

Divorce determinants in four CEE countries: diversity or uniformity?

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Short abstract

Using selected demographic, social and cultural predictors, this paper analyses the risk of divorce in first marriages in four countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE): Bulgaria, Russia, Lithuania, and Poland. Due to lack of data, the phenomenon of divorce has been understudied in this region and therefore very little is known about its determinants. Formerly having been part of the socialist bloc, these countries share a lot of similarities in their political history and in their economic and societal development. With respect to their cultural and religious background, certain commonalities and differences can be distinguished that place Bulgaria, Russia, Lithuania, and Poland in various clusters. Drawing on these observations, we aim to investigate effects of various divorce predictors and to examine whether the seemingly easy identifiable similarities and diversities are reflected in behaviour related to first marital dissolution. Effects of non-marital cohabitation and motherhood status at first marriage that have been found to be of high but different significance in each country receive a special attention in this paper. The study is based on data from the Generations and Gender Surveys carried out in the 2000s and applies techniques of event-history analysis.

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Extended abstract

1. Introduction/objectives of the study

Using selected demographic, social and cultural predictors, this paper provides an analysis of divorce risk in first marriages in four countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE): Bulgaria, Russia, Lithuania, and Poland. Due to lack of proper data, the phenomenon of divorce and its determinants are still greatly understudied in this region. They all are former post-communist countries and share a lot both in their political history and in their economic and societal development. Until 1989, Bulgaria and Poland belonged to countries of the Eastern Bloc, while Lithuania until 1990 and Russia until 1991 were part of the Soviet Union. Political history starting in the 1990s slightly diverges between these countries. Lithuania, Poland and Bulgaria chose to join the European Union and thus are oriented towards western values, political, societal and economic institutions, whereas Russia took a path of a relatively independent country both in political and economic terms. However, cultural commonalities and differences suggest other possible clustering of countries. Cultural features mutual to Russia and Bulgaria include an Orthodox religion and a Slavic language and alphabet. Poland also has a Slavic language, but culturally it could be expected to be closer to Lithuania than to the other two Slavic countries. Lithuania and Poland are not only neighbouring countries that were once merged into one state (the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 16th to 18th centuries) but are also countries, in which the majority of population are Roman Catholics.

Taken all together, we aim to investigate divorce determinants in these four CEE countries and to examine whether the seemingly easy identifiable similarities and diversities are reflected in behaviour related to marital dissolution. The study is based on data from the Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS) carried out in the 2000s in all the four countries. In the analysis, we apply event-history techniques.

2. Divorce trends

Figure 1 shows trends in the total and crude divorce rates available for the four countries. Russia stands out by the highest divorce level, which is not just a recently observed development but is a rather long-standing trend. Already in the 1960s and 1970s, the Russian divorce rates were close to those typical of Western countries and were even among the highest (Council of Europe, 2006). High divorce rates have also been observed for Lithuania and replicate the pattern characteristic of Russia to some extent. The TDR was steadily increasing in the 1960s through the mid-1970s in these two countries, which is partly explained by the simplification of the divorce process in 1965 (Moskoff, 1983; Avdeev and Monnier, 2000), and stabilized during the 1980s. Meanwhile, Bulgaria and Poland constitute a cluster of countries (Lithuania belonged to it until the mid-1960s) with low levels of divorce that were preserved until the end of the 1980s. Local experts maintain that the long-standing stability of divorce trends in these two countries existed due to impediments to divorce created by the communist regime (e.g., Dimitrova, 2008; Łobodzińska, 1983). The period starting in the early 1990s witnessed remarkable changes and abrupt fluctuations in the divorce trends in all the four countries. Waves observable in the values of divorce rates reflect responses to rapid economic changes and legislative reforms. In addition, the 1990s was the period of significant ideational changes that made an impact also on population behaviour related to union formation and dissolution.

3. Data and methods

For studying first divorce risk, we use data from the first waves of Bulgarian, Russian, Lithuanian and Polish Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS), which provide detailed histories of union formation and childbearing and include other rich individual-level information. In Bulgaria and Russia, these surveys were carried out in 2004, in Lithuania – in 2006, and in Poland – in 2011.

The dependent variable in our study is disruption of the first marriage formed before 2005. The *process time* (the basic time factor) is the time elapsed between the entry into first marriage and separation, measured in months. Date of separation and divorce can either coincide or not. For our analysis, we take the date that comes first. Observations are censored at the date of interview if there is no event and at the death of the partner. We restrict our sample to first-time married women. Additionally, we exclude women with inconsistent union formation histories and those who married before the age 16.

In our analysis, we apply a piecewise constant event history model. This model assumes that hazard rates are constant in each segment of the basic time factor (duration of marriage) but can vary across them. (For more details, see e.g. Blossfeld and Rohwer, 2001.) Results are presented in the form of exponentiated coefficients, which are interpreted as relative risks.

Our study of divorce is based on the following set of covariates:

- *Duration of marriage* (baseline): 1st year of marriage, 2nd year, 3rd year, 4th year, 5th year, 6-7 years, 8-9 years, 10-14 years, and 15+ years.
- *Calendar period* is a time-varying covariate and embraces these time intervals: the years before 1970, 1970-1974, 1975-1979, 1980-1984, 1985-1989, 1990-1994, 1995-1999, and the period from 2000 (the last interval includes covers the time up to the date of interview).
- *Age at first marriage*: 16–19 years, 20–24, 25–29, and 30+.
- *Three types of variable for assessing the effect of non-marital cohabitation*:
 - *Any experience of non-marital cohabitation*: “No prior cohabitation” and “Cohabited”. This variable refers to any prior experience of premarital cohabitation. In other words, a positive answer means that either the first marriage was preceded by cohabitation or any previous union was a non-marital cohabitation.
 - *Experience of premarital cohabitation*: “Direct marriage” and “Marriage preceded by cohabitation”. This variable basically focuses on the type of the union and on experience of cohabitation with future spouse.
 - *Experience of non-marital cohabitation*: “Direct marriage: no prior cohabitation”, “Direct marriage: prior cohabitation with other partners”, “Indirect marriage: first-time cohabitation with future spouse”, “Indirect marriage: multiple cohabitation experiences”. This is a more detailed variable that combines the two above variables into one.
- *Motherhood status at marriage*, comprising three groups of women: pregnant at marriage, with child(ren) at marriage, and childless at marriage.
- *Mother’s parity and age of the youngest child*. It is a time-varying covariate describing an impact of children on the risk of marital disruption. We distinguish between parity 0 (childless), parity 1, parity 2 and parity 3+. The age of the youngest child is categorized as follows: aged 0–3 years (very young children), 4–6 (children of preschool age), and ages 7+.
- *Parents ever divorced* indicating any recorded divorce to the respondent’s parents. It has three categories: “Yes, parents divorced”, “No, parents never divorced”, and “No, parents never lived together”.
- *Educational attainment* covariate consists of the following levels of completed education: high (ISCED 5-6), medium (ISCED 3-4), and low (ISCED 0-2).

- *Place of birth*: urban and rural. It shows the size of settlement the respondent was born in.
- *Ethnic composition*. Due to sample limitations, we use a crude variable of ethnic composition, consisting of two categories only: national majority and other ethnicities. We could not construct this covariate for Poland as this question was not included in the Polish GGS.
- *Religious affiliation* covariate has been split into five groups: “Roman Catholic”, “Orthodox”, “Muslim”, “Other”, and “None”. However, the country-specific variables consist of four categories only. “Roman Catholic” is not distinguished for Bulgaria and Russia and “Muslim” is not specified for Poland and Lithuania.

4. Preliminary findings

Table 1 summarizes our preliminary results from the piecewise constant event history models of transition to divorce in Bulgaria, Russia, Lithuania and Poland. The model controls for all variables shown in the table. The analysis has revealed that there are both many commonalities and considerable heterogeneity in divorce risk and the role of various predictors between the countries under study.

With respect to effects of the major divorce predictors, we find rather little divergence between the four countries, and the obtained results are in line with the evidence of studies from other countries. As shown by many previous studies, early marriages in these four countries are more likely to dissolve than those contracted at older ages. For woman’s parity, we find that childless couples run the highest risk of marital breakup and that marital stability is enhanced by every additional child. Our data also suggest that the presence of young children (under age 3) has the strongest positive effect on marital stability. For duration of marriage, we see that the risk of divorce increases in the first few years and reaches the peak between the duration of 5 to 10 years. As in many previous studies, our findings confirm the existence of intergenerational transmission of divorce and that children of divorced parents are likely to have less stable marriages. Rural place of birth is associated with a significantly lower risk of divorce. Regarding the educational attainment, in all the four countries the lowest likelihood of divorce is found among low educated women.

The crude variable of ethnic composition has a rather low explanatory power, and it is indeed too crude to make any firm conclusion about the role of ethnicity in the risk of divorce. Its effect is statistically insignificant for Bulgaria and Russia, while for Lithuania it shows that divorce risk is lower among ethnic minorities. The picture is much richer when the group of other ethnic minorities is split into finer categories (it can be done for Bulgaria and Lithuania but not shown here). Furthermore, ethnicity is closely related to religious affiliation, and the inclusion of control for religious affiliation in the model changes the results for ethnicity quite substantially.

The countries differ by the composition of religious affiliation. But there are similarities between Lithuania and Poland and between Russia and Bulgaria. Therefore, we constructed separate variables for Lithuania and Poland and for Bulgaria and Russia. The results for Lithuania show that Roman Catholics are less likely to divorce than Orthodox believers (after Roman Catholics, they constitute the largest religious community in Lithuania and substantial numbers in Poland) or people with other or no religion affiliation. For Russia and Bulgaria, we find much less heterogeneity with respect to religion, but it is evident that divorce among Muslims is the least frequent and thus considerably lower than among those affiliated with the Orthodox Church.

The most interesting results we found for effects of non-marital cohabitation and motherhood status at marriage (see Tables 1-3) and could identify three distinct patterns:

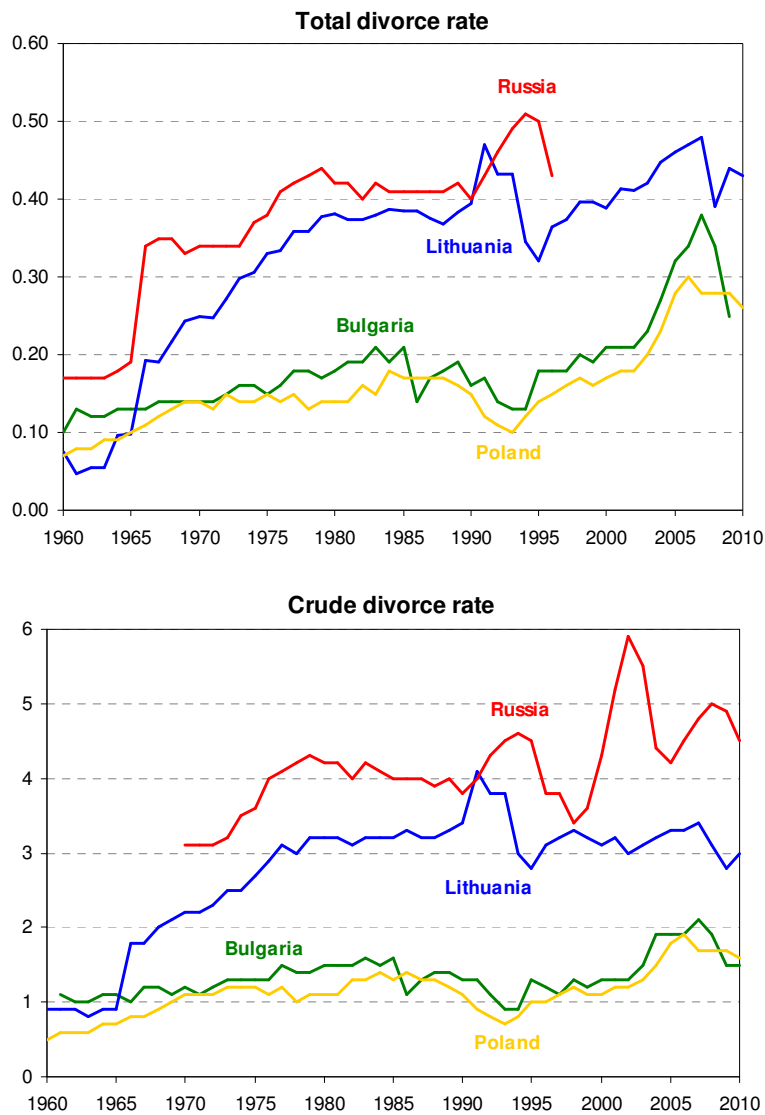
1. Bulgaria: Experience of cohabitation has a positive effect on divorce (Table 1). However, premarital cohabitation with future spouse, which is rooted in long-standing traditions in Bulgaria, significantly decreases the likelihood of divorce (Table 2). No significant effect has been found for premarital pregnancy or premarital children.
2. Poland: Any experience of cohabitation as well as having premarital pregnancy or premarital children has a strong negative effect on marital stability (Tables 1-3).
3. Lithuania and Russia: Cohabitation increases the risk of divorce, especially if it was direct marriage but woman cohabited with someone else before marrying her spouse (Table 3). The results for the effect of motherhood status at marriage on divorce are mostly insignificant and inconclusive.

The divergence in effects of non-marital cohabitation that has been found between the four countries in the present analysis stimulates for further investigation in this direction. There is a number of questions that remain unanswered: Who prefers cohabitation instead of direct marriage? What is the role of selectivity? Are there differences between the countries in this respect? How has the place of non-marital cohabitation and its effect on marital stability been changing in the rapidly changing social and cultural context of these countries?

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Figure 1: Total and crude divorce rates, 1960-2010



Data source: publications and e-databases of the four statistical offices; Council of Europe, 2006; Generations & Gender Contextual Database, 2010.

Table 1: Relative risks of divorce, first time married women (Model 1)

	Bulgaria	Poland	Lithuania	Russia
Duration of marriage				
1st year	1.02	0.86	0.31***	0.65***
2nd year	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)
3rd year	1.44	1.51**	1.40	1.08
4th year	1.32	1.38*	1.90***	1.15
5th year	1.79**	1.54**	2.04***	1.09
6-7 years	2.04***	1.29	2.48***	0.88
8-9 years	1.60	1.25	2.55***	0.77
10-14 years	1.62	1.42*	2.76***	0.82
15+ years	0.70	0.73	1.45*	0.39***
Period				
<1970	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)
1970-1974	0.50	1.31*	1.21	1.64***
1975-1979	1.70*	1.4**	1.82***	1.75***
1980-1984	3.02***	1.7***	1.86***	1.53***
1985-1989	2.74***	1.42**	2.15***	1.39***
1990-1994	2.89***	1.31*	2.04***	1.58***
1995-1999	2.82***	1.35**	2.65***	1.79***
2000-2004	2.35***	2.42***	2.65***	1.70***
Age at 1st marriage				
<20	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)
20-24	0.77**	0.69***	0.74***	0.69***
25-29	0.59***	0.66***	0.63***	0.56***
30+	0.62*	0.83	0.55***	0.35***
Experience of premarital cohabitation				
No prior cohabitation	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)
Cohabited	1.25**	1.51***	3.02***	4.47***
Motherhood status at marriage				
Pregnant at marriage	0.90	1.31***	0.69**	0.68***
Child(ren) at marriage	1.00	1.60***	0.84	0.68***
Childless	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)
Parity and age of youngest child				
Parity 0	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)
Parity 1, aged 0-3	0.68*	0.63*	0.58***	0.94
aged 4-6	0.78	0.97*	0.52***	1.19
aged 7+	0.75	0.89	0.48**	1.06
Parity 2, aged 0-3	0.29***	0.72**	0.18***	0.35***
aged 4-6	0.34***	0.62***	0.24***	0.38***
aged 7+	0.32***	0.77*	0.24***	0.69**
Parity 3+, aged 0-3	0.15**	0.74	0.25***	0.39***
aged 4-6	0.65	0.56**	0.41***	0.58*
aged 7+	0.22***	0.59***	0.22***	0.35**
Parents ever divorced				
Yes	2.04***	1.55	1.56***	1.27***
No	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)
They never lived together	4.75***	0.73	1.36	1.47**
Education				
High (ISCED 5-6)	1.07	1.31***	1.04	1.19**
Middle (ISCED 3-4)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)
Low (ISCED 0-2)	0.96	0.79**	0.56***	0.86
Place of birth				
Urban	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)
Rural	0.62***	0.54***	0.78***	0.74***

Ethnic composition				
National majority	1 (ref.)	–	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)
Other ethnicities	1.27	–	0.72**	0.89
Religious affiliation				
Roman Catholics	–	1(ref.)	1 (ref.)	–
Orthodox	1 (ref.)	1.35	1.53*	1 (ref.)
Muslim	0.61*	–	–	0.60**
Other	1.08	2.28***	1.98***	1.08
None	0.86	1.90***	1.45**	1.66
Model fit				
Initial LL	-2074.90	-4308.58	-2522.42	-5035.80
Final LL	-1825.65	-3970.59	-2154.78	-4238.47

Source: GGS data; authors' calculations; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table 2: Relative risks of divorce, first time married women (Model 2)

	Bulgaria	Poland	Lithuania	Russia
Premarital cohabitation with future husband				
Direct marriage	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)
Marriage preceded by cohabitation	0.65***	1.50***	1.39***	1.35***
Motherhood status at marriage				
Pregnant at marriage	1.00	1.31***	0.72***	0.97
Child(ren) at marriage	1.17	1.60***	1.09	1.17
Childless	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)

Source: GGS data; authors' calculations; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Note: Model 2 controls for all the effects included in Model 1 and presented in Table 1.

Table 3: Relative risks of divorce, first time married women (Model 3)

	Bulgaria	Poland	Lithuania	Russia
Experience of nonmarital cohabitation				
Direct marriage: no prior cohabitation	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)
Direct marriage: prior cohabitation with other partners	--	1.76	5.65***	1.61
Indirect marriage: first-time cohabitation with future spouse	0.65***	1.51***	1.40***	1.36***
Indirect marriage: multiple cohabitation experiences	---	1.08	3.91	1.34
Motherhood status at marriage				
Pregnant at marriage	1.00	1.31***	0.87	0.96
Child(ren) at marriage	1.21	1.60***	1.15	1.15
Childless	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)

Source: GGS data; authors' calculations; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Note: Model 3 controls for the same effects as Model 1 and Model 2; they are all presented in Table 1. For Bulgaria, Model 3 does not work because of too few cases in the 2nd and 4th category of the cohabitation variable.