



# Marriage Foundation

Press Release from Marriage Foundation

Release Date: EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> August 2022

## **Government urged to introduce “Hungarian style” pro-marriage policies to reverse decline in people tying the knot**

The UK Government should look to introduce “Hungarian style” pro-marriage policies if it wants to reverse the decline in people getting tying the knot, according to a major new study from Marriage Foundation.

The study, *Marriage: We need to talk about Hungary*, analyses the latest Eurostat data, which shows that marriage rates fell in every European country during 2020, the first year of the COVID lockdown, except one, Hungary, which rose by three per cent.

While this might sound relatively modest, there was a significant decline in most other countries. “On average, there were 12-16 per cent fewer marriages in the northern European countries of Scandinavia and the Baltic, 23 per cent fewer in Western Europe, 24 per cent fewer in Eastern Europe, and 42 per cent fewer in the Mediterranean countries of Southern Europe”, it says.

The report goes on to highlight how Hungary, now has the highest marriage rates in Europe, which it says are, “...the result of a decade of family friendly policies aimed primarily at encouraging an increase in fertility”.

“Marriage rates in Hungary have now risen by 92 per cent between 2010 and 2020, taking their ranking from 28<sup>th</sup> in Europe to 1<sup>st</sup>. This contrasts sharply with the rest of Europe, where marriage rates have fallen in every country except the Baltic states of Estonia and Latvia. The biggest falls have been in Ireland, Italy and Portugal where marriage rates have fallen by more than half, which includes the falls due to lockdown.”

Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation’s Research Director commented: “What we are witnessing in Hungary, is nothing short of a miracle when it comes to marriage rates and proof that with the right policies and financial incentives, we can the reverse the decline in the number of people tying the knot. As our previous research has shown this is particularly important for those from on lower incomes, who overwhelmingly want to get married, but

due to a range of factors including cost do not. This is why we have seen the development of a 'marriage gap' between the richest and poorest couples. Indeed, when we surveyed over 2,000 young people and asked if they wanted to marry, 87 per cent said yes. However, when we compared their answers with who actually gets married, controlling for age, education and other factors there was a deeply troubling gap, of 39 per cent between those on the highest and lowest incomes.

"What this means in practice is just a third of those classed as semi-skilled workers and fewer than four in 10 casual labourers actually get married. This compares to over three quarters of those in higher managerial jobs such as doctors, lawyers, headteachers and Members of Parliament."

The report makes clear that it is not endorsing all of Hungary's policies including those on immigration and same sex marriage, "But that shouldn't stop us from looking at the reasons why Hungary was the only country in Europe to see a rise in marriage rates during 2020, albeit a rather modest 3 per cent. It takes their total rise in marriage rates since 2010 to 92 per cent", it says.

It continues: "Why? First let's contrast British family policy with Hungary family policy. Whereas Hungary actively encourages marriage via financial incentives, Britain actively discourages marriage via financial disincentives.

"In the UK, there are no overt tax advantages to being married rather than cohabiting. Since the 1990s, HMRC has treated cohabiting couples as 'living together as if married'.

"The UK government's major policy on supporting marriage amounts to little more than lip service. Low income couples can transfer part of their tax allowance from the higher earner and gain up to £250 per year.

"However the very same low income families stand to lose as much as £10,000 every year of tax credit or Universal Credit entitlement if they live together or marry. This is because welfare is assessed on total household income. Move in or marry and their income is added to the household. In fact, that is also the case even if married couples are not living together under the same roof for whatever reason.

"With these disincentives in the UK welfare system, the surprise is that any low income couples bother to marry at all."

Unsurprisingly the report predicts a significant fall in marriage rates in the UK for 2020 due to the effects of the COVID lockdown. It says that rates fell by 16 per cent between 2010 and 2019, taking the UK from 17<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> out of the 30 European countries analysed. "UK figures are not yet available for 2020. However, based on typical falls across Western Europe, I would expect a further drop in marriages of 20-25 per cent", it says.

"Married families are typically more stable, pay more tax, and require fewer benefits. Fewer marriages therefore means more family breakdown, less tax and higher welfare bills."

Mr Benson continued: “What is also interesting when we look at the Hungarian data is there has been no increase in the divorce rate, which suggests that the policies have not encouraged couples to get married for the money, rather it has facilitated those who might have thought they could not afford a wedding to access marriage or to bring forward their plans. At the same time the Hungarian state has unequivocally made clear that marriage is the gold-standard of relationships and has many benefits associated with, this is in stark contrast with most other countries in Europe, where politicians, while being married themselves, do little to promote the institution.”

The report concludes by acknowledging that there will be something of a rebound in marriages across Europe in 2021 and 2022 as government restrictions have been relaxed, but that this should not distract from the downward trend especially among the poorest couples.

Sir Paul Coleridge, founder of Marriage Foundation added: “This timely and fascinating report shows that Governments can, with the right set of policies, make a real difference to marriage rates by supporting those couples who aspire to marry. As we know here in the UK, support for marriage remains incredibly strong, but worryingly is increasingly becoming the preserve of the wealthy. This is why we have consistently championed reforms that will allow couples to marry where they want and help to reduce costs, after all the cost of a wedding must not become a barrier to marrying. These reforms, welcome as they are, do not go far enough. If politicians, who overwhelmingly claim to back the institution wish to reverse declining marriage rates, then we need a set of bold policies, to this end, Hungary provides a fascinating case study of what can be done.”

**ENDS**

### **Notes to editors**

#### **About Marriage Foundation**

Marriage Foundation was founded in 2012 by Sir Paul Coleridge, a High Court judge who was moved by his personal experience in 40 years as a barrister and judge specialising in family law. The think tank seeks to improve public understanding of marriage and to reduce the numbers of people drawn into the family justice system – some 500,000 children and adults each year. It has established itself as a leading voice on marriage issues in the UK.

Sir Paul Coleridge, Harry Benson and Michaela Hyde from the Marriage Foundation are available for comment and for interviews linked to these new findings.

For all media enquiries, please contact Alistair Thompson on 07970 162225