Belarus: The Land of Broken Marriages

According to The Economist, Belarus occupies the fourth highest place in the world for divorce, behind South Korea, Russia and Aruba.

The Belarusian Statistics Agency has recently published fresh data on marriages and divorces in Belarus. It also suggests the growing unpopularity of traditional family lifestyles among Belarusians.

At the same time, marriages to foreigners are becoming increasingly commonplace. Many Belarusians, particularly women, deliberately look for foreigners who can marry them and take them away from Belarus. Weddings with Russians and Ukrainians happen most often. Germans, Israelis, Turks and Balts also feature highly among Belarusians' preferred partners. Of course, not many of them know Belarus' ranking on divorce.

Is Marriage Becoming Less Popular?

In the last decade, the number of marriages in Belarus has fluctuated. But as the table below shows, since independence Belarusians have become less inclined to marry. The marriage statistics in 2010 basically returned to the post-World War II level, when the population suffered a huge demographic blow.
The year 2012 once again saw a decrease. Between January and October the number of newly established families dropped by 10 per cent. 66,000 marriages were registered in this period. This equals about 7.5 marriages per 1,000 citizens.

In the Eastern European context, Belarus places somewhere between its CIS and EU neighbours. For example, the Russians and Ukrainians have higher marriage rates: 8.5 per 1,000 and 7.8 per 1,000 respectively.

And the Poles (6.0 marriages per 1,000 citizens), Latvians (4.2) and Lithuanians (5.7) stay out of wedlock more often than the Belarusians.

The declining trend is similar across the whole of Eastern Europe. However, in the CIS countries marriage numbers still remain higher.

**World Leader in Divorce Rates**

Marriage is just one step which couples take in the direction of a happy family life. But the really big thing has to do with sustaining the relationship. Here the Belarusians seem to have serious difficulties.

Belarus is a world leader in terms of the divorce rate. According to the World in Figures 2013, published by the Economist, the country ranks number 4 worldwide.

Unlike the marriage rate, the divorce rate has stayed generally even throughout the years of sovereignty. Around 35,000 families break apart every year. In January-October of this year the Belarusian Statistics Agency reports 4.2...
divorces per 1,000 citizens. It is higher than in all neighbouring states but Russia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Divorces per 1,000 citizens</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>4.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>2.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>1.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<td>Ukraine</td>
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Interestingly, high numbers of divorces were also registered in Belarus back in the 1980s and 1990s. But because of the falling marriage statistics of the recent decade the ratio of marriages to divorces is growing. Today it is roughly 2 to 1.

**It’s the Economy, Stupid?**

The marriage and divorce trends in Belarus generally correspond to global trends. A 2008 study by the University of Pennsylvania found a worldwide increase in the divorce rate and a decrease in the marriage rate after World War II.

The US scholars explain the findings by the fact that the technological progress of the last 60 years makes it easier for singles to maintain their own home.

Marrying at a later age is another worldwide trend which is also typical of present day Belarus. However, Belarusians still enter into family relations at a younger age than, for example, Western Europeans and Americans. On average, women in Belarus get married at the age of 24.5 years and men at the age of 26.6 years. The table below puts this into the international context.
A number of factors can explain these statistics. Traditions and societal pressure on women to get married early is definitely a reason in Belarus. Another lies in the economic realm.

Several studies have shown that couples in poor countries tend to marry earlier than in countries with high level of wellbeing. It simply makes financial sense, as combining life expenses with someone else saves money.

And that’s often the case in Belarus. Young couples first move in together and later many of them upgrade their relationships to a formal level.

Interestingly, divorce rate can also have an economic dimension. According to the Economist, economic downturns normally cause an increase in separations, especially in better-off families. Crises undermine income and make families cut down on their consumption. Quite often partners tend to blame falling living standards not on governments but rather on each other.

This could well be the case in many families in Belarus, because in recent years income instability has become a widespread phenomenon in the Belarusian economy.

Moreover, some Belarusian families divorce out of pragmatic calculations. This helps them to secure benefits from legislation. For instance, in certain cases separated singles who have children have the right to better housing conditions. Or if one of the former spouses is a pensioner, his or her son can escape mandatory military service.
Welcome to Belarus: the Brides are Waiting

The unstable economy affects the marital choices of Belarusians in one more way. It is reflected in the increase of marriages with foreigners. Belarusians simply seek to leave their motherland by marrying nationals of other countries. Since 2000, the annual number of such marriages has more than doubled. Today, it makes up to 6-7 per cent of all the registered marriages in the country.

This looks quite high given the fact that Belarus has high visa and language barriers. The majority of marriages are with citizens of Russia and Ukraine who have no visa or language problems in Belarus. Russians alone account for 25-30 per cent of all cases.

Other countries that feature highly among the marital preferences of the Belarusians include the Baltic States, Israel, Germany and Turkey.

Marriages with aliens are more widespread among Belarusian women. For some, marrying a foreigner is a life-long ambition. They dream of a rich alien who can take them away from Belarus and provide a high standard of living.

No surprise that foreigners enjoy particular popularity among local women at pubs and night clubs in Belarus. And no surprise, therefore, that inbound sex tourism has been on the rise in the country in recent years.

Thus, the statistics on marriages and divorces give us a telling picture of Belarusian society and economy. In the regional context, this picture is not the gloomiest one. But it still looks alarming.