

Gender aspect of the historical development of childbirth-related leaves in the European former socialist countries

Introduction

Leave policies are based on different gender- and class-related assumptions and may differently affect men and women, as well as various social groups. Understanding gendered assumptions embedded in policy goals and instruments – including a gender-class intersection within the leave policy design – is thus crucial if one wants to understand the outcomes of a particular leave policy design. While the gender dimension of leave policies design becomes increasingly discussed in the comparative family policy literature, discussions have been often limited to the experience of several countries that are usually seen as leaders in the field (e.g., Nordic countries). Experiences of the former socialist countries that have considerable legacies of leave policies development are less known.

In the European former socialist countries, the leave schemes started to develop more extensively after World War II, following the political goal to expand women's labour market participation. Even though a dual-earner family model was actively promoted, the leave policies were built on maternalist (Orloff, 2006) assumptions. The gender equality dimension of leave policy design has ascended at the political agenda in the last two decades, albeit solely in the countries that joined the EU. In many countries, the tendencies to reinforce traditional, mother-centred leave policies remain strong, although women are expected to actively participate in the labour market. Many women thus break their careers to care for their children in their first years.

In the literature, the European former socialist countries are often treated as a homogenous group. Recent works illustrate their diversity, but still little is known on leave policies in the European former socialist countries, particularly in the former Yugoslav- and Soviet countries. First comparative works on former socialist countries (e.g., Kocourková, 2002; Stropnik, 2003; Hantrains, 2004) pointed to similarities and differences in their leave policies and reforms. The complexity of undertaken reforms and their consequences remain under-explored. For instance, the abrupt shifts in gender assumptions behind the leave policy design in the transition period (and even later) had brought essential implications for women's position in the labour market and as family carers.

This paper contributes to the stream of the comparative family policy literature that deals with diverse experience of European former socialist countries (current European Union Member States, as well as ex-Yugoslav and ex-Soviet Union countries) by mapping and discussing the development of childbirth-related leaves (maternity, paternity and parental leave) in these countries in the last five decades, that is, since the 1970s. The aim of this paper is to investigate the gender dimension of these leaves, that is, when and how the gender equality aspect of a work-life balance was considered in the parental leave design and through the introduction of the paternity leave. The particular focus is on competing priorities and inter-related policy concerns embedded in policy design, such as gender equality, fertility incentive, or labour market participation, each of them bringing different gender implications. The paper sheds light on the leave policies' potential to reproduce, impede or transform traditional gender norms in employment and care. The main question the paper aims to

answer is: what are the effects of policy design on gender (and social) inequalities in the European former socialist countries from a historical perspective?

Data and methods

We collected information on three types of leave (maternity, paternity and childcare/parental) for 21 countries (11 current European Union Member States, the other five ex-Yugoslav countries, Albania, and four ex-Soviet Union countries) for the period from 1970 to 2018. The sources include international comparative databases (e.g., Comparative Family Policy Database, OECD Family Database, NIDI Family Database, International Network on Leave Policies & Research – LP&R, and Mutual Information System on Social Protection – MISSOC), the extant literature on leave policies, official national web-sources, and experts.

We used historical comparative analysis to investigate the leave characteristics, such as eligibility rules, duration, benefit levels, flexibility, etc. The analysis covers leave characteristics, such as eligibility rules, duration, benefit levels, flexibility, etc. It puts additional light on the contexts behind significant leave policy reforms, particularly as related to two breaking points: 1) transition from the socialist to the capitalist regime, and 2) the European Union (EU) accession. Our analysis puts additional light on the contexts behind significant leave policy reforms, particularly as related to two breaking points: 1) transition from the socialist to the capitalist regime, and 2) the European Union accession.

Results

In the period of (state) socialism, the childbirth-related leave was mother-centred and thus of equality-impeding character and detrimental for gender equality. It was generous in terms of both duration and earnings compensation. Childcare/parental leaves have been available in all European former socialist countries that later joined the EU since the 1970s. It was first the mother's right, but later on it became transferrable to the father in an increasing number of countries. The socialist period was characterised by the leaves that combined the pro-natalist policy and the enabling of mothers' attachment to the labour market.

In the period of transition to the capitalist regime, the leave policies started to diverge. They were influenced by competing priorities and inter-related policy concerns, such as re-traditionalisation, fertility incentives, gender equality, and labour market participation. In 2000, parental leave was a family right in most of the European former socialist countries. The paternity leave has been introduced since 2000.

After the European Union accession, leave policies have been gradually transformed towards more gender-equal ones. Nonetheless, the progress has been slow, and only three countries can be classified as having equality-transforming leaves (Slovenia, Lithuania and Romania). In 2018, the parental leave still was mostly a family right, but in some countries, it was transformed into a (fully) transferrable individual right or a family right with quota. The duration of parental leave was six to nine months in five countries (four EU Member States), and over 30 months in four countries (two EU Member States and two former Soviet Union countries). The paternity leave was available in nine out of 11 European former socialist countries that are the EU Member States and in one that is not – but only in Slovenia and Lithuania it was lasting (around) a month (cf. Figures 1-3). We position the

countries in four types of leave policies, taking into account the indicators of “mother-centeredness of the leave” and “father incentives”.

Figure 1: Kinds of paid leave (2018)

| Kinds of paid leave, 2018 | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| | MATERNITY | PATERNITY | PARENTAL |
| Czechia | + | + | + |
| Hungary | + | + | + |
| Poland | + | + | + |
| Slovakia | + | | + |
| Bulgaria | + | + | + |
| Romania | + | + | + |
| Estonia | + | + | + |
| Lithuania | + | + | + |
| Latvia | + | + | + |
| Slovenia | + | + | + |
| Croatia | + | | + |
| Bosnia-Herzegovina | + | | |
| North Macedonia | + | | |
| Montenegro | + | | + |
| Serbia | + | | + |
| Kosovo | | | |
| Albania | + | | |
| Russia | + | | + |
| Georgia | + | | |
| Moldova | + | + | + |
| Ukraine | + | | + |

Figure 2: Paid maternity leave (in weeks) in 1990 and 2018

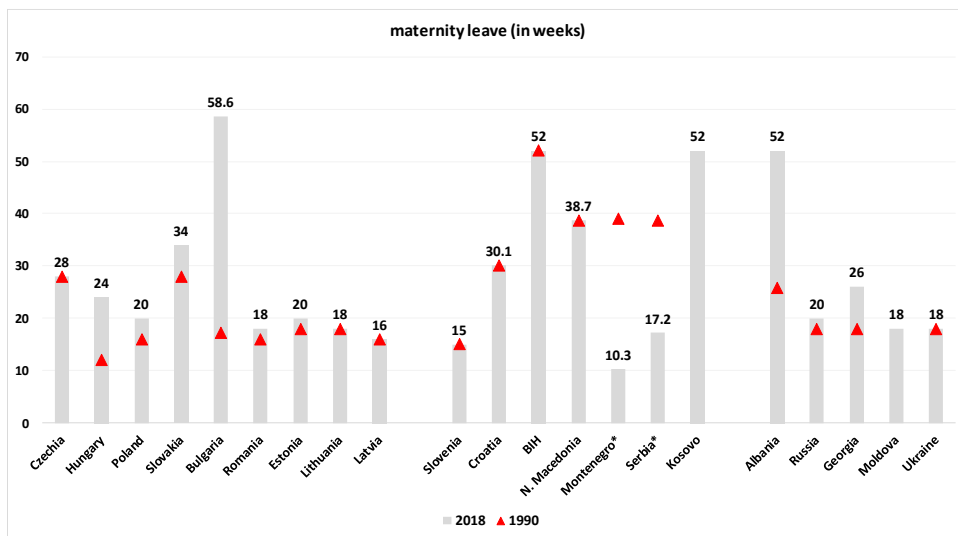
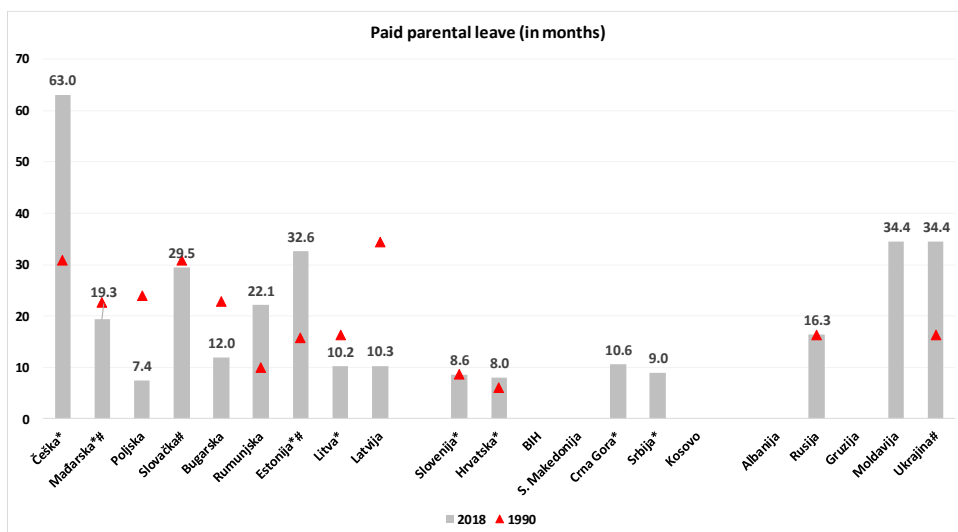


Figure 3: Paid parental leave (in months) in 1990 and 2018



Contribution to scientific knowledge

This paper upgrades the existent comparative studies on maternity/paternity/parental leaves through an exploration of the region that has been overseen by such research. It provides valuable insights into the implications of intersectional dimensions of leave design as well as competing priorities and concerns embedded in it. It also points to the methodological complexity of evaluating the development of leave policies in a cross-country perspective.