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Fragile Pronatalism? Barriers to Parenthood, One-Child Families, and Childlessness in European Post-Socialist Countries

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Table of Contents

Fragile Pronatalism and Reproductive Futures in European Post-Socialist Contexts
Ivett Szalma, Hana Hašková, Livia Oláh, and Judit Takács 82–86

Patterns of Co-Residential Relationships Across Cohorts in Post-Socialist Countries: Less Time for Childbearing?
Sunnee Billingsley and Livia Oláh 87–99

Growing Childlessness and One-Child Families in Slovakia in the Shadow of Fragile Pronatalism
Branislav Šprocha 100–111

Home Alone: Exploring Childcare Options to Remove Barriers to Second Childbearing in Belarus
Kamila Ishchanova 112–123

Childlessness and Barriers to Gay Parenthood in Czechia
Hana Hašková, Hana Maříková, Zdeněk Sloboda, and Kristýna Pospíšilová 124–137

Exploring Older Men's Pathways to Childlessness in Hungary: Did the Change of Policy Regime Matter?
Ivett Szalma and Judit Takács 138–148

Perceptions of Barriers to Motherhood: Female STEM PhD Students' Changing Family Plans
Veronika Paksi, Beáta Nagy, and Katalin Tardos 149–159

Things to Gain, Things to Lose: Perceived Costs and Benefits of Children and Intention to Remain Childless in Poland
Monika Mynarska and Zuzanna Brzozowska 160–171

Contested Parenthood: Attitudes Toward Voluntary Childlessness as a Life Strategy in Post-Socialist Bulgaria
Elitsa Dimitrova and Tatyana Kotzeva 172–183

How the Everyday Logic of Pragmatic Individualism Undermines Russian State Pronatalism
Larisa Shpakovskaya and Zhanna Chernova 184–193

Table of Contents

When Family Policy Doesn't Work: Motives and Welfare Attitudes Among Childfree Persons in Poland
Dorota Szelewa 194–205

Climate Change Concerns and the Ideal Number of Children: A Comparative Analysis of the V4 Countries
Borbála Júlia Szczuka 206–216

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Editorial

Fragile Pronatalism and Reproductive Futures in European Post-Socialist Contexts

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Abstract
This editorial seeks to define fragile pronatalism by highlighting why pronatalism in the examined Central and Eastern European post-socialist countries should be considered fragile. Moreover, it aims to map desirable future changes in fertility policies in the region. Following a brief presentation of the articles contained in this thematic issue, our concluding thoughts complete this editorial.

Keywords
barriers to childbearing; Central and Eastern Europe; childlessness; family; fertility policies; fertility; pronatalism; reproduction

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Fragile Pronatalism? Barriers to Parenthood, One-Child Families, and Childlessness in European Post-Socialist Countries" edited by Ivett Szalma (Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence / Corvinus University of Budapest), Hana Hašková (Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences), Livia Oláh (Stockholm University), and Judit Takács (Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence).

1. Fragile Pronatalism?

Pronatalism is considered to imply "encouragement of all births as conducive to individual, family and social well-being'' (Heitlinger, 1991, p. 344). Based on this definition, policies in post-socialist countries are not purely pronatalist. Single parents, same-sex couples, Roma, and low-income families are frequently excluded from the circle of those who are encouraged to have children, or the policies impose explicit barriers to their parenting. The term selective pronatalism has been used to describe such policies in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries that were also present even before the 1989–1990 political system change (see, for example, Hašková & Dudová, 2020).

In addition to selectivity, the other common feature of post-socialist family policies is the way how governments encourage "desirable" childbearing. Financial measures such as generous maternity benefits, paid family leaves, and/or housing subsidies dominate among these. Another frequently used measure in this region is family taxation, which strengthens the traditional gendered divisions by encouraging men's breadwinner roles and mothers to withdraw from the labour market to carry out full-time childcare and household activities. At the same time, support for gender equality is missing in the region. For example, none of these countries has introduced fathers' quotas on parental leaves except Slovenia (Eurofound, 2019). Public childcare for children under the age of three is extremely limited

in post-socialist states (OECD, 2022). Generous financial measures and tax subsidies may reinforce traditional gender roles while policies that exclude particular social groups from reproduction contribute to low fertility. Consequently, pronatalism, built on selective, heteronormative, and exclusionary measures is fragile in CEE countries.

2. Reproductive Futures

In a recent overview of changing global childbearing patterns, Skirbekk (2022, p. 372) argued that today "most fertility policies primarily focus on improving reproductive autonomy and reducing unintended births, as opposed to reaching some specific, quantifiable target." Post-socialist policies do not adhere to this completely, as seen in the restriction of abortion in Poland in 2021, or gays and lesbians experiencing (legally) "prescribed childlessness" (Takács, 2018, p. 70) in CEE countries. People, especially those belonging to under-privileged social groups fail to realize their fertility plans given insecurities related to financial difficulties or partnership challenges (as shown in the contributions by Monika Mynarska and Zuzanna Brzozowska, as well as that of Sunnee Billingsley and Livia Oláh) whereas (voluntary) childless persons are exposed to policy proposals aiming to punish childless people (as demonstrated by Dorota Szelewa).

To increase reproductive autonomy governments should aim at eliminating barriers to realizing personal fertility ideals across all population groups. Prospective parents also need adequate knowledge to achieve reproductive autonomy. Governments should secure access to evidence-based, non-biased, and up-to-date knowledge about reproductive issues, especially for young people in CEE countries, where sexuality knowledge transfers are limited and anti-gender movements have recently grown.

3. Thematic Issue Overview

Fertility decisions, trajectories, and circumstances leading to childlessness and one-child families are underresearched in CEE countries. The trends indicate that childlessness and one-child families have been on the rise in the region since the 1990s. Quantitative data help measure and compare the magnitude, speed, timing, and circumstances of such fertility changes and the relations between fertility ideals and outcomes. At the same time, qualitative data can capture meaning-construction and help to uncover and contextualize how people interpret their reproductive decisions, trajectories, and circumstances. This thematic issue, applying both quantitative and qualitative approaches, expands existing research by focusing on the region, addressing the barriers to parenthood (Billingsley & Oláh, 2022; Hašková et al., 2022; Ishchanova, 2022; Šprocha, 2022; Szalma & Takács, 2022) and attitudes regarding parenthood (Dimitrova & Kotzeva, 2022; Mynarska & Brzozowska, 2022; Paksi et al., 2022; Shpakovskaya & Chernova, 2022; Szczuka, 2022; Szelewa, 2022). These eleven articles, including two comparative studies, cover altogether 12 countries: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Slovakia.

Billingsley and Oláh (2022) studied cohort patterns of co-residential relationships as potential contributors to declining fertility in five CEE countries and six post-Soviet states. They showed that the number of years in a union before age 30 declined in the former group, due to postponement of partnership formation and increasing union instability. In Hungary, where the decrease was most pronounced, abstaining from a partnership entirely has also contributed to the decrease. No trends toward fewer years in unions were seen in the former Soviet republics indicating a limited role of early union dynamics in the fertility decline there. The authors conclude that a better understanding is needed of the relationship between unions and childbearing if partnership dynamics are to be considered in policymaking.

Šprocha (2022) analysed cohort childlessness and the prevalence of one-child families in Slovakia, linked to fertility postponement. Postponed first births were realized later to a greater extent than postponed second children, resulting in changing parity structures. The lack of comprehensive policy measures to mitigate long-term labour market disadvantages related to motherhood is suggested to shape fertility trends. The insufficient quality and availability of childcare, inflexible working hours, and the gendered division of paid and unpaid work are singled out as in urgent need of a policy response.

Ishchanova (2022) analysed second-birth intentions in Belarus given the importance of low second childbearing for the newly emerging "small family" pattern there. Relying on mixed institutional and informal childcare support was seen to be associated with higher intentions to have a second child, but being a woman, aged late-twenties or above, with a first child older than six years suppressed such intentions. The author thus argues for gender-egalitarian family policy measures beyond cash benefits along with motivating men to take a fairer share in the care of children to reduce barriers to second childbearing in the country.

Hašková et al. (2022) also examined segments of the population who face severe difficulties in becoming parents. While in most Northern and Western European countries it is possible to adopt a child as a same-sex couple and there is an increase in lesbian, gay and queer families in the CEE countries, parenthood of non-heterosexual persons lacks recognition. This article gives insight into how Czech gay and bisexual men adjust to the local conditions in their parenting desires and intentions.

The focus in Szalma and Takács (2022) is also on men. They analysed how the political regime change of 1989–1990 interfaced with the life course of Hungarian childless men over 50. To structure and understand the barriers to childbearing they applied Merton's

anomie theory and examined the increasing discrepancy between cultural goals and institutionalized means during and after the transition period.

Paksi et al. (2022) explored barriers to motherhood in a male-dominated high-skilled profession. Their interviews with young female engineers in Hungary reveal how the pressure for high productivity from the professional and organizational culture of the field, accompanied by traditional societal expectations of women as solely responsible for childcare, prevent them from realizing their childbearing intentions.

Mynarska and Brzozowska (2022) examined how perceived costs and benefits of having children affected reproductive intentions of childless persons in Poland. The authors found that women took both costs and benefits into account while men only regarded the benefits. They pointed out that any policy measure aiming to encourage parenthood can be successful only if it addresses the main reasons (i.e., obstacles as well as motivations) people have for limiting their childbearing. Their results show that the recently emerged negative educational gradient to childlessness is not limited to behaviour, but appears also in intentions, suggesting fertility polarization is related to uncertainty.

Dimitrova and Kotzeva (2022) revealed a decrease in negative attitudes and a strong increase of neutral stances to voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria in the first decades of the 2000s. This applied especially to women, the unmarried childless, highly educated, employed, and ethnic majority individuals who also had stronger non-conformist attitudes and were more likely to reject traditional authorities. The authors point to the need for more effective gender equality measures likely to lead to greater tolerance and respect for individual reproductive choices, including the option of not becoming a parent.

Shpakovskaya and Chernova (2022) come to a similar conclusion based on interviews with Russian middle-class working mothers. In the context of pronatalist policies, which focus on financial incentives rather than gender equality and work-care reconciliation, young mothers use "pragmatic individualism" to cope with the instability of the labour market and their marriage. Based on this logic, they limit their childbearing in line with the class-based rationality of respectability.

Szelewa (2022) presents the first research study of voluntary childless persons' views about family policies in Poland. If we consider children as a public good because of their future contribution to the workforce and to financing the welfare state, then this brings an obligation for non-parents to share the costs of raising children. If non-parents contribute to children's welfare, it is important to know their opinions on family policies. The author's qualitative research shows that Polish childfree persons present favourable views on state support for families, but they prefer investing in childcare services in order to enable parents to participate in the labour market, instead of providing cash benefits or measures that are perceived as a punishment for the childless persons, such as linking the level of pension benefits with the number of children.

Szczuka's (2022) innovative research calls for more attention to a timely issue: the possible link between concerns about climate change and the ideal number of children, which she studied in the Visegrad countries. Her results reveal unexpected cross-country variations in the relationship, climate concerns being positively associated with smaller family size ideals in Hungary and Czechia, unlike in Slovakia and Poland. The author pointed to a shift needed in the environmental narrative to suit the normative context. This research raises the question of whether pronatalist family policies and green policies are at all compatible.

4. Conclusion

The articles in this thematic issue provide evidence that there are various forms of attitudinal and structural barriers and gender inequalities influencing reproductive decisions and behaviour. In addition, new aspects are raised such as reproductive rights of same-sex couples, reproductive choices of women in science, and climate-change-related anxieties affecting family size ideals.

So far, pronatalist policies in CEE countries have been modestly effective at best. In this thematic issue, many studies show that financial support is not sufficient to increase fertility rates. They call attention to the poor and inadequate provision of childcare services, difficulties in work and family reconciliation, and highlight policies that exclude certain social groups from reproduction. Promoting gender and social equality is seen as enabling the realization of personal fertility ideals, as demonstrated in Northern Europe. However, fertility rates declined even in Nordic societies in the last decade. There is perhaps no general recipe for family policies and instead of asking how to get people to have more children, governments should ask how to best adapt societies to families having fewer children (Skirbekk, 2022).

Future research should also examine the knowledge of fertile age individuals about issues of reproduction such as the relationship between ageing and fecundity decline, the drivers and prevalence of infertility among men and women, and the possibilities and limits of assisted reproduction technologies. Researchers should use multidimensional approaches taking into account, at the macro level, norms, values, structures of care, pandemics, and climate change, and, at the micro level, partnership formations, access to infertility treatment, precarious jobs, and other types of uncertainties, potentially affecting reproductive decision-making processes.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Patterns of Co-Residential Relationships Across Cohorts in Post-Socialist Countries: Less Time for Childbearing?

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Abstract
Co-residential partnerships are a pre-condition for childbearing and less time is spent in these unions when there is difficulty finding partners, a delay in union formation, and partnership instability. Our study explores patterns in co-residential partnerships across birth cohorts in 11 post-socialist countries to assess changes in the number of years spent in these partnerships and the patterns underlying any trend. Using the Harmonized Histories dataset, based on partnership data from generations and gender surveys, we calculate changes in co-residential union trends. In about half of the countries, the share of women who have not entered a co-residential union by age 30 increased, whereas the proportion still in their first union by this age decreased universally. The latter trend, reflecting union instability, pre-dates the transition from socialism. Delays in starting the first union were seen in only a few countries immediately after the transition began but more countries experienced union postponement in coming-of-age cohorts in the 2000s. A declining median age at first union in the former Soviet republics before and immediately after the transition from socialism balances the impact of increased union instability. Overall, the number of years spent in a co-residential union before age 30 declined across the Central and South-Eastern European countries, especially in Hungary. Union dynamics may have contributed to declining fertility in these countries. In contrast, little or no change in time spent in unions in the post-Soviet countries indicates that union dynamics were less likely to have influenced these women's fertility behavior.

Keywords
co-residential union; fertility; partnership instability; post-socialist countries; union formation postponement

Issue
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1. Introduction

Finding a partner and moving in together is one of the most significant rites of passage into adulthood. It reflects successful relationship building and sufficient resources on which two people can build an independent life together. Also, offspring are usually born in co-residential unions (Kiernan, 2001; Thomson, 2005). Delays in union formation and instability of unions can thus influence childbearing by reducing time spent in the setting most conducive for family formation and expansion. In contexts with few births out of a union, demographers would think of co-residential unions as the relevant "exposure" to understand childbearing (see, e.g., Hellstrand et al., 2022). This study explores changes over time in co-residential union dynamics across 11 post-socialist countries in a period of dramatic fertility decline (Billingsley, 2010; Billingsley & Duntava,

2017; Frejka & Sobotka, 2008), with an eye on whether changes intensified around the transition from socialism or maintained a steady pace. This descriptive analysis can inform our understanding of the potential relevance of union dynamics for declining fertility rates as well as offer an insight into the changes confined to this sensitive coming-of-age period in individuals' lives.

Many studies on individual countries in our selected group have documented the delay in union formation or the increase in union instability (see, e.g., Frejka, 2008; Hoem et al., 2009; Puur et al., 2012). In addition, we have often seen the importance of being in a union for childbearing in single-country case studies (Aassve et al., 2006; Baranowska-Rataj, 2014; Philipov & Jasilioniene, 2008; Puur & Klesment, 2011). These comparative and case study analyses give, however, only a partial picture on their own of how fertility may be influenced by union dynamics. Likewise, micro-level studies of fertility that include partnership status cannot tell us how the lack of a partner has changed over time, possibly affecting fertility development. The main contribution of this article is that we focus on the combined role of partnership dynamics in generating a set number of years women have spent in a co-residential union during their twenties, which is the age range women are most likely to have children in the region of interest. Specifically, we explore from a cohort perspective and using comparable measures whether the timing of entering a first co-residential partnership has increasingly been delayed, whether the share of people never entering a union by age 30 has increased, and whether the share of people still in their first union at the age of 30 has declined. Finally, we track how much union delay and instability have resulted in a decline in the total number of years spent in a co-residential union before the age of 30.

We use partnership histories from harmonized surveys conducted in the first decades of the 2000s. To observe the most recent cohorts possible, and get the best sense of how partnership dynamics are changing recently, we narrow our focus to what happens by the age of 30. To maximize our capacity to capture the most recent trends, we focus exclusively on women, who enter unions earlier than men. Finally, we do not consider whether unions are marital or non-marital, as this factor varies in importance to births over time and across our countries (Frejka, 2008; Thornton & Philipov, 2009). It may be that in some countries union timing and length did not change, but more time is spent in a non-marital union preceding marriage in which case it matters if childbearing remains confined to marriage or not (see, e.g., Andreev et al., 2022; Hărăguş, 2015). To account for such differences we would need to model how specific union type relates to births, whereas our interest here is union dynamics more generally and possible implications of union dynamics for fertility.

2. Background

2.1. Postponement and Instability of Co-Residential Unions

All of the processes in which we are interested in this study are considered to be main features of the second demographic transition (SDT) that is argued to lead to diverse family configurations and fertility rates (well) below population replacement levels (Lesthaeghe & van de Kaa, 1986). The SDT is stimulated by ideational change centered on individualization that leads to stronger desires for self-actualization and was made possible by three revolutions: a contraceptive revolution, a sexual revolution, and a gender revolution. Combined, the three provided women with nearly complete control over their childbearing, strengthened their autonomy from men both economically and socially, and relaxed the need for marriage (Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 2004). As a consequence of these revolutions and the value transformations that accompanied them, pronounced changes in family patterns emerged throughout Europe, with little historical precedence, especially, in the former socialist countries, triggering governments' concern and sometimes pronatalist policy responses (Goldstein et al., 2009; Sobotka, 2008).

In line with family changes as an outcome of the SDT, we would expect to see the life course of adults follow more heterogeneous paths, according to individuals' preferences. Indeed, we have seen cohort change from a pattern of "early, compacted, and simple" to "late, protracted, and complex" (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010). This corresponds to foregoing or at least postponing marriage and childbearing, having fewer children overall, and less enduring partnerships. Even though the desire to form a household with a partner exists, ideational changes notwithstanding, the sense of urgency and the norms that structure the timing of this event have likely changed according to the theory. Moreover, ideas about love and partnership may have shifted toward what Giddens (1992) refers to as the "pure relationship," whereby partnerships are formed to meet one's own desires and expectations. These criteria may be more difficult to meet, thus delaying the process of finding a stable partner.

Another set of mechanisms are highlighted in the literature on economic uncertainty, linking the phenomenon both to the postponement of family formation (including both starting a co-residential union and having children) and partnership stability (see, e.g., Alola et al., 2020; Blossfeld et al., 2005; Vignoli et al., 2020). Accordingly, individuals who gained independence via the gender and sexual revolutions may face economic barriers due to, for example, pronounced labor market uncertainties that restrict opportunities for moving in together or leaving an unsatisfactory co-residential union. There is little research specifically on co-residential union avoidance or postponement, but

much on marriage. In line with Oppenheimer's (1988) argument on uncertainty about men's future earnings being a barrier to marriage, the research indeed shows that when economic prospects are poor for men, marriage is delayed (for Europe see, e.g., Kalmijn, 2011; for the US see Oppenheimer, 2003). In contrast, the economic context can affect divorce positively or negatively. Difficult economic circumstances due to unemployment or a decline in household income increase conflict in relationships related to stress accumulation (Conger et al., 1990); Fischer and Liefbroer (2006) found higher dissolution rates when consumer confidence declined. Poor economic conditions can however increase the costs of separation and living independently, which is why we often see that divorce rates are pro-cyclical (Amato & Beattie, 2011; Schaller, 2013).

2.2. Union Dynamics and Fertility

The relationship between union dynamics and fertility can operate due to both processes responding to the same mechanisms. As highlighted above, the SDT and economic considerations are key in the theoretical discussions of union postponement and instability, as well as childbearing. In this sense, the determinants of delaying a co-residential union are the same determinants of delaying childbearing. Alternatively, the relationship between union dynamics and fertility can operate mechanically in contexts without high adolescent fertility. As childbearing is closely linked to partnership, there is simply a shorter amount of time to have the children one might wish to have if beginning co-residential unions later in life or ending them earlier. This has generated various branches of research.

One relevant body of research is that specifically on childlessness. Mynarska et al. (2015) show the diversity of the paths that lead to childlessness in terms of educational attainment, labor market experiences, and union histories for the cases of Italy and Poland. Klímová Chaloupková and Hašková (2020) show that never being partnered is a main pathway to childlessness in the Czech Republic. Similarly, the risk of childlessness increases with the number of years one remains without a partner (Keizer et al., 2008). In Norway, both those who have a late entrance into a first union that is short-lived and those who do not quickly enter a union—or have many short unions—have a higher risk of remaining childless (Hart, 2019). Turbulent partnership histories in Germany were also linked to childlessness (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017), as was never partnering (Raab & Struffolino, 2020). In Finland, both fragmented and empty co-residence histories were linked to childlessness (Jalovaara & Fasang, 2017).

Another branch of research focused on the implications of divorce for fertility rates. That union dissolution leads to lower fertility overall has been established in different country contexts (Winkler-Dworak et al., 2017). Thomson et al. (2012) also take into account changes in the timing of union formation. Partnership dissolution opens the door to a new partnership, which may offer an incentive for additional childbearing, regardless of the parity already reached. Assessing the contribution of multi-partner fertility to total fertility as a response to the expectation that unstable unions would naturally lead to fewer children, Thomson et al. (2020) find that childbearing within a second (or later) union comprises only a small share of total childbearing (up to 9%) in 14 European countries.

2.3. Post-Socialist Research

Post-socialist countries can be considered as ideal contexts for the theoretical pathways for change in union dynamics, involving individualization and uncertainty. With the collapse of the socialist system, norms and institutional structures shifted dramatically and rapidly. But the changes were not uniform. From a remarkably similar set of conditions in the 1980s, this set of countries underwent individual processes of identity and nation-building, market reforms, and policy development. In addition, the transformation was accompanied by worsening economic conditions that were either brief or protracted, depending on the context (Gimpelson, 2001). In other words, we should not expect the countries to form a cohesive group on anything besides a shared history of state socialism. Indeed, we should expect that institutional developments affected the degree of individualization (Esping-Andersen, 2007) if we extrapolate from existing comparative European research (Mayer, 2001). When addressing their family dynamics we also need to take into account the massive emigration of young people from this region, especially Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria, to Western and Northern Europe (e.g., Black et al., 2010).

In the literature on (or including) post-socialist countries, many of the same countries in this study have been addressed, sometimes comparatively, showing a delay in marriage and union formation, with much focus on the shift from marital to non-marital unions and childbearing (Andersson & Philipov, 2002; Andersson et al., 2017; Billari, 2005; Hoem et al., 2009; Puur et al., 2012; Sobotka & Berghammer, 2021).

Increases in divorce risk or rates in post-socialist countries have been documented in studies on Bulgaria (Philipov & Jasilioniene, 2008), Hungary (e.g., Spéder & Kamarás, 2008), Romania (Mureşan et al., 2008), and Russia (e.g., Solodnikov, 2016). To date, the only comparative research on divorce has been Philipov and Dorbritz's (2003) study based on aggregated data and Härkönen et al.'s (2020) study based on individual-level data. Both studies argued that the transition from state socialism did not lead to a clear divergence from previous divorce trends. Our research addresses union instability more broadly and not just divorce; if we were to extrapolate based on divorce trends, which may or may not be indicative, previous findings imply that the contribution

of union instability to time spent in unions is likely to vary across the countries we study and will not necessarily be tied to changes occurring after the transition from socialism began.

Based on the literature to date, no clear expectations can be drawn about which union dynamic trends will generate the most change over time, nor in which countries they will be strongest. As all countries included here experienced a fertility decline during the 1990s, there is potential for union dynamics to have changed in all countries if we assume they are linked. Approaching the question from this angle (i.e., how fertility may have been influenced by union dynamics), it is worth considering differences concerning the fertility decline. Two different patterns of fertility decline have been identified, whereby some post-socialist countries (a) maintained a relatively early age at parenthood but saw a decline in second and higher parity births, while others (b) experienced more postponement of parenthood but kept similar levels of second and higher parity births (Billingsley, 2010; Billingsley & Duntava, 2017; Spoorenberg, 2015). The latter pattern appears more commonly in countries that were not former Soviet republics and that experienced more rapid and successful economic transitions (Billingsley, 2010; Sobotka, 2003). If union dynamics contributed to fertility decline, we might expect delayed union formation to be the dominant contributor to fewer years in a union in countries with pronounced fertility postponement, whereas this is less likely to be the case where unions are not postponed. We might instead expect to see union instability shorten the years spent with a co-resident partner where higher parity births declined. To be clear, union stability is not currently a common explanation for lower-second and third-birth progressions in the literature.

3. Data and Methods

The data used for this study is based on the Harmonized Histories dataset (Perelli-Harris et al., 2010) in which the partnership histories, as well as other information, were harmonized across generations and gender surveys for over 20 countries. Generations and gender surveys rely on a nationally representative sampling strategy documenting all partnerships and their timing along with other life course events based on retrospective respondents' reports. Participants were asked about when they entered and ended their first co-residential union (marital or non-marital), if ever, and the sex of their partner. Subsequent unions were documented as well. While recall errors may occur, the country data for the participating countries have been carefully assessed and deemed of high quality (see, e.g., Festy & Prioux, 2002; Vergauwen et al., 2015). The sample that was created covers enough birth cohorts to track changes from before the end of state socialism to as recent years as possible. Table 1 lists the years in which each country was surveyed as well as the latest cohort to reach age 30 by the time of the survey. We limit the oldest cohorts to those born in 1945.

The main comparison is of the birth cohorts who came of age before the transition from socialism began (1945–1969) and those born later (1970s). For a few countries, we are also able to assess trends for the cohorts born in the 1980s. Because we focus only on cohorts that reached age 30 by the time of the interview, the differences in survey years have no impact on the results. However, this difference does mean that in some countries we can follow more recently born cohorts but not in others. The recent cohorts in these few countries can only be compared among themselves. The 11 countries are separated into two groups in the presentation of results based on whether they were once part of the Soviet Union or not. Not only did the collapse of state socialism occur a little later for the Soviet Union, but, as mentioned, distinct paths in fertility development, as well as structural differences, make this division sensible (e.g., Aliyev, 2015; Billingsley & Duntava, 2017).

As the purpose of this study is to explore and describe trends, the methods used are relatively straightforward.

Table 1. Descriptive information related to the Harmonized Histories.

	Survey years	Oldest cohort	Latest birth cohort reaching age 30	Number of women in sample	Number of women reaching age 30
Belarus	2017	1945	1987	5059	4079
Bulgaria	2004	1945	1977	5475	4093
Czech R.	2005	1945	1978	3933	2843
Estonia	2004–2005	1945	1974	3460	2709
Georgia	2006	1945	1979	4162	3331
Hungary	2004	1945	1978	5285	4443
Kazakhstan	2018	1945	1988	8538	6868
Lithuania	2006	1945	1979	3642	2674
Poland	2010–2011	1945	1984	9172	7661
Romania	2005	1945	1975	4071	3344
Russia	2004	1945	1977	4973	3961

Using the data on union histories, we calculate (a) the share of all women in a given birth cohort that had not entered at least one co-residential union by their 30th birthday and (b) the share of all women in a given birth cohort that are still in their first union at the age of 30. All women in our samples who reached the age of 30 by the time of the interview were included for the first calculation on ever entering a union, whereas we select only women who entered a union and reached the age of 30 in the second calculation related to union stability.

For the analysis of delayed union formation, we extract the median age at entering the first co-residential union from Kaplan Meier failure estimates in which the process time is age: Women enter the risk set at age 16 and exit at first union or the month of the interview. The Kaplan Meier estimate is the best way to establish statistics such as the median age at an event because it allows all people in the data to contribute to the estimate, even if some individuals under observation have not yet completed the event under study, meaning they are censored before the event occurs. All women in our samples were included for the analysis of union formation timing, up to the cohort for which we were able to derive an estimate for median age. The specific cohorts are detailed in Figures 1 through 4.

For the analysis of total time spent in a union, we sum the months in which women stated they were in a union including all union spells that occur before the age of 30. All women who reach the age of 30 were included in the analysis of total time spent in unions by that same age.

4. Results

The first question we address is whether the timing of entering a first co-residential partnership has been delayed over cohorts. We show the timing of the delay onset and the extent of the delay using the same procedure and cohorts across all 11 countries. We estimate as many of the years in the most recent cohort bunch as possible to derive a median estimate. For example, in Belarus we can use the 1990 to 1995 birth cohorts because at least 50% of these women entered a union by the time they were surveyed in 2017. In contrast, Bulgarian women were surveyed most recently in 2004 and we can estimate a median age only for the 1980–1981 cohorts. Which birth cohorts can be included is a function of both when the survey was administered and how much union formation has been postponed. We cannot derive a median estimate for Hungary at all for the 1980s cohorts due to the greater extent of postponement there than in other countries that were surveyed in similar years.

Although the trend is toward a delay in entering co-residential unions, the increase in age was not universal. For the 1960s cohorts, who came of age before the transition from socialism commenced, the median age at first union was between 21 and 23 for all countries (Russia had the youngest age at 20.9 and Kazakhstan the oldest at 23.1). By the time the 1970s cohorts came of age, this age range had spread from 20 to 24 (Figure 1).

In general, the age at first union formation has been more homogenous outside the Soviet Union than within it. But whereas Bulgaria and Romania saw little change for the cohorts of the 1970s vis-á-vis the 1960s cohorts, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland showed a rapid increase in age at first union: almost a year in the Czech Republic and Poland, and over two years in Hungary. Bulgaria and Romania experienced the onset of union postponement first for the 1980s cohorts that came of age in the 2000s, with increases of over a year and a half in Bulgaria and almost two and a half in Romania. Strong union postponement continued in the other three Central and South-Eastern European (CSEE) countries as well, even though the median age at union formation in Hungary could not be estimated for the 1980s cohort, as mentioned above. For the cohorts and countries for which the median age could be estimated, we see a two-year delay between the 1960s and 1980s cohorts, most of which occurred after the transition from state socialism.

In the post-Soviet group, Kazakhstan stands out with having the latest age at union formation of all countries for nearly all cohorts. Worth noting is the different pattern in this group compared to CSEE countries with a slight decline in the age at entering a first union until cohorts born in the 1980s. This mirrors what we know about the timing of first birth trends in Russia (see, e.g., Billingsley & Duntava, 2017). The transition from socialism, therefore, did not seem to have the same impact on this group. The pattern of a later union postponement, similar to Bulgaria and Romania, appeared in all countries, except Kazakhstan, where postponement of union formation occurred only in the 1990s cohorts. Georgia and Russia experienced the most pronounced postponement of union formation from the 1970s to 1980s cohorts, with a delay of 2.5 and 2.1 years, respectively. In the cohorts considered, Estonia shows the least postponement (only 0.6 years).

The second question we set out to answer involved whether the share of people never entering a co-residential union by age 30 has increased. An increase in the median age at entering a union (see Figure 1) could be driven by either more people not finding partners or choosing not to move in together with their partner or both. Only women who reached age 30 by the time of the interview are analyzed here. For each country, we calculate the share in each birth cohort group that had not entered at least one co-residential union by their 30th birthday.

As shown in Figure 1, post-Soviet states were more heterogeneous in their union behavior than those in our sample from CSEE countries. In our earliest cohorts (1945–1959), between seven and 17% of women had not entered a co-residential union in CSEE countries, whereas it ranged from eight to 30% in the former Soviet countries—and again, an increasing trend appears for CSEE countries but not for post-Soviet.

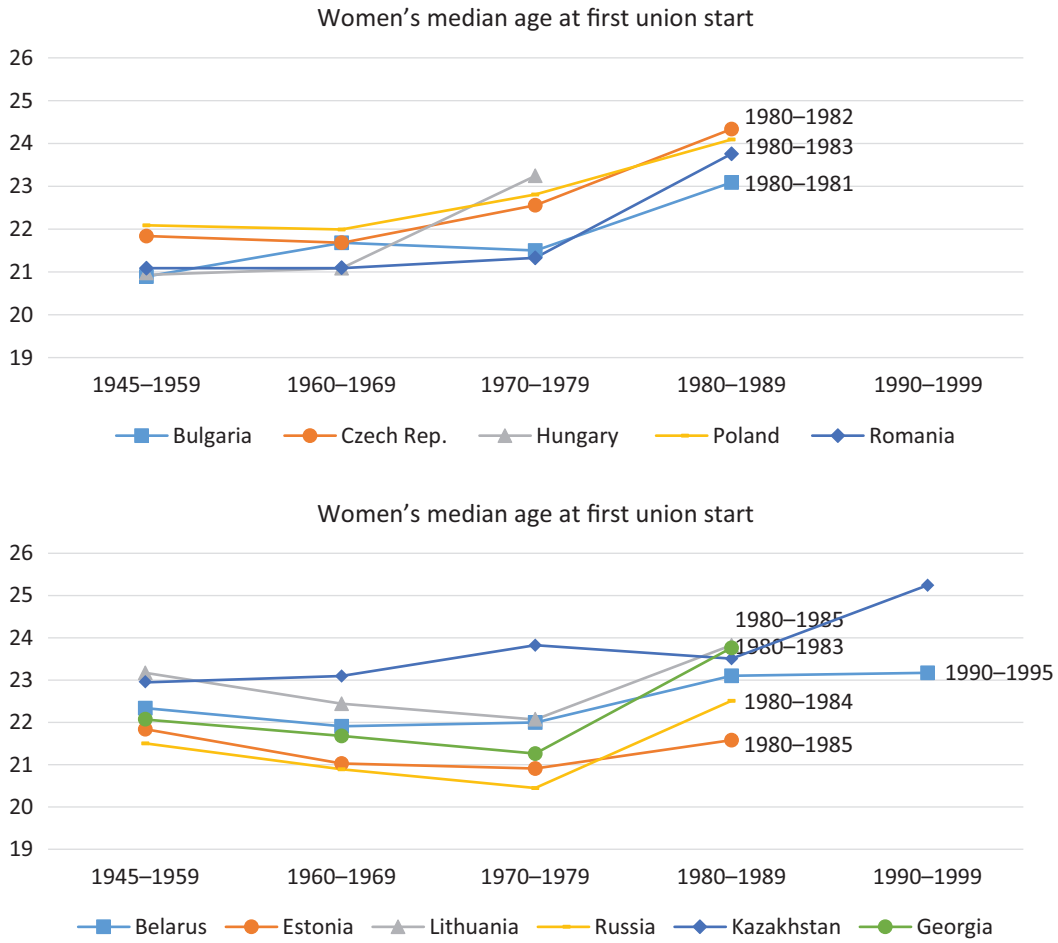

Figure 1. Women's median age at the start of a first co-residential union, by country and birth cohort. Notes: Given the survey year and the degree of partnership postponement, not all birth cohorts could be included in the analysis; no final cohorts are specifically indicated for Hungary and Poland in the top panel and Kazakhstan in the lower panel because the cohorts follow the legend.

Figure 2 reveals three different trends. First, there was a slight increase across birth cohorts before the transition from state socialism in Hungary, Poland, Georgia, and Estonia, and a more pronounced increase thereafter in these countries except for Poland. Second, in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Romania we see an increase in the share not entering a union only after the transition for the 1970s cohorts. The third trend, with no consistent change across cohorts, or even a decrease for the youngest cohorts characterizes Belarus, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, and Russia. Putting the two pieces of information depicted in Figures 1 and 2 together, it would seem that only in Hungary might it be the case that some of the postponement of union formation may actually be driven by an increase in those who do not form a union at all by age 30. This conclusion is based on the fact that only in Hungary is there a relatively pronounced increase in both the age at forming a union and the share of women who did not enter a co-residential union by the age of 30.

In the third analysis, we focus on whether the share of women still in their first union at age 30 has declined. We would expect such a decline over time if there is an increase in partnership instability when women are in their twenties. For this analysis, we again only selected women who had both reached their 30th birthday by the interview and entered a co-residential by age 30. In CSEE countries (Figure 3), we see striking similarities between the Czech Republic and Hungary on the one hand, in which a lower share of women (just under 90% for the earliest cohorts) was still in their first union by the age of 30, and between Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania, in which the share was higher (around 95% for the earliest cohorts). Most post-Soviet countries cluster at the upper side of this range when we look at the earliest cohorts, but Estonia and Russia settle below the others at around 80% of women maintaining their first union until age 30.

A decline in the share of these unions lasting is notable across both groups of countries. Kazakhstan is the only country where there was no marked decline, hence we can conclude that partnership instability was not affecting the amount of time women spent in co-residential unions there. The pace of decline was similar across the rest of the countries, even with

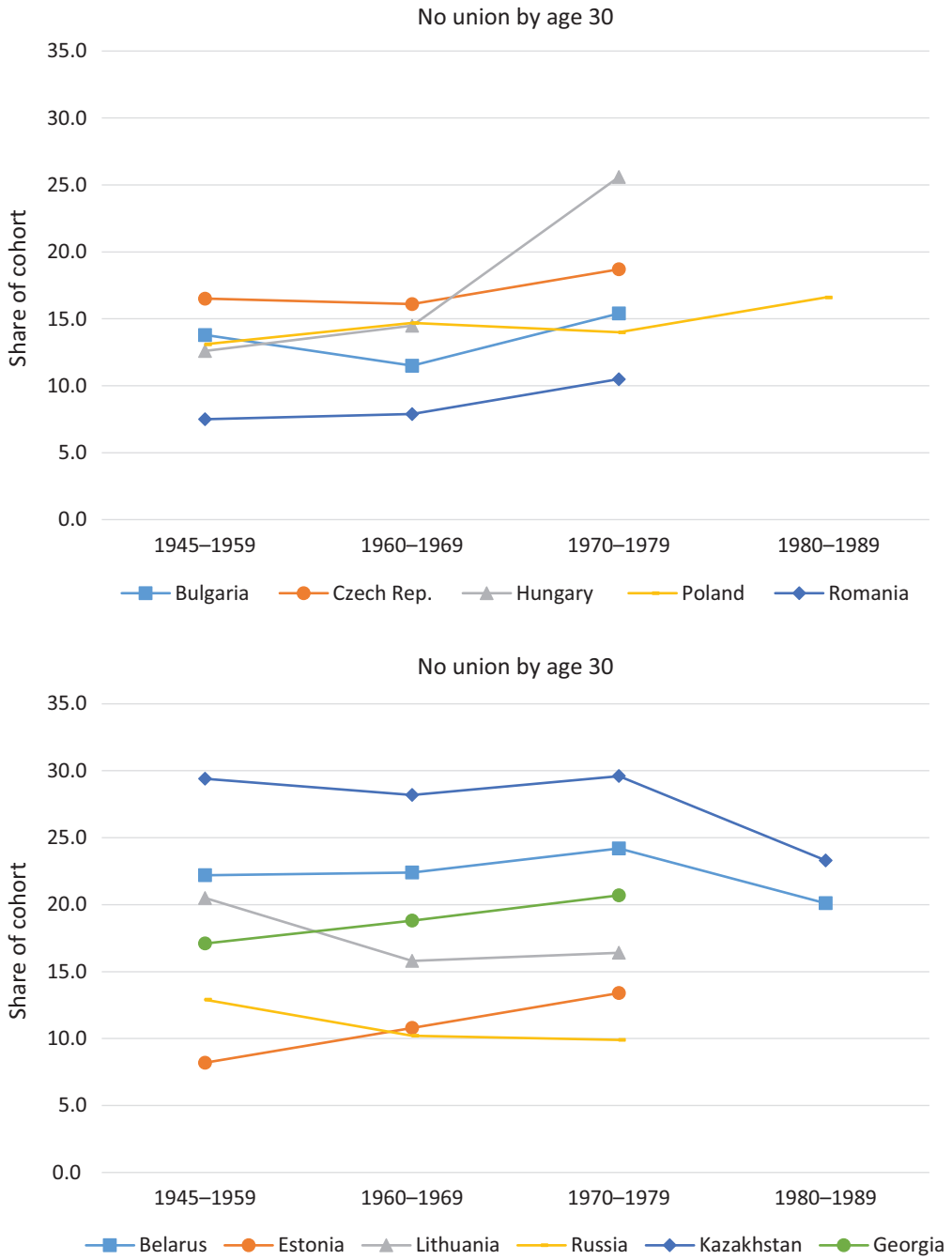

Figure 2. Share of women that did not enter a co-residential union by the age of 30 by country and birth cohorts.

their different starting levels. The trends appear to be long-term and not related to the transition, which is what comparative research specifically on divorce has shown (Härkönen et al., 2020). The only exception is Russia, where a substantial decline in first union stability appeared for the transition cohort (1970s). These findings point to partnership instability particularly contributing to fewer years spent in a union during women's twenties in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Russia, and increasingly in all countries except Bulgaria and Kazakhstan.

Finally, we calculate the total number of years spent in a co-residential union before age 30 and observe whether it has declined over cohorts. Note that we also include here women who were never in a union. This means that we pick up the contribution of changes in the share of women never entering a union before age 30, a delay in union formation, and union instability before age 30. The trends for only those women who were ever in a union before age 30 are displayed in the Supplementary File (Figure A).

In our earliest cohorts, women in CSEE countries spent more years in co-residential unions in general (between 6.1 and 7.4) than women in the Soviet republics (between 5.2 and 6.4). But this lower range of time spent in unions in the latter group held relatively

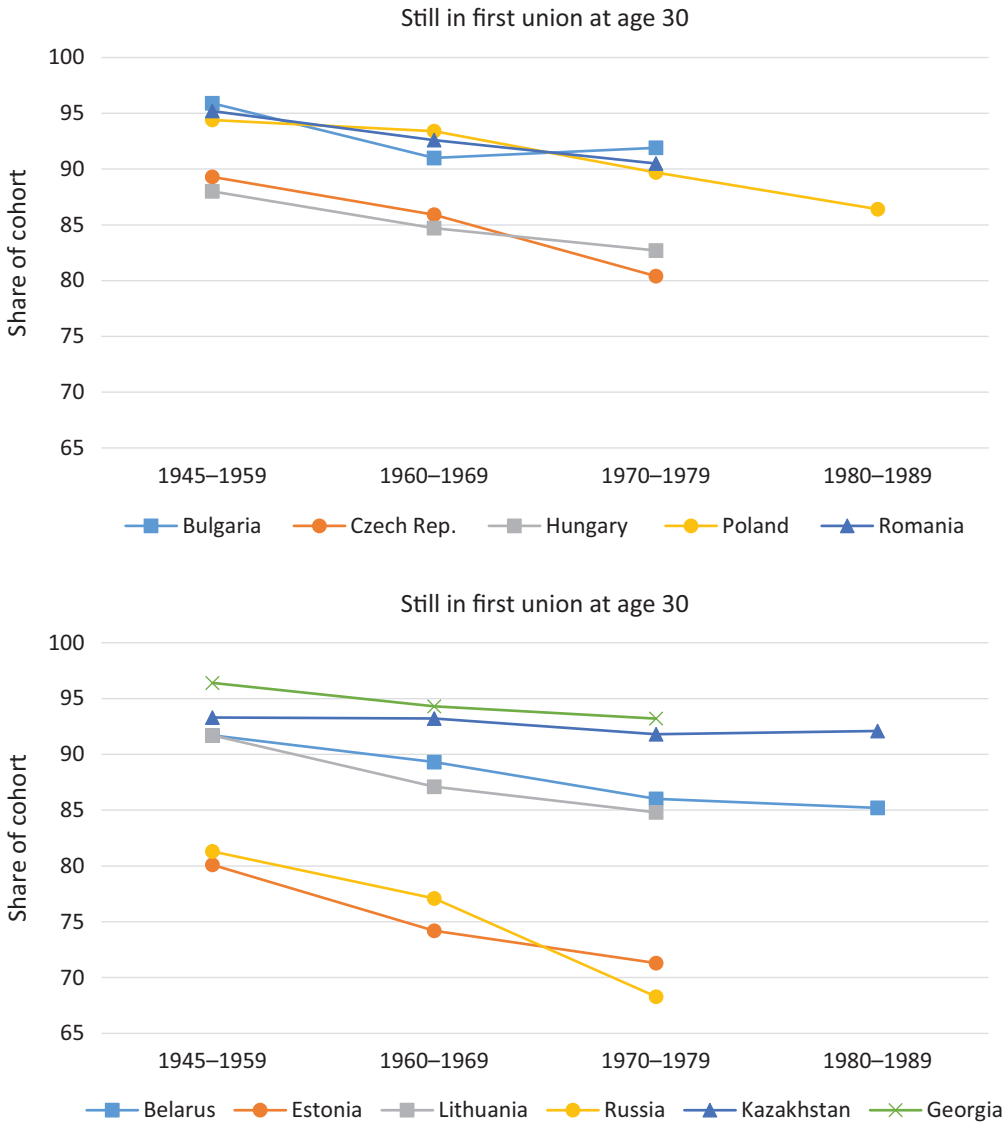

Figure 3. Share of women that are still in their first co-residential union at the age of 30 by country and birth cohorts.

stable across the cohorts even during the transition from state socialism. In contrast, CSEE countries saw a universal decline in the number of years with a partner (Figure 4). Hungary showed a strong decline (a loss of 2.1 years) in time spent in union(s) for the transition cohort. In a rare estimate for the 1980s cohorts, Poland showed a loss of one and a half years. The remaining CSEE countries lost between half a year and a year. This more moderate decline appears to be part of a longer trend in Bulgaria and Romania.

The post-Soviet countries mainly show a slight decline for the transition cohort, except for Georgia, and with recovery in Kazakhstan for the most recent cohort. The change for the post-Soviet countries amounted to less than half a year. Interestingly, very little change appeared for Russian women; the strong increase in union instability there seems to be counter-balanced by the younger age at entering a union until the very last cohort.

The same procedure is followed to estimate the number of years spent in unions up to age 35 (see Supplementary File, Figure B). While this is arguably a better measure (than observing only up to age 30) of understanding how this precondition for childbearing has changed over time, it includes a substantially reduced number of women in the latest cohorts as those who did not reach age 35 by the time of the interview were excluded. The same general trends appear, nevertheless.

5. Discussion

Despite much focus in the literature on changes in childbearing behavior, little attention has been given to whether there were changes in a basic pre-condition for childbearing, particularly co-residential unions. This study was primarily concerned with the coexistence of partnership changes in recent decades and how they together shape the possibilities women have for

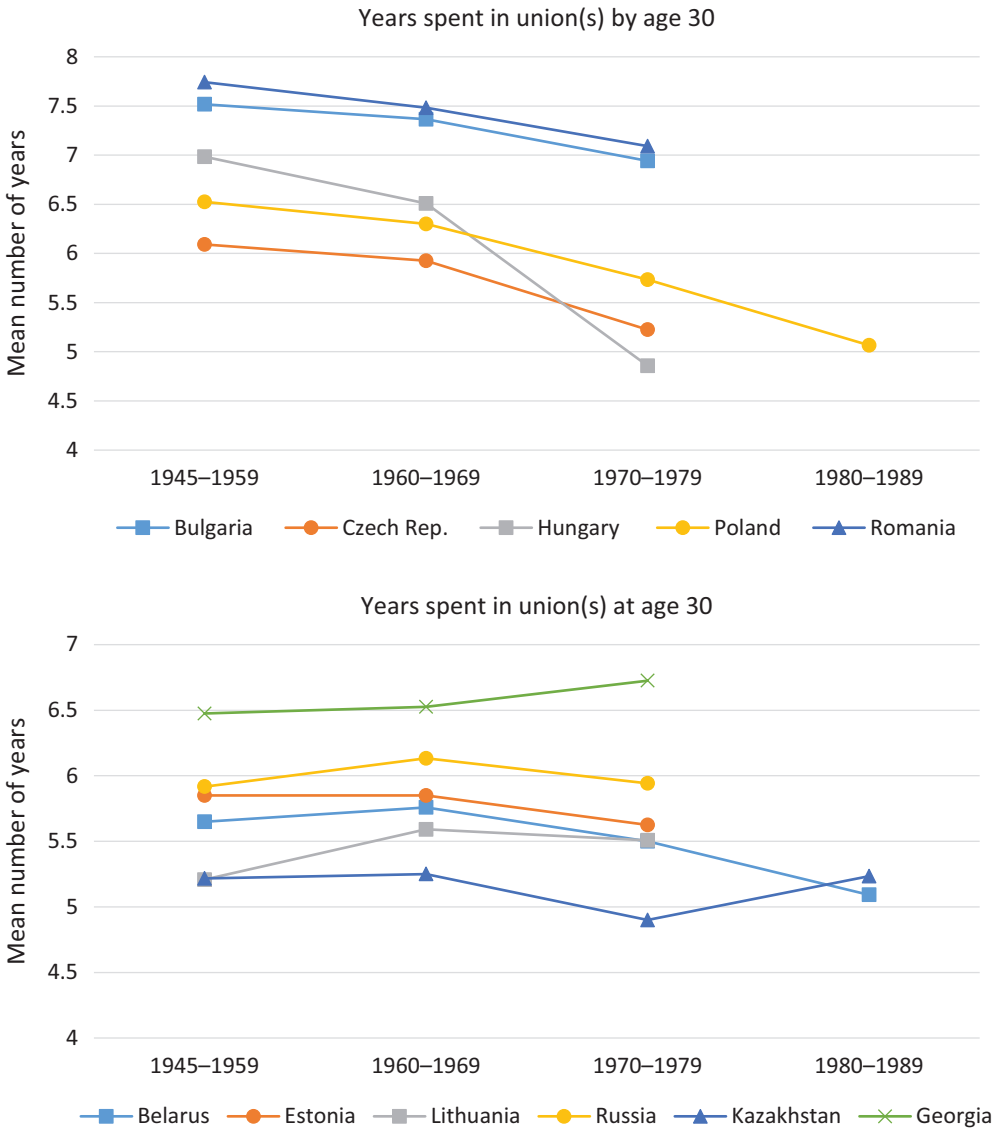

Figure 4. Average number of years women spent in co-residential unions by country and birth cohorts.

childbearing. We focused on the former socialist countries in which fertility rates declined dramatically, particularly following the transition from state socialism. This group of countries is far from homogenous, given variations in the success of market reforms (Bohle & Greskovits, 2007) as well as changes in norms and values (Sobotka, 2011).

Before considering our findings, a few limitations should be highlighted. First, our data relies on respondents remembering when their unions began and ended, and there may be some margin of error due to difficulties recalling the exact dates. Whereas the oldest cohorts could have a more difficult time recalling dates than younger cohorts, the pattern of nearly universal marriage entered at young ages that dominated partnership dynamics in the region at the time they were young and formed a family mitigates such concerns, as well as the start of all unions beginning with moving in together. As mentioned earlier, we did not distinguish between marital and non-marital co-residential unions, even though the extent of non-marital unions as well as whether such union is considered suitable for childbearing are likely to vary across countries. Finally, we do not account for other potential contributors to low fertility rates, including substantial unregistered emigration of young people.

Overall, our results show that partnership dynamics have changed to a degree that they may be a potential contributor to declining fertility rates in CSEE countries, and in Hungary in particular. We observed a striking decline (2.1 years) after the transition began in the time women spent in co-residential unions over the cohorts in this country. By the 1980s cohorts, women in Poland had lost a year and a half, and this continued decline likely applies to countries with similar trends for which we cannot estimate the development for younger cohorts (the Czech Republic in particular). In Poland, this decline seemed to be driven by both a later age at entering a union and less stability of co-residential unions. In Hungary, all three processes (delay, abstaining

from a union, and instability) contributed to fewer years that women spent in unions, but only union instability appears to have been a long-term trend and not a feature of the post-transition cohorts.

Partnership dynamics have changed enough in other CSEE countries to have potentially contributed to fertility decline as well, albeit of less importance than in Hungary (until more recently in Poland and potentially the Czech Republic). Except in Hungary, this appears to have little to do with women not entering a union at all, but rather by a new trend of postponed co-residential unions and a continued, but modest, increase in partnership instability. The delayed formation of a union mirrors the more pronounced postponement of parenthood visible in this group of countries (Billingsley & Duntava, 2017).

We considered countries with a shared history of being part of the Soviet Union separately. There is more diversity within this group than between the two groups of countries in terms of first co-residential union timing, never in a union by the age of 30, and partnership instability. This is in keeping with expectations based on varied institutional developments and how these shape life course developments (Mayer, 2001). Nevertheless, we see a very different scenario than in CSEE countries.

Most importantly, we do not see a trend toward fewer years spent in union across cohorts in the post-Soviet countries. In overall years lost in co-residential unions, Kazakhstan looks the most similar to the CSEE countries discussed. Women in the post-transition cohort lost a little over half a year in their twenties; but unlike in Poland, the trend reversed instead of deepening with the 1980s cohorts. Interestingly, this recovery in time spent in unions occurred at the same time that postponement of first union began. The factor that may explain the recovery and offset the impact of postponement was a notable decline in the share of women who do not partner by age 30, similarly to Belarus. Pointing toward a strong link between partnership and fertility dynamics, the reversal of this union trend mirrors a reversal in the declining fertility trend observed in more recent years in Kazakhstan (Spoorenberg, 2015).

Belarus and Estonia saw a very minor decline—about two or three months—in time spent in co-residential unions for the 1970s cohorts compared to older cohorts. The contribution of union dynamics along the lines studied here to childbearing in these two contexts could therefore be only very minor, if at all. However, looking at the 1980s cohorts in Belarus, a more substantial decline in years spent in a co-residential unions appears. This is mostly driven by postponement of the first union, as the median age for this cohort increased by over a year. Union instability appears to have contributed slightly as well. The small decline observed in Estonia cannot likely be explained by postponement of first co-residential union (at least not in the 1970s cohorts, the most recent we can observe there). Rather it appears due to both partnership instability and an increase in the share of women who do not partner by the age of 30.

The final three countries—Georgia, Lithuania, and Russia—experienced very little change in the time women spent in a co-residential union during their twenties. These three countries saw a fall in the age at first co-residential union instead of postponement for the pre-transition cohort. This was not unusual for the post-Soviet countries, as the median age either held constant or was dipping for these women; it was not until the 1980s cohorts that we saw an increase in the median age (except for Kazakhstan). This increasingly early entrance into co-residential unions was strong enough to offset the sharp increase in union instability (Lithuania experienced only a modest increase, whereas Georgia saw barely any change at all). Plus, a steady but small increase in the share of women who never entered a union during their twenties in Georgia (with only negligible change in Lithuania and Russia) mattered little for total years in a union. By the time women are in their early 30s, however, these other union dynamics (instability and never entering a union) appear to become more dominant, as we can see more signs of a decline in total years spent in a union when considering trends up to age 35 (see Supplementary File, Figure B). Whether union stability has the potential, as a single contributor, to provoke the decline in higher parity births in Russia, for example, is something that may be worth further exploring.

Taken together we can say that the changes in early co-residential union dynamics may have contributed to the fertility decline in CSEE countries, but probably played a limited role in the post-Soviet states. Just as we found various patterns of changing union dynamics in these 11 countries, the early stages of family building are less static also elsewhere in the world. Marriages are increasingly postponed in advanced societies elsewhere in Europe, North America (for an overview see Oláh et al., 2021), and Asia, but this trend is accompanied by rising singlehood only in certain contexts displaying long-term extremely low fertility, in particular, Southeast and East Asia (Raymo et al., 2015; Yeung et al., 2018). All in all, a better understanding of the relationship between partnerships and childbearing is necessary if partnership dynamics are to be considered as new avenues for policy-making aimed at sustainable societal development.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

Growing Childlessness and One-Child Families in Slovakia in the Shadow of Fragile Pronatalism

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Abstract
The model of very low childlessness and the low prevalence of one-child families was once important for Slovak society. The collapse of the Communist regime, however, led to many changes in reproductive behaviour. This article aims to analyse the development of cohort childlessness and the prevalence of one-child families in Slovakia. Possible scenarios of childlessness and one-child families are presented. The article tries to place the obtained results within a broader framework of social and gender inequalities, existing barriers to parenthood, and family policy settings in Slovakia. The results confirm that the onset of the postponement process, combined with limited recuperation, especially of second and further children among women born since the second half of the 1960s, has brought a quite substantial increase in the proportion of childless and "one-child" women. The persistence of some social and gender differences and obstacles in reconciling work and family, which has only recently seen a response from family policy in Slovakia, was confirmed; however, the impact of these new tools on reproduction appears to be obscure.

Keywords
barriers to parenthood; childlessness; fragile pronatalism; gender inequalities; one-child families; Slovakia; social inequalities

Issue
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1. Introduction

From a historical point of view, the Slovak population has been characterized by early and almost universal marriage and motherhood (Šprocha & Tišliar, 2016). As some analyses show (e.g., Frejka & Sardon, 2004; Potančoková, 2011; Šprocha & Tišliar, 2016), Slovakia was long characterized by a very low proportion of one-child families. The period of the Communist regime strengthened these features of demographic reproduction (Potančoková et al., 2008; Šprocha & Tišliar, 2016). The collapse of that regime in 1989 and the resulting avalanche of economic, social, cultural, political, and psychological changes led to many dynamic changes in reproductive behaviour (Potančoková et al., 2008; Sobotka, 2011; Šprocha & Tišliar, 2016). In terms of fertility, there was a decline in intensity, which was largely saturated by the process of postponing motherhood to a later age (Potančoková, 2011; Sobotka, 2004). As several scholars have shown (Kohler et al., 2002; Sobotka, 2011; Sobotka et al., 2011), the process of postponing maternity and overall fertility to an older age is becoming a universal phenomenon in Europe. Indeed, the decline in fertility in Western Europe has been accompanied by an increase in childlessness (Rowland, 2007). As research by Tanturri et al. (2015) has shown, this applies to all populations regardless of their differences in cultural or socio-economic conditions. Similarly, some studies from post-communist countries (Beaujouan et al., 2016; Sobotka, 2004) suggest that the rise of childlessness could be particularly dynamic in

these populations. The question is how these changes will affect the representation of (non-)voluntarily childless women and women with only one child. An equally important aspect is whether existing population policies and their tools have any significant impact on developmental trajectories in these historically specific changes in reproductive models, and which barriers in the context of social and gender inequalities—particularly concerning women—apply to Slovakia.

This article presents an analysis of the development of childlessness and one-child families in Slovakia with an emphasis on the postponement of fertility after 1989. This was closely related to an effort to determine the possible development scenarios among the cohorts of the 1970s and 1980s. The obtained results were placed within the broader context of existing barriers to parenthood with a special focus on gender and social inequalities and family policy in Slovakia. The main contribution of this article is a deepening of the existing debate on the development of these phenomena in the context of transformational changes in post-communist countries, especially concerning possible existing barriers and gender inequalities. Another contribution of this article is its emphasis on Slovakia, which is largely overlooked in international research yet is characterized by relatively significant barriers to parenthood and social and gender equality problems.

2. Childlessness, One-Child Families, Fertility Postponement, and Social and Gender Inequalities in Slovakia

2.1. The General Theoretical Framework of Demographic Change

Changes in demographic behaviour in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 are most often explained by relying on theoretical frameworks which can be differentiated into two main groups according to the main factors. The first theoretical framework is based on structural (economic) factors. According to Becker's (1993) fertility model, people rationally consider the direct and indirect costs of parenthood and its benefits. In line with this, Mills and Blossfeld (2003) show that unstable labour market conditions, unemployment, insufficient salaries, and part-time or non-standard jobs may create a need for young people to strategically postpone the realization of positive fertility intentions. As highlighted by McDonald (2002), starting a family poses a certain threat as it is not possible to estimate in advance the direct and (in particular) indirect costs associated with parenthood. In years of crisis, various structural barriers to parenthood may come into play. Uncertainty, discontinuity, and disorientation can hurt the acceptance of long-term commitments such as parenthood (Hašková, 2006).

The second framework is based on values and norms. It is probably most comprehensively postulated in the theory of the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe, 1995; van de Kaa, 1987). Its main features include a change in values and life orientations towards individualism, self-expression, and emancipation (which are reflected in the way families are formed), attitudes towards family planning, and motivations for parenthood (van de Kaa, 1997). In the postmodern era, moreover, there has been growing importance placed on education, career growth, and flexibility along with a wide range of family planning options. According to Sobotka (2004) and Frejka (2008), the radical and relatively abrupt change in economic, political, and social circumstances in post-communist countries in the early 1990s formed the basis for emerging changes in the values system, norms, and attitudes associated with marriage and parenthood. These aspects in connection with the population of Slovakia have not been sufficiently researched, and there are only limited sources of data; therefore, this article does not address these aspects in the empirical analysis.

It is also important to mention one of the most discussed theoretical frameworks combining structural and normative factors. According to the theory of gender equity (McDonald, 2000), more educated women with work aspirations may encounter several problems primarily related to the rigidity and inertia of gender relations in societies with a persistent traditional status of women and a division of labour between the sexes. These aspects worsen their ability to combine work responsibilities with those concerning the family and the household.

A study of various aspects of gender equality by Neyer et al. (2013) confirmed that full-time employment is important for all childless women and men for the birth of their first child. A more gender-balanced division of household work and care tended to support the intention to become a parent for both sexes (Neyer et al., 2013).

2.2. Barriers to Parenthood in the Context of Social and Gender Inequalities in Slovakia

In the first half of the 1990s, Slovakia experienced several negative aspects of transformation processes: inflation; rapidly rising unemployment, especially among young people and women; the removal of some family and social policy measures; and rising housing prices, combined with declining real incomes and overall living standards—all of these created an unfavourable environment for the fulfilment of reproductive intentions. With the continuing transformation, the structural barriers of parenthood associated with the development of a market economy have become noticeable (Frejka, 2008). Several of them can be identified: There is, for example, the restructuring of the labour market, the emergence of new job opportunities and career building, and a growing degree of competition in the labour market and job insecurity—especially among young people. There are also gradual changes in the values and norms associated with family and parenthood. The acceptance of childlessness, single motherhood, cohabitation,

divorce, and children outside of marriage is increasing (Frejka, 2008).

Parenthood brings an increased vulnerability to social risks associated with the interruption of paid work, reduced income, increased expenses, and difficulties in connection with childcare and the return to the labour market (Gerbery, 2017). In families with small children, the problems associated with the deterioration of the financial and material situation of the household, the prospects of advancement in employment, and the chances of retaining or obtaining an interesting job are significant (Filadelfiová & Gerbery, 2014). Nonetheless, these impacts are quite gender asymmetric, and one can even talk about a significant "penalty of motherhood" in Slovakia (Gerbery, 2017). Insufficient institutional care capacities for young children also contribute to this situation. The 1990s in particular brought about a reduction in the number of crèches and kindergartens. Although there has been an increase in these facilities in recent years, this is not enough to meet the existing demand. The number of unprocessed applications for the placement of a child in a kindergarten in Slovakia has almost quadrupled (compared to 2000) to more than 18 thousand (Dubovský & Kováč, 2021). As a result, Slovakia has one of the lowest proportions of children aged two years attending care facilities in the EU27 and it lags significantly behind other countries in the case of children aged three and four years (Eurostat, 2022).

Insufficient institutional security, combined with discrimination against mothers of young children by employers (Turkovič, 2021) as well as prevailing "proper mother" standards (see next paragraph), significantly affect the presence of mothers of young children in the labour market. Indeed, Slovak mothers of young children (under 14 years of age) have one of the lowest employment rates in the EU27 (62% vs the EU average of 73%; OECD, 2022). It is clear that labour market participation rates decline sharply with the declining age of a young child. In the case of a child under three years of age, the employment rate of women in Slovakia is the second-lowest in the EU27 (19% vs the EU average of 59%; OECD, 2022). As Turkovič (2021) adds, women often enter a vicious circle: Younger childless women are rejected by employers because they are expected to start a family in the near future, whereas women with children are rejected because they are mothers.

Potančoková (2009) identifies the persistence of the norm of all-day childcare by mothers at home and optimally up to the age of three years as the "only proper motherhood." During this period, the mother is supposed to subordinate her ambitions to the needs of the child; job ambitions and career-building paths are particularly problematic (Potančoková, 2009, p. 63). Moreover, as research shows (Grňo, 2006; Lukšík, 2013), women in Slovakia find it very difficult to give up their role as the primary caregivers of children, while the concept of the "irreplaceable mother" and the father in the role of helper is strongly supported in Slovak society. Together, these factors subsequently influence women's decision-making; for example, the purchasing of childcare services on the market is perceived very negatively (Martinkovičová et al., 2015).

Some research (e.g., Chorvát, 2015; Kika & Martinkovičová, 2015) has shown that the most important qualities of the "ideal woman" in Slovakia include the ability to take care of the household, whereas for the "ideal man" it is his ability to provide financial security for the family. This is also reflected in the distribution of domestic work. Chorvát (2015) and Kika and Martinkovičová (2015) state that the performance of unpaid work in Slovakia has a significant gender disparity and that the overall burden on women is significantly higher than it is for men.

A more even distribution of domestic work is an important factor in the perceived higher quality of married life (cohabitation) and overall life satisfaction (Chorvát, 2015). The results of the World Gallup Poll for 2014 (OECD, 2022), which placed Slovakia in a group of countries with below-average levels of reported life satisfaction, pointed to certain problems. Similarly, results on the relationship between life satisfaction and work-life balance based on the European Quality of Life Survey for 2012 (OECD, 2022) indicated a relatively low satisfaction score and hence Slovakia's unfavourable position within the EU27. Slovakia has also been ranked among those countries where women experience increased levels of stress when reconciling work and family responsibilities (Steiber, 2009).

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the position of Slovakia among OECD and EU27 countries was also very unfavourable in terms of setting one's working hours or working from home. In addition, OECD (2022) findings have confirmed significant gender differences; as a result, Slovakia ranks among those countries that disadvantage working women the most. Despite a clear reduction, Slovakia still has one of the highest gender pay gaps (OECD, 2022).

Despite the underdeveloped non-standard forms of employment in Slovakia, there is indeed a higher frequency of part-time and temporary employment among women. It is still the mothers who have to reduce the length of working hours due to childcare (Gerbery, 2017); moreover, according to the OECD Family Database, there has been a deepening of gender differences over time (OECD, 2022).

2.3. Family Policy and Fragile Pronatalism in Slovakia

Efforts to involve the state in the sphere of families and reproduction have a tradition of more than a century in Slovakia (Koubek, 1981). They underwent an intensification during the previous political regime, often in the context of propaganda and ideology (Vaňo, 2009); however, while there were efforts to eliminate social inequalities and differences in living conditions, the emphasis on the active participation of women in the labour market

and institutional state-run care for young children (in the crèche and nursery system) prevailed until around the mid-1960s. In the following period, the emphasis was mainly on the maternal status of women (Koubek, 1981; Vaňo, 2009). In this regard, several pronatalist measures were adopted in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

As stated by Frejka (2008) and Frejka and Basten (2016), this was a gradually built complex of measures consisting of various types of financial aid to individuals and families, the establishment of a network of institutions serving families (crèches and kindergartens), and preferential access to housing for young families with children. An important tool of population policy was state-guaranteed loans, which were used to either obtain or furnish housing. In addition to direct support, it is necessary to mention the system of various indirect subsidies in education, children's meals, and children's clothing. These outlays resulted in a considerable lowering of the costs of childbearing and child-raising (Frejka, 1980).

In the context of the official state-controlled population policy of the former regime, Vaňo (2009) points out that one overlooked negative aspect was a significant reduction in the possibility of free choice. He adds that virtually no tools were created that explicitly sought to reconcile work and family responsibilities and a fairer gender division of care for young children (Vaňo, 2009). For example, a man was entitled to additional maternity leave (from 1964; in 2001 renamed as "parental leave") and a maternity allowance (from 1970; in 1990 renamed as a "parental allowance") only in very serious cases (e.g., the mother was in prison, or she was not able to take care of her children due to health problems). A model of several years of interruption to women's participation in the workforce was thus created and was supported by relatively long maternity and additional maternity leave. The regime automatically counted on women caring for children, which, combined with their high rate of employment (after the child had reached a certain age, usually three years), only exacerbated their double burden (Vaňo, 2009).

After the collapse of the socialist system, paternalistic state interventions in the field of reproduction and the family were replaced by efforts to reduce the amount of money spent and the existing family policy instruments. Especially in the first half of the 1990s, some policy measures were abolished and the availability of institutional care for young children was reduced. As a result of these negative changes in family policy settings, personal (and especially financial) responsibility for reproduction and the family deepened (Mitchell, 2012; Vaňo, 2009). The value of direct financial support for families in relation to wages and commodity prices decreased (Potančoková et al., 2008). The lack of the construction of municipal flats, a poorly developed housing market, and the financial inaccessibility of housing—especially for young people as mortgages were only made more available from the late 1990s—meant that housing became an important barrier to starting a family (Potančoková et al., 2008). In combination with other transformational changes and their effects (Frejka, 2008), this resulted in a sharp decline in fertility in virtually all post-communist countries (Sobotka, 2011). This put considerable pressure on political leaders and created a broader debate on the possibilities, responsibilities, and rights of society to directly influence demographic reproduction (especially in a pronatalist sense) and support the family (Potančoková et al., 2008). In 1996, the Family Policy Concept was adopted. This is a government-approved strategy, evaluated regularly, and within which the main goals of family policies are formed for upcoming years. These include achieving the relative economic independence of families from the state, the success of families in properly functioning (not explicitly defined), the stability of family relationships, the creation of optimal conditions for the self-production of society, and the successful reconciliation of parental and work responsibilities; however, for a long time these were strategic declarations rather than practices (Vaňo, 2009). As Potančoková et al. (2008) add, the emphasis in the 1990s was on economic reform and governments did not develop a welfare state or build a more coherent social policy. It was not until 1998 that the first reforms of the state social support system took place. There has been a shift from universal family allowances to means-tested benefits related to the age of the child. Further changes took place in 2002 and 2004, when family allowances again became a flat-rate benefit. A tax bonus for working parents was also introduced in 2004. At this time, there was the beginning of the second phase of the formation of family policy in Slovakia. This has been characterized by an intensification of interest in family and reproductive issues as well as a gradual effort to adopt some more advanced family policy instruments.

The setting of the amount of financial compensation during maternity and parental leave underwent important changes. In the case of the maternity benefit, there was an increase from approximately 55% to 75% of the daily assessment base. The payment of health insurance (by an employer, the pregnant woman, or the person caring for a child if self-employed) for at least 270 days in the two years preceding childbirth remains a crucial condition for this benefit. Otherwise, the right to a maternity benefit is lost and only the parental allowance is received. In 2011, the duration of collection was extended from 28 to 34 weeks. Another change in the effort to increase the (very low) participation of mothers of young children in the labour market was the possibility for fathers to apply for the maternity benefit.

The amount of parental allowance received up to the child's third birthday has changed much more often. In essence, however, these were only minor adjustments; the parental allowance has ranged from 20% to 28% of the average wage since the early 1990s. In 2020, two levels of parental allowance were introduced. If a beneficiary applies for a parental allowance and has previously received a maternity allowance, the amount of

the parental allowance is set at EUR 370 per month. In other cases, the amount of the parental allowance is set at EUR 270 per month.

In addition to maternity and parental leave and related financial compensation, it is also necessary to mention some other measures and changes. Concerning childbirth, a birth allowance is paid as a one-off financial benefit (EUR 830 for the first to third children and EUR 152 for any further children). In this case, there were several adjustments to the amount of the contribution. Every month, a family allowance (EUR 25.50) is paid for each child. A working parent can also claim a tax bonus per child per month (EUR 46 for children up to six years and EUR 23 per older child). In 2021, a new family policy instrument—a "pregnancy allowance" (EUR 7–11 per day)—has been introduced aimed at women as compensation for expenses during pregnancy.

An important feature of family policy in Slovakia has been the impossibility of choosing whether to work or to use childcare facilities without losing the right to financial benefits (Šťastná et al., 2019). These restrictions were in effect throughout the 1990s. In 2001, having an income was allowed, which, however, reduced the amount of the parental allowance. Since 2005, restrictions on extra income have no longer applied; however, there has been a continued lack of access to public childcare facilities. In 2009, partial compensation (a childcare allowance) for the costs of caring for a child up to three years of age was introduced for working parents. Since 2011, parents have been able to choose either the parental benefit or compensation for childcare costs (up to EUR 280).

It is therefore clear that family policy in Slovakia has a rich range of tools that are mostly universal and cover the needs of families at different stages of the life cycle (Gerbery, 2017). Despite some changes (an increase in expenditure on services for families; see OECD, 2022), the focus on cash benefits remains an important feature; however, their amount is relatively low (Gerbery, 2017). Other important factors include the limited flexibility in the length of parental leave and the range of choice of instruments.

3. Data and Methods

The empirical analysis presented here is primarily based on three data sources. The first is data from the population and housing censuses from 1950 to 2011. The proportions of childless women $\left(p_C^0\right)$ and women with one child $\left(p_C^1\right)$ at the time of each census were constructed for each cohort with completed reproduction:

$$p_C^0 = \frac{P_C^0}{P_C}, \qquad p_C^1 = \frac{P_C^1}{P_C}$$

where:

P_C^0 number of childless women in the cohort (C)

P_C^1 number of women with one child in the cohort(C)

P_C number of women in the cohort(C)

In the next step, the completed cohort fertility rate by parity $\left(CCFR_C^i\right)$ was derived by using the following formulas:

$$CCFR_C^1 = 1 - p_C^0$$

$$CCFR_C^2 = CCFR_C^1 - p_C^1$$

The second source of data comprises period and cohort fertility tables by the age of the mother and birth order (parity). Both tables were constructed using the Human Fertility Database methodology (Jasilioniene et al., 2015) for the period 1990 to 2020 and women born between 1935 and 1990. In the Supplementary File, only a part of the entire methodology is presented which is related to the functions that are used in further work.

To identify the possible impact of the most important tools of family policy in Slovakia after 1989, a period analysis of table first births and duration-specific second-birth rates (Šťastná et al., 2019; Šťastná & Sobotka, 2009) was undertaken (see the Supplementary File).

The process of postponement and recuperation of the first and second births was analysed in a cohort perspective through a modified benchmark model proposed by Sobotka et al. (2011). The first cohort that experienced an increase in the mean age at the first birth that continued for at least five cohorts was chosen as the benchmark cohort (Sobotka et al., 2011, p. 29). In the case of Slovakia, the beginning of the postponement process was identified in the 1965 cohort.

The postponement measure $\left(PM^{i,C}\right)$ presents the maximum difference in the cumulative number of table births $\left(Sb_x^{i,C}\right)$ between the analysed cohort (C) and the benchmark cohort (B = 1965) up to age (m), when this difference reaches the maximum:

$$PM^{i,C} = \sum_{x=2}^{m} \left(Sb_x^{i,C} - Sb_x^{i,B}\right)$$

The recuperation measure $\left(RM^{i,C}\right)$ represents the difference in the cumulative number of table births in the cohort (C) of parity (i) and the benchmark cohort (B) from age (m) to the end of the reproductive period (50 years). In this analysis, the age of 45 years was used as a simplified end of reproductive pathways:

$$RM^{i,C} = \sum_{x=m}^{50/45} \left(Sb_x^{i,C} - Sb_x^{i,B}\right)$$

The degree of recuperation can be measured as a recuperation index (Sobotka et al., 2011):

$$RI^{i,C} = \frac{RM^{i,C}}{\left|PM^{i,C}\right|} \bullet 100$$

The postponement measure and the recuperation index by birth order (i = 1,2) represented essential inputs for constructing an estimate of the development of cohort

childlessness and the proportion of women with one child for the cohorts born between 1970 and 1990. Since information on these cohorts about the final level of the postponement measure was already available, setting the recuperation index was thus seen as decisive for resulting cohort childlessness and the proportion of women with one child.

In total, three possible development scenarios were created. In general, due to the continuously slightly increasing fertility intensity of the first and second orders, there was no expectation of a decrease in the recuperation index. The constant scenario uses the last known level of the recuperation index. It answers the question of what would happen to childlessness and the proportion of women with one child among younger cohorts if the level of recuperation of first and second births did not change. The other two scenarios involve a gradual increase in the recuperation index by 5 percentage points or 10 percentage points to the 1990 cohort.

4. Results

4.1. The Historical Development of Childlessness and Single-Child Families

An analysis of historical data shows that the highest proportion of childless women in Slovakia (14–18%) can be identified in the cohorts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Figure 1). Cohorts from the beginning of the twentieth century were also characterized by the most frequent occurrence of one-child families (12–15%). These groups were adversely affected by the demographic crisis of the First World War, its effects on the marriage market in the interwar period, and the economic crisis in the first half of the 1930s. Among older cohorts for which there is empirical data, as well as among younger ones, the proportion of childless women and women with one child was significantly lower. From the presented findings, it is clear that both reproductive models were historically exceptional in Slovakia and concerned only a limited group of cohorts with deteriorating reproductive conditions. The proportion of one-child families was steadily below 12% among women born in the second half of the 1920s until the second half of the 1950s.

The lowest level was reached by women born in the mid-1940s, where this model represented only about one-tenth. These are cohorts that essentially experienced their entire reproductive period during the specific conditions of the socialist regime. Women's childlessness reached an even lower level. From a peak of about 18% in the late nineteenth-century cohorts, it continuously fell to less than 7% among women born in the late 1930s. Although there is a slight increase in childlessness among younger cohorts, it was not until women born in the first half of the 1960s that the level of 10% was exceeded. On the other hand, the proportion of one-child families increased relatively dynamically among women born in the late 1950s and early 1960s (see Figure 1).

4.2. The Fertility Postponement Transition, the Possible Development of Childlessness, and the Proportion of Women With One Child

The 2011 census data for women with completed reproduction cannot yet reflect the effects of the transformational changes after 1989 on a larger scale. The analysis of the postponement process among women born since the second half of the 1960s confirms that first and second children are increasingly postponed. The cumulative differences in first births among the analysed cohorts (1966–1990) with the reference cohort (1965) gradually increased (Figure 2). In women born in the early 1990s, achieved fertility by the age of 25 (through age) fell by about 0.5 children per woman—i.e., to 35% of the benchmark cohort fertility.

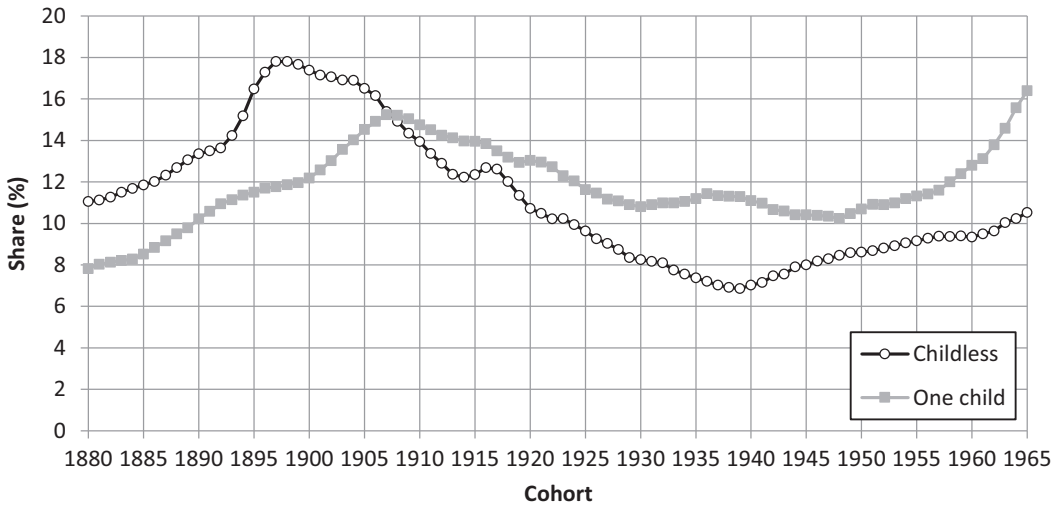

Figure 1. The proportion of childless women and women with one child in Slovakia: 1880–1965 cohorts. Source: Author's calculations based on Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2021b).

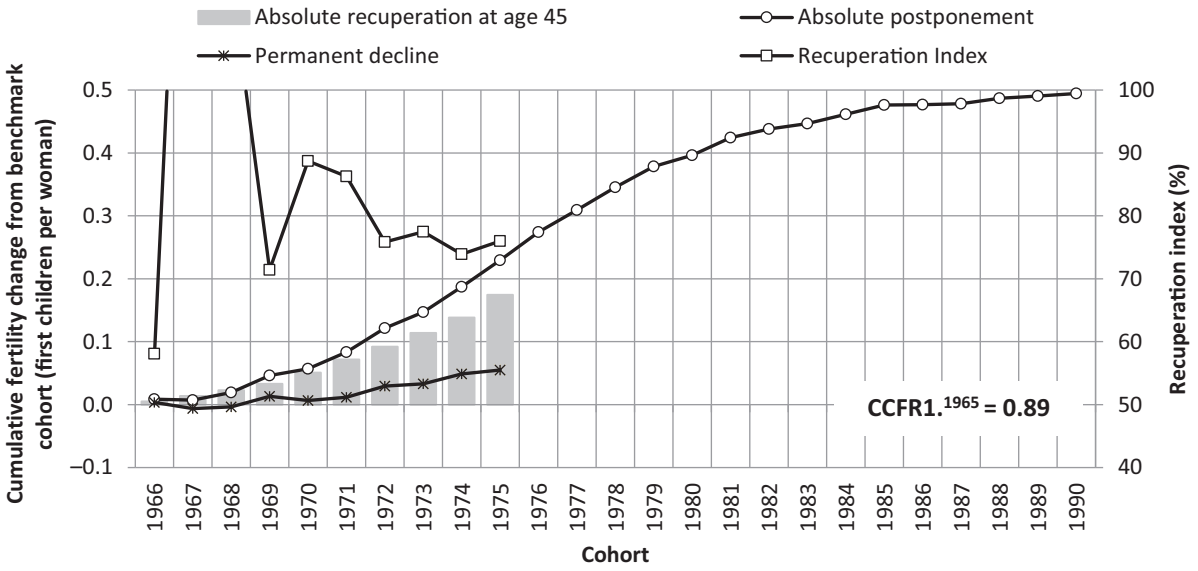

Figure 2. The postponement and recuperation of first births in Slovakia: 1966–1990 cohorts. Source: Author's calculations based on Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (1992–2020, 2021a).

The level of postponement of second births was only slightly lower. By the 1990 cohort, it had decreased by 0.44 children (33%); however, the inter-cohort dynamics of postponement decreased significantly, especially for women born in the second half of the 1980s. It seems that the age model of fertility begins to stabilize at a younger age.

The recuperation measure and the recuperation index show important differences in the catching up of the first and second births at a later age. While in the case of the first children the recuperation index reached the level of 75% (see Figure 2), in the case of the second children it did not even reach 50% (see Figure 3).

The level of the recuperation index will be crucial for the future development of the completed cohort fertility and parity structure. Since there is data on the total volume of first—and second-birth postponement among the 1966–1990 cohorts, it is possible to simulate the development of childlessness and the proportion of one-child families in Slovakia.

Assuming that the last known value of the recuperation index (75% for first children; 48% for second children) does not change (a constant scenario), childlessness would increase to 23% by the 1990 cohort. The proportion of women with one child would also increase to 27.5%; however, from the cohorts of the 1980s (for parity 1) projected values would no longer grow as dynamically as in older cohorts (see Figure 4). With unchanged recuperation conditions, up to half of the women in Slovakia would have a maximum of one

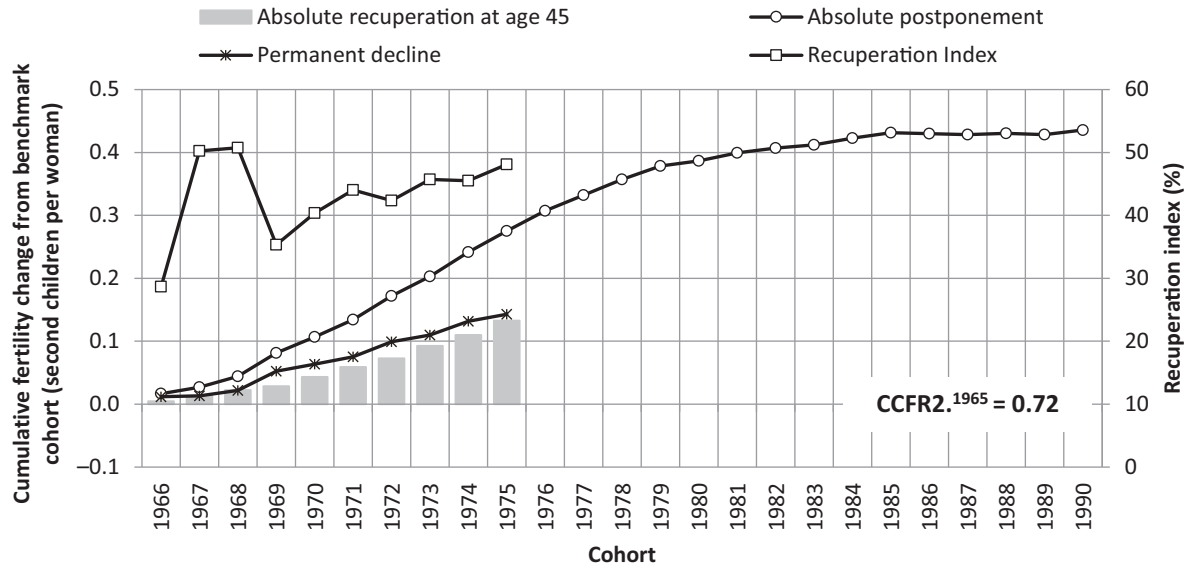

Figure 3. The postponement and recuperation of second births in Slovakia: 1966–1990 cohorts. Source: Author's calculations based on Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (1992–2020, 2021a).

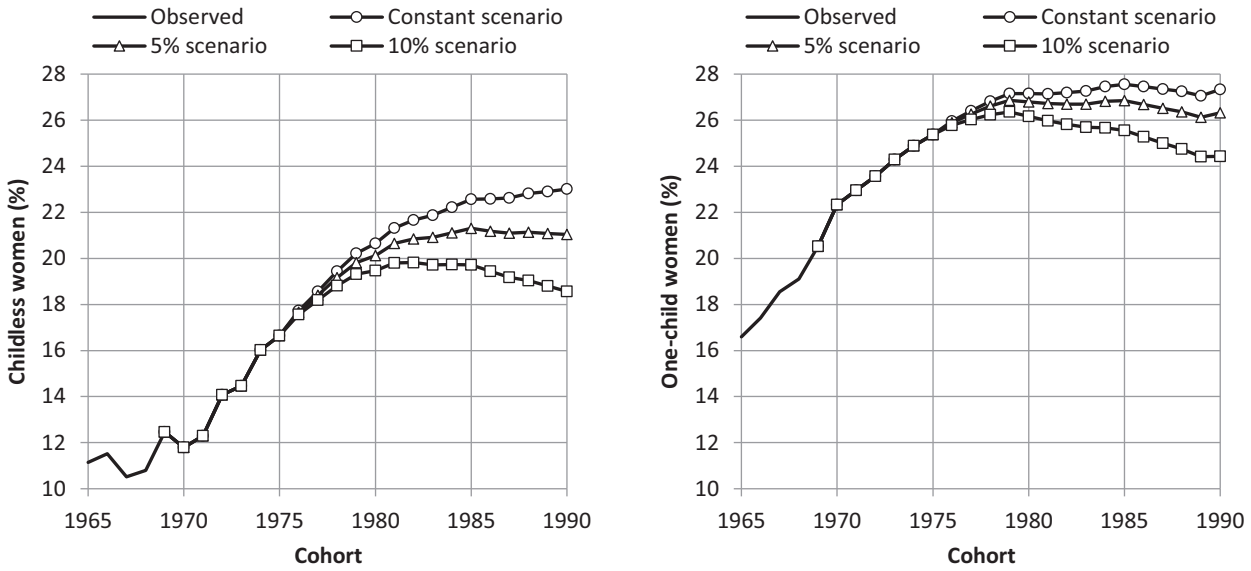

Figure 4. Observed and projected childlessness (left) and one-child (right) families in Slovakia in various scenarios: 1969–1990 cohorts. Source: Author's calculations based on Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (1992–2020, 2021a).

child. The growth in childlessness and the proportion of one-child families can also be identified in the case of a simulation using selected rising scenarios (5% and 10%). Only in younger cohorts could a slight decline in childlessness (below 18%) and the proportion of women with one child (24%) be identified if the recuperation is more pronounced (see Figure 4).

4.3. Rising Childlessness and the Proportion of One-Child Families in the Shadow of Fragile Pronatalism

The real and observed development of childlessness and the proportion of one-child families clearly points to the growth of their influence in Slovak society. The possible impact of population policy measures on the development of childlessness and the one-child family model is very difficult to identify. The significant decline in fertility in Slovakia was associated mainly with the 1990s and with a decrease in childbearing at a younger age (up to 25 years). This development was largely associated with the process of postponing fertility to an older age; however, given the above-mentioned predominance of cohort second-birth postponement as well as the significant decrease in duration-specific second-birth rates (see Figure 5), it is clear that the deterioration of living conditions contributed significantly.

As Figure 6 shows, a slight increase in the number of first births by women aged from 25 to 29 years began in the 1990s. At the age of 30 and over, the beginning of recovery started at the end of the last century. This

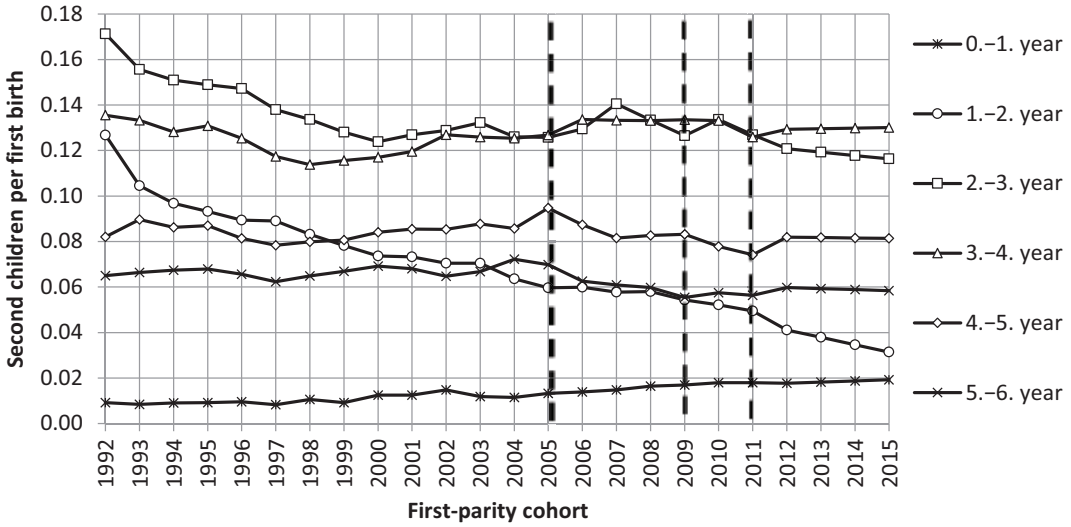

Figure 5. Duration-specific second-birth rates by year at first birth in Slovakia: first-parity cohorts (1992–2015). Source: Author's calculations based on Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (1992–2020). Note: The dashed lines represent the years of the adoption of the most important changes in family policy tools.

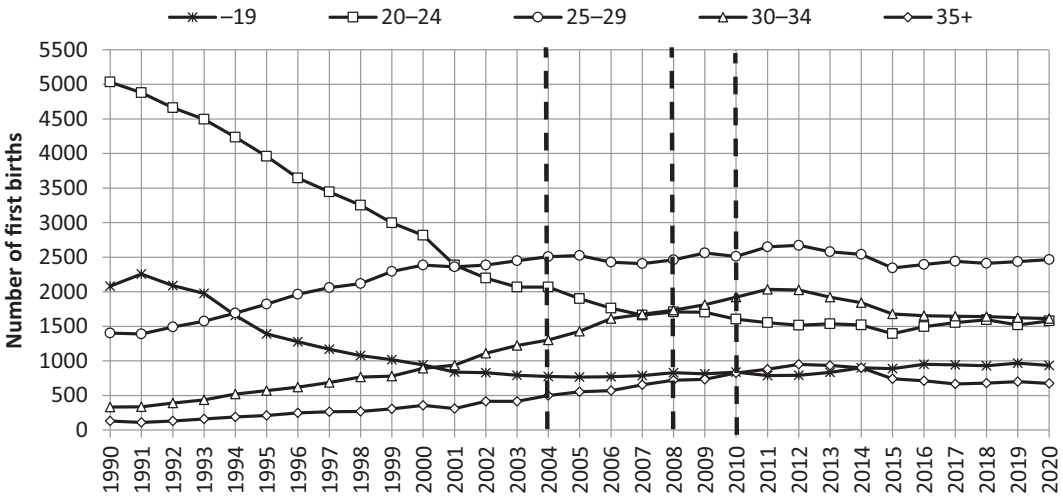

Figure 6. First births by childless women by age in Slovakia in 1990–2020. Source: Author's calculations based on Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (1992–2020, 2021a). Note: The dashed lines represent the years of the adoption of the most important changes in family policy tools.

seems to be the effect of the emerging recuperation of delayed motherhood rather than an impact of family policy. It is obvious from Figure 6 that the period of the last two decades, when some more advanced family policy tools were adopted or some existing ones were significantly modified, did not bring about a more significant increase in the intensity of first-order fertility in Slovakia. Also, in the case of duration-specific second-birth rates, there have been no significant changes in development trends (see Figure 5).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

From a long-term perspective, the obtained results confirm that the development of childlessness in Slovakia essentially copies the main European trends of development (Rowland, 2007; Sobotka, 2017). With the exception of some cohorts from the beginning of the twentieth century, the low tendency toward one-child families was also confirmed (see Frejka & Sardon, 2004). The specific "socialist greenhouse" environment and its system of extensive and egalitarian social care kept opportunities for young people limited and the price of having children low (Sobotka, 2011). As a result of these specific conditions in Slovakia, there was a deepening of the model of early and almost universal entry into marriage and parenthood (Šprocha & Tišliar, 2016). Childlessness and the presence of women with one child were marginal phenomena.

The abandonment of the socialist model of reproduction is gradually deepening across all cohorts born since the late 1960s (Potančoková, 2011; Šprocha & Tišliar, 2016). In comparison with similar research (Sobotka et al., 2011), it is interesting that the postponement process in Slovakia affected second children to a greater extent in the first cohorts that were affected by the transformational changes after 1989. A higher postponement rate in the first children was not identified until women born in the late 1970s. It can be assumed that the cause was the significant deterioration in living conditions and that this was further aggravated by a reduction in family benefits (Frejka, 2008).

Following previous research (Potančoková, 2011; Sobotka et al., 2011; Šprocha & Tišliar, 2016), a cohort analysis of fertility postponement transition also confirmed a higher recuperation measure in first children compared to second children. The known data also show that while up to three-quarters of postponed first children were ultimately born by women at an older age, not even half of second children were. The recuperation process of second children has proven to be a key factor in low fertility and the changing parity structure of women in Slovakia. In fact, all possible scenarios point to growing childlessness and particularly an increase in the proportion of one-child families in the cohorts of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. Only in the case of a more significant increase in the recuperation index could there be some moderation of this dynamic and a partial reversal of this trend in the cohorts of the second half of the 1980s.

Despite the adoption of some progressive family policy instruments, especially in the last decade, their influence on the development of the probability of first and second births has not been significant; however, it is difficult to pinpoint the effects of population policies on demographic reproduction. Nevertheless, the question arises as to whether their potential effect in Slovakia is not hampered by the existence of other and more serious barriers to parenthood.

The reinforced stereotypical notion of the roles of men and women in caring for the family and the household and the overall expectation that women will also contribute financially (Chorvát, 2015; Turkovič, 2021) both point to a long-lasting double burden on women. The reason that the tension between work and family has

multiplied is due to the fact that care services for young children are not well developed in Slovakia, despite a certain positive trend in recent years. This is subsequently reflected in the low employment rates of women with young children.

Despite anti-discrimination legislation, a significant number of women in Slovakia still face more or less hidden discriminatory practices when looking for a job or career opportunity (Turkovič, 2021). In addition, there is a high prevalence of non-standard (temporary and part-time) jobs and a high gender wage gap (albeit gradually declining) affecting women.

The high penalty for maternity is confirmed (Gerbery, 2017). According to Turkovič (2021), there are no comprehensive mechanisms in family policy in Slovakia that could eliminate the negative effects of parenthood and prevent long-term disadvantages for women in the labour market due to their motherhood. As the research by Filadelfiová and Gerbery (2014) showed, the most important measures to enable families with young children to reconcile work and family life were as follows (in order of importance based on the results from an opinion sample survey): flexible working hours, better access to childcare services, part-time work, and the ability to work from home.

Mitchell (2012) is correct in saying that the decision to have a young child or work in Slovakia is not just about individual preferences but is also the result of a range of structural market options, social policies, cultural values, maternal responsibilities, children's needs, and social and kinship networks. In the context of proclaimed efforts to involve women (and especially mothers of young children) in the labour market, addressing the insufficient quality and availability of childcare, setting working hours, and considering the gender division of paid and unpaid work still remain important matters to address. In this regard, one can only agree with Mitchell (2012) in stating that these barriers and gender inequalities must be addressed if the labour market participation of mothers with young children is to be increased; otherwise, the tensions between paid work and family spheres may deepen.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

Home Alone: Exploring Childcare Options to Remove Barriers to Second Childbearing in Belarus

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Abstract
This study investigates the relationship between childcare usage and parents' intentions to have a second child in Belarus. Previous research has established that low fertility in Belarus can be primarily explained by falling second birth rates. However, a substantial research gap remains regarding the determinants of the low rate of second childbearing in Belarus. Based on a comprehensive review of hypothesised fertility barriers and family policy options in Belarus, this study leverages data from the Belarusian Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) from 2017 to examine the relationship between formal, informal, and mixed childcare usage and parents' intention to have a second child. The analysis is based on fertile individuals aged 18–45 who have a partner and one biological child under 11 years old (i.e., up to the age at which children leave primary school). The model controls for sex, age, education, respondents' economic wellbeing, the employment status of both partners, and the age of their child. Applying logistic regression, the analysis demonstrates that mixed childcare support increases respondents' intentions to have an additional child. Having a child aged 3–6 years, being below 26 years old and male, are also associated with a higher likelihood of intentions to have a second child. No association was found between economic wellbeing or employment status and second-parity fertility intentions. The results of this study suggest that gender-egalitarian family policy instruments that improve institutional childcare and that incentivise men to participate in childcare could reduce barriers to second childbearing in Belarus.

Keywords
Belarus; childcare; family policy; fertility decline; one-child families; pronatalism; short-term fertility intentions

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Fragile Pronatalism? Barriers to Parenthood, One-Child Families, and Childlessness in European Post-Socialist Countries" edited by Ivett Szalma (Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence / Corvinus University of Budapest), Hana Hašková (Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences), Livia Oláh (Stockholm University), and Judit Takács (Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence).

1. Introduction

Countries across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) experienced a sharp drop in fertility following the transition from communism to capitalism that commenced in 1989–1991 (Frejka & Gietel-Basten, 2016). Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, fertility patterns in CEE were characterised by almost universal childbearing, combined with a strong propensity for a two-child family and a low mean age at birth (Frejka, 2008; Philipov, 2002; Sobotka, 2011). The total fertility rate (TFR) in CEE countries declined precipitously during the 1990s, mirroring tendencies observed in previous decades across Western Europe (Frejka & Gietel-Basten, 2016). Several CEE countries entered the group of lowest-low fertility countries, with the TFR in most countries ranging from 1.1–1.4 births per woman in 1999 (Sobotka, 2002). Belarus followed this trend, entering the group of lowest-low fertility countries in 1997 (see Figure 1). Even though a rebound was noticeable after 2006, the TFR of Belarus has consistently remained below targets set by the Belarusian government.

Although the demographic decline in CEE seemingly mirrored that of Western Europe in previous decades, the underlying causal factors are thought to have differed considerably. Goldstein (2007) distinguishes three types of low fertility regimes in Europe: the "no family" regime, which is defined by high childlessness rates; the "late family" regime where delayed family formation represses additional childbirths; and the "small family" regime where families opt for having one child only. Contrary to the "no family" or "late family" regimes that are typical in most Western and Central European countries, the fertility dynamics of Belarus are characterised by the "small family" regime, with a low mean age at first birth combined with low second birth rates (Amialchuk et al., 2014; Frejka & Sobotka, 2008; Ministry of Labour and Social Protection et al., 2011). It is anticipated that the effects of depopulation and population ageing will exert negative consequences in a number of areas including negative economic growth, reduced labour productivity and labour force, ineffective pension schemes, insufficient social welfare and healthcare in terms of both quality and availability, and even financial and staffing gaps in areas of national security (Shakhotko, 2011). Hence, Belarus needs prompt solutions in order to sustain its population size.

Recognising the urgency of determining a solution aimed at countering depopulation, the Government of the Republic of Belarus has assigned high priority to pronatalist demographic policy-making, which has resulted in the emergence of several national strategies and policies including the recent "Nation's Health and Demographic Security in Belarus, 2016–2020" strategy, which set a TFR target of 1.75. The focus of existing strategies and policies concerns the creation of financial incentives for childbearing. However, the latest available data from the Human Fertility Database (HFD), which was reported in 2018, indicated that the TFR in Belarus was at 1.45. Despite the political focus on demographic security and the lack of sufficiently effective policies, a noticeable research gap remains regarding evidence for effective pronatalist family policies. Fertility intentions remain largely understudied despite their significant role in identifying the extent to which family policies could improve the TFR, particularly if the barriers that serve to create the gap between intentions and behaviour were removed. With respect to methodology, with the noticeable exception of Amialchuk et al. (2014), existing research on fertility and fertility intentions in Belarus is limited mainly to descriptive studies (e.g., Artemenko, 2016; Elsukova & Kupchinova, 2018), and no panel data is available on fertility behaviour in Belarus. Moreover, the analysis to date has tended to focus exclusively on examining the financial incentives for childbearing, thus excluding other relevant incentives such as accessible and high-quality childcare (e.g., Amialchuk et al., 2014).

To help fill the existing research gap, this study examines what relationship, if any, exists between institutional and informal childcare support and the short-term intentions of Belarusians to have a second child. Although the degree to which fertility intentions provide a viable predictor of actual fertility behaviour is subject to much debate (e.g., Berrington, 2004; Quesnel-Vallée & Morgan, 2003; Toulemon & Testa, 2005), the study of fertility intentions allows for the determination of the manageable fertility increase margin that pronatalist policies can achieve in the best-case scenario (e.g., Morgan & Taylor, 2006). In keeping with existing research on the intentions–behaviour gap (Balbo & Mills, 2011), this study assumes that fertility intentions act as a proximate antecedent of fertility behaviour and, therefore, factors that exert an effect on intentions will also influence behaviour. It is anticipated that the findings of this study will contribute to the creation of evidence-based family policies in Belarus.

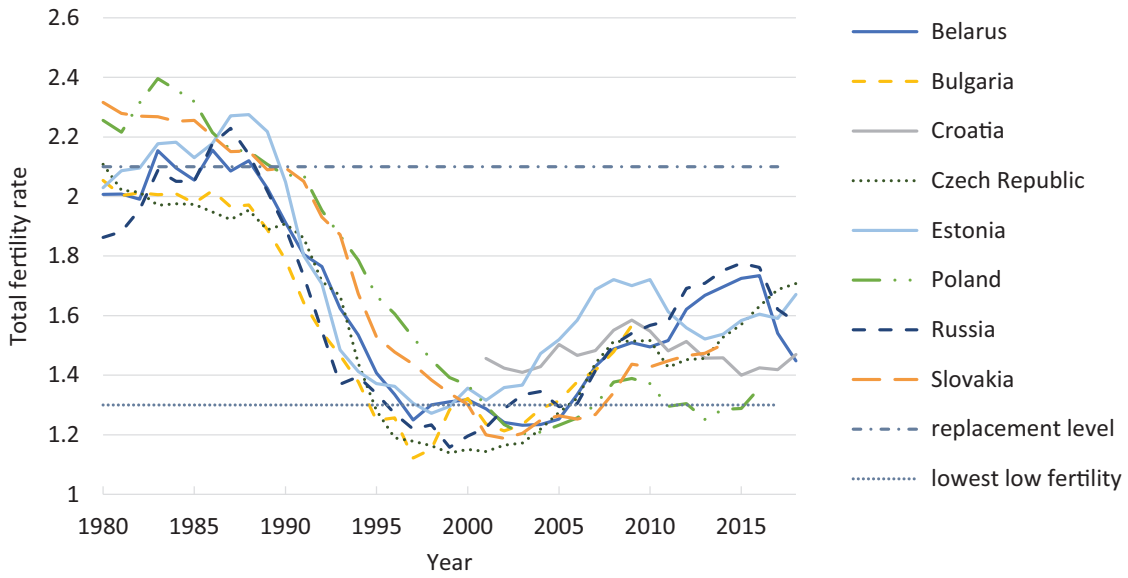

Figure 1. TFRs in selected CEE countries, 1980–2018.

The structure of the study presented herein is as follows: Section 2 discusses the theoretical background of fertility in Belarus, including fertility trends, theories that explain barriers to fertility, family policy options, and related currently-employed instruments and research gaps. Section 3 presents the research question and corresponding hypotheses, as well as the sample, variables and methodology used for the empirical analysis. Section 4 describes the results of the analysis. Section 5, finally, discusses the empirical results and their implications for family policy in Belarus.

2. Low Fertility and the Demographics of Decline in Belarus

2.1. Fertility Trends in Belarus

Following the transition away from state socialism in Belarus, the TFR decreased from 2.03 in 1989 to 1.23 in 1996. The country's TFR remained below the "lowest low" threshold of 1.3 between 1996 and 2006. After 2006, it began to recover but continued to remain below the replacement level.

Scholars of fertility generally explain TFR dynamics through "quantum" and "tempo" effects. Bongaarts and Feeney (1998) define the tempo effect as the change in the TFR caused by the adjusted timing of births, and the quantum effect as the change in the TFR that would have been observed in the absence of tempo distortions. As highlighted above, existing research holds that the fertility decline in Belarus can be primarily explained via the quantum rather than the tempo effect since the country experienced a sharp decline in second birth rates accompanied by only the minimal postponement of first births (Amialchuk et al., 2014; Frejka & Sobotka, 2008; Shakhotko, 2011). Indeed, data from the HFD confirms that there was almost no difference between the TFR and the adjusted TFR (adjTFR) in Belarus up to 1997, even as the TFR collapsed (see Figure 2). This implies that the decline in childbearing up to 1997 occurred primarily due to the reduction in the number of children in families (the quantum effect). Between 1998 and 2016, a moderate tempo effect was observed, with an average difference between the TFR and adjTFR of 0.21 and a slight increase in the mean age at first birth (MAB1) from 23 in 1997 to 25.7 in 2017. The tempo effect faltered in 2011 and, again, after 2016. In brief: The quantum effect accompanied the fertility dynamic of Belarus throughout the observed timeframe, while the tempo effect remained limited in time and scope.

2.2. Hypothesised Barriers to Fertility

According to existing fertility research, explanations for low fertility in Belarus and other CEE countries can be clustered into three theoretical paradigms: the neoclassical economic theory of fertility, the concept of the second demographic transition, and gender equality theory.

The neoclassical economic paradigm is largely rooted in the household production model of the new home economics school (Becker, 1960; Becker & Lewis, 1973), which conceptualises households as economic units that produce outputs such as housework and children, and whose fertility decisions are a result of their expected utilities and disutilities from nth-parity childbearing. New home economics not only considers financial (dis-)utilities such as income and economic certainty, but also the fulfilment of social norms and time investments. Of central importance is the notion that as a population's economic trajectory improves, households prioritise high-quality children—as expressed through separate bedrooms, private schooling, university education, and more time spent on home-based childcare—therefore increasing the cost of childbearing (Becker, 1960). Consequently, as women engage more in paid work to help cover the cost of quality childbearing, the utility of having a higher quantity of children, which was more feasible in the male breadwinner, female

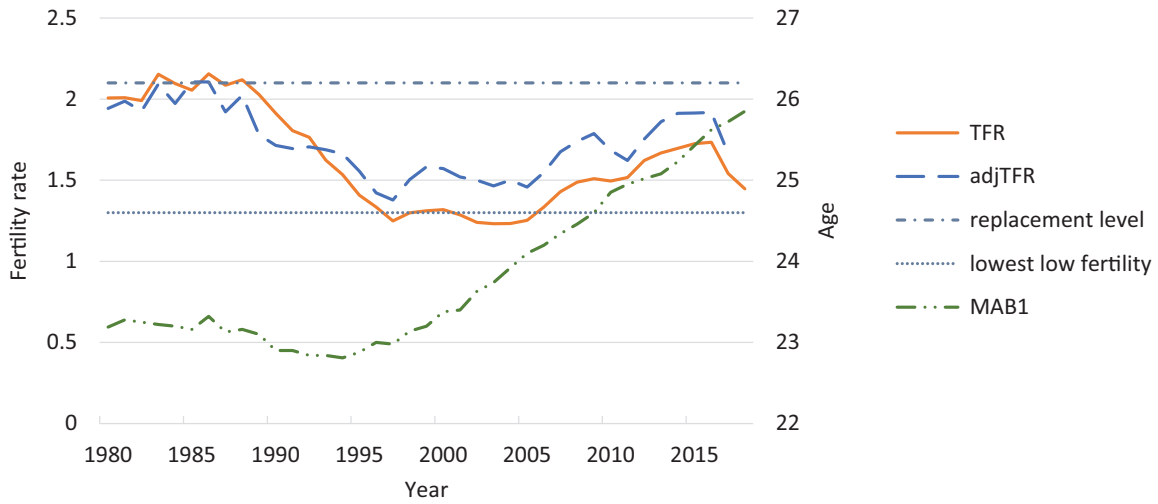

Figure 2. TFR, adjTFR and the mean age at first birth in Belarus, 1980–2018.

homemaker regime, declines, thus lowering fertility rates (Becker, 1981). In addition to the strive toward quality childbearing, neoclassical economic theory holds that household fertility decisions can be influenced by macroeconomic factors such as changes in the GDP and unemployment. In the context of Belarus and other CEE countries, a drop in GDP, increased economic uncertainty and job insecurity, reduced income and living standards, the high cost of childbearing and childrearing, and largely ineffective social protection systems can be identified as barriers to fertility, indicating that the neoclassical paradigm may provide a useful analytical framework (Allison & Ringold, 1996; Basten et al., 2013; Frejka, 2008; Matysiak, 2011; Sobotka, 2011).

The second demographic transition paradigm holds that ideational changes toward postmodern norms and values influence the postponement of a first birth (Lesthaeghe, 2014). Accordingly, lowest-low fertility can be explained by the shift toward "a multitude of living arrangements other than marriage, the disconnection of marriage and procreation, and no stationary population" (Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 2004, p. 2), which leads to an elevated degree of first-birth postponement (Lesthaeghe, 2010). While research conducted in other CEE countries suggests that value shifts may have taken place over the past decades, the central postponement assumption does not hold true in the Belarusian context given the relatively young mean age at first birth (Amialchuk et al., 2014; Sobotka, 2002), which limits the applicability of the second demographic transition theory in the case of Belarus.

The gender equality paradigm draws attention to the observation that "in the world at large, where women's status is low, fertility is high. But in advanced industrial societies…where fertility is below replacement, this generalisation no longer holds" (Chesnais, 1996). Following the "gender as a structure" framework (Risman & Davis, 2013), three domains of gender equality can be distinguished: institutions (such as social norms, policies and regulations); attitudes and values; and practices. Consequentially, the gender equality paradigm holds that fertility is low when institutions, attitudes and partnership practices are not adapted to the changing economic role of women (Esping-Andersen, 2016; McDonald, 2000). Adaptations to changing economic role of women can be observed in their increased engagement in paid work and the increased engagement of men in unpaid work, i.e., childcare and housework (Siemieńska, 2008). As Neyer et al. (2013) point out, empirical studies have shown that the engagement of fathers in informal childcare is linked to higher fertility. Three gender role regimes can be derived: the traditionalist "male breadwinner, female homemaker" regime that was common before the second demographic transition, the transitional "dual breadwinner, female homemaker" regime, and the egalitarian "dual breadwinner, dual homemaker" regime that is common in Scandinavian countries. As formulated in Esping-Andersen and Billari's (2015) "multiple-equilibrium" thesis, higher fertility levels can be expected in two of these regimes: traditionalist and gender-egalitarian. In the context of women's increased economic independence, women who are faced with limited institutional childcare support, the limited division of childcare and housework, unsupportive gender role attitudes and unsupportive parental leave and job protection policies that result in higher female workforce participation elasticity and a greater gender pay gap, are likely to have fewer or no children (Basten et al., 2013; McDonald, 2000; Pastore & Verashchagina, n.d.). As such, the gender equality paradigm challenges the neoclassical "household economic unit" assumption and instead emphasises intra-household bargaining. Belarus, like many other CEE countries, has transitioned away from the traditionalist gender role regime towards the transitional regime, resulting in a double burden for women, which forces many to choose between a career without children or staying at home (Matysiak, 2011). Moreover, economic stagnation in Belarus after the fall of the Soviet Union was matched by poor institutional care facilities for children and elderly people, which contributed to the more elastic participation of the female workforce and the widening of the gender pay gap (Pastore & Verashchagina, n.d.). At the same time, research indicates that sociocultural norms remain largely pronatalist, resulting in many women having only one child at an early age "to satisfy the social norm of becoming a mother, while at the same limiting the inevitable double burden of working full-time and taking care of household tasks" (Amialchuk et al., 2014).

2.3. Pronatalist Family Policy Options

As pointed out by Frejka and Gietel-Basten (2016), family policy has specific implications for a country's fertility even if the underlying intent may not always be fertility-focused. They established four principal family policy models labelled hereinafter as neoclassical, traditionalist, gender-egalitarian, and non-interventionist, of which the first three can be conceptualised as producing pronatalist outcomes. The neoclassical model aims to improve the cost-benefit relationship of childbearing, thereby incentivising increased fertility and family size. Governments that follow the neoclassical model commonly encourage childbearing through financial measures such as birth allowances, child benefits and maternity benefits, or through economic measures such as paid family leave and housing policies. This model of family policy is typically outcome-driven and applied for example by the Russian Federation and Ukraine. The traditionalist model aims to reduce the opportunity cost of mothers staying at home, thereby encouraging traditional household roles involving the male breadwinner. Governments that adhere to the traditionalist model tend to promote taxation models that are advantageous to married couples, as well as to offer generous maternity leave opportunities. This model is

typical for Germany and Slovakia. The gender-egalitarian model aims to promote gender equality in both childcare and employment, thereby encouraging families to overcome the work-home dilemma. Governments that apply gender-egalitarian approaches tend to provide institutional childcare as well as parental benefits for both mothers and fathers. This model is applied in Estonia and Slovenia. These three pronatalist family policy models—neoclassical, traditionalist, and gender-egalitarian—can be broadly categorised as responding to the fertility barriers identified by the neoclassical, second demographic transition, and gender equality paradigms.

Pronatalist goals top Belarus' population policy agenda. To this end, the country's family policy instruments mainly follow the neoclassical model since it focuses primarily on financial incentives rather than on resolving the work-home dilemma for women or improving the quality and accessibility of institutional childcare (Frejka & Gietel-Basten, 2016; Pastore & Verashchagina, n.d.). Since 2011, the central pillars of Belarus' family policy have comprised progressive financial incentives aimed at stimulating second childbearing, including the payment of allowances, housing, and tax and credit policies that favour families with children (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, 2016; Ministry of Labour and Social Protection et al., 2011; Press Service of the President of the Republic of Belarus, 2022). However, child benefits are set at 35% of the average Belarusian wage for the first child and 40% for the second and all subsequent children, and are, thus, comparatively low in value.

In addition, Belarus' family policy also includes a number of less systematic, traditionalist and gender-egalitarian policy instruments. The government continues to stipulate that parents take up to three years of paid parental leave. Childcare options are available in many parts of Belarus: Most preschool childcare facilities accommodate children from three to six years old, with some even accepting two-month-old children (Hurava, 2015). School-aged children can receive after-school care for up to six hours following the end of the standard school day. Preschool facilities and schools are funded largely from the national budget and are free of charge except for meals and extracurricular activities such as dancing lessons and foreign language and martial arts courses. Food accounts for approximately one quarter of the total cost of childcare in Belarus. One new policy instrument that is worthy of note concerns the provision of childcare services that are fully financed by the Belarusian government for up to three years in exceptional cases. However, this policy instrument is only accessible to mothers of twins or triplets, parents of a child with a disability, single parents with a disability or parents who both have disabilities. Interestingly, while the proportion of children enrolled in after-school care centres increased slightly from 14.4% in the academic year 2005–2006 to 21.1% in 2016–2017, the coverage rate of childcare centres for preschool-aged children decreased from 82.5% to 74.8% during the same period according to data available from the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (2013, 2017). It should be noted that the data covering after-school care centres does not differentiate by age group, and the data on preschool-aged children covers children aged 1–5. No other childcare policy changes have since been introduced in Belarus.

While Belarus' TFR increased from 1.5 in 2010 to 1.73 in 2015, plausibly in part due to family policy measures, it was not sufficient to cover the reproduction of the Belarusian population (see Figure 2). Moreover, Belarus' TFR dropped once more after 2016 and has since consistently remained below the target TFR of 1.75 published in the current policy document *The Nation's Health and Demographic Security in Belarus, 2016–2020*.

2.4. Research Gaps

Notwithstanding the political importance of family policy in Belarus and the insufficient effectiveness of existing instruments aimed at raising the country's fertility rate and fertility intentions, the explanatory factors thereof and effective policy options remain understudied. Fertility intentions have, to date, not been addressed systematically despite their significant role in identifying the manageable margin of interest that demographic policies are able to influence. With a few exceptions, most of the existing analysis of fertility in Belarus is limited to descriptive statistics. The focus of such studies (e.g., Amialchuk et al., 2014) has, to date, concerned exclusively neoclassical factors such as income and child allowances. Gender-egalitarian factors and corresponding policy options, however, have not yet been analysed in the Belarusian context, even though a growing body of literature suggests that having to choose between children and a career poses a substantial barrier to women's fertility intentions (Cooke, 2004; Mencarini & Tanturri, 2004; Mills et al., 2008).

Childcare is probably the most obvious family policy instrument that has, to date, remained understudied in the Belarusian context. By helping to reduce the burden of unpaid work and allowing mothers to return to work more quickly, childcare can help women counter both homemaking expectations and female workforce participation elasticity, thus increasing household income and reducing the opportunity cost of having children (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Goldstein et al., 2017). A growing body of evidence suggests that an increase in the availability of childcare may have positive effects on fertility (Del Boca et al., 2003; DiPrete et al., 2003; Greulich et al., 2014). Interestingly, a study on the relationship between childcare and fertility in Russia's similar low-family context indicates that intentions to have a second child are positively associated with the first child attending formal childcare (Levin et al., 2016).

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Question

Considering the above-mentioned research gaps, this study aims to answer the following research question: What relationship, if any, exists between institutional and informal childcare support and the short-term intentions of Belarusians to have a second child?

3.2. Data and Methodology

I used the representative database of the international Generations and Gender Survey (GGS, 2022; see https://www.ggp-i.org/data) for the analysis of the association between childcare support and intentions to have a child in the next three years in Belarus. The GGS comprises a quantitative cross-national, large-scale panel survey of a nationally representative sample that covers fertility and relationship histories, household and individual-level data, a wide range of socioeconomic variables and information on well-being, value orientations and attitudes. The first wave of the survey was conducted in Belarus in 2017 employing a nationally representative sample of 9,996 men and women aged 18–79. To date, the first wave of the GGS dataset is the only cross-national survey to have been conducted in Belarus that provides data on childcare and fertility intentions.

Aimed at ensuring that the short-term fertility intentions of the respondents were assessed as realistically as possible, the analysis was based on a sub-sample of respondents aged 18–45 who were in a partnership, had one biological child under 11 years old (i.e., up to the child leaving primary school), and reported being fertile and not pregnant. The final sample contained N = 349. While the final sample size was relatively small, the benefits of obtaining a novel insight into the relationship between childcare and fertility in Belarus outweighed the disadvantage of potentially obtaining beta errors due to the small sample size.

Fifty-three percent of the respondents in the final sample were female. Fifteen percent were aged between 18 and 25, 64% were 26–35 years old, and 21% were older than 35. Forty-five percent of all the respondents had a child under three years old, one-third (36%) had a child of 3–6 years of age, and 19% had a child aged 7–10. Forty-six percent of all the respondents did not use any form of childcare, 16% used institutional childcare only, 24% used informal childcare only, and 14% used mixed childcare.

The analysis involved the use of descriptive statistics to describe potential differences between sociodemographic subgroups regarding their fertility intentions. Additionally, I applied two binominal logistic regression models of the probability of intending to have another child in the next three years, of which the second model included the age of the respondents' first child as an additional independent variable aimed at examining whether the first child's age affected the hypothesised association between fertility intentions and the usage of childcare.

3.3. Measurement of the Variables

This subsection describes all the variables applied in the analysis of the subset from the Belarusian GGS database.

3.3.1. Dependent Variable

For the variable *short-term fertility intentions*, childbearing intentions were elicited via the following question: Do you intend to have another child during the next three years? The five possible responses were: "definitely not," "probably not," "I am not sure," "probably yes," and "definitely yes." To draw meaningful comparisons between the respondents with and without fertility intentions, I dichotomised the variable by collapsing the two "yes" and the two "no" answers, and by eliminating those respondents who stated "I am not sure" from the analysis.

3.3.2. Independent Variables

The variable *childcare* comprised a four-level categorical: (a) non-usage of childcare; (b) the usage of only regular institutional childcare support comprising crèches, kindergartens, preschool facilities, after-school care and other institutional arrangements; (c) the usage of only regular informal childcare that was defined as help with childcare received over the last 12 months from relatives or friends or other persons for whom caring for children is not their primary occupation; and (d) the usage of mixed childcare, i.e., the respondents reported the usage of both institutional and informal childcare.

3.3.3. Control Variables

The *sex* variable was represented by a dummy that took the value 0 if the individual was female and 1 if the respondent was male.

The *age* of the respondents was divided into three categories: (a) 18–25 years old, (b) 26–35, (c) 36–45 years old.

A three-level categorical variable was used for *education*. The lower category comprised those with lower secondary education while the next category combined those who had completed upper secondary education and those with a post-secondary non-tertiary education. The highest and third category comprised those who had completed tertiary education.

In *employment status of both partners*, I distinguished, in general, between employed (respondents who indicated that they were employed, helping a family member on a family farm, engaged in business or self-employed), unemployed (respondents who indicated that they were unemployed, homemakers, or students in school or vocational training), and respondents

on parental leave (i.e., maternity leave, parental leave or childcare leave). Since I considered the employment status of both partners in the analysis, a total of four categories were defined: (a) both partners are employed; (b) one of the partners is unemployed, the other is employed; (c) one of the partners is employed, the other on parental leave; (d) one of the partners is unemployed, the other is on parental leave. No other combinations of employment status were considered in the dataset.

The monthly *household income* was used to measure the effect of economic factors. This variable was split into three categories: (a) under 600 Belarusian roubles, (b) between 600 and 999 Belarusian roubles, and (c) 1,000 and more than 1,000 Belarusian roubles. According to the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (n.d.), the average monthly wage in 2017 was around 800 Belarusian roubles. Since economic constraints comprise the most frequently cited reason for the decline in fertility, and the Belarusian government's current family policy focuses on the payment of regular financial benefits, it was considered crucial that the role of an individual's economic wellbeing and their reproductive behaviour were analysed.

To determine whether the age of the first child was linked to fertility intentions, I also included the *age of the child*. The age categories were defined as (a) under 3 years of age (i.e., the age of crèche attendance and the age range over which a parent can take parental leave); (b) 3–6 years of age (i.e., kindergarten age); and (c) 7–10 years of age (i.e., primary school age).

3.4. Hypotheses

Based on the two theoretical paradigms that apply to the Belarusian context and on their corresponding hypothesised fertility barriers that were discussed above, a range of hypotheses can be applied to the dataset to examine what relationship, if any, exists between institutional and informal childcare support and the short-term intentions of Belarusians to have a second child.

3.4.1. Childcare-Related Hypotheses

> H1: Childcare usage is positively associated with short-term intentions to have a second child.

Following Esping-Andersen and Billari's (2015) multiple equilibrium thesis, it was hypothesised that access to childcare contributes to an egalitarian gender-role regime by reducing the childcare workload of women, thus reducing their work–home double burden and the corresponding homemaking expectations, and countering female workforce participation elasticity and the gender pay gap. This was expected to hold true for both institutional and informal childcare.

> H1a: Mixed (institutional and informal) childcare usage is more strongly associated with short-term intentions to have a second child than the usage of only one of the two forms of childcare.

It was hypothesised that mixed childcare usage would be most strongly associated with short-term intentions to have a second child since mixed childcare would lead to opportunity cost reductions. In addition, mixed institutional and informal childcare could serve as a proxy for the adaptation of both institutions and social attitudes towards the changing economic and social roles of women (Esping- Andersen, 2016; McDonald, 2000).

3.4.2. Hypotheses Related to the Control Variables

> H2: Being female is negatively associated with short-term intentions to have a second child.

Given Belarus' "dual breadwinner, female homemaker" gender role regime, it can be expected that the increase in childcare and housework is higher for women than for men following the birth of a first child. Therefore, it can also be expected that women bear a substantially larger opportunity cost than men when deciding whether to have a second child (see Matysiak, 2011; Pastore & Verashchagina, n.d.).

> H3: A secondary education level is positively associated with short-term intentions to have a second child.

Existing research paints an ambivalent picture concerning the relationship between education and fertility. Although there is evidence that completing secondary education is associated with fertility since it acts to reduce economic uncertainty (Perelli-Harris, 2006), other studies point to a negative relationship between higher education and fertility (e.g., Axinn & Barber, 2001). Van Bavel and Różańska-Putek (2010) point out that the relationship between education and fertility might be contingent on childcare enrolment rates. As a working hypothesis, I expected a positive relationship between medium (upper secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary) education and fertility.

> H4: Living in a partnership where both partners are employed or where one partner is employed and one is on parental leave is positively associated with short-term intentions to have a second child.

Partners who are both employed, or where one is employed and one is on parental leave, were expected to be less exposed to economic uncertainty, in line with the neoclassical paradigm (Becker, 1960; Frejka, 2008).

> H5: Having a higher household income is positively associated with short-term intentions to have a second child.

A higher household income was expected to remove economic barriers to fertility, in line with the neoclassical paradigm. This link is supported by evidence from previous studies in the Belarusian context (e.g., Amialchuk et al., 2014).

H6: Having a child that is between 3 and 6 years old raises the probability of second-child fertility intentions.

It was expected that respondents who have a child of kindergarten age (3–6) would be associated with second-child fertility intentions, since the reduced need for home-based care would allow women with a child in this age bracket to re-enter employment, thus increasing household income and economic certainty in line with the neoclassical paradigm. Having a child above kindergarten age was not expected to be associated with intentions to have a second child since the biological and economic opportunity cost of having a second child increases over time.

H7: Being 36 or older is negatively associated with short-term intentions to have a second child.

It was expected that respondents who were above 36 years of age were less likely to intend to have a second child due to biological and cultural constraints.

4. Empirical Results

Table 1 displays the results of the descriptive statistics with bivariate correlations between short-term intentions to have a second child and the sociodemographic

Table 1. Bivariate correlations and odds ratios of intentions to have a second child in the next three years in Belarus.

	Descriptive statistics	Logistic regression model 1	Logistic regression model 2
	%	OR	OR
Sex			
Female	53.8	1 [Ref.]	1 [Ref.]
Male	66.7*	1.79*	1.89*
Age group (in years)			
18–25	67.3	1 [Ref.]	1 [Ref.]
26–35	67.3	0.82	1.80
36–45	32.4***	0.18***	0.17***
Education			
Low	50.0	1 [Ref.]	1 [Ref.]
Medium	64.8	2.13^{+}	2.20*
High	58.1	1.84	1.92
Employment status			
Both employed	60.6	1 [Ref.]	1 [Ref.]
Employed & unemployed	68.0	1.32	1.34
Employed & on parental leave	59.5	0.84	1.17
Unemployed & on parental leave	36.4	0.30	0.45
Household income			
Low	54.1	1 [Ref.]	1 [Ref.]
Medium	63.5	1.32	1.38
High	59.7	1.16	1.18
Childcare			
No	52.2	1 [Ref.]	1 [Ref.]
Only institutional	63.6	1.55	1.22
Only informal	63.1	1.26	1.35
Mixed	75.5*	2.58*	2.07^{+}
Age of the child (in years)			
0–2	57.6		1 [Ref.]
3–6	69.4		2.12^{+}
7–10	47.8**		1.39
n	349	349	349
Nagelkerke pseudo R2		0.19	0.20

Note: The values of p(Chi2) for the descriptive statistics are reported next to the final category of variables: $^{+}p \leq 0.1$, $*p \leq 0.05$, $**p \leq 0.01$, $***p \leq 0.001$.

and economic characteristics of the respondents and the age of their child, as well as the results of the two logistic regression models that examined these relationships as discussed above. 67.3% of respondents in the youngest and middle age groups had short-term intentions to have a second child, against 32.4% of respondents in the highest age group. Furthermore, 66.7% of men had fertility intentions compared to only 53.8% of women. Almost two-thirds of respondents with children aged 3–6 intended to have a second child compared to 57.6% of respondents with a child aged 0–2, and 47.8% of respondents with a child of primary school age. With respect to the main independent variable of childcare usage, 75.5% of respondents who used mixed institutional childcare intended to have a second child. By contrast, 63.6% of respondents used institutional childcare only, 63.1% of respondents used informal childcare only, and 52.2% of respondents used no childcare.

The results obtained from the logistic regression models confirmed the tendencies detected in the descriptive statistics. Firstly, both regression models revealed that mixed childcare is positively associated with second-parity fertility intentions (H1a). However, when considering the age group of the first child in model 2, the statistical significance of this relationship was observed to be weaker. No significant associations were found between the usage of only institutional or only informal childcare and second-parity fertility intentions (H1). Secondly, both models confirmed that being male is positively associated with a higher likelihood of intentions to have a second child (H2). Thirdly, both models found that the odds of having fertility intentions are elevated if a respondent has a medium (upper secondary or post-secondary, non-tertiary) level of education, compared to people with a low level of education (H3). A positive but non-significant correlation between having a high education level and having fertility intentions was observed. Fourthly, no association was found between employment status (H4) or income (H5) and second-parity fertility intentions. Fifthly, model 2 suggested that the odds of intended further childbearing of respondents with a child aged 3–6 were twice as high as those of respondents with a younger child (H6). Sixthly, respondents aged 36 and above were less likely to intend to have a second child (H7).

5. Conclusion

This study examined several potential determinants of short-term fertility intentions concerning persons with one child in Belarus, focusing specifically on childcare. The study determined a positive association between mixed childcare usage and second-parity fertility intentions. This association fits with the gender equality paradigm, which holds that fertility is higher where institutions, attitudes and practices adapt to the changing economic role of women. These results are also in line with Artemenko's (2016) finding that ensuring the availability of institutional childcare is among the "top 4" most in-demand policy measures in terms of stimulating the childbearing willingness, and is consistent with evidence on childcare and second-parity fertility from other countries where the small family regime dominates (e.g., Levin et al., 2016). However, it was unexpected that institutional or informal childcare alone would not be significantly associated with intentions to have a second child. One plausible explanation concerns the fact that institutional childcare alone is not sufficient to cover parents' childcare needs. Additionally, the low sample size may have resulted in beta errors.

The study also found that being female is negatively associated with intending to have a second child. This validates the hypothesis that women in Belarus' transitional "dual breadwinner, female homemaker" regime face a double workload which increases their opportunity cost of having a second child compared to men. While this finding is consistent with empirical analysis on gender equality and fertility (e.g., Esping-Andersen, 2016; Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Pastore & Verashchagina, n.d.), it has not to date formed the subject of an evidence-based academic debate and may merit further investigation.

The study did not determine a significant association between economic wellbeing or employment status and second-parity fertility intentions. This result contradicts both the neoclassical paradigm and the findings of recent empirical studies on fertility in Belarus (e.g., Amialchuk et al., 2014; Artemenko, 2016); however, it is in line with the findings of empirical studies from other "small family" countries such as Russia (Kumo, 2009). Possible explanations for the results of this study comprise the relatively small final sample size of the data and a lack of additional economic variables such as income uncertainty and maternal and child benefits. Further academic research needs to be conducted so as to clarify the effect of neoclassical economic factors on fertility in Belarus, the interplay of gender norms and employment patterns, and the interaction between economic factors and childcare usage.

The other study findings, while noteworthy, are in line with existing research and theoretical expectations. Firstly, the analysis confirmed that a medium level of education, compared to a lower level, is positively associated with second-parity fertility intentions in the Belarusian context. Secondly, the age of the first child plays a significant role in second-parity fertility intentions, in line with both neoclassical assumptions and descriptive data from the HFD, which shows that the mean interval between the first and second childbirth is four years. Thirdly, being aged 36 or older is associated with a lower likelihood of short-term intentions to have a second child, which is consistent with data from the HFD that shows that the mean age at second birth (MAB2) has remained constant at around 29 over the last decade.

As with all studies, this study has its limitations. Firstly, while factors that influence fertility intentions

can be assumed to also influence fertility behaviour, there may be other unobserved factors that explain the intention-behaviour gap (Balbo & Mills, 2011). Secondly, the fertility intentions of the respondents' partners were not assessed in the survey, omitting potentially relevant details on intra-household bargaining. Thirdly, the data allows for an analysis of childcare usage but not of its availability and quality. Fourthly, the cross-sectional study design allows for the analysis of statistical associations but not for causal conclusions on the impact of childcare or other variables on fertility intentions. Fifthly, the relatively low sample size elevates the risk of "false negatives." Sixthly, the data allows for an analysis of fertility determinants but not of the effectiveness of family policy instruments that aim to shape them. Further research will be needed to address these limitations.

The findings of this study have a number of implications for the formulation of effective family policy instruments in Belarus and in other "small family" countries. Most notably, the findings of the study challenge the almost exclusively neoclassical focus of the Belarusian government's pronatalist family policy. The findings that mixed institutional and informal childcare are associated with second-parity fertility intentions, and that being a woman is associated with lower second-parity fertility intentions, point to the dual importance of creating more supportive institutional arrangements and of facilitating a more supportive social environment for working mothers. To this end, policy makers should consider firstly improving the availability and quality of institutional care facilities, and secondly incentivising men to increase their participation in housework and, particularly, in childcare. This could be achieved, for instance, by offering non-transferable, paid parental leave to fathers. This second measure would not only reduce the double burden on women but also help to challenge existing gender norms, attitudes and practices (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This is of essential importance in terms of moving towards a gender-egalitarian "dual breadwinner, dual homemaker" gender role regime, which recent research indicates is conducive to increasing fertility rates (Esping-Andersen, 2016; Esping- Andersen & Billari, 2015).

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Childlessness and Barriers to Gay Parenthood in Czechia

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Abstract
This mixed-methods article focuses on childlessness and barriers to parenthood among non-heterosexual men in Czechia. On the quantitative sample of 419 men (165 gays, 125 bisexuals, and 129 heterosexuals with same-sex romantic/sexual attraction), recruited on a representative online panel, we map the parenting desires, intentions, and perceived barriers to parenthood. Our analysis identifies a substantial group of gay men without parenting desires and intentions compared to heterosexuals and bisexuals, and the lack of legal recognition of same-sex families as a crucial barrier to gay parenthood. The qualitative enquiry, based on semi-structured interviews with 23 self-identified gay men aged 25 to 47 years, explores how they reflect on (not) becoming parents and contextualises those reflections. The deployed concept of "parental consciousness" captures the variety of considered pathways to gay parenthood and proves itself useful in understanding the low parenting desires and a generational shift among Czech gay men. We argue that men able to come out in their early adulthood in the post-socialist context tend to have more diversified perspectives on possible pathways to parenthood. Among gay men without children, we identified three distinct perceptions of the state: given childlessness, chosen childfree life, and a life stage/indecision. The informants pursuing parenthood have seen identity-specific barriers to parenthood as crucial, which is discussed in the context of state selective regulations of the relational lives of persons with non-normative identities. Although Czech gay men's parental consciousness has increased, legal conditions remain crucial for increasing their real-life options.

Keywords
barriers to gay parenthood; childlessness; Czechia; gay men; parenting desires and intentions

Issue
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1. Introduction

In so-called Western societies, the LGBTQ+ movement played an essential role in legitimising intimate relations and parenting constellations other than those practised by heterosexual individuals (Roseneil et al., 2013). Research carried out mainly in the Anglo-American context documented how lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parenting aspirations are shaped by the sociocultural, legislative, and institutional conditions (e.g., Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Gato et al., 2017; Lasio et al., 2020; Leal et al., 2019; Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Shenkman et al., 2021). In some countries, the growing number of same-sex families has been referred to as a "gay baby-boom" (Johnson & O'Connor, 2002). However, other countries, including Czechia, show resistance to adopting legislation to support LGBTQ+ parenting rights (e.g., Guasti & Bustikova, 2020; ILGA-Europe, 2021), and the parenthood of non-heterosexual persons lacks recognition in these countries (e.g., Mizielińska et al., 2015; Takács &

Szalma, 2020). Thus, it is important to investigate how LGB parenting aspirations are shaped by conditions in different contexts.

In this article, we focus on childlessness, parenting desires, intentions, and the barriers to parenthood among non-straight men in Czechia. Considering the topic of LGBTQ+ parenthood is underresearched in post-socialist countries, and that there is a research gap in understanding gay men's parenting desires, intentions, and experiences of childlessness/pathways to parenthood, particularly in this region, we undertook an explorative mixed-methods study with a main focus on qualitative enquiry to obtain a comprehensive knowledge of the topic.

While most research on LGB parenting desires and intentions is based on convenience sample surveys, our research also demonstrates the advantage of combining qualitative data with a quantitative sample derived from a country-representative online panel. The quantitative enquiry maps men's parenting desires and intentions by their sexual identities and perceived barriers to gay parenthood, while the qualitative enquiry explores gay men's experiences and meanings of (not) becoming parents and contextualises them—resorting to the concepts of "parental consciousness" and "heteronormativity." The contribution our study tries to make is twofold: First, we endeavour to fill the knowledge gap on parenting desires, intentions, and the barriers to parenthood among gay men in Czechia; second, we want to validate a research approach that allows the use of in-depth knowledge of gay men's experiences of childlessness and barriers to parenthood to better understand some of the differences in men's parenting desires and intentions according to their sexual identity. Finally, we discuss our findings with previous studies on LGBTQ+ parenting desires, intentions, and barriers to parenthood in neighbouring post-socialist countries to indicate a possible avenue for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

Late-modern societies provide individuals with more freedom for shaping their biographies. Widespread birth control and assisted reproductive technologies have helped decouple sexuality from reproduction and free reproduction from heterosexual intercourse. This has contributed to an increasing acceptance of childlessness as a deliberately adopted way of life—coined "childfree" (Lunneborg, 1999)—and the simultaneous spread of same-sex families (Roseneil et al., 2013).

Although becoming a parent is increasingly seen as non-mandatory, it remains an expected life transition that tends to be associated with heterosexuality as its privilege. There remains a tendency to stigmatise families that deviate from the norm of heterosexuality (Lasio et al., 2020). Here, researchers write about heteronormatively prescribed childlessness (Takács, 2018) and strategic denial of and compensation for parenting desires among gay men and lesbians (Kuhar & Takács, 2007; Mizielińska & Kulpa, 2011).

It does not mean that LGBTQ+ people do not express positive parenting desires and intentions (i.e., wishes and plans to become a parent). Besides various sociodemographic, personal, relational, ideational, structural, and cultural factors that influence parenting desires, intentions, and transitions to parenthood in general, studies have identified factors affecting non-straight men's parenting desires and intentions in particular. They include heteronormativity in social institutions and interactions (Mizielińska & Stasińska, 2018), internalised heteronormativity (Pacilli et al., 2011), the legal conditions of becoming a parent and the parenting rights of non-straight persons (Takács, 2018), experiences of stigmatisation (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Jeffries et al., 2020; Leal et al., 2019), minority stress-related avoidance of intimacy and interdependence (Shenkman et al., 2019), and the financial, time, and other costs of non-straight men's pathways to parenthood by means of surrogacy, adoption, multiparenting (e.g., with a lesbian couple), and foster care (Golombok, 2015; Murphy, 2013). Country differences in parenting aspirations of LGB people were also explained by individualistic or familistic value orientations, pronatalism, and economic constraints at the societal level (Shenkman et al., 2021).

Quantitative studies done mainly in so-called Western countries demonstrate weaker parenting desires and intentions among non-straight persons and a greater desire-intention gap among gay men compared to their straight and bisexual peers (e.g., Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Riskind & Patterson, 2010). Gay men thus convert their desire into an intention to have a child less often than non-gay men and are more likely to remain childless (Gato et al., 2017). Furthermore, Riskind and Tornello (2017) indicate more similarities between bisexual and straight men than gay men because bisexual persons are more likely to have children in different-sex couples. We were inspired by such studies and expected to observe similar trends in our first quantitative mapping in Czechia. We anticipated low parenting desires and intentions among gay men due to homophobia and a long history of selective pronatalism in Czechia that excludes certain groups from reproduction.

To explain "how" gay men "become aware" that they can/cannot become parents in heteronormative societies, we were inspired by qualitative studies. Marsiglio and Hutchinson (2002) introduced the term "procreative consciousness" to conceptualise how men understand themselves as procreative and nurturing beings through sexual and romantic relations and fertility-related events. Others explored how procreative consciousness emerges among gay men in the absence of a direct fertility experience through adoption agencies, fertility clinics, and a bureaucracy that mediates access to parenthood (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007). Murphy (2013) used the same concept to explore the pathways of American and Australian gay men towards surrogacy, revealing

that among the sources of their procreative consciousness were the promotional strategies of surrogacy agencies, media, their peers, and partners. Exposure to messages that promoted gay parenthood enabled them to develop the procreative consciousness that had previously been unavailable to them. The findings are context-specific and show that parenting desires are socially informed and enacted through available discourses and resources. Exploring the emergence of procreative consciousness among gay men in much less advanced countries in terms of LGBTQ+ rights, such as Czechia, is missing. Thus, by exploring Czech gay men's experiences with the use of "parental consciousness"—a concept based on procreative consciousness that captures the variety of pathways to parenthood beyond biogenetic reproduction—our study contributes to filling the knowledge gap on gay men's raising awareness of themselves as parenting persons outside advanced societies regarding LGBTQ+ rights.

Overall, our mixed-methods study examines the topic of childlessness, parenting desires, intentions, and barriers to non-straight parenthood through the lens of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is based on the assumption of two complementary genders as "normal,'' "natural," and "ideal." From the heteronormative perspective, being gay is associated with childlessness (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007), and gay fathers are faced with "dual stigmatisation" associated with the belief in the "naturalness" of heterosexual parenthood and the belief that men do not have a "natural'' caregiving ability and cannot be as competent at parenting as women (Stacey, 2006). Heteronormativity manifests in a set of processes to re/produce heterosexuality on legal, cultural, structural, institutional, interactional, discursive, and individual levels (Lasio et al., 2020). Kimmel (2003) defines heteronormativity as an interplay of four social dynamics: misogyny (which marginalises femininity), bipolarisation (which marginalises non-heterosexualities), essentialism (which constructs heteronormativity and the resulting marginalisation of non-heterosexuality as "natural"), and religious prejudices. Although the last is relatively weak in Czechia, the Czech conservative gender regime and (internalised) homophobia (as signs of heteronormativity) have been fuelled by the medicalisation of sexuality via sexology in the 20th century, which also strengthened the essentialising and bipolar substance of heteronormativity (Lišková, 2018; Sloboda, 2021; Sokolová, 2021).

While LGBTQ+ movements have changed the "landscapes" of heteronormativity and transformed the institutions regulating non-straight sexualities in some societies (Roseneil et al., 2013), heteronormativity remains strongly institutionalised through legal and social barriers to same-sex parenthood in Czechia and its neighbouring post-socialist countries (European Commission, 2019; ILGA-Europe, 2021; Takács & Szalma, 2020). Their governments have applied selective pronatalist policies to protect such values as heteronormativity and ethnic and national belonging. While supporting the fertility and parenthood of some persons, they hinder the fertility and parenthood of others via limited access to assisted reproductive technologies, adoptions, childcare support, and legal definitions of parents and families (Hašková & Dudová, 2021; Takács, 2018). Our study thus also contributes to the knowledge about how gay men's parenting aspirations are shaped by a particular post-socialist context.

3. Context

In Europe, post-socialist countries are in general less accepting of LGBTQ+ rights, with Czechia doing better compared to many neighbouring post-socialist countries (European Commission, 2019). Civil unions have opened for same-sex couples in Czechia, Slovenia, Hungary, and Croatia but not in Poland and Slovakia. In Czechia, gays/lesbians are allowed to adopt children individually and, in contrast to Poland, research suggests this right is not to be circumvented in Czechia (Nešporová, 2021). However, joint adoptions by same-sex couples and step-child adoptions in same-sex couples have remained forbidden in Czechia, like in neighbouring post-socialist countries. Although neither assisted reproduction for lesbian couples nor surrogacy is legislated for same-sex couples in post-socialist countries, there is research evidence of these practices, and, in Czechia, the knowledge on how to proceed at fertility clinics is widely shared among lesbians (Nešporová, 2021). In same-sex families, though, only one of the parents has parental rights and obligations, while their same-sex partner remains legally unrecognised as a parent in Czechia (Burešová, 2020). Some gay men opt for multiparenting (Nešporová, 2021); yet again, no legal provisions for such families exist in Czechia (Burešová, 2020).

Sokolová (2009) found that gay men in Czechia who grew up under state socialism usually did not come out until long after they had children in a heterosexual relationship, while younger gay men typically came out before they reached the average reproductive age. As the state socialist regime ostracised and stigmatised homosexuality (Sokolová, 2021), it made it difficult for gay men to think about intimate relations outside the heteronormative condition. Despite persisting stigmatisation, attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights have been improving in Czechia and coming out has become much easier in the last two decades with same-sex parenting being positively portrayed in the media in the last decade (Sloboda, 2021).

In contrast, Hungary has experienced a strong neoconservative nationalist backslide towards LGBTQ+ rights since 2010 (Kováts, 2021). In religious Poland, LGBTQ+ and gender ideology are defined as a threat to the nation (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021), and a similar trend was observed in Slovakia (Guasti & Bustikova, 2020). Although negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights and visibility are identifiable all across the post-socialist region (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021), which is fuelled by

anti-Western sentiments (Kováts, 2021), Czechia has remained relatively untouched by this (Sloboda, 2021). Nevertheless, homophobia persists in Czechia. It manifests itself in the fewer than two in three Czechs agreeing with step-child adoptions in same-sex families and only less than half approving of same-sex marriage or joint adoptions by same-sex couples (Spurný, 2019).

Gay fatherhood is moreover constrained by gender-conservative essentialising attitudes of Czechs towards parenting and gendered familialist policies that cement mothers as primary caregivers and constrain men's participation in care (Lutherová et al., 2017). In Czechia, mothers' long, full-time, intensive childcare and separate gender roles in families with preschool children are dominantly practised, leaving little space for fathers to participate in care (Lutherová et al., 2017).

Besides Sokolová's (2009) qualitative study of Czech gay parenting desires, only a few studies focused on the topic within the neighbouring post-socialist countries. They include mainly convenience sample surveys of non-straight people and rarely address both desires and intentions. Polish mixed-method study that started in 2013 (Mizielińska et al., 2015; Mizielińska & Stasińska, 2018) showed very low positive parenting intentions of gay men (5% contrasting to almost a quarter among lesbians) and a share of fathers among them (5%). More than half of those planning to have a child considered surrogacy and raising the child in a same-sex couple, less than a third considered adoption, while other options received much less support. In Slovenia, almost 40% of gay men desired to have children, with younger ones more often postponing the decision and older ones expressing more often resignation to parenthood (Švab, 2007). In Croatia, researchers found lower parenting desires in gay men (48%) compared to bisexual men (58%) and a preference for adoptions/foster care over surrogacy, with raising a child in a heterosexual relationship being the least preferred (Štambuk et al., 2019). In Hungary, before individual adoptions were banned in 2021, Háttér Társaság (2017) indicated an increasing share of non-straight people wishing to parent with solid support for adoptions among gay men. Despite the fact that the samples and methods of these studies differ, the short overview indicates that there are country-specific differences in the region.

4. Data and Methods

We apply a parallel mixed-methods research with a main focus on qualitative enquiry. While quantitative enquiry maps the outline of gay men's parenting desires, intentions, and barriers to their parenthood, the qualitative analysis explores their experiences and meanings of (not) becoming parents. Qualitative data alone could not provide enough information on the scope of gay men's parenting desires and intentions and the extent to which they differ from men declaring other than gay identities. In contrast, quantitative data alone could not provide enough insight into gay men's experiences and meanings of childlessness and constrained pathways to parenthood. In both enquiries, we applied a broad definition of parenthood that includes procreating and raising a child who is genetically one's own, adopted, a partner's, or in one's long-term foster care.

Considering it is difficult to collect a representative sample of persons with non-normative sexual identities, studies have mostly relied on convenience samples (e.g., Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Carneiro et al., 2017; Costa & Bidell, 2017). In Czechia, there are no relevant census data, and general population surveys have produced extremely small samples of non-straight men. In the absence of a sampling frame for a representative survey of persons with non-normative sexual identities, we opted for an online survey using the representative Czech National Panel in 2019. We asked 25,000 respondents aged 25–49 (95% of people of this age use the internet every day; see CZSO, 2019) to complete a screening questionnaire on sociodemographic characteristics, including sexual identity. The screening clarified the distribution of persons by declared gender, sexual identity, place of residence, and age, helping us determine the quotas for our main sample that were allowed to proceed with the full questionnaire. As we focused on persons with non-normative sexual identities, those declaring exclusively heterosexual identities were excluded. The main sample thus consisted of self-declared gay men, lesbians, bisexual persons, persons declaring heterosexual identity with romantic/sexual attraction to the same-sex person in the last five years (predominantly straight), and persons declaring "other" identities. Given that we focus on men in this article, the analysed weighted dataset consisted of 129 predominantly straight men, 125 bisexual men, and 165 gay men. Another 22 men who declared "other" identities were excluded from the sample because this was probably a heterogeneous group that could not be merged with any other group nor analysed separately because of the small size of the group. The final sample of 419 men allows only descriptive statistics; yet, it is on a topic that has not yet been mapped in Czechia and the results complement the qualitative data.

Our qualitative enquiry was based on semi-structured interviews with 23 self-identified gay men aged 25–47 years in 2018–2020; nine of them were raising children and 14 were childless/childfree. They lived in a range of settlements from small villages to large cities, and their education ranged from apprenticeship to college. The interviews were on average 1.5 hours long and were transcribed verbatim. The interviewees' names are fictitious.

The interviewees were asked whether they were considering having a child in the future or had raised/were raising a child already. We then encouraged them to explain their reasons for (not) considering a child in the past/future and to explain the pathways and barriers to parenthood considered/experienced. Subsequently, we asked them about their childhood, formation of

non-straight identities, coming out, job and relationship trajectories, issues related to (pathways to) parenthood, discrimination, support networks, and engagement in LGBTQ+ movements.

The analysis included several steps. We started with thematic analysis. Three of the authors were coding the first nine interviews independently. Subsequently, we discussed the codes (repeatedly identified themes), produced a list of 45 codes and their "families," and then re-coded these interviews and coded all the remaining interviews in the Atlas.ti software program using the list. For example, the family of codes "pathways to parenthood" included not only codes such as "surrogacy,'' "adoption," and "child from previous relationship," but also "not/importance of biological parenthood," "not/importance of mother," etc. Then, we searched for further relations between the codes to develop more complex categories such as "declining parenthood." Subsequently, we analysed the interviews as "life-stories'' of childlessness or becoming a parent. Although life-stories accentuate personal experience and subjectivity, they contribute to the understanding of the formation of life-paths beyond an individual case (Rustin & Chamberlayne, 2002). Each life-story represents a fragment within the mosaic of contextualised understanding of gay men's experience of (not) becoming parents. Finally, we merged our analysis of individual life-stories with developed categories to formulate collective stories (Charmaz, 2006). Collective stories do not capture the details of individual life-stories. They were constructed to highlight the main differences in the experience of childlessness and barriers to parenthood. In particular, we constructed collective stories of those who have never considered parenthood as their life option, those who chose to remain childfree, those who remain undecided whether to pursue parenthood, and those who have desired parenthood and considered ways to achieve it.

5. Quantitative Enquiry

Quantitative data explore the "landscape" of heteronormativity in Czechia by mapping the extent to which parenting desires and intentions of self-identified gay men differ from those self-identified as bisexual or predominantly straight and by mapping the perceived barriers to gay parenthood.

As Czechia belongs to a region known for limited advances in LGBTQ+ rights, we expect that only a small portion of gay men would target parenthood. Our data are in line with such an assumption. While 78% of the predominantly straight men found it definitely or rather important to raise children, the same was true for 62% of the enquired bisexual men and only for 26% of gay men (Figure 1). Yet, social mechanisms leading to the reduced importance of raising children for gay men are to be explored with the qualitative data.

As in other countries (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Kranz et al., 2018; Riskind & Patterson, 2010), gay men in Czechia too showed smaller parenting desires, intentions, and transitions to parenthood compared to men in the other subcategories (Figure 2): Only 8% of gay respondents were fathers in contrast to 48% of bisexual men and 61% of predominantly straight men. In addition, 65% of gay men respondents reported not wanting children compared to only 25% of their bisexual and 12% of their predominantly straight peers. Moreover, the parenting desires of Czech gay respondents led to parenting intentions less often compared to the others. What discourses and barriers may contribute to these differences are to be further explored.

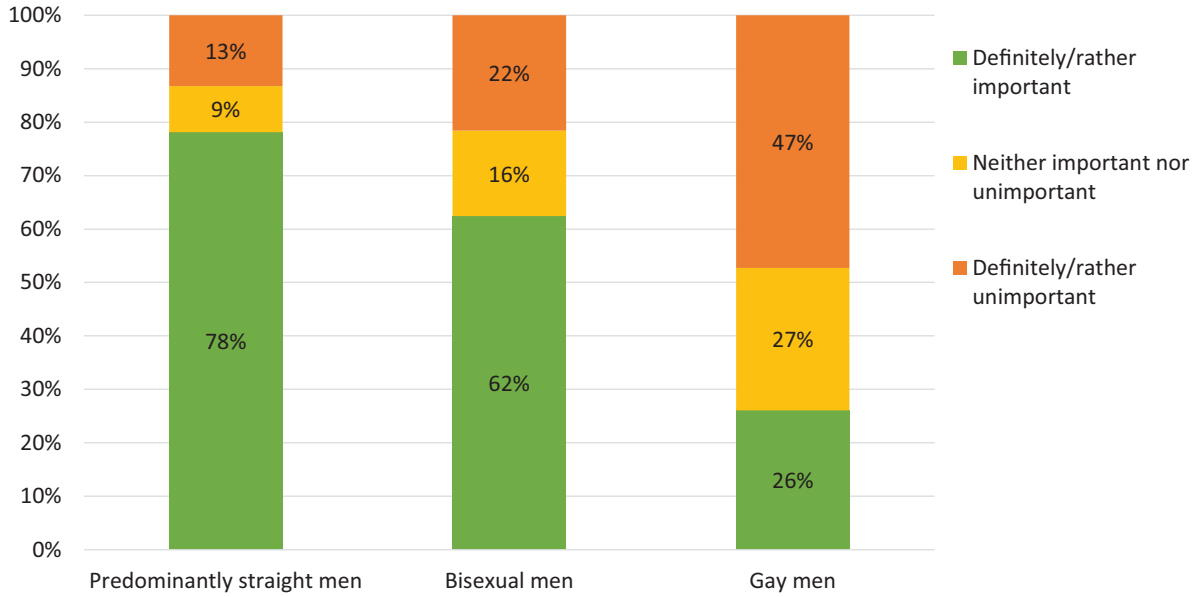

Figure 1. Importance of having one's own family and raising children, by men's sexual identities. Note: Chi-square test is statistically significant (Sig. = 0.000).

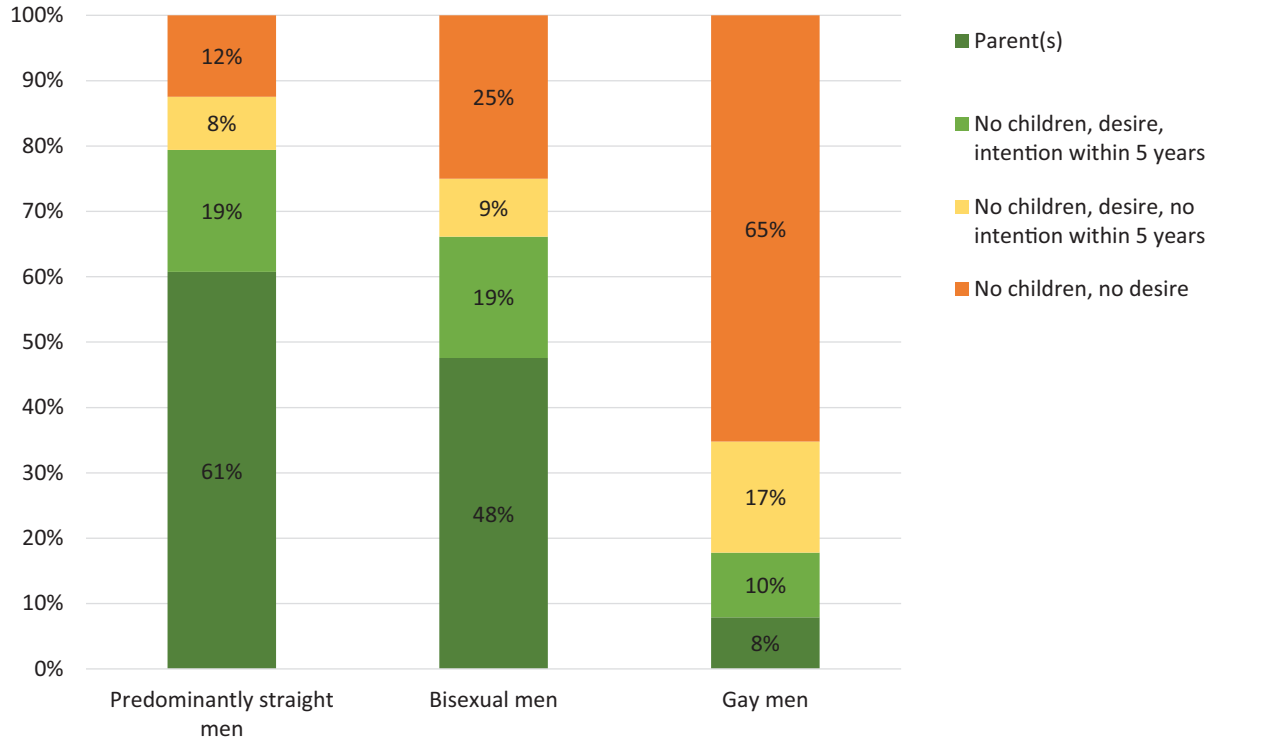

Figure 2. Parenthood, parenting desires and intentions, by men's sexual identities. Note: Chi-square test is statistically significant (Sig. = 0.000).

In all the three subcategories of respondents, conception in a heterosexual relationship was the most frequent pathway to fatherhood. As many as 60% of the children of gay respondents were brought into the world in this way. This may reflect the plasticity of sexual identities, difficulties of declaring one's gayness, and inaccessibility of other pathways to parenthood for gay men. The last reason is supported by the fact that the majority of gay respondents who wanted one/an additional child did not consider getting the child in a heterosexual relationship. Despite the small number of respondents, our data also imply that Czech gay men show neither a strong preference for biological children nor for a single pathway to parenthood (including adoption, surrogacy, foster care, heterosexual relationship, multiparenting, and raising their partner's children from their previous relationships). Akin to other men, parenting with their partners is the most considered childcare arrangement by gay men (91%), followed by parenting with the help of one's family (58%) and multiparenting (42%), while solo parenting and parenting with friends are the least considered options.

Although in late-modern societies, people are supposed to decide rather freely whether to start a family and, indeed, 92% of predominantly straight men feel free to choose, the same applies only to 87% of bisexual men and 69% of gay men (Figure 3).

A few percentage points more gay respondents are consistently single (23%) and fewer gay respondents have long-term monogamous relationships compared to other respondents; yet, the differences are not statistically significant. Therefore, relationship status cannot explain the differences found in parenting desires, intentions, and perceived freedom of choice. A range of barriers to parenthood perceived by gay men seems to better explain such differences (Figure 4).

Topmost amongst the list of factors influencing gay men's parenting intentions is their partnership situation with their economic situation also playing an important role for many. However, before the economic situation, almost 50% of gay men declare the impact of legal uncertainty of same-sex families on their parenting intentions. Moreover, legal uncertainty of multiparenting, fear of low acceptance of the child by society, and conditions of surrogacy are also mentioned as influential by a significant portion of the participating gay men. In short, gay men consider the mainstream factors influencing their parenting intentions and, by and large, the barriers specific to gay men on top of that.

6. Qualitative Enquiry

The qualitative enquiry examines how gay men reflect on (not) becoming parents. First, three collective stories of childlessness are analysed. Second, barriers to gay pathways to parenthood are discussed.

6.1. Childlessness as a Given

The quantitative analysis showed a substantial group of gay men wishing no children. The interviews illuminate why. Some gay men construct their childlessness as a "given," a "matter of course":

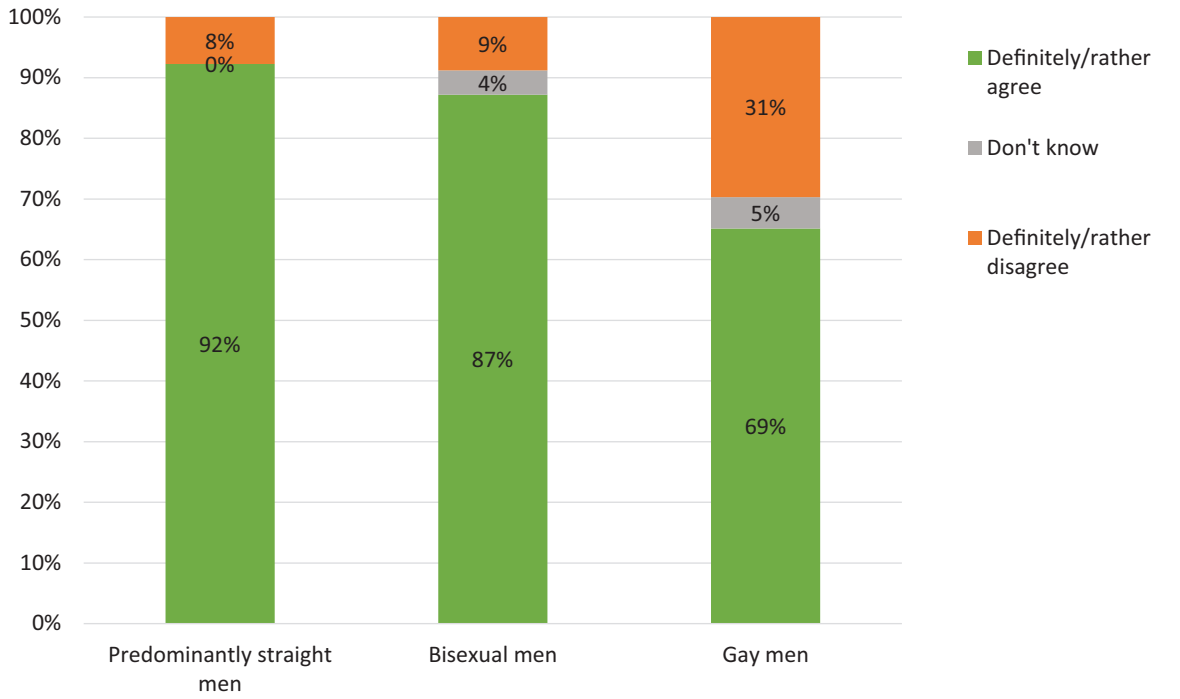

Figure 3. Perceived freedom to decide whether to become a parent, by men's sexual identities; percentages were calculated based on answers to the question: Would you say, about yourself, that you are free to decide whether to become a parent? Note: Chi-square test is statistically significant (Sig. = 0.000).

> I think I can't be a parent due to my orientation….It would also be against nature to be a parent when I'm who I am. (Juraj, age 40, single)

> If nature had wanted me to have children, it probably wouldn't have made me what it made me. (Nomád, age 40, partnered)

These gay men's rejection of parenthood refers to the "biologising discourse" of intimate relations. Their considerations are informed by the privilege of heterosexuality over homosexuality achieved in this discourse by attaching significance to linkages between parenthood and reproduction by heterosexual intercourse and by constructing manhood and womanhood as two complementary halves of a "natural" whole. Their experience may be described in terms of internalised homonegativity, manifested by self-stigmatization and internalization of negative societal attitudes towards homosexuality into the system of one's self-concept, as a result of processes of minority stress (Shenkman et al., 2019).

However, as Kamil (age 40, partnered) shows below, the essentialising gendered view of caregivers is yet another aspect of heteronormativity that represents an important barrier to gay men's parenting desires:

> I don't know how a man, or two men, should take care of a child. It's the mother who takes care in the movies and fairy tales, she is the caregiver.

Kamil refers to the pronounced cultural belief in Czechia that women are always the caregivers and that female bodies/minds are better equipped for childcare (Lišková, 2018). When accepting this view, gay men do not perceive themselves as those who should become parents. The norm of heterosexuality and the essentialising gendered view of caregivers block the emergence of their parental consciousness. They expect permanent childlessness as a "natural" outcome of their non-normative sexual identity and assumed lack of disposition to care. These strains of heteronormativity contribute to producing childlessness as a given in the views of these gay men; they lack the discourses for raising parental consciousness and thus cannot choose parenthood.

6.2. Childlessness as a Choice

Other gay men view their childlessness as a consequence of "liberation" from a "duty to become parents" rather than a perceived "inability" to procreate and care. Their narratives suggest that homosexuality can be viewed as a source of greater freedom than heterosexuality regarding the social pressure to become parents:

> In childhood…no one wanted children….But I knew that one day I'd grow up and have children after all, but it's not like I wanted it….It developed to the point that I never wanted children, that I'm content not to have to. [For gay men], not wanting a child is probably easier to defend, work with, or live with. If I was straight and had to get a wife, a wife who might want a child, then I would be under greater pressure to have one. (Martin, age 31, single)

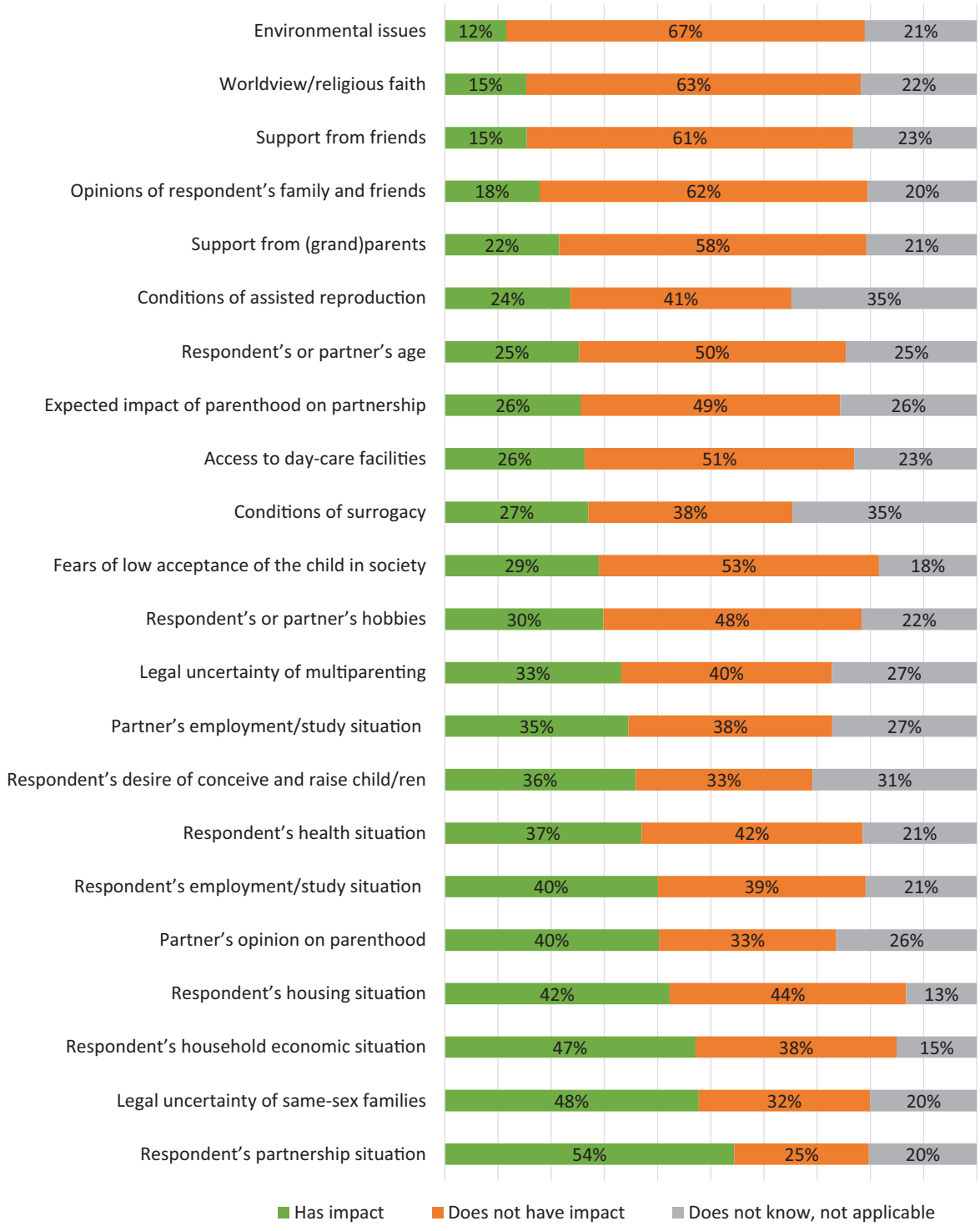

Figure 4. Factors in the view of gay men that have affected their parenting intentions.

For these gay men, childlessness is a preferred way of life allowing them to focus on their professional careers, childfree relationships, hobbies, or a combination of these. They may be aware of their potential of becoming parents. Their childlessness does not relate to an absence of parental consciousness. Just as childless gay men who lack parental consciousness and see their childlessness as "naturally" given, childfree gay men consider their childlessness as a permanent way of life; but as opposed to the former, they construct this way as their genuine choice (e.g., van Houten et al., 2020).

6.3. Childlessness as a Life Stage and/or Indecision

Other childless gay men do not perceive their childlessness as a given nor do they adopt narratives of childlessness as a chosen way of life. Like many heterosexual childless men (Maříková, 2021), they view their childlessness

as unintended (but not given) or they are (still) undecided about their pursuit of parenthood. "Being undecided" relates primarily to younger gay men (mainly under the age of 30 years):

> It's something I've been thinking about more often than before but it's not something I have clarity about. (Erik, age 25, single)

> I don't know, I haven't felt the need to have children so far, nor do I feel one at the moment, but I suppose this will change within a couple of years. (Jáchym, age 30, intermittently partnered)

> It's a bit hard for me to tell if my reasons are rationalisations of the fact that I'm being prevented by external circumstances…or whether they are a result of my way of thinking. But I believe there are economic reasons and I'm not sure if the relationship I'm in…would be good enough to take care of a child. (Boris, age 26, partnered)

From a biographical perspective, they are still in the process of clarifying their orientation in life; they thematise the absence or quality of partnership, issues of study and work, and housing and financial insecurity—just as their heterosexual peers do (Maříková, 2021). In addition, they may face difficult relationships with their parents following coming out that may hinder decisions about parenthood in relation to minority stress-related avoidance of intimacy (Shenkman et al., 2019) and anticipated lack of support (Mizielińska & Stasińska, 2018). From a generational perspective, they do not share the rather older gay men's a priori denial of gay parenthood. While conscious of their parental potential, they remain undecided about whether to pursue parenthood. They do not identify with permanent childlessness: Either they do not (yet) view parenthood as personally relevant or they view parenthood as a potential way later in life.

6.4. Barriers to Different Pathways to Parenthood

In their narratives, many gay men detail their considerations of different pathways to parenthood, although they have often resulted in perpetual/permanent postponement of parenthood. Only some accounted for real steps taken towards parenthood, some of which again failed to achieve their goals.

A few gay men in their 40s stated that their parenting desire had motivated them to have a child in a heterosexual relationship. Yet for none of the younger gay men who did consider parenthood, the pathway implied keeping their gay status a secret. This is in line with the quantitative data that indicated that most gay respondents who wanted a child did not consider a heterosexual relationship. Cyril's (age 27, partnered) quote below illustrates such a generational shift. Although barriers to gay parenthood remain enormous, given the (LGBTQ+ movement driven) increase in knowledge about same-sex families and the legislative and social acceptance of same-sex couples, young gay men's contemplation of future parenthood is no longer compulsorily linked to different-sex couple life:

> I know people who have completely covered up their true orientation to have their family….I considered it but…such a life probably does not have the quality it should have.

Similarly, both types of data indicate that partnership plays a major role in gay men's parenting intentions. In their narratives, the gay men thematised the absence/existence of a partnership, its quality, and their partner's parenting preparedness. The last was emphasised as few gay partners may be prepared for parenthood given the low share and visibility of fathers among gay men. Although the country's heteronormative legal system does not allow two men to become a child's parents, Czech gay men (akin to heterosexuals) prefer the biparental model over solo parenting:

> A child requires some security, you can have that with your significant other, I can't imagine having a child on my own. (Tomáš, age 36, partnered)

> I could not make it on my own…also timewise…when there's a couple…the other person can fill in for you. (Karel, age 41, single)

Adoption and surrogacy are their preferred means to start a biparental family while multiparenting (like solo parenting contradicting the biparental model) is less preferred. As for multiparenting, they pursue the more or less extensive parental role. The extensive role includes, for example, shared custody whereby the child spends alternating periods in the gay father's and the biological mother's families. The minimal role foresees, for example, being a distant biological father and getting irregularly involved in childcare.

The absence of legal regulation of same-sex parenthood was considered a major barrier to gay parenthood. The men emphasised that only one of them could become the child's parent, while the other partner would remain devoid of any parental rights and obligations. They realistically anticipated problems due to such legal regulations combined with anticipated prejudices against gay parenthood:

> This is a huge problem…that only one can be the parent. This means that the child is cut off from half of their rights…inheritance, but also a representation of that child. Even if there are powers of attorney, a right cannot be 100% replaced by that. (Kamil, age 41, partnered)

The gay men who were considering the pursuit of parenthood were weighing the pros and cons of different pathways to that goal. Although the interviews suggest that adoption tends to be the initial consideration, many gay men are reluctant to accept a biologically unrelated child who would have a disadvantaged start in life:

> For adoptions, I am worried that…there is no automatic feeling that this is my child. (Boris, age 26, partnered)

Some also anticipated prejudices from the adoption bureaucracy, but adoptive gay fathers did not confirm such prejudices either in our study or in a recent study of gay and lesbian families by Nešporová (2021). Eventually, adoption was only considered by those who did not insist on biological fatherhood and wanted to help an existing child.

Surrogacy was only considered following thorough mapping or failed pursuit of other pathways to parenthood, a process accompanied by a growing desire to have biological children; however, many gay men found surrogacy unacceptable as "shopping" for children or "a breach of the bond" between biological mother and child:

> A child is not a thing that you buy at a supermarket or through an arrangement with someone: "Look, you will carry my baby, I will then take it." (Tadeáš, age 29, partnered)

> Surrogacy can't have a good influence either on the baby or on the children in the surrogate mother's family….The baby must sense being handed over by its mother. (Kamil, age 41, partnered)

> I do not want to create a child in an unnatural way….Regarding surrogacy…I cannot afford to pay a mother…there are no legal provisions in Czechia and, above all, a woman has certain needs, hormones, potentially complicating the handing over of the child. (David, age 27, partnered)

They further emphasised the absence of surrogacy provisions in Czech law and the lack of financial, linguistic, or other resources for the pursuit of surrogacy abroad. Typically realised after many years of planning, surrogacy was an option only for stable couples of gay men who desired their biological children, knew other gay couples who had succeeded on this pathway to parenthood and had the above resources at their disposal.

When multiparenting was declined, this was typically in the context of the child-raising norms of coupledom and parental cohabitation. More than two parents and one household were considered confusing for the child and associated with difficult negotiations between more than two partners:

> I know how difficult it is to negotiate with two people, let alone three people….Disputes between the parents are the worst thing the child can experience….I know gay families of three or four adults…there are disagreements…it is ideal when a child is raised by two people. (Kamil, age 41, partnered)

Real steps towards multiparenting were taken only by those willing to transgress the coupledom norm and view the existence of more involved parents as more resources for the child, rather than confusion. However, some told us that their pathways to multiparenting had failed because they wanted a greater stake in childcare than that offered by the prospective multiparenting lesbian couple:

> Our idea was that we would be fully involved in that parenting…and the idea of the lesbian couple was that we would be involved just a little bit. It started to be a drama…then they said "no." (Libor, age 45, partnered, children born with the same surrogate abroad)

Compared to heterosexuals, gay men's pathways to parenthood are typically more complicated, longer, and negotiated with more people. The negotiations involve institutions in the case of adoption, a surrogate mother, a co-parenting lesbian mother/couple, and the like. All this renders the pathways highly planned, multilaterally negotiated, and consequently more prone to the risk of permanent postponement of parenthood. One has to overcome more obstacles and reconcile more interests than in the case of an unassisted conception by a heterosexual couple:

> Many people in straight couples also feel they can't afford a child, or [that] their relationship is not ready…but to us, it can't just happen. We are much more obliged to consider this and take rational steps….My pathway to parenthood is also influenced by the sense of having to be the perfect parent….It's another thing when having a child is a rational decision. (Boris, age 26, partnered)

In sum, parenting desires and intentions are conditional upon the existence of parental consciousness, which has grown in the new generation of gay men. However, their parenting desires and intentions often do not result in actual parenthood because of the severe barriers to their parenthood, leading them to postpone parenthood permanently.

The interviews also revealed important intersectional differences among gay men—concerning not only generation but also socioeconomic standing. High costs make surrogacy available only for gay men with high incomes. Moreover, given the geographic location of surrogacy agencies and the legal complexities of surrogacy, surrogacy seems also limited by communication skills. Moreover, multiparenting negotiations reflect the social

location of all potential parents too, which is strengthened by the fact that a positive approach to multiparenting is mostly related to the notion of increased resources for the child. Similarly to Takács (2018), we may thus view gay parenthood as a feature of socioeconomic privilege, while most gay men wishing for parenthood remain deprived of it.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Akin to the foreign studies (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Kranz et al., 2018; Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Riskind & Tornello, 2017), our quantitative data show that gay men in Czechia differ from bisexual men and predominantly straight men in terms of significantly lower parenting desires, intentions, and transitions to parenthood. The data also indicated that Czech gay men turn their parenting desires into parenting intentions less often than bisexual and predominantly straight men and less often feel free to choose whether to become a parent. This relates to a legal uncertainty of same-sex families in Czechia (Burešová, 2020) being perceived as one of the major barriers to parenthood by gay men and highlights the impact of heteronormative state regulations on the relational lives of persons with non-normative sexual identities. Compared to legislative barriers, fears of low acceptance of a child in society and opinions of those surrounding gay men did not matter as much in their parenting intentions. Although even their impact must not be underestimated, their lower rating may reflect that the neoconservative backslide towards the rights of LGBTQ+ people observed in the post-socialist region (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021) may have been less pronounced in Czechia.

Additionally, our quantitative and qualitative data complemented each other in showing that akin to heterosexual men (e.g., Zhang, 2011), Czech gay men attach the greatest importance to their partnership situation because they also prefer to become parents while having a partner. Rejection of solo parenthood could be indicative of a conservative view of the family (in Czechia, however, not as a result of religiosity). The interviews show this rejection to be more a result of the need for support though, in terms of practicalities (time, resources) and to overcome the stigma of gay parenthood that manifests in the minority-related stress to undertake perfect parenthood.

Moreover, in the conservative gender regime in Czechia (based on the essentialisation of gender relations and the societal support for separate gender roles in families), all men are directed into the role of the secondary caregiver (Lutherová et al., 2017). This belief (even institutionalised in policies discouraging men from participating in care) contributes to the internalisation of the view of gay families as less competent in parenting and compromises gay men's parenting desires.

To better explain Czech gay men's low parenting desires and the generational shift in their approach to parenthood while embracing the variety of (considered) pathways to gay fatherhood beyond biogenetic reproduction, we deployed the concept of parental consciousness inspired by the concept of procreative consciousness (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Murphy, 2013). The collective stories of childlessness illuminated how gay men's parenting desires are conditioned by their parental consciousness. Some (older) gay men internalised the belief that their sexual orientation is in contradiction with parenthood. In some countries, religiosity partially accounts for the negative beliefs about gay families (Costa & Bidell, 2017; Lasio et al., 2020) but in highly secularised Czechia, such beliefs are historically anchored in the biologising discourse on intimate relations (Lišková, 2018) and the related essentialising gendered view of caregiving (Sokolová, 2021). Qualitative data thus show how the absence of parenting desires may be coming from sociocultural contexts (Shenkman et al., 2021).

Besides those whose heteronormatively prescribed lack of parental consciousness translated into the belief in their childlessness as given, we identified childfree gay men who defined their gayness as a source of freedom from the social pressure to become parents and those who remain undecided whether, how, and when to pursue parenthood. The indecision may last long because gay pathways to parenthood are highly planned, multilaterally negotiated, and full of institutional barriers, and, as a result, at risk of permanent postponement.

Even if sharing knowledge of pathways to gay parenthood becomes a resource for increasing parental consciousness of younger gay men, legal conditions remain crucial for increasing their real-life options. Moreover, due to the intricacies of gay men's pathways to parenthood, gay men seem to be divided more than others in their access to parenthood by their socioeconomic standing as was documented by Takács (2018) for Hungary. In the end, we see that very few Czech gay men pursue parenthood, and only a handful of them actually achieve their goal.

While Sokolová (2009) captured the shift in the timing of coming out in relation to parenthood, we captured the shift in parental consciousness of Czech gay men. While the older generation had to choose either fatherhood while keeping their gayness a secret or accept their gay lives as inherently childless, younger generations (currently in the reproductive age) seem to be conscious of the various types of openly gay parenthood.

This trend is in line with the studies for Poland (Mizielińska et al., 2015), Croatia (Štambuk et al., 2019), and Hungary (Háttér Társaság, 2017), wherein it was found that although most children in same-sex families were born in one of the parents' previous opposite-sex relationship, young gay men and lesbians prefer other ways to parenthood. Despite the severe barriers to gay parenthood persist in these countries, information on same-sex families is becoming more accessible. Moreover, as Sloboda (2021) shows, same-sex parenting has been positively portrayed in the Czech media in the last decade (in contrast to Hungary; cf. Takács, 2018),

which could have contributed to increased parental consciousness among Czech gay men.

The fact that neither the quantitative nor the qualitative data indicated either a clear preference for the only pathway to parenthood or any clear preference for biological fatherhood among gay men may relate to the context-specific barriers to the various pathways to gay parenthood. In contrast to some contexts (Murphy, 2013), promotional strategies of surrogacy agencies are remote for Czechs (geographically and language-wise) and surrogacy abroad is demanding and costly. This could partly explain why Czech gay men do not show any clear preference for biological fatherhood. Gendered essentialising belief in the importance of the mother in early childhood could also contribute to the distancing of gay men from surrogacy in particular.

Yet, in the context of other post-socialist countries, such as Poland, with its severe social and legal barriers to gay parenthood, a much stronger preference for surrogacy over adoption has been identified among gay men (Mizielińska et al., 2015). This might be because adoptions by gay men seem to be easier in Czechia than in Poland. Czech Constitutional Court repealed the previous provision prohibiting adoption by a person in a civil union, which received wide attention in the media (Hašková & Sloboda, 2018). Nešporová (2021) also documents that Czech gay men do not have to hide their partners during the adoption process. In contrast to Poland, preference for adoptions was identified also in Croatia (Štambuk et al., 2019). In this respect, our research also contributes to the knowledge about how geo-temporal conditions shape LGBTQ+ relational lives in yet another context beyond the dominant Western understanding of queer kinship (e.g., Mizielińska & Stasińska, 2018). Comparative international research is needed to explain country differences, though.

Among the main limitations of our study are the limited number of respondents and the absence of exclusively heterosexual men in the quantitative enquiry. While the limited number of respondents allowed for descriptive analyses only, the other limitation did not allow direct comparison with exclusively heterosexual men. Moreover, the focus on men alone does not allow potentially useful comparisons by gender. Finally, researchers in future should pursue international research to allow a direct comparison of how the variety of post-socialist gender regimes (in their Hungarian populist-nationalist, Polish and Slovak Catholicising, or Czech essentialising versions) shape the relational lives of persons with non-normative identities.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article

Exploring Older Men's Pathways to Childlessness in Hungary: Did the Change of Policy Regime Matter?

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Abstract
In many post-socialist countries, there is a strong social ideal that, in order to live a fulfilled life, men and women should have children; thus "childfree" lifestyles are much less popular than in North-Western Europe. In this article, we explore factors leading to childlessness among men who were mostly socialized under state-socialist conditions and in the subsequent transition period by analysing 30 in-depth interviews conducted with heterosexual childless men over 50 in Hungary. Older interviewees who grew up in state socialism followed a standardized life-course and went through the same life-course events—including school, work, and, in some cases, childless marriages. However, the political change of 1989–1990 interrupted these standardized life-courses. Our results show that, besides individual-level factors, macro-level factors connected to the political-economic transition in the early 1990s influenced our interviewees' pathways to childlessness. In this sense, we can say that the change of policy regime influenced these men's choices, as in most cases there was a strong interplay between the individual- and the macro-level factors.

Keywords
Hungary; male childlessness; Merton's anomie theory; pathways to childlessness; post-transition effect

Issue
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1. Introduction

Many studies have examined fertility puzzles in Europe, including in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries (Billingsley, 2010; Sobotka, 2011, 2017; Spéder & Kapitány, 2014), and focused on factors revealing the pathways to childlessness among men and women (Hašková, 2010; Miettinen et al., 2015); however, only a few have examined the path towards childlessness through the prism of the change in the political system of 1989–1990 (Philipov et al., 2006). The question is relevant because so many changes occurred in partnership formation and fertility-related behaviours after 1989. Radical changes were brought about by the collapse of state socialism and the subsequent period of economic transformation, including the privatization of state companies, the end of job security guaranteed by the state, and the ensuing rise of mass unemployment. These economic changes affected life-course events linked with partnership formation and fertility behaviour for many people in Hungary too, where first births and first marriages were postponed to higher (reproductive) ages. An increasing number of people started living in cohabitation instead of marrying and the link between marriage and childbearing became weaker between 1990 and 2009 (Kapitány, 2021).

The childlessness rate was very low in the former state-socialist countries but, after the political transition,

profound changes occurred in cohort reproductive patterns, especially among the cohorts born in the 1970s in Hungary (Spéder, 2021). In 2011 the voluntary childlessness rate differed from that of the EU15 countries, where 6% of men and 4% of women preferred childlessness, while in many post-socialist countries it remained below 3% for both genders (Miettinen & Szalma, 2014). The initially relatively low childlessness levels started rising among the cohorts of women born in the late 1960s, approaching or surpassing 10% in the post-socialist region (Sobotka, 2017).

This rapid increase is noteworthy since men and women aged 18–40 continued to attach a high importance to parenthood in a re-emerging pronatalist social climate, where having children is perceived as a common cultural goal, characteristic of most CEE countries (Sobotka, 2011).

Many studies examined the consequences of the transition on demographic phenomena such as mortality, divorce, delayed fertility, and the decline in higher-order births, but the link between childlessness and the political and economic transition from state socialism to capitalism remained much less explored (Billingsley, 2010; Philipov et al., 2006; Sobotka, 2011). A focus on childless men in Hungary is pertinent because both the predominant standardized life-courses in the state-socialist era and the more destandardized life-courses afterwards were gendered, and social expectations, emphasizing different roles for men and women, re-emerged after the transition (Nagy et al., 2016). These processes gradually turned re-familisation into the widely accepted norm in CEE countries (Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2006). Therefore, we decided to investigate the connection between the transition and not having children from the perspective of men, which is still an under-researched topic in Hungary.

Our goal is to contribute to a better understanding of the social and historical embeddedness of pathways to male childlessness in a pronatalist context. If we understand the phenomenon of childlessness from men's perspectives better, we can propose more acceptable and well-founded family policy measures. We want to examine how different individual-level factors that can lead to not having children are linked to macro-level factors. For example, lack of partnership can have different fertility outcomes in liberal societies striving for gender equality than in traditional societies insisting on traditional gender role models. Similarly, labour market insecurity in social democratic welfare states can have different effects than in more conservative settings, and the availability of affordable institutional care for young children and elderly people can also affect childbearing decisions.

2. A Theoretical Explanation for the Post-Transition Fertility Decline

In Table 1 we present the main theoretical starting points that may explain fertility decline in post-socialist countries, including Billingsley's approaches (2010): the economic crisis explanation, the postponement–transition argument, and the second demographic transition (SDT) approach. Additionally, following in the footsteps of Philipov et al. (2006), who already highlighted the post-transition effects of anomie on the level and timing of fertility intentions in Bulgaria and Hungary, we also want to apply Merton's (1938) anomie theory stating that anomie develops when access to culturally approved goals by institutionalized means is blocked. Having a child is a culturally strongly approved goal in Hungary (Szalma, 2021), and its institutionalized form was within marriage, especially before the transition period. We argue that since then, among men whose life-course developed without children during the transition period, an increasing discrepancy between cultural goals and institutionalized means can be observed that cannot be properly elucidated on the basis of Billingsley's categories. Thus, our theoretical framework combines Billingsley's approaches with Merton's anomie theory.

Table 1. Overview of theoretical explanations of (different forms of) childlessness in post-socialist societies.

	Economic crisis	Postponement due to the transition	SDT	Post-transition anomie
Socioeconomic context	Crisis	Transition/stability	Stability	Democratic transition
Process leading to childlessness	Interrupted behaviour	Postponement, risking running out of time	Choosing a childfree lifestyle (at least for a while)	Choosing to be childfree or not being able to achieve parenthood
Motivation behind childlessness	Prioritizing material needs	Uncertainty, instability	Individual self-realization	Discrepancy between cultural goals and institutional means
Type of childlessness	Involuntary	Involuntary	Voluntary	Involuntary as well as voluntary

Source: Developed by the authors after Billingsley (2010) and Merton (1938).

2.1. Economic Crisis Aftereffects

When securing material needs has a higher priority than having (more) children, individuals may subjectively feel that they cannot provide the appropriate financial background for raising children and may therefore choose not to have any (or more) children.

The economic crisis resulting from the transition not only saw an increasing unemployment rate but also led to a reduction in government revenues and spending: "A variety of public transfers to families have been scaled down or completely phased out. In particular, the various family policy benefits, for example, childcare benefits and child allowances have declined" (Macura, 2000, p. 203). As a consequence, having children restricted the economic welfare of parents in the transition period so those who had no children prevented their living standards from falling even further (Macura, 2000). For example, in Hungary, during the state-socialist era, family allowance was a universal benefit and parental leave was 75% of previous income (Aassve et al., 2006). In 1995, dramatic changes took place with the introduction of a new set of policy reforms, the Bokros Package: The wage-indexed childcare benefit was eliminated and means-testing for family allowances was introduced. Besides the reduction in cash benefits for families, childcare services were also reduced. An important consequence of the Bokros Package was that "many [people, including potential and actual parents] lost trust in state provision of family allowances, and thus experienced another level of uncertainty" (Aassve et al., 2006, p. 136). The Bokros Package gave a signal that family policies would not necessarily be as predictable in the future as before. In 1998, the new government made family allowances once again universal. After 2010 new family policy—more precisely, political demography policy—elements were introduced, with their selective pronatalist nature becoming more pronounced by supporting only the select better-off, white, heterosexual families.

2.2. Postponement Due to the Transition

Like the increasing number of those who fell into unemployment, many left the labour market by taking advantage of early retirement or disability pensions. The dynamics of the labour market changed: A shortage of labour gave way to a lack of (well-paid) jobs. In such an oversupplied labour market, competition for jobs was fierce (Spéder & Kapitány, 2014), while precarious forms of employment appeared, such as temporary work, fixed-(short)-term contracts, bogus self-employment (i.e., a form of self-employment, where the entrepreneur is de facto employed by the largest or only customer of the firm) and untaxed work in the grey economy with which employers evade paying social premiums as well (Cseres-Gergely, 2007). These new characteristics of the labour market caused changes in family life, including the postponement of important decisions awaiting more stable work and career trajectories. Hence many women and men chose cohabitation over marriage or postponed their marriage and childbearing in the face of these uncertainties. It should be noted that partnership formation changes started in Hungary already in the 1980s—but while more than half of young people chose marriage as their first long-term relationship between the mid-1980s and the first half of the 1990s, this trend reversed after the mid-1990s, when the majority of young people preferred to have cohabitation as a first long-term relationship. Between 2000 and 2004, 70% of young people started their first long-term partnership in cohabitation (Spéder & Kapitány, 2007). Besides these changes in the form of first partnership, postponement could be observed in the mean ages of first marriages as well as at first births.

The postponement–transition argument was examined in Hungary using data from the first and second waves of the Hungarian Generation and Gender Survey (GGS), confirming that the timing of childbearing at a later age can lead to an increase in the childlessness rate because those who plan to have a child at a later age might have given up those plans or have run out of time (Szalma & Takács, 2015).

2.3. Second Demographic Transition

The SDT framework explains demographic changes based on changes in value systems, such as individualisation and declining religiosity (Lesthaeghe, 2010), where childbearing is no longer seen mainly as a duty towards society. In CEE countries, the SDT started after the political and economic transition of 1989–1990. In the context of value shifts towards increasing individualisation associated with SDT, the perception of family formation not being compatible with other goals in life has been reinforced by a delayed post-socialist version of late modern commodification also in Hungary (Takács, 2013), where the increased opportunities for self-realization were often prioritized over having children.

Previous empirical studies have found some evidence for the role of value changes in the increasing rates of childlessness (Keizer, 2010). In Hungary, the link between SDT and childlessness could not be confirmed by analysing GGS data as, for example, the inability to establish a partnership appeared to be more important than value preferences in the question of whether to have children or not (Szalma & Takács, 2015).

2.4. The Spread of Anomie

Previous empirical research found that rapid social change, such as democratic transition, can elevate the level of anomie, where anomie is defined as "the delegitimation of social norms with an emphasis on the goals-means discrepancy" (Zhao & Cao, 2010, p. 1225). Merton (1938) saw democracy as a precondition for the prevalence of anomie and, at the same time,

interpreted limited anomie as "a normal state that is a permanent part of a democratic society" (Zhao & Cao, 2010, p. 1213).

In Table 2 we apply Merton's categories describing different modes of adaptation to anomie matched with various types of childlessness. In this framework, "conformists" follow the most common mode of adaptation: They accept both the culturally approved goals and the institutionalized means for achieving them. Those involuntarily childless belong to the category of those who would like to have children within marriage or a steady relationship but cannot achieve this goal either because of (reproductive) health-related problems or lack of partnership.

The "innovators" accept the goals but they do not want to (or cannot) follow the culturally prescribed means to achieve them, thus they innovate their own means. Those involuntarily childless who would like to have children but not in the culturally approved ways belong here: For instance, later in life or without a stable partnership. Persons with same-sex orientation who wish to have children can also be "forced to innovate," when they are denied access to institutionalized means available to others.

The "ritualists" are those who reject the culturally prescribed goals while accepting the institutionalized means: These can be voluntarily childless steady couples. The "retreatists"—who can be, for instance, drug users or alcoholics—give up both the culturally approved goals and means. Finally, the "rebels" do not only reject the existing goals and means, but they also (try to) create new goals and means through protest or revolutionary activities: They can join, for instance, a religious or a queer community and establish a "family of choice'' (Weston, 1991) without having their biological children.

3. Data and Methods

The research presented here is exploratory and novel because older men's childlessness patterns have not been examined in Hungary until now, even though childlessness rate among men is higher than among women. For example, in 2016 more than 20% of men aged 45–54 were childless in Hungary, while this proportion was 17.9% among women (Makay et al., 2019). To gain more insight into these issues, we used semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in 2015–2016 with 30 childless men living in different regions of Hungary. Individual interviewees were recruited through online community groups, in printed and social media advertisements, with the help of NGOs, and by snowballing when possible. Before starting the interview, all interviewees provided informed consent after having had the details of the applied data collection procedures, based on confidentiality and voluntary participation, explained to them. They also chose a pseudonym, which, together with an indication of their age, was used to identify them throughout the study.

Our selection criteria included age over 50, not having any biological children, and not living together with children under 18 in their household at the time of the interview. We used this age limit because, according to Hungarian census data, becoming a father is very rare over the age of 50 in Hungary (Makay & Spéder, 2018; Szalma & Takács, 2018). Applying this age limit also makes it possible to focus on those childless men who grew up and were in their (main) fertile phase under state-socialist conditions and during the transition period.

Our sample included interviewees from different geographical areas within Hungary: 17 were from Budapest, the capital, four were from smaller towns, and nine

Table 2. Categories of childlessness based on Merton's anomie theory.

Mode of adaptation	Cultural goals	Institutionalized means	Type of childlessness
Conformist	accept	accept	Involuntarily childless (due to health-related problems or lack of partnership)
Innovator	accept	reject	Temporarily (in/voluntarily) childless: Those who want to have children later in life or without a stable (heterosexual) partnership
Ritualist	reject	accept	Voluntarily childfree: Those who live in a stable partnership but do not want to have any children
Retreatist	reject	reject	In/voluntarily childless: Those who do not (want to) marry or have children (e.g., because of drug use)
Rebel	Rejecting existing goals and means, while creating new ones		Voluntarily childless: Those who want to achieve different goals by different means (for example, by joining a religious or queer community)

Source: Developed by the authors after Merton (1938).

were from small villages of about 3000 residents. There were three educational subgroups among them: 10 with low levels of education (lower than completed secondary school), eight with medium level education (having gained a secondary school leaving certificate), and 12 were highly educated men (with a university degree). Regarding marital status, most of them (23) were single, one was married, three were divorced, one had a cohabiting partner, and two lived in a LAT (living-apart-together) relationship. As for age, the youngest interviewee was 50 years old and the oldest was 77. Eighteen interviewees belonged to the 50–60 age group and 12 interviewees were older than 60.

We interviewed only heterosexual men who did not have—and/or whose partners did not have—health conditions that make a successful pregnancy difficult or impossible. In our view, childlessness among men with a same-sex orientation is a specific theme that should be examined by taking into consideration those discriminative policies that push (most of) them into a state of "heteronormatively prescribed childlessness" (Takács, 2018, p. 68) in many countries, including Hungary; and childlessness related to reproductive health problems also require a different approach. To filter out non-heterosexual men and those with reproductive health problems we used a post-interview self-administered questionnaire with questions about reproductive health and sexual practices.

Most interviews lasted about one-and-a-half to two hours. The interviews were tape-recorded and the recorded interview material was transcribed verbatim. The interview guide included topics related one's perception of their own family and family practices, employment and partnership history, and plans for the future. Through the interviews we gained rich retrospective biographical narratives with a focus on the interviewees' private and family life, including their experiences, desires, and intentions regarding having children. Using these narratives, we applied structural coding to identify all passages related to the earlier discussed theoretical approaches. The richness of the textual data allowed us to study the relationship between men with different backgrounds and their fertility choices in detail, and enabled us to reconstruct various mechanisms leading to their childless lifestyles.

4. Empirical Results

In our interviews, we were able to identify different factors potentially affecting our interviewees' pathways to childlessness according to the theoretical approaches presented in Table 1.

4.1. Economic Crisis-Related Factors

Precariousness, describing non-standard or temporary employment forms that may be poorly paid, insecure, unprotected, and insufficient to support a household, was a central feature of the new labour market that emerged after the political regime change. In the early 1990s, we saw such a great deal of change in people's lives that must have had a significant effect on many life events. The large numbers of people who permanently or periodically left the labour market because of unemployment or early retirement were considered the "losers" of the regime change from an economic perspective. Educational background and regional disparities were important factors in producing inequalities: The relative position of highly educated people and those living in a larger city or a regional centre improved, while those with lower levels of education and living in smaller towns or villages worsened (Kolosi & Tóth, 2008). This duality was clear from our interviews too. Those who lived in the capital and had a university degree did not report any negative career breaks. Some, including Alfred (50), a divorced, highly educated man from Budapest, even experienced that possibilities opened up for them: "[At the beginning of the] the 1990s I had my doubts about whether my business would succeed [but] actually it went very well and I went ahead like a goat in an amusement park." Other well-educated interviewees also reported that, while they had a relatively good financial situation during and after the transition period, they faced previously unknown threatening uncertainties. For example, highly educated and single, Anthony (62) from Budapest reported that:

> No one knows what's going to happen in two, three, five, or ten years…[even now] I can only hope that I will more or less be able to keep this standard of life. But there is no guarantee for that because the predictability of the great [economic] processes has significantly decreased [after the political system change].

The emerging financial uncertainties had a direct effect on childbearing plans among highly educated men. Since they used to have very stable positions during state socialism, they did not learn how to handle these uncertain conditions. Single and highly educated, Chris (50) from Budapest described the link between the uncertainties and childbearing plans: "[People often say that] we will start having children when all existential conditions are favourable." Alfred (50) also mentioned that they did not dare to have children because of a lack of financial stability. However, for those with fewer resources (lower levels of education, living in smaller settlements), the transition period required more strenuous efforts to survive. They often had to find escape routes from the labour market, for example, by becoming bogus entrepreneurs or working in the grey economy, and most of them had to face financial difficulties related to their everyday lives. Peter (60), who is single, has a low level of education, and lives in a village, mentioned how he first became a bogus entrepreneur in the agricultural sector and then escaped from the labour market in his early forties with a disability pension:

> We didn't earn much money [during state socialism], but at least we had more free time [to work in our own backyard in the greenhouses]. Privatizations started around 1987 and the risk of layoffs was visible. Thus, I decided to leave this company because sooner or later I would have been dismissed anyhow. I [remained] an agricultural entrepreneur until 1996 when I had some health problems and claimed a disability pension.

His income was so low that he could not move out of his parent's house and could not start his own family. Thus, he was not just involuntary childless but also involuntary single until his parents passed away because his parents did not allow him to bring any girlfriends into their house. The other typical pathway was working in the grey economy. For example, low-educated and living in a LAT relationship in a village, Simon (60) recalled this period in the following way:

> I was a driver for 40 years. But some years I spent in the informal sector [as an undeclared employee] and those years, unfortunately, do not count towards my pension because I was paid cash-in-hand. Of course, I also had a market gardening side-job, because being a driver was a low-paid job.

Having two jobs was a typical case in the countryside where nearly 20% of the rural working-age population worked in agriculture after the change of regime. Frequently, two jobs were necessary because those who worked in the agricultural sector were extremely underpaid. Similarly to Simon, Valentin (55), who lives in cohabitation in a village, admitted that he "also worked in the informal sector" and "did not have an official permit." The precariousness of their jobs was not independent of their family situation: Unstable jobs usually came with unstable partnerships. For example, Simon (60) lived in a LAT relationship, Peter (60) did not have any kind of partnership until the age of 45, and Valentin (55) started a relationship at the age of 49 with an older woman.

People had to face uncertainties (in employment and otherwise) not just directly after the transition but also after the 2008 global economic crisis hit. For example, the highly educated Anthony (62) reported that, during the crisis, he had to concentrate all of his energy on making his business survive. Steven (59), who is low educated, said that he was able to set up a small business as a painter in 2002 and for a couple of years everything went well. However, in 2008, "it was this economic crisis [and] there was less and less work and fewer commissions. People had less money…and they didn't want to spend it on painting [so I gave up my business] and went to work for someone else as an employee."

While the 2008 economic crisis hit the low and highly educated people similarly among our interviewees, the post-transition economic crisis affected these two categories of men differently. Many low-educated men living in the countryside did not have sufficient financial means to start a stable partnership, the lack of which is likely to lead to childlessness. Meanwhile, highly educated men living in a large city had stable partnerships, but the subjective feeling of financial uncertainties prevented them from having children.

4.2. Postponement Factors

The mean age of first marriage and first birth extended significantly between 1990 and 2001 in Hungary. Our interviewees were 25 years old or older in 1990. If their life-courses had followed the statistics, then they would already have been married at the time of the transition and would probably already have had children also, since there was a strong link between marriage and childbearing in that period (Kapitány, 2021).

Those who did not choose to be childless in their twenties went through some form of postponement which led to involuntary childlessness in most of our cases, although some of them still planned to become fathers. This postponement feature can be found among most of our highly educated interviewees living in large cities. For example, Henrik (55), a well-educated married man from Budapest, said:

> The idea of creating a family nest was greatly pushed into the distant future. Even when we started planning a wedding…we didn't start considering having a child together, let alone thinking about it properly.

In Henrik's case, the postponement only concerned childbearing, as marriage was among his plans. His argument was that an intellectual career model requires time to reach the stage when one is financially secure. Alfred (50) got married when he was 22 (in the late 1980s) and did not want to have children straight away: but the couple did plan to have children when his wife finished university. Cedric (53), a well-educated single man from Budapest, also reported he had married in his twenties and that the couple had been together for five years, yet avoided having children because they were not financially independent from their parents. By the time the issue of childbearing could have come up, they had just divorced.

In our sample, nine men lived together with one or more elderly family members, typically with their mother. Seven of them cared for their relatives at least on a part-time basis because they wanted to avoid sending their parent(s) to a care home, either for emotional or financial reasons. According to the traditional familiastic care model prevailing in Hungary, younger and especially female family members are expected to provide care for older relatives—but in the absence of suitable female family members, and due to the lack of sufficient state services, men can also face care provision tasks. For example, Oscar (50), a highly educated single man from Budapest, explained that he "was trained…to take responsibility for [his] grandparents, especially for [his

grandma who was ill," and so it wouldn't occur to him #not to take part in her care."

Peter (60), a low-educated single man from a village, did not have enough money to move away from the parental home but his mother forbade him from bringing home any girlfriends, so he could not date anybody until the age of 45, when his parents died. By then he considered himself too old for parenthood. In the context of the Hungarian post-transition "super homeownership regime" (Murinkó, 2019), characterized by a very high (over 90%) rate of owner-occupation and a very limited private rental sector, Imago (54), a highly educated single man living at his mother's place in Budapest, saw the ownership of an apartment as a precondition, not just for having children, but also for having a stable partnership: "Sometimes I felt that women didn't go out with me because I didn't have my own apartment." Pinki (53) on the other hand, a highly educated single man living in a rented apartment in Budapest, did not refer to women rejecting him on account of him now owning an apartment, but also emphasized: "I do not want to raise a child in a rented flat."

In these cases, the postponement feature of childbearing was linked to the precariousness of their situation, deriving from unfinished education, caring for older relatives, and lack of financial independence. However, while highly educated men living in larger cities had steady partnerships and chose to postpone only having children, their lower educated counterparts living in villages could not even establish a proper partnership, let alone have children.

While postponement seemed a conscious decision among highly educated men, most of them did not anticipate its possible consequences such as remaining childless permanently. For example, Joseph (50), from Budapest, was married for more than 17 years and planned to have children together with his wife, but they kept failing to conceive and waited instead of seeking medical help: "We somehow trusted that time wouldn't run out….We might still be confident, but we may still be wrong." On the other hand, running out of time caused Aron (53), a highly educated divorced man from Budapest, to give up his plans to have children:

> It seemed utterly absurd to me to start a family now when my peers' children were already leaving their parental homes….Should I start having children now, while my strength is declining with age, to make up for something that didn't happen in my life because I took a completely different path?

He felt that too long a postponement made it impossible to follow the "natural order" of life events.

4.3. Self-Realization Factors

Some aspects of increasing individualization associated with SDT were also reflected in our interview material. About every third interviewee did not want to have children at all, and about half of the interviewees wanted to focus on self-realization and resolved that fatherhood was not part of their personal fulfilment. For example, Bernard (50), a well-educated single man from Budapest, clearly had other goals in his life than having children: "My main ambition was to be able to get to exotic places [instead of getting settled]." Due to state-socialist travel restrictions, travelling, especially to Western countries, was a newfound leisure activity for many Hungarians from the 1990s onward. The goal of travelling instead of having children was not a unique feature in our sample: Henrik (55) also mentioned that there was a period when he and his partner told each other that "travelling is our children to some degree." Maříková (2021) had similar findings of highly educated Czech men having new opportunities opening up for them after 1989, opportunities that their parents' generation did not have, steering their lives in directions other than parenthood.

In our sample, effects of SDT appeared not only among highly educated men but also among men with lower education. For example, Steven (59), a man with low education from the countryside, who remained single until his mid 40s, went to work in several settlements in Hungary and spent two years abroad as a painter because he wanted to travel and get to know new places and people, instead of settling down and starting a family. He was 45 when he met an older woman and first had the idea of adopting a child with his partner (the age of whom did not allow them to have biological children together). In the end, he didn't even mention the idea of adoption to his partner, as he thought they would no longer be physically able to raise a child. Another low educated interviewee, Simon (60), also reported that he chose to work as a truck driver specifically to have the opportunity to travel in Hungary and Europe. However, later, both Steven and Simon regretted their lifestyle choices leading to childlessness, while this was not the case among the highly educated interviewees, some of whom still wanted to have children in the future. These differences might be explained by the significantly different perceptions about the socially acceptable ages of becoming a father according to socioeconomic status. Those with a higher level of education and better financial resources can still imagine becoming a father even in their fifties or sixties, while their lower-educated peers would no longer attempt to start a family in their fifties or even in their forties.

4.4. Adaptation to Anomie

When trying to interpret our interviewees' different pathways to childlessness in the framework of Merton's anomie theory, we could see that these routes can include different modes of adaptation to post-transition anomie, sometimes even within one person's life-course.

Some of our childless interviewees, especially single men with lower education living in the countryside,

could be considered "failing conformists." They accepted both the culturally approved goal of having children and the institutionalized means of achieving this goal within marriage, but they remained childless mainly because of their inability to establish a stable partnership due to economic factors, preventing them from conforming. While we found many examples of childless marriages among highly educated men living in the capital (who can be categorized as "ritualists" in the sense that they chose to remain childless within a steady relationship), none of the lower educated men in the countryside was married, which can indicate their lack of institutionalized means to reach their goals. Some highly educated men living in the capital can also be seen as "failing conformists" who became "retreatists" in their fifties (or even earlier) when—after realizing their limited access to socially approved means—they gave up parenthood and marriage plans for good.

More classic—alcohol and drug use related—cases of retreatism, characterized by giving up both the culturally approved goals and means, also emerged in our interviews. For example, Jonas (55), a low-educated man living with his partner in a small town, reported how the serious alcohol problems he had during the first decade of his adult life (during the 1990s) negatively affected his relationship and family formation attempts: "I have ruined my whole life, I admit it….In those years I wasn't sober at all." Due to his alcohol problems, his girlfriend left him and, by the time his alcohol addiction was over, he considered himself too old to have children. Nicholas (50), a single man with medium-level education living in a small town, had drug problems for many years in his twenties in the early 1990s. He reported that taking drugs changed the way he thought about life, to the extent that, even when he was not using for long periods of time, he was not content with what many people would consider a decent life: "I believed that happiness can be achieved by working hard, having a house and children. I have worked hard, and I had a house, but I felt like a droid."

Jonas and Nicholas were not alone with their problems: During and after the transition period, both drug use and alcohol-related problems were rapidly increasing in the CEE countries, including Hungary (Lehto, 1995), while global awareness of the negative effects of alcohol and drug addiction on male fertility also intensified (Sansone et al., 2018).

We could also identify "innovators" who wanted to have children but not in the culturally approved ways: For instance, Falcon (52), a highly educated single man from Budapest, did not reject parenthood in itself, but only its links to a long-term partnership:

> I wanted to have a child and a family, but I didn't want to be together with the same woman for years….I knew that I would probably not be a very fit husband, and it wouldn't be a very good option for the women I love.

His was not a unique case in our sample: Three other highly educated men also reported that, due to their choice of avoiding long-term partnerships, they opted for not (yet) having children, although they might want to have children later in life.

Finally, in our sample, we found two examples of "childless rebels" who did not just reject the existing goals and means, but also created new ones for themselves, in this case by joining a religious community. After his divorce, Aron (53) joined a Catholic community in the early 1990s because he wanted to have some direction in his life and feel like he belonged somewhere: "I met these young people, and we became friends. I was very attracted to what they were doing. They lived together. And without knowing exactly who or what they were…I joined them."

Gedeon (50), a highly educated single man living in the countryside, also joined a religious group in the early 1990s, which he described as a transformative experience:

> It was the first weekend retreat in December 1990, and it was like coming out of hell…out of my own chaos, unsolved problems, fixed ideas, flying pieces of my ego. One comes up and sees the blue sky for the first time.

In both cases joining a religious community helped these young adult men to reorganize their lives just after the change of regime. As opposed to the state-socialist period, religious groups and institutions, going through a revival after the political system change, could convey new values and goals to people from the 1990s onwards. Aron and Gedeon thus represent those who did not want to have children, nor marriage or a stable partnership, but instead chose the goal of community building and wished to achieve this goal by becoming a member of a religious group.

5. Conclusion

Our results showed that besides individual-level factors (including partnership failure, alcohol-related problems, etc.) macro-level factors connected to the political-economic transition in the 1990s (such as increasing levels of unemployment and uncertainty, the lack of institutional care provision for older people, etc.) influenced the childlessness patterns of our interviewees. In this sense, we can say that the change of policy regime did matter, as in most cases there was a strong interplay between the individual- and the macro-level factors.

Because of the qualitative nature of our study, it was perhaps easier to highlight that the actors of the political and economic transitions are flesh-and-blood people for whom the time since the system change has also brought changes in their life-course. We focused on how the change of regime influenced the reproductive careers of childless men who were in their twenties or early thirties

during the change of regime, which was the most common age for men to have children at that time.

The combination of Merton's anomie theory (seeing democracy as a normal state of normlessness) and Billingsley's (economic crisis, postponement, and SDT-related) approaches regarding the transition period and fertility changes was useful to identify various factors potentially affecting our interviewees' pathways to childlessness. This way we were able to highlight different—although sometimes overlapping—categories, contexts, and interpretations of male childlessness in Hungary.

We found that the economic crisis induced by the transition had a clear effect on the life events of the interviewees. We can distinguish between the subjective effects of the economy, which are caused by the emerging uncertainties after the transition, and objective effects such as exiting the labour market, for instance, due to unemployment. These effects are distributed unequally among people with different socioeconomic backgrounds. Highly educated men living in the capital experienced the subjective effects, while lower educated men living in the countryside frequently faced financial difficulties that prevented them not just from having children, but also from forming stable partnerships.

Regarding SDT, similarly to a recent Czech study (Maříková, 2021), we also found that the political and economic system change provided our interviewees with more choices and individualized options to follow diversified life paths, especially in the case of men with a higher socioeconomic status. At the same time, barriers to starting a family were experienced more heavily by the less educated men living in the countryside.

Postponement can be regarded as a consequence of the economic crisis and SDT. However, it seemed to be a relevant approach mainly in the case of highly educated men as their lower educated counterparts did not even reach the stage of having a stable partnership, in which they could consider having children. Among the highly educated interviewees, we found different outcomes of postponement: Some of them cancelled their plans to have children because they felt that, at the present stage of their life, they should focus on something else rather than having children, while others still hoped that they would become fathers later in their lives.

By applying the different anomie-related adaptation categories to our sample of childless men, we were able to identify examples of "failing conformists" turning into "retreatists," as well as "innovators" and "ritualists" according to their specific goals–means discrepancy settings. We also found some "rebels" who did not just reject the culturally approved goal of having children, and the institutionalized means of achieving this goal, but also set new goals (of community building) and means (by joining a religious community). Our findings also reflect that not everyone has equal access to the institutionalized means to attain their goals: We could find a pattern across different socio-demographic groups and different categories of adaptation. For example, low educated men living in the countryside were more likely to belong to the failed conformist category because of insufficient access to institutionalized means. At the same time, highly educated men living in the capital were more likely to belong to the innovator and the rebel categories who could more easily deviate from the social norms or choose new goals and means for their lives.

Based on our results, the Hungarian pronatalist family policy could be amended to remove barriers facing involuntarily childless men. For example, some men wish to have children outside of marriage or a stable partnership. Thus, it is a poor policy that single men cannot adopt children. Financial security is very important for men in a pronatalist society where gender roles are strongly separated, so policies should support everybody if they find themselves in a vulnerable situation, with longer unemployment benefits and higher family allowances. Even men with higher education display a knowledge deficit about fertility, as some of them want to become a father in their 60s. It would be important to inform them that they also have to face age-related fertility problems such as the decreasing quality of sperm with age.

There are several limitations to this exploratory study. For example, our qualitative results cannot be generalized even to the population of Hungarian childless men over 50, and we have not examined heteronormatively prescribed and reproductive health problems related to childlessness either. However, we believe that the presented findings can highlight previously under-researched aspects of male childlessness in a post-socialist context.

We also believe that we can contribute to the study of at least certain aspects of pronatalist societies, where having children is a widely accepted cultural goal, and non-parenthood—especially in the case of women—can be considered as deviating from the norm. Previous research showed that social attitudes towards childless women were quite negative, and they were often considered abnormal and deviant (McCutcheon, 2018). By applying Merton's anomie theory, we were able to highlight that childless men can similarly be considered deviant in certain contexts. Our aim was to look at how childless men's life-courses can be linked to a specific period in Hungary in the era when the pronatalist features were increasing, forcing men to become breadwinners, although this role eroded a lot in the examined period due to the political-economic transformations.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article

Perceptions of Barriers to Motherhood: Female STEM PhD Students' Changing Family Plans

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Abstract
Despite recent pronatalist policies in Hungary, the country has not boosted birth rates at the expected rate. Higher educated women still delay the transition to first birth, a smaller proportion of planned children are born than in Western European countries, and the level of childlessness has also been increasing. As a post-socialist legacy, prevailing traditional family and gender norms strongly constrain the reconciliation of work and family roles, which can prevent women from realizing their childbearing intentions or drive them to live a childfree life. Qualitative studies about how the fertility decisions of women are formed are scarce, particularly in relation to male-dominated high-skilled professions, where the realization of family plans can be especially challenging. The present article explores the barriers to motherhood among female engineers. Results of 27 semi-structured interviews with mainly childless female PhD students in 2014–2015 show that the women were subject to strong social expectations that negatively influenced their fertility plans. On the family side, these involve becoming a mother and being responsible for child care and household chores; on the work side, challenges include the knowledge-intensiveness of jobs and a male career model that hardly tolerates the role of motherhood. As a result, the respondents had further delayed childbearing, forecast reconsidering family plans after first childbirth, and in one case, opted for voluntary childlessness. Women also reflected on how their fertility is at stake due to their postponed motherhood and the cumulative effects of hazardous laboratory work. Several intervention points are suggested to stakeholders.

Keywords
delayed motherhood; fertility; higher educated women; PhD education; pronatalism; STEM

Issue
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1. Introduction

Many studies have been published about how to juggle working life and motherhood, the cultural contradictions involved in mothering and employment, and being a woman and the meanings ascribed to the concept by society (Hays, 1996; Kromydas, 2020). There has also been considerable discussion about the social expectations and norms associated with becoming a mother or staying childless. Remarkably, this debate started as early as the 1910s with concerns about how women were socially controlled through the institution

of motherhood (Hollingworth, 1916; McCutcheon, 2020). Pronatalism sees women primarily as mothers responsible for the reproduction of the population, or even the nation, and has become a widespread and complex ideology globally. In Hungary, as in other post-soviet countries, traditional family and gender norms have never been significantly contested (Gregor, 2016). Recent pronatalist ideologies and policies particularly challenge the career- and fertility-related decisions of female professionals, who are already more likely to be childless, delay childbearing, or have fewer children than their male counterparts (Mason et al., 2013; Paksi et al., 2016).

Pronatalism further reinforces the ab-ovo patriarchal environment of research organisations, particularly in male-dominated STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields (Nagy, 2014). The demand for unencumbered workers and high levels of performance in professional careers in knowledge-intensive fields has been increasing, and this hegemonic work-centric model has become an essential part of the neoliberal university environment (Moen & Sweet, 2004; Rosa, 2021). Masculine "chilly" environments also transmit negative messages toward women regarding their gender roles (Britton, 2017; Maxmen, 2018) and the latter also regularly face the "second shift" at home, such as household chores and caring tasks (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). These barriers generate severe conflicts between work and family life, strongly influencing women's family plans and opportunities, or driving them to live a childfree life (Lewis & Humbert, 2010; Szalma et al., 2020).

Qualitative studies are scarce about how the fertility decisions of female professionals are formed, particularly in STEM fields. The present article explores the barriers to motherhood of young female engineers in the East-Central European context. The research is based on 27 semi-structured interviews with female PhD students in Hungary. The structure of the article is as follows: First, we introduce the theoretical background and previous empirical research; research questions and methodology are presented, followed by a discussion and the conclusion.

2. Background

Pronatalism is likely to emerge when the size of a population is perceived as insufficient and at risk of decline. The aim of pronatalism is "to promote fertility by representing motherhood as a moral, patriotic and economic duty" (Turnbull et al., 2016, p. 102); accordingly, pronatalist policies and ideologies have been considered a guarantee for the existence of nations (Hašková & Dudová, 2020).

In a recent publication, Hašková and Dudová (2020) showed how Czechoslovakia, like other socialist countries in the same period, moved from deploying an emancipatory discourse to a familialist discourse involving the introduction of strong pronatalist measures after the Prague Spring of the 1960s. The authors analysed the selective practices and policies that were introduced to increase fertility, ranging from incentives (e.g., paid childcare leave) to restrictions (banning abortion) throughout the region. The emphasis was on fertility growth and child-rearing, and the "qualitative" concerns about the population were in line with the increasingly conservative gender attitude of the Czechoslovak population. This was how the role of women as mothers was cemented. One of the means of accelerating this goal was maternity leave, which was extended to two and then three years. This was intended to enable mothers to return to the labour market only after providing quality childcare to increase fertility (Hašková & Dudová, 2020).

The Czechoslovak case is of particular relevance to the present topic as the Czech and Hungarian gender regimes were very similar both during and after the socialist regime (for example, in allowing long parental leave, promoting family policies supporting the availability of nursery schools, and in traditional attitudes towards gender roles; see Haney, 2002; Křížková et al., 2010). Recently, welfare policies in Hungary are becoming increasingly pronatalist again. However, these selective policies tend to benefit traditional, upper-middle-class, "better-off" families through generous tax breaks and housing loans. Pronatalist ideologies, the lack of sufficient childcare services, and part-time work opportunities are again reinforcing the roles of women as primary caregivers and housewives (Szikra, 2014).

Pronatalism can lead to the negative construction of the "childless other" and thus to the social exclusion of childless women. In a mixed-methods study of childless Australian women, Turnbull et al. (2016) investigated the extent and nature of social exclusion of such women. Their findings indicated that social exclusion is particularly prevalent in social and civic domains, and less so in service and economic domains. They found evidence that childless or childfree women suffered from stigmatization driven by pronatalism. They also noted how deeply women internalised social expectations about having children, which also formed their reactions: "Childless women are not simply passive receivers of social exclusion. Rather, their internalized, disempowered, or empowered responses influenced experiences of social exclusion" (Turnbull et al., 2016, p. 110).

Bartholomaeus and Riggs (2017), in a qualitative longitudinal study, also showed how childless Australian women were pressured and devalued by society for not (yet) having children. The omnipresent pressure of white middle-class mothers on their daughters' fertility decisions was found to be a vital influence. McCutcheon (2020) reviewed empirical studies on attitudes towards women without children. She found that the attitudes of individuals towards childless women are becoming slightly more positive. Whereas childless women were not appraised negatively, couples with children were rated more positively than in earlier studies. She also concluded that the stigma non-mothers

experienced had shifted from old-fashioned to contemporary forms, coming particularly from family and friends (McCutcheon, 2020).

Pronatalist ideologies have been significantly incorporated by young women and have affected women's decisions regarding childbirth, even if the postponement of first childbirth has become a general trend. From an examination of fertility patterns in Hungary, Spéder (2021) concluded that instead of a continuous decrease in fertility over the past three decades, a new fertility pattern has emerged and solidified: Peak motherhood and childbearing at around the age of 23 to 25 has been replaced by late fertility at the age of 29–31. Better educated women are more likely to have children during a shorter period of their life, between the ages of 28 and 34. The timing was heterogeneous even within the group and can be considered status-related rather than due to the process of individualisation (Spéder, 2021). At the same time, in Hungary as in other Eastern European countries, individuals are defining the "ideal" timing of motherhood at a younger age (Paksi & Szalma, 2009), putting further pressure on the shoulders of higher educated women.

Regarding family size, the proportion of women with one child increased after the political system changed; those with two children decreased, and those with three or more children stagnated. The one-child family model is more frequent among people with a secondary-level education, and the three-child model prevails among lower educated couples (Spéder, 2021). However, in Hungary, proportionately fewer planned children are born than in Western European countries (Spéder & Kapitány, 2014). More specifically, results of panel research also found that temporarily childless women aged between 30 and 45 were typically not able to realise their fertility plans within seven years (Szalma & Takács, 2018). The proportion of childless women at the age of 30 had quadrupled since the turn of the millennium (from 13 to 56%; see Spéder, 2021). Recently, total childlessness has stabilized at around 15% and is highest among the better educated (Szalma & Takács, 2018).

Regarding traditional attitudes towards women's family roles, although they weakened after the turn of the millennium, the majority of society still considers that mothers should not return to their workplace until their child reaches the age of three (Blaskó, 2011). The attitudes of higher educated women towards family roles are also twofold: Gregor (2016) recently found a larger proportion of those who held egalitarian attitudes regarding household chores, but also a larger proportion of those who consider family life and motherhood to be the primary realms of life (compared to the lower educated). Nevertheless, even breadwinner women in Hungary tend to undertake a greater share of household chores (Neményi & Takács, 2016). Consequently, childbearing has the highest negative impact on women's labour market activity in Hungary among EU member states (European Commission, 2018).

Empirical investigations of the situation with PhD students are scarce in Hungary. The issue of their childbearing appeared in a regional study based on ten in-depth interviews with female PhD students of humanities (Tornyi, 2007). It highlighted how they were planning to give up their careers for the benefit of their family and husband due to the severe work–life imbalance they were experiencing. Regarding the timing of motherhood, they followed one of two strategies: They either postponed completing their education and had a child first or, in the majority of cases, postponed childbearing until they completed their studies. Finánczy (2007) surveyed 210 PhD students at the same university who were studying various disciplines. The young persons in their research were aiming to establish both a family and a career. One-fifth of them had children, but another fifth did not view children as an essential part of life. Two percent clearly rejected the idea of motherhood, while the rest had already postponed forming a family for financial or career-related reasons, while other women reported difficulty finding a partner. In another piece of research, members of an engineering faculty agreed that having children involves an interruption in women's careers. Staff members believed in very traditional family and gender roles, including the idea that having a career and motherhood are reconcilable only if women subordinate their job to their family life.

3. Research Questions and Methodology

Based on the literature discussed above, we formulated two research questions: What are the barriers to motherhood among doctoral students in the STEM field? And how do motherhood-related intentions change in a male-dominated environment despite the existence of pronatalist national policy?

For the qualitative research design, a semi-structured interview method was applied. The sample consisted of 27 female PhD students of engineering, 15 students taking chemistry, environmental, and bioengineering (CEBE) courses, where course content is characterized by laboratory work and the proportion of women was greatest (at around 34%), and 12 students from the field of electrical and informatics engineering (EIE), where the proportion of women was the smallest (around 3%). These proportions corresponded to the proportions of female PhD students in these fields in Hungary. The variety of institutional and social contexts allowed us to explore the different perspectives of women in STEM (Creswell, 2007). The interviews were conducted in 2014–2015 at a prestigious technical university in Budapest. For data collection, purposive sampling and—in the case of EIE—snowball sampling was also applied, but not even this method helped us to identify any mothers among the PhD students. The students' age varied between 24 and 33 years (28.6 years on average) in all subsamples. The proportion of singles was higher among the EIE students (one quarter) than among the

CEBE students (one-fifth). Five mothers were taking CEBE courses. Twenty-four students were working in parallel with completing their PhD, mainly in universities.

The interviews lasted for 75 minutes on average and were tape-recorded for later transcription. Data collection, analysis, and interpretation were anonymized. The interviewees provided informed consent orally. For the analysis, template analysis within thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was selected, and the interpretation of the data was based on the constructivist paradigm.

4. Results

Motherhood was a fraught issue for the young engineers and a topic that had been worrying them for months or even years. With one exception, all women planned to have a child (or another child) in the near future. In this section, we first describe the barriers to motherhood that women experienced in doctoral schools and workplaces, which include occupational (STEM-related) and organisational barriers (see Figure 1). Then their family plans are introduced in a normative context, with a description of the barriers that influenced women's fertility plans and their realization.

4.1. STEM-Related Barriers

Interviewees described engineering as a highly male-dominated discipline. The small proportion of women reinforced the image that STEM careers were not suitable for women. There were almost no women in industrial workplaces and few women researchers in research organisations and universities. In connection to this, EIE students reported an alarmingly large number of negative experiences based on gender stereotypes.

The reinforcement of traditional gender expectations associated with an engineering university education was a very intense experience for these women. It was routine for some professors to devalue women's knowledge. This became manifest when a male professor called it "the shame of men" that women had been allowed to study at the institution. Women studying in technical fields felt this excluding attitude since their first year of university. An elderly male professor also discussed the danger of women "becoming men," and several interviewees were advised to choose different jobs:

> He looked at me as if I was some kind of bitch. He told me he wouldn't recommend that I go back because it is harmful to men—and again, that word "shame"—that a woman could achieve a [grade] four [B] or a five [A] in maths. (Interviewee#20, EIE, age 33, childless)

Further, the devaluation of women's knowledge was also a relatively frequent experience among CEBE students. A woman explained that a career in chemistry is like cooking or playing in the children's kitchen in nursery schools. This indicated the opinion that women could perform well in this field because chemistry was similar to their traditional tasks at home, but also illustrated how women themselves accepted this form of devaluation.

The masculine character of the engineering profession was also reinforced when the attitude of bosses or colleagues at work implied that men were more competent in relation to having technical careers. Therefore, in certain fields—especially where there were fewer women than average (electrical engineering, IT, mechanics)—women had to work harder and perform better.

Overt sexism against women was also evident when male professors said to the group of PhD students that

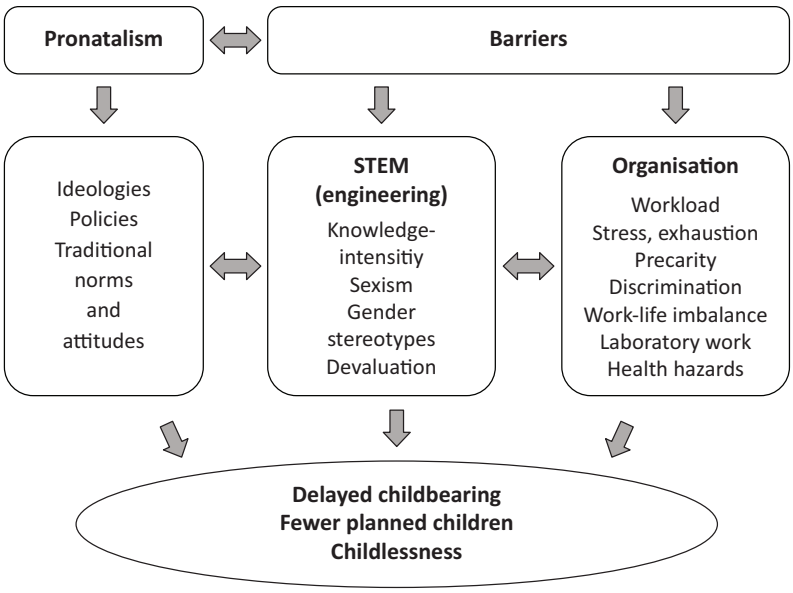

Figure 1. Changing motherhood-related plans of female PhD students in the STEM fields.

women did not understand computer sciences at all. In such cases, women stated that they had individually tried to change the image and "cleverly correct" the "male chauvinist" professor as part of their mission and responsibility.

One way of learning the male norms of engineering was to become assimilated into the majority group. For women, it was necessary to accept the masculine culture, yet to display femininity, even to the point of extremes. However, this strategy did not challenge the status quo either. One interviewee explained how she had adjusted her behaviour to expectations. While she was incredibly hardworking, she was perceived as feminine, even "girly," and was not seen as a threat to her male colleagues. She consciously maintained this dichotomy in her daily life to avoid professional rejection. This duality creates gender-specific expectations for the women who remain in STEM careers.

Regardless of whether women tried to assimilate, they were likely to be excluded from men's networks. Many women shared how they were not invited to informal events at which professional or organisational information was circulated or well-paid projects were assigned. Instead, women were assigned reams of administrative tasks because men did not have the patience or time for these, or they were simply happy to get rid of them, or because men were considered unreliable:

> I have noticed in this technical field, too, that a woman who is equally competent and a man who is equally competent are assigned different tasks. So [the situation is] so different, and it's holding women back anyway, and, of course, they may prefer to spend their time bringing up children, and there are some tasks that are not so professional but have to be done—PR, financial, administrative things. Very often women get given them anyway, even if there are hardly [any] women here. (Interviewee#16, EIE, age 26, childless)

Many stories of a hostile or chilly environment indicated how a macho organisational culture discouraged women from staying in engineering. Women's experiences ranged across a broad spectrum of sexism but also differed in how respondents perceived and understood the actions of men. One interviewee spent her working days trying to compete with sixty men. The men were mostly older and saw women less as colleagues than sexual objects. Cruel manifestations of macho behaviour were also encountered by some women when they were placed in a humiliating position to make them feel inferior in the organisation:

> I was sitting there, and they were talking about—I don't know if you want to hear this—very obscene things, and they took a pen drive and asked me to do something to [it] and threw it on the floor. (Interviewee#19, EIE, age 27, childless)

In this context, it was extremely challenging for the views of women with children to be represented. Engineering offered limited opportunities for women, who were seen as a small component of the workforce. Having children was not perceived as a natural part of life but as an individual, private matter, which did not make the STEM field attractive to women who wanted to have a private life and children too. While it was obviously difficult for young women to fulfil their fertility plans under such conditions, men, especially older male professors, did not understand the specific problems women faced. For example, when a mother of three submitted a request regarding her oral examination (*rigorosum*), she was seen as trying to obtain an undue advantage and set an undesirable precedent. Women also lacked female role models whom they could follow, or from whom they could receive support. Those that existed were described as overburdened, nervous, and burnt out.

There were also faint signs of benevolent sexism in women's stories of how colleagues helped and supported young women: Doors were opened for them, they were given presentation awards at conferences regardless of the professional quality of their presentations, professors were polite to them at exams if they were expecting a baby, and some women said they had received a better grade for their dissertation because they were pregnant. However, having children was seen as disruptive to the engineering profession, and while women's structural disadvantage was clear, they made little criticism of the system.

4.2. Organisational Barriers

We identified a large group of factors stemming from organisational and labour market processes that might have hindered or forced the PhD students to deviate from their original plans for motherhood.

The vast majority of the women struggled with work–life imbalance. The massive amount of teaching-related activity and project-based research associated with short deadlines and long experiments in laboratories all resulted in overwork. Due to organisational pressure and the lack of female role models, childless women tried to copy the 12–14 hour "male working model," which seemed to be quite easily manageable for men. Young mothers managed some family time between their paid work and the night shift at home, but the male environment devalued this "family working model" However, women themselves associated this male working model with the image of the "ideal, good researcher" and a successful career.

Childless women perceived that their high level of work-family imbalance made childbearing impossible, at least until they had received their degree. They hardly knew any peers among electrical and informatics engineers who had successfully raised a child while completing their PhD, and the same applied to chemical engineers in the business sector:

> Although I don't have any children yet, sometimes I have no idea which way to look. I really don't have a clue how I will manage all that. I think if you have a job and also do a PhD and have a kid, you can easily lose control. It's very difficult to do a PhD and raise children as well as work. I don't know anyone who could pull it off. (Interviewee#11, CEBE, age 29, childless)

The lack of flexible work practices also imposed substantial barriers to motherhood and work–life balance, particularly in the business sector and in laboratories. Laboratory work was inflexible even within academia. Though students tried to plan their lab days thoroughly, day-long measurements literally could not be stopped otherwise both work and expensive materials would be wasted. Because of the heavy workload and work–family imbalance, female PhD students fell drastically behind with their PhD-related tasks, delaying them from obtaining their PhD degrees.

Precarity and insecurity also increased the uncertainty about childbearing during the students' studies. Women experienced different forms of discrimination based on the grounds of gender or parental status. Half of the working students had received two-to-twelve-month fixed-term contracts and only very few EIE students had permanent contracts. In contrast, their male partners or peers—with the same qualifications—received permanent contracts at the beginning of their employment. Students often considered leaving the field of science entirely. Also discouraging was when mothers' short-term contracts at organisations were terminated before or during maternity leave, as was the case with three mothers included in the present research. Childless women also frequently voiced their fears about reintegrating into the labour market after childbearing. In some cases, they were openly warned that they should not "dream" about receiving permanent status if they planned to become mothers. A childless woman clearly summarised the barriers to motherhood in relation to precarity and discrimination—a phenomenon that was strongly responsible for women "leaking from the academic pipeline":

> We were messing about with two-month contracts and that was constant stress. They don't do that to men. My experience is that when you leave to give birth, stay at home for two years, then go back, they pull funny faces or you get fired. But if you leave the same job to have a second child, it is sure that you are going to get fired. (Interviewee#24, EIE, age 25, childless)

Women PhD students also could not establish families due to the low income they received from PhD scholarships or as assistant researchers. Moreover, at the time of the interviews, tertiary students were not eligible for maternity benefits (this changed a year later), and they also could not work full-time if they had received a scholarship. Moreover, EIE students often highlighted that engineering does not allow for long career breaks, particularly not the expected three-year maternity leave that is typical in Hungary.

A large proportion of students had reached their physical limits. Due to their burdens and stress, women experienced ubiquitous tiredness and exhaustion. For mothers, insomnia had become a persistent feature of life. Strain-based work-to-family conflicts caused health problems in many cases. Women were definitely aware of the harmful effects of their overwork—they even predicted having such symptoms after a demanding research project:

> Extra hours are expected and ever more scientific results, and there are people who internalise the stress and some people are nervous. You can tell: They have nervous ticks, and they are tense or in a sour mood. (Interviewee#11, CEBE, age 29, childless)

Finally, laboratory work with hazardous substances also implied different health hazards for CEBE students. Although laboratory work was prohibited during pregnancy, women asserted that they could not be cautious enough. A pregnant student shared that two accidents had happened in the lab before she knew about her pregnancy. Moreover, others noticed that pregnant colleagues often worked in labs, supposedly due to the high pressure for productivity. The students also perceived the cumulative side-effects of hazardous substances and their consequences in the long term. They shared how several senior colleagues had encountered gynaecological problems and had struggled to conceive or remained childless:

> It is worth [becoming a mother earlier] because the longer period of time women are exposed to hazardous substances, the more difficult [conception] is. They [the interviewee's colleagues] unfortunately had several different health problems, especially in the past, which were just gynaecological in nature. (Interviewee#5, CEBE, age 28, childless)

The previously described delay in finishing PhD studies, on the one hand, and conceiving babies as early as possible in one's career to avoid health hazards on the other, stand in dire contradiction. Hence, female CEBE PhD students were caught in a trap involving the timing of motherhood.

4.3. Family Plans and Constrained Choices

In the following, we introduce how prescriptive social norms and the above-introduced STEM- and organisational-related barriers influenced the formation and modification of PhD students' family plans.

In most cases (20), young female engineers wished to have two or three children. Those who planned to have two children wanted siblings for their children and they

felt they could raise a maximum of two children responsibly regarding time, energy, and money. Those planning three or more children were typically CEBE students, including all the five mothers in the sample, and they were more often socialised in large families. However, EIE students—all childless—clearly opted for fewer children, and several shared the opinion that women's intentional childlessness was widespread in their occupation. Only a few women (2) planned to have one child. A chemical engineer aged 28 was voluntarily childless. She described herself as too "immature" for childbearing, but later she shared that a child would change the equilibrium of her life.

Women's perceptions of the timing of motherhood were firmly based on social norms and shared expectations. The majority considered the age range 25–30 to be the "ideal age" for motherhood, their thirties to be "late" to have a first child, and "too late" from 35 onwards, considering the health risks it could involve. Engineers regularly perceived strong social pressure from their environment. The role of norms was so vital that in several cases women questioned their own will compared to social pressure concerning their own childbearing intentions:

> I often contemplate this—whether I really want to have a child myself or if this is social pressure, and if it is just an expectation that women have to have children, or that the time has come for it. (Interviewee#23, EIE, age 27, childless)

The fierce opinions of family members mainly targeted the timing of starting a family and family size, including in indirect ways such as when a husband of a chemical engineer put his wife under pressure when he stigmatised her female colleague who planned to have only one child. Colleagues and friends also voiced their opinions, and women often voiced their anger at why external actors felt authorised to intrude into their private sphere. An electrical engineer was particularly irritated by her male colleagues' directness because no one else in their professional environment had established a family at this "early" age. She also contrasted the situation with that of her male peers, who were never asked or pressured about their fatherhood:

> I always get at my workplace that "since you already have a husband, you can go and have a child, which would be much better." But there's really nobody else doing this because they are all in the same situation as me, and everyone is somehow trying to close this stage [finish their PhD]. (Interviewee#26, EIE, age 33, childless)

Hence, these female engineers often hid their family plans in order to avoid social pressure and stigmatising. An electrical engineer even vehemently protested that social pressure had had the reverse effect on her childbearing intentions.

Despite the strong social pressure and their original intentions, women in the present research had delayed motherhood due to their enrolment into the PhD programme. Around half of the women in this sample acknowledged (sometimes with sadness) during the interviews that they had already passed the original deadline they had set themselves in their younger years. They also often confessed that they believed they would have had (more) children by now, but had seemingly already failed at it. The idea that by the time they were 30 they would have had "two or three children," and that, comparatively, "reality is obviously different," was phrased quite frequently. With one exception (an unplanned child), all mothers in the sample had had their first child after enrolment. However, childbearing during the completion of a PhD also seemed like a bad option for the majority of the childless women due to the severe work–family conflict it implied, as discussed in the previous section. In addition, delaying completion of a PhD for two or three years was a common phenomenon in their academic environment, meaning respondents would typically be at least 30 or more before graduating, which they considered being too late for motherhood. This scenario generated very high levels of stress. Many older students also understood the risk of their shortened period of fertility and they were also worried about the realization of their fertility plan within such a short period, while they rejected artificial reproduction technologies due to the risks they involved.

The majority of CEBE students felt they could no longer postpone childbearing and found it better to have a child—as the least bad option—at the end of their PhD studies. Their dilemmas were more closely connected to age norms, normative pressures, and work-life balance problems. EIE students tended to delay motherhood more, even after obtaining their degree. They rather reasoned about STEM-related barriers—such as the loss of knowledge that would occur during a career break due to the knowledge-intensiveness of engineering—and about the biological limits of childbearing, and conception-related problems. Singles were more common among EIE students and lacking a partner contributed to their childlessness. For the 33-year-old informatics engineer quoted below, both her masculine profession and its knowledge-intensiveness had curbed the realisation of her family plans to a large extent. She had difficulty maintaining long-term relationships with men who would hardly accept her as an engineer, and because of the workload that her PhD and private sector job involved:

> On the one hand, I believed that I would obtain my PhD degree earlier—I had different ideas about what it meant to pursue it. On the other hand, both partnership and family are tied to life situations and opportunities that change over time. (Interviewee#23, EIE, age 33, childless)

Finally, although these women had postponed their motherhood to pursue an academic career, the majority of them felt they would have to choose between the two after childbearing. The pressure to choose was tangibly stronger for CEBE students, perhaps because they planned to establish a family earlier than EIE students:

> I think it is hard for women to be mothers and to remain wives—to remain in the workforce and be housewives at the same time. I think the whole of female society is in a situation which is not simple, I mean this group we are talking about now. Difficult. You have to give up something. I think several women have given up their careers. And I think if a woman wants a child, the child should come first. (Interviewee#11, CEBE, age 29, childless)

The unequal share of household and caregiving tasks did not support these women's motherhood plans either. The dominant and traditional attitudes about family roles in Hungary were apparent in our interviews as well. While childless women shared household chores with their partners in a quite egalitarian way, mothers played quite traditional roles. The mothers in this sample had already partly sacrificed their careers due to their constrained choice, and the majority of the childless women said they would choose family over work after childbearing. A large proportion of women even stigmatised female peers who had delayed motherhood long after obtaining a PhD degree as being fixated on their careers.

5. Discussion

Our research focused on two interrelated topics: the main barriers women PhD students in STEM fields face while planning their motherhood, and how, despite persistent pronatalist policy, intentions about motherhood change and become less feasible in a male-dominated environment. In harmony with our first research question, we identified two main types of barriers: (a) the masculine features of the STEM fields and (b) organisational obstacles.

Our results confirm earlier findings that the hegemonic work-centric model of neoliberal universities (Rosa, 2021) and the masculine environments of STEM fields (Nagy, 2014) do not support motherhood. The high volume of teaching, administrative and research tasks, the hierarchical nature of the organisations, expectations about performance, and, in the business sector, the lack of flexible working practices negatively influence work–life balance (Moen & Sweet, 2004).

The related barrier identified in our research was a masculine organisational culture. This was particularly salient in the field of EIE, where the message was that becoming a mother would not allow one to become a "good researcher" and pursue a successful research career. It was a particular challenge for women PhD students to have a child and be accepted within the engineering profession. Our results also agree with the findings of earlier studies that women in engineering receive less recognition and are given fewer professional responsibilities and organisational support but are subject to more (hostile or benevolent) sexism (Maxmen, 2018; Nagy, 2014). Their professional environment devalues their competencies, pushing women to work more and harder. This effort burdens them beyond their capacity, causes different health problems, and diverts their focus from other fields of life, such as family and children (Lewis & Humbert, 2010).

Moreover, although young male researchers suffered from precarious employment too, women were often discriminated against based on gender—e.g., by being awarded extremely short working contracts, or not having the opportunity to return to their previous employer after childbearing. This finding agrees with that of previous research that identified how gender-based discrimination was one of the five most frequent grounds for discrimination from 2010 to 2019 in Hungary, along with age, state of health, social background, and financial status (Neményi et al., 2019).

This finding leads to our second research question on changing intentions about motherhood in a male-dominated environment. The main "solution" we identified was to decrease or postpone motherhood. PhD students initially aimed to become mothers in their twenties, but their enrolment in doctoral school pushed them to postpone motherhood. This fertility pattern is also a part of the standardisation process of life courses (Spéder, 2021). However, in our case the barriers we explored delayed motherhood well beyond graduation in the highly masculine fields despite the perception of heavy social pressure from families regarding the gender role of mothers. It is no surprise that all childless women aimed to become mothers. Our results support previous findings that voluntary childlessness is still a relatively rare phenomenon in Hungary (Szalma & Takács, 2018), and provide evidence for the claim of prejudice against childless or childfree young people (McCutcheon, 2020; Turnbull et al., 2016). This situation explains why our respondents tended to stigmatise female peers who delayed motherhood long after obtaining PhD degrees as fixated on their careers.

It is noteworthy that women working in the fields of EIE were more liable to plan to have fewer children and tended to delay motherhood more than those studying and working in the more gender-balanced field of chemical engineering. From this, we suppose that the negative influence of STEM-related barriers may be stronger on women engineers' family plans and motherhood than the pressure of organisational barriers.

Becoming a mother in Hungary typically goes hand in hand with gender inequality in the household division of labour. While childless women shared household chores with their partners in a relatively egalitarian way, mothers played quite traditional roles in this regard. This result

resonates with Gregor's (2016) findings about the changing attitudes of higher educated women. Strong social expectations mirrored the traditional attitudes of society in general, as defined by recent selective pronatalist ideological and policy contexts. The former targeted "better-off" traditional families, as Hašková and Dudová (2020) and Szikra (2014) claim, including those female professionals who tend to have fewer children (Mason et al., 2013).

6. Conclusion

Women professionals face a dual barrier in relation to STEM fields. First, their access to STEM fields is limited, along with their opportunities for a successful research career. Second, they are also likely to have to sacrifice their motherhood; their intentions change under the normative pressures they are subject to in their environment, and due to the barriers they face. Although many of the STEM-related barriers have already been discussed in academic literature (Britton, 2017; Lewis & Humbert, 2010), our results reveal how the pressure of the professional and organisational culture in STEM for high performance and assimilation into the masculine world of science prevent women from realizing their fertility plans. Fertility decisions during PhD studies can only represent initial steps in changing the family plans of these young engineer women; it is still an open question how they will be able to realise these plans at later career stages, if at all. Eliminating barriers to childbearing can also enhance parenthood and the work–life balance of non-female students, and decrease the attrition rates of doctoral students.

It is paradoxical that on the one hand women are delaying their motherhood—thereby confronting internalised social norms, endangering their own and their babies' health, decreasing their opportunity to realise fertility plans, and risking being subject to stigmatization as workaholics—to pursue a career in science. On the other hand, after becoming mothers, a wide range of structural barriers force them to choose between their families and careers, and the young engineers in our research—having no other option—tended to choose the traditional path: prioritizing family over work.

The present results offer several intervention points for stakeholders. However, if gender norms and professional culture do not develop in such organisations, even selective pronatalist ideologies and policies will not lead to change. This suggests one way of making engineering careers more attractive to women.

This research is not without limitations. The women in the sample had not reached the end of their fertility period so their family plans were malleable and subject to later realization. Fertility behaviour is a complex phenomenon and focusing on a wider range of factors would have extended the scope of the article. Future panel research may focus on how the fertility plans of women working in highly masculine engineering disciplines may be realised beyond the age of 40, as well as on attitudes towards voluntarily childless women in Hungary.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article

Things to Gain, Things to Lose: Perceived Costs and Benefits of Children and Intention to Remain Childless in Poland

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Abstract
A rapid fertility decline observed in Poland since the 1990s has been accompanied by a marked increase in childlessness. This may seem surprising given the high value placed on parenthood in the country. Some evidence exists on how childlessness in Poland relates to biological and situational constraints, but still relatively little is known about how the decision to never have children is made, especially among men. This article contributes to this literature by analysing how the perceived positive and negative consequences of parenthood affect the reproductive intentions of childless women and men of different socioeconomic characteristics in Poland. Using a subsample of childless respondents extracted from the second wave of the Polish Generation and Gender Survey, we examine the interplay between (a) the intention to remain childless, (b) the perceived costs and benefits of having children, included as a unique set of questions in the Polish Generation and Gender Survey (GGS), and (c) respondents' socioeconomic characteristics (education, employment, household financial situation, and the size of the place of residence). The results suggest that among women both costs and benefits strongly affect the likelihood of intending to remain childless, whereas among men only the benefits matter. While the effects do not depend on any of the socioeconomic characteristics, the probability of not intending to have a child does vary by some of them. Our results indicate the pattern of fertility polarisation already seen in some low-fertility countries: for the disadvantaged segment of the population, it is increasingly difficult to become parents.

Keywords
childbearing intentions; childbearing motivations; childlessness; costs and benefits of children; Poland

Issue
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1. Introduction

The high value of family and parenthood—especially motherhood—is strongly embedded in Polish culture (Fokkema & Esveldt, 2008; Giza-Poleszczuk & Poleszczuk, 2004; Kotowska et al., 2008; Mishtal, 2012). Poland is predominantly Catholic, highly religious (Pew Research Center, 2018) and traditional in terms of gender norms (Matysiak & Węziak-Białowolska, 2016). Childlessness is still often socially disapproved of (Gedvilaite-Kordusiene et al., 2020; Morison et al., 2016). In such a context, the decision to have no offspring is challenging.

Nevertheless, a rapid fertility decline observed in Poland since the 1990s has been accompanied by a marked increase in childlessness (Kotowska et al., 2008). For cohorts from 1935–1960, the share of childless

women was still low, between 5–10% (Kotowska et al., 2008; Sobotka, 2017). However, among women born after 1960, the childlessness levels increased drastically: They have been estimated at 15.5% for those born in 1965 (Kotowska et al., 2008) and—based on representative survey data—at around 18% for the 1970 cohort (Mynarska et al., 2014). The data for these cohorts need to be considered with caution due to very high outmigration (Sobotka, 2017; Tymicki et al., 2018), but they consistently indicate a clear trend towards higher levels of childlessness.

Numerous studies have examined determinants of childbearing choices in Poland, contributing to our understanding of the low fertility rates in the country (Kotowska et al., 2008; Matysiak, 2009; Mishtal, 2012; Mynarska & Styrc, 2014). Yet, only a few of them have focused on determinants of lifelong childlessness. The available findings show how childlessness among Polish women is linked to infertility and various life circumstances, such as employment instability or lacking a partner (Mynarska et al., 2015). Moreover, the existing evidence indicates that, like in many other low-fertility countries, childlessness might result from fertility postponement rather than from individual preferences (Miettinen & Szalma, 2014). At the same time, some recent psychological studies suggest that low childbearing motivations and desires may also contribute to Poles' decision to forego parenthood (Mynarska & Rytel, 2018, 2020). These studies have found that childless individuals, who perceive high costs and low benefits of childbearing declare a weak desire for parenthood (Mynarska & Rytel, 2020), and this in turn is related to a weak childbearing intention (Mynarska & Rytel, 2018). These studies did not ask explicitly about the intention to remain childless, however. They did not control for socioeconomic factors either, making it impossible to tell whether motivational and situational factors act independently.

This study expands our knowledge on childlessness in Poland by examining determinants of intention to never have any children, related to both motivational factors and socioeconomic conditions. To this end, we use a subsample of childless respondents extracted from the second wave of the Polish Generation and Gender Survey (Gauthier et al., 2018; Kotowska & Jóźwiak, 2011). This dataset includes a unique set of questions on the perceived costs and benefits of having children, which capture the motivational forces behind people's fertility choices (Hoffman & Hoffman, 1973; Miller, 1994). Additionally, we consider a set of socioeconomic factors, such as educational attainment, employment status, material situation, and place of residence. Consequently, we can assess the independent effects of motivational and central situational factors on Poles' intention to remain childless.

2. Model of Reproductive Decision-Making

There are several theoretical models of reproductive decision-making used in population and family research, such as the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Klobas & Ajzen, 2015), traits-desires-intentions-behaviour theory (Miller, 1994, 2011b) or the cognitive-social model of fertility intentions (Bachrach & Morgan, 2013). With some noticeable differences (Miller, 2011a; Morgan & Bachrach, 2011), these theoretical approaches share several key characteristics. First, they depict reproductive decision-making as a motivational sequence in which childbearing intentions are direct predecessors of reproductive behaviour. They also commonly define childbearing intentions as psychological states, oriented toward a reproductive outcome. Intentions define a behavioural goal (to have a child or to avoid pregnancy) and entail some commitment to act towards this goal (to engage in proceptive or contraceptive behaviour).

Second, even though different terminology is used, the mentioned theoretical models consider mental representations of parenthood as very basic motivational forces that underlie childbearing intentions. Mental scripts and schemas (Bachrach & Morgan, 2013), beliefs and attitudes (Klobas & Ajzen, 2015) or motivations (Miller, 2011b) all correspond to people's overall perceptions of parenthood that carry some affective meaning. People's focus on positive or negative consequences (benefits/values and costs/disvalues) of having children constitutes the starting point for the formation of childbearing intentions.

While Miller et al. (1999) highlighted the genetic origin of childbearing motivations, scholars universally agree that positive and negative perceptions of parenthood are shaped in the course of individual development, starting from early childhood (Bachrach & Morgan, 2013; Miller, 1992; Miller & Pasta, 2000). Consequently, although they may change over the life course, they are far more stable than childbearing intentions, which are highly responsive to personal circumstances (Klobas & Ajzen, 2015; Miller, 2011b). In other words, childbearing intentions originate from affective reactions to parenthood but are "constrained by reality" (Miller, 1994, p. 228). Thus, both underlying motivational forces as well as situational factors need to be considered to fully understand childbearing intentions.

3. Motivational and Situational Determinants of Childlessness

Early studies on motivational origins of childbearing—perceived costs and benefits of parenthood—demonstrated that emotional values of children are highly relevant for entry into parenthood, while instrumental values (e.g., related to economic maintenance of family) are more important for higher-order births (Bulatao, 1981). Later research expanded these findings by showing that expected low levels of joy and stimulation from childbearing, low perceived importance of parenthood for a couple's relationship and seeing child-caring and child-raising as burdensome and expensive are all important motivations for remaining childless

(Avison & Furnham, 2015; Langdridge et al., 2005; Park, 2005). For women, affective reactions to pregnancy and infancy play a particular role (Mynarska & Rytel, 2020; Park, 2005). Some gender differences have been also detected in the perceived costs of children and in how they motivate childbearing choices. Women's decisions often hinge upon their concerns about how motherhood would impact their employment prospects, but those of men are more driven by how they perceive the direct financial costs of parenthood (Park, 2005).

Undoubtedly, the affective reactions to various aspects of childbearing and—rearing—perceived costs and benefits of parenthood—determine the strength of women's and men's motivation to become a parent and constitute an important factor in their reproductive decisions (Miller, 1994, 2011b; Mynarska & Rytel, 2018). However, motivation can be reinforced or limited by situational factors, including partnership and socioeconomic status. For instance, in- or sub-fecundity as well as being single are among the strongest determinants of childlessness for both women and men (Jalovaara & Fasang, 2017; Keizer et al., 2008; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008). The role of socioeconomic status is more complex and gendered. Many studies have documented a positive educational gradient in childlessness: Highly educated women are at higher risk of remaining childless than their lower educated peers, be it due to fertility postponement or because they are less family-oriented (Berrington, 2017; Keizer et al., 2008; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008; Wood et al., 2014). Recent evidence, however, has demonstrated that the relationship between education and childlessness has changed in several European countries. In Northern European and some post-socialist Central-Eastern European (CEE) countries, the share of childless women among the low-educated is now higher than among the university-educated (Beaujouan et al., 2016; Jalovaara et al., 2019; Rotkirch & Miettinen, 2017). Similarly, women's employment has repeatedly been found to be conducive to childlessness (Keizer et al., 2008; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008), but according to recent studies, unemployment, unstable employment or precarious jobs might have a similar effect (Mynarska et al., 2015; Tocchioni, 2018). For men, the role of socioeconomic status is much clearer, with low education and unstable employment being related to a higher risk of childlessness (Burkimsher & Zeman, 2017; Fiori et al., 2017; Jalovaara et al., 2019; Keizer et al., 2008).

Most of the studies cited above identify determinants of remaining childless by either showing how characteristics and life course developments of childless individuals differ from those of parents or by examining the (retrospectively) declared reasons for childlessness. However, the evidence on how the motivational and situational factors shape reproductive decision-making and contribute to the intention to never have any children is still scarce. In fact, the vast majority of studies that consider the subjective perception of costs and benefits of children as well as socioeconomic factors focus on short-term (in three years' time) childbearing intentions (Albertini & Brini, 2021; Billari et al., 2009; Ciritel et al., 2019; Dommermuth et al., 2011). Only a few studies investigated how socioeconomic status is related to the intention to remain permanently childless (Fiori et al., 2017; Heaton et al., 1999; Miettinen, 2010; Miettinen & Szalma, 2014). Yet, none of them has systematically analysed the role of both motivational and situational factors. This is where our study contributes.

4. Data and Methods

We use the second wave of the Polish GGS conducted in 2014–2015, which oversampled a young segment of the population. Specifically, we extract a subsample of 2,690 respondents who are childless and aged between 18 and 49 years old. Our analytical sample, with no missing information on any of the variables included in the analysis, consists of 2,548 childless women and men.

Our goal is to examine the interplay between (a) the intention to remain ultimately childless (intention of lifelong childlessness—outcome variable), (b) the perceived costs and benefits of having children included as a unique set of questions in the Polish GGS, and (c) respondents' socioeconomic characteristics (education, employment, household financial situation and the size of the place of residence). The intention to remain childless is dichotomous (yes/no) and combines answers to two questions:

1. Do you intend to have a child during the next three years?
2. Supposing you do not have a/another child during the next three years, do you intend to have any (more) children at all?

The second question was asked independently from the answer to the first question. Therefore, only those respondents who answered "probably not" or "definitely not" to both questions are labelled as intending to remain permanently childless. Those who answered "probably yes" or "definitely yes" to both or either of the questions are classified as intending to have a child in the future (sooner or later).

The perceived costs and benefits of having children are constructed from two batteries of questionnaire items (18 items in total). While the standard GGS questions on attitudes towards children ask about expected (positive and negative) consequences of having a child in the next three years' time, the items added in the Polish GGS do not include this timeframe. The respondents were asked about their current opinions on the costs and benefits of children, which might occur at any time in the future, which is better suited for analysing the lifelong intentions. To be exact, the respondents were asked to assess how important for them personally and at the current point in time the following reasons for having a child are: (a) experiencing a unique kind of love and closeness through parenthood, (b) fulfilling religious values

concerning family, (c) passing own characteristics and values on to offspring, (d) not feeling lonely in older age, (e) watching how the child grows and develops, (f) receiving help from offspring in old age, (g) having somebody to pass on an inheritance to, (h) feeling fulfilled as a woman/a man through parenthood, and (i) strengthening the relationship through parenthood. The tenth reason for having children ("having someone to work in Poland in the future") was of a slightly different nature, tapping into nationalistic attitudes and was dropped from these analyses. In the same vein, the respondents evaluated the following reasons for not having children: (j) fear that the child will be born ill, (k) having children limits parents' free time, (l) difficulties in engaging in paid work and professional development, (m) having less time for one's partner/spouse, (n) financial burden, (o) experiencing worries and concerns related to raising a child, (p) difficulties in combining motherhood and paid work, (r) burden and hardship of pregnancy and childbirth, (s) perceiving parenthood as too high a responsibility. Possible answers to all questions were: very important, rather important, neither important nor unimportant, rather unimportant, not important at all.

We apply exploratory factor analysis with a principal factor solution, using polychoric correlations and varimax rotation on the 18 items on perceived benefits and costs of having children. Based on the Keiser criterion and following the scree-plot inspection, two clear dimensions were identified related to positive and negative consequences of childbearing. Based on this solution, the factor scores were computed for each dimension. The resulting two variables are standardised, with the mean equal to zero and the standard deviation equal to one. The details of the factor analysis are shown in Table A1 in the Supplementary File. Notably, we also tested a solution with assumed three factors to verify whether it would be possible to distinguish two kinds of perceived benefits: emotional and instrumental ones. The third dimension that emerged from the data was related to items "receiving help from offspring in old age" and "having somebody to pass on an inheritance to," but it did not add much to the solution. The share of explained variance rose from 51 to 54% and the third factor accounted for 6% of the variance. Moreover, the items with high factor loadings on the third dimension showed high cross-loadings.

The socioeconomic characteristics used in the analysis include the following variables: education (below secondary, secondary and tertiary), employment status (working for pay, being in education, being unemployed, and being inactive, i.e., not working and not looking for work), financial situation of the household (making ends meet very easily or easily, fairly easily, with some difficulty, with difficulty or great difficulty), and place of residence (large town, i.e., with 100,000 thousand inhabitants or more, smaller town, and village). All these variables are based on respondents' self-assessments. This is particularly important in the case of employment status: Those defining themselves as "working for pay" may still be pursuing some kind of education. Similarly, the group "in education" certainly include students who have a (part-time) job. Table 1 shows the sample characteristics.

To examine how strongly the intention to remain childless varies by the perceived benefits and costs of parenthood and to what extent this relationship is modified by socioeconomic characteristics, we use logit models, in which the dichotomous intention to remain childless is the outcome. We apply a step-wise procedure in which we start with a model with only the perceived costs and benefits of having children as independent variables (M1) and then iteratively test the effect of each individual socioeconomic variable. We thus compute four models (M2-M5) in which M1 is extended by education (M2), the employment status (M3), the financial situation of the household (M4), or the place of residence (M5). The last model, M6, includes all independent variables simultaneously. In all models, we control for age and age squared of the respondent, their partnership status (coded as 1 for those respondents who have a partner and as 0 for those who do not have one) and infecundity (coded as 1 for those who declare being aware that they are probably unable to have children and 0 for all others). While the effect of the three variables is not of interest in this study, we control for them as they are known to affect fertility intentions (e.g., Albertini & Brini, 2021; Billari et al., 2009; Régnier-Loilier & Vignoli, 2011) and may thus act as confounding factors. In all six models, each independent and control variable interacted with the respondent's sex, so that the estimates for women and men can be directly compared as coming from the same models.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive Analysis

Overall, 20% and 22% of women and men, respectively, intend to remain childless (Figure 1, horizontal dotted line). As expected, these values vary substantially across socioeconomic characteristics. The key factors for both women and men are employment status and financial situation (Figure 1). The share of respondents who intend to remain childless is by far the highest among the economically inactive population. It should be mentioned, however, that this group is rather small in our sample and made up predominantly of disabled or ill respondents. Furthermore, women working for pay declare more often that they intend to remain childless than those in education and unemployed (26% as opposed to about 10%). In the case of financial situation, the more difficult it is to make ends meet, the more often respondents intend to remain childless, with values ranging from 17% to 31%. The gradient is a bit steeper for men than for women. Education plays a role only among men: the intention to remain childless is much less spread

Table 1. Sample characteristics, unweighted data.

	Women	Men
Dependent variable		
Intending to remain childless (%)	23.9	24.1
Independent variables		
Perceived costs of having children (mean)	0.0	0.0
Perceived benefits of having children (mean)	0.1	−0.1
Education (%)		
below secondary	22.2	27.3
secondary	47.9	56.2
tertiary	29.9	16.5
Employment status (%)		
works	42.3	50.2
in education	42.0	32.4
unemployed	10.8	13.2
inactive	4.9	4.3
Financial situation: making ends meet (%)		
easily	16.2	16.4
fairly easily	39.5	36.0
with some difficulty	26.7	26.7
with difficulty	17.7	20.9
Place of residence (%)		
towns above 100 thous.	30.4	27.3
towns below 100 thous.	30.0	29.0
village	39.7	43.8
Control variables		
Age (mean)	26.1	26.5
Having partner (%)	34.0	22.2
Being infecund (%)	5.6	1.4
N	1,195	1,353

among those with a university degree (15%) than among those without it (slightly over 20%). For women, in turn, the place of residence seems to be important: 14% of those who live in the countryside plan their future without children as opposed to around 24% among those living in cities and towns.

Respondents who intend to remain childless differ drastically from those who intend to have children with respect to the perceived costs and benefits of having children, as Figure 2 clearly shows. Among respondents assessing the benefits of childbearing as low, over 40% do not wish for children. This number drops to less than 15% among those who perceive the benefits as high. In the case of perceived costs of having children, the pattern reverses but only for women: Those assessing the costs as low intend to remain childless less often than those assessing them as high (13% compared to 31%). The gradient, however, is not as steep as in the case of the perceived benefits and very weak and inconsistent among men. When broken down further by socioeconomic characteristics, these numbers do not substantially change (results not shown). Thus, it seems that the motivational factors are not correlated with the socioeconomic ones. In the next section, we test the bivariate relationships and examine whether they also hold in a multivariate setup.

5.2. Multivariate Analysis

The effect of perceived costs of having children on the intention to remain childless is strong and unaffected by the socioeconomic characteristics: it does not vary across models M1 to M6 (Figure 3 and Table A2 M1-M6 in the Supplementary File). Assessing the benefits of childbearing one standard deviation higher than the mean decreases the probability of intending to remain childless by about 7 percentage points (p.p.), for both women and men and in all model specifications. Similarly, seeing the costs of having children one standard deviation higher than the mean raises the chances of planning a future without children by 6 p.p. but only among women. The multivariate analysis confirms the descriptive results shown in Figure 2: Men's intention to remain childless does not depend on the perceived costs of having children. The fact that both effects do not change when controlling for education, employment status, place of residence, and financial situation of the household indicates that the perceived costs and benefits of having children

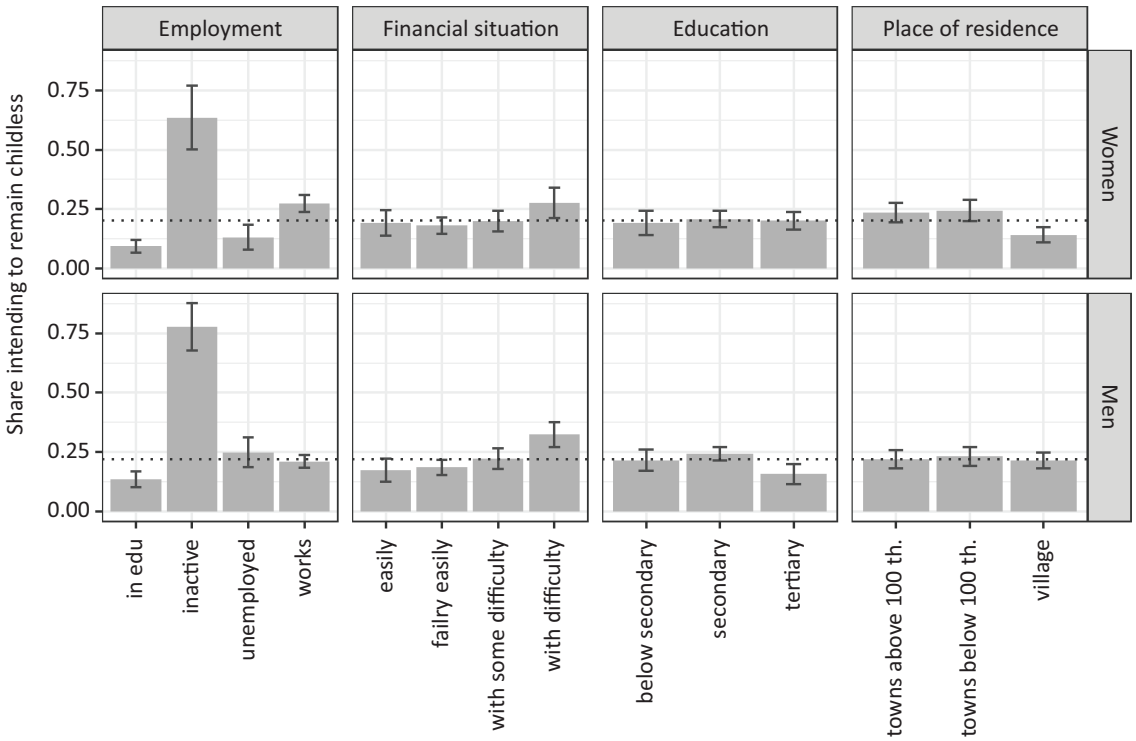

Figure 1. Respondents intending to remain childless, by socioeconomic characteristics and gender, with 95% confidence intervals. Notes: The dotted horizontal lines denote the mean share of women (upper panels) and men (lower panels) intending to remain childless; data weighted with post-stratification weights.

shape the intention to remain childless independently from socioeconomic factors.

In the multivariate setup, some of the bivariate relationships between socioeconomic characteristics and intention to remain childless disappear whereas others rise in importance (see Figure 4 and see Table A2 M1-M6 in the Supplementary File). As in the descriptive analysis, being economically inactive vastly increases the probability of intending to remain childless compared to respondents who work for pay, by over 20 and 30 p.p. among women and men, respectively. There are no differences, however, between those who are in employment, in

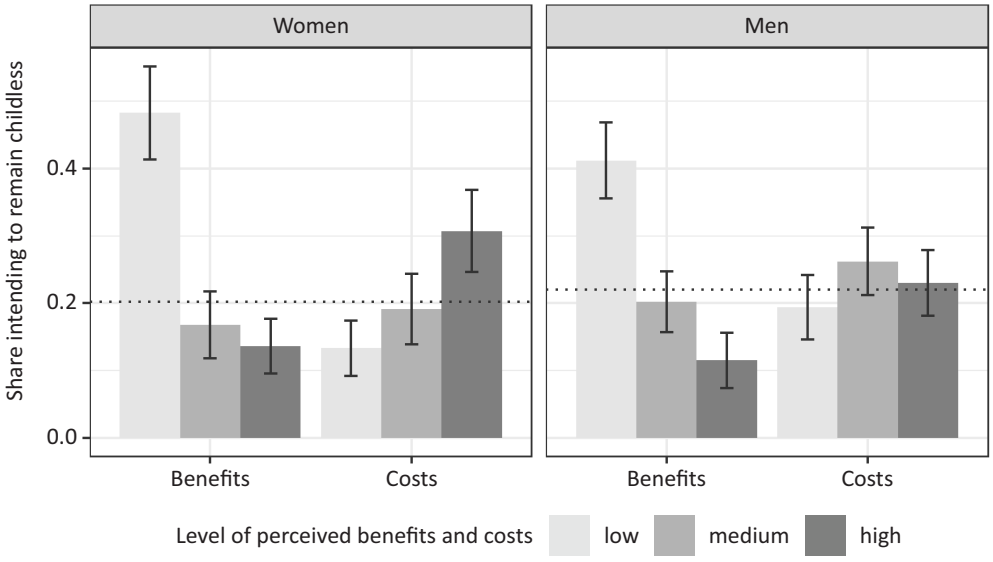

Figure 2. Respondents intending to remain childless, by perceived costs and benefits of children. Notes: Low, medium, and high values of costs and benefits denote the first, third, and fifth quantiles, i.e., the bottom 20%, those between 10% below and 10% above the median, and the top 20%; the dotted horizontal lines denote the mean share of women (left-hand panel) and men (right-hand panel) intending to remain childless; data weighted with post-stratification weights.

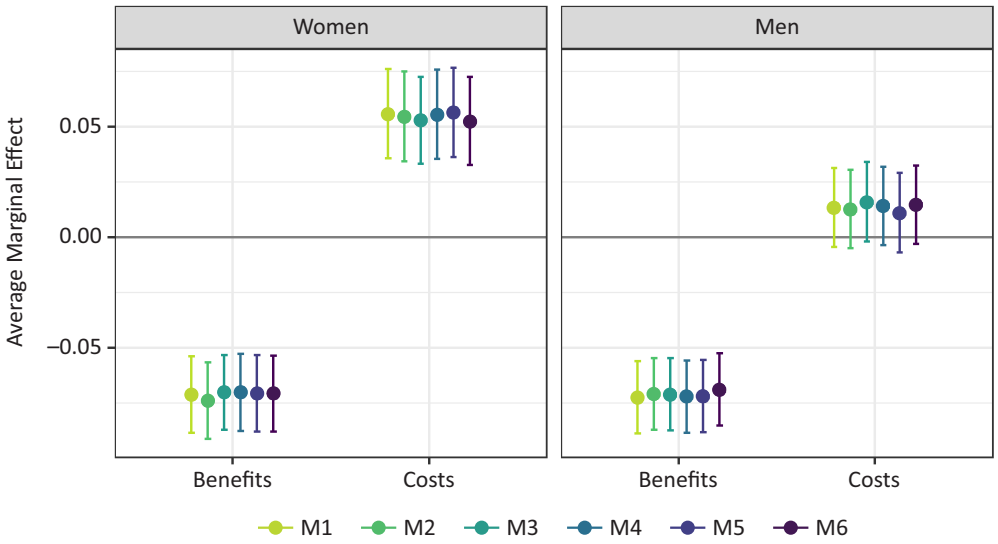

Figure 3. Effects of perceived costs and benefits of having children on intention to remain childless. Notes: Average marginal effects (AMEs) of intending to remain childless (vs. reference category: intending children in the future) in models M1–M6 together with 95% confidence intervals; AMEs expressed on the scale of the response variable (as changes in probabilities) from logistic models M1–M6 estimated jointly for women and men. AMEs express a change in the probability in response to an increase by one standard deviation.

education and unemployed. The effect of financial situation holds only when comparing the poorest with the richest male respondents: the probability is 7 p.p. higher among the former than among the latter. In the full model, i.e., when controlling for all socioeconomic characteristics (M6), the effect loses statistical significance.

Unlike in the descriptive analysis, there is a clear education gradient in the intention to remain childless

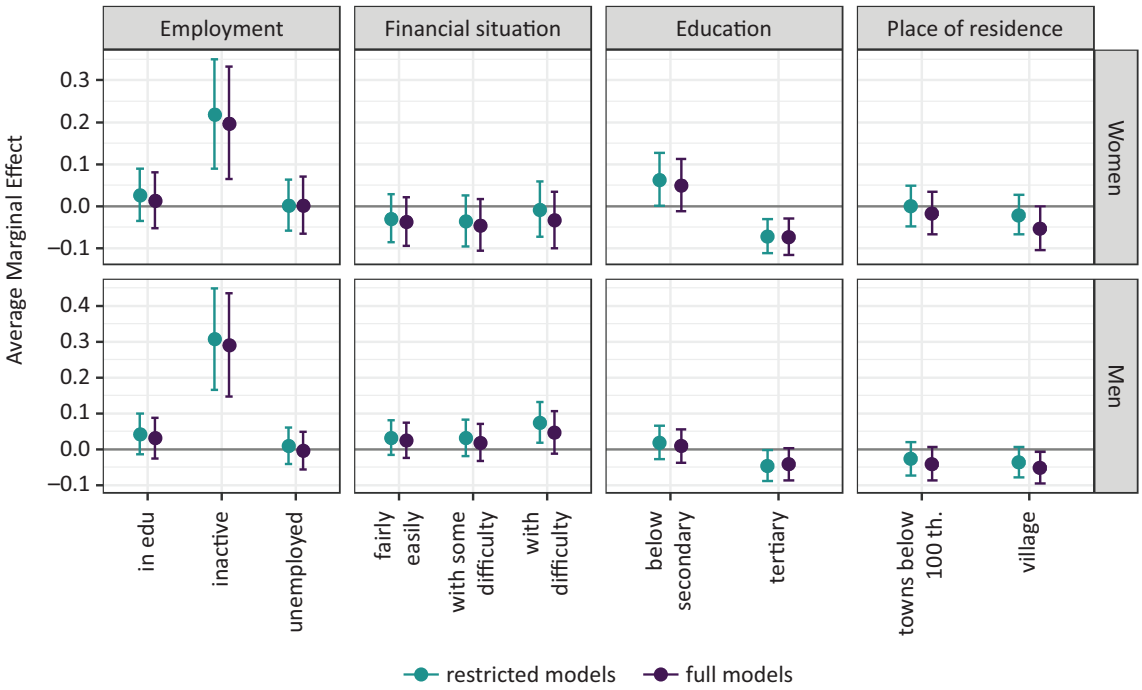

Figure 4. Effects of socioeconomic characteristics on intention to remain childless. Notes: AMEs of intending to remain childless (vs. reference category: intending children in the future) in restricted models (M2-M5) and full model (M6) together with 95% confidence intervals. AMEs expressed on the scale of the response variable (as changes in probabilities) from logistic models M1–M6 estimated jointly for women and men. Reference categories: education (M2 & M6): secondary education; employment status (M3 & M6): working/in employment; financial situation (M4 & M6): making ends meet easily; place of residence (M5 and M6): towns above 100,000 inhabitants.

among women. Compared to women with secondary education, those with a university degree are 7 p.p. less likely to plan their future without children. Among men, this figure amounts to 5 p.p., marginally missing the significance level of 0.05 in the full model M6 (but remaining significant at $p < 0.1$). The confounding factor that makes the multivariate results inconsistent with the descriptive ones is age (if the differences in the age structure between educational groups are not controlled for, the educational pattern resembles the one shown in Figure 1 even when controlling for other characteristics). Overall, it can be concluded that the higher the educational attainment, the less likely the respondents are to intend to never have children, and the effect is stronger for women.

Finally, the importance of the place of residence largely depends on whether other demographic (age) and socioeconomic (education) characteristics are controlled for or not. The effect of living in a village as opposed to a town with more than 100,000 thousand inhabitants (M5) disappears once age is controlled for (results not shown). However, it becomes significant again when education is also included in the model (M6): Women and men living in a village are 5 p.p. less likely to plan a future without children than respondents living in large towns.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the results presented in this article, it can be estimated that around 1/5 of childless women and men in Poland plan to never have any children. This number may seem rather high, but it is consistent with existing estimates and projections of ultimate childlessness in Poland (Kotowska et al., 2008; Mynarska et al., 2014), and also similar to that in other countries in CEE (Vienna Institute of Demography et al., 2020). Together with persistently low fertility, increasing levels of childlessness prompted many governments in CEE to introduce policies to encourage parenthood. But whether any introduced measures are successful depends on how well they address the major reasons as to why people limit or forego childbearing. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the motivations behind and obstacles to having children.

In this article, we focus on factors related to intentions to remain permanently childless and their motivational and socioeconomic determinants in Poland. As for motivational factors, viewing the benefits of having children as low is the main factor for intending to never have any children for men and women in all socioeconomic groups analysed in our study. Among women, perceiving the high costs of having children plays an important role, too. Our results corroborate the existing evidence. Affective reaction to children—especially infants—was shown as central to women's choices for or against motherhood in previous research (Avison & Furnham, 2015; Park, 2005). It was suggested that for men, benefits related to childrearing and expected interactions with an older child might be more decisive (Mynarska & Rytel, 2020; Pezeshki et al., 2005). As for the role of costs, previous studies conducted in the US and across Europe (Langdridge et al., 2005; Park, 2005), including in Poland (Mynarska & Rytel, 2020), similarly demonstrated that the decision of whether to become a parent is sensitive to concerns about opportunity and financial costs, with the latter type of costs being more important for men's choice to remain childless. In our data, only one question (out of nine) concerned direct financial costs. Meanwhile, three items addressed various costs faced by women: difficulties in combining motherhood and paid work, burden and hardship of pregnancy and childbirth, or difficulties in engaging in paid work and professional development. This may help to explain why, in our analysis, the assessment of costs is irrelevant to men's decision of whether to become a father or not.

Beyond the motivational factors, the main socioeconomic determinant of intending to remain childless is education. Poles, especially women, with a university education, intend to remain childless considerably less often than their less-educated peers. This negative educational gradient in the intention to remain childless indicates that Poland might be going through a similar process as the Nordic and some CEE countries: A reversal in the relationship between women's level of educational attainment and childlessness from positive to negative or U-shaped. Analyses of (almost) ultimate childlessness have shown that it is becoming increasingly difficult for the low-educated and low-skilled to have children (Beaujouan et al., 2016; Jalovaara et al., 2019; Rotkirch & Miettinen, 2017). Our results demonstrate that the change in the educational gradient of childlessness is not limited to behaviour (i.e., actual childlessness) but is also happening at the level of childbearing intentions.

As for other situational factors considered in our study, among all socioeconomic groups, the economically inactive respondents were most likely to intend to remain childless. This group was very small but, notably, it consisted predominantly of disabled or ill individuals. It is feasible that health status was decisive for their childbearing intention. In fact, it has been previously suggested that chronic illness or serious health problems could be a primary reason for both economic inactivity and childlessness (Mynarska et al., 2015). For the healthy, non-disabled segment of the Polish population employment status does not play any significant role.

Importantly, our study demonstrates that motivational (perceived costs and benefits of parenthood) and situational factors (socioeconomic characteristics) affect the intention to never have children independently from each other. While this may seem surprising, it is in line with the theoretical frameworks of reproductive decision-making. The childbearing motivations develop from early childhood and are more stable and far less affected by situational circumstances than intentions (Bachrach & Morgan, 2013; Miller, 2011b). They shape a person's overall desire for or against parenthood, while

socioeconomic conditions reinforce or constrain this wish as intentions are formulated (Miller, 1994, 2011b). No intention is carved in stone and even a very certain intention to never have any children might be revised as the circumstances change (Albertini & Brini, 2021; Bernardi et al., 2015; Heaton et al., 1999). The perceived costs and benefits of children constitute the most basic motivational forces but close attention to socioeconomic factors is needed to understand how the decision to remain childless unfolds over one's life course. A qualitative study on reproductive choices conducted in Poland in the mid-2000s showed that as people get older not only their life priorities but also evaluation of available resources may change (Mynarska, 2010). Also in the current study, age was a confounding factor, affecting the relationship between education and intention to remain childless.

It is worth noting that, in our data, the effect of financial situation or place of residence on intention to remain childless also differed depending on whether age or education were included in the model. Since these effects were rather small and our main aim was to assess the independent effects of motivational and socioeconomic factors, we did not analyse the interdependencies between situational variables more closely. Investigating how different circumstances and life-course developments interact in shaping lifelong fertility intentions constitutes an important avenue for future research.

The central conclusion of our study relates to how perceived low benefits and, among women, high costs of childbearing, and lower level of education—indicative of lower-earning potential—contribute to the intention to never have children. It suggests the pattern of fertility polarisation already seen in some low-fertility countries: For the disadvantaged segment of the population, it is increasingly difficult to become parents. This is particularly the case for women. Does it mean that the policy measures oriented toward lowering the costs of children can be successful in decreasing the level of childlessness in Poland? While such measures have some potential, things are far more complicated.

First, it is important to distinguish between different types of costs to better understand their role in reproductive choices and to explore possible ways to reduce them. In Poland, the pronatalist measures launched in 2005–2015 were mostly directed toward women's opportunity costs. They included substantial improvements in maternal and parental leaves, and childcare arrangements (Kotowska, 2020). In 2016, the right-wing government introduced a universal monthly child benefit of approximately 120 EUR (500 PLN, the "programme 500+"). This programme is oriented towards the direct costs of childbearing. These different types of measures are likely to affect different segments of the population, with the former ones being more important for highly educated women, with high earning potential and strong labour market attachment. The direct benefits are more likely to affect those with lower earning potential although this effect might not necessarily be as expected. When the programme 500+ was introduced, economists identified a drop in mothers' labour force participation, especially among women with lower education (Magda et al., 2018). At the same time, the effect of the programme on fertility is limited (Kotowska, 2020).

Moreover, the direct financial costs and opportunity costs are not the only ones related to childbearing. In our study, the dimension of costs included also having less time for one's partner or for other activities, women's fears concerning pregnancy and delivery, or stress and responsibility related to parenthood. To reduce this type of cost, it is necessary to create secure conditions for childbearing and rearing. This should include easy access to and wise investments in, among other things, health services (especially, in relation to reproductive health), high-quality child-care facilities and education. With limited resources, governments need to prioritise their investments and carefully consider which measures to implement and how. This further highlights the importance of disentangling the effects of different situational factors as well as different types of perceived costs of parenthood for fertility choices.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

Contested Parenthood: Attitudes Toward Voluntary Childlessness as a Life Strategy in Post-Socialist Bulgaria

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Abstract
The article focuses on the social differences in the attitudes toward female and male voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria and their dynamics over time. The analysis is based on data from the European Social Survey conducted in 2006 and 2018 in Bulgaria. By the means of multinomial logistic regression, we test the effect of the period, gender, age, marital status, number of children, education, employment, minority status, and religiosity on attitudes toward childlessness. The results reveal a decrease in negative attitudes and a strong increase of neutral stances. However, higher age of respondents is still associated with an increase in negative attitudes toward voluntary childlessness rather than neutrality. Women are significantly more likely to accept voluntary childlessness than to be neutral compared to men. Respondents who are married, parents, lowly educated, jobless or economically inactive, people belonging to ethnic minority groups, and highly religious people are more likely to disapprove of voluntary childlessness. Perceptions on female or male voluntary childlessness are significantly correlated with attitudes toward extramarital fertility, cohabitation, divorces when children are under twelve years old, and full-time female employment when children are below the age of three. The analysis of variance reveals that the individuals who accept or are neutral to voluntary childlessness have stronger non-conformist attitudes emphasizing self-expression, the idea of "having a good time," and rejection of traditional authorities compared to the respondents with negative attitudes.

Keywords
Bulgaria; European Social Survey; family values; non-conformist value orientations; parenthood; social differences; voluntary childlessness

Issue
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1. Introduction

Voluntary childlessness is not a new social phenomenon, but the freedom to choose not to have children and to express this choice certainly appears in post-modern societies where the child is no longer an (economic) necessity (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In this sense, the concept of "childlessness" signifies the absence of a child (e.g., due to infertility or health-related problems), while the notion of a "child-free lifestyle" focuses on the conscious choice not to parent (Harrington, 2019). The denial of parenthood may not be a fixed life strategy but could be associated with a perpetual postponement of reproduction due to different reasons, including the

inability to find a partner or sustain a family, etc. (Clarke et al., 2018; Miettinen & Szalma, 2014).

Shapiro (2014, p. 1) delineates the multiple meanings associated with voluntary childlessness and points out that, "while childlessness describes a person or couple who does not have children for various personal, biomedical, or situational reasons, voluntary childlessness is characterized by an active choice, commitment, and permanence regarding the decision not to parent." Discussing the differences in the definitions of this phenomenon, Berrington (2017) emphasizes the distinction between individuals who are involuntary childless due to different biomedical reasons and voluntary childlessness as a social inability to become a parent. The causes and consequences of "childlessness by circumstances" (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007) have been associated with an absence of a partner, discrepancies in fertility intentions in the couple, or other social and economic circumstances impeding parenthood. Authors emphasize the necessity to study childlessness as a continuum of personal decisions and behaviors taken across the life course and to distinguish between "child-less" and "child-free'' status (Albertini & Arpino, 2018; Blackstone, 2014; Stahnke, 2020). Regarding the child-free status, Watling Neal and Neal (2021, p. 1) point out that "child-free individuals voluntarily choose not to have children, and therefore potentially are quite different from individuals who also do not have children but are not-yet-parents or childless." Studies show that, among child-free individuals, life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and subjective wellbeing have been higher, suggesting that life without children may not be necessarily associated with negative emotional experiences (Dalphonse, 1997; Stahnke, 2020). Contrarily, individuals sharing more traditional values about family and parenthood experience the status of childlessness as a loss and failure that brings about unhappiness and regret (Chauhan et al., 2021).

This article aims to reveal if the rise of childlessness in Bulgaria has been accompanied by an increasing prevalence of more tolerant views concerning this phenomenon. With a focus on the attitudes toward female or male voluntary childlessness, the present study addresses the following research questions: Has there been a shift in public attitudes regarding voluntary childlessness from stigma to tolerance? What are the sociodemographic differences between individuals who disapprove, remain neutral, and have affirmative attitudes toward voluntary childlessness? Finally, is there an association between the attitudes toward voluntary childlessness and other general and family-related values? Under (general) value we understand a "conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action" (Kluckhohn, 1951, p. 395). The article provides insights into attitudes toward voluntary childlessness in the Bulgarian familistic context. Unlike Western European countries, where voluntary childlessness is more widespread and on which many studies have already been conducted, in most of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including Bulgaria, it is an emerging social phenomenon and still an understudied research topic.

1.1. Trends of Childlessness in Europe

In the recent context of decreasing fertility in Europe, the phenomenon of childlessness has been studied from various research perspectives. The trend of increasing childlessness can be explained by macro-factors and individual life circumstances. Research shows that some structural factors influence reproductive decisions, such as the increased control of fertility through modern contraception (Chancey & Dumais, 2009), prolonged education of women, increased employment and more demanding and insecure jobs (Mills & Blossfeld, 2005), decreased dependence of the individual from the family due to protection from the welfare state (Park, 2005), and greater social mobility related to job opportunities (Meil, 2010). Studies point also to women's overburden with unpaid domestic work, which affects negatively the reconciliation of parenthood and paid work (Thèvenon, 2009).

Ultimate childlessness in European societies has been associated with trends of increasing age of union formation and parenthood, especially among highly educated women, repetitive postponement of parenthood across the life course, increasing union instability, and relaxed social pressure on reproduction (Mills et al., 2011; Rybińska & Morgan, 2019). Kreyenfeld and Konietzka (2017) reveal that, in West Germany, ultimate childlessness increased from 10 to 20% in the cohorts of women born in the 1940–1964 span. Their study shows that the increase in childlessness has a strong educational and socioeconomic gradient, being higher among highly educated women and less educated men.

Recent studies show that, although increasing, voluntary childlessness remains relatively low in CEE countries, like Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Russia. In these countries, under 10% of women at age 40–44 are expected to remain childless (Miettinen et al., 2015). Präg et al. (2017) point out that, in CEE countries, especially in Bulgaria and Russia, the recent fertility regime is featured by low completed fertility (around 1.6 children per woman) and low but increasing levels of ultimate childlessness (around 8%). The increase in childlessness in CEE countries, especially among women born in the 1970s and the 1980s, could be related also to socioeconomic and cultural transformations that changed the attitudes of young adults about family and parenthood (Sobotka, 2017). There also seems to be a growing acceptance of childlessness in CEE countries (Sobotka, 2004).

1.2. The National Context

During the socialist period (from the 1950s until the beginning of the 1990s) Bulgaria was recognized as a

country where more than 90% of women had a child and the average age of first birth was around 22 years. It is supposed that, when the proportion of childless women is below 10%, childlessness is mainly due to involuntary reasons and the absence of a partner (Koytcheva & Philipov, 2008). Pronatalism as an ideology that "implies encouragement of all births as conducive to individual, family, and social well-being" (De Sandre, 1978, p. 145) has a long tradition in public discourses and public policies in Bulgaria. The pronatalist pressure was part of the socialist political regime in the country characterized by the strong support of parenthood and family formation at a young age, marital fertility, the two-child family model, prohibition of abortions and modern contraception, and lower tolerance for divorces and non-marital cohabitations (Brunnbauer & Kassabova, 2009).

Recent studies on Bulgaria reveal that the levels of ultimate childlessness began to increase in the cohorts of women born in the late 1960s (Moralyiska-Nikolova, 2021). It increased to 14.5% in the cohort of women born in 1978. The trend of voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria has also a strong ethnic and educational gradient (Dimitrova, 2020). The advancing process of stratification of reproduction was associated with faster fertility decrease and increasing rates of ultimate childlessness among women of Bulgarian ethnicity and also among highly educated women (Dimitrova, 2012). Studies on the values and perceptions of the recent young generations in Bulgaria reveal that family and children are strongly appreciated in their value orientations (Kotzeva, 2020a; Mitev et al., 2019). One of the explanations for these findings is that trust in family counterbalances the general mistrust in the public institutions in the country.

The negative implications of the demographic decline during the last three decades featured by rapid population aging, severe labor shortages, and strong pressure on the pension and health systems boosted the public concerns about the "demographic crisis," the low birth rates, and revived the traditional stereotypes about childless women (Apostolova, 2021). High female employment was accompanied by gender inequalities in the hours spent on paid and unpaid work, identifying a discrepancy between structural conditions and cultural norms related to gender equality practices (Stoilova & Kotzeva, 2020). In recent years, the rise of nationalist parties and social movements awoke, in some segments of the society, the idea of the "traditional family" and the return to the "authentic" roles of women as mothers and caregivers. Disapproval of childlessness has also been followed by re-traditionalization of gender roles in certain spheres in the post-socialist transition period in Bulgaria (Luleva, 2016).

On the other hand, after 1990, the coercive pronatalist measures of the former regime were abolished. The processes of growing union instability, diffusion of new types of "unconventional" living arrangements like cohabitations, "living-apart-together," homosexual unions, the increasing extramarital fertility, lone parenthood, and voluntary childlessness manifested cultural and ideational transformations associated with increased tolerance and acceptance of the new forms of family and parenthood. Studies show that these cultural changes were related to the diffusion of post-materialist family-related values in Bulgaria since 1990 as a manifestation of the unfolding second demographic transition (Dimitrova, 2006). The emerging pronatalist messages and the public concerns about the "demographic crisis" became a discursive political reaction to the actual demographic changes.

2. Data, Variables, and Methods

The empirical part of the analysis is based on the Bulgarian dataset of the European Social Survey (ESS) from 2006 (round 3) and 2018 (round 9). The ESS is an academically driven cross-national representative survey conducted in many European countries. The questionnaire includes topics of political participation, public policy, trust and wellbeing, human values, social inequalities, among others. The present analysis focuses on the dynamics of the attitudes toward female or male voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria. The analysis includes 3598 participants at the age of 15 and above (Table 16 in the Supplementary File). The respondents are equally distributed by gender in both waves. The people above 56 years compose the biggest age group—45% in 2006 and 53% in 2018, which may increase the share of respondents with more traditional views on family and parenthood. Respondents without children are 18% in 2006 and 20% in 2018. People with one child are 23% (2006) and 27% (2018). The respondents with two or more children are 57% (2006) and 53% (2018). The attitudes toward female or male voluntary childlessness are assessed by the question: "How much do you approve or disapprove if a woman/a man chooses never to have children?" Participants in the survey were randomly sorted into two groups. The first group responds to questions on women's life cycle, including voluntary childlessness, and the second group responds to similar questions on men's life cycle.

The differentiating effects of various sociodemographic characteristics on the attitudes toward voluntary childlessness are delineated by the means of multinomial logistic regression. The dependent variable in the model includes three groups of respondents with negative, neutral, or affirmative attitudes. The multiple outcomes of the dependent variable make the application of multinomial logistic regression an appropriate modeling strategy. In multinomial regression log odds of the dependent variable are modeled as a linear combination of the predictors (Long & Freese, 2006). The predictors in the model are the year of the survey, a variable that indicates if the question concerns male or female voluntary childlessness, gender and age of the respondent, marital status and number of children, education and economic status, ethnicity (Bulgarian vs.

non-Bulgarian), and religiosity. The question "how religious are you?" is measured on a 10-point scale. The group of non-religious or slightly religious respondents includes those people whose responses ranged from 0 to 4. Scores from five (5) to seven (7) create the group of moderately religious individuals and scores from eight (8) to ten (10) create the group of highly religious people. Religiosity taps the presence of more traditional or more secular and non-conformist value orientations about family and parenthood (Bein, 2021).

We use correlation analysis to explore the strength and significance of the association between the attitudes toward female or male voluntary childlessness and other parenthood and family-related values such as the acceptance of non-marital unions and childbearing in them, men/women's labor force participation when children are under three years, and divorce of a man/woman when children are under 12 years of age.

By the means of an analysis of variance, we study also the differences in the general values of the respondents who disapprove, have neutral attitudes, or accept female or male voluntary childlessness. In the ESS, general values are assessed following the prompt: "Now I will briefly describe some people. Please, listen to each description and tell me how much each person is or is not like you?" The statements concerning general values are:

1, [It is important] to think new ideas and to be creative;
2. [It is important] to be rich and to have money and expensive things;
3. [It is important] to show abilities and to be admired;
4. [It is important] to live in secure and safe surroundings;
5. [It is important] to try new and different things in life;
6. [It is important] to do what is told and to follow rules;
7. [It is important] to understand different people;
8. [It is important] to be humble and modest, not to draw attention;
9. [It is important] to have a good time;
10. [It is important] to make own decisions and to be free;
11. [It is important] to help people and to care for others' wellbeing;
12. [It is important] to be successful and that people recognize achievements;
13. [It is important] to seek adventures and to have an exciting life;
14. [It is important] to behave properly; to get respect from others;
15. [It is important] to be loyal to friends and to devote to close people;
16. [It is important] to care for nature and the environment;
17. [It is important] to follow traditions and customs;
18. [It is important] to seek fun and things that give pleasure;
19. [It is important that] people be treated equally and have equal opportunities;
20. [It is important that] the government is strong and ensures safety.

Response options are presented on a 6-point scale, ranging from "very much like me" to "not like me at all." To study the differences in the general values of individuals with affirmative, neutral, or disapproving stances on voluntary childlessness, we use a one-way ANOVA test of differences (the results from the statistical analysis are presented in Tables 4–15 in the Supplementary File).

3. Results

3.1. Socio-Demographic Differences in the Attitudes Toward Voluntary Childlessness in Bulgaria

The trends in attitudes toward female or male voluntary childlessness are presented in Figure 1. In 2006, 83% of respondents expressed negative attitudes about the decision of a woman not to have children, while in 2018 their share declined to 70%. The same decreasing trend was observed in the attitudes toward male voluntary childlessness (82% in 2006 and 68% in 2018 had negative attitudes). The analysis reveals a strong increase in neutral stances. In 2018, the share of individuals with neutral attitudes increased to 25% for female voluntary childlessness and 28% for male voluntary childlessness. In 2006, 4% of respondents replied that they would approve the decision of a woman not to have children. In 2018, their share increased to 5.3%. With respect to male voluntary childlessness, the share of people with affirmative attitudes increased from 4% to 5%. These trends reveal a shift in the attitudes toward voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria today associated with growing neutrality and to less extent with increasing approval. The trend of strongly increasing neutrality suggests that the traditional family values and norms in which parenthood is strongly appreciated were partly challenged by the processes of postponement of family formation and parenthood in the recent period in Bulgaria. In an international comparative perspective, data from the ESS 2018 show that the percentage of people with strong affirmative attitudes is above 30% in north-western European countries like Iceland, Finland, Sweden, and even above 50% in the Netherlands, Norway, and Denmark; strong acceptance is 2–4% in CEE countries like Serbia, Lithuania, and Estonia, and around 1% in Bulgaria and Hungary.

In the next step of the analysis, using a multinomial logistic regression, we study the effect of different sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents on their attitudes toward voluntary childlessness.

The results from the multivariate analysis confirmed the significance of the changes in attitudes toward voluntary childlessness between the two waves of the

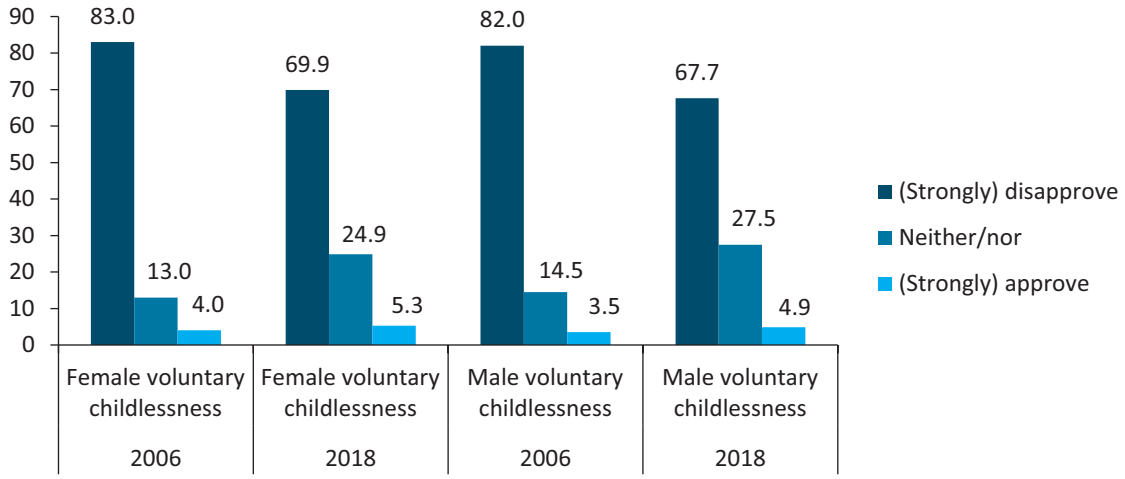

Figure 1. Attitudes toward female or male voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria. Source: ESS ERIC (2006, 2018).

ESS (see Table 1). Compared to 2006 (reference year), in 2018 the respondents were less likely to reject or approve of voluntary childlessness than to be neutral (reference category).

Compared to men (reference category) women are significantly more likely to have an affirmative attitude toward voluntary childlessness than to be neutral (reference category). This result reveals that, on an attitudinal level, women tend to reject more often the traditional normative expectations about the "motherhood mandate.''

Higher age is associated with an increase in negative attitudes toward voluntary childlessness rather than neutrality. This result reveals generational dynamics and the diffusion of more tolerant values and views among younger generations concerning family and parenthood.

Married respondents are significantly more likely to disapprove of voluntary childlessness than to be neutral (reference category). This result reveals the strong association between marriage and parenthood and the affirmative effect of marital experience on reproductive attitudes.

Respondents with children are significantly more likely to disapprove of voluntary childlessness than to express neutral attitudes (reference category). Individuals with two or more children are also less likely to approve of voluntary childlessness than to be neutral (reference category). These results confirm the strong association between a respondent's parenthood status and reproductive attitudes.

Lowly educated people are significantly more likely to disapprove of voluntary childlessness compared to individuals with tertiary education (reference group). This result is in line with the observed strong educational differences in the reproductive behaviors of recent young generations in Bulgaria, according to which, among highly educated individuals, the postponement of fertility is stronger.

Unemployed or economically inactive respondents are more likely to disapprove of voluntary childlessness than to be neutral compared to the people who are employed (reference category). Joblessness and economic inactivity are associated with lower education and, in many cases, with a higher number of children, which may strengthen negative attitudes toward childlessness.

Respondents of non-Bulgarian origin are more likely to disapprove of voluntary childlessness than to be neutral compared to people of Bulgarian ethnic origin (reference group). The persisting differences in the reproductive behaviors and attitudes of the different ethnic groups in Bulgaria explain this result. Ethnic minorities (Turkish and Roma) have higher fertility rates and individuals in these communities share more traditional attitudes toward family and parenthood.

Religiosity has also a significant effect on the attitudes toward voluntary childlessness. Compared to the non-religious or slightly religious respondents (reference category), highly religious people are more likely to disapprove of voluntary childlessness than to be neutral (reference category). Family and parenthood are fundamental values in the worldview of strong believers, and voluntary childlessness is an object of strong disapproval. Moderately religious people have more relaxed attitudes toward voluntary childlessness and are significantly less likely to disapprove of it than to remain neutral (reference category). This may be explained by more ambiguous value orientations of the people with mixed secular and religious views.

3.2. Value Orientations and Attitudes Toward Voluntary Childlessness in Bulgaria

In both waves of the ESS, attitudes toward female voluntary childlessness are positively correlated with the acceptance of non-marital cohabitation and parenthood in consensual unions (Table 2). There is also a significant positive correlation between the acceptance of female labor force participation when an involved child is under three years and the acceptance of divorce when an involved child is under twelve years. The strength of the

Table 1. Multinomial logistic regression of the attitudes toward voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria.

	Disapproving vs. neutral (ref.)		Approving vs. neutral (ref.)	
Factors	RRR	Sig.	RRR	Sig.
Split ballot				
Female voluntary childlessness (ref.)	1		1	
Male voluntary childlessness	0.878		0.932	
Year				
2006 (ref.)	1		1	
2018	0.402	***	0.694	*
Gender				
Man (ref.)	1		1	
Woman	1.088		1.393	*
Age of R.	1.005	*	0.998	
Marital status				
Never married (ref.)	1		1	
Divorced/separated/widowed	1.232		0.935	
Married	1.361	*	0.851	
Number of children				
No children (ref.)	1		1	
One child	1.461	**	0.641	
Two or more children	1.737	***	0.577	*
Education				
Tertiary (ref.)	1		1	
Secondary	1.315	**	1.198	
Primary or lower	1.554	**	1.226	
Economic status				
In paid work (ref.)	1		1	
Unemployed	1.466	**	0.908	
Economically inactive	1.238	**	0.732	
Ethnicity				
Bulgarian (ref.)	1		1	
Non-Bulgarian	1.329	*	0.889	
Religiosity				
Non or slightly religious (ref.)	1		1	
Moderately religious	0.805	**	0.798	
Highly religious	1.456	**	0.910	
Constant	1.977	***	0.448	**

Notes: The analysis includes 3211 respondents; log likelihood is 2084.69; sig.: *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$. Source: ESS ERIC (2006, 2018).

Table 2. Pearson correlations of attitudes toward female voluntary childlessness, parenthood, marriage, and divorce in Bulgaria.

	Approve if a woman chooses never to have children	
	ESS 2006	ESS 2018
Approve if a woman lives with a partner not married to	0.151**	0.219**
Approve if a woman has a child with a partner not married to	0.141**	0.195**
Approve if a woman has a full-time job while children aged under three years	0.186**	0.236**
Approve if a woman gets divorced while children aged under twelve years	0.246**	0.379**

Notes: The analysis includes 647 respondents from the 2006 ESS and 1009 respondents from the 2018 ESS; sig.: *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$. Source: ESS ERIC (2006, 2018).

correlation between these attitudes increases over time. The increase of voluntary childlessness as a new behavioral phenomenon and the diffusion of new family forms such as cohabitations and parenthood in them reflect an unfolding shift in the family-related values in the recent Bulgarian society. The respondents who accept female voluntary childlessness have also more tolerant attitudes toward the early return to work of women with small children. This result suggests that the traditional perception of the primary caregiving role of women is challenged among people who show higher tolerance to the new forms of family and reproductive behaviors in recent Bulgarian society.

The correlation analysis of the attitudes toward male voluntary childlessness and other parenthood and family-related values reveals a positive correlation with the acceptance of cohabitations and parenthood in nonmarital unions as well as with the acceptance of the divorce of a man when the children are below twelve years (Table 3). The strength of the correlations increases over time. The results show that the labor force participation of men with small children is not a source of divergence in the attitudes of the respondents and reflect the prevailing attitudes in the Bulgarian society that the mother needs to be involved as long as possible in the care for children, while the father needs to be the main provider for the family.

In the next step of the analysis, we focus on the differences in the general values of the respondents who disapprove, have neutral attitudes to, or accept female or male voluntary childlessness. The results from the ANOVA test of differences applied to the data from the 2006 ESS reveal that the people who approve of female voluntary childlessness appreciate more a life in secure and safe surroundings compared to individuals with negative or neutral attitudes (see Tables 4–6 and Figure 2 in the Supplementary File). They also share more frequently the view that people should be treated equally and have equal opportunities compared to respondents with negative or neutral attitudes. Respondents with affirmative attitudes express higher support for the statement that it is important for them to help people and care for others' well-being compared to respondents with neutral attitudes.

The results from the ANOVA test of differences applied to the data from the 2018 ESS show that individuals who approve of women's voluntary childlessness more often agree with the statement that it is important to have new ideas, be rich, and have expensive things compared to the people with negative attitudes (see Tables 7–9 and Figure 3 in the Supplementary File). The respondents with affirmative attitudes emphasize more frequently that it is important for them to seek fun and things that give pleasure compared to the individuals with neutral or negative attitudes.

Respondents with negative attitudes to female voluntary childlessness appreciate more a life in secure and safe surroundings and it is more important for them to help people and care for others' well-being, to do what they are told and follow the rules, behave properly to follow customs and traditions compared to people with neutral attitudes. They emphasize less frequently the importance of having a good time in life compared to people with neutral attitudes. For the same group, it is also more important to be humble and modest, not to draw attention, and have a strong government that ensures safety compared to respondents with neutral or affirmative attitudes. Participants in the 2018 ESS who reject female voluntary childlessness report more frequently that it is important for them to care for nature and the environment compared to respondents with neutral attitudes. They also emphasize the importance of understanding different people more often in comparison to individuals with neutral attitudes. Recent studies on tolerance in the Balkans, based on the ESS data, uncover the need to study discrepancies between the declared values of tolerance to different minority groups (e.g., migrants, ethnic minorities, LGBT people) and actual discrimination practices (Dimova & Dimov, 2022). In the context of the present

Table 3. Pearson correlations of attitudes toward male voluntary childlessness, parenthood, marriage, and divorce in Bulgaria.

	Approve if a man chooses never to have children	
	ESS 2006	ESS 2018
Approve if a man lives with a partner not married to	0.176**	0.250**
Approve if a man has a child with a partner not married to	0.167**	0.198**
Approve if a man has a full-time job while children aged under three years	0.020	0.025
Approve if a man gets divorced while children aged under twelve years	0.255**	0.349**

Notes: The analysis includes 685 respondents from the 2006 ESS and 1045 respondents from the 2018 ESS; sig.: *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$. Source: ESS ERIC (2006, 2018).

study, these findings highlight the necessity to study personal value orientations in the context of actual behaviors and to explore the concordance between the declared discursive tolerance, shared universalistic values, and actual behaviors.

The ANOVA test of differences applied to the data from the 2006 ESS reveals that people who approve of male voluntary childlessness report more often that it is important for them to try new and different things and to have a good time in life compared to individuals with neutral or negative attitudes (see Tables 10–12 and Figure 4 in the Supplementary File). Respondents who approve of male voluntary childlessness state more often that it is important for them to "seek fun" and things that give pleasure compared to individuals with neutral attitudes. For the people with negative attitudes to male voluntary childlessness, it is more important to be loyal to friends and devote themselves to close people, to have a government that is strong and ensures safety, and to care for nature and the environment compared to respondents with neutral attitudes.

The ANOVA test of differences applied to the data from ESS 2018 reveals that for the individuals who approve of male voluntary childlessness, it is more important to "seek fun" and things that give pleasure compared to respondents with negative attitudes (see Tables 13–15 and Figure 5 in the Supplementary File). For the people who are neutral to male voluntary childlessness, it is more important to be rich and to have money and expensive things compared to the respondents with negative attitudes. For the individuals who disapprove of male voluntary childlessness, it is less important to try new and different things in life and more important to do what is told and to follow the rules compared to the respondents who are neutral. People who reject male voluntary childlessness appreciate more a life in secure and safe surroundings and emphasize a need to be humble and modest and not to draw attention compared to individuals with neutral or affirmative attitudes. The respondents with negative attitudes emphasize less frequently the importance of having a good time compared to the people with neutral or affirmative attitudes. For the same group, it is more important to help people and to care for others' well-being as well as to understand different people compared to the individuals with neutral attitudes. For the people who reject male voluntary childlessness, it is more important to behave properly and follow traditions and customs, to have a government that is strong and ensures safety, compared to individuals with neutral and affirmative attitudes. For the group with negative attitudes, it is less important to seek adventures and have an exciting life; it is more important to be loyal to friends and devote themselves to close people compared to the respondents with neutral attitudes. People who disapprove of male voluntary childlessness show higher appreciation to care for nature and the environment compared to individuals with neutral or affirmative attitudes.

4. Discussion

The results from the present study reveal the dynamics and the social differences in the attitudes toward male or female voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria today. The trends suggest increasing neutrality and declining negative attitudes along with a slight increase in acceptance. The increase in acceptance patterns is less pronounced but still present. The uncovered attitudinal changes reveal that the traditional stigmatizing perceptions and pronatalist attitudes related to the "motherhood mandate" still exist in Bulgarian society, but they were also gradually challenged over time.

The increasing neutrality to voluntary childlessness relates to an evolving process of postponement of parenthood and increasing ultimate childlessness among the younger cohorts in Bulgaria and reveals cultural and demographic changes outlined in the theory of second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe, 2014; van de Kaa, 2002). The growing neutrality to voluntary childlessness reflects also perceived social risks and social barriers to parenthood as well as adverse life circumstances (such as the absence of a partner, financial difficulties, housing problems, marital conflicts, dissatisfaction with partnership, etc.) leading to social inability to have children. The increasing neutrality may reflect also an attitudinal adjustment to the economic uncertainty, poverty, and socioeconomic difficulties that the young generations have experienced in recent times in Bulgaria.

According to Shapiro (2014), voluntary childlessness has been stratified globally and within societies by encouraging fertility in some segments of the population and discouraging others. The present study reveals also the significant differentiating effect of gender, age, education, economic and ethnic minority status, parenthood, and marital status on attitudes toward voluntary childlessness. The uncovered social segmentation in the attitudes shows that breaking the stigma on voluntary childlessness is stronger among women, while men more often express more traditional attitudes toward family and reproduction. Few studies focus on the gendered aspects of voluntary childlessness and particularly on male voluntary childlessness (e.g., Chudnovskaya, 2019; Klímová & Hašková, 2020; Oláh, 2003). According to Park (2005), women who choose to remain childless are more stigmatized than men, especially in a pronatalist context. In more traditional societies voluntary childlessness conveys negative stereotypes about childless women who are perceived as less mature, selfish, less feminine, and spoiled (Gillespie, 2001).

Miettinen et al. (2015) observe a trend of polarization among childless men and women at age 40–44 years according to their education. In particular, men with lower education and women with very high and very low education have higher rates of ultimate childlessness. Bahtiyar-Saygan and Sakallı-Uğurlu (2019) uncover that higher education is associated with more permissive attitudes toward voluntary childlessness. The present

study reveals that, in the case of Bulgaria, socioeconomic resources (education and economic status) are also in a significant relationship with attitudes toward childlessness. Higher education is associated with higher acceptance of voluntary childlessness, while joblessness and economic inactivity, being associated with higher fertility in Bulgaria, are in a negative relationship with it.

In the recent Bulgarian society, people with more tolerant attitudes to voluntary childlessness express higher acceptance for cohabitation, childbearing in consensual unions, women's employment when involved children are small, and the divorce of a couple with small children. These findings are in line with other studies, revealing that more tolerant views of voluntary childlessness are associated with stronger post-materialist values and preferences that "desacralize" and "desacrifice" parenthood (Noordhuizen et al., 2010; Tanturri et al., 2015). The present study also uncovers a shift in a post-materialist direction. The increasing tolerance facilitates the diffusion of the new behavioral phenomena and changes the familistic profile of the recent Bulgarian society as part of the advancing second demographic transition (Dimitrova, 2006).

Voluntary childlessness has been discussed within the shift to post-materialist values and increasing preferences of young people for self-fulfillment, freedom, independence, enjoyment, and spontaneous life experiences (Gillespie, 2001; Park, 2005). It has also been studied in the context of risk aversion to long-term investments and individual responsibility when parenthood and partnership are considered "social risks" (Lewis, 2006). Studies show that millennials suffer from a deficit of stable intimate relationships and lasting friendships due to their immersion in virtual communication, their reluctance to create stable relationships, or their stronger preferences for a professional career or leisure activities (Barroso et al., 2020). The acceptance of childlessness may be influenced also by new trends, emerging in the social media of "child-free" movements, growing ecological and overpopulation concerns, and diffusion of post-materialist values emphasizing the personal freedom of choice and the child-free status as an individual reproductive right (Kotzeva, 2020b; Shapiro, 2014). Studies reveal also an effect of ex-post rationalization of voluntary childlessness, i.e., ex-post acceptance of childlessness after a consecutive postponement of parenthood across an individual's reproductive life course (Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008).

The present study shows that the individuals with neutral and affirmative attitudes to voluntary childlessness express more often non-conformist and hedonistic values that emphasize personal freedom, self-expression, material well-being, independence in personal decisions, and rejection of the traditional norms. In contrast, the individuals with negative attitudes toward voluntary childlessness appreciate more the obedience and respect to the traditional authorities, customs and traditions, modesty and obedience to the rules. These findings are in line with existing studies that show that voluntary childlessness is associated with a higher appreciation of self-fulfillment, independence, an exciting life and personal freedom, stronger career orientations, especially among women, higher/lower marital satisfaction, fears and doubts in the parenting skills, discrepancies with partner's reproductive intentions, singlehood, etc. (Archetti, 2020; Merz & Liefbroer, 2012; Szalma & Takács, 2015). Additionally, the results from the present study highlight the necessity to explore the correspondence between the declared universalistic values, acceptance of non-conformist behaviors and the actual behaviors and (non)discrimination practices.

The findings from the present study suggest that in future studies it is important to distinguish between voluntary childlessness as a personal decision concerning one's own reproduction and the general public attitudes to this phenomenon, which are more ambiguous and contradictory. The findings also suggest that, in future studies, it is necessary to distinguish between voluntary childlessness as a "temporary" stage in an individual's life course and the "ultimate childlessness" as an end state of one's reproductive life. The continual nature of voluntary childlessness (as a continuum of decisions not to parent taken over the life course) and the temporal dimension of this phenomenon should also be taken into account. The plurality of meanings attached to the status of "having no children," which may reflect a conscious denial of a reproduction-related preference for a child-free lifestyle, or a decision to remain childless due to various reasons and life circumstances (including a perceived social inability to become a parent), need also to be distinguished in the studies of this social phenomenon. Last but not least, the application of diverse research methods can provide a deeper understanding of the meanings, causes, and consequences of childlessness, as well as the behavioral patterns and life circumstances associated with it.

5. Conclusion

The main conclusion of the present study is about the dynamics observed in public attitudes in Bulgaria today, shifting from stigma and denial to a more tolerant view of voluntary childlessness. This change is stronger among women, highly educated people, childless and unmarried people, and individuals belonging to the Bulgarian ethnic group. In "recent times Bulgaria," reproduction and parenthood are, gradually, becoming accepted as private matters, involving private decisions, and negative judgmental attitudes have gradually changed toward neutrality and respect for personal choice. Despite a comparatively more relaxed pronatalist stance and a weakening normative control on reproduction in Bulgaria today, changes and differences to Bulgarian traditional reproductive norms are still an object of controversy, conflict, and ambiguity in public attitudes. The policy implications of the present study imply the necessity for more

effective measures focused on gender equality in the public and private sphere to provide Bulgarian citizens with more options to make reliable life choices and parenting decisions. This would pave the way to more tolerant and respectful views of an individual's reproductive decisions, including the choice not to parent. Studies on reproductive attitudes shed light on important aspects of the advancing changes in individuals' actual reproductive behaviors. In this regard, the present study on public attitudes to voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria can help academics and policymakers reflect on possible future developments of fertility trends and develop adequate policies as a response to them.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

How the Everyday Logic of Pragmatic Individualism Undermines Russian State Pronatalism

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Abstract
The article examines the reproductive decisions of Russian urban middle-class women. We look at women's lives in the context of Russian pronatalist family policy and the official conservative gender ideology of 2019–2020. Based on biographical interviews with 35 young women, we focus on working mothers. The sample is composed of middle-class mothers since their lifestyle serves as a cultural model for the whole Russian society. We reconstruct the everyday rationalities deployed by the mothers to justify their reproductive decisions. The respondents seek "self-realization," postponing childbirth or limiting their reproduction. We reconstruct the discourse of "pragmatic individualism" as an everyday logic used by mothers, which helps them cope with the instability of the labor market and marriage and the lack of state social support. Using the logic of "pragmatic individualism," women present themselves as respectable, socially competent individuals able to build their lives according to middle-class living standards. The logic of pragmatic individualism contradicts the message of pronatalist state ideology based on "traditional" gender roles and high fertility. It gives women a rational explanation for why, despite socially supported childbearing, they decide to have only one or two children. We argue that while women rationalize childbearing decisions for financial security and social well-being, their rationale is determined by class standards of respectability. These standards are associated with high standards of care and quality of life for a small number of children.

Keywords
gender inequality; labor market; married women; middle class; pragmatic individualism; Russia; social policy; state pronatalism

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Fragile Pronatalism? Barriers to Parenthood, One-Child Families, and Childlessness in European Post-Socialist Countries" edited by Ivett Szalma (Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence / Corvinus University of Budapest), Hana Hašková (Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences), Livia Oláh (Stockholm University), and Judit Takács (Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence).

1. Introduction

This article seeks to answer the question: How do urban, young middle-class women discursively frame their life stories, inscribing them into the dominant neoliberal ideology of individualism and self-productivity, alongside the conservative gender ideology of family and fertility? Why do female respondents, we ask, despite sharing the ideas of conservative Russian state ideology, limit their fertility to 1–2 children? Based on interviews with 35 young women and their biographical stories, we reconstruct meaningful categories in which these women make sense of themselves as gendered subjects in narratives about employment, marriage, and experiences of social policy. We try to determine how everyday neoliberalism is combined with pronatalist traditionalism, and

how their common sense appropriation leads to limited family sizes, making the Russian state pronatalist policy fragile.

Based on the data analysis and by following studies of everyday gender ideology in a neoliberal capitalist context (Meuser, 2003; Utrata, 2015, p. 94), we develop the concept of "pragmatic individualism" as a type of everyday discourse shared by young middle-class women who seek to build a coherent interpretation of their lives among the conflicting demands of individualization and traditionalization. The discourse of pragmatic individualism is a type of gendered ideology, an everyday "folk knowledge." It allows women, on the one hand, to present themselves as independent and competent social actors who can overcome their vulnerability in the labor market and family (associated with precarity and low pay in the workplace and a high divorce rate in the family sphere); on the other hand, pragmatic individualism allows women to correspond to the ideal of "traditional" femininity, associated with external attractiveness and the ability to handle a "prosperous" family (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2010). We also claim that the discourse is class-rooted, as it explains how to convert available resources into class-based womanhood and motherhood.

The sociological conceptualization of reproductive choice allows us to present it as a decision based on a moral rationality—which we call pragmatic individualism—set by class notions of a decent way of life. Class rationality forces people to manage various resources (labor market, family capital, social support measures) and to focus on the high standards set by class position for a limited number of children.

Members of the Russian middle class are engaged in the signification and legitimation of their life project, placing it within a semantic framework of what is culturally acceptable and admissible. In our biographical interviews, the female respondents construct their narrative identity by normalizing their life stories and aligning them with cultural notions of "respectability" (Skeggs, 1997). The concept of respectability refers to class and group conventions regarding lifestyle and consumption. It is also based on individuals' moral judgments about each other's behavior (Paxson, 2004). By constructing their biographical project and discursively presenting it in interviews, the interviewed women are guided by notions inherent in their class morality. This discursive work is a way of producing subjectivities (Lawler, 2000).

Occupying a dominant position in Russian symbolic space, the middle class has hegemony in producing cultural norms, gender and family models, and professional biographies (Salmenniemi, 2012). Symbolic orders of gender and class are built on various systems of distinction, based, among other things, on the assessment of moral and ethical qualities, behavior, and lifestyle of individuals, which are labeled as decent and respectable in contrast to others that have less symbolic significance (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2010). Skeggs (1997) uses the concept of respectability to describe how British working-class women attempt to fit a British middle-class lifestyle when working-class women are depicted as lacking respectability in British society and media. In this sense, working-class women struggle for respectability in classed and gendered judgments and power issues. Russian middle-class women are situated in a different context. Being a part of the global middle class, they compare themselves with the cultural patterns and representations of the Western middle class. They are newcomers to the global post-colonial order where the struggle for respectability is conducted between different parts of the national middle class. Their position in social space is set by the double reference system where they want to distinguish themselves from the local working class and get respectability in the global dimension. They are involved in class dynamics which produce the symbolic order and moral judgments about what is decent and worthy (Bourdieu, 1996). In the global cultural and consumption space, women develop the discourse in pragmatic individualism to bring dissonant ideas together and think about their future.

In the following sections, we briefly present the theoretical discussion relevant to our study and address the issues of research methods, data collection, and analysis. We then describe the social composition of the Russian middle class and state pronatalist policy in the context of childbearing decisions. We present our empirical results by explaining how the everyday logic of pragmatic individualism plays in work, family, and women's perception of state policy, as it helps them to reconcile contradictory demands of pronatalism and pragmatism by rationalizing their limits on childbearing. In the conclusion, we engage in a discussion of how the pragmatic thinking of middle-class women contradicts the traditionalist political message and leads to fertility restriction.

2. Data and Method

The body of data was built with biographical interviews with 35 women. The criteria of respondent selection were age (under 35), children (no age criteria), marital status (married, divorced, with a partner), level of education (BA/MA/PhD), and work experience (all respondents had an experience of paid employment). The sample was built in two stages: First, we used our social networks to generate the snowball sample, then subsequent respondents were found through the snowball method. All women interviewed dwelled in St Petersburg at the time of the research.

The research design and guide for the interview were reviewed and approved by the ethical board of the St Petersburg Sociological Association in 2019. Data were collected in 2019–2020, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews were structured around life course issues with questions about marriage, childbirth decisions, work experience, and perception of social policy measures. The interviews were conducted in person

in the places chosen by the respondents (their homes, offices, or cafes) in a confidential and supportive atmosphere. The interviews lasted on average 1–1.5 hours, after which they were transcribed and anonymized.

To analyze biographical narratives, the method of thematic coding was used (Flick, 2006). Transcripts of the entire body of interview data were coded using the ATLAS.ti program. We relied on an inductive logic of data analysis. Based on the open coding procedure, the typical categories were identified to describe and interpret respondents' experiences regarding employment, family, and social policy. We reconstruct the reproductive choices, meaning we look at them not only as direct answers to the questions about their desired and planned number of children; because the discussions developed into complete biographical stories, we were also able to dissect the interwoven narratives about their different spheres of life, such as employment, marriage, and social support. The analytical interpretation of the meanings of the categories allowed us to understand them as a part of an overall everyday discourse, which we called the discourse of pragmatic individualism.

3. Russian Urban Educated Middle Class as Bearer of Cultural Norms

The category "middle class" was identified by the following criteria: education (university or higher vocational school) and employment (in such sectors as IT, management, education, medicine, banking, and design). The middle class numbers about 40% of the Russian population, but its composition is heterogeneous and depends on the stability of the economic situation in the country (Mareeva, 2021; Tikhonova et al., 2018). The Russian middle class is analyzed as a bearer of the lifestyle of the global middle class (Jouko & Tšernyšov, 2020; Salmenniemi, 2012). The concept of the global middle class refers to the newly emerged and globally-oriented segments of the middle classes in the recently economically modernized countries that maintain consumption standards typical to the Western middle class (Koo, 2016).

The Russian middle class used to be characterized by a nuclear family structure and relatively egalitarian gender relations (Chernova, 2012b). This wasn't accompanied by gender equality in employment, as the gender pay gap reached 24.8% in 2019 (Statista, 2022). Salary levels and tax policy stimulated double-career families. About 85% of women of fertile age were employed (Federal State Statistics Service, 2019). At the same time, the motherhood wage penalty was 11% in the period 2000–2015 (Karabchuk et al., 2021), with divorce occurring in up to 50% of marriages on average (Federal State Statistics Service, 2019). All these indicate that women are being pushed into the labor market with high risks to motherhood. The average total fertility rate in Russia in 2020 was 1.5 births per woman. This figure varies considerably from region to region. This indicator is lower in large cities and urbanized regions (e.g., in St Petersburg it was 1.4 in 2019; Federal State Statistics Service, 2019). Together with the well-developed educational, health care, and public services infrastructure, the low fertility rate indirectly testifies high rationalization and individualization involved in family planning in these centers of modernization and post-industrial economy (Tikhonova, 2010; Zubarevitch, 2019).

Our respondents are the first post-Soviet generation whose experience of growing up took place in the market economy, with rapid social change, increasing risk and instability, and social inequality (Radaev, 2019). This period was also a time in which the consumer society formed (Abramov & Zudina, 2012; Gladarev & Tsinman, 2007). Our respondents grew up in a situation where diversity of consumer choice was already the symbolic order (Djuk, 2003).

Post-Soviet transformations have affected the sphere of family and parenting both at the level of discourses and practice. Young women actively mastered the ideology of "responsible parenting," the Russian version of Western intensive parenting (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2011). "Responsible parenting" made childbirth and childrearing an extremely time- and money-consuming project and became a distinctive element of the middle-class lifestyle. It also justifies traditional female roles as mother and wife as necessary for a child's well-being (Shpakovskaya, 2015).

As representatives of the first post-Soviet generation, our respondents could rely on their parents' resources as private property, real estate, and bank savings became available. Therefore they didn't need to fight for survival but could devote themselves to pursuing their interests and preferences. All our research participants had paid employment experience, as do most women in Russia. Some respondents positioned themselves as career-oriented. They shared the neoliberal market ideology of effectiveness and self-development (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015). In the 2000s in Russia, the neoliberal ideology was produced not only by the market but also by the rapidly growing industry of psychological counseling and pop psychology (books and magazines on popular psychology; see Adamson & Salmenniemi, 2017; Lerner, 2011). Thus, the life projects of our respondents become rooted in the context of market, consumption, reflexivity, and individualization, which permeated all areas of their lives, from work to family and parenthood.

The early 2000s was characterized not only by the penetration of neoliberal market ideology but also by a growing political pronatalism and traditionalism. The traditionalist discourse first appeared in a document titled the *Russian National Security Concept* (Russian Federation, 2000) and was then developed by Vladimir Putin in his public speeches (see, e.g., Putin, 2006). The official statements framed Russia's declining population as threatening national security. The policy aimed at raising the birth rate through "protection of [the] family

as the fundamental basis of Russian society, preservation of traditional family values" ("The concept of state family," 2014). The pronatalist conservative agenda has been supported by the Russian Orthodox Church and also found support in local NGO initiatives (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2021). Conservative discourse was reflected in mass culture that produced images of male breadwinners, female "hearth-keepers," and happy families with many children (Nordenstreng et al., 2010).

Social policy measures have been focused primarily on female fertility (Chernova, 2012a; Rivkin-Fish, 2010). Women benefited from the paid six-month "decree" leave, after which they could use paid maternity leave for up to 1.5 years, which can be extended for another 1.5 years without payment, although their role in the workplace would be preserved. The amount of monthly allowance during paid maternity leave was 40% of the salary, but it must not exceed RUB 31,281 (EUR 422) in 2021. The average salary in 2021 comprised RUB 56,545 (EUR 603). Public clinics provided medical care, but citizens could use paid medical services in the private sector or purchase health insurance for private clinics (Shishkin et al., 2019). Thus the structure of the labor market and public support measures did not favor raising many children or having a one-career family (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2020). The middle class was compelled to reconcile the contradictory messages of gender ideologies, market, and social policy while pursuing their family and fertility projects.

4. Employment: Finding the Meanings of Instability in the Labor Market

In this section, we analyze the meanings of employment shared by the women in relation to their childbirth decisions. We show that pragmatic individualism in a situation of precarious employment and low job security makes middle-class women limit their fertility to minimize the risk of job loss and gain promotion opportunities. Our respondents aspired to well-paid middle-class positions, which were highly competitive, especially for young women. Struggling for "good workplaces," they faced overwork, excessive workloads, and stress. By the age of 30, women managed to move between three or four jobs, which meant that their length of work in one place was no more than two years. The average age of entering the job market for university graduates in Russia was 25 (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2020). At the time of the research, some had yet to find a permanent position or job they considered their main occupation. The transition from education to employment was a long, complex, and diffuse process (Cherednichenko, 2020). This diffusion was determined by the Russian labor market, which contains a large and diverse segment of project employment and temporary work (Gimpelson, 2019; Luk'ianova, 2017).

Sharing the discourse of pragmatic individualism, our respondents took advantage of such precarious employment, rationalizing it as an opportunity to receive practical competences. They also develop the pragmatic vision of such employment by giving it a meaning of a chance for "self-realization." They perceive changing jobs as a way to find interesting, "creative," and meaningful work. Respondents make sense of instability by explaining that they do not strive for a high income, as their work expectations are mostly related to "personal growth." The quotation below is an example of a story about entering a labor market in which moving between several professional fields, low wages, and semi-legal contracts are justified as they give an "opportunity to gain an experience'':

> I went to work as a purchasing manager….I was recommended by an acquaintance to this office, with no work experience, without anything, they took me on. I worked there for four years….I received a salary in an envelope, 12,000 rubles officially. But it was a very interesting job, and I'm madly grateful to the head of this firm, who helped me and made a good professional out of me. After four years, I realized that I didn't want to work in that field anymore. But I learned how to negotiate, and the overall experience was amazing. (Nina)

As mentioned by the respondent, semi-formal employment and pay are widespread and tolerated in small and medium-sized businesses in Russia (Gimpelson & Kapeliushnikov, 2015); indeed, in the interview, it is presented as something usual and fair.

The narratives about employment unfold alongside the stories about reproduction. Women who are planning childbirth share other types of narratives about the workplace. Permanent employment, legal contracts, and "white" salaries are reported as the most important. When choosing a job, they consider the type of enterprise; ideally, it should provide them with extra support during the maternity period and provide childcare as part of its corporate policy. In the quote below, the interviewee describes her job in a large international company as ideal in terms of medical insurance:

> I don't want to leave this place. We have a good premium insurance program; it covers the top clinics, it includes dentistry, we have massages. Next, we have very good maternity insurance, which is paid by the employer if you have worked for the company for more than two years. Then, in my case, for example, I've been on maternity leave, but I haven't worked for two years. But it was arranged for me by an agreement—I just asked—and I was told: "Of course, you are a person who has been with the company for a long time; we'll give you the insurance anyway.'' (Varvara)

Regarding maternity leave, the research participants are pragmatic and have a sound understanding of labor

law, being well aware of the statutory labor law guarantees and informal discrimination against mothers. Ksenia describes how she faced discrimination when she came back from maternity leave and how she was able to solve the problem by insisting on her employment rights:

> After two years of being on maternity leave, I called my boss and told her that I was ready to come back and had a very tough conversation. She said: "Why are you leaving now? You will ruin everything for us." Despite the fact that I was a very good employee, there were no complaints about me. I said: "Look, I have to work." [The boss] said: "We already have a temporary worker now." I did not trust her very much; I saw that she was cheating me for her benefit. And I then called and said that I would be out in a month. They couldn't do anything against me.

In general, employment is presented as insecure. Not all women have access to well-paid, stable jobs. Some make a conscious choice for precarious employment, justifying this choice by "professional development" and "interest." The pursuit of stable employment is a way of minimizing economic risk in the period of maternity leave. The discourse of pragmatic individualism turns the disadvantages of unstable employment into women's own preferences and rational decisions in favor of "self-development.'' Combining work and motherhood in a situation of precarious employment makes child rearing a risky project. Women limit their fertility and justify it as being due to self-fulfillment at work, but with little discussion of reasons related to working conditions and contracts. Pragmatic individualism gives the feeling of mastering one's career within an unstable job market.

5. Family; or How to Insure Against Marital Failure

Unlike employment, which is presented as unstable, the informants define family as more stable and controllable. Despite that, it turns out to be a sphere of uncertainty; rationalizing it and dealing with it leads to strict birth control. The respondents are aware of the high divorce rate and worry about possible marriage breakdowns, but if that were to happen, they believe they would be able to survive. Limiting childbirth is one way to cope with marriage instability. Narratives about marriage are largely similar in their content and structure. A typical marriage narrative is structured as follows: One gets to know and starts a relationship with a socially close partner; the relationship develops further, usually involving a period of living together, which is understood as a period of testing the relationship; the couple decides to get married with reproductive plans in mind; official registration of marriage (wedding) is followed by the birth of the first child. As quoted below, a marriage narrative is typically structured around the same set of biographical events:

> My husband is a couple of months older than me—we are the same age. We met at university a long time ago. We dated and got married in 2014….Because we love each other—there is no other way to put it. In 2016, Sasha was born. (Svetlana)

Young women present marriage as a project requiring planning and assessment of possible risks from a long-term perspective. The narratives about getting to know a partner and the further development of the relationship seem rather rationalized. There are no accounts of strong emotional feelings of love and passion; conflicts and serious disputes are not mentioned either. The respondents share an emotional culture (Illouz, 2007) type involving the management of emotions and the ability to adjust them to a meaningful context and situation. They demonstrate the skill of correct presentation of feelings by normalizing their love and marriage story according to the conventional cultural script of the middle-class bourgeois family. This script is built on the value of an individualized choice of partner, with the requirements of social proximity, the ability to share personal aspirations and interests, and having enough resources to provide a middle-class lifestyle.

In order to minimize possible risks of the marital project, the informants resort to the discourse of pragmatic individualism, which in the context of intimacy and family relations is most evident in handling such cross-cutting categories as to count on yourself," "safety airbag," and "self-development in marriage."

The category "to count on yourself" emerges in the context of the problematization of marital stability. Although middle-class women seek to build stable relationships, the stages of which are planned (marriage, having a child, acquiring joint property), they still assess the potential risks of marriage. Children tend to stay with their mothers after divorce, and the number of men who evade child support is extremely high. The logic of pragmatic individualism allows women to imagine themselves as actors capable of controlling their marriage:

> Only at my own expense [in case of divorce]. I, of course, can count on child support, but I do not like this option. I've read up different life stories on [a popular forum] that women believe that they owe, they owe the man, they owe someone else. Respectively, if women divorce, the man is forced to pay child support. I do not like this. I endorse that only I [will support myself in case of divorce]. (Nina)

The category "to count on yourself" implies the capability to use available resources to support personal well-being in marriage and that of one's children. In the quote below, a young woman (Irina) lists sources of material stability, which include her partner's income, parental support, owned dwelling, and respondent's own position in the labor market: "I feel secure enough because I have own apartment, have a profession, have parents who

are still in good shape, have a husband, only one child, not sick."

Irina takes into account not only revenue but also necessary expenses. In particular, she says that having only one child makes her feel financially secure, as it is not a burden on the family. In addition, she notes that her child is healthy ("not sick") and does not require expensive treatment, which means that she can work rather than care for the child. As regards parents "who are in good shape," this means that, on the one hand, Irina can count on their financial and childcare support when needed, but on the other, the parents themselves are healthy and don't need care or material support from her. The family is presented here as nuclear but extended by demand (Rotkirch, 2000), which was typical for the later soviet time. It is a system of support where material aid and care circulate from one generation to another when needed. Family expenditure is not driven by the logic of survival but by the logic of class distinction, as it is oriented toward maintaining access to high-quality private medical care (rather than the public health system) and family care for children under three (instead of institutional care).

Another category of the discourse of pragmatic individualism is the "safety airbag." A "safety airbag" is a personal savings fund made even by married women for a "rainy day." This money can be used in case of divorce, a family member's illness, or job loss. A "safety airbag" may also mean real estate and other property on which respondents can rely. The "safety airbag" is an insurance according to informants' individualized view of their vulnerable position in the marriage and labor markets. It is seen as a personal asset that is managed directly by women for their use in case of need. Knowledge about "safety airbags" functions as folk wisdom that women share. In the following quote, Larisa talks about her female boss, who gives her a piece of advice:

> She [the boss] said [to me]: "You need an airbag anyway." She said that the airbag helped her greatly during her divorce and when her mother was ill. She said that per person…roughly put, "you need 200,000 [rubles] per snout" [the equivalent of EUR 2,500]. Before the divorce, she came to the point where she had two hundred thousand for herself and her child, and with this money, she was able to move to Moscow, help her mother get cured, and find a job herself. She is a very wise person.

"Self-development" is another axial category of women's talk about marriage (in one or another form in all interviews). Marriage, while giving life stability, can deprive women of "their own" and "self-development," leading to "personal degradation." According to one informant, full commitment to marriage and children can reduce women's competitiveness in both the labor and marriage markets (in case of divorce):

> There are lots of women now: They have children, they stand behind their husbands, and think that this will always be the case, they don't develop in any way. They, roughly speaking, put themselves on the altar of [the] family. Their husband may look to his right, to his left, and he no longer needs his wife. And who needs a wife who hasn't worked for 15 years? Children don't need her either because she's already raised them. It appears to me that in 10–15 years, we will come to a crazy division between women. There will be one part of successful, self-fulfilled, developing women, and the other part will be, let's call them, "dumped" [*broshenki*], who aren't wanted, and they will be with a wild feeling of self-dissatisfaction and depression. (Raisa)

"Self-development" in marriage refers to acquiring new knowledge in the fields of privacy, hobbies, beauty, and body shape. These may include learning foreign languages, culinary skills, interior and landscape design, acting, or yoga. Self-development may also deepen parent–child relationships and relations with partners through active mastery of popular psychology and the use of psychotherapists and family counselors. Motherhood in this context is a controversial project, which on the one hand, allows the development of parental skills and, in this way, female maturity, but on the other, having many children may hinder female attractiveness and personal skills.

Thus, the discourse of pragmatic individualism helps women cope with marital instability and economic vulnerability caused by dependence on their partner's income. The "concept of self" developed by the respondents falls into a logic of neoliberal ideology of self-efficacy and independence. This logic makes women rationally plan childbirth, limiting their family size to one or two children. Women are aware of the risk of divorce (despite believing it will not happen to them) and know they might end up being the sole breadwinner and care provider for their children. Pragmatic logic is combined with traditionalist thinking. All our respondents believed that marriage was an indispensable element in a woman's life. They also considered having children to be necessary for them. For most, motherhood was more important than a successful career. Women saw the ideal of family life as a lifelong heterosexual marriage with a breadwinner husband, with the wife responsible for childcare, housekeeping, and self-grooming to maintain the spouse's interest. Family as an extended by demand system, in their narratives, is a core category for talking about themselves and presenting themselves in the interview situation as a socially competent, fulfilled woman.

6. "Who Does Feel Socially Secure Nowadays?": Attitudes Towards Public Support

Whereas in the narratives about the labor market and marriage, respondents present themselves as independent actors able to manage potential risks, resorting to

public assistance places them in symbolic relations of need, dependency, and disadvantage. Young women's perception of social policy is ambivalent since they share the concept of public aid as primarily about helping the poor and, at the same time, pragmatically want to take advantage of all benefits available to them. The unevenness in attitudes towards state support is expressed, on the one hand, in articulating the fact that respondents do not count on the state and do not see it as a source of welfare and decommodification (Esping-Andersen, 1990); on the other hand, they strive to use all social rights regardless economic or family status. They resolve this contradiction through a discourse of pragmatic individualism.

Respondents mention the support they receive: maternity leave, parental leave, one-off childbirth payment, allowance, and benefits for low-income families. They also use public child daycare services. By constructing a discursive presentation of themselves as successful and independent, young women demonstrate their social competence and agency in relation to public support and the state. Although most benefits are universal, they are provided by request and are subject to certain conditions. Social competence in dealing with the state is a class-specific cultural capital that provides respondents with the skills to find necessary information about benefits and application procedures. Women can understand all the complex and confusing bureaucratic rules, fill in all papers and electronic forms, and ensure all benefits have been paid. In the quote below, Anna demonstrates her social competence:

> I found out right away what I was entitled to when I got pregnant: I got registered at a maternity clinic at the very early pregnancy stage. There was a small payment for that. Of course, it doesn't make any difference, but it's still nice to get something. Then I calculated with our accountant what maternity benefits I'm entitled to and then strictly made sure that I was paid, all that was due, a one-time payment at birth too, and I got a baby card.

Even if the amount of material support is not a meaningful contribution to the family budget, the informants strive to receive as much as possible, as this demonstrates their ability to "get on in life." This skill implies social dexterity to combine and maximize different types of income, benefits, and allowances, which is also complemented by their consumer competence and the ability to "spend money wisely." In this logic, they interpret entitlement to social support as a nice bonus or something that "drops" into their personal account, which they receive in addition to their family income. It is precisely because of this logic that informants do not see the state benefits they receive for low-income families or families with many children as symbolically threatening their concept of self as respectable middle-class women. The quotation below is an example of such social dexterity, when a "good salary" does not discourage claiming an allowance for low-income families. Elena leads a middle-class life and shares the appropriate standards of consumption. However, she finds a way to get a low-income allowance because her husband works semi-legally. Elena came to the low-income benefit in a period of unpaid maternity leave:

> Up until a year and a half, everything was fine. Because I had a good salary, and so I had maximum pay for the whole period. That's a pretty decent amount. And then the monthly payments were also maximum—which was also a decent amount. Plus, I got four thousand a month from the state, which dropped on my child card. Then I applied for a supplementary allowance for low-income families. My husband had a very low official salary, and we fell into the low-income family section.

The situation Elena describes is widespread and is set by the semi-legal structure of the Russian labor market (Gimpelson, 2019), as well as by the rules of applying for state benefits. Manipulations with declared income are quite common and morally acceptable practices in the context of the low level of trust in the state (Rotkirch et al., 2007). Discursively presenting their social respectability, women do not consider state assistance a source of economic stability and social security. Like the market and marriage, social policy seems an unstable source of well-being since the rules and forms of state support are constantly changing, and the social policy programs often have a limited duration. In the following quote, Lidia describes her attitude towards public support as "skeptical," as it does not cover the costs of maintaining middle-class living standards:

> I'm very skeptical about our state. I laugh when I hear the news that somebody's salary [in the public sector] has been raised by 200% when the equivalent in money is 50 roubles. Or that the indexation of pensions was enormous, and in rubles, it was three rubles. The benefit level is really the money that is equal to my rent payments. What is there to live on after that? It's not clear. This isn't social security.

Sharing the discourse of pragmatic individualism, in a situation where the main sources of well-being (market, marriage, state) are causes of risk, women present themselves as independent, able to use all available resources, and maximize their income. The credo of pragmatic individualism can be summed up in Varvara's words: "You have to count on yourself. Rely on others, but don't be fooled.''

Nadia illustrates the everyday logic of pragmatic individualism as a regulator of fertility:

> The ideal family, I believe, is with a husband, wife, and children, the more the better; they live in a house

> or a separate apartment, but quite large. Each child has their own room….But realistically, we can't afford more than two children; it's a big burden. A family must allow the spouse's personal development. I want to have an opportunity to read a book and meet friends, and no one cancels the money issue.

Russian state pursues a pronatalist policy by offering various benefits related to childbirth and develops conservative rhetoric of family as a natural woman's destiny. Despite this, women do not consider all those measures in terms of their reproductive plans. On the one hand, this is because benefits are insufficient to maintain the consumer standards of middle-class parenthood; on the other hand, it is due to their pragmatic perception of themselves as independent. We agree with the observation that the mother–child bond is an elementary form of family in Russia (Utrata, 2015). Women limit their childbearing by considering their own ability to raise their children according to middle-class standards in case of job loss, divorce, or termination of benefits. They diversify their resources and pragmatically do not put all eggs in one basket, thus demonstrating their social competence and "female wisdom."

7. Conclusion

Young women are involved in the discursive class production, orienting on the global consumer middle-class culture. They remain in a relatively privileged position in terms of available resources. The discourse of pragmatic individualism sets the logic of respectability and limits childbearing according to class-based rationality.

Pragmatic individualism allows young women to develop their concept of self as having enough knowledge and resources to prevent a decline in their socioeconomic status and to avoid symbolic exclusion from respectability. In the labor market, it enables them to reinterpret the barriers to obtaining stable employment positively, and it allows them to justify the precariousness of their positions. In the sphere of the family, it allows them to cope with marriage instability. Concerning public support, pragmatic individualism offers practical strategies when the measures are not consistent with the actual costs of a middle-class lifestyle.

Traditionalist discourse manifests itself on the periphery of respondents' stories and emerges predominantly when they talk about the ideal family, marriage, and gender division of roles in households. Traditionalist discourse gives women a tough choice between motherhood and employment; when forced to withdraw from the labor market for three to six years, they can potentially lose their competitiveness or even their job. In other words, their position in the labor market is vulnerable and unstable. The state support of women with children does not compensate for the drop in the standard of living due to the birth of a second and subsequent child. Women limit the number of their children to one or two to not fall out of the market for a prolonged period. Pragmatic individualism is a type of "folk" knowledge that women share with each other. This knowledge helps them perceive the biopolitical initiatives of the state critically, use it in their own interest, and direct the benefits received not to raise more children but to invest in class-differentiated lifestyle and care.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

When Family Policy Doesn't Work: Motives and Welfare Attitudes Among Childfree Persons in Poland

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Abstract
The primary goal of this article was to analyse the welfare attitudes of people self-declaring as childless by choice alongside the exploration of their social experience as childfree persons in the context of a rapid increase in the generosity of pro-natalist public policies in Poland. The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 19 respondents recruited via Facebook network groups. Thematic analysis was applied identifying six general themes: "satisfied and never had the need"; "dealing with social pressure"; "family measures—yes, but not this way"; "unfair treatment of the childfree"; "towards welfare state for all"; and "change my mind? Never, even if offered one million dollars." The research demonstrated that childfree persons present favourable views on state support for families with children. While critical of cash-based family support, respondents have a clear preference for investing in services enabling women to participate in the labour market. Finally, if public policies aimed at removing barriers to parenthood were strengthened, this would not change the respondents' minds about procreation.

Keywords
childfree; childless by choice; childlessness; family policy; Poland; voluntary childlessness; welfare attitudes

Issue
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1. Introduction

Studies on population ageing often identify policy measures to increase fertility (McDonald, 2002). A common feature of these studies is the assumption that various family support programmes are incentives to have (more) children. The barriers to parenthood, according to the literature, are mostly limited to a couple's financial capacity, the gender balance concerning unpaid domestic work, or infertility (Brewster & Rinfuss, 2000; Kotowska et al., 2008). Despite heavy investment in family policies, the share of the childless population continues to increase (Sobotka, 2017), where more and more persons are opting for *voluntary* childlessness (Avison & Furnham, 2015).

Existing research focuses on the pathways to the deliberate decision about (remaining) childless and the motivations and personal traits of voluntary childless persons (Fiori et al., 2017; Hagestad & Call, 2007). While the studies above focus on the impact of family policy measures on fertility, employment, or distribution of paid and unpaid work between the parents, the attitudes of voluntary childless populations towards welfare policies remain unexplored. Studying a voluntary childless population could be important for at least two reasons. Firstly, identifying the reasons and motivations behind voluntarily choosing to be childless, which is seriously understudied so far, brings to light a growing population group and their identity as a minority group, often with distinct needs and social roles. Secondly, and more specifically,

a discussion of the needs and attitudes towards family policy measures among the childfree population would focus on this societal group as constituencies, i.e., voters and taxpayers. This is especially interesting in light of the approach of treating children as a public good, generating the obligation to contribute to the cost of raising children among non-parents. The analysis of the Polish case takes into account the specific context of a considerable increase in family policy measures that took place during the right-wing populist party Law and Justice's (PiS—Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) two consecutive terms in office (2015–2019 and 2019–present), including heavy investment in family benefits (in cash).

The study intends to explore the attitudes of voluntary childless persons in Poland towards welfare policies, and their experiences and motivations for staying childless. The analysis was conducted based on interviews with 19 persons who declared that they do not have and do not plan to have children, defined as voluntary childless or childfree persons. Due to avoiding defining the persons that deliberately resign from parenthood with the prefix "less," the term "childfree" became popular (Harrington, 2019; Helm et al., 2021; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008). In this article, the terms "voluntary childless(ness)" and "childfree (persons)" will be used interchangeably.

The article is structured as follows: It begins with a review of existing literature and theoretical background, followed by methodological remarks. Secondly, the Polish context will be briefly discussed. Then an analysis according to the themes identified will be presented and the article concludes with a discussion of the results and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature Review on Voluntary Childless: Motives and Policy Context

2.1. Voluntary Childless/Childfree: Defining the Group

Childlessness (irrespective of whether voluntary or involuntary) has usually been analysed in the context of population ageing. Policymakers and experts identify various processes, including delaying the first child's birth and an increase in definite childlessness (OECD, 2011; Sobotka, 2017). Historically, the trend toward childlessness in Europe was characterised as a U-shaped pattern among women born between 1900 and 1972, with the lowest levels among the 1940s cohorts (Sobotka, 2017). Currently, various estimates set the share of childless persons at the level of 10% of the whole population, although the trend toward an increase of definite childlessness is not universal, with the lowest levels of childlessness among the East European countries (below 10%) and highest among such countries, as Germany, Italy, Ireland, or Finland, where around every fifth woman born in 1968 remained childless (Sobotka, 2017). Further, differentiating between voluntary and involuntary childlessness is a challenge in itself, and the scale of voluntary childlessness tends to be underestimated (Berrington, 2017), especially when it comes to projected childlessness of cohorts younger than those born in the late 1960s/early 1970s. A recent Pew Research Center survey revealed that 44% of non-parents from the age of 18 to 49 declared that it was not too or not at all likely that they will have children someday, an increase of seven percentage points as compared to 37% who said the same in 2018 (Brown, 2021). Among this group, 56% say they "just don't want to have children," while for 44% the three main reasons declared were: medical reasons (19% within the group), financial reasons (17%), no partner (15%), age (10%), state of the world (9%), climate change (5%), and partner not wanting kids (2%; Brown, 2021). Therefore, there are indications that the group is growing in size.

How to differentiate between involuntary and voluntary childlessness? For example, Szalma and Takács (2018) applied the criterion of "no health problems," which is a wide understanding of voluntary childlessness. Among the reasons for childlessness, the literature points to such circumstances as the inability to find a suitable partner (Berrington, 2017; Szalma, 2021; Waren & Pals, 2013) or orientation toward professional work (Hakim, 2003). Kelly (2010 p. 158) defines voluntary childless women as "women of childbearing age who are fertile and state that they do not intend to have children, women of childbearing age who have chosen sterilization, or women past childbearing age who were fertile but chose not to have children." The same author proposes to differentiate between childless "by choice" and "by circumstance," where the latter category would include persons physically able to procreate but choosing not to due to specific circumstances. This would include not being able to find a partner, fear about unequal division of caring responsibilities, difficult material conditions, or professional status often resulting in the person remaining in a transitional phase between postponing, delaying, and a definite (voluntary) childlessness (Kelly, 2010). In this context, researchers also propose to interpret the categories as fluid and processual when referring to "remaining childless" or "becoming childless" (Szalma & Takács, 2015), with another interesting category, i.e., "postponers." Apart from delaying the decision about having children caused by various circumstances, postponing can also be a strategy to cope with the "internalised pressure about the 'parenting directive' " (Szalma & Takács, 2018, p. 317). In Hungary, among those that declared themselves as postponers in 2001, only 22% went into parenthood seven years later, although this was twice as many as compared to those who declared themselves as voluntarily childless in the first point in time (11%; Szalma & Takács, 2018). Although the postponers remained in the category (and did not transfer to definite, voluntary childlessness), such results may signal stability of fertility decisions, also among the childfree. A study on childfree persons in Italy showed that an increasing number of women not planning motherhood

declared that the most important reason for their decision is that they would like to spend more time with their partners and that they place much importance on the quality of their relationship (Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008). Qualitative studies about childfree persons in Poland seem to characterise the group as being quite stable in terms of the interpretation of their own status and future plans regarding parenthood. In research conducted with childfree couples, it was found that the decision to remain childfree was often made at a very early stage of partnership (Tomaszewska, 2017).

Research on childlessness in Poland mostly focuses on a general group of childless persons, usually aiming at identifying the reasons behind non-parenthood (Anna Baranowska-Rataj & Anna Matysiak, 2012), pathways to definite childlessness (Mynarska et al., 2015; Mynarska & Rytel, 2020), the decision to remain childfree regardless of circumstances. Especially in the early 2000s, when Poland went through a period of high unemployment, childlessness was strongly connected to the possibility of continuing employment and having a stable professional career, especially among women (Slany, 2008). Also, according to Mynarska et al. (2015), the insecure labour market position was one of the key factors leading to childlessness. Mynarska and Styrc (2014) emphasised material conditions as the most important determinants of the decision to have children. Hence, Poland may be characterised by a high relevance of a secure working situation and its impact on the decision to remain childfree or the perception of such by the experts and policymakers.

This could also be viewed in light of the specificity of Central and Eastern Europe, due to relatively low levels of definite childlessness (as mentioned) and a stronger commitment to the parenthood norm (Szalma & Takács, 2018). A comparison of self-perceived social reception of childless women in Lithuania and Poland demonstrated the existence of social pressure to have children coming even from the nearest environment these women were functioning in (Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė et al., 2020). While pointing to insecurities linked to economic status, Hašková (2011) suggested that although work-related issues are important, childlessness in the Czech Republic has also been the effect of a shift in values, an increase in individualisation and more emphasis on personal development.

While this study does not have the ambition to redefine voluntary childlessness, it is taking an approach based on the self-reported intentions of the respondents and their self-definition as childfree, regardless of circumstances. The abovementioned Pew Research Centre's methodology is also useful for defining voluntary childlessness, i.e., a situation where a respondent declares that they "just don't want to have children" regardless of age, material conditions, "state of the world," or when the partner does not want to have children.

2.2. Welfare Attitudes

Childfree persons are welfare policy recipients, taxpayers, and voters who make choices in support of a certain combination of public policies reflected in the political party programmes. Research on support for welfare policies "tells us something about whether or not existing social arrangements are legitimate" (Svallfors, 2012, p. 2). On one hand, self-interest is one of the most important predictors of support for concrete policy measures (Busemeyer & Garritzmann, 2017a; Goerres & Tepe, 2010). In the case of work-life balance policies, parents or potential parents are mostly interested in enacting a generous version of these policies. On the other hand, the support of just one societal group would not guarantee the enaction of policies in the context of democratic governance. Hence, as a system of organising and governing redistribution, the welfare state requires political support from various groups of population who would support welfare policy programs beyond their immediate self-interest (Svallfors, 2012). Other possible factors influencing welfare attitudes include family socialisation/culture, gender attitudes, political ideology, and family involvement (Goerres & Tepe, 2010). Welfare attitudes are most often surveyed among the general population (Busemeyer & Garritzmann, 2017b), but sometimes particular social groups are under research due to the nature of budgetary trade-offs often linked to social cleavages that arise in the process of competing over welfare funding. Especially in the context of an ageing society, the existing research tends to focus on intergenerational tensions and the trade-off between investment in children and the need to finance social security systems for elderly citizens, which poses a challenge in the conditions of a shirking tax base (Gál et al., 2018). Therefore, although elderly persons are not the target of family policies, researchers are interested in attitudes towards these policies among the group and also in the light of their participation in the process of political representation (Gál et al., 2018).

Childless persons are another group whose welfare attitudes should be interesting for the above-stated reasons linked to welfare state legitimacy, as well as budgetary trade-offs and welfare governance model; however, so far, they have not received scholarly attention. Even though (voluntary) childless persons represent only a fraction of society, their views should be treated as a representation of a minority and their interests and opinions should be studied, just like in the case of other smaller societal groups, such as people with disabilities, representatives of sexual and gender minorities and migrants.

2.3. Child as a Public Good

One of the arguments originally coming from the literature on family economics is that children, as future citizens, should be treated as "public goods" because they

produce positive externalities for non-parents (Folbre, 1996). As children are the future workforce and taxpayers, this creates an obligation for non-parents to share the costs of raising children, otherwise benefiting from the children's activities means that non-parents are free-riding on parents (Olsaretti, 2013). Contemporary welfare state literature also refers to the concept, emphasising that in the conditions of population ageing and shrinking of the tax base, falling fertility rates mean that children are "ever-scarcer public goods" (Gál et al., 2018, p. 944). Hence, children are treated as public goods because of their future contribution to the workforce, as well as to financing the welfare state.

There are certain consequences of this argument. Firstly, it justifies the redistribution (at the level of the welfare state) from childless persons to families with children to spread the costs of raising children more equally, including time spent on child raising and lost opportunity costs for parents. Redistribution from non-parents to parents (among others) has been quite common in European welfare states investing in education. Policies such as childcare services, paid parental leave or free healthcare (at least) for children are financed from general taxation or social insurance systems. However, little is known about the attitudes of non-parents towards these policies. Considering the aforementioned understanding of the welfare state as stemming from a democratic rather than a purely technocratic process, the possibly increasing group of childfree persons and the acceptance of their choice may potentially intensify the scale of contestation of (some) welfare policies. Alternatively, childfree persons may have pro-redistribution attitudes and would like to compensate the parents for care work and raising children as long as they (non-parents) do not have to do it themselves, therefore agreeing to a specific division of labour and costs between parents and non-parents. Finally, childfree persons may have preferences in relation to what kind of policies they support or do not, and which policies they will reject.

As argued by Olsaretti (2013), the argument in favour of sharing the costs of raising children by non-parents holds in the conditions, "when benefits of children are socialised" (p. 254) and when "a cooperative scheme is in place" (p. 255), meaning an institutionalised welfare state with its system of redistribution which guarantees that parents get compensated for raising children, but also that children receive access to various services that help them acquire skills and competencies to participate in society in the future.

This may mean that there is some balance between obligations on the side of non-parents to contribute and the benefits they are receiving (collectively) as members of society. However, their willingness to accept these obligations may be shaken when there are new claims that they perceive as excessive. Literature that would confirm this claim was not found, however, I would include here policy measures that are directly penalising childfree persons (or, in fact, the whole childless population), for their choice, such as additional and targeted taxes or pension contributions.

2.4. Policies Aiming at Mobilising Childfree People Into Parenthood

Another reason to conduct research on childfree people's welfare attitudes is that even if they declare their preference of not having children, they are still the target of public policies and discourses. This is especially visible when it comes to countries where the political scene is dominated by right-wing populist parties. Concerns over demographic decline have driven policy discourses in Hungary (Szikra, 2014), where leading politicians directly target their pro-natalist discourse toward the childless. As suggested by a leading Hungarian politician, László Kövér, childless people are "not normal" and "stand on the side of death" while "having children is a public matter, not a private one" (Hopkins, 2019). Research on childfree persons in the macro context often focuses on the reception of their choice not to procreate. Childfree women are often viewed as "unproductive," "selfish," or even "immoral" (Ashburn-Nardo, 2016). While for a liberal public or policymakers, such decisions are not linked (or are, at least, less related) to any moral judgement and are mostly perceived as personal choices (that might be influenced through policy), such voluntary childless choices could lead to stigmatisation and penalising the voluntary childless in more conservative policy settings (Harrington, 2019).

Finally, childfree persons may have their own claims over the shape of family policies, also in the context of how work-life balance policies have universally been perceived as policies for working parents (Szelewa, in press). There may be childfree persons prioritising professional work but still needing work-life balance policies. Others will place little emphasis on their professional lives but, at the same time, remain childfree. It is as if the tension between work and private life cannot exist for the voluntarily childless. However, they experience similar conflicts, often intensified by poor work organisation within companies offering few or no family-friendly policies, where childfree persons are additionally burdened in order to compensate for ad-hoc concessions made for employees with children (Bullock, 2019).

3. The Polish Context

After 1989, the main demographic trend in Poland was a decline in fertility: Throughout the 1990s, the total fertility rate dropped from 1.99 in 1991 to 1.3 in 1999, as per data from the Polish Statistical Office. Despite the trend continuing for almost two decades, policy measures favouring support in cash and through the new paid parental leave schemes have been improved only during the recent decade (Kurowska, 2019). The most significant programme was introduced by the PiS-led government in 2016 (amended in 2019), which gives the right to a

monthly benefit of 500 PLN (around 110 EUR) per month to each child until the age of 18. The program is unprecedented and remains the second biggest social spending item in the public budget after spending on pensions. Other changes included a system of discounts for big families, increased tax credits, non-returnable loans as a means to increase access to affordable housing for families with children, etc. Consequently, spending on family policies in Poland increased from 1.5% of the GDP in 2015 to over 2.6% in 2018 (OECD, 2021).

In addition, even though the abortion law was already strict in Poland, it was further limited in 2020, when the possibility to terminate pregnancy in the case of foetus malformation was banned. Altogether, the pronatalist discourse and familistic policies represent specific circumstances. Especially those who declare themselves childfree may feel under pressure as they are targeted by policymakers aiming to mobilise this group to change their decision discursively by shaming their childfree lifestyle and repeatedly presenting policy proposals explicitly penalising childlessness.

Just as in Hungary, conservative discourses and arguments about the selfishness of childfree lifestyles in Poland are strongly gendered, with women often blamed for low fertility, and therefore penalised, or at least incentivised to procreate. Faced with demographic pressures, right-wing (populist) parties may also propose simple solutions, e.g., penalising the voluntarily childless. Conservative think-tanks have discussed an alimony-based pension system where (working-age) children's contributions would directly finance their parents' pensions, or where the number of children would determine the level of one's future pension (Czarny & Kostrzewa, 2013). Recently, the Deputy Minister of Family in Poland suggested the need to reform the pension system in Poland so that the level of benefit would reflect the number of children a given pensioner has ("Emerytalna rewolucja," 2022).

The government's demographic strategy reflects the major concern over fertility pointing to cultural shifts and a decline of the family-centred values, i.e., an increase in the "individualisation popularization of a consumptive lifestyle, reduction of the impact of community, religious and altruistic value" (Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej, 2021, p. 55). Postponing the decision to have children is primarily interpreted within this bigger context of cultural changes as causing "permanent obligations, shallow relations and a tendency to leave 'open options' in social life" (p. 55). Another important factor contributing to resignation from parenthood, in the government's interpretation, is (women's) engagement in paid work and a long period of education that coincides with "the best biological time for procreation'' (p. 48).

It should also be mentioned that due to restrictive policies with regards to same-sex partnerships, marriages and parenthood rights of the LGBTQ+ population, the group may often fall into the category of involuntary childless, as their procreation preferences may conflict with the legal system not recognising children born to same-sex parents.

4. Research Questions and Methodology

Although the study does not intend to explore all of the issues discussed above, the following research questions were inspired both by the literature on the motives for remaining childfree and the (scarce) studies focussing on voluntary childless persons' attitudes towards public policies in support of parenthood: What are the motives behind the decision about remaining childfree? What are the experiences of voluntary childlessness in family and social contexts? What are the most and the least favoured policies supporting the family among the childless by choice? Would they respond to policy changes by opting for parenthood?

4.1. Recruitment and Sampling

The study has an exploratory character and is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with 19 childfree persons recruited via social media networks. Recruiting via social media for qualitative research has been recognised as a helpful tool to approach populations that are difficult to reach (Sikkens et al., 2017). Childfree persons may be included in this group due to the potential stigma and moral outrage against the voluntary childless (Peterson, 2015), making them difficult to be identified. For example, while it is relatively easy to find big family organisations or parent organisations, childfree groups do not appear as organised communities, therefore matching the criteria of populations that are increasingly recruited via social network sites (Jones et al., 2021). Participants were recruited via two closed Facebook groups in Poland via an advert offering cinema vouchers: *Bezdzietnik.pl* ("childfreedom") and *Childless by Choice*. The response form included a screening question: Do you consider yourself a person that is currently childless by choice and does not plan or intend to have children in the future?

The response needed to be positive to be considered. The group of 19 recruited interviewees included 15 female, two male, and two non-binary respondents, aged 18–24 (1), 25–34 (8), 35–44 (5), and 45–60 (5), living in big cities (10), medium-sized cities (4), small towns (1), and in the countryside (2), and all partnered apart from three respondents. Although the question about education level was not included in the survey and the informants were not explicitly asked about it during the interviews, throughout the interview, it became clear that at least 15 persons completed university studies. The characteristics of the sample confirmed previous research on the socio-economic profile of childfree persons. As compared to the general population, childfree tend to be more often employed full-time (Avison & Furnham, 2015), more likely to have a college education, higher income, and live in urban areas (Waren & Pals, 2013).

4.2. Data Collection

The interview questionnaire was divided into two parts corresponding to the main research questions covering (a) the motives behind the decision and (b) questions related to the policies. The informants were encouraged to come up with their own motives in the first part, while in the second, the researcher provided a brief introduction to welfare support for the families with the request for an opinion. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted via zoom or Messenger and recorded; each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes.

At the beginning of the interview, the interviewer's approach was to openly reveal their positionality as a childfree researcher, in line with what Reich (2021, p. 575) argues about how "knowledge and experience are situated, co-constructed and historically and socially located." Revealing the researcher's identity may mistakenly assume common cultural understandings, while the effect of social desirability may bias the interviewees' responses (LaSala, 2003). However, these potential limitations are offset by the advantages stemming from the researcher's (communicated) status as an insider, such as better access to respondents, the interviewees' increased willingness to share as they feel safe and not judged for their minority status, i.e., the "ability to communicate the expressions, sentiments and goals of the group" (LaSala, 2003, p. 18). At the same time, maximising the benefits of the insider requires an active strategy of minimising bias, such as presenting various standpoints and previous research results, debriefing and ensuring joint understanding and asking similar questions in different ways throughout the interview. In this, the interview itself followed the style of reflexive interviewing that facilitates joint understanding of the respondent's perspectives and experiences through such techniques as sharing and reflecting on the understanding of the interviewees' opinions, explaining the background and context for the questions asked and making sure that the message conveyed is not one-sidedly interpreted by the researcher. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

4.3. Data Analysis

All the 19 interview transcriptions were analysed using Atlas.ti software. Several rounds of coding and recoding were applied to systematise the qualitative material. A thematic analysis approach was applied for data analysis and the researcher followed the six steps recommended by Nowell et al. (2017), including generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming them. The most general codes were applied to grasp the reasons for remaining childfree, and the positive versus negative opinions versus family policies. Within these general codes, a more inductive approach was applied to grasp the repeated phrases and statements—one example can be the repeated phrase "I never felt the need to have children," interpreted as a motive independent of circumstances.

For the reasons of space, only the most outstanding results are present, i.e., whenever the coding process helped identify prevailing themes and interpretations that received a considerate level of saturation. Altogether, six general themes were identified. The respondents' names were replaced by randomly chosen names, while the information about their age was given in brackets.

5. The Analysis

5.1. Satisfied and Never Felt the Need to Have Children

When it comes to the motives behind childlessness by choice, almost all respondents emphasised that they never felt the need to have children and that their reasons are independent of various factors. Especially female respondents stressed that although they felt they were expected to express friendly and warm behaviour towards (especially) small children, they never had any maternal feelings when surrounded by children. The lack of any particular reason for being childfree sometimes causes problems when it comes to communicating the decision to family and friends. As stated by one female interviewee:

> I do not like the fact that I even need to justify the decision—it is what it is, I will not be searching for the reasons for it. Why don't you ask people whether they regret not becoming an astronaut, but they still ask you why you don't want to be a mother. And I just don't know why. (Hanna, 33)

It does not mean that the respondents were not referring to other reasons and motives, often pointing out how these other circumstances contribute to their confidence. Respondents were also satisfied with their current life and did not want to change anything. This was often connected with the possibility of living a flexible life, having more time for either socially engaged activities or leisure or having a hobby. Partnered informants often justified satisfaction with the current life situation with high relationship quality. Several of them were proud of their long-term marriage/partnerships and brought the longevity of their relationship as another factor strengthening their decision not to have children, which also cements their relationship. One interviewee specifically mentioned that until she met her current husband, she still planned to have children with her previous partners:

> I felt that perhaps I wanted to have children with the previous partners because I wanted to compensate for the lack of affection and love. But with my husband, I understood that I do not need to (have children) because I have the love of my husband. (Alicja, 34)

Many declared having pets, contrasting the inherent need to have pets, and taking care of them with the lack of any desire to have kids. One interviewee, specifically, demanded that childfree persons together with their partners (married or unmarried) and pets should also be recognised as "family" (Agnieszka, 47).

Even when stressing that they "just do not feel the need" to have children, the informants emphasised their decision as considerate and deliberate, contrasting it with many parents deciding to have children as a default option, pressured by society. Several interviewees demonstrated their awareness of the literature and social media networks of parents who regret their decision to have children, pointing to such groups as the Facebook page *I Regret Having Children* or Orna Donath's book *Regretting Motherhood* (Donath, 2017), which was also translated to Polish. Childfree persons noted that some parents decided to have children due to social pressure despite doubts or insecurities. This is, according to interviewees, also reinforced by the fact that society and media hide the difficult side of parenthood. As argued by Anna (37):

> I think it's terrible that so many people are just unaware of what such true parenting looks like because social media…and friends' stories show only the good side of parenting.

One respondent added that, according to her, many parents are frustrated, because the childfree persons "are triggering something [the frustration] in them, because they [the childfree] did not have the courage not to follow the social pressure" (Paulina, 45).

The reasons other than "just not wanting to have children" were often brought up in addition to those mentioned above, and only after the researcher listed some hypothetical reasons while waiting for the interviewee's reaction. Among those that the informants mentioned were the climate crisis and the uncertain future. They expressed concerns about scarce resources and the responsibility of "bringing one more human into this world" (Adam, 25; Renata, 38) or argued they are "not contributing with yet another human that needs to be fed and clothed" (Ariel, 23). Although not exclusively, these were mostly the youngest respondents.

5.2. Dealing With Social Pressure

Most respondents declared they experienced social and family pressure to have children. Usually, this came in the form of repeated questions from the family and relatives about the plans to have children arguing that the childfree relatives "will change their mind." Simultaneously, the parents of childfree persons often expressed regret that they will not experience being grandparents. Sometimes, the pressure was smaller in the case of those respondents who had siblings with children. Especially the comments about the possible shift in the decision were perceived as intrusive, and the interviewees often said they felt treated like children, not like adults.

Some of them felt different or even suffered from not being accepted by their peers and society, in general. One respondent, also describing herself as a highly sensitive person, admitted: "I felt that I am so different that something is wrong with me" (Barbara, 34). At the same time, the interviewees stressed that social media networks and the literature by childfree public figures about a childfree lifestyle appear to have contributed to the social acceptance of their standpoint on having no children. A female interviewee commented on her reaction to one of the books promoting a childfree lifestyle: "I finally understood that I do not need to be a mother and that no one has the right to change it" (Iwona, 32).

A couple of respondents mentioned having some bad experiences during their visits to see a gynaecologist, especially when the latter was advising that pregnancy and childbirth will solve female health issues and suggesting that the patient will change their decision in the future, and therefore should not delay. Again, especially younger interviewees were denied their agency. Kamila (26) experienced this several times:

> This is the case with older [male] doctors. They are comfortable sharing supposedly funny [sexist] but possibly harmful remarks. I was addressed as a "little girl." (Kamila, 26)

The childfree persons also experienced social pressure more generally when portrayed as "selfish." Some respondents expressed their frustration about being labelled as "selfish" and brought in their social engagement or the nature of their professional work. As argued by Ewa (37):

> It has nothing to do with any selfishness. I sometimes come across accusations that I do not make any sacrifices for anyone. I am a doctor, and I believe that I dedicate myself enough to others in my work.

Some respondents had caring responsibilities, including caring for their parents (also disabled), siblings or other family members. Others felt the pressure to compensate for their non-parenthood: As noted by one respondent, the family perceived her as more available because of not having her own child, and hence being able to take care of the other family members (Maria, 41).

5.3. Family Support Is Needed, But Not in This Form

When asked about their opinions about welfare policies and family policy measures in Poland, almost all respondents agreed that families should be supported in some forms; however, they seem to have a pretty clear vision of policies they would prefer, and this was certainly not the policy model based on cash transfers.

Hence, the respondents were rather critical of the universal programme of child benefits "Family 500+," most often pointing to (as the respondents argue) a mistargeted distribution and misuse of the funds. According to Joanna (48):

> The beneficiaries do not necessarily spend their money on the needs of their children. Especially in big families, where there is a problem with alcohol, where there is violence, it is not money spent on children, it is money spent on worldly goods.

Two respondents working in HR in their companies also pointed out that it is increasingly difficult to find employees who "openly admit it does not pay off to take a job" (Paulina, 45). Overall, there was a preference for investing in crèches and kindergarten. According to Ewa (37), cash transfers and professional deactivation may lead to women losing their economic independence:

> I think that a better idea would be, first of all, to offer crèches and kindergarten…so that a woman would not disappear from the labour market….She would earn herself for retirement, and you don't need to have to give her any additional pension, just let the woman return to work, let her own money, be independent of her husband. Because a man can say "I can earn well enough," but this can lead to economic violence: "I'm holding the money, and you have nothing to say."

Several interviewees also supported introducing more gender equality-oriented measures, such as equal sharing of care responsibilities. The arguments focused on the need to preserve women's human capital and that sometimes women can have better and more promising professional careers. Linking it to the general idea of partnership within a couple, a male informant emphasised:

> [Childcare] is not only a woman's thing, it's equally important for both parents. I wouldn't imagine not participating in this equally. I don't like saying that the man should "help." Come on, you can ask for help when you need to move a table or something. I am not supposed to "help." (Tomasz, 37)

5.4. Welfare State and (Sometimes) Unfair Distribution

Another general theme identified is that the respondents felt they were sometimes treated unfairly at the policy level and in the workplace. The respondents had quite a strong reaction against the policy proposal linking the level of pension benefit with the number of children, pointing to the fact that they already pay their social insurance contributions and taxes while not receiving family support, suggesting that such a solution would lead to "a double penalty" (Sylwia, 47). As noted by Kamila (26):

> The problems with long-term financing of the pension system] are not the fault of childless people. I was born barely a quarter of a century ago, and these problems existed much earlier. And this is throwing responsibility again, searching for another khokhol [a straw figure], because it is convenient to rule with fear and dividing, saying: look, this is their fault, they will be punished and then you will all get better.

Paulina (45) stressed that often childfree persons might have high incomes and may have already contributed more to the system through taxation and social insurance contributions:

> Saying that I do not have children that would contribute to the pension system is unfounded because I am paying my taxes and perhaps earning even more than many families with children and these taxes are used to support these children. So, I don't understand these arguments—this is me who is now paying to support someone [else].

When asked about workplace relations and work organisation, about half of the respondents either did not see any differentiated treatment of childfree persons and parents or thought that parents should have some privileges to facilitate their participation in work and family duties. Others pointed to being perceived as always available and on-call, being assigned more duties and having their work scheduled in non-standard hours and days (holidays) due to not having children:

> It happens that my husband is called at very short notice…as if he didn't have any of his own matters. As if when you don't have children, you do not have any personal life. (Agnieszka, 47)

5.5. Towards Fair Treatment for Everyone

When asked about which policies they would want for themselves, childfree persons emphasised that some policy tools should be available regardless of family status, such as holiday vouchers (in reaction to Covid-19, in 2020, the government introduced vouchers for families with children only). One interviewee explicitly mentioned a universal basic income as a fair solution.

At least half of the informants demanded better access to gynaecological treatment. Kamila (26) specifically emphasised refraining from the word "reproductive" when it comes to childfree women and noted that the approach to gynaecology "is mostly focused on reproduction'':

> Therefore, childfree women are second category patients…there is some kind of assumption that if you have a uterus, you need to use it….And when a young woman is visiting a doctor the only cure for

> everything is pregnancy as if the whole medicine is about whether a woman will or will not have a child.

Other suggestions were to make sexual education more widespread altogether with access to contraception and voluntary sterilisation. Many referred to the current situation in Poland and the abortion ban as extremely oppressive and demanded liberalisation of the abortion law. Pola (33) associated the abortion ban and the unequal treatment in terms of gender and systemic violence "so that women finally fill in their uteruses…that this is such a repressive and objective treatment of women." Especially two non-binary respondents found the harsh situation with respect to reproductive rights in Poland very disturbing. Although explicit references to the Catholic Church appeared, they were surprisingly rare. However, when making remarks about the current political situation in Poland on the one hand and the decision about remaining childfree on the other, some respondents emphasised that they are either atheists or briefly criticised the Church's involvement in politics.

Younger respondents also expect better support for people transitioning from education to employment in terms of housing or equal treatment at work. The postulate was also to make the voice of young people heard and to include the younger generation in the conversation about policy reforms and the vision of the country's future.

5.6. "Change My Mind? Never, Even If Offered One Million Dollars"

The last question was whether the respondents would rethink their decision if they received various forms of state support, if the political circumstances would change and if they lived in an ideal world. All of the informants confirmed this would still not change their minds, often stating this in a very definite way, saying this is "absolutely not possible" or that they would not change their mind "even if offered one million dollars" (Iwona, 32). One respondent said that she was open to the possibility that she would change her mind in the future, but for now she does not see any circumstances that would turn her decision. In general, the respondents were emphasising that their decision is deliberate and independent of any pressures. They also regarded state support and work-life balance policies as additional and not central for making people change their minds about such an important issue. As noted by Ewa (37):

> Everything that the state is doing is only a supplement. These are the parents…the biggest pressure is on them—how to socialise the child, prepare them for conflicts, the culture of behaving among people. This is all that the child needs to find at home. No state support can replace it.

6. Conclusion

Increasing numbers of people are either remaining childfree or deciding to remain voluntary childless in the future. Although various aspects of voluntary childlessness have received some scholarly attention, these were mainly about either pathway toward childlessness or the societal perception of childfree people. At the same time, the group is hardly ever the topic of research on welfare attitudes, even though it can be considered a substantial minority, and in the light of the increasing interest in family policies as a response to declining fertility rates. This article contributes to the literature by providing an exploratory view of the reasons for remaining childfree and the attitudes toward welfare policies. The latter's importance stems from at least two different viewpoints: firstly, when asking childfree persons about their favoured welfare policies for families, it is possible to identify one growing constituency supporting particular reform programs, secondly, pointing to the fact that there is a growing social group that would not react to pronatalist measures.

All informants declared themselves childfree. Reasons for the decision to remain childfree were mainly given as independent of various circumstances or pressures, although other reasons were secondary, including the need to preserve the current lifestyle and a high level of satisfaction with the relationship. This is consistent with previous research done by Peterson (2015), stressing "fifty shades of freedom" valued by childfree individuals, as well as Tanturri and Mencarini's (2008) research on the childless Italian individuals stressing the relationship quality as important for their decision not to procreate. Although research on the reasons for childlessness often points to the fact of women's inability to find a suitable partner (Berrington, 2017; Waren & Pals, 2013), in some cases the need to have a child disappeared once a respondent found a happy relationship. In addition, the respondents underlined the deliberate decision-making process when it comes to their childlessness and a conscious decision not to procreate, often contrasting it with the experiences of parents who either find parenthood difficult or regret parenthood as such. Another contrast the interviewees were bringing in was their identification as childfree against the political domination of the PiS party and its conservative, pro-natalist rhetoric.

As for the attitudes towards welfare policies, respondents seemed to favour the support of care and education services over support in cash. The latter view was especially evident in their critical opinion of the program of universal child benefits. Interviewees emphasised the importance of policy tools strengthening gender equality in care responsibilities as well as female employment and independence. While respondents were, in general, not opposed to the idea of investing in children and treating children as a public good, they felt that their contribution to society may sometimes be overlooked. They were also strongly opposing any reforms penalising the choice

of not procreating, while also feeling they already contribute to the system by taxes and social insurance contributions while not receiving the same level of support as families with children do. When asked about which policies would benefit them, childfree persons often mentioned that benefits and schemes should be universal. In addition, female respondents stressed that unbiased gynaecological care is also needed together with better access to contraception. They often mentioned it in the context of the low level of reproductive rights in Poland and the general political climate (although discussion of the political circumstances in Poland was not explored here enough due to the reasons of space). Possible avenues of further inquiry could explore the profile of childfree groups in various welfare regimes, studying various groups of childless persons, but also work towards the understanding of the childfree choice as an autonomous decision, often very difficult to change.

Limitations of this research include the specific political context in Poland with its abortion policy and LGBTQ+ rights restricted to the highest extent as compared to other EU countries. The polarised political scene is reflected by societal cleavages, with all the childfree respondents clearly opposing the current government. Other limitations may stem from sampling and recruitment, in particular, recruitment via social network sites, where respondents who are particularly vocal or willing to share may not be representative of the whole group of childfree persons.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Climate Change Concerns and the Ideal Number of Children: A Comparative Analysis of the V4 Countries

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Abstract
The Visegrád countries (Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia) faced a sharp decline in fertility rates after the regime change in 1989. Since then, total fertility rates have largely remained below the EU average, although they have increased during the past decade. Family policies (support for the parental caregiving model) and the conditions of women's employment might be shaping these trends. Besides the pronatalist rhetoric, there is another reason why people might alter their fertility plans: climate change-related worries. Our analysis in this article examines whether such concerns exist in these four countries, pointing out that the efficacy of pronatalist measures depends on the widespread adoption of such attitudes among young people of childbearing age. Pronatalist pressure is strong in the V4 countries but may be diluted by strengthening environmentalist norms. Scholarship about the relationship between climate change-related concerns and fertility in these pronatalist countries is scarce. I examine this potential relationship by analysing respondents' ideas about the generally and personally ideal number of children using Eurobarometer data from 2011 through logistic regression analysis. The results are contradictory: Climate change concerns seem to be positively associated with a smaller ideal family size in Hungary, but only from a general perspective (i.e., not for respondents personally). A positive relationship can be found in the Czech Republic regarding climate concerns and personal ideal family size. In Slovakia, a strong negative association was observed between climate change-related concerns and smaller general and personal ideal family sizes.

Keywords
climate change; childbearing intentions; family policy; environmental policy; ideal number of children; Visegrád countries

Issue
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1. Introduction

The hazards of climate change are being felt around the world, albeit with a high level of heterogeneity across different countries and regions. Environmental sensitivity and risk perception are higher where the effects of climate change are more visible due to individuals' personal, direct experience (Diakakis et al., 2021). Environmental catastrophes are increasingly depicted in mainstream media, and many people are developing anxiety about the climate (Clayton, 2020), even without being directly exposed to negative environmental effects. The phrases "climate anxiety" and "eco-anxiety" have been integrated into the general vocabulary. People may also react to climate change by changing their attitudes and adopting responsible behaviours if environmental sensitivity is widespread (De Rose & Testa, 2015b).

This article focuses on the Visegrád countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). It deals with the following question: Do those who consider climate change to be the most serious threat the world is facing regard having fewer children to be theoretically ideal

for families and themselves personally? While the literature is rich in studies about childbearing intentions and voluntary childlessness in general, as well as macro-level factors behind fertility choices such as the effects of economic conditions and changes (e.g., Goldstein et al., 2013; Sobotka et al., 2011), scholarship is lacking about the relationship between concerns about climate change and fertility intentions (Schneider-Mayerson & Leong, 2020), especially in a European context. One way of demonstrating concern about the process of climate change is remaining childless or having fewer children: Studies have sparked debate about the idea that one can do most for the planet in terms of environmental considerations by foregoing having a child (Murtaugh & Schlax, 2009; Wynes & Nicholas, 2017). Such attitudes already exist in some parts of the world—for instance, polls recently implemented in North America have identified individuals who are factoring climate change concerns into their fertility plans (e.g., Miller, 2018; Morning Consult, 2020). Besides choosing non-parenthood to limit environmental impact, a more common consideration is that the well-being of potential children will be threatened by poor environmental quality (Arnocky et al., 2012; Helm et al., 2021; Schneider-Mayerson & Leong, 2020).

Central and Eastern European countries, including the V4, faced a sharp decline in fertility rates during and after the 1990s. Consequently, governments started to formulate and expand family policies to reduce the unfavourable effects of the decline. Demographic concerns were related to a potential lack of human and financial resources, including the cost of an ageing population (Frejka & Gietel-Basten, 2016). The fertility decline was partly due to the uncertainty caused by the economic and social transformation which followed the collapse of state socialism (Sobotka et al., 2011), but other forces such as changing conditions in a competitive labour market, wider access to modern contraceptives (Frejka & Gietel-Basten, 2016), and the general European trend to the postponement of family formation (Billari et al., 2006), contributed to the process.

My analysis examines the connection between climate change concerns and the limitation of the ideal number of children to a maximum of one, since studies have pointed out that this behaviour can also be a response to concerns about the carbon footprint of procreation, or about the well-being of the next generation (Schneider-Mayerson & Leong, 2020). Since pronatalist pressure is strong in the V4 countries, and the hazards of climate change are not directly tangible for most people living there, we presume that only a very narrow stratum of society actively factor climate change considerations into their childbearing attitudes. Although the phenomenon is not common yet, in the long term the efficacy of pronatalist measures might depend on the spread of environmentalist norms among young people of childbearing age.

An analysis of 2011 Eurobarometer data (which I also use) was carried out by De Rose and Testa (2015a, 2015b), who examined the effects of climate change-related worries on fertility intentions in the 27 EU member states. It differs from my research in several ways—most importantly, in its dependent variable. Fertility intentions (the intended number of children additional to present ones) were measured by the question "How many more children do you intend to have?" My analysis, however, uses questions preceding those used by De Rose and Testa (2015a, 2015b) and assesses fertility intentions from a more distant viewpoint that involves identifying respondents' ideal number of children. Empirical research often mixes the concepts of childbearing *ideals* and *intentions*. Philipov and Bernardi (2011) draw attention to the Miller-Pasta theory, according to which childbearing desires that do not necessarily relate to action form expectations that lead to intentions, and thus involve what may be called commitments. The concept of ideals is closer to that of desires when defined in relation to one's ideal circumstances in life (i.e., it assumes that any obstacles to childbearing are neglected). Furthermore, I differentiate between individuals' personal ideals concerning family size and their positions about ideal family size for individuals generally. I create a dichotomous variable that collapses the categories of the ideal number of children to measure attitudes toward a smaller family size (zero or one child) in contrast to a larger one (at least two children). In similar surveys, variance in personal ideals has been found to be larger than in general ideals (i.e., a family's ideal number of children, generally speaking), and the latter seems to be stable across time, although slightly declining (Philipov & Bernardi, 2011).

The reason for using a dataset from 2011 is mainly practical. To my knowledge, no other more recent cross-country surveys cover both topics of interest, i.e., climate change-related issues and family planning at the same time. Using combined data from separate surveys (data on fertility intentions/attitudes and attitudes toward climate change) would have been an alternative but then I would not have been able to analyse my research question at the individual level. Hoping that suitable databases will be available in the future, I carried out my analysis on the latest data that was available, thereby providing insight into a phenomenon that has received even more attention since the release of the data under analysis here. Since the data I use are from 2011, I present the specific social context and trends from that time in the following section.

2. Background

2.1. Fertility Trends

After the regime change, there was a decline in both first and higher-order births in most post-socialist countries. However, the data highlight the prominence of a two-child family norm, as at least half (but usually 60–85%) of the mothers of one child had a second

child in nineteen post-socialist countries (Billingsley & Duntava, 2017). The difference between the pre-transition and post-transition periods is greatest in terms of third births. However, the smallest decline in births occurred, among other areas, in Poland and Hungary, while even more women had a third birth in the Czech Republic after the transition than before it. But the main drivers of post-transition fertility decline are the falling second-birth rates in Central and Eastern Europe (Zeman et al., 2018). Besides the fertility decline, demographic trends show the postponement of family formation in Europe (Billari et al., 2006). Nevertheless, in non-Soviet countries, age at first birth began to increase earlier than in post-Soviet countries. The process of decline in second and higher-order births is distinct from the process of postponement in post-socialist countries: A shift in the timing of parenthood did not always lead to a reduction in family size (Billingsley & Duntava, 2017). One explanation for these trends is that the economies and societies of these countries went through a great transformation after 1990. Economic uncertainty escalated, youth were faced with entering a new, global labour market associated with increased risk, and the number of those returning to higher education increased, raising the opportunity cost of childbearing (Brainerd, 2014; Róbert & Bukodi, 2005).

2.2. Family Policies, Childcare Services, and Maternal Employment Rates

The V4 countries are often labelled "familialistic" for their family policies, which refers to the preference for providing childcare at home, usually by the mother. Since women are supported to leave the labour market and care for children at home, they are often perceived through their role as carers (Michoń, 2015).

Policies about leave vary in flexibility and length, in their relation to earnings, and whether well-paid. In comparison to other OECD countries, in terms of total weeks of paid leave granted to mothers, including maternity leave (which is available only to mothers before and after giving birth) and parental leave, the V4 countries led the way with between 110–164 weeks (Thévenon & Solaz, 2013). These extended terms of leave have contributed to making mothers the primary caregivers for children below the age of three in all four countries (Szikra & Győry, 2014). Statutory paternity leave, which allows fathers to spend time at home after the birth of a child, was extremely short at the time of the survey: one week in Hungary and Poland (Moss, 2011), and not a statutory entitlement in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Poland stands out due to the generosity of its leave policy, and this country undertook the most impressive reforms in terms of length and flexibility of leaves, starting in 2007 (Michoń, 2015).

Childcare services are underdeveloped in the V4 countries—the state does not support "defamilialisation"; it rather discourages it, supporting the traditional family model instead (Michoń, 2015). Attendance levels associated with formal childcare arrangements were generally low in these countries in 2011 compared to other EU member states, especially among children under three years old. Attendance was between 3–5% in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia, and 8% in Hungary in contrast to the 29% EU average attendance rate in this age group. No V4 country reached the EU average (83%) for use of childcare services for children between the age of three and compulsory school age, with 74–75% in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia, and an extremely low rate of 43% in Poland.

Female labour force participation also conformed to the traditional picture suggested by leave and childcare policies. While the employment rate of mothers with a child between 3–5 years old (62–80%, lowest in Hungary) was around the OECD average (66%) in 2011, the proportion of employed mothers with a child under three years (6–21%, also lowest in Hungary) was well below average (52%), except in Poland (54%). Polish women are encouraged to become mothers only after they find a job, as well as to return to work after giving birth before having another child due to the incompatibility between family and work, unstable contracts, and the fear of unemployment (Matysiak, 2009).

In these countries, where social attitudes toward gender roles are often conservative and quality part-time employment opportunities are scarce, but also for economic reasons, women often have to choose between employment (having a full-time job) or family (withdrawing from the labour market; Michoń, 2015). This is a good example of how family policies that were introduced or expanded to mitigate the fertility decline are not always effective in shaping fertility behaviour, and their impact is mediated through socioeconomic and other structural conditions of countries and features of the policies (Neyer & Andersson, 2008).

2.3. Climate Change, Environmental Attitudes, and Related Policies

Nowadays, we see two contrasting processes related to the world population. Globally, our planet is overpopulated, whereas in many parts of the world nations are facing the challenge of an ageing society. For the former, childlessness or lower fertility rates could be an answer; however, this approach may contribute to increasing the problem of the latter because the shrinking working-age group would not reproduce itself. Of the 30 countries with the highest old-age dependency ratio, which is calculated by dividing the 65+-aged population by the working-age (15–64) population, 26 countries are from Europe. The Czech Republic ranked nineteenth on the list with a ratio of 31%, Hungary ranked twenty-first, Poland twenty-ninth, and Slovakia forty-first (with 25%; see The World Bank, 2020). Countries where population growth is low or negative often have high income and consumption levels, while poorer

high-fertility nations often have low or even negligible consumption. The greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to the change in the climate are associated with these high levels of consumption. However, it is not simply the population size that drives the process of climate change—it is interconnected with consumer behaviour and the emission levels linked to that. The impacts of climate change, however, are and will be greatest on people from developing countries and poorer regions (Stephenson et al., 2010).

Perceptions of climate change have been changing constantly over the past decades. In the early 2000s, although it was acknowledged as a danger, it was only a secondary consideration compared to other environmental risks in the EU and the USA (Lorenzoni & Pidgeon, 2006). In 2011, climate change was seen as the second most serious problem in the EU (indicated as most serious by 20% of citizens), following poverty, hunger, and a lack of drinking water. The proportions of citizens of V4 countries who felt this way remained at or below this average, with Hungary having the smallest share of citizens who felt that climate change was the most important environmental risk (14%). Being a woman, younger, and better educated increased climate change concerns. Tackling climate change was mostly perceived to be the responsibility of either national governments, the EU, or business and industry. Twenty-one percent of EU citizens regarded themselves as having personal responsibility, with Slovakia (25%) and the Czech Republic (19%) leading the way in this respect among the V4, and Poland and Hungary falling behind (11% and 7%, respectively). While 53% of EU citizens and Hungarians reported that they had taken some action to fight climate change recently, this share was 45–47% in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and 30% in Poland (Eurobarometer, 2011).

Climate change has implications for social policies. Meadowcroft (Gough et al., 2008) argues that closer connections need to be established between social and climate policy to prevent further changes in the climate. Today's welfare state is unsustainable in the sense that it is built on continuous economic development. Literature stresses that population-size-related issues should be linked to environmental considerations and the well-being of humans and nature in the future (Gough et al., 2008). Nevertheless, although reducing population growth could considerably contribute to bringing down CO2 emissions globally, it is questionable that policies that reduce fertility would be appropriate in countries with already low rates, taking the dilemmas about the ageing population into account (O'Neill et al., 2010).

A study that used data for 2016–2017 (Otto & Gugushvili, 2020) measured support for climate change policies and public welfare provision, identifying four distinct attitude groups. The Czech Republic was one of the most divided European countries in terms of eco-social priorities, meaning that an almost equal share of people belonged to each attitudinal group. In Hungary and Poland, a fairly large share of people (above 30%) were "eco-social sceptics," disliking both public welfare and environmental policies, but the second major group had different opinions: While 31% of Hungarians were suspicious of the welfare state but in favour of policies for mitigating climate change, 32% of Poles supported public welfare programmes but rejected climate change policies.

It is a question of whether members of society will accept the trade-off of environmental protection over economic growth. It was true of most EU member states according to 2006 Eurobarometer data, but not in three countries of my analysis (Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). The Czech Republic, conversely, had the fourth highest approval rating for environmental protection among the EU member states (with around two-thirds of citizens agreeing that economic growth should be restricted in favour of environmental protection; see Gough et al., 2008).

3. Method

3.1. Sample

Datasets that include recent information about both climate change issues and family planning are scarce: the empirical basis of my analysis is wave 75.4 of the Eurobarometer from 2011 as it covers both topics ("social climate and family planning" and "climate change"). The European Commission's Eurobarometer surveys are carried out in EU member states twice a year, are always based on new samples, and involve interviewing approximately 1,000 respondents per country face-to-face at their homes. Participants are selected through a multi-stage, random (probability) sampling design that represents the population aged 15 or older (Eurobarometer Data Service, n.d.).

The present study is based on data from the V4 countries. The database is weighted using the post-stratification weight (given by the data publisher). The full Eurobarometer sample for the four countries included 4,023 observations, of which 2,037 were associated with individuals of the age group of my interest (people of reproductive age, aged 18–45; see Table 1 for a detailed description of variables).

3.2. Measures

The dependent variable, ideal family size, was measured by dichotomous variables regarding the ideal number of children generally and personally. The original variable was dichotomized to capture both stronger and weaker attitudes towards a smaller family size. The related questions were "Generally speaking, what do you think is the ideal number of children for a family?" and "For you personally, what would be the ideal number of children you would like to have or would have liked to have had?" Those who thought zero or one child would be ideal for a family/themselves were coded 1. A minority

of respondents would prefer families to remain childfree. Note that some parents may have shared this opinion and belonged to this group since this question was asked from the whole sample. Besides the very low number of answers indicating zero children as ideal, there is another reason for collapsing the categories and including those who think one child would be ideal for a family/themselves: This lets me test the assumption that climate change-related concerns may contribute to the belief that fewer children are ideal for a family. I believe that downward deviation from the ideal family size of two children, which is generally considered ideal for the majority of the sample, may signal a way of thinking that is typical of those who would entirely give up parenting due to worries about climate change, only a little less radically.

Table 1. Description of dependent and independent variables by country.

	Czech Republic		Hungary		Poland		Slovakia	
Variable	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Gender								
male	50.9	259	49.5	244	49.8	240	52.0	287
female	49.1	250	50.5	249	50.2	242	48.0	265
Age group [1]								
18–24	22.4	114	20.9	103	26.1	126	28.6	158
25–29	16.5	84	12.8	63	19.9	96	16.3	90
30–34	19.8	101	18.0	89	18.5	89	17.0	94
35–39	19.8	101	24.5	121	19.3	93	18.5	102
40–45	21.4	109	23.9	118	16.2	78	19.6	108
Highest level of education								
low	9.2	47	52.3	258	11.4	55	4.4	24
medium	77.4	394	33.7	166	66.9	323	76.4	421
high	13.4	68	14.0	69	21.7	105	19.2	106
Type of settlement								
rural area or village	35.2	179	35.0	173	38.9	188	44.6	246
small/middle town	40.5	206	30.0	148	34.2	165	40.6	224
large town	24.4	124	35.0	173	26.9	130	14.9	82
Difficulty paying bills								
most of the time	11.9	59	16.0	78	6.9	32	4.5	24
from time to time	39.9	198	46.7	227	26.7	124	33.1	175
almost never/never	48.2	239	37.2	181	66.5	309	62.3	329
Has at least one child								
yes	56.9	289	63.1	310	52.7	251	54.8	298
no	43.1	219	36.9	181	47.3	225	45.2	246
Considers climate change to be the single most serious problem the world is facing								
yes	16.4	82	15.2	75	21.3	100	20.7	114
no	83.6	418	84.8	417	78.7	369	79.3	436
Mentioned themselves as responsible for tackling climate change								
yes	21.8	107	8.2	39	12.0	53	25.9	140
no	78.2	383	91.8	435	88.0	387	74.1	401
Has taken action to fight climate change over the past six months								
yes	52.0	251	59.0	269	34.4	158	50.8	265
no	48.0	232	41.0	187	65.6	301	49.2	257
Ideal number of children in general								
maximum 1	21.1	95	16.6	79	13.1	54	18.5	93
2 or more	78.9	356	83.4	398	86.9	357	81.5	411
Ideal number of children personally								
maximum 1	21.1	99	17.6	82	16.9	69	21.8	110
2 or more	78.9	371	82.4	384	83.1	340	78.2	395

Notes: Data are weighted by post-stratification weight; [1] age is included as a continuous variable in the regression models.

As for climate change-related concerns, I used the question: "Which of the following do you consider to be the single most serious problem facing the world as a whole?" The main explanatory variable distinguishes those who consider climate change to be the single most serious global problem (coded 1) from those who marked something else (e.g., the economic situation, the spread of infectious diseases, etc.) as the most serious problem (0). For the main explanatory variable I intended to use a comprehensive indicator that could be broadly interpreted since studies point out that reasons for the mental-health impacts of climate change vary on a wide scale, including anxiety related to an uncertain future or concern about potential harm to one's future offspring (Clayton, 2020). The analysis of De Rose and Testa (2015a, 2015b) on the relationship between climate change concerns and fertility intentions applied the same explanatory variable.

For control variables I included *gender*, *age*, *squared age* (respondent's age squared was included to check whether the relationship between age and the odds of regarding having fewer children as ideal is linear or U-shaped), *highest level of education* (includes three categories: "low" education means primary education, first- or second-stage basic education, or lower secondary education; "medium" means upper secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary education; "high" means tertiary education), *type of settlement* (rural area or village, small/middle town, and large town), *subjective financial situation of respondents* (since income data was not available, I used a variable that contains information about whether the respondent had difficulty paying bills the year before, to which replies were: most of the time, from time to time, and almost never/never), and *whether the respondent has a child* (no distinction was made between biological and adopted children in the questionnaire). Additionally, two climate change-related variables were included in the models: whether respondents indicated that they were *personally responsible* in response to the multiple-choice question "In your opinion, who within the EU is responsible for tackling climate change?"; and whether the respondent said yes to the question "Have you personally taken any action to fight climate change over the past six months?" The reason for controlling for these climate change-related variables is that I assumed they might be correlated with the main explanatory variable, and might have a separate, perhaps contrasting effect on ideal family size (if someone is actively taking action against climate change, it is possible that this will make them feel that they are working for a better future and thus creating the conditions to have children without concerns). By involving individuals' own responsibility for tackling climate change, it becomes easier to distinguish between the mechanisms presumed to connect climate change concerns and reduced ideal family size: If a person believes that having fewer or no children is an ideal means of reducing environmental problems, this variable is believed to capture this effect and distinguish it from another potential driver (smaller ideal family size because of concerns about the well-being of one's own child).

3.3. Analytical Strategy

Following the descriptive analysis, bivariate relationships between the dependent and independent variables were examined through cross-tabulation analysis separately by country.

Logistic regression analysis was then conducted separately by country on the subset of valid responses to the respective dependent variable, thus the analytical sample might be selective. Non-response rates to the questions about the ideal number of children in general and personally for the respondents were the following, respectively: Hungary—3.3%, 5.3%; Slovakia—8.6%, 8.6%; Czech Republic—11.4%, 7.8%; Poland—14.8%, 15.2%.

For each country the two dependent variables (ideal number of children in general and personally) were analysed in separate, nested regression models: Model 1 included only the main explanatory variable, while Model 2 also included all control variables. The advantage of using logistic regression analysis to examine the relationship between the explanatory variables and the two-category dependent variables is that the results are easily interpretable: If the coefficient is negative, this means the odds of regarding a maximum of one child as ideal are lower, while a positive coefficient means higher odds of preferring a smaller ideal family size.

4. Results

The ideal number of children is two or more for the majority of respondents in all V4 countries, both generally speaking and for them personally. However, according to the descriptive results presented in Table 1, the four countries differ considerably regarding the exact share of respondents who think a maximum of one child is the ideal number. Among those who provided a valid answer to the question (excluding those who answered "there is no ideal number" or "it depends," etc.), this proportion varied from 13.1% of Poles to 21.1% of Czechs in terms of the ideal number of children for a family, speaking generally. On a personal basis, those who think zero or one would be the ideal number of children they would like to have (or would have liked to have had) represented 16.9% of respondents in Poland, 17.6% in Hungary, and more than one-fifth of respondents in the Czech Republic (21.1%) and Slovakia (21.8%).

Continuing with the bivariate relationships, regarding general views about the ideal number of children, Slovakia is the only country where there is a significant difference ($p = 0.005$) according to the main explanatory variable: Among those who consider climate change to be the single most serious problem, we find a smaller proportion of those who regard a maximum of one child

to be ideal (8.7%) compared to those who consider something else to be the most serious problem (20.6%). A similar but smaller difference (p = 0.045) exists regarding personal ideals about the number of children for Slovaks whose main concern is climate change (14.5%) or something else (23.4%), while there is an even smaller but considerable (p = 0.071) difference among Poles (10.3% vs. 18.5%) in the proportion of those who believe that a maximum of one child is personally ideal.

Overall, there were some differences in general views about ideal family size according to the demographic and climate change-related control variables, mostly in Czech Republic and Slovakia: A smaller proportion regarded a maximum of one child to be ideal in general among those who had taken action to fight climate change lately, among women, and among parents (in Slovakia), while a larger proportion of those living in a large town and those having difficulties paying the bills most of the time (in Slovakia and the Czech Republic) regarded a smaller family size to be ideal. In terms of personal ideals, the odds of regarding a smaller family as ideal were higher among men and those living in a large town (Czech Republic, Slovakia), those having difficulties paying bills most of the time, and those who were moderately well educated compared to the higher educated (Slovakia), as well as among childless persons (all countries). The odds were lower among those who indicated themselves as responsible for tackling climate change (in Hungary and Slovakia) and who had taken action to fight climate change recently (Slovakia). In Hungary, both in terms of general and personal views, individuals aged 25–29 and 40–45 had a greater likelihood of regarding a maximum of one child as ideal than those in other age groups.

Table 2 shows the coefficients of the logistic regression analysis only for the main explanatory variable, climate change-related concern. The full set of coefficients is presented in the Supplementary Material (*Tables S1-S8*). Contradictory results are obtained in the four countries: there is a positive association between climate change concerns and regarding a maximum of one child as ideal both generally speaking and personally in the Czech Republic and Hungary (except for the uncontrolled estimate in Model 1a for the Czech Republic), while a negative association is found in all models for Poland and Slovakia. In terms of general views, the coefficients are significant only for Hungary and for Slovakia, at different levels (p < 0.1–0.01). For personal ideals, results are significant for Slovakia in both models (p < 0.05), for Poland in Model 1b (p < 0.1), and for Czech Republic in Model 2b (p < 0.1).

Regarding the climate change-related control variables, attitudes towards one's own responsibility for tackling climate change seemed to matter only in relation to personal views in Hungary (p = 0.029) and Slovakia (p = 0.008): Those who considered it their own responsibility were less likely to regard zero or one child as ideal. Results from the analysis of bivariate relationships regarding basic demographic variables were roughly reproduced in the multivariate analysis, with a few exceptions, as detailed below. In terms of general attitudes towards the ideal number of children, in Hungary, the positive coefficient of living in a large town became significant (p = 0.019), while a negative relationship was discovered between having children and regarding a maximum of one child as ideal (p = 0.086). Regarding personal views, gender was no longer a predictor of ideal family size for the Czech Republic (p = 0.207); nevertheless,

Table 2. Connection between climate change-related concerns and the ideal number of children in general and personally in the V4 countries.

	Czech Republic		Hungary		Poland		Slovakia	
Dependent: ideal no. of children in general								
Considers climate change to be the single most serious problem the world is facing								
(Model 1a)	−0.069	(0.313)	0.598#	(0.308)	−0.205	(0.369)	−0.970**	(0.365)
(Model 2a)	0.148	(0.331)	0.886**	(0.335)	−0.180	(0.418)	−1.124**	(0.419)
Dependent: ideal no. of children personally								
Considers climate change to be the single most serious problem the world is facing								
(Model 1b)	0.390	(0.291)	0.323	(0.316)	−0.627#	(0.374)	−0.579*	(0.294)
(Model 2b)	0.520#	(0.314)	0.447	(0.350)	−0.703	(0.436)	−0.748*	(0.345)

Notes: Model 1 includes only the main explanatory variable; model 2 includes all control variables; for the full set of constant values and coefficients see Supplementary Material (Tables S1–S8); estimates obtained from separate logistic regression models (unstandardized coefficients and standard errors in parentheses); #p < 0.1; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

in Hungary, men were less likely to regard a maximum of one child as ideal than women (p = 0.085). Age had a positive effect in Poland (p = 0.091), and the negative coefficient of people living well financially on smaller ideal family size (p = 0.05) became significant in Hungary. Otherwise, the associations seen in the bivariate analysis were sustained in the multivariate one.

5. Conclusion

Sociological research often neglects environmental considerations as potential predictors of childbearing attitudes. In this study, I examined whether concerns about climate change are in relation to ideal family size. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, more than 21% of the respondents regard a small family size, i.e., of zero or one child as ideal in terms of personal attitudes, and this rate is slightly lower in Hungary (17.6%) and in Poland (16.9%). Among individuals who belong to the cohorts born prior to my sample (between 1940–1970), in Central and Eastern Europe, there was a decline in total fertility driven by falling second-order births. On the contrary, first-birth rates were relatively high and negative attitudes towards childlessness were dominant in comparison with other low-fertility countries. According to Zeman et al. (2018), factors such as the uncertainties related to the economic transition after 1990, relatively low wages and living standards, and the traditional gender roles in the family collectively contributed to the rise of one-child families. The individuals of my analysis (belonging to cohorts born between 1966–1993) entered the conventional age of first childbirth around or after the regime change, thus only part of these factors should play a role in forming their ideals and attitudes regarding childbearing. I assumed that other reasons, such as climate change worries as new forms of uncertainties might contribute to the high share of those with a smaller ideal family size in my analytical sample.

This analysis points out that there may be a relationship between climate change-related concerns and ideal family size, although it is not uniform. Within countries, no inconsistencies were found in terms of the direction of effect between general and personal views about the ideal number of children when the difference was significant, although the magnitude of the discrepancy varied. Climate change-related concerns appeared to be positively associated with a smaller ideal family size in Hungary, but only when generally speaking. Regarding personal ideals about family size, a positive relationship was identified for the Czech Republic. Contrary to expectations, in Slovakia, a strong negative association was observed between climate change concerns and smaller ideal family size (in general as well as personally), which means that those who regard climate change as the most serious threat were more likely to consider a larger family size with at least two children to be ideal.

These contradictory findings have several potential explanations. Given that climate change was considered a serious threat by relatively few people in the Visegrád countries, the weak effects are not surprising. Although the data are not suitable for revealing causal relationships, the assumed direction of the association runs from concerns about climate change to childbearing attitudes. However, following De Rose and Testa (2015a, 2015b), the negative coefficients in the case of Slovakia and Poland could be interpreted in the opposite way: Climate change-related concerns may play a role for people thinking of having a bigger family because they are more concerned with the future of the next generation. Nevertheless, research has revealed that larger family size is one of the determinants of weaker climate change-related concerns, probably due to an (unmeasured) traditional family orientation (Price & Bohon, 2019). Although my study is concerned with ideal family size, research that investigates actual family size might be illuminating, even despite that the ideal number of children is reported to be higher in Europe than actual fertility (Liefbroer et al., 2015). In the case of the present research, this would suggest that the explanation must be sought in traditional family orientations and conservativism. In Hungary, when individuals are asked about societal ideals, environmental concerns seem to matter, but at the level of personal desires for children, a stronger traditional orientation might suppress the relationship between environmentalism and childbearing attitudes.

This, however, does not explain the between-country variance. The four countries are often treated as one unit in international comparative research, but these controversial results suggest that a more detailed, in-depth examination of country-level discrepancies is necessary, since besides plenty of similarities there were non-negligible differences in family and childcare policies (Czech Republic and Slovakia had similarities in their leave policies, while Poland stood out in terms of the availability and attendance of formal childcare services and maternal employment rates; see Michoń, 2015) and in climate change-related attitudes (again, the Czech Republic and Slovakia shared most similarities regarding the indicators). Neyer and Andersson (2008) also argue that the context (not only the local but also temporal) cannot be neglected when the effects of family policies are evaluated, since the policies do not have a universal impact. Even where pronatalist expectations in fertility trends might seem to be met, other contextual factors play important roles regarding individual fertility behaviour. Individual-level factors and features of the sample of this analysis might also be behind the dissimilar results: Slovak data is unique in that men and younger people dropped out from the analytical sample in larger proportions due to their non-responses. If this factor plays a role, the results would indicate that gender and age may mediate the relationship between climate change-related concerns and ideal family size.

This study has drawn a picture of the situation ten years ago, when climate change was less of an everyday topic than it is today. The article has its limitations:

Perhaps the major shortcoming is that, due to the low case numbers in some categories, a dichotomous variable was used to measure the ideal number of children instead of taking all the different values into account. Moreover, the database did not allow me to control for religiousness or political ideology, although these factors have been shown to affect environmental considerations (Otto & Gugushvili, 2020; Price & Bohon, 2019), and might also affect childbearing ideals. Finally, a more recent database which covers the analysed topics would be greatly needed to address this question in a more up-to-date manner. Nevertheless, I believe that the research draws attention to the fact that, in addition to the well-researched determinants, other considerations such as environmental attitudes might influence childbearing attitudes or desires. Additionally, my study demonstrated the problems of treating the V4 countries as belonging to one unit despite the apparent differences in attitudes toward environmental issues as well as toward ideal family size. These findings have potentially important policy implications. To increase support for policies aimed at tackling climate change in pronatalist countries, a shift in the narrative would be necessary so that environmental protection appears as a traditional norm in discourse (Price & Bohon, 2019). The question of whether pronatalist family policy and green policy are at all compatible may sound harsh, but it is definitely an issue for further discussion.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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