

# DIVORCE – A SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

*The Romanian family has gone through, especially after the fall of the communist regime, a series of changes regarding the dynamics of processes and practices within this social group. Starting from the interest that the authors have in the issue of family sociology, using concepts and notions specific to demography and combining elements related to the field of statistics, the work Divorce - a socio-demographic perspective during the COVID 19 pandemic aims to bring to the readers' attention a transversal analysis on the latest transformations that affected the family, in the sense of a social group, from the perspective of divorce in the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic period. In the first part, we proposed to make some clarifications on the concepts we will use, followed by presenting some sociological theories related to the family. Next, we will refer to some legislative and social aspects that have influenced family dynamics over time in Romania, following which, in the last part of the paper, we will refer to the most recent data provided by the official statistics, in order to create an overall picture of this phenomenon. We aim to provide an x-ray on the phenomenon of divorce in Romania, using the latest available data, through the technique of secondary data analysis. We will refer to the years before the COVID 19 pandemic, to the years when it reached its peak and to the post-pandemic years, the aim being to follow the dynamics of the divorce phenomenon in Romania, during this period.*

## KEYWORDS:

Coronavirus, demographic events, divorce, family

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, also known as the coronavirus pandemic, was a global event with widespread effects felt at all social levels. The rapid mutations of various viral strains forced governments worldwide to implement measures aimed at preventing and slowing the spread of the virus. These measures included the development of vaccines, discovery of new treatments, travel restrictions, business closures, quarantines, isolations, contact tracing, food supply chain modifications,

school closures, restrictions on movement, and the cancellation or postponement of social events.

In this context, it was expected that demographic phenomena such as birth rates, marriage rates, divorce rates, and mortality would also change compared to previous years. While the rise in mortality rates is evident, we found it interesting to examine how the government-imposed measures during the pandemic influenced divorce dynamics. We focused on this phenomenon to explore whether a causal

model could be constructed between these factors – divorce and the pandemic – and whether the pandemic influenced the rate of divorces.

## **2. Literature review, conceptual framework and hypotheses**

### **2.1. Theoretical benchmarks on the family as a social group**

The term “family” can be understood at the level of common sense, at an individual level, or at a legal level, with multiple perceptions of it. However, beyond these nuances, there are, from a sociological and anthropological standpoint, a series of theoretical approaches that have developed around this concept.

Popescu (2009, p. 21-27) proposes a typology of these approaches, starting from the most important types of sociological theories. Thus, the first approach identified by the author is illustrated by structural-functionalist theories, which view the family as a goal-oriented system (Tischler et al., 1986; Morgan, 1985), the family through the lens of gender relations (Friedan, 1971; Beechey, 1977; Butler, 1999), the division of labor, power relations, and the inequalities between men and women (Coleman & Cressey, 1990), or the major identity contexts that individuals go through during their existence (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). Applied to the family, this perspective treats this social group as a goal-oriented system, dependent on external environmental constraints, with this system, in turn, influencing society. The emphasis is placed on the systems and subsystems it generates rather than on individuals. The classical functionalist theory with implications for the family was developed by Talcott Parsons (1998), who, in analyzing the contemporary American family, found that it has three essential characteristics: it is an open, multilinear, and conjugal system.

Systemic changes are also highlighted by another founding author, anthropologist George Murdock (1967): “*When a social*

*system has reached equilibrium, it begins to change, such change starting gradually with the modification of residency rules. The alteration of these rules is followed by either development or decline. Ultimately, changes are adaptive*” (Murdock, 1967, p. 221-222). In his theories, he emphasizes that the family is a social group with a common residence, based on economic cooperation, and fulfils four important functions for social life: sexual and reproductive function, economic cooperation, socialization function, and education function.

Canadian researcher Margrit Eichler (1981, 1997) considers family interactions involved in fulfilling the family’s functions, identifying six types of interactions: procreative, socialization, sexual, residential, economic, and emotional. However, she emphasizes that these cannot be sufficient to explain the family through an integrative model, and that many researchers make a series of errors when analyzing the family (such as conservative errors that view the nuclear family in an overly romanticized way, sexist errors that distort realities regarding the division of labor between the sexes, age-related errors etc.).

From the sphere of theories that address the family at the macro level, the social exchange theory (Nisbet, 1967) is also notable, which essentially asserts that interactions between individuals involve both costs and rewards.

We believe that, for a more complex understanding of the family as a social phenomenon, it is important to also present some theories that address the family at the micro level, focusing on interactions and practices within the family.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, individuals (re)act based on the meaning they attribute to things and relationships around them. From this point of view, the family can be seen as a unit within which roles are established through interactions and negotiations. Barbalet (2008) defines symbolic interactionism as an “*approach centered on the analysis of*

*the social formation of symbols, socially constituted and shared meanings, and their use in communication, both at the level of the self and in orienting the self towards others in interactions*” (Popescu, 2009, p. 205). According to Blumer (1969, p. 3), symbolic interactionism is centered on the following premises: the first is that social actors assign meanings to things/objects through the social interactions they participate in; then, these meanings are reconfigured depending on the interpretative strategies of social actors and their ability to act in a process of symbolic negotiation – thus, the author points out, we should not understand the meaning of a thing/phenomenon as being intrinsic to it (Blumer, 1969, p. 4-5).

Therefore, functionalists view the family as a relatively standardized structure with norms and rules designed to fulfil a series of social functions, while interactionists understand the family as the result of interactions between its members, interactions based on subjective interpretations of roles, as well as the use of specific meanings and symbols.

Beyond these major groups of theories, which are primarily concerned with the study of balance and consensus within a particular system, there are other theories specific to critical studies.

One such theory is conflict theory, which considers the study of power relations and inequalities that may arise within social systems. Applied to the family, it can be considered that it reproduces on a smaller scale the conflicts between social categories, being the first form of social antagonism organized for the benefit of men (Coleman & Cressey, 1990, apud Popescu, 2009, p. 24).

Also from the realm of critical theories is the feminist perspective, which focuses on the gender division of domestic tasks, power relations between spouses, and the study of the division of domestic labor. For liberal feminism (Friedan, 1971), the traditional family is seen as an obstacle to the manifestation of gender equality for women, who have limited access to the public sphere (Friedan, 1971, p. 17).

It should be noted that the theories presented primarily refer to the classical forms of families, consisting of two parents and their descendants. They do not consider alternative family forms, such as commuting couples, families whose children live in other localities, single-parent families, families with divorced or remarried parents, couples with children from previous marriages, or families consisting of homosexual or lesbian partners, “convenience” marriages, or extended families. Therefore, we will implicitly understand the concept of “divorce” in relation to the classical form of the family.

## **2.2. Conceptual clarifications**

Divorce rate *“is a demographic phenomenon that expresses the intensity of divorces within a population or in certain subdivisions of it”* (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1993, p. 183).

Both legally and from a demographic and social perspective, divorce represents *“the dissolution of a legally concluded marriage through a final court decision, by a civil registrar, or by a public notary”* (INS, 2023, p. 8).

Execution of the divorce ruling – *“after the divorce ruling becomes final, the court communicates it ex officio to the Civil Status Service. The annotation of the divorce on the marriage certificate constitutes a public measure, intended to make the dissolution of the marriage opposable to third parties. The marriage is dissolved on the day the final court decision pronouncing the divorce becomes irrevocable. In cases where the marriage is dissolved by the civil registrar or a public notary, it is dissolved on the date the divorce”*.

## **2.3. Legislative aspects of divorce**

The institution of marriage and its dissolution has implications from psychological, social, and legal perspectives.

We consider that all these aspects are interdependent, and to better understand the

dynamics of divorce at any given time, it is important to not only comprehend how family dynamics function but also how legal regulations in this area can influence the process. The right to marriage is granted both nationally and internationally to all individuals who meet the legal conditions to enter into such an act. However, the right to divorce, while recognized in most countries around the world, does not enjoy the same level of protection at the international level as the right to marry.

In Romania, the dissolution of marriage has undergone an interesting evolution over time, reflecting the transformations that Romanian society has experienced.

In the past, marriage and family were regulated by church laws, but starting in 1864, civil marriage became mandatory, and the causes for divorce were transferred to the courts. The church's attitude towards divorce remained the same: it reluctantly accepted the dissolution of a marriage blessed by a priest, considering from a moral standpoint that the union between a man and a woman in marriage is eternal, and not even death should dissolve it. The legal regulations after 1923 show that not just any disagreement between spouses could be grounds for divorce, but only very serious ones, based on concrete facts and clear evidence.

The Communist regime established norms regarding the new type of family through Law No. 4 of January 4, 1953, amended and supplemented by Law No. 4 of April 4, 1956. Later, changes were made through Decree No. 779/1966, Law No. 3/1970, and Decree No. 174/1974. In fact, starting in 1954, the Communist regime eliminated from the Civil Code the articles related to consensual grounds for divorce established until 1948 and tightened the conditions for granting a divorce. As a result, in the short term, the crude divorce rate decreased, fluctuating around 0.5-0.6‰, but by 1960, it had risen to 1.4‰ (Mătușan, 2014, p. 9).

A significant moment occurred in 1966, which marked not only repression against abortion but also against divorce, a social phenomenon with indirect effects on birth rates. In practice, through Decree 779 of 1966, divorce became an entirely exceptional measure, very difficult to obtain in practice, based mainly on a few exceptional reasons that could lead to the dissolution of a marriage: for example, if one of the spouses was diagnosed as insane, or if one spouse left the country, abandoning the other (Mătușan, 2014, p.9). Once again, the state's interventionist policy had the desired effect, with the number of divorces dropping from 25,804 in 1966 to just 48 in 1967. In the following years, the trend of divorces began to increase: 4,023 in 1968, 6,991 in 1969, 7,865 in 1970, 14,472 in 1973, 17,951 in 1974, etc.

After the Communist period, through Law No. 59/1993 for amending the Civil Procedure Code, the Family Code, the Administrative Litigation Law No. 29/1990, and Law No. 94/1992 regarding the organization and functioning of the Court of Accounts, regulations on divorce became more relaxed, with the view that maintaining a marriage in which the relationship between spouses is no longer harmonious is not beneficial under the new social transformations. Later, through the amendments to the Family Code and the New Civil Code in 2009, new, reformist regulations were introduced, inspired by the contractualism theory of marriage, which provided for a new relaxation of conditions under which divorce could be granted by mutual agreement. Thus, divorce could be obtained both through administrative procedures and via notarial means, eliminating the requirement of a certain period from the conclusion of the marriage, as well as the condition that there are no minor children. In fact, all these regulations have led to a liberalization of the dissolution of marriage in the field of private international law.

We considered it necessary to make these legal clarifications to understand that the social transformations of a particular historical period, regulated legally, influence the dynamics of processes within social groups – specifically the family at the macro level – or the social behaviours of the individuals that compose it, at the micro level. Moving forward, we will also refer to some psychological aspects related to the causes of divorce, highlighting some implications that these may have on family members.

#### ***2.4. Psychological implications of divorce on the family***

From a psycho-social perspective, divorce is a process that has implications both for society and for family members at an individual level. Socially, divorce can resolve issues such as eliminating conflicts and social tensions; however, from a psychological standpoint, it can bring about tensions, conflicts, frustrations, dissatisfaction, psychological stress, and more. Through divorce, the functions of the family (economic, solidarity, socialization, etc.) are either altered or disrupted, with the most significant negative effects often being on the children. In most cases, when a family breaks apart, one of the first effects is the loss of the emotional function, and parental responsibilities are typically assumed by the parent who is granted custody of the minor. Although in many cases the effects on the child are negative, there are also situations where these effects are counterbalanced by beneficial outcomes, especially in cases where a child has an aggressive or alcoholic parent, for example. The effects on the minor can manifest directly or indirectly in behaviors the child might adopt in the short or long term, such as irritability, hypersensitivity, isolation, poor academic performance, or delinquency.

A study conducted in 2001 shows that *“in general, about 20% of children who experience parental divorce exhibit serious*

*problems, compared to about 10% of children whose parents did not divorce. This finding can be interpreted in different ways to support opposing views on the effects of divorce on children’s adjustment. Since this finding shows that the risk of serious problems doubles, one could conclude that parental divorce has very negative consequences for children. Alternatively, because the finding also shows that 80% of children who experience this transition do not exhibit serious difficulties, one could conclude that parental divorce has limited negative consequences”* (Anderson & Wolchik, 2001, p. 3807-3810).

Among the internal family factors that can influence divorce are: lack of premarital experience, insufficient knowledge of the partner, absence of love, early marriage, significant age differences between partners, differences in educational levels, behavioural incompatibility, aggressive behavior, alcoholism, and so on.

Before the legal dissolution of a marriage, there are several stages that a couple typically goes through, such as the existence of conflictual states (arising from the redefinition of male and female roles; lack of communication between partners; motivational divergences; differences between desires and expectations; sexual dissatisfaction; tense relationships with the family of origin, etc.). Due to its complexity, divorce brings about changes in all the family functions: *“At the level of the two partners, the psychological effects depend heavily on whether or not there are children, the emotional investments made in the marriage, who initiated the divorce, the value of the partners in the erotic or marital market, and the density of each partner’s network of relatives and friends”* (Iluț, 2005). Divorce is a painful phenomenon, with serious consequences for both partners, but especially for the children.

Recent research on divorces during the COVID-19 pandemic conducted by researchers in Denmark shows that there is

“no evidence indicating an increase in the number of people intending to divorce during the COVID-19 pandemic in Denmark compared to previous years” (Fallesen, 2021, p. 6). The Danish researcher’s results showed that the pandemic could have led to a higher number of divorces, but most likely, couples who had decided to divorce would have done so eventually regardless.

This idea is also supported by other authors who point out that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, couples did not move forward with the divorce process but were rather in an indefinite pause, continuing to live in the same space without clarifying their situation (Lebow, 2020, p. 967). The same studies revealed that the pandemic limited the legal possibilities for obtaining a divorce, with procedures becoming more cumbersome during this period.

### 3. Methodology

From a methodological perspective, the study titled Divorce Rates – A Socio-Demographic Perspective during the COVID-19 Pandemic falls within the realm

of descriptive research. Addressing essential questions (who, what, where, when, how?), the study aimed to analyze how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced divorce rates in Romania. As a research method, we employed secondary data analysis, utilizing official statistics from the National Institute of Statistics.

For the analysis, we selected variables that we considered relevant to highlight the issues of interest, specifically: divorce rates by county, divorces per thousand inhabitants by county, divorces per thousand inhabitants by residence area (urban vs rural), divorces by marriage duration, and divorce rates based on the number of minor children remaining after the marriage dissolution. It should be noted that we focused on the total figures for these indicators. A more in-depth analysis of data by macro-regions, development regions, or counties could be the subject of a potential future study.

We took into account that this type of research – secondary data analysis – highlights the influence of the social context on survey data, and from this standpoint, we considered it relevant for our study.

### 4. Results and discussion

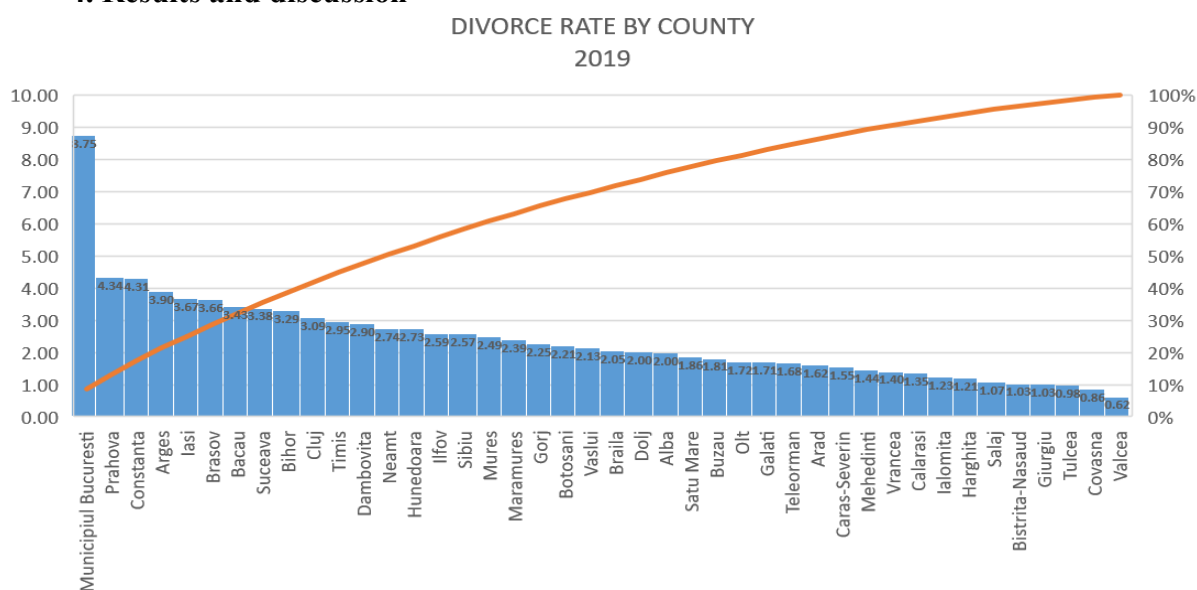


Figure no. 1: Divorce rate by county 2019  
(Source: INS, 2024)

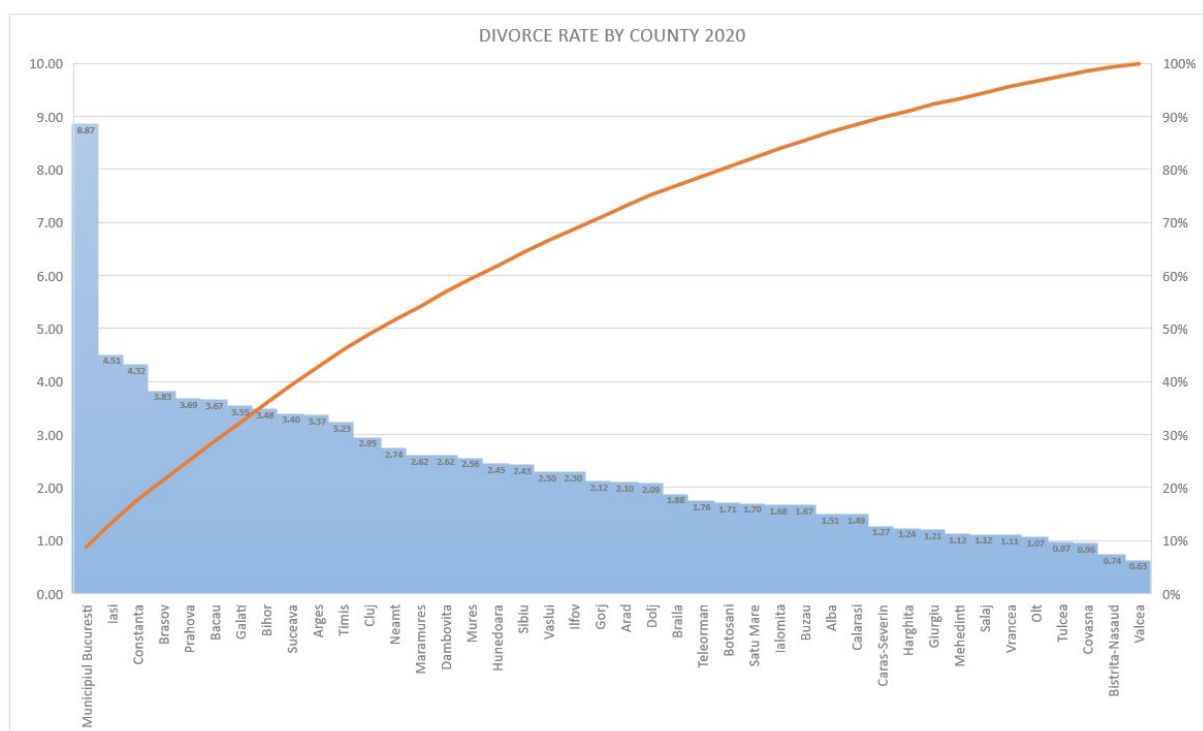


Figure no. 2: *Divorce rate by county 2020*  
(Source: INS, 2024)

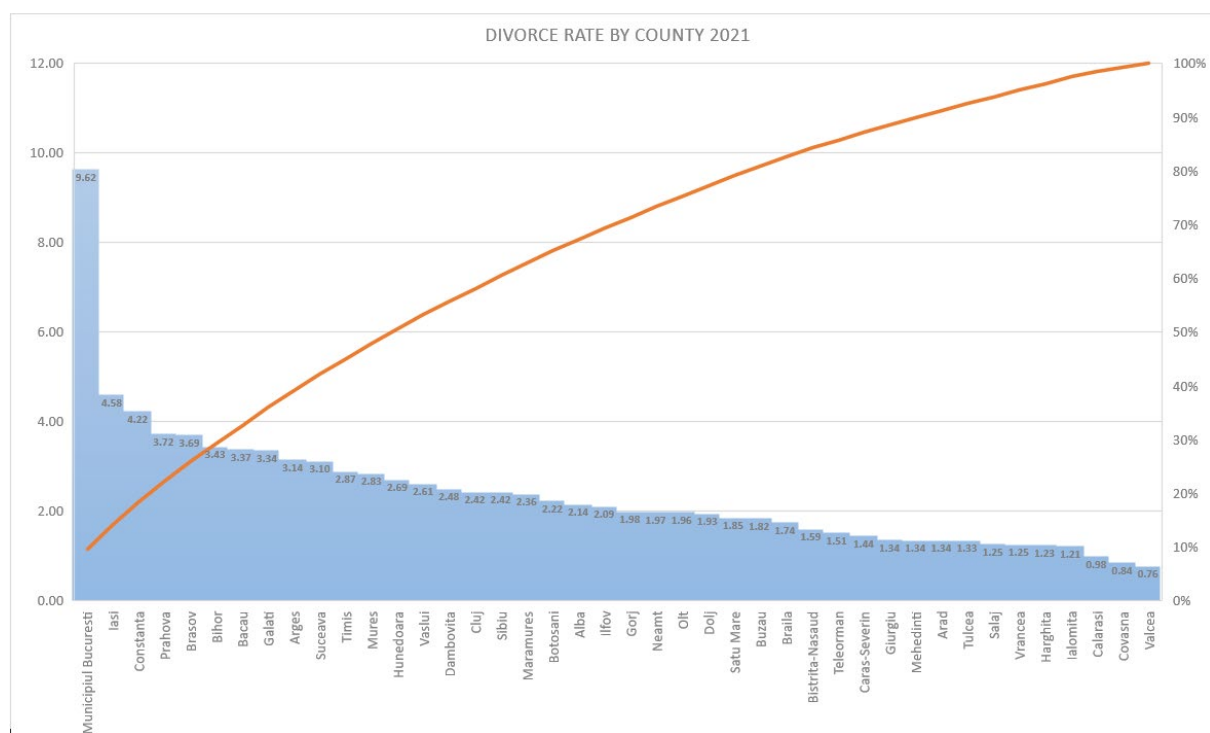


Figure no. 3: *Divorce rate by county 2021*  
(Source: INS, 2024)

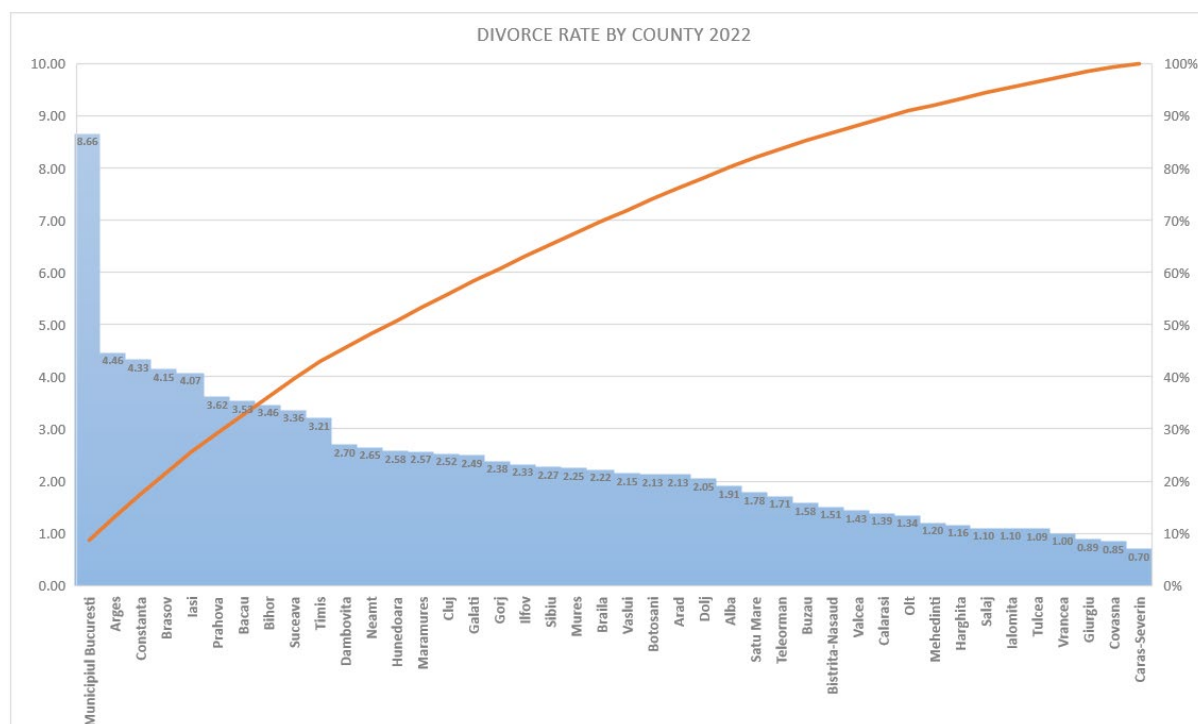


Figure no. 4: *Divorce rate by county 2022*  
(Source: INS, 2024)

Regarding the divorce rate by county, it can be observed that it remained the highest in Bucharest over the course of the four years, with the peak occurring in 2021 (9.6%). However, this percentage is not significantly higher compared to the previous years (8.7% in 2019 and 8.9% in 2020). In 2022, the divorce rate in Bucharest decreased by almost one percentage point compared to 2021, returning to the pre-pandemic level of 8.7%.

Other counties that recorded higher divorce rates were Constanța, with a rate of over 4% across all four years, and Brașov, where the rates fluctuated between 3.7% and 4.1%. However, it is worth noting that there is no significant increase in the divorce percentages during the peak pandemic years compared to the previous year or 2022, when we can assume that the pandemic was nearing its end.

Regarding divorces per thousand inhabitants, it can be noted that in 2019 Gorj county had a 4 times higher divorce rate compared to Vâlcea (2.16/0.54) or Dolj, and Vâlcea consistently had less than 1 divorce per thousand of inhabitants (the average being >1), having the lowest divorce rate. In comparison, counties like Brăila, Brașov, or Hunedoara consistently had higher divorce rates per thousand inhabitants than other counties in the country.

Therefore, in this case, we can conclude that the counties in the Oltenia region maintain a more conservative trend, recording the lowest number of divorces in the country, with the exception of Gorj. Meanwhile, counties in the central part of the country, such as Brașov or Hunedoara, registered a higher number of divorces over the four years analyzed compared to other counties in Romania.

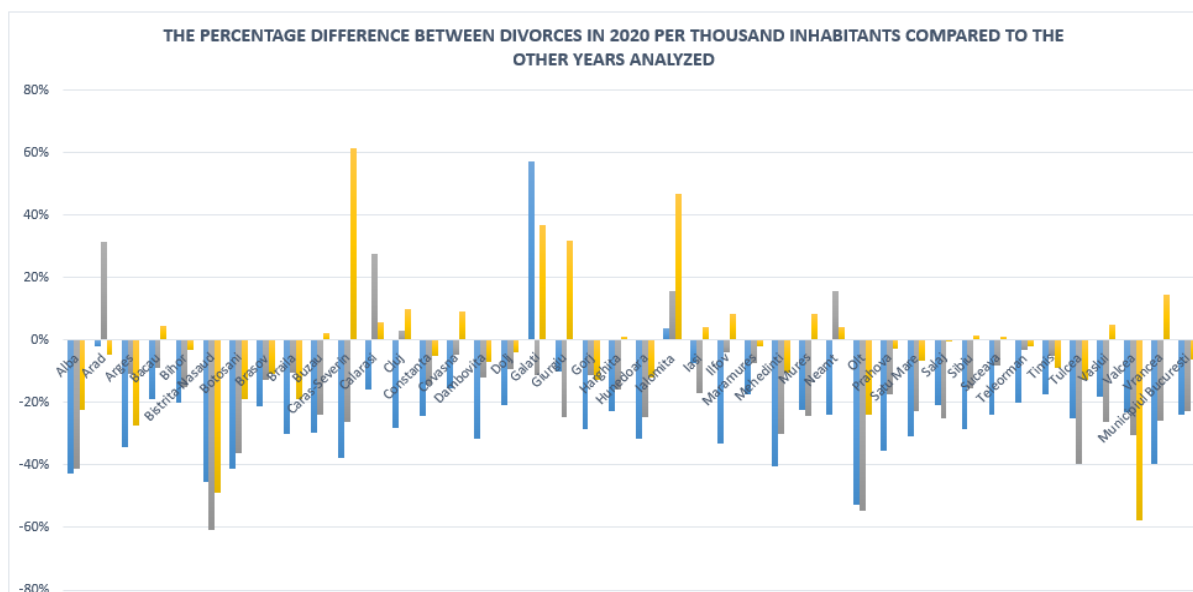


Figure no. 5: *The percentage difference between divorces in 2020 per thousand inhabitants compared to the other years analyzed*  
(Source: INS, 2024)

We can observe that in some counties, the divorce rates per thousand inhabitants were lower in 2020 (e.g., Alba, Bistrița-Năsăud, and Olt), while in other counties, like Galați and Ialomița, the rates in 2019, 2021, and 2022 were lower or at most equal to those in 2020.

The overall variation of divorces per thousand inhabitants unfolded as follows: in

2020, the rate decreased compared to 2019; in 2021, it increased compared to 2020; and in 2022, it decreased compared to 2021, almost reaching the level of 2020. Therefore, we can conclude that, in terms of the distribution of divorces by county, the pandemic did not significantly influence these rates, as they remained relatively constant throughout the analyzed period.

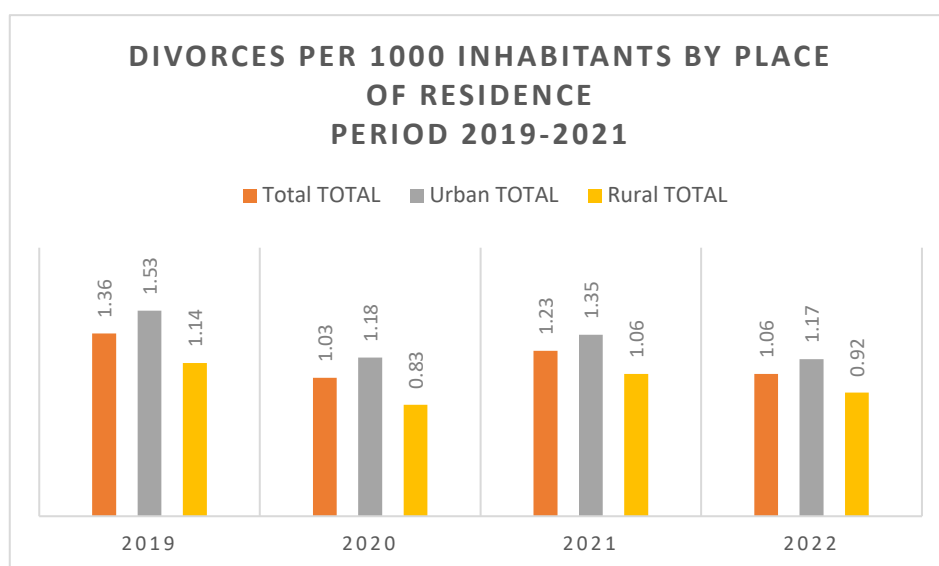


Figure no. 6: *Divorces per 1000 inhabitants by place of residence, period 2019-2022*  
(Source: INS, 2024)

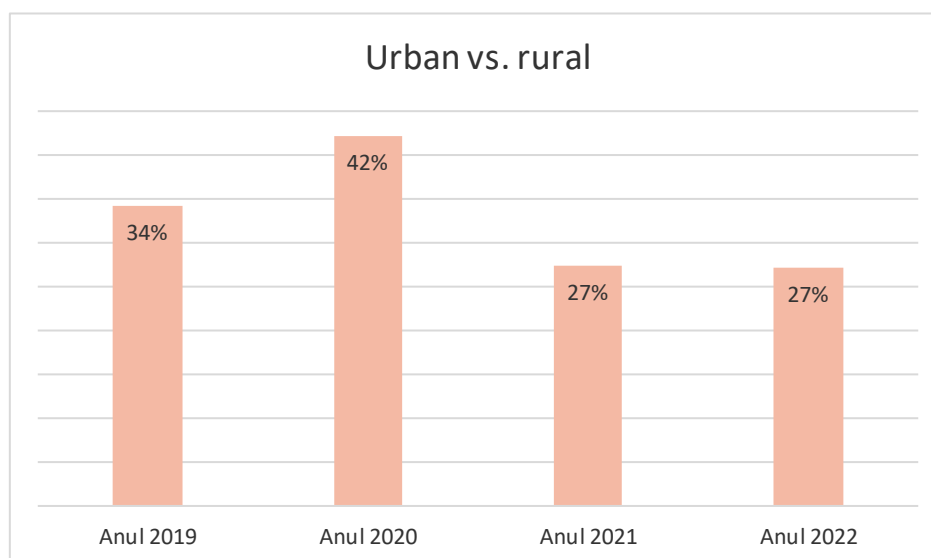


Figure no. 7: *Divorces per 1000 inhabitants by place of residence, period 2019-2022, urban vs rural comparison*  
(Source: INS, 2024)

Regarding the divorce rate by area of residence, for the four years analyzed, it can be noted that overall, the rate was higher in 2019 (1.53%). However, if we break it down by urban vs. rural areas, we can see that in 2020, the divorce rate in urban areas was 42% higher than in rural areas.

We can conclude that, in general, people in urban areas divorce at a significantly higher rate than those in rural areas, and this trend was not influenced by the pandemic, as the rates remained relatively stable throughout the period analyzed.

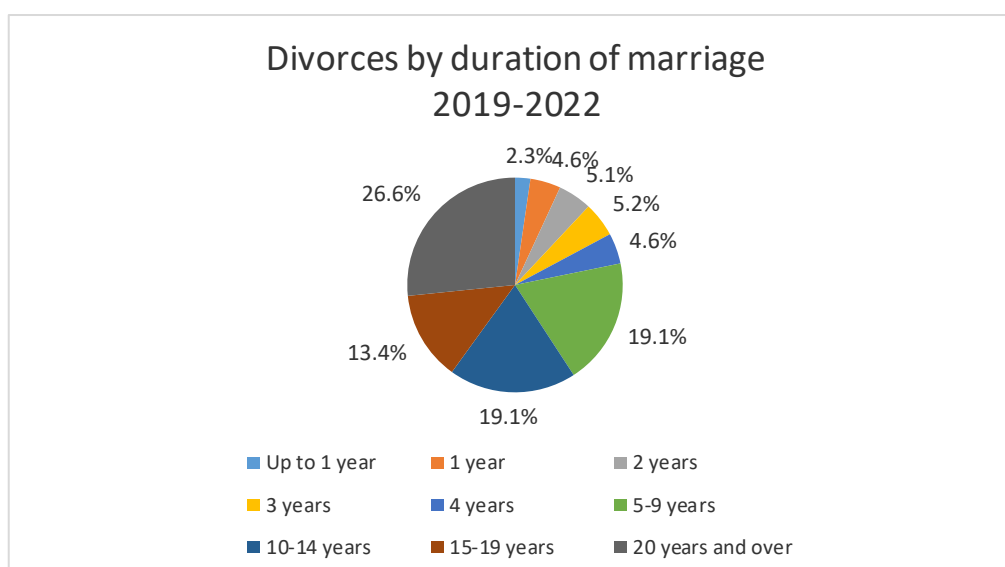


Figure no. 8: *Divorces by duration of marriage, period 2019-2022*  
(Source: INS, 2024)

Regarding the duration of marriage, it can be observed that most divorces occur after more than 20 years of marriage, followed by the 5-9 year and 10-14 year

intervals. The divorce rate based on this characteristic remained relatively constant throughout the years 2019-2022.

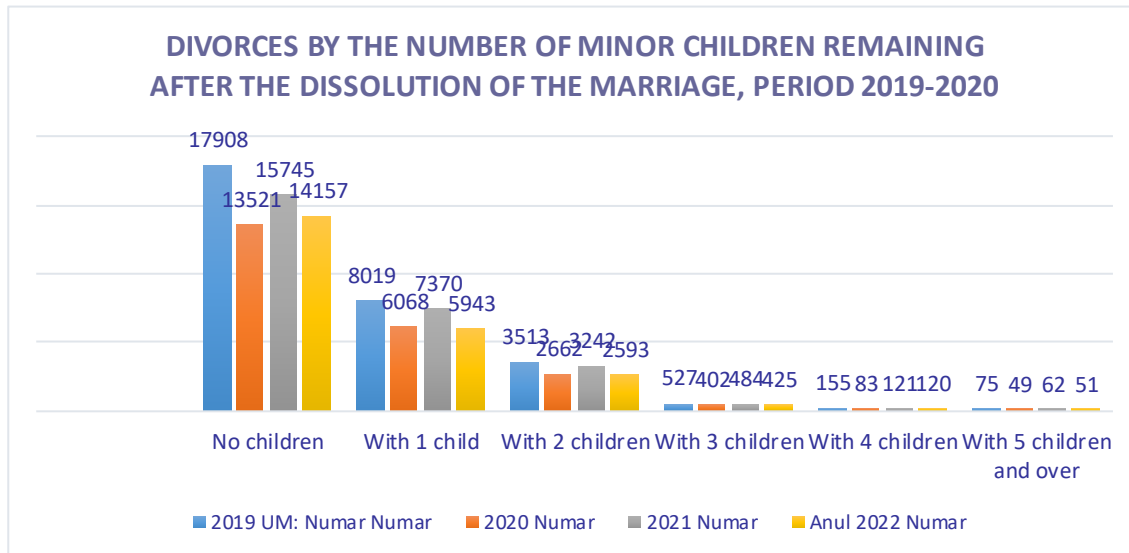


Figure no. 9: *Divorces by the number of minor children remaining after the dissolution of the marriage, period 2019-2022*  
(Source: INS, 2024)

An analysis of divorces based on the number of minor children left after the dissolution of marriage highlights that the more children a family has, the lower the

number of divorces is. Essentially, as mentioned in the introduction, children are one of the reasons why couples delay or avoid divorce.

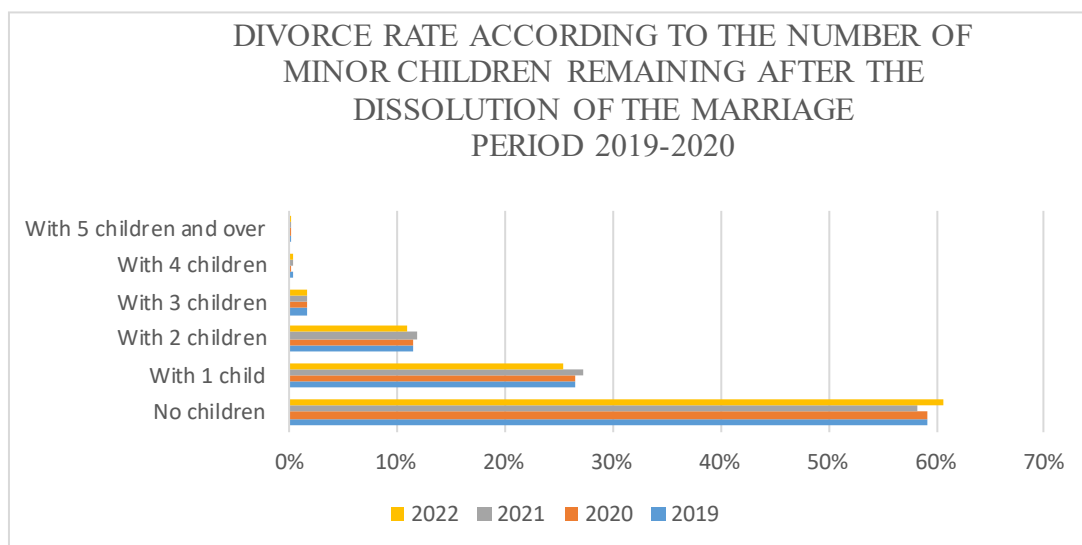


Figure no. 10: *Divorce rate according to the number of minor children remaining after the dissolution of the marriage, 2019-2022*  
(Source: INS, 2024)

It can be observed that the divorce rate, based on the number of children remaining after the dissolution of marriage, remains relatively constant across the five components analyzed. Couples without children divorce more easily, while at the opposite end are couples with five or more children. This trend persisted throughout all the years analyzed.

## 5. Conclusions

Historical periods and legislative decisions can impact family dynamics and implicitly its dissolution, but only in the short term, as the processes of forming and dissolving a family are much more complex. Whether we talk about long periods, during which government regimes leave their mark on individuals' lives through the policies they promote, or shorter periods, when circumstantial factors like the coronavirus pandemic affect people's lives, it is certain that the dynamics of social groups are influenced.

Considering micro-level family theories, we can see that divorces can leave emotional scars on family members, with children being the most affected. From the perspective of macro-level family theories, we observe that economic, cultural, and medical changes affect the social processes of forming and dissolving the social group

known as the family, with relationships between family members being reconfigured in times of social change.

Without a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic left its mark on mortality and birth rates, with an increase in deaths and fewer newborns. The conditions imposed by social isolation and the legal provisions in force at the time likely influenced the marriage rate. The pandemic certainly affected the country's workforce, with important industrial sectors being impacted.

However, regarding divorce rates, the analysis showed that the pandemic did not consistently affect the phenomenon. Couples who had decided to divorce likely maintained this decision and continued the process, while others who would have divorced may have only postponed the process due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. In fact, the presented and analyzed data show that the divorce phenomenon, examined both at the national level and by county, did not exhibit significant fluctuations during the pre- and post-pandemic periods compared to the pandemic period.

Therefore, although the COVID-19 pandemic affected other sectors of social life, its impact on divorce rates was minimal.

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