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Socio-economic determinants of divorce in Lithuania: specialization hypothesis reconsidered

Abstract

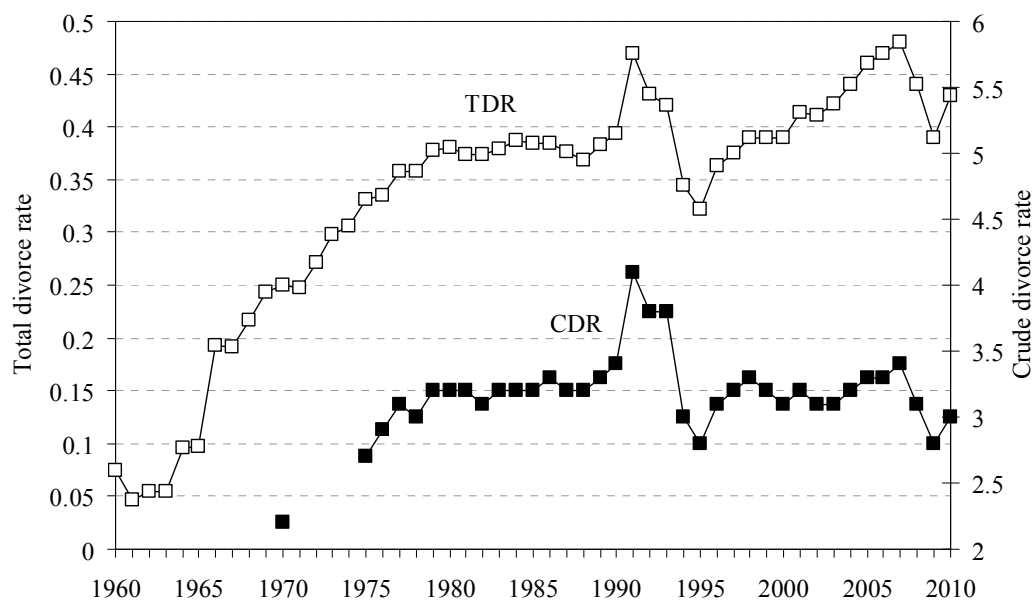
The study focuses on socio-economic determinants of divorce in Lithuania and is based on the census linked dataset covering all first divorces and person years of exposure of married males and females during 2001-2003. The theoretical framework of the research is based on the gender role specialization hypothesis that associates the decrease in the gender role specialization and increase in the divorce risks. Main goal of the study is to examine the potential of the specialization hypothesis for the explanation of the divorce trends in part of Eastern Europe where the family modernization process due to historical circumstances followed a specific path. The study suggests that the observed socio-economic differentials in first divorce risk support the specialization hypothesis for males. Males with lower socio-economic status and lower prospects to fulfil the traditional breadwinner role experience higher risks to end their marriage in divorce. The findings on the link between the economic role of women and the risk of divorce are inconsistent. Although economically inactive women experience a lower risk of divorce, unemployed women were still more prone for divorce as in the case of males.

Extended abstract

Introduction

High divorce rates have been in place in Lithuania for almost more than three decades. The total divorce rate (TDR) sharply increased in the 1970s, reaching the level of around 0.4. After some short-term fluctuations in the first half of the 1990s, the TDR was stable until the beginning of the 2000s when again it took an upward trend peaking at 0.48 in 2007 (Statistics Lithuania, 2011). In the last few years, the level of TDR slightly decreased; nevertheless Lithuania stands along the other EU countries with the highest divorce rates – Denmark, Sweden, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, and the Czech Republic (Council of Europe 2006, GGP Contextual Data Base 2011).

Figure1: Total divorce rate and crude divorce rate, Lithuania



Source: Council of Europe 2006; Statistics Lithuania 2011.

Divorce in Lithuania, much like in other Eastern European countries, is a rather fragmentary investigated phenomenon. Furthermore, a little is known about determinants of divorce. The “hidden story” of divorce determinants in Eastern Europe was and to much extent is up to date conditioned by the enduring shortage of adequate data, thus limiting the research on divorce in this region predominantly to studying the divorce trends (e.g., Darsky, Scherbov 1995, Scherbov, van Vianen 1999, Avdeev and Monnier 2001, Sobotka 2008, Philipov and Jasilioniene 2007). There are a few very recent studies that make exceptions to this. These studies focus on the analysis of divorce determinants in Russia using data from the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) (Jasilioniene 2007, Muszynska 2008).

One of the predominant explanations of the rising and high divorce rates in contemporary society found in scholarly literature suggests that the risk of marital instability, and consequently the risk of divorce, is elevated by changes in gender roles and their diminishing specialization (Becker 1981). The specialization hypothesis is gendered and thus could be shaped in two ways: by looking at changing female roles and their effect on divorce and/or by taking the male side and scrutinizing changes in male roles and their outcomes on divorce.

In the first case, female employment and education are seen as the transformative agents in gender role specialization, which in the societal conditions of earlier times granted the marital stability. “Working men” and “caring women” were bound/interdependent in the marriage by production and exchange of gender specialized “goods” and therefore ensuring the stability of marriage. Diminishing gender specialization decreases the interdependencies in the marriage and accordingly raises the risk of divorce. Employment and education ensure the possession of the economic, social and cultural capital and thus empower women with the independence to evaluate costs and gains of marriage and to secure the welfare in case of marital dissolution.

In the second case, the specialization hypothesis refers to males and the structural barriers, which arouse from the sweeping macroeconomic changes and accordingly limits male’s opportunities to fulfil the culturally prescribed male breadwinner role (Oppenheimer 1994, 1997, Ruggles 1997). One relevant link/element in the specialization hypothesis devoted to the “male side” is the traditional gender and family culture that reproduces expectations towards the gendered division of labour.

The research body on the specialization hypothesis and divorce is numerous. However, until recently the majority of the studies conducted in this field focused on Western Europe (Hoem 1997; Kalmjin, De Graaf, Poortman 2004, De Graaf, Kalmijn 2006, Kalmjin, Loeve, Manting 2007, Bernardi, Martinez-Pastor 2011), excluding Eastern European countries, not to mention the rich and long standing research evidence on this phenomenon existing in the USA (Ruggles 1997, for the review of the research in 1990s see White, Rogers 2000, Burgess, Propper, Aassve 2003, Rogers 2004). This line of study is slightly touched only in the above-mentioned paper by Muszynska (2008). Relevant to our research questions are Muszynska’s (2008) findings, which, as a matter of fact, challenge the notion of universal applicability of the specialization hypothesis. She found no effect of female employment on the increase in the divorce risk in Russia during and after the Soviet period, although in the concluding remarks the author notes positive influence of some employment positions in the post-soviet period (Muszynska 2008).

The main goal of the study is to verify the specialization hypothesis and shed more light on the phenomenon of divorce and its determinants in Lithuania. We examine both aspects of the specialization hypothesis and study the effects of employment status and education on divorce risk among females and males.

Data and methods

This study uses a census-linked dataset provided by Statistics Lithuania. The links were made by employees of Statistics Lithuania, who have permission to work with individual-level data. The dataset is based on all records from the 2001 Population and Housing Census and all first divorce records for the period between April 6, 2001 and December 31, 2003. The data cover all married individuals between the exact ages 15 and 60, and include 3.18 million person-years of population exposure, and 41 thousand first divorces. The data were provided in an aggregated multi-dimensional frequency table format that combines first divorces and population exposures, and are split by socio-demographic variables, including date of first divorce, age, sex, number of children (for females only), education, ethnicity, economic activity status, and urban-rural residence. Divorce rate ratios by socio-demographic group and their 95% confidence intervals were obtained by applying Poisson regression. The first model controlling for age and the second model controlling for all variables under study were applied.

Results

Table 1 presents preliminary findings on the impact of selected socio-demographic variables on the risk of first divorce (dissolution of first marital unions) in Lithuania. For both males and females, the risk of first divorce is the highest in the youngest age groups and gradually declines towards older ages. As expected, presence of children notably decreases probability of divorce among females. However, after controlling for all variables, the effects of having just one child becomes statistically insignificant.

Only a modest association has been found between education and divorce. Among males, the lowest education is associated with a moderately increased risk of divorce, whereas males with secondary education do not show any statistically significant difference. Among females, the opposite relationship is observed: females with secondary education experience a significantly lower risk, whereas for the lowest education the divorce rate ratio is not statistically significant. However, after controlling for all variables, the direction of the differential becomes exactly the same as for males (with the highest risk in the lowest education group). As expected, both rural males and females have a notably lower risk of divorce. Ethnicity also appears to be a significant predictor of divorce in Lithuania. The Russian ethnic group faces the highest divorce risk, whilst the Polish ethnic group has the lowest risk of marital dissolution. Lithuanians and Other (remaining) ethnic groups fall in between these two extremes. Interestingly, both urban-rural and ethnic divorce differentials remain almost unchanged after controlling for all variables included in the study.

The study has also discovered that unemployed economically active males and females have a statistically significantly higher divorce risk than employed males and females. This relationship is more pronounced among males. Economically inactive males also show a higher divorce risk, whereas economically inactive females constitute a group with the lowest divorce risk (Table 1). The latter relationship remains statistically significant after controlling for number of children and all variables under study.

Conclusion

The study suggests that the observed socio-economic differentials in divorce risk among males support the specialization hypothesis for males and, partially, for females. Males with the lower socio-economic status and lower prospects to fulfil the traditional breadwinner role experience higher risks to end their marriage in divorce. The findings on the link between the economic role of women and the risk of divorce are inconsistent. Economically inactive women experience a lower risk of divorce, whereas unemployed women are more prone to divorce.

Table 1. Poisson regression first divorce rate ratios. Lithuania, 2001-2003.

	MALES		FEMALES		
	Model 1A Age only	Model 2 All vars.	Model 1A Age only	Model 1B Age and nr. child.	Model 2 All vars.
Age					
15-24 years (ref.)	1	1	1	1	1
25-34 years	0.87* 0.81-0.94	0.95* 0.88-1.03	0.82* 0.78-0.86	0.97 0.92-1.02	0.95* 0.90-0.99
35-44 years	0.51* 0.47-0.55	0.57* 0.53-0.61	0.47* 0.45-0.50	0.65* 0.62-0.69	0.62* 0.59-0.66
45-59 years	0.24* 0.22-0.26	0.26* 0.24-0.28	0.22* 0.20-0.23	0.31* 0.29-0.32	0.29* 0.27-0.31
Number of children					
0	NA	NA	1	1	1
1	NA	NA	0.93* 0.89-0.98	-	0.96 0.92-1.00
2	NA	NA	0.56* 0.54-0.59	-	0.61* 0.58-0.63
3+	NA	NA	0.50* 0.47-0.53	-	0.60* 0.56-0.64
Education					
Higher (ref.)	1	1	1	1	1
Secondary	1.00 0.96-1.04	1.01 0.97-1.05	0.90* 0.87-0.94	0.96* 0.93-0.99	1.01 0.97-1.04
Lower than secondary	1.15* 1.10-1.21	1.16* 1.10-1.22	0.98 0.93-1.03	1.06* 1.01-1.12	1.18* 1.12-1.24
Economic activity status					
Active, employed (ref.)	1	1	1	1	1
Active, unemployed	1.48* 1.43-1.54	1.55* 1.49-1.60	1.10* 1.06-1.14	1.13* 1.09-1.18	1.15* 1.11-1.20
Inactive	1.24* 1.18-1.31	1.34* 1.27-1.41	0.78* 0.75-0.81	0.84* 0.81-0.87	0.89* 0.85-0.92
Urban-rural residence					
Urban	1	1	1	1	1
Rural	0.59* 0.57-0.61	0.57* 0.55-0.59	0.58* 0.56-0.60	0.64* 0.62-0.67	0.65* 0.63-0.67
Ethnicity					
Lithuanian	1	1	1	1	1
Russian	1.21* 1.14-1.27	1.10* 1.04-1.16	1.21* 1.15-1.27	1.13* 1.07-1.19	1.07* 1.01-1.12
Polish	0.68* 0.64-0.73	0.69* 0.65-0.74	0.70* 0.66-0.75	0.69* 0.65-0.73	0.70* 0.66-0.74
Other	0.97 0.90-1.06	0.89* 0.82-0.96	1.00 0.92-1.08	0.95 0.87-1.03	0.90* 0.83-0.98

Note: Model 1A - controlled for age only; Model 1B – controlled for age and number of children (available only for females); Model 2 – controlled for all variables. * - first divorce rate ratios are statistically significant (p<0.05).

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