Does Family Policy Affect Decisions to Become a Parent? Case Examples

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Abstract

In this essay, the author presents some results of a case study on the experiences of reproductive decisions among the university-educated, referring to family policy measures. The study outline was based on the reviewed recent demographic studies about the impact of family policy measures on fertility rates. Employing the qualitative approach, the interviewees and research location were selected according to socioeconomic and demographic characteristics that were in accordance with the main research question. The author mainly seeks to explain the widely perceived discrepancy between family policy regulations and the exercising of them in family formation. The interviewees' distrust of state institutions was also related to their harmonisation of the family and work, which proved to be a significant negative factor in their fertility decisions. With the perceived incompatibility of care work with the culture of 'long working hours', the author also foresees a '*locus*' of possible state support investment. The necessity of more flexible arrangements and alternatives for parents' easier reconciliation of their employment and care also affects intergenerational relations.

KEYWORDS: fertility rates, family policy measures, qualitative approach, Slovenia

Introduction

In the 1970s and 1980s, the total fertility rate was at below replacement level in the majority of European countries. 'Low fertility', 'below replacement fertility' and 'sub-replacement fertility' became keywords in demographic terminology describing this European fertility trend. When decline of total fertility rate fell to unprecedented levels, close to 1.0 in the 1990s, demographic terminology employed even more distinctive classifications. Demographers Kohler, Billari and Ortega (2002) coined, for instance, a new term the 'lowest-low fertility' to indicate a total fertility rate of 1.3 or below. With this new term, it was possible to distinguish between the 'lowest-low' fertility countries and 'more successful' countries that have managed to withhold its fertility above the 'lowest-low' level (Sobotka 2004: 195).

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Among many 'negative repercussions' of fertility declining below replacement levels for the nation-state, demographers persistently stressed the endangered social security systems. According to their calculations, the low fertility trend substantially affects the ratio between economically active and economically dependent people. Economic growth may be threatened, because government budgets may be overloaded with paying for pensions and health services, and there may be too few adults of working age to provide care and support for older people (Grant et al. 2006).

Similar concerns have been expressed in Slovenia, too. According to the more pessimistic assumptions of the Slovenian *Institute of Macroeconomic Analysis and Development*, the overall population numbers would start to drop sharply around 2020. The number of the working-age population would fall as would the number of people in employment, which could have substantial negative impacts on public finance (Kraigher 2005: 9, 10).

Those concerns have also been expressed by the current Slovenian Government, which explicitly put in its Coalition Treaty 'improving conditions for family development and the raising of fertility in Slovenia' among the main goals of its mandate 2004-2008 (Coalition Treaty[1] 2004: 3). In the Coalition Treaty, the argument is made that the creation of positive attitudes towards families and children in society would alleviate decisions for the first, second and each subsequent child (*ibid.*: 23).

Given the fact that Slovenia has been, even before the proposed measures, considered one of the European states with a very 'generous' family policy (Ule and Kuhar 2003; Stropnik 2005), the question still remains whether the family policy itself can substantially improve fertility in Slovenia.

The issue of the policy impact on fertility rates has been becoming an increasingly distinct research topic in the field of fertility behaviour. As a rule, the majority of these studies are policy-oriented; not only that they seek to find the strength of connection between policy and fertility, but in many cases the authors of such studies also recommend particular measures for family policy improvements.

One such recent study was the international comparative survey *Population-related Policy Acceptance and Attitude Survey* (PPA2), in which Slovenia was one of the fourteen participating countries (Stropnik in this issue). The study aimed to capture the values and attitudes influencing fertility decisions, the meaning of family and parenthood, life's aspirations, opinions and attitudes towards population policy issues and the role of government in providing support to families (Stropnik 2005: 3, 5). The main findings of the Slovenian PPA2 survey showed that 'improved parental leave', 'lower income tax' and 'better housing for families with children' were three of the most desirable family policy measures that could have positive influence on parity progression (Stropnik 2005: 44, 45). However, further analysis that took into consideration the education of respondents showed that in the case of highly educated people[2] this finding was not confirmed. Moreover, due to comparability of obtained data sets and consequently, some method-

[1] The Coalition Treaty on Membership in the Government of the Republic of Slovenia in the 2004-2008 Mandate.

[2] High education was defined as more than secondary education (Stropnik 2005: 47).

ological restrictions of the survey, it is not clear how respondents understood some statements, especially those related to three most desired measures of family policy. To explore these findings in depth, I aimed my case study at university educated people.[3]

Between November 2005 and February 2006, I carried out interviews with university educated couples in the administrative unit of Maribor. The location itself was not randomly selected; it had those 'typical' socioeconomic characteristics, e.g. economic uncertainty, high levels of unemployment, and low fertility, which according to some studies could explain low fertility under certain social circumstances (Ranjan 1999; Kohler, Billari and Ortega 2002; Kreyenfeld 2005). In comparison with other Slovenian administrative units, most women who have completed their reproduction with one child only were evidenced in Maribor. Since the current family policy in Slovenia aimed its measures particularly at creating necessary conditions for higher-order births, I was interested in those couples who conditionally would desire more than one child.

Accordingly, I firstly tried to discover to what extent selected interlocutors were informed about Slovenian family policy measures in the times of their reproductive decision-making. As to their familiarity with existing measures, I was further interested in their views of the measures' applicability. In order to determine whether current family policy had had significant impact on their reproductive decisions, I finally analysed the respondents' parenthood experiences by drawing on their own views of employment and policy measures.

Can family policies have an impact on fertility?

The question about the possible impact of family policy on fertility rates is often part of family policy evaluations, especially in countries that actively pursue pro-natalist policies (Hantrais and Letablier 1996: 156). However, as Strohmeier points out, there is no simple answer to the question of whether family policies matter or not, because the causal relationship between policy and people's behaviour is not clear (Strohmeier 2002: 321).

Demographic research on family policy impact on fertility rates has become topical, particularly since some comparative studies have proven that family benefits and tax reductions did not substantially affect fertility rates while some others found that family benefits in the form of family allowances had a positive impact on fertility (Wennemo; Gauthier and Hatzius in Neyer 2003: 33).

Neyer estimates (2003: 33) that most studies on the policy-fertility link are country-specific and predominantly directed to the childbearing issue and short-term policy implications. Among them, the Swedish parental-leave system with its 'speed premium' benefit for parents who had their second or subsequent child within an appointed period of time deserved a special attention. The authors who investigated the effects of the 'speed premium' believed that its introduction in the 1980s caused changes in the spacing of births and contributed to the rise of Sweden's total fertility rate in that period (Hoem; Hoem and Hoem; Andersson in Neyer 2003: 34). Following the Swedish example, a similar policy of rewards was introduced in Austria in the late 1990s. Yet Hoem, Prskawetz and

[3] University education was defined as a completed bachelor's degree and more.

Neyer showed that this reward had a significant effect only on the third-birth fertility rate (*ibid.*).

Neyer also pointed to several studies, which found that availability of preschool programs had a positive impact on fertility rate. While in Norway and in West Germany, the availability of public preschool programs was significantly positively related to the third-birth rates, in East Germany this impact was already evidenced in the first-birth rates (*ibid.*).

Among family policy reviewers, France's is often considered a model example of a successful family policy. French family policy, mostly known by its long tradition of pro-natalist goals, has provided benefits for prolific families, all-day childcare services and support for single-parent and low-income families. Some authors are convinced that the substantial increase of fertility rate in France after the year 1950 was the result of their comprehensive family policy. Furthermore, it is often stressed that current French family policy that aims to alleviate childcare, is directly related to current French fertility rate, which is still above the EU average (Kaufmann 2002: 461; Letablier 2003: 1, 2).

Diverse evidence of the link is the main reason why there is no uniform consensus on whether family policy measures could impact fertility rate. While some researchers are convinced that large government expenditures could raise fertility rates (McIntosh in Caldwell et al. 2002: 19), others stress that this impact is not tangible (Bagavos and Martin 2000: 19).

Finally, some scholars prefer to maintain the idea that the extremely low levels of fertility represent difficulties that women supposedly experience in harmonising work and care. In their view, fertility is higher where easy labour market accessibility and child care support make it easier for women to balance family and career (Rosenbluth, Light, Schrag 2002: 2, 3; Kohler, Billari and Ortega 2006: 14, 15).

Statistical data speak in favour of this last assumption. In Scandinavian countries, the female employment rate is the highest in Europe. Yet the fertility rate is above the 'lowest low' level. In Mediterranean countries, where female employment rate is the lowest, there is also the 'lowest low' fertility rate. Slovenia is an exception. Women's employment rate of 60.5% is well above the EU average (55.7%). However, the total fertility rate is low (1.22 in the year 2004; Eurostat 2005). Moreover, in comparison with other EU member states, Slovenia has the highest employment rate for women with children under the age of twelve (85%), and the majority of these women are working full-time (Eurostat 2005).

The further analysis of the employment rate of women by the number of their children shows an inverse relation between the number of children and the employment rate: the higher the number of children, the lower is the women's employment rate. In Slovenia, the opposite trend is evidenced: women's employment rate is not decreasing according to the number of their children. On the contrary, the highest employment rate is observed in women with three or more children (82%) (Eurostat 2005).

Given these data on women' employment rate and the increasing practice of 'long working hours'[4] in Slovenian companies, one would expect that measures for easier

[4] Long working hours spent visibly at workplace are valued and understood as representation of commitment and productivity (Lewis 2001: 23). A recent Slovenian survey on the work-family balance indicates that most parents are forced to adapt to employers' demands for long working hours regardless of their parental responsibilities (Kanjuo Mrčela and Černigoj Sadar 2004: 26).

reconciliation of work and family life would be incorporated in all segments of family policy legislation. In this regard, it is necessary to review those segments of family policy that apply to motherhood, fatherhood and parenthood protection.

Family policy in Slovenia

Family policy in independent Slovenia was firstly defined with *The Resolution on the Principles of the Formation of Family Policy in Slovenia* in 1993 (UL RS 40/1993). The Resolution defines the family as a living community of children and adults who permanently take care of them (UL RS 40/1993: 2). The measures are mostly directed toward families with children, so the policy is child-oriented. The family is defined as the 'primary social space' and childcare as the 'primary function' of the family. Further emphases are given on equal opportunities for women and men in childcare, and on the establishment of conditions for reconciliation of work and family (UL RS 40/1993). In this regard, more detailed measures are defined by *Parental Protection and Family Benefits Act*, which regulates insurance for parental protection and the rights for family benefits.

This Act manages parental leaves (maternity leave, child care leave, paternity leave and adopter's leave), the benefits during parental leaves, the right to work part-time and entitlement to the payment of social security contributions for parenthood (UL RS 110/2003, UL RS 47/2006). The rights established with this Act belong to parents, adoptive parents and, in some cases, grandparents.

Under the current Act, mothers are entitled to a maternity leave of 105 days, followed by a childcare leave of 260 days. The latter leave can be taken either by a mother or a father, yet in practice, it is mostly taken by mothers. Fathers are entitled to 90 days of paternity leave, which places Slovenia among the more 'generous' countries. For instance, in Italy, fathers can take paternity leave only in case of the death or inability of child's mother, while in France and Denmark fathers are entitled to paternity leave only of two weeks with 100 percent benefits. In Slovenia, the Act provides 100 percent benefits for 15 days only. For the other 75 days, the state provides contributions only for social security. According to this Act, adoptive parents have the right to the leave for duration from 120 to 150 day, depending on the age of adopted child.

The benefits during these leaves (maternity benefit, paternity benefit, child care benefit, adopter's benefit) aim at compensating the lost income during these leaves, and are determined by one's social security, his/her permanent residence in the state, and Slovenian citizenship. The compensation level in a case of full absence from work amounts to 100 percent of the previous salary basis; however the payment of parental benefits can not be less than 55 percent of the national minimum wage.

The measures on flexible working time under the Act from 2003 were aimed at employed parents only. With the revised *Parental Protection and Family Benefits Act* from 2006, the rights to different working hours are expanded to self-employed parents and farmers (UL RS 47/2006). According to this Act, one of the parents who is caring for a child up to three years of age has the right to part-time work, which must include at least half of the normal working obligation (20 hours) per week. If one of the parents takes care of two children, this right can be prolonged until the youngest child is six years old.

Parents that employ this right are paid by the employer according to the actual working duties, yet the Republic of Slovenia guarantees payment of social security contributions based on full working time (UL RS 47/2006).

The *Parental Protection and Family Benefits Act* also regulates the family benefits (parental allowance, child birth allowance, child benefit, large family allowance, special child care allowance and partial payment for lost income). Parental allowance is financial aid to parents who are not entitled to parental benefits after the birth of a child. All parents are entitled to childbirth allowance, which is onetime benefit, either in cash or as equipment package for a new born baby. When the family income does not exceed the maximum limit of income level determined by this Act, parents are entitled to the child benefit, which is adjusted every year. The large family allowance is an annual benefit to which families with three or more children are entitled. The amount of payment rises according to the number of children. Only under special conditions are families entitled to the special child care allowance and partial payment for lost income (UL RS 47/2006).

Preschool education in Slovenia is defined by the *Law on Preschool Institutions* (UL RS 12/1996; UL RS 98/2005). Under this Law, preschool education is performed by public and private preschool institutions and parents are free to choose programmes. In cases when there are no available posts or no preschool institutions in the place of residence, the local community is obligated to find other options (childminder families, part-time childcare at home). Public preschool institutions are mostly founded and financed by local communities and parents who contribute from 0 to 80 % of the full cost of programme, depending on their income (UL RS 12/1996; UL RS 98/2005). With the provision of public and private preschool institutions, the state seeks to assist parents in child care, to improve the quality of life for families and children, and above all to help the reconciliation of work and family life.

Employed parents are protected by the *Employment Relationships Act* (UL RS 42/2002). Regarding parenthood, the Act prohibits gender discrimination, the acquisition of any kind of information relating to family/marital status and special protection of parenthood and pregnancy. According to this Act, employers must enable workers to easily reconcile family and employment responsibilities. Employer should ensure the right to absence from work or part-time work in accordance with the legislation on parental leave. Special protection is given to pregnant and breastfeeding women. According to this Act, breastfeeding women are allowed a breastfeeding break during work time. It is prohibited for women during the pregnancy or breastfeeding period to carry out work where they could be exposed to any risk factors for their health or their children's health. However, with an employee's written consent, an employer is allowed to give a pregnant woman or a woman who is breastfeeding overtime work and/or night working hours (UL RS 42/2002).

As shown above, the state through family policy measures, seeks to support families with children and to moderate all possible negative influences that could constrain families in having the desired number of children. However, irrespective of the generous legislation, recent surveys show that entitled persons rarely employ these rights. Given the highest proportion of women in Slovenia who are working full-time irrespective of the number and the age of their children, one would expect wider and more frequent use

of these measures. Instead, only 1.8% of women with children under age of twelve used the right to part-time working in 2004 (Eurostat 2005). A recent study on paternity in Slovenia corroborates this finding. In the year 2003, on average, fathers used only eight days of paternity leave out of 90 available days according to the Law (Rener et al. 2005: 36).

Moreover, recent survey shows that women did the majority (75-80%) of the housekeeping tasks irrespective of their employment status (Stropnik and Černič Istenič 2001: 75). The high rate of female employment, the low use of paternity leave, and the above study results leads to the assumption of an extensive workload of women.[5] According to some authors, this workload has been substantially increasing with work 'flexibility' (Kanjuo Mrčela and Ignjatović in Kanjuo Mrčela et al. 2004: 3, 4). Moreover, it is work flexibility that often leads to discrimination of women due to motherhood (Ule and Kuhar in Kanjuo Mrčela et al. 2004: 3, 4).

In an attempt to gather viewpoints on family policy and to obtain people's attitudes towards some of the proposed family policy measures, the European comparative *Population-related Policy Acceptance and Attitude Survey* (PPA2) was conducted in Slovenia in the year 2000. With this survey, researchers tried to obtain crucial findings that could serve as a basis in designing proposals with some new emphases for Slovenian family policy (Stropnik 2005: 2, 3).

The PPA2 study showed that respondents, especially parents with three or more children, believed the state measures referring to the protection of employed mothers and the support of families with small children were insufficient at that time (Stropnik 2005: 15, 21). Higher educated respondents were in favour of gender equality and stressed the importance of economic independence of women. They were in the majority when opposing the statement that 'for a woman there is more satisfaction in upbringing children than having employment outside home' (Stropnik 2005: 26). The main conclusion was that the three most desirable measures that could have a positive impact on parity progression were 'improved parental leave', 'lower income tax', and 'better housing conditions for families with children' (Stropnik 2005: 44, 45). However, as the authors of the study also stressed, the impact of the three most desirable measures was the least likely to influence the highly educated. They became more prudent in their answers when statements about the potential impact of most desired measures on their reproductive decisions became more binding. The lowest level of agreement was with the statement 'I would most likely have another child' if the measures would be implemented (Stropnik 2005: 57, 58). At the same time, the survey showed that the 'deficit fertility', defined as the difference between the desired number of children and the realised number of children, was particularly high among the highly educated (Stropnik 2005: 2, 66). Finally, the authors concluded that the 'Slovenian population' was very critical to the government performance in creating a family-friendly environment. The authors doubted the interviewees' accurate understanding of the legislation they evaluated, so they proposed that people should at first be well informed about the legislation and afterwards asked for their opinion (Stropnik 2001: 14; Stropnik and Černič Istenič 2001: 23).

[5] 'Double burden' is a term most commonly used in studies, which focused on work-family reconciliation experiences (Hantrais and Letablier 1996: 104).

Many findings of the PPA2 survey seem necessary to comment on. In the survey question on desired policy measures, it is unclear what it is defined under 'improved parental leave' or how respondents understand this statement by themselves. It is also not sufficiently clear what respondents with three or more children meant by the statement that 'the state measures in areas of protecting working mothers and supporting families with small children are insufficient'. Therefore, it seems necessary to further explore some of these findings. For instance, by the observation that the highly educated turned out as a group that was the least influenced by the policy measures, the question still remains what the obstacles are that prevent the highly educated from having their desired number of children. Is it possible that the state can influence parity progression in individuals and couples who already have had one child? What are the personal experiences, unaddressed needs and expectations of interviewees in connection with family policy support?

A case study

I conducted the case study[6] in the administrative unit of Maribor between November 2005 and February 2006. I carried out semi-structured interviews with thirty university educated interviewees[7] aged 30 or more.[8] I focused on the university graduates because statistical data of the *Family and Fertility Survey* showed that the fertility rates were the lowest in this segment of the population (Obersnel Kveder et al. 2001: 95).

I chose the administrative unit of Maribor as a research location for its specific socio-economic situation. Statistical data for Maribor showed a high unemployment rate, which could substantially affect reproductive decisions as largely confirmed by several studies (Ranjan 1999: 41; Meron and Wildmer in Sobotka 2004: 19; Kohler, Billari and Ortega 2002: 654, Prioux in Sobotka 2004: 19; Kreyenfeld 2005: 6).

From the Second World War to the mid-1980s, Maribor was the centre of former Yugoslavia's textile and metal industry, an economically prosperous city that created more than 10% of all public earnings in the Slovenian economy by the mid-1980s. With the independence of Slovenia in 1991, and the downfall of the united Yugoslav market, Maribor was affected by a strong economic crisis; enterprises declared bankruptcy and the number of unemployed people increased rapidly (Lorber 2006: 64–65). Between 1989 and 1997, the proportion of unemployed in Maribor was nearly 23%, while the Slovenian average was around 14% (Lorber 2006: 67, 69). Some authors anticipated that the economy in

[6] The study was part of my PhD thesis *Between Self-fulfilment and Social Expectations: The Attitude of the University Educated towards Fertility. A Case Study,* which was part of the basic research project *Social Background of Low Fertility in University-educated in Slovenia* (duration: 2004–2007).

[7] I selected the collocutors from random sample which was designed by Statistical Office of the Republic Slovenia. My research sample included mostly married couples (20) and those who lived together out of wedlock (8); two interviewers were single. The average age of interviewees was 33 years. Most of them had one child; one couple had two children, one three. All collocutors had attained at least university education; five of them had attained their masters' degree.

[8] I chose interviewees aged thirty or more with consideration of prolonged education and prolonged living with their parents. Some authors argue that thirties are a symbolic transition period to adulthood and a socially expected age for family formation (Wu and MacNeill 2002: 195).

Maribor would improve in the 21st century (Nidorfer 2000: 63; Barrett 2000: 66), yet others stressed that the recent reported decrease of the unemployment rate was only a 'statistical manipulation', unconnected to 'reality' (Lorber 2006: 69).

Maribor is among administrative units with the lowest level of used paternity leave; paternity leave is used in less than half cases. According to some authors, this implies that the use of paternity leave is usually the lowest in economically 'less developed' areas (Rener et al. 2005: 37)

The administrative unit Maribor also deserves special attention with regards to fertility. Comparing the parity of women by administrative units, it is evident that most women in Slovenia had two children at the end of their reproductive years. In the administrative unit Maribor, the highest proportion of women who did not have two children completed their parity with one child only (Šircelj 2006).

The research location, therefore, seems to have some characteristics, which may negatively influence fertility decisions. However, it is necessary to state that Slovenian family policy, with its basic goal of moderating all possible negative factors that prevent parents from carrying out their reproductive wishes, is often perceived as very 'progressive'. Some argue that Slovenia, in comparison with other European states, has favourable and family-friendly measures or even that it is a model example of 'Sweden in the South' (Ule and Kuhar 2003: 131). Yet the question still remains, why do people not exercise the rights and benefits to which they are entitled? I tried to find the answer to this question with the case study on the presupposed influence of the state family policy on the reproductive decisions of university educated; some examples of its findings are presented below.

A Comparative View: Money and Time

The first set of questions was aimed at interviewees' views on fertility in Slovenia. The majority described Slovenian fertility as 'low', 'declining', even 'catastrophic', and admitted that they learnt about the fertility in country mostly from the media. The reasons for 'declining fertility' some explained by the increasing poverty in the country, particularly by increasing unemployment. Others agreed that low fertility is a result of a 'consumerist' lifestyle. Typical observations referred to increasingly 'demanding' children for new products that are available in the shops especially in the 'current transition times'. As one of the collocutors explained:

> The problem is that a child wants to have everything. If you as a parent can not provide whatsoever product or desire, you immediately feel guilty. For instance, there are situations when a child says: "They have Nike shoes and I don't" (man, age 32, married, one child).

Even though most of interviewees believed that there are many people who could not afford to have a child because they were living in poverty, at the same time, they questioned the likelihood that fertility rate can be raised by the family allowances. Moreover, according to them, people would follow the 'consumer lifestyle' and would not decide to have another child even when financial crisis stopped. All collocutors were convinced that 'financial rewards' could not persuade them to have another child: 'What I would compensate with additional state money? Money cannot compensate my time!' (woman, age 32, married, one child).

Interviewees further interpreted 'the cost' of a child. In most cases, they pointed to the financial burden of having a child:

> The child is seen as a cost. Firstly, it is a cost of time […]. You give a child your time. Second, the expenses to properly raise a child cannot be ignored. I mean first financial expenses when you start to raise a child. Later, you must take into account a child's education […]. Now, it is better not to think about sending your child to study abroad! It is too expensive! (man, age 35, married, one child).

Yet the majority at the same time referred to the 'lack of time' in their decisions to have another child. Their musings were quite typical: 'I hesitate to have another child due to the lack of time.'; 'Do I really want to have more children for whom I would not have enough time?'; 'We have far less time at disposal after the work. I don't know even how to manage the time with my daughter, let alone to have another child!'; 'You have to invest your time in your child and in our lives this is a big problem.'

Given that all interviewees perceived the low fertility in country, and as a main reason for this trend indicated quite controversial observations – on the one hand, the increasing poor economic conditions in the state, and on the other hand, the increasing adoption of 'consumer lifestyle' among people – which determine their reproductive decisions particularly in having another child, the question remains: how can the state support their reproductive decisions? Is there any measure of family policy that refers, for instance, to the 'lack of time', as most of the interviewees expressed?

'The state failed completely'

Many collocutors stressed that Government is responsible for declining fertility in Slovenia. They mostly agreed that the Slovenian government is trying to promote family values, especially through the media. Yet at the same time, they observed that government measures aimed at supporting the family are visible only at declarative level: 'The law on paper is one thing; the situation in reality is another. Can you imagine, you just work because you don't dare to risk a job loss or anything else' (woman, age 30, married, one child). Moreover, some interviewees deemed that the state failed to assure the basic social rights:

> The state failed completely! It has some programs, which in my opinion have never reached their goal […]. The state did nothing to prevent the rising prices of real estate. Apartments are very, very expensive. The government did not succeed in assuring the basic conditions for parenthood. You need basic social rights first (man, age 31, married, one child).

Despite the fact that the majority of collocutors obtained permanent job positions, they all expressed concerns about the unemployment rate in their region, which also might affect their own work positions in the near future:

> Instantly they move the production to the third world countries! This also can happen to us! We are too expensive. I am worried watching on TV and listening on the radio the stories of all those people. We are daily bombarded by news about unemployment (woman, age 30, married, one child).

Some collocutors doubted that Slovenian society is a 'family friendly'. Quite on

the contrary, they believed that: 'in our society, children are often perceived as a threat'. Interviewees mostly experienced the negative opinion of children at their work places:

> If children were a value to our society, then parents would not have problems at work when children get sick. Young mothers and potential mothers would not have problems in finding a job: "Aha, with two children you will be on sick leave all the time," or, "Oh, you have already two children, hmm, we can't hire you because, because you have children." If children were a value then society should take care of this value in all its segments (woman, age 41, married, two children).

Collocutors were, in general, very well informed about their parental rights; however, they all shared experiences about the violation of particular measures, such as the *Employment Relationships Act*. Women were more frequent victims than men were, particularly in the cases when an employer implicitly recommended a pregnancy delay, or when the employer explicitly asked them about their family planning:

> You notice such violations at the very beginning. When woman wants to take up maternity leave, she immediately encounters difficulties. Many of them are forced to sign illegal contracts […] and some simply decide not to have children (man, age 39, unmarried, two children).

Reiterated were stories about fear of losing one's work or current working position in case of using parental leaves: 'Women who pursue a career can lose it in the moment they take maternity leave' (man, age 39, unmarried, two children).

Given the one year parental leave in Slovenia, it is not surprising that most women reported difficulties when they took parental leave. Some of them admitted that a one-year-long leave could be problematic from the employer's point of view. The employers cannot easily replace somebody, especially in cases of highly specialized workforce:

> Let's say that you hire someone. Just like that, from the employer's viewpoint […]. It takes at least a year for a new employee to become an expert in her position. You teach this woman to be good at her job, and suddenly she decides to take a parental leave. So, you need someone else to replace this person for a year, which means new introduction to work […]. This means costs and problems for the employer. Okay, there are laws and so on, but a practice is completely different (woman, age 30, married, one child).

Interlocutors shared the opinion that main reason for discrimination of potential parents lay in a system that prioritises the employers' profit:

> In the end, it is the system that allows such violations at working places. It is nonsense to expect from someone who must create a profit to employ potential parents! Of course, employers avoid the disabled, women and everybody for whom they have to pay necessary contributions but at the same time they cannot fully benefit from them (man, age 36, married, three children).

Moreover, interviewees believed that wider 'society' itself expects mostly from mothers to stay at home during childcare leave. Although fathers are allowed by the law to take this leave, it is to be unusual and negatively accepted by others whether fathers would decide to use it. Quite illustrative is the following musing:

> I know a case when a father used this unconventional mean. He used a childcare leave. It was extremely unusual! His employer was very surprised! He accepted the news with disapproval, not very positive, so to speak. Nobody uses the rights provided by the law because people are afraid of losing their jobs and working positions (man, age 35, married, one child).

Similar views can be seen in the evaluations of paternity leave use. Interviewees' explained the poorly exercised right to paternity leave with the worker's expected dedication to work the process from employers.

Views on extant and desired family policy measures

Identified discrepancy between family-friendly policy and difficulties met by the interviewees led to the question of desired policy measures, which could support the collocutors' reproductive wishes as employees. Only a few male collocutors insisted in a prolonged parental leave up to three years, which was some years ago proposed by the Slovenian Christian Democratic Party. Yet they expected that only women would take this leave. However, none of female collocutors supported this idea. They believed the extension of parental leave would create even more difficulties for women in labour market, making them even less desirable employees. Furthermore, most collocutors stressed the importance of encouraging women to return to their jobs after childbearing.

Many critiques were aimed at the organization of preschool institutions in Slovenia. Interviewees spoke of the limited access to preschool institutions, and incompatible opening hours of preschool providers with working time of parents. The rigidity of the system makes parents to look for other options; the majority of them are dependent of the assistance of their parents, and of paid nannies, in some cases:

> It is very rare to end the job before six in the evening. Now, if you have a small child you need to pick him up at least at four in the afternoon [...]. Okay, you are lucky if a child's father can go to pick him up. But if his father works until late, you have a big problem, especially if you live in a city far away from the grandparents […]. In such cases you need a nanny. You have no other alternative. What could you do? You cannot explain to your employer that you have to go home (woman, age 30, married, one child).

Another critique was directed toward the system of payments for preschool programmes. Even though the majority of interviewees supported the system of free childcare for families with the lowest income, they believed that current payment system permits violation of regulations and fails to control the execution of regulations. The current payment system of preschool programmes 'rewards cheaters' [the ones who avoid payment for programmes, added by the author] and punishes those parents who barely exceed the defined payment level. Some of them blamed the state, which in their opinion 'does nothing to prevent such infringements'. For whoever breaks the law, either an employer or a parent, there are no sanctions:

> I think the system or the state does not know how, or does not want to prevent what is going on. There is no political will. Politicians talk a lot, but they do nothing (man, age 36, married, three children).

Given the negative experiences in the employment and preschool settings, collocutors no longer trust state institutions. Their musings about the future prospects were rather pessimistic:

> I don't feel we are getting better. On the contrary, I feel we are as a society very immature. We went straight into capitalism, rough capitalism. From other examples we take only what we like […] we are too materialistic (woman, age 41, married, two children).

Many collocutors were quite straightforward in emphasising the prevalent importance of economic profit in limiting the social rights of people:

> I'm afraid of, as I said before, these tensions at workplace. It's a big question whether the rights of parental leave will remain as they are, because everything is valued through the money. More or less: it's going more and more in this direction. I think social security will become even weaker than it is now (woman, age 35, married, three children).

Insecure future, fears of losing a job or being sanctioned in the workplace strongly influence the interviewees' decisions not to apply the rights that are available by the law. The right to use part-time working hours, which was implemented to support reconciliation of work and family, was rarely used by collocutors. They ascribed the main reason for this discrepancy to their employers:

> It is not a problem that people do not want to use these rights. Employers simply do not allow them to do so. I'm not familiar with a firm in Slovenia that would allow this. Perhaps you know one? I would certainly agree if my wife wanted to work part-time after her childcare leave runs out. I would support this! But I know for sure, if she had suggested this in her firm, they certainly would have looked at her as if she fell directly from the Moon (man, age 32, married, one child).

There is a substantial financial burden on the family budget if one of the spouses decides to work part-time. Therefore, some women, even though they support the legalised part-time option, opposed its use:

> If I stay at home for four hours, my income is halved. There is also a question, who wants me only for four hours? I don't think I have any real choice in this matter (woman, age 32, married, one child).

Other women stressed that due to their working demands it is impossible to work less than full-time: 'I don't believe in part-time work in my kind of job. It would have never been only four hours. There would always be more and more' (woman, age 33, married, one child).

Finally, interviewees concluded that it is impossible to talk about the right to choose among various state options for harmonising work and family because, in practice, they are more determined by the extant circumstances they are embedded in.

Conclusions

The case study showed that family policy measures were generally identified as important and necessary parts of 'parenthood protection' by the majority of collocutors. Yet at the same time, they also stressed that current family policy regulations failed to be employed in practice by the entitled people. In this regard, most critiques were aimed at protection of employed parents. Employed mothers especially often experienced negative reactions by the employer due to their parenting status. Moreover, interviewees argued that their em-

ployers failed to realise that an employee could be also a parent; usually, the employers are only profit-oriented.

Given many negative work related experiences by interviewees, it is not surprising that many collocutors questioned the proper functioning of the state institutions related to employed parents' protection. Irrespective of their permanent working positions at the time of interviewing, many interlocutors were afraid of losing their jobs or their work positions; partly due to uncertain socioeconomic conditions in their region, and partly due to discrepancies between employment demands of the market economy in the current transition times and their family demands. This discrepancy further determined their views on future prospects about their employment status and also, at least implicitly, their fertility decisions. Their negative experiences and assessments of working legislation were also reflected in their musings about the applicability of family policy measures. For instance, the main reason why the right to part-time work for parents with children under the age of three is not exercised, all interviewees explained by the implicit opposition by the employers. The same holds true for paternity leave. Interviewees explained the poorly exercised fifteen days of 100% paid paternity leave with the worker's expected commitment to continuous work process by an employer. It is more than obvious that money alone does not motivate people to use the existing 'generous' measure.

A similar conclusion can be extracted from the interviewees' evaluations of the impact of family allowances on their reproductive decisions: all collocutors agreed that basic material goods and 'proper' social security are the foundation for family formation. However, they sincerely doubted that family allowances themselves could affect their fertility decisions. The research material offers some other speculations. It is evident from interviews that state-sponsored preschool capacities were often full and 'inflexible' and not 'adjusted' to the parents' working schedules'. Therefore, the majority of collocutors had to find other alternatives. In most cases, their parents took the role of multipractical support services, particularly with childcare and housekeeping.

In this vein, the 'lack of time' proved the main obstacle for not having more than one child. It seems that the issue of 'long working hours' demanding by employers remains the problem of employed parents only; the family policy does not implicate the widely spread difficulty of 'long working hours' in any of its measures. The perceived incompatibility of care work with the culture of 'long working hours' and diversified life courses of individuals, demand more flexible arrangements and alternative choices for parents. It seems that state could support reproductive decisions above all by offering more feasible options for the harmonisation of work and family. According to collected interviews, one such alternative could be recognised in intergenerational collaboration since many parents will soon be confronted with caring for children and their elderly parents.

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Povzetek

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