

Who Converges to Whom?

Divorce Patterns Across East, West, and Migrant Populations more than 30 Years after German Reunification

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Introduction

The reunification of Germany in 1990 marked not only a political and economic turning point but also a profound social transformation. More than three decades later, it offers a unique opportunity for studying differences and convergence processes in family behavior between East and West Germany. Divorce patterns, in particular, serve as a sensitive indicator of societal change, as they reflect shifts in gender roles, economic conditions, and institutional frameworks. Prior to German reunification, these factors differed markedly between the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR), resulting in distinct marriage and divorce patterns (Böttcher, 2006). Before reunification, crude divorce rates were higher in East Germany compared to West Germany. Following reunification, West German divorce laws were applied in the East, which led to a sharp decline in divorce rates in East Germany after 1990 (Grünheid, 2013). Overall, divorce rates in both East and West Germany increased throughout the final decades of the 20th century. Since the mid-2000s, however, this upward trend has stabilized or may even have reversed (BiB, 2023).

The higher divorce risk among East German women can be largely attributed to their lower levels of religious affiliation, the greater likelihood of having divorced parents, and the higher rates of female labor force participation in the former GDR. In contrast, family policies in the conservative welfare regime of the FRG promoted a male-breadwinner model, offering marriage-related benefits and tax allowances while providing no public childcare for children under three—thereby discouraging women’s participation in the labor market (Leitner et al., 2008; Rosenfeld et al., 2004). Reunification created a single German state with unified laws and institutions virtually overnight. In the aftermath, East German mothers began experiencing more frequent and prolonged employment interruptions and were increasingly employed part-time. Meanwhile, labor market participation among West German mothers gradually increased over time. (Leitner et al., 2008; Trappe et al., 2015). Nevertheless, due to the greater availability of childcare, East German mothers remained more likely to be employed than their West German counterparts (Rosenfeld et al., 2004). Gender ideologies have partly converged over the 30 years since reunification, but substantial East–West differences persist in views on maternal employment and its implications for children’s well-being (Zoch, 2021). Regarding divorce patterns, previous research has documented rising divorce risks across marriage

cohorts, followed by a reversal in the youngest cohorts in both East and West Germany—indicating that marriages have become more stable in recent cohorts (Schmid & Wagner, 2023).

At the same time, the migrant population in Germany has increased. Today, about a third of the resident population has immigrated or has an immigrant parent. Continuing immigration has contributed to growing diversity of the migrant population; several migrant generations coincide, and the composition of the countries of origin has been changing (Straub et al., 2024). Previous research has demonstrated substantial diversity in union formation and family trajectories among immigrants and their descendants in Europe (Milewski, 2025), emphasizing the importance of childhood socialization into different family-related norms (Andersson et al., 2015; Hannemann et al., 2020; Kulu et al., 2025). Consequently, migrants face multiple layers of adaptation as they navigate not only the family norms of their countries of origin but also the institutional and social frameworks of a reunified Germany. Previous research on divorce in migrant populations estimated lower divorce rates in migrant populations compared to the majority populations (e.g., Milewski and Kulu (2014) for Germany).

Although divorce rates among East and West Germans and migrants have been studied separately, comprehensive analyses of divorce trends over time that jointly consider reunification and the growing migrant population remain scarce. Our study addresses this gap by investigating whether divorce patterns across social origins (i.e., migrants, East and West Germans) have converged or remained distinct since 1990, thereby shedding light on how these historical and demographic transformations have shaped contemporary family dynamics in Germany.

Theoretical Background

The study builds on the framework of the Second Demographic Transition, which aims to explain changes in fertility, marriage and divorce pattern due to increasing sexual liberalization, a decoupling of marriage and fertility, and individualization over time (Lesthaeghe, 2014). While modernization processes in family dynamics are driven by factors such as stronger support for gender equality, lower religiosity, higher education, and rising female employment, the pace of this change may differ by social origin. Following German reunification, West German women experienced gradual gains through higher female employment and educational attainment (Leitner et al., 2008; Trappe et al., 2015). Migrants also experienced structural change across generations: first-generation migrants often follow the marital norms of their countries of origin, and marriages may be linked to immigration policies, such as residence permits, which can reduce divorce likelihoods. In contrast, second-generation migrants, socialized predominantly in Germany, may become more likely to follow norms of the majority

populations. Accordingly, trends in individualization may vary across subgroups in Germany and may exhibit different temporal patterns of divorce risks across cohorts.

Data and Methods

Our analysis draws on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) (Goebel et al., 2025) and examines divorce patterns among women born between 1960 and 1990, that is, before German reunification. Specifically, we analyze the likelihood of divorce across three marriage cohorts: those married before reunification (1976–1989), those married after reunification but predominantly socialized in a divided Germany (1990–2005), and those married after reunification and predominantly socialized in a reunified Germany (2005–2020). We employ Kaplan–Meier survival analysis to estimate divorce risks over time. The analytical sample by social origin comprises 14,404 ever-married women, among whom 2,539 experienced a first divorce during the observation period.

Sample Description

Table 1: Overview of Sample Description

	Social Origin			Total
	West Germany	East Germany	Migration Background	
Age at censoring	35.57	34.25	34.41	34.93
Age at marriage	27.01	25.53	28.07	27.20
Educational Background (in %)				
low	65.08	63.26	66.25	65.24
high	34.92	36.74	33.75	34.76
Number of children at censoring	1.29	1.73	2.32	2.01
Marriage cohorts (in %)				
1976 – 1989	52.22	23.53	24.25	46.58
1990 – 2005	56.50	13.22	30.28	14.98
2005 – 2020	28.77	9.10	62.14	38.44
Experiencing the event of divorce (in %)				
no divorce	74.26	72.24	90.23	80.37
divorce	23.92	24.65	8.18	17.98
widowhood	1.82	3.10	0.88	1.65
Marriage duration until censoring (in years)	16.49	17.63	11.92	14.30
N (persons)	6,709	2,158	5,537	14,404
In %	46,56	14,98	38,44	100,00

A descriptive overview of our sample by social origin (**Table 1**) highlights that East German women married at younger ages than both West German and migrant women. The latter group shows the highest proportion of women with a low educational background (66.25%), compared to 65.08% among West German and 63.23% among East German women. Migrant women also have the highest mean number of children (mean = 2.32). Most women in the oldest marriage cohort (1976–1989; 52.22%) and the middle cohort (1990–2005; 56.50%) are West

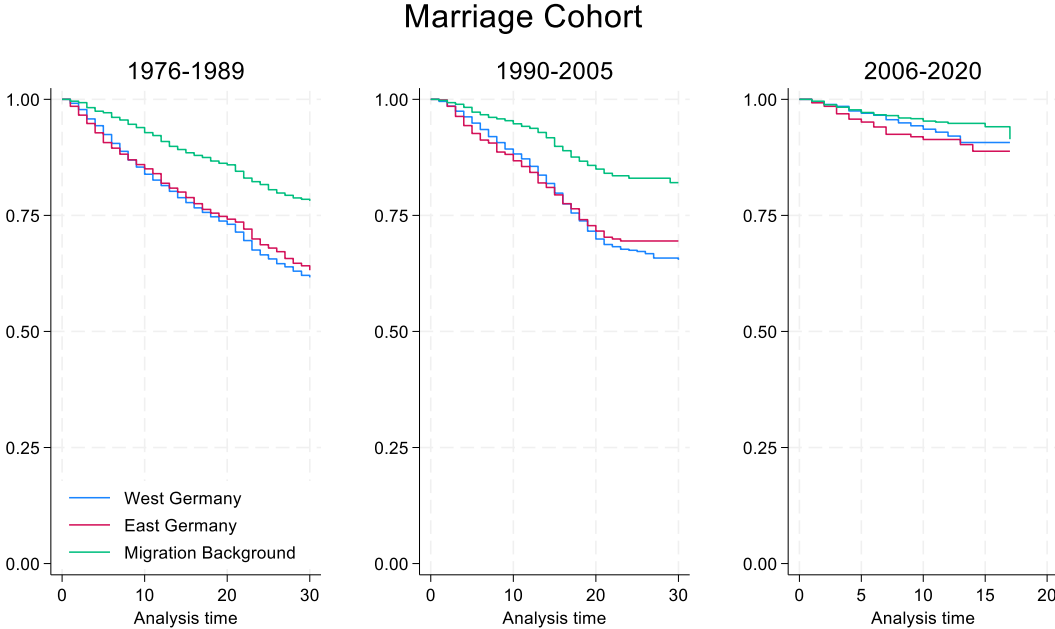
German, whereas women with a migration background are most prevalent in the youngest marriage cohort (2005–2020; 62.14%). This group also exhibits the lowest share of divorces: 90.23% of marriages of women with a migration background do not end in divorce (until censoring), compared to 72.24% among East German women.

Results

The Kaplan–Meier survival estimates by social origin and marriage cohorts are presented in **Figure 1**. Overall, the divorce likelihoods of the two older marriage cohorts are at comparable levels, whereas the youngest cohort exhibits a clearly lower likelihood of divorce. Regarding social origin, we observe a convergence over time. While in the two oldest marriage cohort the likelihood of divorce is similar in West and East Germany, migrants display a substantially lower likelihood of divorce. For the youngest cohort, all social origin groups are at a similarly low level – lower than observed for any group in previous cohorts.

The findings indicate a convergence of divorce risks across social origins, accompanied by an overall decline in divorce among younger marriage cohorts. Since reunification, divorce risks in East and West Germany have remained largely similar, while the divorce patterns of migrants are gradually aligning with those of the native population, reflecting a broader trend toward homogenization in marital stability across social origin.

Figure 1: Kaplan-Meier survival estimates by social origin and marriage cohorts



In the next step, we aim to assess whether differences in selection into marriage can explain the observed convergence in divorce risks, taking into account socio-demographic characteristics such as education, fertility patterns, age at marriage, and religion.

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