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SOVIET DIVORCES: SUSTAINED DEMAND

Summary: For the fifth year following the liberalization in 1965 of the divorce laws, the Soviet divorce rate has continued at its near record level. Some Soviet authorities had expected a leveling off in the rate but the demand remains strong. None of this would cause undue concern in the Kremlin were it not for the falling birthrate. As the most permissive society for divorce in Europe, the Soviet Union now is second only to the world leader, the USA: 2.6 divorces to 2.9 per thousand population.

The Soviet divorce rate continued at its high level during 1970 for the fifth year following the 1965 liberalization of the divorce laws. Some Soviet authorities had thought there would be a noticeable tapering off from the peak reached in 1966, but the volume of registered divorces showed only a slight change from the record high set that year, according to data published in the Central Statistical Administration's monthly journal. (1)

With this record the Soviet Union has now approached the most liberal country for divorces -- the USA -- with 2.6 per 1,000 population, compared to the 2.9 rate in the USA. Moreover, the Soviet figure is now highest in all Europe, East and West alike.

The schedule of Soviet marriage-divorce dynamics appears in this order: (2)

Year	Marriages		Divorces	
	No. Thousands	Per 1,000 Population	No. Thousands	Per 1,000 Population
1960	2591	12.1	270	1.3
1965	2008	8.7	360	1.6
1966	2087	9.0	646	2.8
1967	2131	9.1	646	2.7
1969	2285	9.4	640	2.6
1970	2365	9.7	636	2.6

In line with the trend in the western world, the marriage rate in the USSR recorded a sharp drop since 1960, although a modest recovery was reached in the latter part of the decade. It is evident that the post-war baby crop has reached the family formation stage with a positive impact on the marriage rate. An improvement in living conditions, a liberalization of the divorce law, and perhaps a trend toward registering more marriages no doubt contributed to the upward movement.

The divorce series reveals a pronounced change in Soviet family structure. Divorces have moved from a steady 1.3 per thousand population in the late fifties and early sixties to 1.6 in 1965, followed by the sharp rise in connubial dissolutions to 2.8 in 1966, 2.7 in 1967, and a settling to 2.6 in 1968-70. In terms of divorce totals, the rate has almost doubled in the last decade with 636,000 registered in 1970 in a country reckoned to have between 60 to 70 million families. These figures, according to Literaturnaya Gazeta, are on the low side as not all divorces are registered. It quoted a Moscow

survey which demonstrated that one-third of the couples who obtained divorces in the courts did not bother to register them afterwards at ZAGS, the registry office. The literary weekly expressed concern over the declining birth-rate in the Soviet Union and the high divorce rate as inter-relating social phenomena which give authorities pause for concern. (3) "The family is the demographic basis of society," it warned.

The primary reason for the sharp rise in Soviet divorce proceedings is a result of the liberalization of the rigid divorce laws in 1965. The 1944 Stalinist marriage laws were amended to make divorce easier and to reduce the high rate of common law marriages. The 1944 law was expensive and time-consuming: it required the couple to publish their marriage banns, appear before a people's court, undergo a cooling-off period, make three payments of fees, and finally appear before a higher court for adjudication.

The 1965 revision of the laws vested power with lower courts to dissolve marriages at their own discretion, without confirmation by the higher courts and to settle issues of custody, alimony and personal property. The fees were reduced and the time involved in the proceedings was cut back to several weeks. Grounds for divorce no longer need to be published. Citizens are permitted a maximum of three divorces.

The statistical series documents the observation that a large reservoir of discontent existed in families that were formally held together by the Stalinist bonds of bliss. The 80 per cent upsurge in divorces during the first few years of the liberalized divorce law attests to the validity of this conclusion, but what was not foreseen by the Soviet authorities was the continuation of the high rate of family instability.

Divorce in the Soviet Union is mainly a problem of urban, white youth. The highest rates, nearly three times the average, are in Moscow, Leningrad and other large cities, although the areas with adverse living conditions (such as the north and far east) have a high rate of break-up. The lowest turnover is in Transcaucasia and Central Asia where the traditions of stable marriage and male dominance prevail. Here only one divorce in a thousand is the rule compared to the three to four ratio for the European Soviet republics.

None of this would be cause for concern to the Kremlin were it not for the declining birthrate. The concept of over-population in relation to natural resources, a prime consideration reflecting the quality of life by Western standards, is foreign to the Soviet Union. It has vast spaces of land and a

labor shortage. The proximity of China and its immense population gives pause to the demographic planners. The 1970 census showed that the gradual decline in the Russian ethnic population will soon place the non-Russian population in the majority.

The following table gives a comparison between the Soviet divorce rate and that of representative Western countries and the Comecon group.

Divorces per thousand population 1970 (4)

USA	2.9	Sweden	1.2
USSR	2.6	Bulgaria	1.1
Hungary	2.2	Poland	1.05
Czecho- slovakia	1.7	Switzerland	0.8
DDR	1.7 ('69)	France & UK	0.6
FRG	1.4	Rumania	0.39

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- (1) Vestnik statistiki, No. 12, 1971, pp. 86-89.
- (2) Narkhoz: 1965 ed, p. 117; 1967 ed., pp. 42-43, 1969 ed., p. 36. Vestnik statistiki, No. 2, 1969, p. 92; No. 12, 1971, pp. 86, 89-90.
- (3) Literaturnaya Gazeta, 3 September 1969.
- (4) Vestnik statistiki, No. 12, 1971, p. 86. Statistical Abstract of U. S., 1970, p. 60. Regime official sources.