Is low fertility in the Czech Republic an inevitable outcome of the new reproductive pattern?

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In recent decades, the gradual transition towards later childbearing has been one of the most characteristic features of demographic change in Europe (Kohler et al 2002) The emergence of a new fertility pattern is usually understood as an outcome of the "second demographic transition", which has been underway in most European countries since the 1960s (Van de Kaa 1987). The postponement transition, from early motherhood to later timing has been dramatically expressed in post-communist countries, because its start was accompanied by a rapid and profound drop in the total fertility rate (TFR). In the Czech Republic, TFR declined from 1.86 in 1991 to 1.19 in 1996. During the 1990s, most post-communist countries registered a decline towards unprecedented low levels of TFR below 1.3, which were labelled as "lowest-low fertility" (Kohler et al 2002, Billari and Kohler 2004).

The decline in TFR has brought a majority of EU countries closer together, in terms of fertility levels. Currently, there are two groups of countries: those never falling below 1.6 live born children per woman (North, West) and those experiencing lowest low fertility. Behind these apparently similar figures, in 2009, we can find distinct structures and the effects of not entirely similar factors. In addition, between 2009 and 2010, the second country group (with lower fertility in comparison with the first) experienced renewed decline in fertility. Besides the postponement effect (to some extent already exhausted), the role of cultural conditions: changing marital status and the rising number of highly educated women (Rychtaříková 2003, 2004, 2007 and 2008) might play important roles in shaping fertility figures. Therefore, the heterogeneity of lowest low fertility settings should be taken into account (Billari 2008). Some suggest that lowest-low fertility was a transient phenomenon, which they expect to end once delays in fertility weaken or come to an end (Bongaarts 2002, Sobotka 2004, Van Peer and Rabušic 2008.). On the other hand in some countries, especially in Eastern Europe, postponement could continue for many decades while unfavourable conditions for starting a family remain (Kohler et al 2002 and 2006). Very low fertility has been viewed as a long-lasting outcome of socioeconomic and cultural conditions that are disadvantageous for childbearing. Lowest-low fertility in this region has also been frequently perceived as a consequence of the painful economic transition following the collapse of state socialism around 1990 (Rychtaříková 1999 and 2000, Frejka 2008). The reduction of comprehensive state support for families in the first half of the 1990s combined with a lack of state concern over low fertility has also been stressed (Kocourková 2001 and 2006, Rychtaříková 1999 and 2000).

McDonald and Lutz, in particular, support the idea that this period of lowest-low fertility could become a long-lasting and persistent pattern. Reasons for the continuation or even the further decline of lowest-low fertility were expressed in the form of the 'low fertility trap' (Lutz et al 2006). McDonald (2006) suggests that a "cultural divide" exists between populations that can maintain period fertility above 1.5 and those that cannot, with the possibility of increasing fertility becoming more and more difficult in less child-friendly societies. Nevertheless, recent studies point out that there is a substantial discrepancy between intended average and achieved fertility. This gap has increased over recent decades as the fall in fertility level has not been accompanied by a corresponding fall in fertility intentions. This increased gap has been conceptualised as indicating an unmet need for children, arising from childbearing constraints. The existence of the fertility gap has encouraged recent policy

initiatives (the Communication from the Commission – The demographic future of Europe – From challenge to opportunity 2006). Although policies aiming to help people realise their childbearing intentions need not necessarily be considered as pro-natalist, 13 European countries explicitly expressed a preference for pro-natalist aims in 2008 (Wall and Deven 2009).

Since 2003, TFR in most low and 'lowest-low' fertility countries has increased moderately. By 2008, TFR had reached between 1.4 and 1.5, in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Ukraine and East Germany, where fertility below the lowest-low level had persisted for 10 to 13 years. However, only Slovenia and Estonia reached a level above 1.5, by 2008 and exited the category of low fertility. As a result Goldstein et al (2009) assume that there is nothing inevitable about lowest-low fertility, due to the fact that recovery to moderately low fertility levels occurred in most of the countries experiencing a period of extremely low TFR. Despite facing economic recession both Slovenia and Estonia continued to register TFR above 1.5 (1.56 and 1.51 respectively) until 2011 while TFR in the Czech Republic decreased to 1.42 in 2011.

Both effects in timing as well as economic, social, and institutional factors have to be taken into account when explaining the observed changes in fertility. The influence of all these factors on fertility level is inter-related which makes their examination rather complex. The elimination of tempo effect might not automatically lead to a subsequent increase in period TFR as long as childbearing-friendly conditions are set up. The reversal of lowest-low fertility may have resulted from improving economic conditions. Luci and Thévenon (2010) confirm that economic development, measured as GDP per capita, is likely to induce a fertility rebound, but it is not sufficient to lift fertility to a significantly higher level in all countries.

Moreover, new policies have been introduced in some countries with an aim to stimulate fertility (Estonia or Russia). Estonia experienced one of the largest TFR increases among European countries, from 1.28 to 1.66 between 1998 and 2008. It is plausible that newly adopted policies contributed to this rise in fertility. An important change in Estonian family policy took place in 2004, when parental benefits were introduced to compensate for income lost by a parent staying at home with children (Puur 2010). Likewise, the Czech population experienced a surge in TFR from 1.18 to 1.49 between 2003 and 2008. The rebound of fertility rates in the Czech Republic occurred during a period of economic growth (GDP grew at an average rate of 6.1% per year between 2003 and 2005) and more favourable housing policy; moreover, a new set of important family-related policies were adopted between 2001 and 2007. However, compared with Estonia, Czech family conditions are more modest and are currently in decline.

The proposed paper addresses the issue of low fertility in the Czech Republic and the formation of a new reproductive model based on later motherhood. We will explore factors behind the recent rise in fertility and the current stagnation or imminent decline of TFR back to well below 1.5 children per woman. While "lowest-low fertility" does not appear to be the inevitable destination, "low fertility" is the current destination for the Czech Republic as well as for most other Central and Eastern European countries (only Estonia and Slovenia reached a TFR above 1.5, as of 2008). It could be assumed that recent fertility developments tend to support the "low fertility trap" hypothesis (Lutz and Skirbekk 2005, Lutz et al 2006) and Mc Donald (2006) hypothesise that it is difficult for a country to bring fertility up to 1.6 once it has already fallen to levels of 1.3 or lower. We want to find out whether McDonald's policy recommendation to improve state support for families with children should be seriously taken

into account. Otherwise, can we expect the TFR to fall again which could be a sign of the re-emergence of lowest-low fertility (below 1.3) or to remain at a moderate level (at least 1.4).

From 2001 to 2007 state support for families with children improved significantly in the Czech Republic, but after 2008 policies were adopted that reduced financial support for families. The possible effect of these measures exhibits a striking correlation with the revival of fertility rates, through 2008, and recent stagnation or slight decline (2009-2010) in fertility in the Czech Republic. In addition, since 2008 the Czech Republic has been subject to wide-spread economic crisis. Economic factors can clearly play an important role; however, they are distinguished by instability and short-run effects. On the other hand, a well developed system of state support for families, based on long-term policies, creates relatively stable conditions that are important for initial family formation or subsequent family enlargement. We hypothesize that, without state concern about fertility levels and without systematic improvements in conditions for family formation, it is not very likely that TFR would have risen above 1.5 children per woman on its own (Rychtaříková 1999 and 2000, Kučera 2001 and 2002, Sirovátka 2003, Kocourková 2006).

We use the unique opportunity to explore the fertility intentions and behaviour of Czechs, since 2005, to find out whether these were influenced by adopted measures. We plan to use existing GGS panel data, acquired in 2005 and 2008, along with data from a new additional survey of panel respondents that occurred in 2013. Women in reproductive age will be asked new questions concerning the possible impact of adopted policies in addition to other questions regarding fertility intentions and behaviour. We anticipate that the effect could be analysed as 2005, 2008, and 2011 are the most important time periods, when changes in family policy approach occurred. In 2005, the improvement of financial support for families culminated with the adoption of an increase that doubled the birth grant and parental benefit. In 2008, a tendency towards a more deliberate approach was apparent and, after 2011, clear reduction of the previously adopted measures has been clearly evident.

When studying the effect of family policies on reproductive behaviour it is necessary to consider to what degree the adopted measures correspond to public expectations. Since the beginning of the 1990s, a relatively strong emphasis has been put on moving childcare into the family in the Czech Republic, without any support for gender equality. Sirovátka and Bartáková (2008) claimed that the so-called re-familisation process enjoyed strong support within Czech society. According to the results of the Population Policy Acceptance (PPA) survey in 2001 the majority of the population would welcome measures aimed at improving the financial situation of families (Kocourková 2006). For this reason, Czech society preferred childcare-related financial compensation for families over support for women's participation in the labour market. Recently, Sirovátka and Bartáková (2008) has shown that the general values of the Czech society have contradicted with traditional gender arrangements, particularly for higher educated people. Nevertheless, some analyses pointed out that measures promoting a work-life balance alone are insufficient to bring about a rise in fertility (Kotowska and Matysiak 2008, Kuchařová 2009).We want to find out whether Czechs still strongly favour various forms of financial support for families with children or whether they prefer measures to reconcile work and family, such as child-care facilities, flexible work arrangements, etc. Therefore findings from the survey in 2013 will be compared with the 2001 PPA results.

Finally, we want to compare fertility trends in the Czech Republic with those registered in Slovenia and Estonia and investigate in more detail the factors that were behind the recent fertility increase to above 1.5 children per woman, in those two countries.

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