Varying educational difference in divorce risks in Eastern Europe: evidence from the GGS countries

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Background. The increase in divorce is one of the most salient changes in family life in contemporary societies. From the mid-1960s, divorce rates have risen dramatically in all countries of Europe and doubled or tripled in most of them. Although there are signs that divorce rates have started to level off in the countries that have advanced farthest along this direction, up to 40–50% of marriages will eventually break up under the contemporary nuptiality regime. In a broader framework, the change in divorce risks did not occur in isolation. It is considered to be a part of a major transformation of the family and household relationships, termed the Second Demographic Transition (SDT), that incorporates a decline in fertility and marriage rates, postponement of childbearing, increasing cohabitation and disconnection of procreation from marriage (van de Kaa 1987; Lesthaeghe 1995).

In this context, research addressing union dissolution can be divided into two main streams, one focusing on the trends, differentials and mechanisms governing the spread of the phenomenon, and the other addressing its consequences for the well-being of adults and children concerned. The present study seeks to contribute to the first of these two streams. We investigate the educational gradient in divorce in seven countries of Eastern Europe — Bulgaria, East-Germany, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Romania and Russia. Eastern Europe offers an interesting case for the study of union dissolution for several reasons. With regard to the incidence of divorce, many countries in the region rank close to the top in Europe (Council of Europe 2006). In addition, several countries can be regarded trendsetters in the „divorce revolution" since high rates of union dissolution have been manifest ever since the 1960s and early 1970s. Against that background, however, there are relatively few studies that have addressed the patterns of divorce in the countries of Eastern Europe in comparative perspective.

Focus of the study, theoretical perspectives and hypothesis. The specific focus of our study relates to educational differences in divorce risks which deserves attention for a number of reasons. Most importantly, education holds a prominent place in all major explanatory frameworks that are applied for the understanding of union dissolution in contemporary societies.

The micro-economic theory predicts that educational attainment of women leads to the increase in divorce risks. Becker (1981) argued that because education improves women's chances in the labour market, their earnings potential, and thus their economic independence, but decreases their relative economic gains of marriage, women with more education makes it possible to leave unsatisfying partnership more easily. Individuals with higher education might also have better resources to handle the costs related to divorce (Blossfeld et al. 1995). By the same token, higher education might hold more be associated with more liberal values and higher expectations towards the quality of relationship which are seen conducive to more frequent divorce (Levinger 1979).

Other accounts, however, have led to opposite predictions. It has been argued that education improves resources — economic, social, and cultural — that increase the stability of relationship either by reducing economic strain, by successful partner matching or by

enhancing the ability to solve conflicts more easily (Amato 1996; Hoem 1997). In addition, as economic resources of the highly educated make them more attractive in the marriage market, their partners have more to loose from union dissolution.

Irrespective of direction of the predicted effect, the frameworks mentioned above share an expectation that the association between education and behavioural outcomes is fixed across time even though there are fair reasons to expect otherwise. Goode (1962; 1993) was probably the first to posit a changing link between education and divorce. According to Goode's view, the relationship shifts as societies evolve from traditional to modern. In a society in which divorce is (yet) relatively unusual, it represents a notable breach of established social norms and requires significant resources to accomplish. This implies a positive association between social status and divorce risks at the early stages of „divorce revolution". As divorce rates increase, however, societies become more tolerant towards the new behaviour. As a result, the positive educational gradient is expected to fade away or even turn to slightly negative due to greater marital strain among the less educated.

Conceptually, Goode's thesis appears to be in line with the premises of the SDT according to which demographic development is a gradual, multi-stage process that produces „leaders" and „laggers" among sub-groups of the population. A succession of stages produces divergence, as new advances emerge among the forerunners, and convergence, as behavioural innovations spread. Several comparative studies have made reference to the Goode's hypothesis and found some empirical support to it (e.g. Blossfeld et al. 1995; Graaf and Kalmijn 2006; Härkonen and Dronkers 2006). Studies of divorce risks in the Nordic countries, often considered the forerunners of the SDT among European countries, also report a mostly negative effect of education (Hoem 1997; Jalovaara 2003; Lyngstad 2004).

In our study we confront the above described perspectives with the recent data from Eastern Europe. We focus on the patterns of divorce among women and hypothesise that the educational gradient varies across countries of the region. More specifically, we expect the educational gradient to be more positive in the countries that are less advanced in the SDT, and less positive or neutral in countries in which the features of the SDT are more manifest.

Data and methods. The data used in this study come from national surveys carried out in the framework of the Generations and Gender Programme. In the surveys, implemented in 2004–2005, complete retrospective histories of partnership formation and dissolution were collected which make the particularly suited for the present analysis. We included all countries of Eastern Europe for which the data from the first panel wave of the survey were available in August 2011 — Bulgaria, East-Germany, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Romania and Russia.[1] The selection of the countries is considered representative of the diversity of demographic patterns that exists in the region.

We selected the first marriages of women who reported having been married. Our dependent variable is the occurrence of divorce. Our main independent variable is educational attainment, which was coded into three categories according to the International Standard Classification of Education: low (0–2), medium (3), and high (4–6). In addition, we distinguished enrolment in education as a separate category. Our education variable is time-varying, and it follows a specification that has been used in the GGS analyses by other authors (Hoem and Kreyenfeld 2006). At present, we have included age at entry into first marriage, pre-marital childbearing and pregnancy, parity status, and birth cohort as controls; controls for parental divorce and pre-marital cohabitation will be also added at the following stages of the analysis.

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[1] We decided not to include Georgia for the reason that the country has historically demonstrated a pattern of nuptiality that combines East European and Central Asian features (Coale, Anderson and Härm 1979).

The proportional hazard event history models were applied to examine the relationship between divorce and education. The respondents were followed from the date of marriage until divorce, or until censoring at the interview, or until 20 years of marriage. Table 1 reports the sample size in terms of number of female respondents, persons-years of exposure, and family dissolution events.

Table 1. Basic characteristics of the GGS samples, exposure time and number of divorces.

Country	Year of data collection	Sample size (women)	Person-months of exposure	Number of divorces	Divorce rate, per 1000 person-months
Bulgaria	2004	4942	911 057	454	0.49
East-Germany	2005	553	105 119	122	1.39
Estonia (native)	2004-05	2321	403 416	708	1.75
Hungary	2004-06	5706	1 071 113	1273	1.15
Romania	2005	5135	1 021 304	494	0.48
Russia	2004	5511	919 565	1580	1.72

Results. Our preliminary modelling results pertaining to educational differences in divorce risk are summarised in Table 2. Following the example of several earlier studies, we used low education as reference category to present the results.

Consistent with our general expectation, we found noticeable variation in divorce risks across the countries included in the analysis. Regarding the difference between women with low and high educational attainment, our countries can be divided into two groups. In Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Russia, highly educated women feature a significantly higher propensity of divorcing their first marriage compared to their less educated counterparts. The relative risks range from 1.35–1.39 in Bulgaria, Hungary and Russia to 2.11 in Romania. The results for the former East Germany, Estonia and Lithuania, on the other hand, do not reveal significantly elevated propensity to divorce among the highly educated. Relative to women with low educational attainment, the highly educated women have marginally lower divorce risks in Estonia while in Lithuania the difference runs in the slightly opposite direction. However, in both countries the difference does not reach the level of statistical significance. In East Germany, women with high (and medium) education have significantly lower divorce risks than their counterparts with low education. However this finding should be treated with some caution since women with low education constitute a rather small group in the East-German sub-sample of the German GGS.

Table 2. Relative risks of divorce in first marriage by educational attainment.

Educational attainment	Bulgaria	East-Germany	Estonia (native)	Hungary	Lithuania	Romania	Russia
Low (ISCED0–2)	Ref.	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Medium (ISCED3)	1.31**	0.37**	1.27**	1.29***	1.26**	1.51***	1.48***
High (ISCED4–6)	1,39*	0.41*	0.97	1.35***	1.14	2.11***	1.37***

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
Source GGS database, author's calculations.

The differences in divorce risk between women with medium and high education are smaller and do not reach the level of statistical significance in most countries. Only Romania stands out for large and significant difference, with divorce risks among the highly educated women exceeding those of the middle group by 40%. Estonia, on the other hand, features the difference running in the opposite direction with highly educated having 24% lower risk of

divorcing than their counterparts with medium education. With the exception of East Germany (the exceptionality of the former GDR should be treated with caution for the reasons mentioned above), in all countries included in the analysis women with medium education feature higher divorce risks than those with low educational attainment.

Overall, the results lend some support to our hypothesis that countries which have progressed farther in the Second Demographic Transition tend to exhibit a reduced contrast in divorce risks between population groups with high and low educational attainment. We will continue to explore the findings presented here, refine our statistical models, and interpretation of the results.

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