War and the military service in the post-collapse communist bloc: which impact on marriage and divorce?

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Short abstract

A large scientific literature explores the correlates and determinants of union formation and dissolution around the world. However, a want of knowledge is evident for what concerns the impact on marriage and divorce of such a stressful and all-consuming event like war is. The implications of active participation in the conflict (namely, serving in the army) are even less explored, and that is often due to a lack of data. In the working paper we propose here, we use a unique data source: the Life in Transition Survey (LITS), i.e. a longitudinal dataset providing data for individuals in former soviet countries (mostly in Eastern Europe and Central Asia) from 1989 to recent times. Hence, during and after the collapse of communist regimes and its ensuing wars.

We test how the interviewee's yearly participation in the military service impacted on him marrying and divorcing on the years before, during and after that. Preliminary results show, most interestingly, that serving in the army corresponded to a lower chance of divorcing in the next few years. We also compare the effect of serving in the army with the effect of experiencing war in one's environment (i.e. in one's country at a given year) on marrying and/or divorcing at various years: the results are similar to those observed in the previous part of the study. We also propose a socio-cultural interpretation of these results, which contradict the findings of the few existing studies, all conducted in the US.

Long abstract

Introduction

A large scientific literature explores the correlates and determinants of union formation and dissolution around the world. However, a want of knowledge is evident for what concerns the impact on marriage and divorce of such a stressful and all-consuming event like war is. In fact, the enormous sense of uncertainty and affliction that individuals face during armed conflicts can, in theory, impact on family matters in two different ways: by having people join their forces and stick together, in order to cope with the uncertainty (hence, marrying more and/or divorcing less); or by breaking unions (i.e. fewer marriages and more divorces), in consequence of the strong relational stress couples have to undergo during these events. In the face of these possible, conflicting mechanisms, experiencing war can affect couples' lives simply as the event occurs in their environment (e.g. in their country, but with no member of the couple directly involved in the conflict) or, arguably even more, as one couple member actively

participates in the war, notably by serving in the army. These kinds of dynamics are widely understudied and this is due to many factors, one of which is the poor data availability.

In the study we propose to present at European Population Conference 2024, in fact, we try to fill this gap by exploiting a dataset that is a rare example of its kind and that allows to test just that, i.e. the impact of actively participating in an armed conflict on marrying and divorcing at various years, most importantly in the years immediately following the military service. And that is, in particular, for a region and a time frame that witnessed several, bloody wars: the region is the former communist bloc (i.e. countries in Eastern Europe and the former USSR) and the time frame is from 1989 (i.e. right before the regimes collapsed) up to the mid-2006. The dataset hence covers almost two decades of strong political instability which saw the outbreak of the Yugoslav Wars, the Albanian Civil War, etc. The dataset is the Life in Transition Survey[1], collected at the household level in 29 countries belonging to the above-mentioned region. Though not properly a longitudinal dataset, the first LITS waves (conducted in 2006) provides information yearly and retrospectively for one member in each household, from 1989 onwards, therefore allowing the user to exploit it as a panel dataset, after proper manipulation. The information collected yearly covers family and employment matters including, interestingly, whether the interviewee served in the military.

Methodology

In this study, we use the Life in Transition Survey (LITS), a unique longitudinal dataset providing information for 1000 families in each of the 29 former communist countries included in the survey. It also provides retrospective information from 1989 to 2006. This wave of the survey, indeed, asks one individual in each household, for each year, about specific family events, economic activities and more: namely, if they served in the army, married or divorced, etc. This information is hence available longitudinally for 29000 individuals across 18 years.

We test through fixed-effect logistic regressions how individuals serving in the army (in the baseline year) impacted on them getting married the year before, that same year, a year later, two and three years later. The same models are also run using divorce as the outcome variable. It is an analysis that no study we are aware of has attempted yet.

The regressions include also various control variables. The availability of time-varying indicators in the LITS dataset (originally cross-sectional) is limited, but we could include the age of the household head, the prevalence of marriage and divorce yearly and country-wise, and whether the interviewed individual received financial assistance from relatives at the baseline year (i.e. the best proxy we could find for the yearly income of the respondent).

In a second part of the study (currently less developed than the previous one), we run the same regressions replacing participation to the military service with living in a country at war. We build, indeed, a dummy variable that has value 1 whenever the observation we are using refers to a year of armed conflict for the country the individual lives in.

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[1] https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/economic-research-and-data/data/lits.html

Preliminary results

We show the main results of the regressions in the tables below. We do not show the results of the control variables, but only the impact of the main dependent variable (e.g. serving in the army in the baseline year) on marrying and divorcing at various years.

Concerning the regressions on marriage (see Table 1), the preliminary results show that, as expect, individuals are less likely to marry before and during the year while the serve in the military; in the following ones, however, the likelihood to marry significantly increases and stabilizes after two years.

The most interesting results, however, concern divorce (Table 2). The regressions show that, before and during the military service, individuals seem less likely to divorce (although the impact is not significant). The strongest effect is observed on the following year, when the odds ratio is the lowest of the regressions and significant.

Table 3 shows the (very preliminary) results of living in a country at war at time t on divorcing at various years: in this case, too, war seems to have a repressive impact on divorce (significant at time $t+1$ and $t+3$).

Our results seem therefore to point to the fact that active participation in the war has a bonding effect on couples, who prefer to delay separation, or avoid it altogether, in order to face distress and uncertainty together.

Table 1: Main results of regressions testing the impact of serving in the army at time t on marrying at various years

Impact of military service at time t	Odds-ratio (standard error)
On marriages at time t-1	.5600 *** (.0805)
On marriages at time t	.9267 (.1016)
On marriages at time t+1	2.1337*** (.1751)
On marriages at time t+2	2.9617*** (.2224)
On marriages at time t+3	2.8561*** (.2131)

***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1

Table 2: Main results of regressions testing the impact of serving in the army at time t on divorcing at various years

Impact of military service at time t	Odds-ratio (standard error)
On divorces at time $t-1$	4.05e- (.0003)
On divorces at time t	.2084 (.2135)
On divorces at time $t+1$	.1772* (.1813)
On divorces at time $t+2$	.5683 (.3509)
On divorces at time $t+3$	.4560 (.2779)

***$p<0.01$, **$p<0.05$, *$p<0.1$

Table 3: Main results of regressions testing the impact of one's country being at war at time t on divorcing at various times

Impact of one's country being at war at time t	Odds-ratio (standard error)
On divorces at time $t-1$	.9674 (.0659)
On divorces at time t	.9812 (.0650)
On divorces at time $t+1$	.8813* (.0601)
On divorces at time $t+2$	.8990 (.0626)
On divorces at time $t+3$	.8617** (.0626)

***$p<0.01$, **$p<0.05$, *$p<0.1$