



## Divorce Rates Falling Across Europe

Harry Benson, January 2020

- The United Kingdom has experienced the biggest fall in divorce rates across Europe over the past twenty five years. Our analysis – using data from Eurostat – provides a far more accurate assessment of divorce rates than has been previously available.
- UK couples who married in 1992 had an actual divorce rate of 30.7% during their first 15 years of marriage, the third highest divorce rate out of twenty one countries surveyed. A decade later, the actual divorce rate for couples who married in 2002 had fallen to 28.1%, the biggest fall in Europe, taking the UK down to tenth place in the league table of marital breakdown.
- On current trends, UK couples who married in 2017 have a projected divorce rate of 22.5%, a reduction in percentage terms of 27% compared to their 1992 predecessors. This is again the biggest fall in Europe and now puts Britain in fourteenth place, a huge improvement.
- Previous Marriage Foundation research has shown that the substantial fall in UK divorce rates is almost entirely due to fewer wives filing for divorce in the early years of marriage. I attribute this improvement in stability to those men who do marry being more committed – ‘deciders’ rather than ‘sliders’ – and not to any socio-economic or policy causes. There are clear signs of this improvement in stability – as marriage becomes more optional – spreading across Europe.
- Divorce rates are now highest in Sweden (36%), Finland (33%), Latvia (33%), Belgium (31%) and Denmark (31%). After the UK’s 27% fall in divorce, other countries to experience notable drops are Switzerland (-22%), Germany (-17%), Hungary (-14%), Austria (-9%) and Slovakia (-8%).
- There is no current evidence to suggest that break-up rates of UK cohabiting couples, typically three times higher than UK married couples, have also fallen.

### EUROPEAN DIVORCE RANKINGS

### Over 1st 15 years of Marriage

	1992	Actual	2002	Actual	2017	Projected	2017 vs 1992 Improvement
<b>Highest</b>	Sweden	33%	Belgium	38%	Sweden	36%	<b>UK</b> <b>-27%</b>
<b>2</b>	Finland	32%	Sweden	38%	Finland	33%	Switzerland <b>-22%</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>UK</b>	<b>31%</b>	Austria	36%	Latvia	33%	Germany <b>-17%</b>
<b>4</b>	Denmark	30%	Latvia	34%	Belgium	31%	Hungary <b>-14%</b>
<b>5</b>	Austria	30%	Norway	33%	Denmark	31%	Austria <b>-9%</b>
<b>6</b>	Czech	29%	Finland	31%	Czech	29%	Slovakia <b>-8%</b>
<b>7</b>	Hungary	28%	Lithuania	30%	Norway	29%	Romania <b>-7%</b>
<b>8</b>	Norway	28%	Hungary	29%	Spain	27%	Czech <b>-2%</b>
<b>9</b>	Switzerland	27%	Denmark	29%	Austria	27%	Netherlands <b>-1%</b>
<b>10</b>	Belgium	27%	<b>UK</b>	<b>28%</b>	France	26%	Lithuania <b>+1%</b>
<b>11</b>	Germany	27%	Germany	27%	Lithuania	25%	Denmark <b>+2%</b>
<b>12</b>	Latvia	25%	Czech	27%	Netherlands	25%	Norway <b>+3%</b>
<b>13</b>	Netherlands	25%	France	27%	Hungary	24%	France <b>+5%</b>
<b>14</b>	Lithuania	25%	Switzerland	27%	<b>UK</b>	<b>23%</b>	Finland <b>+5%</b>
<b>15</b>	France	24%	Spain	25%	Germany	22%	Bulgaria <b>+8%</b>
<b>16</b>	Spain	21%	Netherlands	23%	Switzerland	22%	Sweden <b>+10%</b>
<b>17</b>	Slovakia	20%	Slovakia	22%	Bulgaria	20%	Poland <b>+26%</b>
<b>18</b>	Bulgaria	18%	Bulgaria	21%	Slovakia	18%	Belgium <b>+15%</b>
<b>19</b>	Romania	16%	Romania	17%	Poland	17%	Spain <b>+32%</b>
<b>20</b>	Poland	13%	Poland	17%	Italy	16%	Latvia <b>+29%</b>
<b>Lowest</b>	Italy	6%	Italy	7%	Romania	14%	Italy <b>+151%</b>

## Introduction to 'divorce rates'

The subject of 'divorce rates' is far more complex than we might assume.

Most of us want to know the percentage of marriages that end in divorce at some stage.

However any estimate of divorce rates in the future must rely entirely on what has happened in the past.

Most national estimates of divorce rates are based on the number of divorces today and divided by the number of people married or number of people in the entire population.

Alas this 'year of divorce' method is not particularly reliable. It's a bit like catching fish from a pond. Even if we know how many fish are in the pond, we still don't know whether the average fish survives longer or shorter.

For many years, I have used a 'year of marriage' method to calculate UK divorce rates. I do this by mapping marriages that end after one, two or three years duration, etc onto the marriages that began one, two or three years earlier (*Benson 2012, 13, 19b*).

In this way I can track the couples who married in any one year and see what happened to them over time.

This is like dividing the one large pond of all age fish into lots of smaller ponds, each of which represents one year's cohort of fish. Now I can compare what happens to fish as they grow older over time and get a much clearer indication of survival trends.

Headline data from Eurostat on divorce rates across Europe typically uses the less reliable 'year of divorce' method.

The 'year of marriage' method uses more detailed data on divorces by duration of marriage, also from Eurostat, and compares it to the weddings in the relevant year.

Now I can look at actual divorce rates across Europe over the first 15 years of marriage and from these make much more accurate projections for today's marriages.

## Divorce rates: 'year of marriage' method

AUSTRIA example, source Eurostat

Year of marriage	Number of marriages	0-1 year	1-2 years	2-3 years	3-4 years	4-5 years
2012	36,140					2.6%
2013	37,458				2.7%	
2014	44,502			2.0%		
2015	44,890		1.3%			
2016	44,981	0.1%				
Divorces during 2017		53	580	904	999	937

## Divorce rates across Europe

Data from Eurostat gives the number of divorces in each year 1990-2017 by duration of marriage through the first 35 years.

However in order to compare trends over time, I have limited my analysis to what happens during the first 15 years of marriage.

In this way, I can compare the actual divorce rate among couples who married in 1992 with those who married ten years later in 2002. By collating divorce rates in 2017 for each individual year of marriage, I can make a projection for 2017 marriages.

The table below ranks the projected divorce rates for 2017 marriages in twenty European countries from highest to lowest.

## Divorce rates across Europe

MF analysis of Eurostat data

	1992 Actual	2002 Actual	2017 Projected	25 year Change
Sweden	33%	38%	36%	+10%
Finland	32%	31%	33%	+5%
Latvia	25%	34%	33%	+29%
Belgium	27%	38%	31%	+15%
Denmark	30%	29%	31%	+2%
Czech	29%	27%	29%	-2%
Norway	28%	33%	29%	+3%
Spain	21%	25%	27%	+32%
Austria	30%	36%	27%	-9%
France	24%	27%	26%	+5%
Lithuania	25%	30%	25%	+1%
Netherlands	25%	23%	25%	-1%
Hungary	28%	29%	24%	-14%
UK (E&W)	31%	28%	23%	-27%
Germany	27%	27%	22%	-17%
Switzerland	27%	27%	22%	-22%
Bulgaria	18%	21%	20%	+8%
Slovakia	20%	22%	18%	-8%
Poland	13%	17%	17%	+26%
Italy	6%	7%	16%	+151%
Romania	16%	17%	14%	-7%

(NOTE: Because Eurostat uses survey rather than national data, I have used our own national data for England & Wales to represent UK because it is more accurate. The results are comparable either way.)

These results are quite different to what analysts conclude if relying only on the official Eurostat 'Crude' and 'Per Marriages' ('PM') measures of divorce rates.

The table below shows the variation in rankings between the official 'year of divorce' methods and my 'year of marriage' method among the twenty countries analysed.

### Ranking of divorce rates across Europe

Official rates vs MF analysis

	Eurostat Crude	Eurostat PM	MF analysis
Sweden	4	9	1
Finland	4	5	2
Latvia	1	11	3
Belgium	8	3	4
Denmark	3	7	5
Czech	4	6	6
Norway	8	10	7
Spain	7	1	8
Austria	15	18	9
France	10	2	10
Lithuania	2	13	11
Netherland	10	4	12
Hungary	10	16	13
UK (E&W)	15	12	14
Germany	10	15	15
Switzerland	10	14	16
Bulgaria	20	17	17
Slovakia	15	20	18
Poland	18	19	19
Italy	20	8	20
Romania	19	21	21

Three surprising observations jump out from this analysis.

#### 1. Divorce rates are highest in Scandinavia and northern Europe.

My results reveal that [Sweden](#) has the highest divorce rates in Europe, rather than 4<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> place using the official methods.

[Finland](#), in 2<sup>nd</sup> place, is also worse than its official 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> place.

[Latvia](#) should really be in 3<sup>rd</sup> place, but the official stats put it at either 1<sup>st</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup>.

[Belgium](#), at 4<sup>th</sup>, is worse than its 8<sup>th</sup> place, using the 'crude' method, yet slightly better than its 3<sup>rd</sup> place using the 'PM' method.

Further down the table, [Austria](#) is worse at 9<sup>th</sup>, rather than its official 15<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> place.

However [France](#), [Lithuania](#) and [Netherlands](#) are doing better at 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> place, whereas official stats have them all near the top of the divorce table.

[Germany](#) at 15<sup>th</sup> and [Italy](#) at 20<sup>th</sup> are also doing substantially better.

The [UK](#) comes in at 14<sup>th</sup> place – using the data for England & Wales – compared to 15<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> using the official methods.

Only [Poland](#) has roughly the same ranking, at 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup>, across all three methods.

#### 2. Divorce rates are lowest in Catholic countries.

[Romania](#), [Italy](#), [Poland](#) and [Slovakia](#) have the lowest divorce rates in Europe.

The exception to this Catholic rule appears to be [Spain](#) which sits in 8<sup>th</sup> place, in the top half of the divorce table. Spain is a nominally Catholic country, however fewer than one in six Spanish Catholics attend church regularly (*CIS 2016*).

#### 3. The UK has experienced the biggest fall in divorce rates across Europe

Nine of the twenty one countries in Europe surveyed have shown falls in divorce rates over 25 years.

The biggest falls were in the [UK](#) (-27%), [Switzerland](#) (-22%), [Germany](#) (-17%), and [Hungary](#) (-14%).

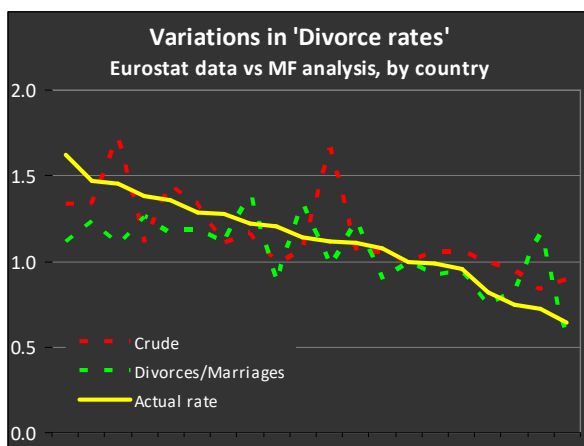
[Austria](#) (-9%), [Slovakia](#) (-8%), [Romania](#) (-7%), [Czech Republic](#) (-2%) and [Netherlands](#) (-1%) also showed smaller falls.

The biggest risers were [Italy](#) (+151%), [Spain](#) (+32%), [Latvia](#) (+29%) and [Poland](#) (+26%).

The modest correlation of  $r=.31$  between divorce rates using the two official methods

(red and green lines) can be visualised in the chart below. I've left off the country names on the x-axis to make the chart clearer.

My projected rates (yellow line) correlate rather better with the official methods at  $r=.69$  and  $r=.63$  respectively, although this remains a long way from presenting an accurate reflection of divorce rates.



## Discussion

My analysis of divorce rates – using the more reliable ‘year of marriage’ method – shows that the UK has experienced the biggest fall in divorce rates over the last 25 years of any major country in Europe.

The analysis shows that divorce has fallen by more than 5% in seven of twenty one countries and risen by more than 5% in eight countries.

Although it is not a surprise that divorce is lowest in Catholic countries, it has been rising strongly in Italy and Poland while falling in Romania and Slovakia.

What is perhaps more of a surprise is that the Scandinavian countries have the highest divorce rates, with Sweden and Finland in first and 2<sup>nd</sup> place, Denmark in 5<sup>th</sup> and Norway in 7<sup>th</sup>.

Scandinavian countries are known for their progressive social policies – which don't seem to be working when it comes to the stability of marriage.

For the last few years, I have reported on the substantial fall in UK divorce rates. So this finding is not a surprise.

UK divorce rates are falling almost entirely because fewer wives are filing for divorce in the early years of marriage (Benson 2019a).

This supports the hypothesis that as pressure to marry at all reduces, men who marry are more committed. US research suggests that men's commitment is linked to decision making. If men are no longer under pressure to marry, then those who do are more likely to be ‘deciders’ rather than ‘sliders’. Hence fewer wives filing from divorce in the early years of marriage.

The big question is how and when we will see this trend begin to take shape across the rest of Europe.

The answer is that it is already happening.

Divorce rates during the first five years of marriage have already fallen by more than 30% compared to a decade earlier in Austria and the UK, and by more than 20% in Belgium, Slovakia, Norway, Romania, Germany and Hungary.

Divorce has also fallen by lesser amounts in France, Switzerland, Poland, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Latvia and Finland.

Only Italy, Denmark, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and Bulgaria buck the downtrend so far.

Divorce rates are definitely falling across Europe.

## References

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