Seventy years of climbing: Post-socialist transition and educational mobility in Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract:
It is widely believed that twenty years of post-socialist transformation has strengthened the association of socio-economic status, such as education or incomes, between parents and children. This finding is mainly based on studies conducted in post-socialist countries in Europe. Little is known about Central Asia. This paper investigates developments in educational mobility during the transition in Kyrgyzstan, one of the five Central Asian countries. Using the data from three household surveys collected in 1993, 1998 and 2010, we examine how educational mobility has changed in a half century by calculating correlations and running regressions between educational levels of adults aged 20-69 to the schooling level of their parents. We find that Kyrgyzstan has maintained strong educational mobility comparable with the levels in Soviet times. We argue that the expansion of tertiary educational institutions in the last two decades is a reason of high mobility. However, consistent with other studies in Eastern Europe, we find a sharp decline in educational mobility for aged 25-34, the generation whose schooling and employment experience was affected by the transition. This may indicate that nowadays a higher parental socio-economic status may play a major role in children’s enrolment at the post-secondary education, thus leaving fewer opportunities for children from worse-off families. In addition, as there is practically no gender disparity in schooling in Kyrgyzstan, we find no significant gender differences in our estimates.

Keywords: intergenerational mobility, educational attainment, transition economy, Kyrgyzstan

JEL Classification: I21, J62

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1. INTRODUCTION

The former socialist countries in Europe and Central Asia were highly equal societies before the transformation to the market system. The last twenty years of the transition, however, has been associated with an unprecedentedly sharp increase not only in economic inequality (Milanovic, 1999), but also in opportunities (Micklewright, 1999). As inequality of incomes and opportunities in highly unequal societies tends to be transferred across generations (Solon, 2002), the intergenerational association of a socio-economic status, such as education or income, has also strengthened in many transition countries. These findings are mainly based on the studies on post-socialist countries in Europe that made a substantial progress in the transition, and therefore, the evidence for a heterogeneous group of transition countries remains unbalanced. It would thus be of interest to learn how intergenerational mobility has changed during the transition in the low-income post-socialist countries.

This paper investigates the effect of the transition to intergenerational educational mobility in Kyrgyzstan, a low-income country in Central Asia. We pose three questions in the paper: what is the magnitude of intergenerational mobility in Kyrgyzstan; how has the transition affected mobility; and, is there a gender gap in mobility? We hypothesize that the relation of schooling between parents and children after the transition have remained as low as it was in the pre-transition times as there are forces that push mobility in downward and upward directions. We use three sources of household survey data, collected in Kyrgyzstan in 1993, 1998 and 2010 to approximate for pre-transition, post-liberalization and late transition times. Using years of schooling of respondents (aged 20-69) and of their parents, we calculate regression and correlation coefficients to infer the conclusions on educational mobility. For the transition effect we analyze separately elasticity and correlations for a group of aged 25-34 in each data set.

The next section discusses the developments in intergenerational mobility in post-socialist countries. Section 3 argues that Kyrgyzstan benefited greatly from the Soviet educational equality policy and reasons why the recent expansion of tertiary educational institutions has taken place. The data and methodology is followed by the description of the findings and validity of the results. The concluding section highlights the implications of the findings, and discusses the limitations and possible research extensions of the paper.
2. INTERGENERATIONAL MOBILITY BEFORE AND DURING THE TRANSITION

In international comparison, the transition countries during socialism times were considered as equal and mobile societies. It is well known that equality and high mobility were mainly the result of state interventionist policies. In this respect, two particular actions deserve elaboration. First, the policy of universally literate population, implemented by providing free education, produced vast benefits for masses, and especially for the countries that had low level of educational achievements before becoming a part of the camp. Secondly, the policy of reverse discrimination, a promotion of the children with a low class origin into higher education by setting reserved quotas, and restricting an entry for the children of educated parents, was another factor that equalized the schooling attainment (Ganzeboom and Nieuwbeerta, 1999). These equalization policies gave a way to high educational mobility in the socialist countries. Furthermore, the equalization policy was targeted also in respect to incomes and access to public services, such as healthcare (Hanley and McKeever, 1997).

Empirical literature on post-socialist countries finds high educational and social mobility in the pre-transformation period. Titma and Saar (1995) concluded that real equalization of educational opportunities had been achieved in the Soviet Union, but that strong regional differences existed in availability of secondary education schools. Titma et al. (2003) found relatively high intergenerational mobility in European part of the Soviet Union in the last years of its existence by investigating occupational status between generations. They concluded that the Soviet society in its final years was quite open, though not meritocratic. Vereshchagina (2009) found declining educational mobility for the generation of the 1950s in the study of 12 transition economies in former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries.

In a transition from a planned to a deregulated market-oriented system a number of factors push intergenerational mobility in upward or downward directions. On the downward pushing side, the major factor is the decline in the standards of living, happened in the first years of transition, might force families to reduce investments in the education of children, especially, at the tertiary level. This vulnerability relates in the first place to the poor households. As poverty in general is associated with lower level of educational achievements of household members, this may potentially lead to educational poverty gap over generations. One possibility to mitigate this issue is to provide public social support to poor households,
though in the transition context expenditures for social support and public schools in most cases declined.

Another important factor that reduces educational mobility is decline of public expenditures on education sector, especially in the first decade of transition. Hertz et al. (2009) documents a strong decline in education expenditures in Bulgaria that had affected the enrollment rates and closure of schools.

The factors that increase educational mobility are the restructure and liberalization of the educational system and the removal of the quotas. This process has been accompanied with increasing number of private educational institutions, mainly at tertiary level. Paying a tuition fee became a norm in these higher education institutions, and though it may be difficult to pay it for poorer households, the perceived high social status and better employment chances keep parents to finance investments into education of their children. Except for the most prestigious ones, the universities compete with each other for students mainly through tuition fees, as quality of teaching and other elements of education do not differ much. As a result, an expansion of universities has led to increased opportunities to obtain university diplomas, thus, increasing an educational mobility among generations. Whether the increased enrollment in universities will keep its pace and whether this process is of equal nature is a matter of further analysis. The research papers reviewed below have looked at some of these issues in the transition context.

Most of the papers investigating the effect of transition on intergenerational mobility find a decline in intergenerational mobility. Gerber (2000) found growing educational stratification in Russia due to declining enrollment in the post-secondary education of the children of parents with the lower educational attainment. The transition shock has lowered the return from education and forced a higher proportion of young people to enter the labor market earlier as they would do in the previous regime. However, children of more educated parents retained higher enrollment rates. Gerber also found a gender effect: enrollment rate for men was lower than for women.

Hertz et al. (2009) has estimated educational mobility in Bulgaria using two sources of data and has found a strong decline in intergenerational mobility among a group of respondents aged 16-20. They explain this with the difficulties in the proper public financing of the schools and the rise in educational expenses. Similarly, Vereshchagina (2009) has found a
stronger correlation between parents’ and children’s schooling in the post-transition period for the group of 12 transition countries.

The only paper that includes Kyrgyzstan is the study done by Hertz et al. (2007), which estimated educational mobility for 42 countries. Using the Kyrgyz household survey data for 1998, authors estimated educational persistence in Kyrgyzstan to be one the lowest among a group of developed, developing and transition economies.

3. EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN KYRGYZSTAN

Kyrgyzstan has obviously benefited from the Soviet Union centralized educational policies and investments. Having started with three percent literacy rate in the 1920s, the country had achieved almost universal literacy upon the breakup of Soviet Union. Education in Soviet times was definitely based on ideology and did not develop critical thinking, however, it was free at all levels, including higher education (Mertaugh, 2004). Access to higher education, though, was restricted to about one-fifth of secondary school graduates to follow the planning nature of the Soviet system. It was, however, enough to rank Kyrgyzstan’s tertiary enrollment rates in the middle among 15 union republics (Karklins, 1984).

Structure of the educational system in Kyrgyzstan has largely remained unchanged during the two decades of transition. The current school system is based on 4-5-2 year scheme. The first, primary level, up to 4th grade, is attended by children aged 7 to 10. The next level, basic or incomplete secondary education, lasts till grade 9. After this grade, students have a choice to go for vocational education (technikum, uchilishe), or continue studying two more years to complete secondary school to qualify for enrollment in universities. Compulsory secondary level schooling, inherited from Soviet times, was reduced to 9 years in 2003 to ease a pressure on public expenditures.

Public expenditures were not enough to maintain quality of education. As Kyrgyzstan promoted rapid reforms, including price liberalization, public expenditures to education

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2 The population among aged 9-49. Source: http://www.welcome.kg/ru/kyrgyzstan/population/ur/

3 The vocational track, however, does not preclude entry to universities after completion of vocational study.

4 However, it seems that few opted to discontinue studying after the basic level, driven, probably, by easier access and wider choice of tertiary institutions.
declined in real terms. However, Government was able to sustain pre-transition share of public spending to education (WorldBank, 2004), which, contrary to experiences of some transition countries, prevented from closure of schools and decline in enrollment, with the exception being the pre-school level (Mogilevsky, 2011). Public expenditures to education mainly covered remuneration of teachers, while other critical components of learning, such as textbooks, school infrastructure and teacher training, have been underfinanced (Mertaugh, 2004). These factors, along with a shortage of teachers on important subjects, are thought to be main causes of widespread deterioration of the quality of education. For illustration, 15 year old students from Kyrgyzstan performed worst out of 65 participating countries by the results of OECD PISA, conducted in 2009 (OECD, 2010). Despite the perceived decline in quality of education in schools, enrollment rates in tertiary level have tripled, driven mainly by expanded private universities.

Deregulation of tertiary education system has led to increased number of private universities, and correspondingly, of students. Number of universities was 52 institutions by mid-2011, which is a five-fold increase since the Soviet times. As a result, the share of university educated (or pursuing it) has increased to 16 percent in 2009 among aged 15 and over compared with 11 percent in 1990 (NSC, 2009). In contrast, the number of vocational or technical institutions, that were run by sectoral ministries and large factories in previous regime, declined somewhat.

It seems that high enrollment in the universities is driven by social status aspirations and better employment prospects. A university degree, along with its direct function of providing skills necessary in the labor market, serves also an important social signaling function, as individuals with higher education are respected members of Kyrgyz society. Yet, a university diploma is not a guarantee of being employed, as there is clearly excessive supply of university graduates (DeYoung, 2011) with the skills that do not largely meet expectations of prospective employers. Given this mismatches, youth unemployment rate is the highest among the working age groups.

In summary, educational attainment in Kyrgyzstan both in Soviet and transition times looks favorable, resulting in more schooling years for each new generation. However, there are recent issues that pose questions in continuation of the upward educational mobility. Most important are lower return from higher education, saturation of the labor market and skills mismatch. All of these can potentially reverse the current high mobility between generations.
In this paper we use information on educational attainment of the respondents and of their parents from three household surveys. These surveys, collected in 1993, 1998 and 2010, correspond to important historical moments in the two decades of Kyrgyzstan’s transition. We assume that 1993 data provide a proxy to demographic structure and educational attainments achieved in Soviet times; the 1998 data show a demographic composition after a large out-migration and completion of the major transition reforms. The 2010 data allows an analysis of the young generations who have studied and entered the job market during the transition. As this type of intergenerational mobility analysis can be done using only one data source, we argue that the use of three data sources is important to reflect the demographic changes over this period. For illustration, around 14 percent of 1989 population in Kyrgyzstan had out-migrated permanently in the following 10 years. It is believed that the ethnic groups who migrated (mainly Russians, Ukrainians, and Germans) had higher educational attainment than Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, the two largest ethnicities nowadays.

The major data source used is the panel household survey “Life in Kyrgyzstan”, collected in October-December 2010. This nationally representative survey collects data from 3,000 households and 8,160 individuals aged 18 and older (Table 1). The family module of the survey asks adult respondents about parental education and last occupation. In line with the literature, we limit our analysis to individuals aged 20-69, and available number of respondent-parent observations, after cleaning procedures, is 6,545.

**Table 1: Summary of the datasets used**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dataset</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Original sample size</th>
<th>Child-parents pairs used</th>
<th>of which (in %):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td># of households</td>
<td>members aged</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KMPS</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>1,937</td>
<td>5,018</td>
<td>3,924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KPMS</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>2,979</td>
<td>8,736</td>
<td>7,064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LiK</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>8,160</td>
<td>6,545</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: 1998 indicators are weighted

The second source, 1998 Kyrgyz Poverty Monitoring Survey (KPMS), is a nationally representative household survey comprising 2979 households. The family module comprises
retrospective questions about the parental education and sector of occupation. We exploit 7,064 parent-child pair observations.

The third data source, 1993 Kyrgyz Multipurpose Poverty Survey (KMPS), is a nationally representative survey designed to measure the standard of living. The sample contains about 2,000 households and 10,000 members of those households. The migration section of the adult questionnaire contains information about the level of parents’ education. We exploit 3,924 child-parent observations.

The three sources of data are comparable on gender and locational dimensions, and reflect the changes in ethnic composition over time.

We use years of schooling of respondents and their parents based on the level of educational attainment. In the data for 1998 and 2010 the respondents report own cumulative years of schooling. In the 1993 survey the highest level of educational attainment of the respondents is transformed to years of schooling based on time needed to complete. This procedure was applied to the parental information for all three data sources. This approach potentially leads to some inaccuracies, such as assigning fewer years of schooling for repeaters.

In general, we analyze the sample of male and female respondents jointly, to compare the results with the earlier studies. For this particular analysis, if information on education of one of the parents is missed, we use educational information of the second parent to preserve the larger sample. For the robustness check we also conduct the analysis using only observations in which both parents’ education is available. However, for the gender effect analysis, we divide the samples to gender based sub-samples.

We conduct a number of cleaning procedures to the data to construct reliable respondent-parent pairs. For example, if a respondent was enrolled at the time of the survey, we derive additional years of schooling using the reported grade. Another example is exclusion of the observations when a respondent born after 1970 reports an illiterate parent. We treat such observations as an error given compulsory nature of educational system in Soviet Union after 1940s. Appendix provides a list of cleaning procedures we applied to the data.

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5 In 1993 KPMS 13% of cases (out of the final sample used) lacked information on one of the parent’s education. In KMPS 1998 and LiK 2010 the number of missing information of one of the parents’ education constituted, respectively, 3.8 and 2% of the sample used.
The resulting data demonstrate impressive increase in educational attainments in Kyrgyzstan in seventy years. Figure 1, which depicts the average years of schooling of the respondents and of their parents for all three surveys, shows that the respondents in late 70s have about 7.5 years of schooling, whereas the respondents in mid-20s have 11 years of education. The schooling gap between the respondents and of their parents has declined from around 6 years to 0.5 years, which implies that the respondents in late 70s had nearly illiterate parents and the respondents in 20s have parents with nearly the same level of education.

Figure 1: Years of schooling of respondents and of their parents

![Graph showing years of schooling of respondents and of their parents](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Source: KMPS 1993, KPMS 1998, LiK 2010

5. EMPIRICAL APPROACH

In line with the literature we estimate two basic indicators of correspondence in schooling between parents and children: a regression coefficient and correlation. Both indicators measure the degree of educational persistence across two generations; the higher coefficients indicate lower intergenerational mobility. The regression coefficient is obtained by regressing years of schooling of an individual to parental years of schooling. The regression coefficient shows how a one-year change in the schooling of parents affects the expected schooling of their children. Correlation provides a largely similar interpretation of intergenerational persistence, though it measures association between one standard deviation change in parents’ education and one standard deviation change in children’s education. These two measures will match if standard deviation of years of schooling is similar in both parents’ and
children’s generations. If the standard deviation in generation of parents is lower than of children’s, then a regression coefficient is lower than a correlation coefficient.

Our regression model is the following:

$$S = \beta_0 + \beta_1 S^p + \beta_2 YB + \epsilon$$

where, $S$ is the years of schooling of an individual, $S^p$ is the average years of schooling of the parents, $YB$ is an individual’s year of birth. By including a year of birth of individuals, we try to capture any policy effect that might affect schooling of the children’s generation.

To measure the effect of transition we compare the correlation and regression coefficients for the aged 25-34 in each sample. We choose this group because individuals from it in the 2010 sample have experienced the economic transformation and obtained education during the transition. We may judge on existence of a transition effect if there are differences in indicators in 2010 compared with those estimated for two earlier surveys.

Gender effect is identified by measuring the correlation and regression coefficients separately for male and female individuals. If there are significant differences in the estimated correlation or regression coefficients, we may conclude that there is a gender effect.

6. RESULTS

Table 2 shows two measures, regression coefficient and the correlation, calculated for each source of data. The results for our first interest, how the intergenerational mobility has changed across all three data sources, show that the educational mobility has not changed much since 1993. The regression and correlation coefficients are at the range 0.20-0.24, which is low by international standards. Our result for the 1998 regression coefficient is comparable with the findings of Hertz et al. (2007) for Kyrgyzstan, but we find much higher correlation coefficient.\(^6\)

A high level of educational mobility in Kyrgyzstan has been associated with higher educational attainment of each young cohort. It appears that in Kyrgyzstan the mobility expectedly has been driven by upward mobility. For instance, a two third of individuals in the

\(^6\)We associate this discrepancy to the differences in counting years of education and treatment of the missing information.
2010 sample had higher level of education compared with of their parents, and around 17 percent had lower level of education.

**Table 2: The relation between parents’ and children’s education, total sample and young cohort**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Regression coefficient</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aged 20-69</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of obs.</td>
<td>3,924</td>
<td>7,064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged 25-34</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of obs.</td>
<td>1,159</td>
<td>2,005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: KMPS 1993, KPMS 1998, LiK 2010

In order to capture the transition effect, we have calculated the two measures for aged 25-34. Both measures in Table 2 for 2010 demonstrate strong growth compared with earlier samples. The 2010 regression coefficient implies that compared with 1993 and 1998 data, one more year of education of the parents is associated with almost 0.5 additional years of schooling of individuals from the children’s generation. Correlation coefficients also support this conclusion. This finding implies that in a context of a low income transition country the mobility-reducing factors may prevail.

**Figure 2: Intergenerational educational regression coefficients and correlations**

![Figure 2: Intergenerational educational regression coefficients and correlations](source)

Source: KPMS 1998

Source: LiK 2010

Figure 2 illustrates the dynamics of the educational mobility across age cohorts for the data from 1998 and 2010. It is clear from the 2010 data that increase of association in educational
attainment between parents and children has grown particularly for the last three cohorts, who have been exposed to the economic transformation and educational system changes while they studied. So, in many respects this group reflects how the transition has been affecting the educational mobility.

In order to see whether there is a gender effect among sons and daughters we estimate our regressions separately for men (sons) and women (daughters). As it can be seen in Table 3, in the full samples we find a higher association in education between parents and daughters, and less – for the samples of sons. For some years this gender difference is quite large, up to 0.1 points in both regression and correlation coefficients.

**Table 3: Educational mobility based on gender**

<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regression coefficient</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of obs.</td>
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<td>3,402</td>
<td>3,118</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged 25-34</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.39</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.16</td>
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<td>1,024</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aged 20-69</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.34</td>
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<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.07</td>
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<td>2,005</td>
<td>3,427</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged 25-34</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of obs.</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>981</td>
<td>845</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: KMPS 1993, KPMS 1998, LiK 2010

We find small gender gap in educational mobility for the sample of aged 25-34. Both sexes were equally exposed to the transition effect, with slightly higher coefficients for female respondents. This finding reinforces the fact that there is almost no gender gap in educational opportunities among sexes in the post-socialist transition countries.

**7. CONCLUSION**

The paper contributes to the research on intergenerational mobility in transition countries. In concord with the findings from a number of transition countries in Europe, we find that educational mobility has not changed in Kyrgyzstan over the course of twenty years of
transition. From a low income country that experienced a number of painful reforms, including liberalization and restructure of its economy, and saw halved national output, sharp decline in living standards and rise in income inequality, one barely would expect mobility between generations to remain on a level of socialist times. This we relate to the increased opportunities in pursuing a university education, as higher education lifts to a respectful social status and seemingly provides better employment prospects.

However, there are signs of increased educational stratification, as we find much higher educational persistence for the cohort of 25-34 aged in 2010 data compared with estimates from the two data sources from earlier years. We can associate this with the effect of transition as this population group was affected by the changes in educational system and increased university education options. This finding is again consistent with the results from transition countries in Europe (Hertz et al., 2009). We contend that upward educational mobility probably cannot be sustained for long time, and depending on perceived economic and social returns from education, the downward mobility may even prevail.

The gender does appear to play a minor role in educational persistence across generations. Though we find lower mobility among women in our analysis, the difference from men’s mobility is not too large. We correspond this finding to gender parity in educational attainments in Kyrgyzstan, as in many post-socialist countries. Likewise, young cohorts of women were as equally as men affected by the transition changes and saw a decline in educational mobility if to look at the results from the latest survey.

The paper is of a descriptive nature and does not address causality issues. However, it has two important contributions. First, it provides evidence using the latest data to see the effect of transition processes. Second, it is the first detailed study to explore intergenerational mobility in a case of low income transition country.

There are several possible extensions this paper does not address. One extension of this research would be to include the occupational information, though it would be not straightforward analysis as it is a case with education. The use of information about the special social status of parents, such as membership in Communist Party in soviet times, can be another extension, as there are cross-country data sources, such as Life in Transition survey by EBRD, that allow for such an analysis. We think these potential studies may bring interesting perspectives to the literature on inequality in the transition context.
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