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Involved Fatherhood in Slovakia? A Multi-Dimensional Picture Painted Using Multiple Methods

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Abstract

While multiple Western European countries have introduced leave policies that set aside well-paid leave for fathers—policies expected to support more involved fatherhood—post-socialist Central and Eastern European countries were slower to follow. The 2010 Slovak fathers’ leave policy reform was an early regional exception in granting fathers 28 weeks of high leave benefits, not transferable to mothers. The reform provides a unique opportunity to explore the extent to which such policies may foster involved fatherhood in a post-socialist context characterized by practices, individual attitudes, and societal norms geared towards fathers’ economic provision rather than hands-on childcare. I draw on a three-dimensional conceptualization of paternal involvement, entailing engagement, accessibility, and responsibility, and a combination of methods: qualitative (38 interviews with fathers and mothers) and quantitative (unique administrative microdata). My qualitative analysis shows that fathers’ leave-taking can stimulate greater engagement and accessibility, but brings about less change in fathers’ responsibility for children. My quantitative analysis reveals further limits to the policy’s potential for fostering fathers’ involvement: A considerable proportion of fathers were excluded from using the policy, and among those eligible, fathers with lower-class markers were less likely to use it.

Keywords

Central and Eastern Europe; involved fatherhood; leave policy for fathers; Slovakia

1. Introduction

1.1. *Motivation and Theoretical Considerations*

Historically, scholarly attention to fathers' involvement in the care of their children prioritized their role as economic providers (Takács, 2020). In the 1980s, the concept of involved fatherhood, put forth by Lamb et al. (1985), turned attention to a different, hands-on model of paternal involvement linked to the development of caring masculinities in fathers (see also Suwada, 2017; Takács, 2020). This model entails engagement (direct interaction with the child, like care or play), accessibility (being physically and mentally available or supervising the child), and responsibility (ensuring the child is taken care of; see Lamb, 2000).

Fathers' involvement with their children has been linked to policies that allow "equal" parenthood (O'Brien & Wall, 2017), and specifically to leave policies for fathers (Brandth & Kvande, 2016; Huerta et al., 2014; Wray, 2020), in particular when fathers are encouraged to take longer leaves (Knoester et al., 2019). Leave-taking allows fathers to spend time away from paid work, providing care, learning parenting tasks, developing routines, and gaining decision-making experience (Knoester et al., 2019). However, research on fathers' leave policies has relatively rarely operationalized Lamb's conceptualization of involved fatherhood directly and in full. In fact, despite its theoretical salience, literature on fathers' involvement has only infrequently considered changes to all three dimensions of fathers' involvement simultaneously (Knoester et al., 2019; Sarkadi et al., 2008).

In addition, mirroring a growing cultural shift towards more involved fatherhood in Northwest Europe, much literature linking leave policy and fatherhood has focused on the Nordic countries as well as a subset of other Global North contexts, prominently featuring anglophone countries like Australia, Canada, the UK and the US (Huerta et al., 2014; Knoester et al., 2019; Wray, 2020). With exceptions (Aidukaite & Telisaukaite-Cekanavice, 2020; Suwada, 2017; Takács, 2020), less attention has been paid to fathers' childcare involvement in the post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In Hungary, Takács (2020) has investigated the development of fathers' caring masculinities and factors that enable or constrain paternal involvement. Though she found fathers gaining more experience with and appreciation of their emotional involvement with their children, these developments were limited as fathers persisted in their role of (modified) breadwinners. Factors constraining fathers' involvement in care included societal and workplace norms, but also a lack of supportive policies. A Lithuanian leave policy for fathers is at the center of a paper by Aidukaite and Telisaukaite-Cekanavice (2020); however, the authors found the policy was understood by Lithuanians more as a means to support the family financially than to foster fathers' hands-on involvement. In Poland, Suwada (2017) has argued that fathers had not been encouraged to develop more involved fathering through the implementation of supportive policy in the first place. In sum, CEE scholarship on involved fatherhood has told a story of limited transformation. Both the meagre attention paid to involved fathering and the limited transformation observed may be partly due to a slower introduction of policies supporting fathers' involvement in CEE countries, especially policies that set aside non-transferable and well-remunerated periods of leave time for fathers.

Slovakia became the first CEE outlier: an unusually generous 2010 reform gave fathers the right to six months of well-paid benefits, not transferable to mothers, and to be used before their child reaches the age of three. The policy change allows me to investigate whether and to what extent such a long, generous, and

non-transferable leave policy for fathers can support more involved fatherhood in a CEE setting. Hašková and Klenner (2010) argue that Czechia and Slovakia can best be described as an interrupted dual-earner model, where both fathers and mothers are expected to engage with full-time paid work throughout their lives, though men are to develop careers, while women take long breaks from paid work to stay at home with young children. Saxonberg (2014) posits that in the Visegrad Four countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), the time fathers and mothers spend with their young children is guided by the norm of threeness, which mandates that it is natural for children under three to be at home in their mothers' care. By extension, fathers' role is to provide for their children financially, which necessitates their absence from the home (see also Saxonberg & Maříková, 2023). The model is also supported by some of the most inequalitarian individual attitudes to the role of fathers in childcare in the EU. More than elsewhere, Slovaks see fathers as breadwinners and think they should prioritize paid work while mothers should stay at home (European Commission, 2010, 2014, 2017). Consequently, although before the generous benefits analyzed in this article were introduced in 2010, fathers had already been eligible for three years of parental leave associated with a low, flat-rate parental allowance, fathers took barely any leaves (Schulze & Gergoric, 2015), while mothers' long leave-taking was almost universal (Miani & Hoorens, 2014).

Despite its exceptional generosity, the Slovak leave policy for fathers has received limited attention in scholarly literature. While a 2023 paper on fatherhood in Czechia and Slovakia overlooks the policy entirely (Saxonberg & Maříková, 2023), more recent papers investigate the effects of the policy on the gender structure (Dančíková, 2025) and obstacles fathers face in the workplace (Dančíková & Muter, 2026), rather than the transformation of involved fatherhood. The present article draws on the Slovak case to contribute to filling the gap in the literature on fatherhood in Slovakia and CEE, as well as on the link between fathers' leave policies and involved fatherhood more broadly, in two ways. First, it draws an explicit conceptual link between fathers' leave policy and involved fatherhood, conceptualized based on Lamb's (2000) three-dimensional typology: I investigate whether and to what extent fathers become more engaged, accessible, and responsible in response to the new, well-paid, and non-transferable policy. And second, I explore the link between policy and involved fatherhood in a setting in the under-researched CEE. I answer the following research question: What changes in fatherhood were or can be observed in Slovakia following the 2010 reform? My aims are two-fold: First, drawing on qualitative interview data, I explore the changes to fatherhood when a father takes leave, but also the limits to those changes. Second, making use of the quantitative administrative data, I analyze the broad trends in fathers' leave-taking to consider the potential of the policy to foster such changes across the population of fathers: How many fathers could take leave, and which fathers were likely to?

My qualitative findings show that fathers' leave-taking has little effect on their overall responsibility for their children. However, their engagement with and accessibility to their children may increase considerably when they take leave solo, even if less so when the mother stays at home simultaneously. However, my quantitative findings show that even such effects will be limited within the overall population of fathers in Slovakia. While the policy reform was followed by a considerable increase in fathers' leave-taking, fathers with lower-class characteristics were much less likely to make use of the policy compared with the higher-paid and educated. In addition, a large share of fathers with lower-class characteristics were altogether excluded from using the policy and capitalizing on its potential for more involved fatherhood.

This article will proceed with an introduction of the Slovak leave policy for fathers and its context, followed by a laying out of my analytical approach. I will then present my findings and conclude with a brief discussion.

2. The Slovak Case: A Generous Leave Policy For Fathers in a Context Geared Towards Fathers' Breadwinning

Like much of CEE, Slovakia is a late adopter of policies aimed at supporting involved fatherhood. A mix of leave policies has been developing since the 1960s, when the Czechoslovak state socialist regime introduced unpaid extended maternity leave of one year. Between the late 1960s and 1980s, the leave was gradually lengthened to three years. Fathers entered the leave policy landscape only in the 1980s, when fathers of children under the age of two were given the right to maternity benefits if looking after their child full-time and not living with the mother or a partner, or if the mother was unable to provide care to the child (Federálne zhromaždenie Československej socialistickej republiky, 1984). In 1990, a three-year flat-rate allowance became available to all fathers (Federálne zhromaždenie Českej a Slovenskej Federatívnej Republiky, 1990). Fathers' entitlement to parental leave was only introduced after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, in 2002, when they became eligible for 3 years of leave. However, though parental leave was an individual entitlement, parental allowance was a family entitlement and could only be taken by one parent at a time.

In 2010, with the policy at the centre of this article, fathers were granted an individual, non-transferable entitlement of 6.5 months of "maternity benefits" (for more on this misnomer, see below in this section), on par with mothers' post-birth maternity benefit entitlement (Národná rada Slovenskej republiky, 2010b). In the original legislation, the benefits amounted to 60% of fathers' previous income; by 2017, the rate increased to 75%. The benefits were not subject to taxation and so amounted to most fathers' full net income. Fewer than 10% of fathers earned more than the generous benefit cap, meaning very few families would face a loss of income when fathers took leave, especially when mothers simultaneously (re)started paid work.

Though mothers were to use their maternity benefit directly after giving birth, fathers could use theirs at any point before their child reached the age of three. No dedicated paternity leave was introduced to match mothers' entitlement to maternity leave; fathers could combine their new benefit entitlement with their existing individual entitlement to three years of parental leave. Parliamentary debates preceding the reform suggest that, rather than aiming to broadly support involved fatherhood or gender equality, the policy was originally only intended for adoptive fathers (Národná rada Slovenskej republiky, 2010a) and introduced alongside similar legislation for adoptive mothers, to grant them time to bond with their newly adopted children. However, the policy was written in a way that ultimately extended benefits to all fathers with a history of insurance contributions (at least nine months of paid work-related or voluntary contributions over the two years prior to the start of the benefit period). The lack of intention to broadly intervene in fatherhood or gender equality helps explain why policymakers extended "maternity benefits" (in place for mothers) to fathers and why fathers' new benefits were to be combined with existing parental leave, rather than introduce new, dedicated paternity benefits and leave. This manner of introduction also helps explain why the reform wasn't accompanied by any government campaigns (Dančíková, 2023). The reform only entered public discourse gradually, from 2016, when Jozef Mihál, one of its authors and Minister of Labor when the policy was introduced, helped publicize it with a series of seminars, blog posts, media appearances, and a book (Mihál, 2017). The way the policy was introduced may also help understand its additional, idiosyncratic characteristics. According to an interpretation of the legislation by Mihál (2017), both fathers

and mothers can continue with paid work while drawing on their maternity benefits if their paid work is based on a new contract (as maternity benefits are tied to an interruption of income from a past contract, rather than a mere absence of income during leave). The small number of adoptive parents initially expected to benefit from the reform and expected low overall cost to taxpayers may explain less detailed scrutiny from policymakers which resulted in this option to work while receiving benefits. This option to engage in paid work while on benefits is less likely to be used by mothers, whose maternity leave directly follows giving birth and so includes physical recovery. By contrast, fathers' combining the benefits with paid work has drawn considerable attention from both policymakers and the Slovak media ("Podľa Sme Rodina," 2019; "Richterovo ministerstvo," 2019).

Despite the idiosyncratic option, the length of fathers' non-transferable benefit entitlement, combined with the high wage-replacement rate and high benefit cap, makes the policy one of the most generous of its kind globally. Leaders in fathers' leave policy typically grant men shorter and less well-paid quotas: Fathers in Iceland and Sweden are entitled to 20 weeks of non-transferable benefits and receive 80% and 77.6% of their previous pay, respectively, but benefits in both countries are taxed (Arnalds et al., 2023; Duvander & Löfgren, 2023). Before the 2010 reform, the policy mix in Slovakia, intertwined with a significant gender pay gap, was more conducive to mothers' than fathers' leave-taking. Though both parents could take three years of parental leave (separately or simultaneously), only one at a time could use the parental allowance. The gender pay gap in Slovakia reached 27.7% (Eurostat, 2023) in 2002, the earliest year for which relevant Eurostat data is available. By 2010, the year of the reform at hand, it narrowed to 19.6%, but regional comparison shows it remained the seventh largest in the EU (Eurostat, 2023). By 2021, the most recent year for which data has been published at the time of writing, the gender pay gap shrank further to 16.6%, but widened compared to other EU countries, becoming the fifth largest in the EU (Eurostat, 2023). The considerable gap likely contributed to fathers' negligible use of the parental allowance (Schulze & Gergoric, 2015), which was overwhelmingly used by mothers (Miani & Hoorens, 2014).

Fathers' limited leave-taking was also reflected in—and likely underpinned by—attitudes geared towards mothers' rather than fathers' care of young children. Based on 2012 ISSP data, at 60%, people in Slovakia were the most likely in the OECD to believe that paid leave should be taken entirely by the mother, even if both parents were in similar work situations. Some 10% thought leave should be split by mothers and fathers equally (OECD, 2016), showing potential for fathers' greater involvement in care. Yet, before the reform, Slovakia was also tied for the third-highest proportion of people in the EU who opposed men staying at home to look after children. Half of Slovaks were against men taking care of children, well over the EU average of 36% (European Commission, 2010). Several years after the policy came into effect, Slovaks were still the most likely in the EU to think that fathers must put their careers ahead of childcare, at 48%, compared to the EU average of 29% (European Commission, 2014) and the third most likely to think men's most important role was to earn money, at 75%, compared to the EU average of 43% (European Commission, 2017). Accordingly, Slovaks were much more likely to believe that women's main role was to look after the home and family (73%) than the EU average (44%).

Fathers' limited involvement was also underpinned by the gendered societal norm on leave-taking. Sekeráková Búriková (2019) speaks of a cultural preference for mothers' care for small children. While women are expected to be in paid work full-time for most of their adult lives, according to the norm, it is natural for children to be in the care of their mothers until the age of three (Saxonberg, 2014; Saxonberg & Maříková, 2023). While I found

no literature explicitly speaking of an equally clear norm related to the role of fathers, it is implied in the norm of threeness: The mother's staying at home excludes the father from doing so (Saxonberg & Maříková, 2023).

The unexpected introduction of a generous leave policy for fathers into the inegalitarian Slovak setting presents a chance to explore what transformation of fatherhood may follow from a generous leave benefit reserved for fathers in the under-researched CEE context characterized by little support for fathers' involvement in childcare.

3. Analytical Approach: Qualitative Analysis of Interviews and Quantitative Analysis of Administrative Data

To explore changes to fatherhood following the reform, I combine qualitative (thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews) and quantitative (descriptive and regression analysis of administrative data) data and methods (see Table 1).

Table 1. Data and methods used.

	Method	Data
1	Qualitative (thematic) analysis of interview data	Semi-structured interviews with 38 parents
2	Quantitative analysis of administrative data	Administrative dataset of fathers eligible for benefits in 2011–mid-2019 ($n = 446$ thousand observations)

3.1. Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

In response to the first aim of this article—to explore the different extent to which the introduction of the new policy may stimulate fathers' greater involvement along the three dimensions of fatherhood—I analyzed qualitative interview data. Between fall 2019 and fall 2020, I interviewed 38 parents, 36 in 18 different-gender couples, and one mother and father whose partners did not wish to take part in the research. I reached out to participants through social media, my personal and professional networks, and snowball sampling. Initially, I selected couples in which both parents were willing to participate; however, I later relaxed this rule to facilitate the recruitment of parents with specific characteristics, like lower education. To facilitate respondents' openness, I conducted interviews with mothers and fathers separately. The data was originally collected for a wider research project focused not only on parents' response to the new policy but also their decision-making about fathers' leave-taking. I recruited six couples where fathers made no use of leave or benefits and 14 couples where fathers drew on benefits but combined them with leave and paid work in different ways. This purposive sampling allowed me to account for different degrees of change in fatherhood. Six fathers took complete leave from paid work, while eight continued with paid work while receiving benefits (six of them part-time and two full-time) and relied on their partners for childcare. Parents came from various regions and professional backgrounds, but despite my efforts for sample variation, most were over thirty, highly paid and educated, and living in the capital. To protect parents' anonymity, I used pseudonyms starting with the same letter for each couple (for a sample summary, see Table 2).

Table 2. Interview sample composition.

Father				Mother				Couple	Benefit uptake
Name	Age	Education	Profession	Name	Age	Education	Profession	Residence	
Aleš	30	Higher	Civil servant	Anna	23	Middle	Medical student	Bratislava	Yes
Bruno	30	Middle	User experience designer	Betka	30	Higher	Town planner	Bratislava	Yes
Cyril	42	Higher	Library director	Cecília	32	Higher	Kindergarten teacher	Bratislava	Yes
Dano	36	Higher	Civil servant	Diana	33	Higher	Kindergarten teacher	Bratislava	No
Edo	43	Higher	Manager, private corporation	Elena	34	Higher	Lawyer	Bratislava	Yes
Fero	38	Higher	Manager, private corporation	Frederika	36	Higher	Manager, private corporation	Bratislava	Yes
Gregor	32	Higher	Schoolteacher	Gabika	29	Higher	Accounting analyst	Bratislava	Yes
Hugo	37	Higher	Manager, private corporation	Helena	33	Higher	Store owner	Bratislava	Yes
Igor	39	Higher	Manager, hospitality	Ivana	37	Higher	Structural designer	Piešťany	No
Juraj	31	Higher	Bank branch manager	Júlia	31	Higher	Civil servant	Bratislava	Yes
Kamil	31	Higher	Contract commercial specialist	Katia	29	Higher	Training coordinator	Bratislava	Yes
Lukáš	38	Middle	Technical foreman	Lucia	37	Higher	Public speaking coach	Bratislava	Yes
Martin	37	Higher	Schoolteacher	Mirka	31	Higher	Bank branch manager	Detva	Yes
Krištof	38	Higher	Planning engineer	Katarína	33	Higher	Civil servant	Žilina	No
Ondrej	33	Higher	Training coordinator	Olívia	30	Higher	Community coordinator, NGO	Banská Bystrica	No
Patrik	39	Middle	Transport foreman	Paulína	43	Middle	Sales assistant	Nemecká	No
Richard	28	Middle	Quality technician	Not interviewed	-	Middle	Sales assistant	Spišská Nová Ves	Yes
Samo	37	Lower	Factory worker	Sandra	37	Lower	Kitchen staff	Veľká Lomnica	No
Not interviewed	35	Middle	Construction contractor	Táňa	25	Middle	Sales assistant	Podbrezová	No
Ulysses	40	Higher	Manager, private corporation	Uľa	38	Higher	Researcher	Bratislava	Yes

I analyzed the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013), developing codes both from the literature and the empirical material. With initial coding, I paid attention to the outlines of the parents' leave division (fathers' leave-taking, its length, continued paid work, mothers' return to paid work); the details of fathers' involvement (their presence and availability, activities undertaken, and assumed responsibilities); and the implications of fathers' involvement for the relationship with children. Eventually, I established several themes that informed my analysis, including fathers' greater accessibility, increased engagement and limited responsibility, effects on father-child relationship, and time-boundedness of effects.

While my analysis in this article draws on an understanding of changes to fatherhood acquired from the entire sample, I illustrate my arguments primarily with quotes from one couple, Fero and Frederika, both high-earning corporate managers and parents of a first-born daughter and second-born son. Fero took leave with both children and did no paid work while on leave with either. He used not only the 28 weeks of maternity benefits with each child but also drew on the parental allowance available to parents as a family entitlement. Unlike the maternity benefit, the parental allowance was still very rarely used by fathers at the time of my interviews. Overall, he stayed at home for a full year with his daughter and almost ten months with his son. However, Fero's two leaves differed considerably in terms of his involvement: During his first leave, he was on leave solo, as Frederika travelled for work every week. During Fero's second leave, Frederika was between jobs and so still at home after his leave started. This set-up is unique in research on fathers' leave-taking and presents an opportunity for a direct comparison of the two modes of fathers' leave-taking, solo and together with the mother. In addition to the case of Fero and Frederika, I underscore my analysis with quotes from interviews with further parents.

Together, this material presents an opportunity to consider both the potential of policy to foster fathers' greater involvement and differences in that potential depending on the mother's presence in the home. However, the qualitative data provide little insight into the transformation of paternal involvement across the population of fathers in Slovakia.

3.2. Quantitative Analysis of Administrative Data

To fulfil the second aim of this article—to analyze the broad trends in father's leave-taking in order to consider the potential of the policy to foster such changes across the population of fathers—I used a unique administrative dataset, which covers the entire population of fathers eligible for the new benefits from their introduction in 2011 until mid-2019, the most recent data available at the time I negotiated access to data from the Slovak Ministry of Finance. I constructed the dataset from four separate registries held by the Ministry:

- The registry of physical persons of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic (register fyzických osôb Ministerstva vnútra Slovenskej republiky), which allowed for linking fathers to their children and the mothers of their children, but also included data on family members' age, usual residence, and ethnicity (identified in microdata by the Ministry of Finance based on the 2013 Atlas of Roma Communities).
- The registry of persons with social security of the Social Insurance Agency (register poistencov Sociálnej poisťovne), with data on benefits paid out.
- The registry of persons looking for employment of the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (register uchádzačov o zamestnanie Ústredia práce sociálnych vecí a rodiny), with data on parents' income from contract work (monthly) and self-employment (on an annual basis).

- The central registry of university students of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (centrálny register študentov vysokých škôl Ministerstva školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu Slovenskej republiky), with data on parents' education.

The final dataset comprised approximately 446 thousand observations of fathers eligible for benefits with individual children, amounting to 71% of children born in the relevant period. Fathers were ineligible for leave in more than 183 thousand or 29% of cases. The dataset contained information on fathers' benefit uptake (rather than fathers' leave-taking as such, for which data was not available).

The dataset allowed me to explore broad trends in fathers' response to the policy—changes in fathers' leave-taking following the policy change: How many fathers were excluded from using the policy and so an opportunity to use it to become more involved fathers due to ineligibility, how many fathers used the policy, and in what way (together with mothers or in conjunction with paid work). The data also allowed for a regression analysis to consider which fathers were more likely to use the policy. I used a binary logistic regression to distinguish fathers who drew on the benefits from those who didn't, depending on mothers' and fathers' individual characteristics, including their income before and during the period of fathers' eligibility for benefits, the highest completed level of education, and ethnicity—Roma (associated with socio-economic marginalization in Slovakia) and non-Roma. I also controlled for a range of other characteristics, including parents' age, residence, and number of children, type of work (employment vs. self-employment), and the child's year of birth.

4. Analysis

To explore changes to fathers' involvement after the 2010 policy reform, I first examine findings from interview data with fathers and mothers. Then, I explore what can be gleaned from a quantitative analysis of my unique administrative dataset.

4.1. Thematic Analysis of Interview Data: Fathers' More Engaged and Accessible Depending on Mothers' Presence, Not More Responsible

My qualitative analysis of interviews allows for an exploration of changes to fathers' involvement in childcare when on leave, along the dimensions of paternal involvement in Lamb's typology (Lamb et al., 1985)—fathers' engagement with, accessibility to, and responsibility for their children. While drawing on my entire sample, I illustrate my analysis primarily with the case of one father, Fero, recounted both by Fero and his wife, Frederika. Fero's case is pertinent as his first leave provided the greatest opportunity for paternal involvement within my entire sample, since Frederika, a high-earning manager, spent most of her workweeks away in a different city. Moreover, Fero not only made use of the full 28 weeks of his "maternity benefit" but also drew on the low flat-rate parental allowance and stayed at home for a total of one year. This gave Fero the longest stretch of time to become more involved in childcare of all the fathers in my sample. By contrast, during Fero's second leave, at the time of our interview, Frederika had finished her leave and was no longer in receipt of benefits. However, she had quit her job and was still at home looking for a new position. This set-up allows me to also directly compare paternal engagement, accessibility, and responsibility both when on leave solo and together with the mother. I supplement my presentation of Fero's case with illustrative quotes from interviews with further respondents.

Fero engaged with his children intensively during his leaves, as he organized activities to fill the day, inside during winter (playdates, and cafes) and outside during summer (spending time in nature). Similar to Fero's engagement, his accessibility to his children increased immensely. Fero spoke of an intense, all-encompassing accessibility both physically and mentally, especially to his daughter when on leave with her on his own:

A regular person who doesn't have children is used to taking showers on his own, going to the toilet on his own. But explain it to a 13-month-old child that [you] want to go to the toilet. If you close the door, [they] start crying....And you just don't have the heart to lock the door on your child.

Fathers' accessibility in the absence of mothers' presence allowed them to develop new caring routines and skills. Bruno, a UX designer, was a thoughtful, engaged, and, in the words of his wife, "talented" father. However, taking leave with both his children allowed him to develop his "talent" further, by learning to engage with his children in new ways:

For instance, I can now put [my daughter] to sleep, no problem, because we have, in a matter of days or weeks, established a [new] kind of relationship. Before, she wouldn't have let me, right? She would cry for her mom....[Now] I put her to bed, or we talk, or I stroke her, I give her milk, sometimes she cries, sometimes she doesn't, but she can fall asleep.

When both parents were at home together, both paternal engagement and accessibility were considerably less intensive. Frederika recounted that when she was also present: "There are also times when [Fero] goes away, despite being on leave, he too, needs time for himself and vice versa. I'd say we more or less [divide time with children] equally."

Fathers' limited engagement and accessibility when the mothers stayed at home recurred in other parents' accounts, as fathers relied on mothers' care to pursue their careers or activities unrelated to their children's care. Multiple fathers continued with paid work in various forms and for different reasons: Cyril, writer and full-time library director, took leave from his day job with his third child, but spent long chunks of time away from his care commitments while abroad in relation to his other career—writing. In an extreme case, Lukáš, a technical foreman at a private company, took leave with both his children, but citing burnout, recounted spending considerable time away from home, while his partner Lucia, who was self-employed and working part-time as a public speaking coach, shouldered most of the children's care. Said Lukáš:

I spent a part of my "maternity" leave on renovating the garden shed. Lucia had time to look after the children. I was officially on leave, but when Lucia was taking care of the children, I spent a part of it on something productive.

When I asked Lukáš to estimate what proportion of care he took on, he said 30–40%. Lucia estimated his share of care similarly, at 30–35%, only slightly up from 20% when she had been on leave and Lukáš was in paid work full-time. While overall, paternal engagement with and accessibility to children grew when fathers took leave, the change was much more pronounced when the leave was taken solo, compared to sharing leave-time with mothers.

Encouragingly, fathers' increased engagement and accessibility when on leave solo can be transformative for the father-child relationship. Fero reflected very positively on the evolution of his relationship with his

daughter. Their bonding was facilitated by his wife's travel for work on a weekly basis, when he was the only parent available to respond to his daughter's immediate physical and emotional needs. This qualitatively different connection persisted even when Frederika returned over the weekend:

I've created a deep, intense, human relationship with my daughter. The kind you can't experience when you come back from work at 5, 6, 7 pm and she goes to bed at 8....The first thing is that you have more time for each other, and it was key that I was there on my own for her, that my wife wasn't there, and I wasn't just for show, it was really just the two of us. Because if it's just the two of you, you have to solve both the good and the bad, and it brings you together....When my daughter fell and was bleeding, we survived it. I remember [it] to this day....My wife would come home for the weekends, and once [my daughter] fell and ran to me....And I told myself, wow, now I am a real parent? And Frederika was sad that [our daughter] doesn't love her anymore.

The linked narratives of fathers' insufficient time with children when in paid work and of the novel, equal parent status acquired on leave, evidenced by their new ability to soothe their children, appeared repeatedly in my interviews. Juraj, a bank branch manager who took leave with his daughter, reflected that before his leave, time with his daughter was limited to two hours before the bedtime ritual started: "You don't find out what the child experiences all day, their needs, how to engage with them." Two months into his leave, the relationship with his daughter was transformed: "[My daughter] was totally dependent on me, she wanted to be with me all the time and didn't want to be with her mom." The deep father-child relationship created through intense daily engagement and round-the-clock accessibility was unlikely to be achieved when sharing leave-time with the mother: Notably, Fero did not speak of a similarly intense relationship with his son, whose care was divided between both parents to a greater degree, as Fero's leave overlapped with Frederika's time out of paid work. Similarly, Lukáš, the foreman and father of two, who spent much of his leave away from home, mused:

I thought I had a good relationship [with my children], but during my first leave, I realized that [there was] no way [that was so]. I had been the strange mister, who came from work [in the evening]....It's better now. I can't say that, when [they] hurt themselves, they automatically come to me, but [they] no longer choose [the mother only].

Like with Fero, the children now also turn to Lukáš when in need of soothing, but less frequently, corresponding to his relatively limited accessibility and engagement.

Irrespective of being on leave solo or together with the mother, changes to fathers' responsibility for children were less profound than changes to their engagement and accessibility. When on leave, Fero did take over day-to-day responsibility for the children's needs: dressing and feeding them, managing kindergarten runs with his daughter, etc. However, he assumed limited responsibility for meeting his children's needs in terms of cooking, shopping, or cleaning, and even when travelling for work, Frederika went to great lengths to continue shouldering these responsibilities:

Before leaving for the week...I cooked until eleven, so they would have food for two, three days. Then I [would leave] at 12 [pm], one at night to [another city], and sometimes I returned during the week to cook again. Because, at that age, a child just can't eat restaurant food, and he [Fero] just couldn't

do it....Basically, he didn't clean, he didn't shop....When I came back at the end of the week, the flat was a pigsty....I had to do the laundry for the child, so [they] would have things to wear the following week...then maybe go buy new things...because [children] constantly grow out of something, so you are always buying things....My husband can handle buying [things], but he always needs a list, [whether it is] one milk or two...yogurts, [or] five bread rolls or seven....He has not yet matured into knowing that there has to be milk and bread rolls at home [all the time].

Similarly, Martin, a teacher and father of two who took leave with his younger daughter, recounted that his wife, Mirka, retained responsibility for 60–70% of housework, despite being back in paid work full-time and Martin “handing his daughter over” to Mirka upon her return home. Mirka was responsible for most of the cooking, laundry, and ironing.

Fero did not assume responsibility for cooking, cleaning, and planning daily or long-term purchases even when Frederika was away for days at a time. Instead of cooking, he implemented creative solutions, organizing meals in restaurants or a student canteen, dropping in at his parents' or friends' houses. However, in line with the widespread gendered division of such unpaid and mental labor, much responsibility remained with Frederika, who acutely felt the strain of it:

Thinking of a hundred things is really hard, tiring. It would sometimes really help if Fero would initiate something that needs to be done for the family....It ranges from big things to small....A child needs to eat. Mostly, I have to tell him that the child needs [to be fed] and he can then execute it. And then [on to] big things, [like] that we need to change the kids' rooms, that is also always on me....I have to initiate every single thing.

While in Frederika's absence, Fero assumed responsibility for the children's immediate needs, but there was a limit to his taking over responsibility for tasks that required more planning. Similar limitations to fathers' responsibility were reported by other respondents, too. Both Mirka and Lucia, the partners of Martin and Lukáš, respectively, recounted that they needed to instruct their partners to carry out housework tasks. Lukáš reported that Lucia also retained responsibility for the children's health and education. Education also remained the primary domain of Juraj's wife Júlia.

Finally, there were also limitations on the extent to which paternal involvement spilled over beyond the end of leave. When both parents were back in paid work after the end of Fero's leave with their first-born, Frederika estimated 75% of childcare fell to her, while Fero took on 25%. This was partly because, to combine paid work and childcare, the couple agreed one of them would have to take a step back in their career, and without discussion, this role was assigned to the mother. While Frederika was unemployed and Fero was still on parental leave, it was gendered norms about fatherhood and motherhood rather than their respective labor market positions that drove this decision. Frederika recounted:

It left a deep mark on me that will probably last for another decade...someone had to take care of the family, and everyone somehow expected it would be me....I had been in a higher position, much more successful, so it also had financial implications....I thought it was really unfair. Because why couldn't it be him?

Paternal involvement in hands-on childcare may have increased considerably during leave, even if to different degrees depending on the mother's presence. However, paternal involvement ebbed again upon the father's return to paid work, as their breadwinning role regained priority.

4.2. Quantitative Analysis: Potential for More Involved Fatherhood Varies With Individual Characteristics and Paid Work

My quantitative analysis of administrative data allowed me to explore the potential of the policy to stimulate involvement across the population of fathers in Slovakia. Fathers' leave-taking increased considerably after the 2010 reform, suggesting scope for more involved fatherhood during the period of leave (see Figure 1). While fathers' uptake remained very low in 2011–2015, it took off considerably from 2016 and 2017, when Slovak media started paying increased attention to the policy (“Načo chodiť do práce,” 2017; Onuferová, 2017; “Slováci objavili dieru,” 2016). In 2019, fathers' uptake was projected (based on data for the first half of 2019, the final period for which I could access data) to reach nearly 13-thousand fathers or 23.2% compared to the number of children born during the same period (data was only available by calendar years and could not be related to the number of births in each year; in addition, an equal proportion of fathers using benefits in their children's first, second and third year of life was assumed here). Of those eligible for the benefit, 36% made use of it. However, uptake remained relatively limited compared with other contexts, like pioneering Norway and Sweden, where almost all fathers were taking their daddy quotas—well-paid portions of parental leave reserved for them—within years after these policies were introduced (Dančíková, 2023).

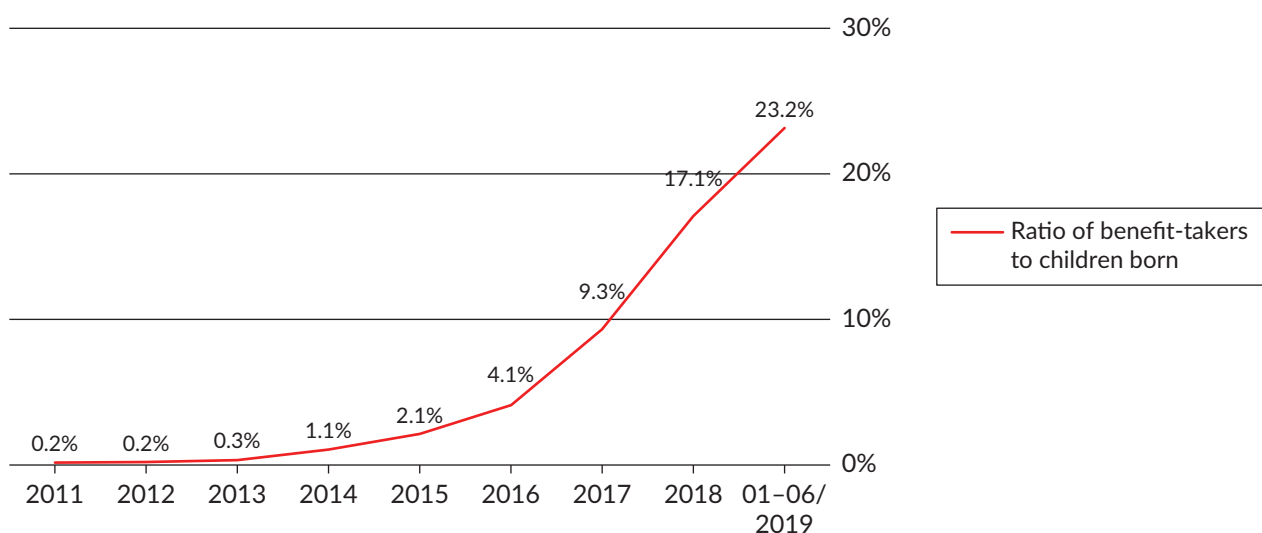


Figure 1. Fathers' uptake of benefits after the 2010 reform.

Consistent with findings from other contexts, the quantitative data also show that not all fathers were equally likely to take leave, and so not equally likely to use the opportunity to become more involved in childcare (see Table 3). Researchers interested in leave policies have rightly paid increasing attention to policy eligibility (Dobrotić & Blum, 2020; Uzunalioglu et al., 2021), and my data showed that almost a third of fathers (29%) were not eligible for the new policy. Eligibility is based on insurance payments for at least nine months over the two years before making a benefit application, meaning fathers are less likely to be eligible if they do not have stable employment.

Beyond stable employment, a binary logistic regression showed that even when eligible, fathers were less likely to use the benefit when they had below-average incomes, and when neither they nor their partners had completed higher education. The odds of fathers using the benefit were also considerably lower when fathers were from marginalized Roma communities. Overall, like in research from other settings (Rostgaard & Ejrnæs, 2021), fathers' higher social class was linked to more leave-taking, and consequently, to an opportunity for more involved fatherhood.

Table 3. Logistic regression of fathers' benefit uptake, odds ratios.

Variable		Odds ratio
Education	No parent has higher education	ref
	Only mother has higher education	1.77***
	Only father has higher education	1.57***
	Both parents have higher education	2.17***
Father's income from employment	1. quartile (up to €182/month)	ref
	2. quartile (up to €642/month)	2.10***
	3. quartile (up to €1,240/month)	3.37***
	4. quartile (up to €170,436/month)	2.73***
Ratio of mother's and father's income	≤ 50%	ref
	>50% & ≤ 100%	1.07***
	>100%	1.57***
Father's income from both employment and self-employment		2.03***
Father's income from self-employment only		3.02***
Mother's income from both employment and self-employment		1.78***
Mother's income from self-employment only		2.47***
Mothers with pre-birth income		1.12***
Father from marginalized Roma communities	non-Roma	ref
	Roma	0.26***
Fathers' number of living children	1–3 children	ref
	4–6 children	0.93*
	>6 children	0.52***
Father's age	1. quartile (≤ 29)	ref
	2. quartile (≤ 33)	1.12***
	3. quartile (≤ 36)	1.11***
	4. quartile (≤ 75)	0.97
Mother's age	1. quartile (≤ 27)	ref
	2. quartile (≤ 30)	1.08***
	3. quartile (≤ 33)	1.00
	4. quartile (≤ 53)	0.94**
Multiple births		1.15**

Table 3. (Cont.) Logistic regression of fathers' benefit uptake, odds ratios.

Variable		Odds ratio
Father's usual residence—region	Bratislava	ref
	Trnava	0.81***
	Trenčín	1.17***
	Nitra	0.60***
	Žilina	1.08***
	Banská Bystrica	0.78***
	Prešov	0.85***
	Košice	0.72***
Parents' different usual residence		0.90***
Year of birth	2008	ref
	2009	2.75
	2010	12.98***
	2011	36.25***
	2012	100.02***
	2013	240.37***
	2014	586.25***
	2015	1294.71***
	2016	2481.05***
	2017	1827.55***
	2018	813.62***
	q1–2 2019	67.16***
Constant		0.0000207
Log likelihood		–76,073
Observations		445,683

Notes: * statistically significant at 10%; ** statistically significant at 5%; *** statistically significant at 1%; **** a robustness check showed that coefficients do not vary considerably with the year of birth of the child.

In addition, a large proportion of fathers made use of the option to combine benefit uptake with employment, showing that changes to fatherhood in response to the reform were likely less consequential than would seem from merely looking at benefit uptake (see Figure 2). In 2018, at the height of the trend, nearly half of all fathers who used the benefits combined them with some employment. By 2019, the share fell to less than a third, possibly due to government efforts to curb this practice (Dančíková, 2023). One in 14 (7%) fathers who drew on the benefits (or 23% of those who engaged in employment) earned more than 90% of their earlier income. This suggests that they worked full-time, and the leave policy provided no impetus for more involved fatherhood. One in six (17%) of the fathers who made use of the benefits (57% of those who combined employment with benefits) earned no more than half of their previous income, which suggests their paid work was part-time. For these fathers, the 2010 reform facilitated some time off from employment, and so a notable, if limited, shift towards greater involvement in the care of their children.

Paradoxically, higher-paid fathers were more likely to combine employment with benefits. In 2019, more than half (57%) of fathers who engaged in employment while on benefits earned more than 1.25% of the

average wage. Only 14% earned less than three-quarters of the average wage. Hence, while less-paid and less-educated fathers were less likely to make use of the benefits, once they did, they were more likely to take complete breaks from paid work.

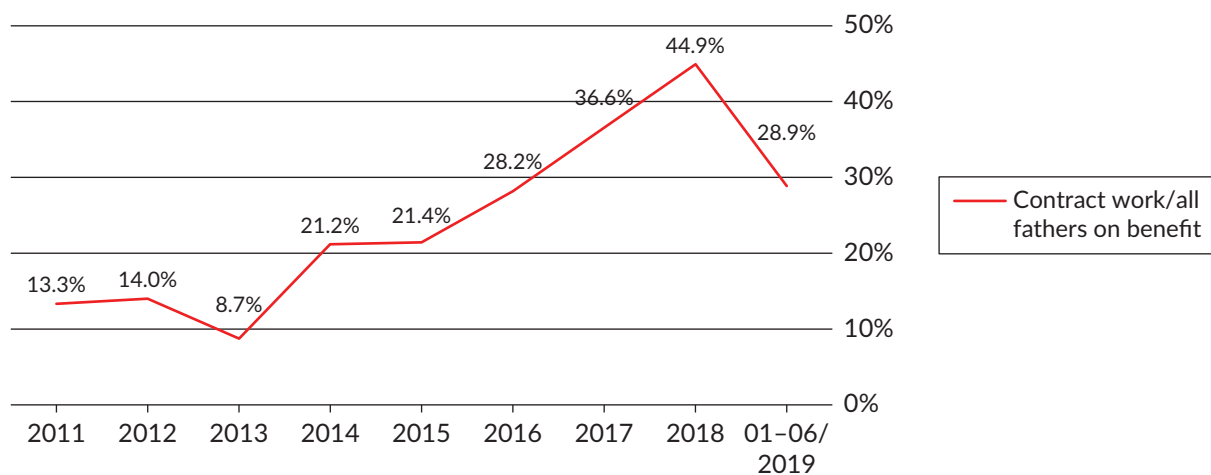


Figure 2. Proportion of fathers with income from paid work while on benefits.

In sum, the quantitative administrative data painted a broad-brush picture of the leave-taking of Slovak fathers following the 2010 reform and its capacity to support more involved fatherhood: First, almost a third of fathers were excluded from the policy altogether due to their unstable labor market attachment. Second, despite the promising overall trend in benefit uptake among those eligible, fathers with lower socio-economic status characteristics (lower-educated and lower-paid and from a marginalized ethnicity) were less likely to use the policy. Finally, for a considerable proportion of those fathers who used the benefits, their involvement in childcare was likely limited through their simultaneous employment, though these were paradoxically more likely to be higher-paid fathers.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article explored changes to paternal involvement in childcare in Slovakia following a 2010 reform that granted fathers 28 weeks of high “maternity benefits,” not transferable to mothers, and to be combined with parental leave before their child reaches the age of three. I drew on a combination of qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with fathers and mothers, and quantitative administrative data. My qualitative findings have shown both the potential for fathers’ greater involvement in response to the new policy, but also limits to that potential. Compared with the policy mix previously in place, the reform did more to encourage fathers’ leave-taking, and when used by fathers to take full breaks from paid work, it allowed for a transformation of paternal accessibility to and engagement with their children. In terms of accessibility, fathers spent considerably more time with children during which they were available to respond to the children’s physical and emotional needs. The leave-time also stimulated greater engagement—it encouraged fathers to plan and carry out a range of activities with their children. However, both fathers’ accessibility and engagement increased comparatively less when mothers stayed at home as well, than when fathers stayed at home solo. Fathers’ staying at home together with the mother is quite common across contexts (O’Brien & Wall, 2017), but may be particularly likely in settings where leave-taking is understood as the mother’s prerogative, like in the CEE Visegrad Four countries, guided by the norm of threeness (Saxonberg, 2014).

Fathers' sharing leave with mothers is even more likely when enabled by policy design that allows for combining employment with benefits, as in the Slovak case. A similar design, encouraging fathers to draw on benefits without having to cut back on paid work, has also been put in place in Lithuania (Aidukaite & Telisaukaite-Cekanavice, 2020).

In my sample, the presence of mothers had less of a moderating effect on fathers' responsibility for childcare beyond the children's immediate needs—the bulk of responsibility remained in the hands of mothers even when fathers took leave solo. In addition, paternal involvement diminished again markedly after the end of leave, contributing to ongoing—and so far inconclusive—debates on whether the effects of fathers' leave-taking on parents' division of childcare and paid labor are time-limited or last beyond the end of leave (Duvander & Johansson, 2019; O'Brien & Wall, 2017; Wray, 2020). My data suggested that increased maternal involvement may be considered automatic after both parents return to paid work, irrespective of the mother's wishes.

Further limitations to the capacity of the policy to transform fatherhood in Slovakia into being more involved were revealed by my quantitative data. Almost a third of fathers were excluded from using the policy altogether, due to an insufficient record of insurance contributions—a sign of no or unstable labor market attachment. Of those eligible, fathers' benefit uptake increased considerably, reaching 36% by 2019 (or 23.2% of fathers compared to the number of children born in the same year). However, among these fathers, those with lower-class characteristics (their own and the mother's lower education and income, as well as their belonging to the marginalized Roma community) were less likely to use the policy and so benefit from its potential to stimulate their greater engagement with and accessibility to their children. This is consistent with findings from other contexts, where research also found that fathers with higher incomes and higher completed education, as well as with partners with higher incomes and education, were more likely to take leave (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Lappegard, 2008; Sundström & Duvander, 2002). Finally, the quantitative data showed the extent of the practice of fathers combining employment with leave benefits. In 2018, more than two in five fathers who used the policy combined their benefits with employment, part-time or full-time. The proportion of fathers making use of this option fell to less than one in three in 2019. The drop coincided with public scrutiny of this practice and public debates about the purpose of the leave policy for fathers—whether it was to support fathers' time with children or help them provide for their families financially (Dančíková, 2023). Fathers' widespread combining of employment with benefits can be explained both by such conflicting messaging about the aims of the policy in public debates and the inequalitarian gender structure, which persisted in Slovakia despite the new policy and continued driving fathers towards breadwinning rather than caregiving (Dančíková, 2025).

To my knowledge, no data has been released by the Slovak government on whether the practice of combining employment with benefits has continued to decline after 2019 or rebounded after public scrutiny eased off. More quantitative research on the latest microdata is needed to chart not only more recent trends in this practice, but the trajectory of fathers' leave-taking altogether. More research should also zoom in on the nuances of paternal involvement—their engagement, accessibility, and responsibility after the end of leave. Future research could also address the limitations of this article. My quantitative analysis paid attention to differences in fathers' leave-taking depending on their individual characteristics and made links to fathers' socio-economic status. However, differences in paternal involvement based on class were not directly addressed in my qualitative analysis. This was due to purposive sampling implemented for the

broader project that my data was originally collected for, which aimed to cover not only fathers' responses to the policy but also parents' decision-making process about their response, including deciding that the fathers make no use of the policy at all. In addition, while this article provides insight into the "what"—what changes to paternal involvement followed the 2010 reform and the limits to those changes, it does not shed light on the "why"—why these changes have been limited. Further research should explore why an increase in responsibility seems less likely to materialize than growth in both engagement and accessibility.

The data available at the time being suggests that a well-remunerated policy that sets aside leave time for fathers does have the potential to increase fathers' childcare involvement in the post-socialist CEE context, despite the widespread inegalitarian norms, practices, and attitudes when it comes to the division of leave by mothers and fathers. CEE policymakers can draw inspiration from the Slovak case and implement daddy quotas, which may motivate mothers and fathers to divide leave more equally. However, careful attention to policy design is advised to avoid allowing fathers to draw on benefits without actually taking time off paid work to look after their children, especially in contexts where strong gendered norms and identities push parents to persist with a highly inegalitarian division of labor if policy permits it. Such contradictory design—supporting and limiting fathers' involvement at the same time—is more likely than it might seem, as illustrated by its occurrence in both Slovakia and Lithuania (Aidukaite & Telisauskaite-Cekanavice, 2020). In the Slovak case, the issue could be addressed by allowing fathers to take leave part-time, but only providing benefits for the time spent out of paid work (Dančíková, 2020); in other contexts, it could be avoided with thoughtful policy design from the get-go. However, CEE policymakers should also consider a broader set of policies aimed at supporting fathers' leave-taking. Unlike in Slovakia, where the policy at hand was rolled out with little discussion or supportive measures, the introduction of the daddy quota in Sweden was preceded by decades of government campaigns to change the public perception of fatherhood and accompanied by additional campaigns, trainings, and communication with parents as well as employers (Bergman & Hobson, 2009). Such complementary policies may help close the gap between the relatively low rate of leave-taking by Slovak fathers and the much higher rates in Sweden.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The qualitative data used for this article is available upon request in the original language. The quantitative data was obtained under the condition that it would not be shared further.

LLMs Disclosure

No LLM tools were used.

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