

**STILL BELIEVE IT?
AN ANALYSIS OF PARTNERSHIP TRAJECTORIES AFTER FIRST
UNION DISSOLUTION IN ITALY¹**

Alessandra De Rose, Eleonora Meli

1. Introduction

The deep transformations in conjugal behaviour, such as the growing number of consensual unions, but also the recent introduction of the “brief” divorce and other legislative innovations, have changed the context of re-partnering in Italy. In order to provide an updated picture of the Italian situation, we examine the patterns of conjugal behaviour after the first union dissolution by analysing data from the Survey “Families, Social Subjects and Life Cycle”, carried out by Istat in 2016.

The aim of this work is to examine the characteristics of re-partnership, focusing on the second union type, including LAT (Living Apart Together), among the various forms of coupling. Since re-partnering is a field not extensively investigated, and LAT is a very uncommon way to consider a partnership, we intend to contribute with original results to the research on consequences of marital dissolution in contemporary societies.

The topic of re-partnering has long been the subject of attention, mainly in countries with decades of experience of separations and divorces (Thornton, 1977; Oppenheimer, 1988; Amato, 2000, 2010; Wu and Schimmele, 2005; Beaujouan, 2012; Ivanova *et al.*, 2013; Gałężewska *et al.*, 2017; Mortelmans, 2020). In Italy, studies on the consequences of marital dissolution are relatively recent, due to the late diffusion of marital breakdown (Salvini and Vignoli, 2011). Despite this delay, the Italian divorce rate is on the increase, although still below that of the countries of central and northern Europe: the most recent data show a level about 1.5 divorce per 1,000 inhabitants against 1.9 on average in EU (Impicciatore and Guetto, 2021). As a consequence, the incidence of second marriages is on the increase (Istat, 2021). Meanwhile, couples based on informal unions have spread and, because of their higher instability, also re-partnering of previously cohabiting individuals is on the increase (De Rose *et al.*, 2008).

¹ This article is the result of the collaboration between the authors. In particular, paragraphs 1 (Introduction) and 4 (Conclusion) are attributed to Alessandra De Rose and paragraphs 2 (Data and methods) and 3 (Results) are attributed to Eleonora Meli.

The past decades trend in union formation and dissolution is spurring research on living arrangements after the break down and on their characteristics. Findings of the analyses conducted on Italian data so far, also in a comparative perspective, suggest that the speed and frequency of re-partnering are very different between men and women and highly dependent on age, on presence of children from the previous union, on socio-occupational status, namely on education and work, as well as on cultural traits (Rettaroli, 1997; Angeli and De Rose, 2003; 2007; Meggiolaro and Ongaro, 2008; Gałęzewska *et al.*, 2017).

The behaviour after first union dissolution can be very heterogeneous. Some individuals never enter a new couple, while others follow a variety of different paths: some meet a new partner very quickly, while others take longer; some form a lasting union while others separate after a short time; some marry (or remarry) while others simply cohabit; and a few may experience several different unions in succession. Among the possible ways of living a new romantic relationship after the failure of the first one, cohabitation does not necessarily have to be foreseen. A different living arrangement, which is summarized by the term LAT, proves to be an alternative to cohabitation (Levin, 2004). As outlined by Liefbroer and colleagues (2015): “*Most people in LAT unions intend to live together but are apart for practical reasons. LAT is more common among young people, those enrolled in higher education, people with liberal attitudes, highly educated people, and those who have previously cohabited or been married. Older people and divorced or widowed persons are more likely to choose LAT to maintain independence*”. The propensity to establish a shared home decreases with increasing levels of educational qualification and with income, and vice versa, it increases at the lower end of the social hierarchy (Régnier-Loilier, 2019). In fact, money constraints can push couples to move in together to benefit from certain economies of scale associated with cohabitation (one rent rather than two, etc.). The presence of cohabiting children also affects the likelihood to form another cohabiting union, and this especially true for women (Vanassche *et al.*, 2015). In these cases, couples often pursue LAT relationship rather than cohabit or marry (de Jong Gierveld, 2004; de Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013; Duncan *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, cohabitation is not the predominant choice of re-partnering for those experiencing union dissolution at older age, who want to maintain own independence (Schimmele and Wu, 2016; Brown and Wright, 2017). In Italy, studies on LAT are quite rare and the latest evidence suggest that LAT relationships are essentially concentrated in the early phases of the life course, among young couples who are waiting to start a cohabitation or to marry (Régnier-Loilier and Vignoli, 2018).

In this paper, we will provide an overview of the re-partnering behaviour of Italian individuals after the eventual break-up of their first union and try to enlighten the role of LAT as an alternative way of living a new romantic experience. Our goal

is twofold: we first estimate the probability that people who had dissolved a first union get into a new union and which factors are mainly associated with this risk; then, we concentrate on those entering a new union and try to disentangle among cohabiting and non-cohabiting unions and factors associated with the alternative choices.

2. Data and methods

Our analysis examines the union histories collected by the Istat Survey “Families, Social Subjects and Life Cycle” in 2016. Using the sample of people aged 18 and over, the unions’ trajectories are investigated to reconstruct the sequence of the unions; moreover, many other pieces of information have been considered in order to build a reference frame. Our sample includes all individuals who have had their first cohabiting union dissolved ($n=4,997$); the sub-sample of those individuals who have had a second union ($n=1,682$) has been then selected in order to estimate the propensity to choose one type of union or another. Weighted data have been shown in the analysis to account for the stratified sampling design used, as well as nonresponse.

Retrospective union histories offer a complete data collection on the partnership path. Our study starts considering the individual’s first cohabiting union that could have been an informal cohabitation, a direct marriage (without a previous cohabitation) or an indirect marriage (with a previous cohabitation). For those who dissolved their first union with the end of the cohabitation, a separation, or a divorce we consider any subsequent union, with or without cohabitation. In this second step, unions studied are informal cohabitations, second marriages and LATs.

In explaining patterns of re-partnering in Italy, and according to the empirical literature in the field, we consider the role of the following characteristics²: type of first union, territory, gender, birth cohort, age at union break-up, duration of first union, presence and age of the youngest child from previous union, educational level, support network.

Territory is the geographical area of residence at time of the interview, that could be different from those at the union formation or dissolution.

Birth cohorts are grouped into ten-year periods (1939 and before, 1940-1949, 1950-1959, 1960-1969, 1970-1979, 1980 and after).

Duration of the first union is the discrete time, in years, from the union’s beginning – start of cohabitation for informal union and indirect marriages or year of marriage – until the first date of union break-up.

² In this paper we only included time-constant variables.

Presence and age of the youngest child (if any) from the previous union are also considered. We built a three-category variable: No children, youngest child less than 18, youngest child 18 or older.

Educational level is the higher educational attainment obtained, categorised in three classes: “High” is at least a university degree, “Medium” is secondary school diploma, “Low” is middle school diploma or less.

Support network is the dimension of the community that could offer help in case of need. It is defined as a “Strong network” if the person can count on at least two types of networks (neighbours, friends, relatives, or someone who would lend 800 euro in case of need), “Weak” only one network and “No support network”.

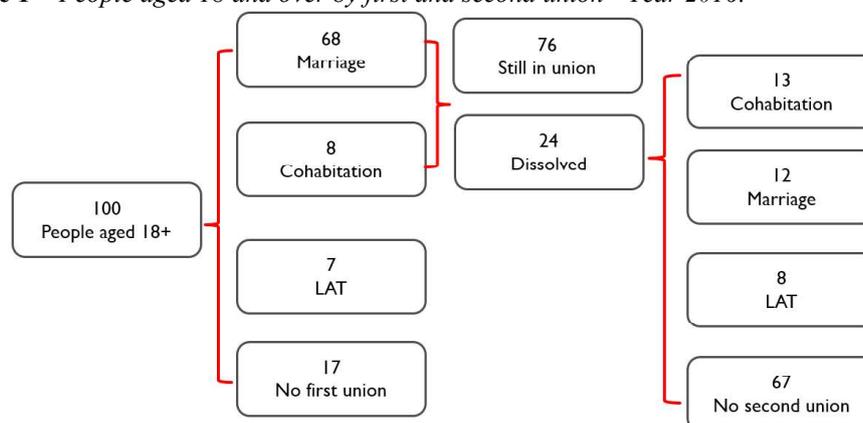
To estimate the risk of entering a second union and investigate on the association between the survival time and our predicting variables we apply the standard Cox proportional-hazards model. In this work, duration is defined as the time interval between date of first union break-up and second union (if any) or date at the interview.

Then, we selected only those who entered a second union, and we analysed the differences between types of union (marriage, cohabitation, and LAT). Performing separated logistic regression analyses, firstly we estimate the likelihood to choose a non-cohabiting relation (LAT) rather than a cohabiting one (considering both marriages and cohabitations); then, we discriminate among those who choose to live together, estimating the probability to getting married rather than starting an informal cohabitation. All models are performed in a multivariate setting, including all the variables previously illustrated.

3. Results

Paths of unions’ formation and dissolution can be very different. In Figure 1 reducing the complexity, the common transitions from one status to the next are shown. Based on data collected on union histories, we estimated that 10 million people have experienced a union dissolution in the Italian population; in quite 80% of the cases the first union was a marriage, leftover from a cohabitation. Among those who dissolved the first union, more than one third of them engaged in a new partnership. Cohabitation has been chosen by 13.3% and marriage by 12.1%, while 8.1% of people chose to have a relationship without cohabiting.

Figure 1 – People aged 18 and over by first and second union - Year 2016.



Source: Istat, Families, social subjects and life cycle.

In Table 1 a more detailed analysis of the partnership trajectories is reported: 77.7% of those who dissolved a marriage are still single, while only 26.2% of those who dissolved a cohabitation did not enter a new union. Over one third of former cohabitants choose again as second union a cohabitation. Entering a new union without cohabitation (LAT) is chosen by a minority of former partners (8.1%), however the percentage among the former cohabiting is about three times that among former married individuals.

Table 1 – People who dissolved their first union, by following trajectories Year 2016.

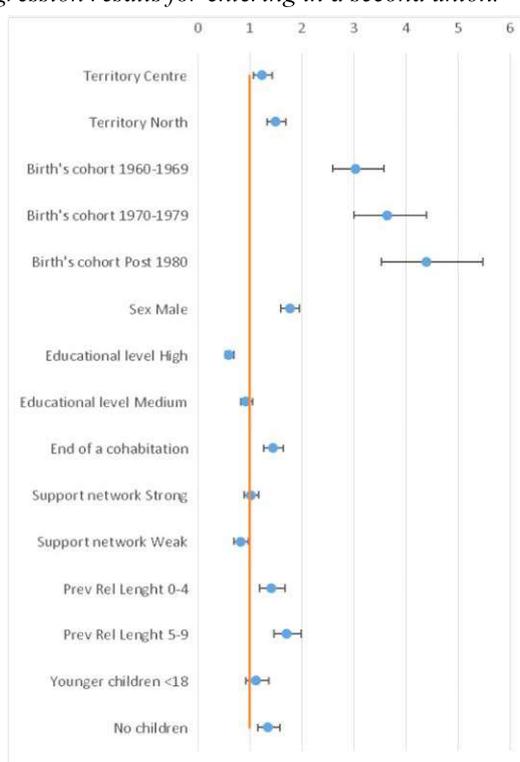
	Second union				
	No second union	Marriage	Cohabitation	LAT	All
First union					
Marriage dissolution	77.7	9.2	7.5	5.6	100
End of a cohabitation	26.2	22.6	34.0	17.3	100
All	66.5	12.1	13.3	8.1	100

Source: Istat, Families, social subjects and life cycle.

Re-partnering depends on birth cohort and gender, as well as on different factors related to personal and contextual characteristics. In Figure 2 the hazard ratios from the multivariate Cox’s regression analysis are reported. Results suggest a higher probability to enter earlier in a second union for men, for those who live in the Centre and North of the country with respect to the South. Younger people show higher

probability to enter a new union³. There are conditions which appear to facilitate re-partnering such as having ended a cohabitation instead of a marriage, having had a shorter union (less than 10 years) and not having children from the previous union. Education, instead, plays a negative role, that is people with high educational level have less chances to enter a new union, while no clear pattern of effect is observed for the support network.

Figure 2 – Cox's regression results for entering in a second union.



Source: Istat, Families, social subjects and life cycle.

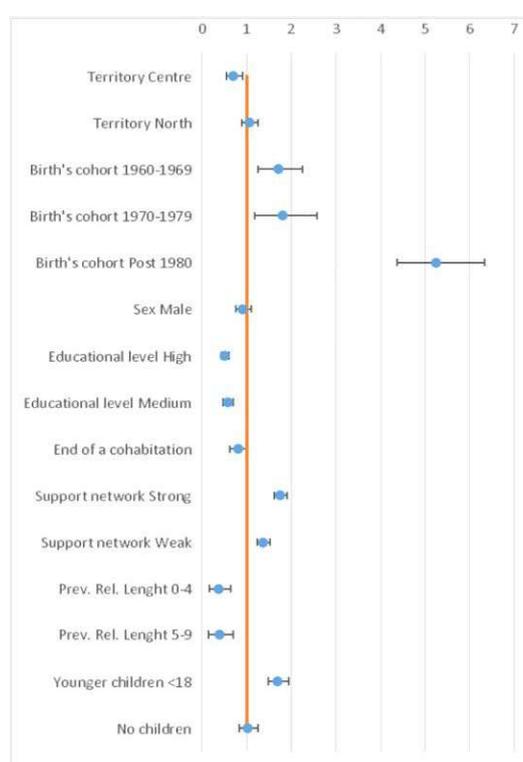
In a second step of the study, we deepen the analysis of the second unions. Thus, we concentrate on those individuals who did enter a second union and perform two distinct logistic regression models in order to: 1) single out the different

³ In a different model - here not shown but available upon request - we also included age at separation, that, as expected, has a strong negative effect on the re-partnering risks, the other effects unchanged, including that of the birth cohort. For the seek of model parsimony - especially in the following logistic regressions based on a lower number of cases - we retain only the birth cohort as indicator of age.

characteristics associated with the choice of entering a LAT rather than a cohabiting union; 2) evaluate, among those who started a new cohabitation, what are the differences between marriage and informal unions.

In Figure 3 the odds ratios of the model that evaluates the probability to choose a LAT rather than cohabitation as a second union are shown.

Figure 3 – Logistic regression model on the probability to choose a LAT instead of marriage or a cohabitation.

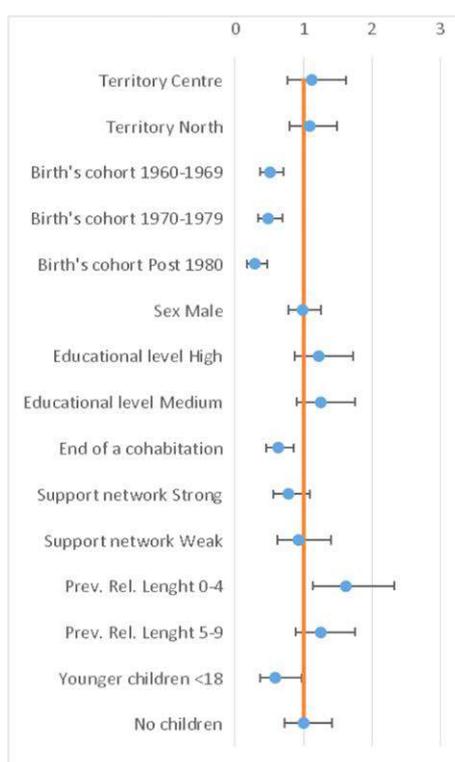


Source: Istat, Families, social subjects and life cycle.

The youngest people (those born after 1980) are more likely to choose a LAT-type union, as well as those having at least one child aged less than 18. Another characteristic that favours LAT is having a strong support network, a factor that has apparently no role in time to re-partnering, as previously noted. Even duration of previous union plays a different role: people coming from unions that lasted 10 years or more are more likely to enter a LAT as a second union instead of a cohabiting one.

Focussing on the individuals entering a new cohabiting union (Figure 4), the probability of getting married rather than starting a new informal cohabitation is higher among those who dissolved a previous marriage than among those coming from a previous informal cohabitation and among those whose experienced a very short first relationship (less than 5 years); instead, it is lower for younger generations and for those who have at least one child under 18 years of age. Interestingly, no gender differences turn to be statistically significant in both of these two last models.

Figure 4 – Logistic regression model on the probability to choose a marriage instead of a cohabitation among those living together a partner in a second relationship.



Source: Istat, *Families, social subjects and life cycle*.

4. Discussion

Transition to the second union is quite high: our data confirm that one in three people who exit a first union enter a new one. This would seem a clue that people “still believe it” and are willing to try again. Another interesting finding in this respect is the persistence of the partnership model: although the likelihood to re-partner is higher among those coming from an informal union, the probability of getting married rather than informally cohabit is higher among those who have already a marriage behind them, and those who have dissolved an informal union tend to repeat the same experience.

An alternative is emerging, that is starting a new sentimental relationship without cohabitation. LATs, although a still marginal reality, are becoming a true partnership form especially in certain circumstances, among the youngest, among those with small children and among those who can count on a solid network of help.

Our study confirms that men re-partner more often than women, but no gender or territorial differences appear as far as the type of second union is concerned. Also, territory differences persist: the risk to re-partner is higher in the North than in the rest of the country. The presence of children and their age act as an important constraint for the formation of a new union and condition the form of union chosen, also controlling for gender, age and duration of the union. Level of education also plays a non-trivial role, with the more educated people less likely to enter a second union: this result can be interpreted with the narrower marriage market that the most educated people have access to (de Graaf and Kalmijn, 2003; Wu and Schimmele, 2005) and given the persistent high homogamy by education level in our country (De Rose and Fraboni, 2016). An alternative explanation of this result is the independence hypothesis, that is the major human capital of more educated individuals makes them less in need of a new partner. Both interpretations deserve further investigation, namely on two directions: first, performing separated analyses by gender, since second marriage/unions market is highly different between men and women (Theunis *et al.*, 2015); second, by including other and more objective indicator of economic independence (Pasteels and Mortelmans, 2017) - such as income and employment status - which are however time-varying, requiring a more complex analytical approach, that go beyond the explorative purposes of this paper.

References

- AMATO P.R. 2000. The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 62, No. 4, pp. 1269-1287.
- AMATO P.R. 2010. Research on Divorce: Continuing Trends and New Developments, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 72, No. 3, pp. 650-666.
- ANGELI A., DE ROSE A. 2003. Donne e uomini dopo lo scioglimento della prima unione, in PINNELLI A., RACIOPPI F., RETTAROLI R., *Genere e demografia*, Bologna: Il Mulino, pp.367-392.
- ANGELI A., DE ROSE A. 2007. Women and men after the first union dissolution. In PINNELLI A., RACIOPPI F., RETTAROLI R. (Eds) *Genders in the Life Course*, Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 185-204.
- BEAUJOUAN É. 2012. Repartnering in France: The Role of Gender, Age, And Past Fertility, *Advances in Life Course Research*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 69-80.
- BROWN S.L., WRIGHT M.R. 2017. Marriage, Cohabitation, and Divorce in Later Life, *Innovation in Aging*, Vol. 1, No. 2.
- DE JONG GIERVELD J. 2004. Remarriage, Unmarried Cohabitation, Living Apart Together: Partner Relationships Following Bereavement or Divorce, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 66, No. 1, pp. 236-243.
- DE JONG GIERVELD J., MERZ, E. M. 2013. Parents' Partnership Decision Making After Divorce or Widowhood: The Role of (Step) Children, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 75, No.5, pp. 1098-1113.
- DE ROSE A., RACIOPPI F., ZANATTA A.L. 2008. Italy: Delayed adaptation of social institutions to changes. In Family Behaviour, *Demographic Research*, Vol. 19, No.19, pp. 665-704.
- DE ROSE A., FRABONI R. 2016. Educational Assortative Mating in Italy: What Can Gini's Homogamy Index Still Say?, *Genus*, Vol. 71, No. 2-3, pp. 53-71.
- DUNCAN S., CARTER J., PHILLIPS M., ROSENEIL S., STOILOVA M. 2013. Why Do People Live Apart Together?, *Families, Relationships and Societies*, Vol.2, No.3, pp. 323-338.
- GAŁEZEWSKA P., PERELLI-HARRIS B., BERRINGTON A. 2017. Cross-National Differences in Women's Repartnering Behaviour in Europe: The Role of Individual Demographic Characteristics, *Demographic Research*, Vol. 37, pp. 189-228.
- DE GRAAF P.M., KALMIJN M. 2003. Alternative Routes in The Remarriage Market: Competing-Risk Analyses of Union Formation After Divorce, *Social Forces*, Vol. 81, No. 4, pp. 1459-1498.
- IMPICCIATORE R., GUETTO R. (Eds) 2021. *50 anni dalla legge sul divorzio. Cause e conseguenze dell'instabilità matrimoniale in Italia*. Firenze: Neodemos.

- ISTAT 2021. Matrimoni, unioni civili, separazioni e divorzi. Anno 2019, *Statistiche Report*, 18.
- IVANOVA K., KALMIJN M., UUNK W. 2013. The Effect of Children On Men's And Women's Chances Of Re-Partnering In A European Context, *European Journal of Population*, Vol. 29, No. 4, pp. 417-444.
- LEVIN I. 2004. Living Apart Together: A New Family Form, *Current Sociology*, Vol. 52, No. 2, pp. 223-240.
- LIEFBROER A.C., POORTMAN A.R., SELTZER J.A. 2015. Why Do Intimate Partners Live Apart? Evidence on LAT Relationships Across Europe, *Demographic Research*, Vol 32, No. 8, pp. 251-286.
- MEGGIOLARO S., ONGARO F. 2008. Repartnering After Marital Dissolution: Does Context Play a Role?, *Demographic Research*, Vol. 19, pp. 1913-1934.
- MORTELMANS D. (Ed.) 2020. *Divorce in Europe. New insights in trends, causes and consequences of relation break-ups*. European Studies of Population No. 21, eBook: SpringerOne.
- OPPENHEIMER V.K. 1988. A Theory of Marriage Timing, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 94, No. 3, pp. 563-591.
- PASTEELS I., MORTELMANS D. 2017. The Socioeconomic Determinants of Repartnering After Divorce or Separation in Belgium, *Demographic Research*, Vol. 36, pp.1785-1812.
- RÉGNIER-LOILIER A., 2019. New Partner, New Living Arrangements? The Process of Repartnering After Separation, *Population*, Vol. 74, No. 1, pp. 71-100.
- RÉGNIER-LOILIER A., VIGNOLI D. 2018. The Diverse Nature of Living Apart Together Relationships. A France-Italy Comparison, *Journal of Population Research*, Vol. 35, No. 1, pp. 1-22.
- RETTAROLI R., 1997. *Le seconde nozze*. In BARBAGLI M. SARACENO C. *Lo stato delle famiglie in Italia* Bologna: Il Mulino.
- SALVINI S., VIGNOLI D. 2011. Things Change: Women's and Men's Marital Disruption Dynamics in Italy During a Time of Social Transformations, 1970-2003, *Demographic Research*, Vol. 24, pp. 145-174.
- SCHIMMELE C.M., WU Z. 2016. Repartnering After Union Dissolution in Later Life, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 78, No. 4, pp. 1013-1031.
- THEUNIS L., PASTEELS I. VAN BAVEL J. 2015. Educational Assortative Mating After Divorce: Persistence or Divergence from First Marriages? *Zeitschrift für Familienforschung*, Vol. 27, pp. 183-202.
- THORNTON A. 1977. Decomposing The Re-Marriage Process, *Population Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 383-92.
- VANASSCHE S., CORIJN M., MATTHIJS K., SWICEGOOD G. 2015. Repartnering and Childbearing After Divorce: Differences According to Parental

- Status and Custodial Arrangements, *Population Research and Policy Review*, Vol. 34, No. 5, pp. 761-784.
- WU Z., SCHIMMELE C.M. 2005. Repartnering After the First Union Disruption, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 67, No. 1, pp. 27-36.

SUMMARY

Still believe it?

An analysis of partnership trajectories after first union dissolution in Italy

We examine the patterns of partnership behaviour following first union dissolution analysing the individual union histories from the Survey “Families, Social Subjects and Life Cycle”, carried out by Istat in 2016. The aim of the work is to analyse the frequency and characteristics of re-partnering, and to explore the role of LAT (Living Apart Together) as an alternative for those who form a new union without cohabitation. The Risk of entering a second union by time elapsed since first union dissolution has been estimated with a Cox proportional-hazards model. Then, we selected individuals who entered a second union and applied multivariate logistic models to analyse factors associated with the likelihood to enter a certain partnership form (marriage, informal cohabitation, or LAT) rather than another. More than one third of those who dissolved the first union engaged in a new partnership. Male partners, living in the North, with low-medium level of education, with no children and exiting from a first consensual union show the highest risk to form a new union. LAT proves to be an alternative to a new cohabiting union (marriage or informal). The odds of choosing this new form of union increase with the younger birth-cohort, those with children and with strong family support. Among those who enter a second cohabiting union, marriage is generally chosen by the already married and informal partnership among those who experienced the same living arrangement.

Alessandra DE ROSE, Sapienza Università di Roma,
alessandra.derose@uniroma1.it
Eleonora MELI, Istat, eleonora.meli@istat.it