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Slovenia: The case of a long-term co-existence of a well-developed family policy and a (lowest) low fertility

Introduction

Slovenia has been identified by research as the country that does not fit in any cluster of countries according to family policy and fertility. It has a long tradition of a very good family policy, but it also has had a long period of a low (even a lowest low) total fertility rate. It may be considered as the best natural proof of the family policy's inefficiency to positively influence people's fertility behaviour.

This paper focuses on the factors (including family policy measures) that had influenced people's decisions to have their first, second and third child. The evaluation of family policy measures and preferences is dealt with, too.

Fertility in Slovenia

In the period from 1995 to 2005 Slovenia was the country with the lowest low total fertility rate (TFR). The lowest level of 1.20 was reached in 2003. The TFR was below 1.5 from 1990 to 2007. In 2010 and 2011 the TFR was 1.57 and 1.56, respectively. This was mostly due to the births of second children. Women have been recuperating births that had been postponed.

Family policy

Slovenia has a relatively well-developed family policy, aimed at enabling the reconciliation of professional and family obligations, providing equal opportunities to both sexes and a horizontal redistribution of income in favour of families with children. This is particularly true for parental leave and pre-school childcare. The following overview covers the period up to (not including) 2012.

Since 1986 there have been 105 days of maternity leave and 260 days of parental leave (or 520 days if taken as half-time leave), to which 90 days of paternity leave were gradually added in 2003-2005. The parental leave is extended by 30 days if – at the birth of a child – the parents involved are already bringing up at least two children below the age of eight; by 60 days if they are bringing up three children; and by 90 days if they are bringing up four or more children. Up to 75 days of the parental leave may be taken while the child is below eight years of age. Fathers' entitlement to parental leave was enacted in 1974 (like in Sweden) and is effective from 1975. The parental leave has been a family entitlement since 2002. Fathers are obliged to use at least 15 days of the paternity leave in the child's first six months, while the remaining 75 days can be used until the child is three years old.

To be entitled to parental leave income compensation, the person must be insured just prior to the first day of the leave, or for at least 12 months in the last three years before the start of the individual part of the leave. During maternity leave, parental leave, and the first 15 days of paternity leave, income compensation amounts to 100% of the average monthly

gross wage of the entitled person during the 12 months prior to the leave, or the average basis from which the parental leave contributions were paid. The minimum wage compensation is set at 55% of the minimum wage and the maximum at 2.5 times the average wage in Slovenia (the upper limit is not applied to the compensation during maternity leave).

Pre-school childcare is both available and affordable. Even during the most difficult transition years, Slovenia managed to retain most of its advantages and achievements in pre-school childcare attained in the socialist period, while it also rather successfully reformed services according to the principles of the market economy and improved their quality. Since the mid 1980s, the supply of pre-school childcare has almost completely met the demand in the last two decades. In the school year 2011/2012 as much as 78% of all children of the proper age were included in nurseries/kindergartens: 56% of children up to age of 3 years and 92% of older pre-school children. Around 1990, 30% of children up to age of 3 years and 60% of older pre-school children (52% of all children of a proper age) were included. The majority of children enrolled in pre-school childcare have attended all-day programmes (98% in the school year 2011/2012).

All approved programs of public and private childcare centres/providers are entitled to a public subsidy. On average, this amounted to 75% of the costs per child in 1990, to 71% in 2005 and to 68% in 2011. The parent fee amounting to 80% of the costs was the maximum paid by parents (of about 4-5% of children). Until 2012, families on social assistance were exempt from paying fees altogether. If more than one child from a family attended a subsidized childcare program, the fee for the older children was decreased by one income group. From 2008 to 2012, childcare was free of charge for the second and subsequent child from the same family co-currently included in subsidised childcare; parents paid only for the older/oldest child (and namely the rate for one lower income bracket).

The parent of a child below the age of three may choose to work part-time and have social security contributions (based on the minimum wage) paid by the state budget to make up the difference to the full-time working hours. In January 2007, this right was extended until the youngest child reaches six years of age if the parent is taking care of two children.

Family policy provisions have enabled a continuous full-time employment of mothers and (together with other transfers to families with children) have kept the risk of child poverty at one of the lowest levels in the European Union. Notwithstanding, almost no impact of family policy on fertility has ever been observed.

Data and method

The main data source is the Slovenian survey on the impact of family policy measures, focused on gender issues and parental/paternity leave, conducted in June 2010 in the framework of the "Research Project on the Influence of Current Family Policy Measures on Deciding to Have Children". It was a computer supported telephone survey. The sample size is 1,013 persons aged 20-49 years. The sample is representative of the Slovenian population by sex/age, education and statistical region.

The paper will also make reference to the results of the 1995 Fertility and Family Survey (FFS) and the 2000 International Population Policy and Attitudes Survey (PPA2). The Slovenian PPA2 sample consists of 1,550 persons aged 20-64 years (of which 1,123 persons were aged 20-49 years) and is representative of the population of Slovenia by sex, age, settlement type and region.

In the 2010 Slovenian survey on the impact of family policy measures the respondents were asked to select (and add, if necessary) the factors that influenced their decision to have their first, second and third child. It was presumed that the reasons (and their importance) differed for children of different birth order. Two groups of factors were offered. The first one was not homogeneous and included psycho-social factors, housing and employment conditions. The second group included the family policy measures.

This paper measures the importance of family policy measures for the decision making regarding completed births of the first, second and third children in the families. It also states a relative position of family policy measures among the determinants for deciding to have the first, second and third child. Finally, it deals with the respondents' evaluation of individual family policy measures and their preferences.

Results (preliminary)

Individual family policy measures were very important for less than 10% of the respondents. Fully compensated parental leave proved to have had the greatest impact.

Conclusions (preliminary)

While we have found some positive influence of the family policy measures on deciding to have the first, second and third child, we still cannot claim that family policy had increased the number of births and the TFR in Slovenia. Namely, along with great and important improvements in the family policy measures, the TFR was continuously decreasing. It may be that the decrease would have been even greater or faster had there not been such generous family policy.

It is also possible that people in Slovenia take a comprehensive family policy as granted (as common sense) since it has existed and has been improved and upgraded since the 1970s. We would dare say that people do not even think of a less favourable environment for having and raising children. In such circumstances, it is other factors that rule people's fertility behaviour, like values, norms, preferences, expectations, etc., which was proven by research based on the FFS and PPA2 surveys. Today, one should not neglect the importance of equal opportunities and the unwillingness of highly educated women to give up their professional careers because of motherhood.