



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

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% |
| 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 | 17 | 9 |
| France | 10 | 2 | 10 |
| Lithuania | 2 | 13 | 11 |
| Netherlands | 10 | 4 | 12 |
| Hungary | 10 | 16 | 13 |
| UK (E&W) | 15 | 12 | 14 |
| Germany | 10 | 15 | 15 |
| Switzerland | 10 | 14 | 16 |
| Slovakia | 15 | 19 | 17 |
| Poland | 18 | 18 | 18 |
| Italy | 20 | 8 | 19 |
| Romania | 19 | 20 | 20 |

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 4th or 9th place using the official methods.

Finland, in 2nd place, is also worse than its official 4th or 5th place.

Latvia should really be in 3rd place, but the official stats put it at either 1st or 11th.

Belgium, at 4th, is worse than its 8th place, using the 'crude' method, yet slightly better than its 3rd place using the 'PM' method.

Further down the table, Austria is worse at 9th, rather than its official 15th or 17th place.

However France, Lithuania and Netherlands are doing better at 10th, 11th and 12th place, whereas official stats have them all near the top of the divorce table.

Germany at 15th and Italy at 19th are also doing substantially better.

The UK comes in at 14th place – using the data for England & Wales – compared to 15th or 12th using the official methods.

Only Poland has the same ranking, at 18th, 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 8th 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 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%).

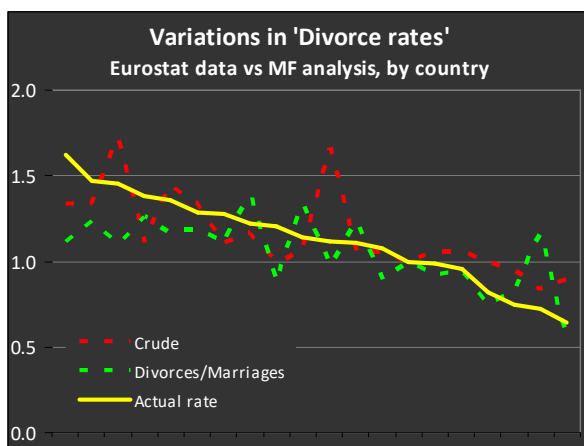
Austria (-9%), Slovakia (-8%), Romania (-7%), Czech Republic (-2%) and Netherlands (-1%) also showed smaller falls.

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 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 2nd place, [Denmark](#) in 5th and [Norway](#) in 7th.

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](#) and [Sweden](#) buck the downtrend so far.

Divorce rates are definitely falling across Europe.

References

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