of individualisation and universalism, only the future will reveal whether they represent a fundamental societal shift or merely another phase within the broader process of modernisation itself.

Regarding RQ1 on the structural and cultural individualisation, our study shows that both long-term trend of individualisation and its recent slowdown is consistently confirmed at the structural micro-level. Individualisation as a modernisation trend, elaborated and suggested by classical sociological theory, can be confirmed on a level of individuals' practices (such as divorces) and beliefs. However, it can be neither confirmed nor rejected as a macro-structural reality. The notion of individual independence as a gradual withdrawal of the state from people's lives turns out to be more of an ideological claim of classical liberalism and neoliberalism than an empirically demonstratable reality. As our data confirms, the role of the state measured through its consumption relative to GDP has only been increasing in the long-run—not only in the Keynesian period but also through the neoliberal backlash against it. The increased interventionism caused by the global financial crisis after 2008, COVID-19 and the energy crisis indicates no major departure in that regard when compared to the previous practices. This is in line with the idea of individualisation as a cultural myth and prevailing narrative forming societies rather as structural reality [33]. Therefore, individualisation has appeared as an important societal trend, but with certain limitations.

Another indicator revealing the complex nature of structural individualisation is the consistent rise in tertiary education, which could imply that individualisation in terms of diversity of choices, specialisation/division of labour, social mobility and individual empowerment continues to increase—unlike the other trends observed in our study. However, the relevance and value of formal education is not necessarily constant. Several studies

argue that educational inflation is a real phenomenon and educational credentials are losing value as more people obtain them. The correlation between formal educational attainment and job opportunities is less straightforward [62,63].

The changes in cultural beliefs are partially consistent with the recent decline of individualisation after a previous long-term rise. This is shown by the shift in significance of independence as a positive child's quality. On the other hand, the intensity of belief in one's free choice and control over one's life has been consistently increasing in a linear way for the whole period under examination in the EVS/WVS research programme.

This discrepancy underlines the importance of the analytical dualism (Archer) between structure, culture, and individual agency [22]. Material resources, institutions, and cultural ideas are conditioning individuals, but the latter interpret these conditions in their own way, construct beliefs and act accordingly. Despite a structural shift away from individualisation, people may still feel empowered—though it is hard to determine how much this feeling is justified. We can offer a partial insight into this issue through our previous study on reflexivity [64]. Responding to social and cultural settings occurs through reflexive deliberations, which at least in one national case study indicate a recent short-term decline. This would be more consistent with the recent structural decline in individualisation than the proclaimed attitudes on individual empowerment in the EVS/WVS. Strong confidence about one's own free choice and control may also be a result of illusions caused by the decline in critical thinking demonstrated by several recent studies [65,66]. This might relate to the phenomenon of the response to the socio-cultural conditioning from the side of social actors, which can lead either to intended post-reflexive actions or to non-critical reproduction of the existing patterns.

The contemporary cultural environment is permeated with narratives and social imaginaries that are, to a large extent, conditioned by algorithms shaping filter bubbles and echo chambers within social media networks. It has been recognised for decades that online social interactions and the passive consumption of vast amounts of digital media content contribute not only to a decline in critical thinking, but also to deepening polarisation, fuelling hate speech, and reinforcing boundaries between communities and their collective identities [2,67].

This is closely related to our RQ2 on structural and cultural indicators of universalism with the results of our study indicating at least a slowdown in the rise in micro-level structural indicators, a consistent decline in macro-level structural indicators and mixed results when it comes to cultural indicators. The emerging patterns of collective formations may become even more significant with the hypothesised decline in individualisation. Instead of inclusive, globally connected communities, promised by several modernisation theories, there is a significant risk of moving to an opposite direction.

One should find worrying that democracy scores has declined recently. This matters here because democratic backsliding is theorised as both a structural indicator of declining universalism (reduced equal protection and political inclusion) and a context in which in-group solidarity—as opposed to universalist openness—tends to intensify. It can also be related to individualisation as democracy presupposes autonomous individuals capable of making their own decision.

Since 2016, marked by two major political turning points: Brexit in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States, the rhetoric of national priorities over global well-being has increasingly come to the forefront. Our study confirms that such political shifts are not coincidental; rather, they correspond with a slowdown, or even a gradual reversal, of structural indicators of universalism at both the macro and micro levels.

This is undoubtedly a serious societal concern, as the decline of universalism can contribute to the weakening of democratic institutions and social trust, while simultaneously strengthening discrimination. However, we should not neglect the agency of individuals, who are able to actively respond to socio-cultural conditions. People are not strictly determined by these conditions, nor do they necessarily reproduce existing social and cultural structures. Through reflexive deliberation, they can contribute to social change.

When examining the cultural indicators of universalism, we observe a complex and not straightforward pattern. Although support for universal women's rights may be declining, the increasing acceptance of diverse social groups as potential neighbours suggests a simultaneous rise in certain forms of cultural universalism. This may indicate that, while individuals are responding to structural conditions characterised by declining universalism, the process itself remains contradictory and uneven.

In this regard, we should emphasise that individuals play a central role in processes of social morphogenesis [44], understood as reflexive and transformative social change. There remains the possibility for meaningful social transformation when social actors critically reflect upon their social context and adopt reflexive stances towards it. Universalism, therefore, may still remain a crucial feature of contemporary society, provided that individuals respond critically and responsibly to the conditions in which they live.

The limitations of our study, as specified in the Section 3, especially regarding the survey-based indicators, led to non-conclusive results on the institutionalised (macro-level) aspects of structural individualisation. These limitations call for a proper caution when drawing any firmer conclusions, especially regarding the cultural indicators. These limitations, together with an open question on whether the current shifts are more of a short-term fluctuation in some specific societies or an indication of a major new era in the human history call for further research. This may involve (1) more in-depth comparisons between the observed countries, placing more attention to their differences and specifics but also placing them in the broader context and expanding the scope of research; (2) incorporating qualitative or narrative data to interpret the mixed and inconclusive results; (3) re-testing the tentative breakpoints—especially these that are hypothesised for the future—as new WVS/EVS waves, data for V-Dem and KOF indices, as official statistics become available; and (4) searching for other, alternative indictors to observe long-term structural and cultural change in a systematic way.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. EVS/WVS: Independence as an important quality of a child.

Here is a list of qualities that children can be encouraged to learn at home. Which, if any, do you consider to be especially important? Please choose up to five! (per cent of respondents with WVS/EVS adjusted by poststratification weights to correct for demographic imbalances choosing "independence" from the list consisting of: good manners, independence, hard work, responsibility, imagination, tolerance and respect for other people, thrift saving money and things, determination perseverance, religious faith, unselfishness, obedience)								
Country\Survey Wave	1981–1984	1989–1993	1994–1998	1999–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2017–2022	Grand Total
Australia	24.52		52.94		63.64	64.97	51.87	51.59
Bulgaria			38.43		46.07			42.25
Canada				62.30	58.10		49.36	56.59
Cyprus					46.73	43.09	37.37	42.40
Czechia		19.91	22.49				34.07	25.49
Estonia			53.77			54.47		54.12
Finland			56.03		69.29			62.66
Germany			51.48		77.56	73.48	69.84	68.09
Hungary	49.85		44.15		81.41			58.47
Netherlands					66.56	60.67	52.90	60.04
New Zealand			53.71		53.25	53.51	52.89	53.34
Norway			88.55		89.95			89.25
Poland			32.18		41.09	43.40		38.89
Romania			50.77		29.11	42.24	39.63	40.44
Slovakia		22.10	22.37				27.70	24.06
Slovenia			71.30		83.22	88.03		80.85
Spain		36.81	24.81	44.44	31.44	43.09		36.12
Sweden			60.65		77.35	70.28		69.43
Switzerland		42.25	42.44		77.72			54.14
United Kingdom			49.29		58.71		51.84	53.28
United States			45.24	61.10	53.82	53.61	55.54	53.86
Grand Total (not weighted for countries' populations sizes)	37.19	30.27	47.81	55.95	61.39	57.57	47.55	52.10

Table A2. EVS/WVS: Belief in free choice and control over life.

Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, while other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Please use this scale where 1 means "no choice at all" and 10 means "a great deal of choice" to indicate how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out. (mean of the responses adjusted by WVS/EVS poststratification weights to correct for demographic imbalances)								
Country\Survey Wave	1981–1984	1989–1993	1994–1998	1999–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2017–2022	Grand Total
Australia	7.09		7.57		7.64	7.69	7.50	7.50
Bulgaria			5.25		5.81			5.53
Canada				7.63	7.63		7.38	7.55

Table A2. *Cont.*

Cyprus					7.49	7.54	6.80	7.27
Czechia		6.03	6.50				7.03	6.52
Estonia			5.98			6.35		6.17
Finland	7.65		7.67		7.46			7.59
Germany			6.93		6.80	6.80	7.13	6.92
Hungary	6.81		6.37		5.84			6.34
Netherlands					6.68	6.90	7.06	6.88
New Zealand			7.84		7.91	7.80	7.69	7.81
Norway			7.18		7.71			7.44
Poland		6.40			6.57	6.67		6.55
Romania			6.27		7.64	7.88	7.66	7.36
Slovakia		5.99	6.38				7.02	6.46
Slovenia			6.89		7.49	7.88		7.42
Spain		6.82	6.33	6.73	6.88	6.95		6.74
Sweden			7.26		7.81	7.62		7.56
Switzerland		7.35	7.31		7.58			7.42
United Kingdom					7.30		7.32	7.31
United States			7.58	7.98	7.63	7.73	7.74	7.73
Grand Total (not weighted for countries' populations sizes)	7.18	6.52	6.83	7.45	7.22	7.32	7.30	7.11

Table A3. EVS/WVS: Rejecting the privilege of men and nationals regarding employment.

When jobs are scarce . . . (per cent of respondents with WVS/EVS adjusted by poststratification weights to correct for demographic imbalances choosing "disagree" on a three-point scale of agree/disagree/neither or choosing "disagree strongly" or "disagree" on a five-point scale ranging from agree strongly to disagree strongly)								
Country\Survey Wave		1989–1993	1994–1998	1999–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2017–2022	Grand Total
Men should have more right to a job than women	Australia		68.08		64.69	73.76	78.10	71.16
	Bulgaria		39.94		52.63			46.29
	Canada			78.49	77.92		82.56	79.66
	Cyprus				46.44	52.44	38.56	45.81
	Czechia	30.74	47.35				44.45	40.85
	Estonia		53.52			59.12		56.32
	Finland		77.28		81.51			79.39
	Germany		63.82		66.77	60.63	78.33	67.39
	Hungary		33.33		63.77			48.55
	Netherlands				81.39	75.40	87.23	81.34
	New Zealand		63.86		72.56	77.62	82.76	74.20
	Norway		79.70		88.55			84.12
	Poland	30.24	41.19		50.98	56.60		44.75
	Romania		34.95		40.94	35.80	41.06	38.19
	Slovakia	29.03	32.69				33.82	31.85
	Slovenia		54.94		73.48	78.06		68.83

Table A3. *Cont.*

Men should have more right to a job than women	Spain	60.04	57.46	67.99	76.00	82.13		68.73
	Sweden		92.32		94.11	93.49		93.31
	Switzerland		55.72		62.87			59.29
	United Kingdom		68.58		76.07		86.06	76.90
	United States		70.01	81.92	66.44	69.91	77.66	73.19
	Grand Total (not weighted for countries' populations sizes)	37.51	57.48	76.14	68.73	67.91	66.42	63.57
Employers should give priority to (nation) people than immigrants	Australia		48.43		36.42	26.92	31.56	35.83
	Bulgaria		6.62		14.74			10.68
	Canada			42.65	46.06		33.89	40.86
	Cyprus				12.18	10.33	10.45	10.99
	Czechia	6.83	3.34				9.72	6.63
	Estonia		40.04			9.20		24.62
	Finland		18.22		30.78			24.50
	Germany		34.18		27.87	34.91	54.64	37.90
	Hungary		5.40		6.83			6.11
	Netherlands				49.79	38.86	44.70	44.45
	New Zealand		27.92		29.25	29.16	31.90	29.56
	Norway		51.29		57.25			54.27
	Poland	23.23	4.54		8.35	13.31		12.36
	Romania		10.14		14.58	11.17	13.73	12.40
	Slovakia	5.18	3.87				3.94	4.33
	Slovenia		7.54		14.96	15.39		12.63
	Spain	18.77	12.67	29.22	34.15	32.21		25.40
	Sweden		74.34		79.85	73.89		76.03
	Switzerland		23.96		35.52			29.74
	United Kingdom		39.91		36.43		50.26	42.20
	United States		31.54	40.10	20.00	23.59	30.69	29.18
	Grand Total (not weighted for countries' populations sizes)	13.50	24.66	37.32	30.84	26.58	28.68	27.26

Table A4. EVS/WVS: Mean number of categories rejected as neighbours.

On this list are various groups of people. Could you please mention any that you would not like to have as neighbours? (mean number of explicitly rejected categories adjusted by WVS/EVS poststratification weights to correct for demographic imbalances—selected from: people of a different race; immigrants/foreign workers; people who have aids; homosexuals)								
country	1981–1984	1989–1993	1994–1998	1999–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2017–2022	Grand Total
Australia			0.49		0.47	0.44	0.39	0.45
Bulgaria			1.16		1.38			1.27
Canada				0.37	0.32		0.43	0.38
Cyprus					1.27	1.27	1.15	1.23

Table A4. *Cont.*

Czechia	1.76	0.86				1.15	1.25
Estonia		1.34			1.59		1.46
Finland		0.79		0.68			0.73
Germany		0.30		0.50	0.83	0.19	0.46
Hungary		1.36		1.20			1.28
Netherlands				0.31	0.44	0.34	0.37
New Zealand		0.47		0.49	0.40	0.24	0.40
Norway		0.46		0.20			0.33
Poland		1.58		1.15	0.78		1.17
Romania		1.61		1.30	1.41	1.30	1.41
Slovakia	2.14	1.22				1.30	1.55
Slovenia		1.46		0.98	0.86		1.10
Spain	0.82	0.59	0.58	0.37	0.30		0.53
Sweden		0.27		0.12	0.17		0.18
Switzerland		0.49		0.32			0.41
United Kingdom				0.48		0.14	0.31
United States		0.64	0.58	0.57	0.53	0.38	0.54
Grand Total (not weighted for countries' populations sizes)	1.57	0.89	0.51	0.67	0.75	0.64	0.77

Table A5. Coverage of the countries by structural indicators.

Country	Divorces/ Marriage	Births Outside Marriage	Mean Size of Household	Internal Migration	Government Expenditure/ GDP	Tertiary Education Attainment	Mixed Marriages	KOF Interpersonal Globalisation	KOF Cultural Globalisation	Equal Rights Protection	Bureaucratic Impartiality	Egalitarian Democracy	Education Gini Coefficient
Australia	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*
Austria	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Belgium	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Bulgaria	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Canada	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*
Croatia	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Cyprus	*	*	*		*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*
Czechia	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*
Denmark	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Estonia	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Finland	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
France	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Germany	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*
Greece	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Hungary	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Iceland	*	*	*		*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*
Ireland	*	*	*		*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*
Italy	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Latvia	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Table A5. *Cont.*

Country	Divorces/ Marriage	Births Outside Marriage	Mean Size of Household	Internal Migration	Government Expenditure/ GDP	Tertiary Education Attainment	Mixed Marriages	KOF Interpersonal Globalisation	KOF Cultural Globalisation	Equal Rights Protection	Bureaucratic Impartiality	Egalitarian Democracy	Education Gini Coefficient
Lithuania	*	*	*			*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Luxembourg	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Malta	*	*	*			*		*	*	*	*	*	*
Netherlands	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
New Zealand	*	*	*		*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*
Norway	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Poland	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Portugal	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Romania	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Slovakia	*	*	*		*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*
Slovenia	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Spain	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Sweden	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Switzerland	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
United Kingdom	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*
United States	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*

* indicates data available and included in the study.

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