A Life Course Perspective on Grey Divorce in Europe

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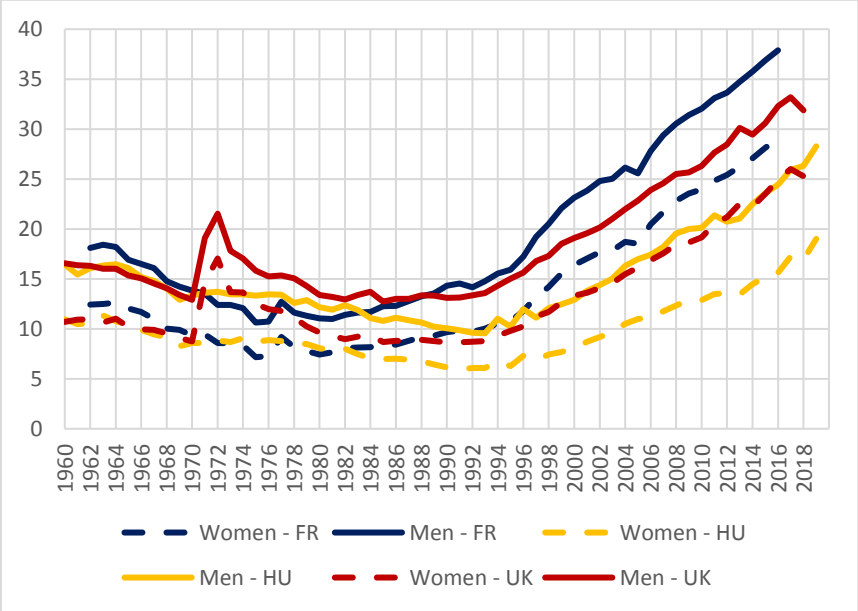
Introduction and background

The divorce rate of persons aged 50 and older doubled between 1990 and 2010 in the United States (Brown & Lin, 2012) and it has also increased in several countries in Europe. For example, among all divorcees of 2016, 38% of men were aged 50 and older in France, while their share was only 20% in 1998 (Solaz, 2021). The same rise has been visible in the United Kingdom and Hungary and also – to a lesser extent – among women (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Proportion of men and women aged 50+ among the divorcees in France, UK and Hungary (1960–2019), %



Sources: Insee, ONS and HCSO

In the context of rising divorce rates, the growing popularity of unmarried cohabitation and increasingly fragile partnerships, what happens after union dissolution has attracted increased scholarly attention (Andreß and Hummelsheim, 2009; Leopold, 2018). The issue of partnership dissolution at older ages has also raised concerns regarding the economic situation, the physical and mental health of older people, and their access to social support and caregiving (De Shane & Brown-Wilson, 1982; Brown & Wright, 2017).

The rise of divorce among elder people has important negative implications for mental and physical health, wealth and social support. Still, research on grey divorce has received less attention in Europe than in the United States and our knowledge about the underlying factors are limited. This lack of research is partly due to methodological difficulties: there is a need for longitudinal data to study this

relatively 'rare' event with background information on the circumstances of the divorce or union dissolution. These data are rarely accessible on a European level.

Previous studies have shown that the determinants of grey divorce do not much differ from divorces at younger ages (Lin et al. 2016). Low partnership quality, health problems, financial difficulties are factors that have a positive effect on these divorces. In the meantime, children and grandchildren have been shown to be protective factors against divorce (Alderotti et al. 2020).

Some studies analyse life course events related to elder people's divorce. In relation to retirement the structure of marital conflict is found to be unaffected by husbands' and wives' transition to retirement but wives' continued employment may be associated with greater conflict longitudinally (Davey & Szinovacz, 2004). The leaving of home of own children ('empty nest') influences the risk of marital disruption but the effect depends on the duration of the marriage: it increases the likelihood of divorce or separation for couples who reach this phase relatively early in their marriages but has a negative effect for couples who enter the empty nest phase later (Hiedemann et al., 1998). Other life course events (e.g. the death of own the parents) have not yet been studied. Our goal is to analyse these events in a European context and to answer three research questions.

Research questions

1. How do life course events affect union dissolution after the age of 49?
2. Do demographic characteristics and family features affect divorce to the same extent among people below and above the age of 50?
3. Are there country differences in the probability of union dissolution by age?

Data and methods

We use data from the first wave of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS; Gauthier, Cabaço & Emery 2018) for 15 European countries: Bulgaria, Russia, Georgia, Romania, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, Italy, Germany, France, Belgium, Sweden and Norway (data were collected between 2002 and 2013). GGS data allows us to reconstruct family trajectories retrospectively.

We define "grey divorce" as union dissolution of either married or cohabiting partners that takes place at or after the age of 50. We analyse men and women who lived with a partner or a spouse at age 50 or over and our event of interest is separation(s) or divorce(s) that took place on or after January 1990 at age 50+. In other words, more than one union of each respondent may be included. Our pooled sample consists of 57,139 partnerships (55,288 respondents) and 1961 separations for the 15 countries. On average 3.1% of the respondents experienced grey "divorce" in our sample (ranging between 0.5 and 7.9% of the respondents at risk for each country). While the overall number of events is sufficient to conduct the analysis, we only have on average 131 separations per country (highest: 331 in Sweden, lowest: 15 in Georgia), which makes country-level analysis impossible.

We study the association between grey divorce and four life course events that usually happen in middle and old age: (1) retirement, (2) entering grandparenthood (when the first grandchild of the respondent is born), (3) entering the "empty nest" phase (when the respondent no longer lives in the same household with any of his/her biological children), and (4) the death of own parents (when the respondent no longer has living biological parents). Unfortunately, no information is available on whether and when the respondent developed some health degradation or disability and whether and when the partner experienced these events.

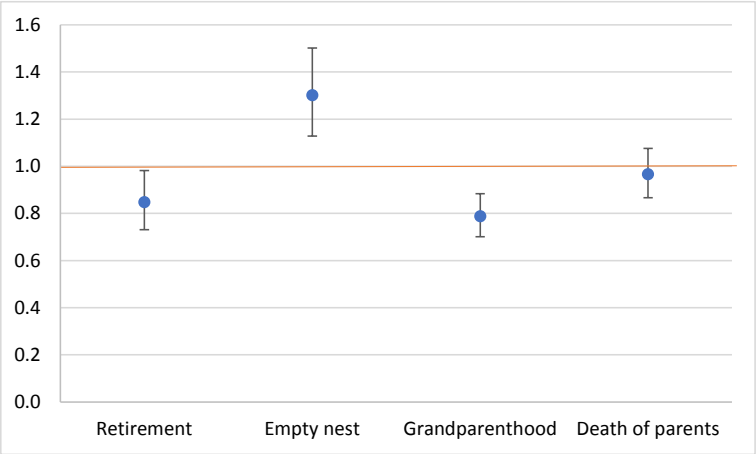
Our covariates include the usual demographic factors: sex, cohort, migration background and education. We also take into account family biography, namely union order, age at start of union, and if the couple had non-shared children at the beginning of the relationship from a previous partner. Partnership-specific "capital" is measured by the type of the union (marriage or cohabitation) and by having shared children or not. One measure of family background was also included: whether the respondent experienced the break-up of his/her own parents.

We use Cox regressions models for recurrent events with clustered standard errors and country dummies. We also compare union dissolutions at age 50+ and those at age 18–49 in order to respond to research question 2.

Results

Our first results show that the death of one's own parents is not related to grey divorce. Two of the studied events, retirement and grandparenthood are protective (they decrease the risk of union dissolution), while entering the empty nest phase is associated with an increased risk of grey divorce (Figure 2). Further models (not included here) show that empty nest had no effect among respondents born before 1940 and the effect of the other events does not differ by sex or cohort. The impact of empty nest is especially strong if there are no grandchildren.

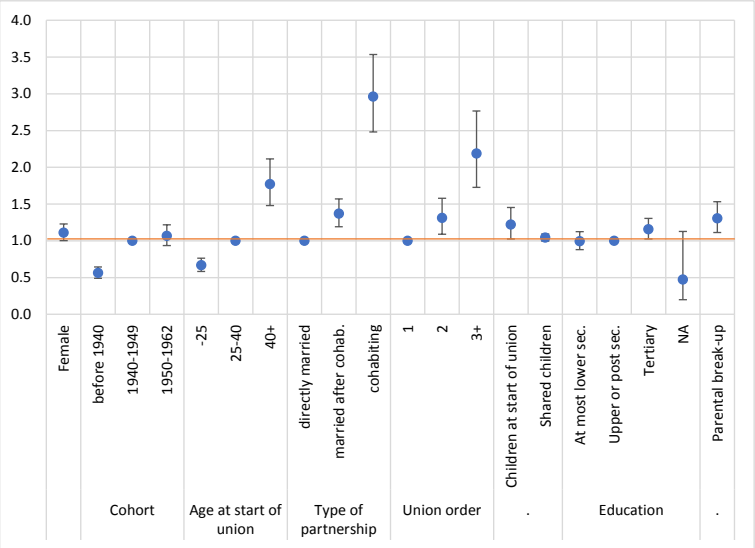
Figure 2: The effect of key life course events on grey divorce



Note: hazard ratios and 95% confidence intervals, controlled for all covariates.

Grey divorce is associated with several covariates (Figure 3). While there is no significant difference between women and men, the risk of grey divorce is higher for younger cohorts than for those born before 1940. The risk of grey divorce is higher among respondents who started the union relatively late (at age 40+), who got married after cohabitation or who did not marry, who lived in a higher order union, who had children from a previous partner, who had tertiary education and whose parents broke up.

Figure 3: Relationship between covariates and grey divorce

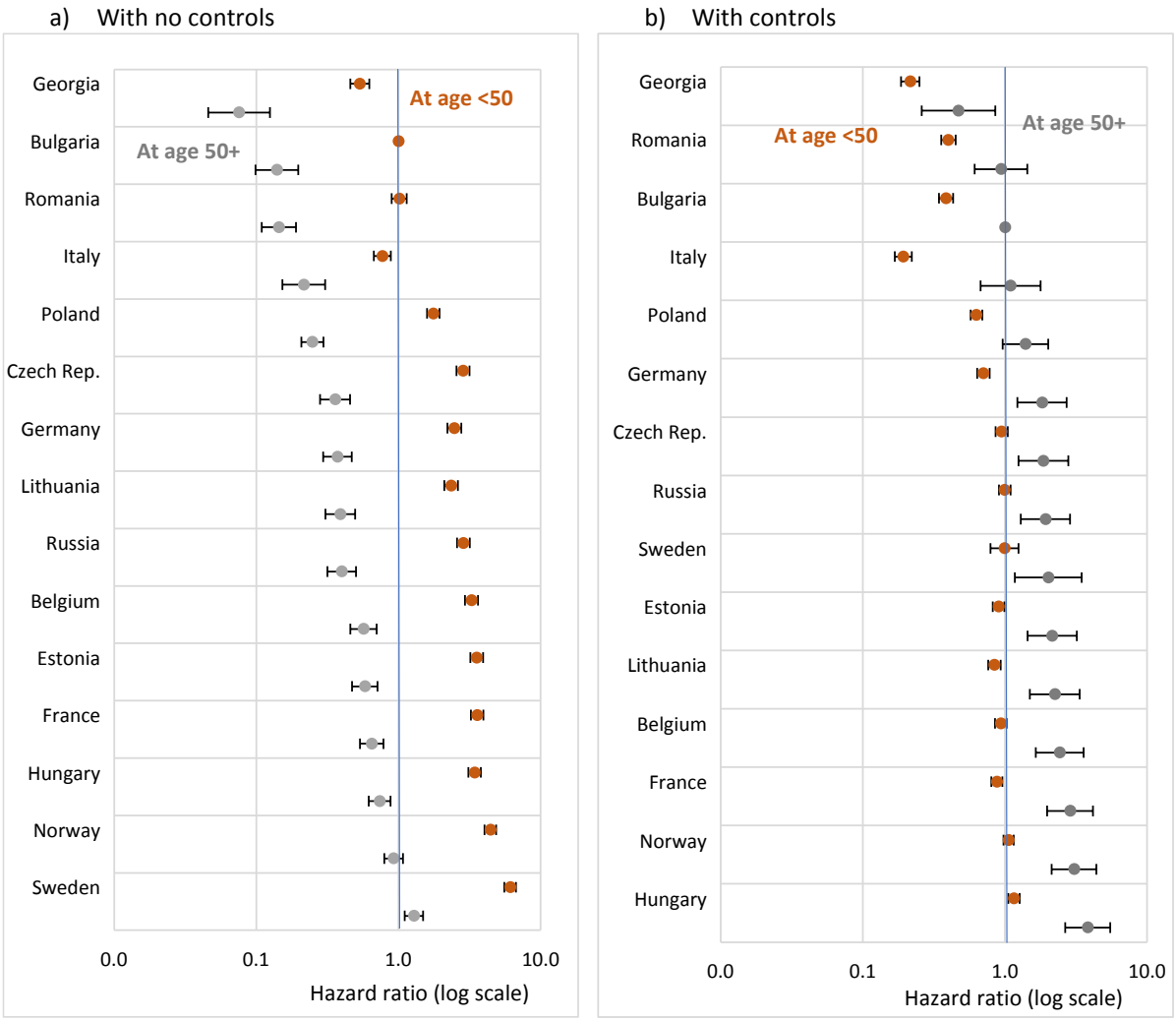


Note: hazard ratios and 95% confidence intervals, controlled for life course events.

In the next step, we compared union dissolution risks by age to study whether covariates have the same effect at ages <50 and 50+ (results not shown). The relationship between union dissolution and sex, parenthood status, birth cohort, type of partnership and parental breakup was the same for both age groups. Three covariates had different effect by age: the effect of education was statistically non-significant at age <50, living in the second union had a positive effect at age 50+ and no effect at age <50, and unions that started at an age younger than 25 were more likely to dissolve at younger and less likely at older ages.

While the low number of events per country did not make it possible to study the effect of life course events separately by country, we still could look at union dissolution risks by country before and after controlling for the life course events and covariates (Figure 4). If no controls are included, the risk of union dissolution is lower at age 50+ than at younger ages in all countries. Grey divorce is less common in Eastern Europe (Georgia, Bulgaria, Romania) and it is also quite low in Italy. Central European and the Baltic countries and Russia are positioned in the middle, and grey divorce is highest in Hungary, Western and Northern Europe. After controlling for the life course events and the covariates, the risk of union dissolution becomes higher at age 50+ than at age below 50 in most countries (or at least the two risks do not differ). The order of countries is basically the same, with a few notable exceptions, such as Sweden and Hungary.

Figure 4: Country differences in union dissolution risks by age



Note: hazard ratios (on a logarithmic scale) and 95% confidence intervals.

Discussion

While the share of middle aged and older people who experience the dissolution of their marriage or cohabiting union is on the rise, there have been very few studies of the individual causes and consequences of grey divorce in Europe. The paper is likely to contribute to a better knowledge of the factors behind divorce above age 50 in a number of European countries. The novelty of our study is the inclusion of both marital and non-marital unions in the analysis of fifteen European countries, comparing people above and below 50, as well as incorporating key life course events and a wide set of background factors in our models.

The first results of our study has proved the importance of studying mid-life and old age transitions and the relevance of the life course perspective for union dissolution in Europe. While entering retirement and grandparenthood are ”protective” factors, separation risk increases during the empty nest phase. These results also indicate that adult children’s own transitions may also matter for the partnership trajectory of the parental generation (“linked lives”). The analysis also proves the importance of covariates, some of which are of larger magnitude than life course events.

Increasing life expectancy, rising overall separation risk, the postponement of union formation, more higher order unions, and legal changes may contribute to increasing grey divorce. Our study enriches our understanding of the possible factors by emphasizing the importance of events at middle and old age. Most importantly, we have found the increasing negative effect of the empty nest period. In the future this effect may become even stronger in light of the increasing childbearing age and the spread of childlessness of adult children, what lengthen the "grandchildless" empty nest period for the prospective grandparents.

While grey divorce has become increasingly salient, it is still a relatively rare event. We are faced with several challenges when studying grey divorce, mostly data availability issues. We would need multi-country large-sample panel surveys that also include information on partners, multiple life domains and the whole adult life course to better understand mechanisms and country-specificities of grey divorce.

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