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Inequality in Family Formation and Dissolution in Central and Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

Comparative research on socioeconomic inequalities in family transitions has largely overlooked Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) both before and after 1989, often applying broad theories without accounting for regional specificities or focusing too narrowly on single countries. Despite a shared legacy of socialism, CEE countries show considerable heterogeneity in family systems and post-transition developments. This review synthesizes evidence on the SES gradient in union formation and dissolution, highlighting emerging inequalities: most notably the selective decline in marriage, the disproportionate spread of cohabitation among the disadvantaged, and the weakening or reversal of positive gradients in union dissolution. We argue that engaging with CEE's historical and institutional context can generate new hypotheses and advance general theory on family change and stratification.

1 | Introduction

The link between socio-economic status (SES)[1] and family transitions (such a union formation and dissolution) is of great interest to many scholars as the nature of its stratification has wider ramifications for shaping unequal outcomes in society (e.g., Blossfeld and Buchholz 2009; Mare and Maralani 2006; McLanahan and Jacobsen 2015). Scholars have formulated a wide-ranging set of theories to explain how family transitions, such as marriage or divorce, might be stratified.

Family transitions and their stratification have been analyzed in a wide range of single-country or comparative studies (e.g., Blossfeld et al. 2005; Härkönen and Dronkers 2006; Kalmijn 2013), some of which also included countries from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and covered also (partly) the post-socialist period.[2] Their primary preoccupation lies in explaining the temporal changes of the educational gradient of transition behaviors and their link to SES. Two general approaches to explaining this link follow a cultural and an economic line.

The cultural approaches, grouped under the paradigm of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT, see Lesthaeghe 2014, 2020), link the emergence of non-traditional patterns of family formation to the adoption of new values. According to this approach, in the initial phase of the SDT, one expects to see a positive educational gradient in union dissolution and unmarried cohabitation due to the highly educated being forerunners in adopting the values of the SDT. As the transition progresses, though, these new values are expected to diffuse among all strata, leveling the SES gradient.

Economic approaches like the Pattern of Disadvantage (Perelli-Harris and Gerber 2011) and crisis perspective (Billingsley et al. 2023; Gerber and Berman 2010) analyze family transitions

through an economic lens, highlighting that changes in the education gradient relate to individuals' economic prospects (Oppenheimer 1997, 2003). Disadvantaged individuals may choose unmarried cohabitation as they struggle to meet the financial requirements for marriage (e.g., Cherlin 2010; Edin and Kefalas 2011), leading to increasing socioeconomic inequality in family transitions. Additionally, under economic strain, less educated individuals may avoid co-residential unions altogether, exacerbating the SES gradient in family formation (Sturm and Bavel 2024).

1.1 | Beyond Testing: Central and Eastern Europe as a Site for Theoretical and Methodological Innovation

Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries offer more than just new contexts for testing the generalizability of existing theories. CEE countries are uniquely positioned to help resolve longstanding theoretical debates and tackle persistent analytical challenges that have shaped the field for decades.

From a theoretical standpoint, CEE countries' social and historical conditions (including developments before and after 1989) should remind sociologists of the importance of context and how it can shape the relationship between SES and family transitions. Yet, this theoretical challenge has largely gone unanswered, as most researchers have made little effort to adapt existing theories to the specific contexts of CEE countries, often applying them without significant conceptual innovation. As a result, important differences between the West and CEE (and within CEE itself) in prevailing family systems and/or patterns of women's labor force participation have been overlooked.

1.2 | Specificities of the Eastern European Family System and the Role of Unmarried Cohabitation

A useful starting point for understanding these differences is the classic dichotomy of "western" and "eastern" family systems as it was initially conceptualized by Hajnal (1965), among others, and later criticized, modified, or elaborated on in the works of, for instance, Chojnacka (1976), Horská (1994), Laslett (1977), Szołtysek (2012), and Wall (1998). A common feature of these classifications is the varying expectations around neolocal residence and economic independence. When neolocality is rare, economic barriers to marriage are reduced, weakening the link between marriage and SES. In extreme cases, patrilocality or matrilocality may eliminate the SES gradient in union formation altogether.

The norms and practice of neolocality varied across CEE countries (Andersson et al. 2017: tab. 4). After 1989, neolocality responded to pressures from the newly established capitalist economy (Ember 1967; Goode 1963) and in response to the increasing societal belief that adopting the Western model of family life was essential for achieving prosperity (Thornton and Philipov 2009). However, these forces did not influence all CEE countries uniformly (Philipov and Jasilioniene 2008). Despite the trend toward neolocality, less educated individuals may have turned to multigenerational living arrangements in response to economic challenges (see Minardi 2025).

Also, patterns of unmarried cohabitation differ markedly across CEE. While cohabiting unions became more common across CEE after 1989 (Sobotka and Toulemon 2008), their prevalence and function varied significantly, ranging from "marginal" (e.g., Poland), a "prelude to marriage" (e.g., Czechia, Hungary) or a "stage in the marriage process" (e.g., Slovenia, Latvia; see Andersson and Philipov 2002; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). Marginal cohabitation typically means couples transition too quickly to marriage for significant stratification in marriage timing to emerge. The other two forms allow couples greater flexibility in deciding when to spend money on the wedding. Hiekel et al. (2014: tab. 3) report that the share of couples who cohabited for economic reasons was much higher in several CEE countries than in the rest of Europe possibly contributing to an increasing stratification of marriage.

1.3 | The Legacy of Familialism and Women's Shifting Roles After the Fall of State Socialism

At the onset of the post-socialist transition, CEE countries presented a unique combination of high female economic activity and educational attainment, with strong familialism and a traditional division of household roles (Kreidl 2004; Ukhova 2020; van der Lippe and van Dijk 2002). Unlike in Western contexts, women's labor force participation was driven by external pressures, including strong legal requirements for wage labor, low male wages, and employment-tied benefits (Fodor 2003).

While women's economic activity continued to grow in the West, South and North of Europe after 1990 (Cipollone et al. 2014), it declined sharply in CEE as its institutional supports collapsed (Gregory et al. 1998; Paukert 1995). More importantly, the decline varied to a significant degree across countries. Some, like Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, and Russia, saw immediate drops, while others, like Poland, declined more gradually (see Figure 1).[3] The decline was also highly stratified, disproportionately affecting less-educated women (see Fodor and Balogh 2010, 291). Most countries have since begun to recover, but the timing and pace of recovery remain uneven. Some countries reached their lowest point in the late 1990s, while others stagnated and began to recover only in the late 2000s.

At the same time, the de-familialisation of values advanced in CEE, though more slowly than in the West and unevenly across education levels. Better-educated respondents were more accepting of non-traditional family behaviors (Chromková Manea and Rabušic 2021; Fodor and Balogh 2010; Fučík 2021). Despite this, preference for the male breadwinner family model was strong in CEE in the mid-1990s and declined only gradually (García-Faroldi 2021: tab. 1).

The CEE pattern of development contrasts sharply with the one known from the West, where female educational attainment and labor market participation correlate highly with (post-)

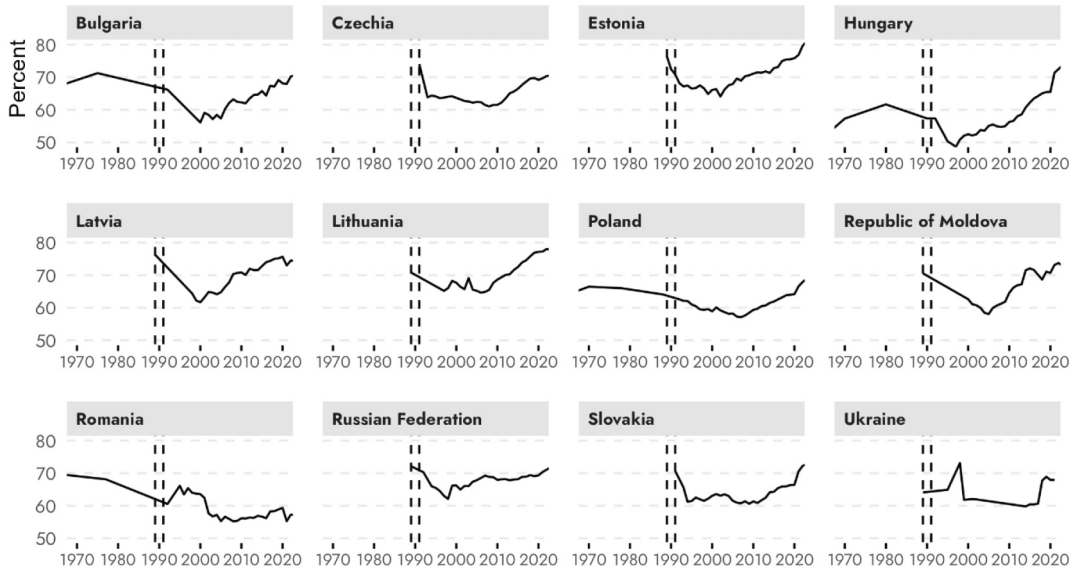

FIGURE 1 | Female labor force participation rate, age 15–64, based on national estimates. Dashed lines mark the transition period between 1989 and 1991. ILOSTAT (2025).

modern values regarding parenthood, partnerships, fertility, careers, and household organization (Calzada and Brooks 2013; Cipollone et al. 2014; Kalmijn and Saraceno 2008; Rindfuss et al. 2016). It appears that high rates of female economic activity grew out of the prevailing value climate in the West and the two phenomena are highly correlated and their independent effects hard to identify. The CEE context can help researchers overcome these identification issues.

We hypothesize: In contexts where women's employment declined sharply, there will no correlation (or even a negative one) between women's education and marriage entry. As female employment recovers, a positive SES gradient should emerge. Men's education, by contrast, is likely to show a stronger positive association with union transitions, especially where women's economic activity fell most. How this link evolves (among men) as female employment rises remains an open empirical question (see Kalmijn 2013, who finds men's education become more important in gender egalitarian contexts).

1.4 | Objectives

Our primary aim in this review is to describe the historical development of inequalities in family transitions in CEE, focusing on the transition from a state socialist to a capitalist economy in the late 1980s/early 1990s and beyond. To that end, we have decided to examine each type of union transition separately—(1) union formation, (2) union dissolution, and (3) repartnering—as the stratification of each transition is shaped by distinct social, economic, and cultural processes. Our study also aims to link Central and Eastern Europe to the literature on family bifurcation in the U.S. and other Western countries, and to consider the implications of divergent family patterns for the reproduction of social inequality and the intergenerational transmission of (dis)advantage (McLanahan 2004).

2 | Union Formation

2.1 | The Spread of Cohabitation and the Persistent Importance of Marriage

The pre-transition state-socialist family system was characterized by universal early marriage and parenthood sustained by a mix of "familialist" policies, notably preferential housing allocation for married people with children, traditionalist attitudes, and low access to contraception (Frejka 2008; Sobotka 2008). After the transition to capitalism, states no longer continued with socialist housing policies, removing an important incentive propping up marriage rates. Educational expansion and increasing economic insecurity compounded this development, resulting in delayed union formation and parenthood (Sobotka 2008).

Another important factor complementing this process was the spread of developmental models from the West, parts of which were family values and norms aligning with the SDT (Thornton and Philipov 2009). This corresponded to the belief that the modern form of the family, originating in Western Europe and the U.S. and characterized most importantly by delayed union formation and nuclear neolocal families, is desirable for economic development.

This model of "developmental idealism" provides a plausible mechanism for the spread of SDT values, which aligns with the timing and location of the rise of cohabitation rates. The increase in cohabitation began before the fall of communism in places, where exposure to Western values would have been higher (Gerber and Berman 2010; Hoem et al. 2009; Sobotka 2008).

Cohabitation has many associated meanings, from a precursor to marriage to becoming its alternative (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Kiernan 2004). Countries in CEE generally do not afford the same rights and legal recognition to cohabiting

couples as they do to married ones (Sánchez Gassen and Perelli-Harris 2015). Despite rising cohabitation rates at the start of childbearing unions in CEE in recent cohorts, more CEE women marry at some point between conception and their child's third birthday than in Western or Northern Europe (Mikolai et al. 2018; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). Analysis of large-scale trends in union formation, pooling cohabitation and marriage, may then obscure how these developments have been received across countries and social strata in CEE.

Empirically, a negative association of cohabitation entry with educational attainment exists across CEE. Gerber and Berman (2010) report a negative, and constant, gradient among men in Russia between 1985 and 2000. Mikolai et al. (2018) show (a) a negative gradient among women in Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, and Romania, except (b) Czechia, which has a positive gradient, and (c) Russia and Lithuania, which exhibit no significant gradient. In this case, the gradients concern women born between 1950 and 1969; no trend was tested. In Czechia's case, research explicitly comparing pre- and post-transition cohorts suggests that a negative educational gradient in cohabitation emerged (Hamplová 2003).

A positive educational gradient can be observed in the conversion of cohabiting unions to marriage among men and women in Lithuania after the transition to a market economy (Maslauskaitė and Baublytė 2015a), and among women in most countries except Russia and Lithuania (Mikolai et al. 2018). A positive educational gradient in marriage, direct or preceded by cohabitation, has also been found in Russia for both men and women (Gerber and Berman 2010) and in Czechia, for men already pre-1989 and women post-1989 (Kreidl 2012).

In sharp contrast to standard SDT theory, cohabitation has spread primarily among the lower educated. The higher educated continue to participate in more traditional family formation pathways (Perelli-Harris and Lyons-Amos 2016; Potârcă et al. 2013; Zimmermann and Konietzka 2018), with cohabitation more likely to represent just a step in the family formation process (Mikolai et al. 2018; Žilinčíková and Hiekel 2018).

The greatest divergence between educational categories emerges at the point of childbirth. The lower educated are more likely to parent in cohabitation, showing what's been called a “pattern of disadvantage” (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010) that wasn't present before the transition to a market economy. Low-educated women lack the institutional incentives present during the socialist era (Sobotka 2008). Moreover, they also lack the economic incentives to marry their partner, who is likely to be low-educated and have fewer resources (Oppenheimer 2003; Upchurch et al. 2002).

Marriage remains the dominant institution for raising children in CEE (Andersson et al. 2017), with most children predicted to experience their childhood with married parents. Research also shows that most cohabiters in Russia, Romania, Hungary, and Lithuania in the mid to late 2000s intended to marry sometime in the next 3 years (Hiekel et al. 2014). A recent Czech government report replicates this research using the second round of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) from 2020–2022 to show that this group of cohabiters remained stable in Czechia. The share of ideological cohabiters with a negative attitude towards marriage has even fallen relative to the mid-2000s (Šťastná et al. 2023), suggestive of the persistence of marriage in CEE.

2.2 | Disentangling the Role of Education in Union Formation

Education has been theorized to influence union formation in often contradictory ways. SDT theorists linked higher education, especially women's education, with adopting norms and values promoting individual fulfillment over family obligations (Lesthaeghe 2002). Likewise, in the framework of developmental idealism, it would be expected that higher education is tied to greater exposure to Western values (Thornton and Philipov 2009). This is manifestly not the case, as indicated by the review above. Despite increases in non-standard behavior across the board, the lower educated adopted them at greater rates. This suggests that education's effect doesn't come primarily from ideational change.

In future comparative studies, it is necessary to deal with 2 key dimensions of education as a measure of stratification. For hypotheses that see education as a measure of current and future economic prospects, it is necessary to establish (1) a measure of economic inequality between educational categories, either through a measure of relative returns on education or, as Kalmijn (2013) has done so through relative rates of unemployment and risk of social exclusion. Higher inequality imply a greater advantage from education, which should intensify the stratification of family formation behaviors for men (Oppenheimer 2003) and women in egalitarian settings (Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015).

Secondly, the role of gender needs to be addressed. Many CEE countries experienced precipitous falls in female labor force participation post-1989, particularly among the lower-educated (Fodor and Balogh 2010), with recoveries beginning between the late-1990s and the late-2000s, following no uniform pattern across countries, as seen in Figure 1. We have outlined in Section 1.3. our hypotheses how these developments could relate to the SES-union formation link.

Empirically, lower-educated men have lower union formation rates than lower-educated women in CEE as a bloc, with no signs of divergence or convergence between the communist and post-communist cohorts (Sturm and Bavel 2024), though due to heterogeneity across CEE, such a zoomed-out view obscures the picture. On a similar note, combining measures of gender attitudes and the division of household labor with female labor force participation into a single index, as Kalmijn (2013) does, may obscure the hypothesized effect. As discussed in the introduction, CEE countries are characterized by a disjunction between these dimensions. High female labor force participation coexisted in the past with traditional gender attitudes and household arrangements, making such composite measures potentially misleading in this context when taking a longitudinal view.

3 | Union Dissolution

The study of stratification of union dissolution, particularly divorce, from a comparative perspective, is far more institutionally and theoretically developed than union formation. Researchers, largely grouped under the European Divorce Network,[4] have conducted major comparative studies of union dissolution utilizing micro-data, which include CEE countries. These studies are theoretically and methodologically unified and often attempt to directly analyze the context-level factors responsible for variation in education gradients (Härkönen et al. 2020; Härkönen and Dronkers 2006; Hogendoorn and van den Berg 2024; Kalmijn and Leopold 2021; Matysiak et al. 2014).

The educational gradient in union dissolution is a richly theorized topic. The dominant approach to understanding divorce, known as social exchange theory, studies the structure of attractions to marriage and its alternatives, and the barriers between these states (Levinger 1976). While male education and economic resources are broadly seen as preventive of divorce, the role of female education is contentious and seen as changing depending on the context (Boertien and Härkönen 2018; Hogendoorn and van den Berg 2024; Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010).

Most research reviewed in this section is preoccupied with this question. One strain of thought following the economist Becker's approach to economics of the family argues that increasing women's educational capital lowers returns from a gendered division of labor, destabilizing marriages (Becker 1981). Others have argued the opposite, pointing out that women's economic resources improve marital matches and subsequently also the family's living standards, leading to lower strain and higher stability (Oppenheimer 1997). Comparative research on the topic tends to side with the latter (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006; Hogendoorn and van den Berg 2024; Matysiak et al. 2014), building on a long-standing hypothesis about the shift in barriers to divorce (Goode 1962).

Major comparative studies (including CEE) motivated by this hypothesis give empirical backing to it, showing that low barriers are associated with lower education gradients (Boertien and Härkönen 2018; Härkönen and Dronkers 2006; Hogendoorn and van den Berg 2024; Matysiak et al. 2014). The identified barriers come in the form of:

1. Social and cultural barriers, which are key drivers of this process. A higher prevalence of diverse family practices (such as nonmarital childbearing, cohabitation, divorce) and normative acceptance of them have both been linked to lower gradients among women (Brons and Härkönen 2018; Härkönen and Dronkers 2006; Hogendoorn and van den Berg 2024; Matysiak et al. 2014).
2. The effect of female labor force participation is unclear, with two studies finding a link between negative gradients and higher participation (Kalmijn 2013; Matysiak et al. 2014), while others have found it plays a weak role (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006), or lowering the gradients of husband/jointly initiated divorces (Hogendoorn and van den Berg 2024). The latter might seem surprising, but the authors speculate that it may originate from a change in the structure of male marital attractions. In contexts where female labor participation is low, educated women planning careers may find their husbands unwilling or unable to accommodate their aspirations, leading to a greater degree of conflict (Hogendoorn and van den Berg 2024).
3. Surprisingly, no study has found a link between divorce legislation and the education gradient (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006; Matysiak et al. 2014).
4. The effect of welfare state expenditure as a share of GDP is also unclear. An earlier study found that higher welfare state expenditures were linked to more positive gradients (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006), while a more recent study found that welfare state expenditures lower the gradient in female-initiated divorces without an effect on other types of divorce (Hogendoorn and van den Berg 2024).

3.1 | Divorce in CEE

Scholars don't spend much time explicitly theorizing the CEE countries' education gradient. Instead, the prevailing approach is to use them as extra contexts to bolster their macro-statistical analysis. In this vein, CEE countries as a bloc appear to have a gradient at a similar level as Western European countries and slightly higher than Northern European countries (Matysiak et al. 2014), but grouping CEE countries conceals a large amount of heterogeneity in values and the historical developments of these countries, which requires more careful analysis (Härkönen et al. 2020). For example, if the norm of independent living is not strong, divorcees may find it easier to move back in with their parents. It therefore facilitates divorce among the less educated.

The trends in both crude divorce rates (an indicator of the social costs of divorce) and divorce rates derived from micro-data (and adjusted for compositional factors) show no clear pattern in timing across CEE over the course of the transition (Härkönen et al. 2020). Similarly, we shouldn't expect a unified gradient or developmental trend in the education gradient of divorce across CEE, as countries differed in their initial conditions and the success of the transition. Compared to Western and Northern European countries, CEE countries' divorce rates have peaked only recently following the transition to a market economy, as shown in Figure 2. According to the Goode (1962) hypothesis, we would expect them to be behind the West, but on track to experience a fall in the education gradient.

Empirically, we can say that (1) in Czechia, we find a negative education gradient in divorce (Fučík 2023) and union dissolution generally (van Damme 2020), but no sign of a trend for post-'89 marriage cohorts (Fučík 2023) and no analysis of the trend pre-1989 or the transition period. (2) In the Baltic countries of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, we find a flat gradient with no evidence of change during the socialist period (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006). In Lithuania, we see a sign that the gradient had already become negative by the early 2000s in large cities. In contrast, rural areas experienced the opposite (Maslauskaite et al. 2015), which might explain

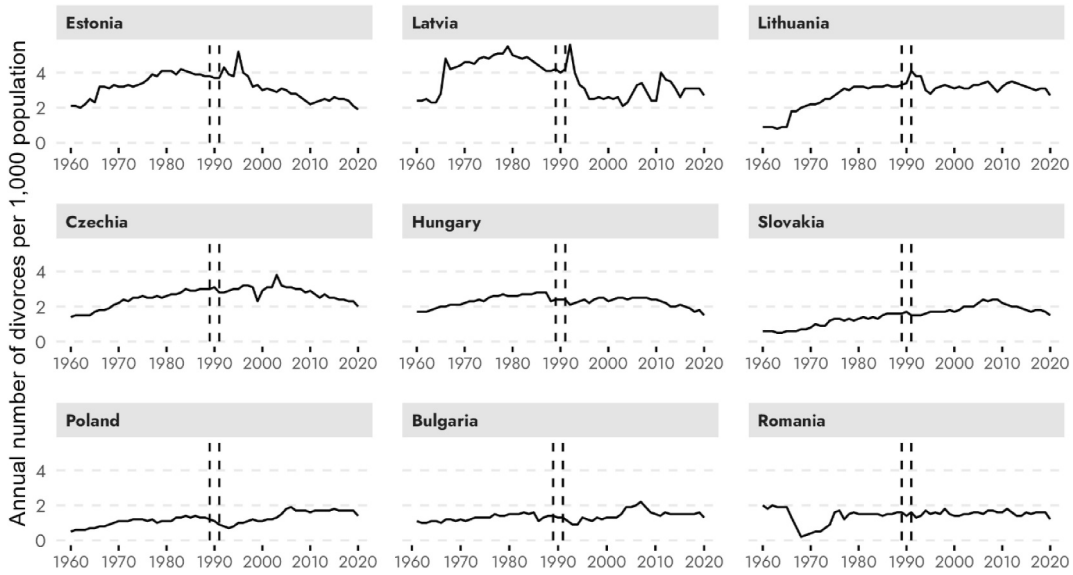

FIGURE 2 | Crude divorce rates in 9 CEE countries. Dashed lines mark the transition period between 1989 and 1991. OECD (2024).

why the average Lithuanian gradient remained flat in marriage cohorts extending to the early 2000s (Hogendoorn and van den Berg 2024).

(3) In Poland and Hungary, we find that the weakening of the gradient began during the socialist period, gradually becoming less positive with successive marriage cohorts (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006). Bulgaria appears to have come down from a positive gradient to a flat one in post-transition marriage cohorts, and so has Moldova even later (Hogendoorn and van den Berg 2024; van Damme 2020). (4) Romania has a consistent positive education gradient (Hogendoorn and van den Berg 2024). (5) Russia is the only country to meaningfully break the trend with a dip to a flat gradient in cohorts leading up to the transition and then rising back to the level of the pre-transition positive gradient after the fall of the Soviet Union (Härkönen et al. 2020; van Damme 2020). Divorces initiated by women drive this development, as husband/jointly initiated divorces exhibit a flat gradient (Hogendoorn and van den Berg 2024). (6) Belarus had a consistently flat gradient with a similar, though much milder, rise in the gradient of wife-initiated divorces in the most recent cohort (Hogendoorn and van den Berg 2024).

Although recent developments generally align with established patterns, with Russia being a notable exception, many questions remain unresolved. At a fundamental level, we still lack comprehensive data on how education gradients in divorce have evolved post-transition in several CEE countries, including Hungary and Poland. Fortunately, new waves of the GGS can help address this gap.

On a more detailed level, census-linked datasets have enabled researchers to explore more nuanced issues, such as urban–rural differences in divorce gradients, as shown in Lithuania (Maslauskaite et al. 2015) or the effects of educational homogamy and heterogamy on divorce probability (Fučík 2023). One particularly promising line of inquiry concerns the impact of divorce legislation being made stricter on the education gradient in divorce in Hungary and Bulgaria during the late 1980s, which was a response to rising divorce rates (Härkönen et al. 2020; see also Figure 2).

This development is exceptional within the European and U.S. context, where divorce laws have largely followed a liberalizing trend (González and Viitanen 2009; Kneip and Bauer 2009). These restrictions imposed external barriers in already increasingly permissive contexts. We therefore hypothesize that such policy shifts may have (temporarily) slowed/disabled the divorce process more among the less educated who had fewer resources to navigate the new context. However, previous analyses have not tested this hypothesis making it a compelling avenue for future research.

3.2 | The Relative (in)Stability of Cohabitation and Marriage

The gradient in dissolution of cohabiting unions is studied less often in a comparative context. Following the Goode hypothesis (Goode 1962), we would predict that it will be lower than the gradient in marriage as fewer barriers are associated with exiting a less institutionalized form of relationship, especially in the context of CEE. This intuition is supported by older scholarship across CEE using the FFS for pre-transition union cohorts (Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006), and more broadly for Europe (Matysiak et al. 2014). A recent study of union dissolution, which included Czechia, Hungary, and Estonia, shows that cohabitations are less stable than marriages (Kalmijn and Leopold 2021) and the "protective" effect of marriage apparently increased (in child-bearing couples) after 1989 in Czechia (Trávníčková and Kreidl 2023). Moreover, higher education destabilizes cohabitation more than marriage.

4 | Re-Partnering

This transition has received the least attention compared to the past two transitions. We have identified just three studies that

included CEE countries in their analysis, and none of them focused on the socio-economic stratification of re-partnering or provided information about trends in the gradient (one reason for this might be the relatively low occurence of re-partnering that permits only limited comparisons over cohorts and across socio-economic groups). Nevertheless, we find some promising patterns, which future research might investigate.

All reviewed studies define the population at risk as those who have experienced a first divorce. Simple re-partnering, viewed as a binary dependent variable, is not found to be stratified in Czechia (Kreidl and Hubatková 2017), Romania, Russia (Ivanova et al. 2013), Lithuania, or Estonia (Maslauskaitė and Baublytė 2015b). Men in Hungary and, particularly, university-educated Polish men are more likely to re-partner, which the authors tie to more traditional settings in both countries compared to the Baltic countries (Maslauskaitė and Baublytė 2015b).

In the case of Czechia, a competing-risks model (distinguishing between remarriage and repartnering) revealed an education gradient, with medium and higher education (compared to low education) more likely to result in remarriage than remaining single or transitioning into unmarried cohabitation (Kreidl and Hubatková 2017).

The example above illustrates the continued theoretical and empirical need to distinguish between union types. Marriage and unmarried cohabitation, as we have demonstrated throughout the article, have different sets of meanings and prerequisites attached to them, which require a more complex modeling strategy.

A comparative view of re-partnering is likewise severely underdeveloped and open to exploitation by future researchers. Two of the three papers have tried to compare statistical models across countries, yet both are concise when discussing comparative theories (Ivanova et al. 2013; Maslauskaitė and Baublytė 2015b). As CEE countries progress in the SDT, we expect the question of stratified re-partnering to become more salient as unions become more unstable and higher-order unions become more commonplace.

5 | Conclusion

5.1 | Empirical Generalizations

Our review has identified only a few findings that can be, with some reservations and context specifications, considered valid generalizations, depending, among other things, on the specific family transition, country, respondent's gender, and model specification. Many findings, however, remain inconsistent, largely due to underdeveloped theoretical frameworks that lack a genuinely comparative perspective. These approaches often fail to acknowledge or analytically engage with the differences between CEE and other European or non-European contexts, as well as the significant heterogeneity within CEE countries themselves. We do, nevertheless, put forward a few findings that gained more systematic support.

5.1.1 | Union Formation

(1) Marriage has gone from being a universal phenomenon to an increasingly selective and stratified one, with positive educational gradients emerging across CEE after 1990 (Gerber and Berman 2010; Kreidl 2012; Maslauskaitė and Baublytė 2015a; Mikolai et al. 2018). Even though cohabitation has slowly replaced marriage as the first union of choice even before the transition to a market economy (Gerber and Berman 2010; Sobotka 2008), marriage continues to be the preferred context for fertility among the higher educated (Groepler et al. 2021; Hărăguş 2015; Mikolai et al. 2018), furthering the interpretation of unmarried cohabitation as a choice of necessity. (2) Education likely indicates economic stability and financial prospects instead of values associated with the SDT, as higher education leads to more traditional family formation pathways (see Mikolai et al. 2018).

5.1.2 | Union Dissolution

(1) A reversal of the female education gradient from positive to negative is taking place, with the notable exception of Russia (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006; Hogendoorn and van den Berg 2024). Likewise, from the point of view of the dissolution of childbearing unions, a negative education gradient is growing (Kalmijn and Leopold 2021). (2) Higher education destabilizes unmarried cohabitation, but not marriage (Kalmijn and Leopold 2021).

5.1.3 | Repartnering

(1) Stratification of repartnering is not universal (Kreidl and Hubatková 2017) but occurs (if at all) only in countries with more traditional values and family systems (such as Hungary and Poland, see Maslauskaitė and Baublytė 2015b). However, some countries do not fit this pattern easily: For instance, Romania and Russia might be seen as traditional, yet no SES inequality in re-partnering was observed (Ivanova et al. 2013). (2) We find a strong effect of education on the choice between marriage and unmarried cohabitation even in countries with more de-institutionalized family systems (such as Czechia, see Kreidl and Hubatková 2017).

5.2 | The Comparative Perspective and the Need for Stronger Theoretical Foundations

Most publications covered in this review were single-country studies that lacked a truly comparative focus or only compared cohorts/periods within one country. Therefore, the need to update the theoretical model was not easily spotted. One major lesson from our review is that the potential contribution of comparative research on the SES gradient in union formation/dissolution in CEE has not been fully realized. To remedy this situation, theory should acknowledge the heterogeneity of CEE with respect to variables highlighted in Section 1.2 and 1.3 above.

Should the comparative view also look at change over time, researchers must consider whether change is driven by period or cohort effects. While demographers typically prefer the cohort perspective (Ryder 1965), there appears to be evidence that family change in CEE operated through period effects (Németh et al. 2025). We side with the period-effect perspective slightly since it lets us specify the respective macro-level variables with higher precision at the moment when a particular individual is at risk of a specific union transition.

5.3 | Comparisons Beyond Europe and the U.S.

CEE can be viewed as part of a broader global trend towards family bifurcation, where socioeconomic disparities in one generation increasingly shape patterns of union formation and dissolution in the next generation (and then also intra-generationally). These trends were originally identified in the United States and other Western countries (McLanahan 2004). Similar patterns are now observable in other regions, including East Asia (Raymo et al. 2015) and Latin America (Wiegand Cruz 2023), where lower-educated women began to replace first marital unions with unmarried cohabitations, and higher-educated women marry at increasingly higher rates. To a more limited extent, signs of this bifurcation are also beginning to surface in Sub-Saharan Africa (Stoebenau et al. 2021).

However, the parallels between these regions remain tentative. The underlying contexts differ markedly across dimensions such as religiosity, prevailing family systems, and the economy. For example, extended family co-residence is normative in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, while East Asian countries often feature strong filial obligations within patriarchal family systems. Similarly, the strength of Catholic influence in Latin America contrasts with CEE's more secular or Orthodox Christian traditions (though we also find countries with a strong catholic influence here). These structural and cultural differences complicate direct comparisons and highlight the need for region-specific theorizing when analyzing global shifts in family inequality.

5.4 | Conceptual Models: How to Define the Dependent Variable Properly

Achieving a higher degree of consensus on substantive conclusions is complicated by differences in how the dependent variable is specified. For instance, some scholars focus on marriage entry (e.g., Gerber and Berman 2010; Kreidl 2012), others prefer to study entry into any coresidential union (e.g., Sturm and Bavel 2024), and others analyze transitions to unmarried cohabitations (e.g., Gerber and Berman 2010). Marriage entry then can be investigated without any constraints on the respondent's previous partnership situation (Gerber and Berman 2010; Kreidl 2012; Müller and Dräger 2019), or the focus is only on the transition from unmarried cohabitation to marriage (Groepler et al. 2021; Hărăguş 2015; Maslauskaitė and Baublytė, 2015a). Only a few authors try incorporating several transitions into a single analysis (but see Mikolai et al. 2018). Given the continued preference for and relevance of marriage in CEE, we would recommend that entry into marriage should be the default choice (unless a specific research question dictates otherwise).

5.5 | Avenues for Future Research

Two recent developments in the GGS open new and promising research avenues. The GGS recently expanded to new CEE countries (such as Belarus, Croatia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, and Moldova). It has also initiated a new round of harmonized surveys in some other countries (including Czechia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland), which may provide greater statistical and analytical leverage. Therefore, we expect researchers to revisit the theoretical issues highlighted in this review, develop them into testable micro-macro-interactions and capitalize on the additional data sources as well as new analytical possibilities to further expand our understanding of the SES inequality in CEE. An interesting avenue of thought is to identify the periods when rates of female economic activity declined with the simultaneous retraditionalisation of gender values (at the country-period level). In these periods, one would expect the SES effects on union transitions to change the most. To break the linear dependency between age, period, and cohort, we would need to refrain from defining periods with reference to calendar time and to operationalize period effects through substantive processes (cf. Blossfeld 1986).

Further topics worthy of investigation include, in our view, also the use of SES measures other than education. We propose that looking into occupational status (see Bastianelli et al. 2024, who apply such an approach in Italy) and earnings potential is promising. Similarly, the issue of net wealth is also worth exploring, especially vis-à-vis the recent growth of housing prices and increasing tendency (in some social strata) to accumulate debt. Noteworthy is the surge in unpaid debts and resulting distress procedures that may effectively render some individuals non-marriageable. Yet another example would involve carefully examining intergenerational financial transfers that help some individuals purchase an apartment/house and thus meet more easily the symbolic prerequisite of marriage and parenthood (see Stephens et al. 2015). We could, for instance, examine to what degree these intergenerational transfers "explain away" observed effects of respondents' SES.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] A classical definition of socio-economic status (SES) states that SES is "a shorthand expression for variables that characterize the placement of persons, families, households, census tracts, or other aggregates with respect to the capacity to create or consume goods that are valued in our society" (Hauser and Warren 1997: 178). It may be indicated by "educational attainment, occupational standing, social class, income (or poverty), wealth, and tangible possessions-such as home appliances or libraries, houses, cars, boats, or by degrees from elite colleges and universities." (Hauser and Warren 1997: 178).

[2] We define Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) as all countries that were once part of the Soviet bloc, geographically belong to Europe and were independent states for at least some time after 1989, that is we limit our review to countries that experienced the post-socialist transition.

[3] There was only one CEE country—Romania—where women's employment did not decline immediately after 1989, but did so in the long run and has continued to stagnate.

[4] https://infoeudiv.wixsite.com/eudiv.

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