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Diverging Paths among Central Eastern European Mothers? The Degree of Incongruity between Employment Preferences and Their Actual Experiences (1994–2012)*

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Abstract: This paper examines the congruity between mothers' preferences and actual experiences when raising preschool children, using data on mothers of reproductive ages (18–49) from the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) (1994, 2002, and 2012). The findings show that (i) with one exception, in all the countries and years, mothers whose preferences were congruent with their actual employment statuses outnumbered those whose preferences and employment statuses were incongruent; (ii) whereas Czech mothers improved their situations during the period (the congruity increases), Polish mothers – who began the period with the highest congruity – experienced a decrease in congruity, while Hungarian mothers showed the lowest congruity and saw a slight improvement in their situations (they achieved more congruity); and (iii) women who had their children during the communist regimes were more likely to experience incongruity because they worked more than they desired to, while women who became mothers during the post-communist period were more likely to experience congruity when they stayed at home, but they were also more likely to experience incongruity because they were inactive and considered working desirable. Therefore, the results confirm similar trends and diverging paths among the three countries. The high degree of incongruity between preferences and actual experiences is a sign of the problems faced by mothers attempting to reconcile work and family life and also impacts other phenomena, such as female employment, gender equality and fertility.

Keywords: work–family conflict, gender roles, refamilialisation, fertility, post-communism

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Introduction

The fall of the communist regimes in 1989 brought about a profound transformation of Central European societies. Structural changes in the economy due to the transition to a market economy resulted in increased unemployment and job insecurity. Many authors [Blum 2016; Hašková and Saxonberg 2016; Javornik 2016; Pascall and Kwak 2010; Szelewa and Polakowski 2008] warned that Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries were undergoing a general process of ‘refamilialisation’. This worsened the economic position of women, as they stopped working and began staying at home to care for their young children, although each country differed in terms of adopted measures.

This study focuses on the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, which historically belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire (although in the case of Poland this involved only part of its territory, as the rest belonged to Russia and Prussia). They later became part of the Soviet Bloc after the Second World War, and in 2004 they acceded to the European Union [Hašková and Saxonberg 2016]. The three countries are also similar in their political progress towards democratisation, and their labour markets were similar before the 2009 economic crisis [Javornik 2016].

Despite these similarities, these countries also show differences: for example, Poland is characterised by a greater emphasis on Catholicism and traditional values [Sobotka 2008], more large households with many generations living together and fewer single-parent families [Iacovu and Skew 2011]. By contrast, the Czech Republic – and to some extent Hungary – is much more secular and liberal [Sobotka 2008]. This article focuses on the gap between mothers’ work-family orientations and their employment statuses. The existence of a incongruity between what mothers prefer and what they experience is related to mothers’ autonomy, that is, in Janus’s words [2013a: 97], ‘their freedom to choose between employment and homemaking as alternative means of self-fulfilment and economic independence.’ The high degree of incongruity between preferences and actual experiences is a sign of the problems mothers face when attempting to reconcile work and family life and also impacts women’s labour-market participation, gender equality at work and in the family, and fertility [Kuchařová 2009].

Using a diachronic perspective (1994–2012), this study investigates (i) the degree of congruity between mothers’ work statuses when they became mothers (women aged 18–49) and what they considered to be the most desirable option for a woman who has a preschool-age child,¹ (ii) whether congruity has increased

¹ It is assumed that these attitudes are related to personal preferences, although some authors criticise the use of general attitudes towards female employment as an indicator of personal preferences for women themselves [Hakim 2003]. This issue is discussed in the Data and Methodology and Conclusion sections.

or decreased over the last two decades, and (iii) whether changes in congruity were similar or differed among the three countries.

This paper contributes to the literature on maternal employment and work–family reconciliation, focusing on three countries that are usually clustered together in international comparisons, despite the fact that they differ in terms of family policies and their impacts on maternal employment. The results show some common patterns and divergences during this period. Among the common patterns this research has found, the number of mothers whose preferences were incongruent with their actual experiences was greater than the number of those whose preferences and experiences were congruent, except in the Czech Republic in 2012. This congruity was largely due to two mechanisms: (i) belief that it is desirable to stay at home when having small children and actual behaviour and (ii) the increased percentage of mothers experiencing congruity working full time and considering it desirable. Lastly, another common pattern found is the main incongruity between preferences (work less) and experiences (working more than what they considered desirable). Regarding divergences among these three countries, the degree of congruity was different in each country (the Czech Republic had the highest percentages and Hungary the lowest) and changes in congruity also differed throughout the period (whereas Czech and Hungarian mothers improved their situations because their congruity increased, those of Polish mothers worsened because their congruity decreased).

The paper is structured as follows: The second section compares the main features of family policies developed in the three countries during the post-communist era and their impacts on fertility, maternal employment and the enrolment rates of preschool children. The third section focuses on the evolution of public opinion towards maternal employment and the factors that influence such opinions. The fourth section introduces the research questions, database, variables used and methodology. In the fifth section, the results are presented. The sixth section discusses the results and the seventh section concludes.

Fertility, family policies, and maternal employment after communism

During the communist era, the CEE countries developed a new model of gender relations, since family policies combined defamilialist aspects by promoting gender equality and familialist aspects by supporting traditional gender roles [Saxonberg and Sirovátka 2006]. The female employment rates in these countries were much higher than in Western Europe, with 70–90% of women aged 15 to 55 working, the majority of them full time [Pollert 2003]. This system was rated by Pfau-Effinger [1998] as a dual earner model with state childcare and by Crompton [1999] as a state-socialist dual earner/state carer model.

This female employment pattern was supported both by communist ideology, which saw female employment as ‘liberation’ for women, and by the need

for a large workforce, given the system's inefficiency [Pascall and Kwak 2010]. The obligation to work also involved financial necessity, since a single salary did not ensure a decent standard of living [Sobotka 2008]. Indeed, entrance into the labour force was also a matter of 'social membership' and eligibility 'rights' were based on the possession of continuous, full-time employment [Szalai 1992]. Nevertheless, the promotion of female employment was not accompanied by other aspects related to gender equality, such as parental leave for fathers. In the private sphere, traditional gender relations were never discussed and remained unchanged [Deacon 2000], leading to an overburdening of working mothers [Pascall and Kwak 2010]. This double burden on women led to a decrease in fertility [Anderson and Kohler 2015; McDonald 2000].

With the fall of the communist regime, the governments in the region had to undertake major cutbacks to social services and austerity policies to adapt to the capitalist system. As a result, the question researchers raised in the 1990s was what direction family policies would take, given that women's participation in the labour market during communism had often been perceived as 'forced commodification' [Adamik 1993] and 'as a matter of compulsion rather than rights' [Szalai 1992: 6]. Governments adopted (cheaper) refamilialisation policies, making it difficult for mothers to work [Saxonberg and Sirovátka 2008]. Among these measures, two were particularly noteworthy during the 1990s: the drastic reduction in nursery places for children under three years of age (these childcare services were not part of the schooling system in these countries at that time) and the extension of paid parental leave (the Czech Republic being the paradigmatic case, with the extension of parental leave from three to four years in 1995 without a simultaneous increase in employment protection, which was maintained at three years). Traditional gender relations in the private sphere were not questioned, domestic work and childcare were considered feminine tasks [Pascall and Kwak 2010].

Despite these similar tendencies towards refamilialisation, there were also differences between the three countries that originated in the historical roots of family policies, which continue to have an influence on family policies today [Hašková and Saxonberg 2016]. Poland has been characterised by a more liberal policy, with shorter maternity leave, fewer childcare places and means-tested benefits limiting access to parental leave, whereas the Czech Republic and Hungary have longer maternity leave, more places and higher enrolment rates for preschool children, and flat benefit rates (in Hungary, there is also a two-year benefit based on the income-replacement principle). For Javornik [2016], while Poland is a case of implicit familialism, the other two countries promote explicit familialism. Hungary, moreover, differs from the rest by encouraging fathers to take parental leave more (4–7%) than the other countries because it is the only country to offer extended leave based on the income-replacement principle [Hašková and Saxonberg 2016; Saxonberg and Sirovátka 2008]. These differences in family policies and their consequences for achieving congruity between preferences and actual experiences are addressed in this paper.

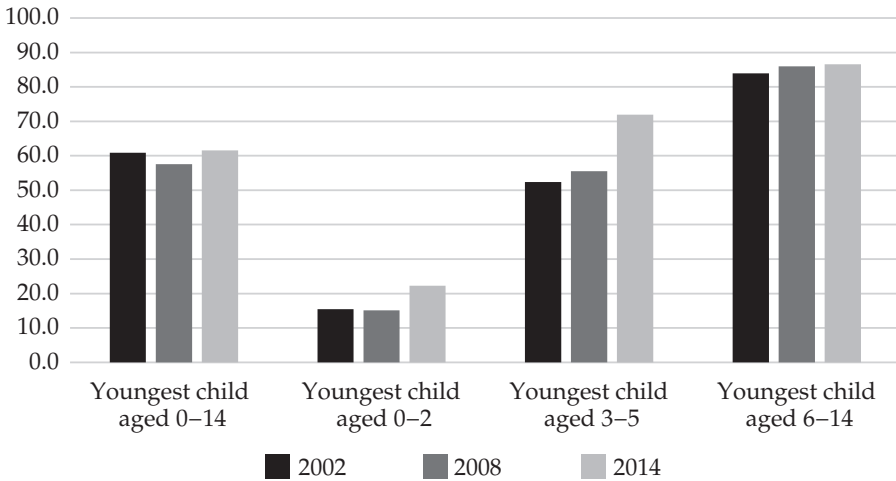
These trends have led some authors to point out that family policies have not undergone substantial changes in recent decades [for the Czech case, see Saxenberg, Sirovátka and Janoušková 2013; for the Polish case, see Szikra and Szelewa 2010]. Other authors have argued that the Czech Republic has undergone a change of model from 'female mobilising' (high quantity and quality of childcare without generous leave) towards 'explicit familialism' (low childcare rates, longer leaves, and parental leave payments) [Szelewa and Polakowski 2008]. More recently, Szelewa [2017] argued that, in Poland in 2016, the implementation of the universal child allowance (for all families from the second child onwards or the first in the case of families with fewer resources, extended in 2020 to cover all first-born children) represents a measure that transforms the policies of implicit familialism into explicit familialism, bringing Poland closer to its Central European peers.

Although the refamilialisation policies implemented in recent decades had a pronatalist objective, fertility has fallen sharply in Central Eastern European countries between 1989 and 2013, and the age at first childbirth has increased. This is due, in part, to the increased cost of childbearing and childraising, which had largely been subsidised during the socialist regime [Frejka 1980].

Figures 1a, 1b, and 1c show the evolution of maternal employment (women aged 15–64) from the beginning of the past decade to 2014. It shows that Polish mothers (1c) worked the most (about half of mothers) when their children were under the age of three, due to the means-tested benefit system, which made many of them ineligible for parental leave once maternity leave was completed. The Hungarian case (1c) exemplified the opposite extreme, as few mothers with children aged 0–2 worked because parental leave was well paid and was based on the income-replacement principle until the age of two. Czech women (1a) occupied an intermediate position, but their rates were more similar to those of Hungarian women than Polish women, because they had a flat-rate benefit for up to four years (three years with protected employment). However, there is a noted effect from the introduction of a reform in 2008 that allowed for a more flexible system, under which two or three years of leave could be chosen, as maternal employment of mothers with children below three increased from 15% in 2008 to 22% in 2014. In the Czech Republic, there was also an upward trend in the employment of mothers with children aged three to five (55–72%), a trend that also occurred in Hungary, though to a lesser extent. In the case of mothers with children aged 6–14, Czech women had the highest and most stable employment rates throughout the period (around 85%). In Poland, the rate rose between 2006 and 2008 but then stabilised around 75% in 2014, and in Hungary, it increased by five percentage points between 2008 and 2014 to 79%.

Figure 2 shows that the number of children under the age of three attending childcare was very low in all three countries, with Poland having the lowest numbers and Hungary the highest. Hungary, moreover, began to distance itself from the other two countries as of 2010 and had nearly 20% of children enrolled, a figure that is in line with the strong commitment, made years earlier, of the

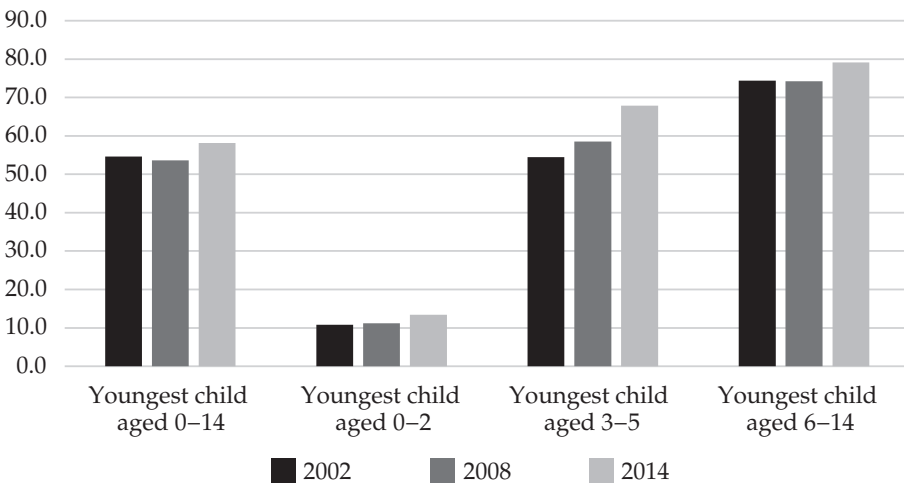
Figure 1a. Employment rates for Czech women (15–64) with children (aged 0–14) by age of youngest child (2002–2014)



Note: Figure 1a. Retrieved 10 September 2020 (<https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>). Table: MER-Child-Age-15-64.

Source: OECD Family Database.

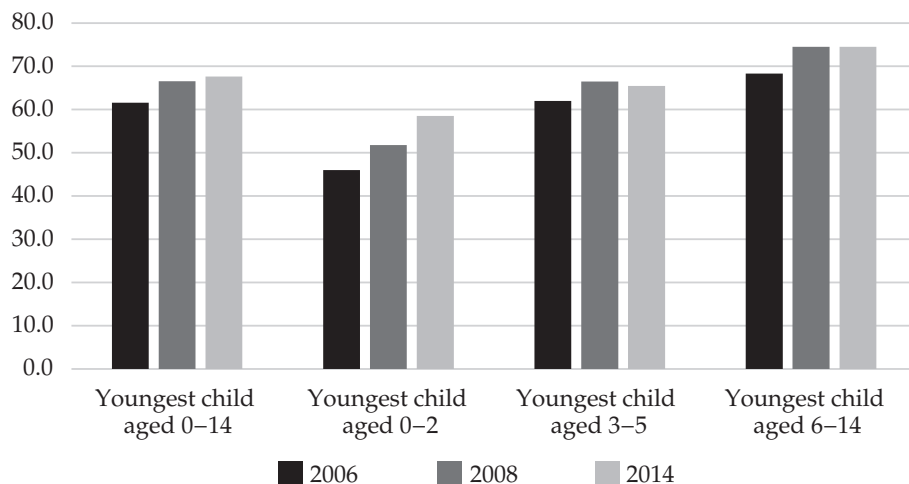
Figure 1b. Employment rates for Hungarian women (15–64) with children (aged 0–14) by age of youngest child (2002–2014)



Note: Figure 1b. Retrieved 10 September 2020 (<https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>). Table: MER-Child-Age-15-64.

Source: OECD Family Database.

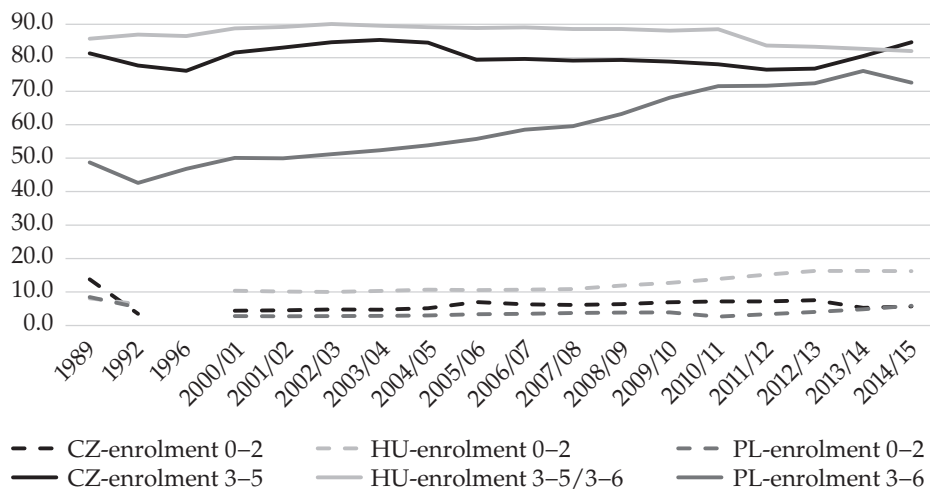
Figure 1c. Employment rates for Polish women (15–64) with children (aged 0–14) by age of youngest child (2006–2014)



Note: Figure 1c. Retrieved 10 September 2020 (<https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>). Table: MER-Child-Age-15-64.

Source: OECD Family Database.

Figure 2. Enrolment rates of children aged 0–2 and 3–6 (1989–2015)



Note: Retrieved 18 June 2018 (<https://www.unicef-irc.org/research/monitoring-in-the-cee-cis-and-baltics-the-monee-project/>). Table: 5.1.1. Data for Hungary refer to children aged 3.5 (1989–1996 data) and 3–6 (2000–2015).

Source: MONEE database.

Hungarian authorities to increase childcare availability [Robila 2012]. Poland rose from 2011/2012, and from 2013 onwards, its percentages equalled those of the Czech Republic, although both remained below 10%. Polish mothers reconcile work and employment through two mechanisms of informal welfare provision, which are vital in the region [Polese et al. 2014]: family support (especially by grandmothers) and the hiring of informal caregivers (nannies). In Poland, the most educated women are in the public sector, with more secure jobs and more incentives to remain, so the informal childcare market is widespread [Javornik 2016]. Poland also stands out for its marketing of care services: 57% of crèches in 2013 were private [Szelewa 2014] and 78% in 2017 [Szwelewa and Polakowski 2020].

The gradual increase in enrolment of children between the ages of three and six in Poland since the late 2000s is noteworthy. Enrolment rose steadily from 50% to 72.6%, while in Hungary it was fairly stable (above 80%) but lower in 2015 than in 2000. Finally, the Czech Republic experienced some fluctuations throughout the period, with a decline in the middle of the last decade and a subsequent recovery reaching levels very similar to those at which it began.

Evolution of public opinion towards maternal employment

As previously mentioned, during the communist regimes, traditional gender roles were maintained. The impact of communist ideology on the family, however, was somewhat contradictory, as Sobotka [2008] observes. While it was a deeply anti-religious ideology that eroded some traditional norms related to sexuality, marriage and the family, it also gradually advocated a conservative family model, promoting the idea of parental 'duty' and the women's responsibility to society to bear children. As a result, paradoxically, communism and Catholicism – in some respects – developed a similar morality [Ferge 1997].

Hašková and Saxonberg [2016] highlight that from the early years of the communist period, psychologists complained about the long hours children under the age of three spent in nurseries, which made them prone to psychological disturbances. In addition, paediatricians argued that infectious diseases spread easily in nurseries because they were overcrowded. With the change in the economic situation in the 1960s (not as much labour was needed because the economy was stagnating) and the decline in fertility, psychologists and paediatricians found the right climate to criticise nurseries. Progressively, governments in the region extended maternity leave for mothers to three years, after which children would attend kindergarten, which were more widely accepted because – contrary to the nurseries – they have educational goals and were responsibility of the ministries of education.

Table 1 shows the evolution of the general population's opinions on two items related to the role of mothers (columns labelled A). These opinions are

Table 1. Evolution of attitudes towards maternal employment (1994–2012) in general population (A), among women 18–49 (B) and among mothers 18–49 (C): ‘What a woman should do when she has a preschool child’ and ‘Agreement with preschool child suffers when mother works’

	Czech Republic			Hungary			Poland		
	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
	1994								
Stay at home	53.9	47.7	49.8	63.9	54	54.9	74.5	65.2	69.2
Work part-time	39.4	46.3	44.0	31.3	38.8	38.5	14.4	19.8	16.5
Work full-time	6.6	6.0	6.2	4.8	7.2	6.5	11.2	15	14.3
Child suffers	49.7	46.3	46.7	73.1	61.9	64.4	68.3	64.2	69.5
	2002								
Stay at home	39	37.5	36.3	46.8	42.3	42.6	56.5	44.8	47.1
Work part-time	47.7	50.5	52.6	46.7	48.4	49.4	23.7	31.5	29.3
Work full-time	13.3	11.9	11.1	6.5	9.3	8	19.8	23.7	23.6
Child suffers	50.7	45.2	45.4	65.4	58.6	62.5	55	49.7	54.2
	2012								
Stay at home	39.1	35.5	35.6	35.3	32.8	34	58.1	42	49.7
Work part-time	44.4	45.1	45.4	48.3	48.5	45.8	28.4	39.1	34.2
Work full-time	16.5	19.4	19	16.4	18.7	20.2	13.5	18.9	16
Child suffers	33.2	30.7	30.4	51.7	48.2	53	45.5	32.7	38.9

Note: A = general population, B = women aged 18–49, C = mothers aged 18–49. Weighted data.

Source: ISSP 1994, 2002 and 2012. Author’s calculations.

compared with those of women (aged 18–49, columns labelled B) and those of mothers (aged 18–49, columns labelled C). The first question asks what a woman should do when she has a preschool-age child: work full time, part time or stay at home. The second question examines the degree of agreement with the statement ‘A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works’ (5-point Likert scale). The table shows the sum of the percentages of the interviewees who agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.²

² One of these items will be used to construct the dependent variable (the question regarding what women should do when they have a preschool-age child), and the other will be used as the independent variable (agreement with the statement that preschool-age children suffer when mothers work).

Concerning the opinion on whether a mother should work when her child is of preschool age, Poland has the most traditional opinion and the Czech Republic has the least. While in Hungary the whole population is increasingly less supportive of the choice to stay at home, in the Czech Republic and Poland, there was first a decline in the 1990s and a slight upturn in the following decade (Poland) or a stagnation of this option (Czech Republic). This is in line with the results of Mullerova's [2017a] study, which found a resurgence of more traditional attitudes in favour of higher task specialisation between men and women in the Czech Republic. A similar trend was highlighted by Szelewa [2014] in Poland.

In all three countries, a minority of the population supports women working full time. It is considered more desirable for mothers to work part time than full time, although this preference for part-time work is lower in Poland. Support for the statement that young children suffer when the mother works declined in all three countries over the period, with the decline in Hungary being more marked in the 2000s and more gradual in Poland since the 1990s, while in the Czech Republic a slight increase was followed by a sharp decrease. While the Czech Republic showed the least agreement with the statement in all three years (1994, 2002, and 2012), Hungary showed the most agreement with it.

In 1994 and 2002, there was a more pronounced preference for part-time employment (in the three countries) and for full-time employment (in Hungary and Poland) among women and mothers than the general population, while in 2012, the preferences of the general population approached those of women and mothers. The differences between mothers and women were not pronounced. Staying at home lost support among mothers and women throughout the period, except in the case of Polish mothers from 2002 to 2012. Women and mothers tended to agree that children suffer when the mother works to a lesser extent than the general population, though with some nuances (Hungarian mothers in 2012 tended to agree more than the general population). The Czech Republic had fewer differences among the three groups analysed (general population, women and mothers).

Discussion of the negative effects of separating young children from their mothers continued after the fall of communism [Sirovátka and Válková 2018], which, together with nurseries' bad reputations since the communist era, explains why the majority of the population supports mothers staying at home when they have children of preschool age [Saxonberg, Sirovátka and Janoušková 2013].

Institutionalist authors highlighted the impact of family policies on the development of these attitudes [Gangl and Ziefle 2015; Kremer 2006]. This approach considers family policies as an important explanatory factor for explaining cross-country differences in preferences towards maternal employment. The institutionalist approach can be complemented with the culturalist one, which pays attention to the role of culture as an explanatory factor of these preferences. Pfau-Effinger [1998] introduced the concept of gender culture to refer to the norms and values regarding 'correct' forms of gender relations and of the divi-

sion of labour between men and women. Pfau-Effinger [2005] argues that norms and ideas continuously interact with institutions. As Sirovátka and Válková [2018: 285] explain in their analysis of the Czech case, ‘we may expect that not only do employment opportunities generate demand for childcare, but also childcare policies are shaping attitudes of the public towards women’s and mothers’ labour-market participation, which in turn influence the demand for childcare and, consequently, provision of the policies’. In the same vein, Hašková and Saxenberg show the continuous interaction between institutions and cultural norms in the three countries [2016: 566]. On the one hand, the policies enacted earlier create normative structures that define the limits of the behaviour of individuals and groups in later years. On the other hand, policymakers are influenced by the dominant cultural norms in their society and also by the norms of their group. In addition, it is difficult to disentangle the effect of institutional and cultural factors [Boeckman, Misra and Budig 2015; Uunk 2015].

Objectives

Although most mothers surveyed in the three countries preferred to stay at home or work part time until their children start school, the experiences of many Czech, Hungarian, and Polish mothers were not congruent with this preference. To determine the degree of congruity between the preferences of mothers of reproductive ages and their personal experiences is the first objective of this study.

Determining the changes in the degree of congruity over the last two decades (1994–2012) is the second objective of this research. The study analyses how a mother’s age impacts congruity. As noted by Ferge in reference to the communist era [1997: 161], ‘*the debate is about whether women wished to work or were only coerced to do so*’ (author’s italics). In her opinion, it is possible to differentiate a first period in which women’s aspirations to emancipate were more important and a second period in which they felt more pressure from political authorities to work. After the fall of the communist regime, the development of family policies that encouraged mothers to stay at home was justified. Governments argued that this was what they really wanted to do but had been unable to because of ‘forced commodification’ [Adamik 1993].

Following Frejka [2008], this paper makes a distinction between mothers born before and after 1966. The mothers in the first group experienced their most fertile years during the communist regime and were marginally – and only in the case of younger women – affected by the transition, since most of their children had already been born by 1990. The mothers born after 1966 adopted new childbearing and family formation strategies in the new post-communist context – except those born in the second half of the 1960s, who experienced part of their fertile life under communist conditions and part of it during the transition. When attempting to compare past behaviour (when they became mothers) with cur-

rent attitudes (when they were interviewed), we cannot be sure if respondents changed their attitudes during that period because the study is cross-sectional and no question was included in the surveys to compare past and present attitudes. To avoid this problem (at least partially), we restricted our sample to mothers of reproductive ages (18–49), because the period elapsed between the moment of having a child and the moment of the survey is shorter compared with the whole sample of mothers.

Finally, the third objective is to analyse the similarities and differences between these countries and whether they have converged in the last two decades.

Data and methodology

To fulfil the above objectives, the ‘Family and Changing Gender Roles’ module of the ISSP was used. The three surveys in which the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland participated (1994, 2002 and 2012) were chosen. The samples are representative of people aged 18 years and over, and the size of each sample varies among countries and surveys, with a minimum size of 1012 (Hungary in 2012) and a maximum size of 1804 (Czech Republic in 2012). From the total sample, we chose mothers of reproductive ages (18–49) who had a spouse or partner when they were raising preschool-age children. With this restriction, the sample size was 846 cases in 1994, 711 cases in 2002, and 586 cases in 2012.³

The dependent variable measures the degree of congruity between mothers’ employment preferences when raising a preschool-age child and their actual experiences. To construct it, we used two items: ‘Do you think that women should work outside the home full time, part time or not at all when there is a child under school age?’ and ‘Did you work outside the home full time, part time or not at all when a child was under school age?’ Unfortunately, these questions do not distinguish between children below three and those 3–5 years old, which would have been preferable as such a distinction may have affected respondents’ opinions and behaviours. As shown in Figures 1a, 1b, and 1c, mothers’ employment statuses differed depending on whether they had children aged 0–2 or 3–5, a pattern closely related to the availability of childcare services (Figure 2). The dependent variable was created by comparing the responses to a question about behaviour (what the respondents did) and a variable concerning attitudes towards maternal employment (what women should do).⁴

³ The focus of the analysis is on mothers with partners because the circumstances in which single mothers with young children must decide whether to work are very different from those of mothers with partners.

⁴ It is assumed that these attitudes are related to personal preferences. Some authors criticise the use of general attitudes towards female employment as an indicator of women’s specific preferences for themselves [Hakim 2003]. Nevertheless, since the available surveys reflect general attitudes, most studies have used them as proxy variables for women’s pref-

The percentage of congruity was obtained by adding three percentages that represent the alignment between employment preference and actual work status when the interviewees became mothers. The first percentage represents the group of interviewees who responded that it is most desirable when a mother has a preschool-age child to work full time and they did so. The second percentage represents the group of mothers who prefer to work part time and they did so. The third percentage represents those who prefer to stay at home and they did so.

There were three potential types of incongruity between preferences and actual experiences: (i) the respondent may prefer to work full time but only worked part time; (ii) the respondent may prefer to work either full time or part time but did not work; and (iii) the respondent may prefer to work part time or not at all but worked more than she desired to because she worked full time (in the first case) or either full time or part time (in the second case).

As independent variables, national contexts were used, including the three countries as dummy variables. In addition, several individual-level control variables were included in the multinomial regression analysis:

(i) Age: The samples were divided into two age groups. The oldest group included women born before 1966, while the youngest group comprised women born in 1966 or later.

(ii) Education: Education level is measured with two categories. The first category includes interviewees with secondary education or below and the second category includes the mothers with tertiary education.

(iii) A variable that measured the degree of agreement with the following sentence: 'A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works'. Previous research has shown that a mother's personal care attitudes are significantly related to her labour-market status, with a bidirectional relation between attitudes and behaviours [Corrigal and Konrad 2007; Fortin 2005; Himmelweit and Sigala 2004; Steiber and Haas 2009].

(iv) The employment status of the male spouse when there were preschool children in the home (worked full time, part time or did not work). This variable controls for whether the mothers' preferences are constrained by economic factors, as women tend to work if their partners are inactive or unemployed to maintain a minimum standard of living in the family.

The analytical strategy had two parts: a descriptive analysis and a multinomial regression. First, the total percentage of congruity between preferences and actual experiences in the three countries and the variation in congruity from 1994 to 2012 are shown. Second, a multinomial regression was carried out to test which

erences [Schleutker 2017]. More concretely, the same ISSP items used in this research have been used previously by Janus [2013a, 2013b], Kangas and Rosgaard [2007], Steiber and Haas [2009], and Schleutker [2017], among others. As Kangas and Rosgaard [2007] argue, these questions are similar enough to be used as proxies for personal preferences used by Hakim.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics (sample: mothers aged 18–49) (1994–2012)

	1994	2002	2012
DEPENDENT VARIABLE			
Congruity preferences-experiences			
Prefer home & stayed at home	27.6	22.6	22.5
Prefer part-time & worked part-time	4.6	7.4	9.5
Prefer full-time & worked full-time	6.2	9.7	14.4
Prefer full or part-time and worked less than desired or didn't work	10.0	18.8	17.3
Prefer part-time or stay at home & worked more than desired	51.7	41.5	36.3
INDEPENDENT VARIABLES			
Countries			
Czech Republic	26.0	36.0	46.8
Hungary	36.5	28.3	25.0
Poland	38.3	36.9	28.2
Cohort			
Born before 1966	83.8	56.1	10.9
Born 1966 and later	16.2	43.9	89.1
Education			
Primary + secondary	85.1	82.1	81.1
Tertiary	14.9	17.9	18.9
'A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works'			
Strongly agree	26.9	20.0	14.0
Agree	33.2	33.4	24.7
Neither agree nor disagree	13.8	13.7	18.7
Disagree	19.3	26.5	27.1
Strongly disagree	6.7	6.3	15.5
Employment status of the partner			
Home	3.7	3.7	5.7
Part-time	0.9	1.3	3.1
Full-time	95.4	95.0	91.2

Source: ISSP 1994, 2002 and 2012. Author's calculations. Weighted data.

independent variables explain this congruity or incongruity. We use weighted data for the descriptive analysis and unweighted data for the multivariate analysis. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for all variables used.

Results

Descriptive analysis: evolution of the degree of congruity and incongruity

This section is divided into two parts. The first part provides a descriptive analysis of the percentage of congruity between mothers' preferences and actual employment statuses and the variation in congruity over the twenty years analysed. In the second part, the impact of individual variables and national contexts on the degree of congruity is analysed for the three years studied.

As shown in Table 3, only in one case was the number of mothers whose experiences were congruent with what they considered desirable greater than the number of mothers who experienced incongruity, a pattern shared by all three countries. The greatest congruity was experienced by Czech mothers in 2012 (54.8%) and Polish mothers in 1994 (48.6%), while Hungarian mothers in 1994 experienced the lowest congruity (32.3%).

The changes in congruity in the Czech Republic and Hungary on the one hand and Poland on the other differed: while in the first two, the trend has always been towards an increasing level of congruity (especially in the Czech Republic), in Poland, the trend has been the opposite. One pattern that the three countries shared was that congruity is largely based on the fact that mothers considered it desirable to stay at home when women have a young child and that this is what they actually did ('Prefer home & stayed at home' row)⁵. However, this general trend must be clarified: while in Hungary and Poland the percentage of this option has tended to decrease (from 25.6% to 19.3% in Hungary and from 38.5% to 23.9% in Poland), in the Czech Republic, it decreased in 2002 and rose again in 2012, showing a higher percentage in 2012 (23.4%) than in 1994 (19.1%). The means-tested system in Poland and the well-paid two-year leave in Hungary, as opposed to the four-year paid system in the Czech Republic, could help explain these results.

A final common pattern in all three countries was the increase over time in the proportion of mothers who preferred to work full time and did so ('Prefer full time & worked full time' row), with very similar figures in all three countries in 2012 (with a slight decrease in Poland from 2002 to 2012). The increase in congruity

⁵ Remember that, as explained in the Data and Methodology section, the percentage of congruity is a result of adding three percentages of mothers, who experience a correspondence between preferences and labour experiences when they became mothers. In the same line, the percentage of incongruity is a result of adding three percentages of mothers who experience a gap between preferences and labour experiences when they became mothers.

Table 3. Evolution of the coherence and the gap between attitudes and work status and their components when children are under school age (sample: mothers aged 18–49) (1994–2012)

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland
1994			
Prefer to stay at home & stayed at home	19.1	25.6	38.5
Prefer part-time & worked part-time	12.0	2.2	1.5
Prefer full-time & worked full-time	4.1	4.5	8.6
<i>Total congruity</i>	35.3	32.3	48.6
Prefer full-time & worked less than desired	1.2	0.0	0.7
Prefer part-time or stay at home & worked more than desired	56.0	57.2	40.2
Prefer full or part-time & didn't work	7.4	10.7	10.5
<i>Total incongruity</i>	64.6	67.9	51.4
2002			
Prefer to stay at home & stayed at home	20.0	22.9	25.3
Prefer part-time & worked part-time	10.7	6.1	4.8
Prefer full-time & worked full-time	9.0	5.7	14.6
<i>Total congruity</i>	39.7	34.8	44.7
Prefer full-time & worked less than desired	0.5	0.9	0.4
Prefer part-time or stay at home & worked more than desired	42.6	46.5	35.1
Prefer full or part-time & didn't work	17.2	17.9	19.8
<i>Total incongruity</i>	60.3	65.3	55.3
2012			
Prefer to stay at home & stayed at home	23.4	19.3	23.9
Prefer part-time & worked part-time	16.2	3.4	4.0
Prefer full-time & worked full-time	15.2	14.6	12.8
<i>Total congruity</i>	54.8	37.3	40.7
Prefer full-time & worked less than desired	2.2	0.5	0.0
Prefer part-time or stay at home & worked more than desired	30.3	38.3	44.4
Prefer full or part-time & didn't work	12.7	23.8	14.8
<i>Total incongruity</i>	45.2	62.6	59.2

Source: ISSP 1994, 2002 and 2012. Author's calculations. Weighted data.

ity in the Czech Republic stems from the fact that the number of mothers who preferred to work part time or full time and did so increased to 6.2% and 15.2% in 2012. The Czech Republic was the only country in which a significant percentage of mothers preferred to work part time and managed to do so.

Table 3 also shows how incongruity between preferences and actual experiences varied over time. The main component of incongruity in the three countries was that mothers worked more than they considered desirable ('Prefer part time or stay at home & worked more than desired' row). The percentage of this type of incongruity was much higher in 1994, as the majority of the respondents had their children during the communist era. Interestingly, however, the change in this category differed between Poland and the other two countries. In Poland, during the 1990s, it fell (from 40.2% to 35.1%), but in the 2000s, it peaked (44.4%), which is likely related to Poland's liberal family policy and the increased prevalence of traditional views on maternal employment. However, in the Czech Republic and Hungary, the decrease in this category was constant throughout the period. Indeed, in Poland, this category mainly comprised mothers who preferred to stay at home but who worked full time, while Czech and Hungarian mothers preferred to work part time. Another contrast can be observed between Hungary on the one hand and Poland and the Czech Republic on the other: in Hungary, the number of mothers who wanted to work but did not increased significantly during the period (from 10.7% to 23.8%). This confirms the difficulties mothers faced in returning to work [Fultz and Steinhilber 2004; Glass and Fodor 2007]. In the Czech Republic and Poland, this category first increased during the 1990s and then decreased during the 2000s. The smallest category is represented by the 'Prefer full time & worked less than desired' row, i.e. mothers who wanted to work full time and worked part time, which is not surprising given the low number of part-time jobs in these countries, even if this option is considered desirable by many mothers (see Table 1).

Multinomial regression analysis: factors explaining the probability of experiencing congruity and incongruity

The aforementioned differences could be due to the effects of composition in the samples, i.e. individual characteristics. Tables 4 and 5 show the results of the multinomial regression analysis to verify which factors increased or decreased the probability that a mother would experience congruity between her preferences and actual experiences.⁶ Table 4 focuses on individual characteristics (controlled for national contexts) and shows the marginal effects of each dependent variable.

⁶ Due to the small number of cases of mothers who said that they worked less than they considered desirable, this category has been added to that of mothers who did not work even though they considered it desirable to do so.

Table 4. Marginal effects of the probability of experiencing coherence or inconsistency between attitudes and behaviours (sample: mothers aged 18–49) (1994, 2002 and 2012) – first part

	Coherence attitude-behaviour			Gap attitude-behaviour	
	Prefer to stay at home & stayed at home	Prefer part-time & worked part-time	Prefer full-time & worked full-time	Prefer full or part-time & worked less than desired/ didn't work	Prefer part-time or stay at home & worked more than desired
Year: 1994					
Observations: 846					
Pseudo R ² : .094***					
Cohort					
Born 1966 or later	.139***	-.010	-.062	.104***	-.171***
Education (ref. tertiary)					
Primary+sec.	.175***	-.018	.0005	-.042	-.115**
Preschool child suffers when mother works	.066***	-.004	-.038***	-.010	-.013
Year: 2002					
Observations: 711					
Pseudo R ² : .056***					
Cohort					
Born 1966 or later	.076***	-.003	-.053**	.078***	-.097***
Education (ref. tertiary)					
Primary+sec.	.010	.019	-.066***	.035	.0008
Preschool child suffers when mother works	.072***	-.005	-.044***	-.026**	.004

Table 4. Marginal effects of the probability of experiencing coherence or inconsistency between attitudes and behaviours (sample: mothers aged 18–49) (1994, 2002 and 2012) – second part

	Coherence attitude-behaviour			Gap attitude-behaviour	
	Prefer to stay at home & stayed at home	Prefer part-time & worked part-time	Prefer full-time & worked full-time	Prefer full or part-time & worked less than desired/didn't work	Prefer part-time or stay at home & worked more than desired
Year: 2012					
Observations: 586					
Pseudo R ² : .059***					
Cohort					
Born 1966 or later	.074	-.028	.007	.031	-.085
Education (ref. tertiary)					
Primary+sec.	.065	.047	-.056	.075	-.131*
Preschool child suffers when mother works	.058***	-.004	-.067***	-.005	.019

Source: ISSP 1994, 2002, and 2012.

Sig. *** $p \leq .01$, ** $p \leq .05$. Controlled for employment status of the partner and for countries.

Table 5 focuses on national contexts (controlled for individual characteristics). Due to the limitations of our dependent variable, as previously explained, we had to be cautious when interpreting the results.

As it is difficult to interpret the results because the coefficients from multinomial logit are relative to the base outcome, in Table 4 we examined the marginal effect of changing their values on the probability of observing an outcome. We used marginal effects to show the change in probability when the predictor or independent variable was increased by one unit. In the case of binary variables, such as those used in this analysis, the change is from 0 to 1. In Table 5, to elucidate the model, we used predicted probabilities to calculate the predicted probability of the occurrence of each of the five categories of the dependent variable in each country after controlling for individual variables.

Table 5. Evolution of predicted probabilities of coherence or inconsistency by country (sample: mothers aged 18–49) (1994–2012)

	Coherence attitude-behaviour			Gap attitude-behaviour	
	Prefer to stay at home & Stayed at home	Prefer part-time & worked part-time	Prefer full-time & worked full-time	Prefer full or part-time & worked less than desired/ didn't work	Prefer part-time or stay at home & worked more than desired
Year: 1994					
Observations: 846					
Pseudo R ² : .094***					
Czech Republic	.201***	.113***	.033***	.090***	.560***
Hungary	.221***	.024***	.060***	.106***	.588***
Poland	.388***	.012**	.095***	.102***	.400***
Year: 2002					
Observations: 711					
Pseudo R ² : .056***					
Czech Republic	.167***	.117***	.096***	.168***	.450***
Hungary	.179***	.056***	.080***	.194***	.489***
Poland	.261***	.050***	.146***	.186***	.355***
Year: 2012					
Observations: 586					
Pseudo R ² : .059***					
Czech Republic	.245***	.170***	.136***	.111***	.335***
Hungary	.146***	.041***	.202***	.236***	.372***
Poland	.229***	.048***	.143***	.173***	.404***

Source: ISSP 1994, 2002, and 2012.

Sig. ***p ≤ .01, ** p ≤ .05. Controlled for cohort, education, employment status of the partner and attitudes towards maternal employment.

Starting with the individual factors (Table 4), younger mothers, whose children were mainly born in the post-communist period, were more likely to have achieved congruity between preferences and actual experiences by staying at home in 1994 and 2002. These mothers were more likely to experience incongruity when staying at home and considered it desirable to work, while being a mother whose children were born during the communist period was associated with experiencing incongruity due to working more than desired. In all three surveys, less-educated mothers were more likely to achieve congruity by staying home, and in 2002, they were less likely to achieve it by working full time compared to mothers with a tertiary education. Agreement with the statement about child suffering ('A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works') was associated with a preference for staying at home and doing so in all three surveys and with being less likely to achieve congruity by working full time.⁷

Finally, Table 5 compares whether the probability of having experienced certain types of congruity or incongruity was similar in the three analysed countries after controlling for individual variables. In 1994, Polish mothers were more likely to achieve congruity by staying at home or working full time than Czech and Hungarian mothers, and less likely to have worked more than they considered desirable. In addition, the more noticeable difference between Czech and Hungarian mothers was that the former were more likely to have experienced congruity through part-time employment than the latter (11.3% and 2.4%), even surpassing Polish women (1.2%).

The pattern discussed above was reproduced by Polish mothers in 2002. Hungarian mothers, however, moved away from Czech mothers; in addition to being less likely to work part time, they were also less likely to achieve congruity through working full time than Czech mothers, which increased their probability of working full time from 3.3% (1994) to 9.6% (2002). At the other extreme, Hungarian mothers were more likely in 2002 to experience incongruity by not working when they preferred to work (19.4%).

Some patterns in 2012 differed from those in the previous decade: Polish mothers were no longer different from Czech mothers in their greater likelihood of achieving congruity by staying at home or working full time; however, Polish mothers were still less likely to work part time than Czech mothers (4.8% and 17%, respectively), a pattern they shared with Hungarian mothers (4.1%). Hungary stands out for its lower probability of mothers staying at home and its higher probability that they would achieve congruity with full-time work and that they would experience incongruity in preferring to work but not doing so (23.6%), while Poland had the highest proportion of mothers who worked more than they desired to (40.4%).

⁷ The employment status of the spouse showed little significance and, therefore, was not shown in the results.

Discussion

This paper has examined the degree of congruity between the employment preferences of mothers of reproductive ages in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland between 1994 and 2012 and their actual experiences, paying particular attention to the difference between women who had children during the communist period and those who did so after its fall. This paper contributes to the literature on family policies and their consequences for maternal employment and work–family reconciliation, focusing on three countries that are usually clustered together in international comparisons. The similarities and differences in the degree of congruity between mothers' preferences and actual experiences in the aforementioned countries and variation in congruity over time were analysed.

The three countries showed different degrees of congruity, with the Czech Republic having the highest levels in 2012 (but lower than Poland in 1994 and 2002) and Hungary having the lowest throughout the entire period (Tables 3 and 5). As for similarities, the findings show that in all cases except the Czech Republic in 2012, the number of mothers whose preferences and actual experiences were incongruent was greater than the number of those whose preferences and experiences were congruent. Table 5 shows that the most likely scenario in all three countries and all three surveys was for mothers' preferences to be incongruent with their actual experiences because most worked more than they desired to. The highest figure was in Hungary in 1994 (58.8% of probability), and the lowest was in the Czech Republic in 2012 (33.5%). By contrast, the highest congruity was achieved by mothers who stayed at home and preferred this option, with the highest figures in Poland in 1994 (38.8%) and the lowest in Hungary in 2012 (14.6%). The only exception to this pattern was Hungary in 2012, where mothers who worked full time and also preferred this option (20.2%) outnumbered the previously mentioned group. The results also confirm that the proportion of mothers who worked full time and preferred this option increased in the three countries.

Nevertheless, divergences among the three countries could also be observed. While Czech and Hungarian mothers achieved greater congruity over the two decades analysed (the former group to a greater extent than the latter), the opposite trend was observed among Polish mothers. Cohorts born before 1966 were more likely to have worked more than they considered desirable when they had young children than those born after 1966. The preferences of the latter cohorts were more likely to be congruent with their experiences when staying at home, but they also encountered incongruity since they were more likely to be inactive although they prefer to work compared to older mothers, who became mothers during the communist period and experienced this type of incongruity less frequently. Table 1 shows that mothers preferred to work part time instead of full time when they had a preschool-age child, but the actual labour-market conditions provided few opportunities to realise their preferences, in contrast with neighbouring countries such as Austria and Germany, where part-time employ-

ment is very common among mothers [Riederer and Berghammer 2020; García-Faroldi 2020]. Only in the Czech Republic in 2012 is the percentage of mothers who achieve this type of congruity (prefer and experience part-time work) noticeable (16.2%).

These results are consistent with the family policies historically developed in these countries, confirming that many mothers were ‘forced’ to work during communism even though they preferred to stay at home. Once this ‘top-down’ pressure to work disappeared, mothers in the post-communist period could stay at home because they felt it was the right thing to do (Table 1). Nevertheless, these women also faced greater difficulties in working at the end of their parental leave even when they wanted to [Glass and Fodor 2007; Mullerova 2017b; Saxonberg and Sirovátka 2008].⁸

The findings also show that in the last decades mothers’ support for staying at home when raising preschool-age children has decreased, and fewer mothers agree that children suffer when mothers work. Accordingly, some of them prefer to work without interruption when they become mothers, though part-time work is a desired option that is unavailable to many of them. In their analysis of the Czech Republic and Poland, Saxonberg and Sirovátka [2008] highlight that women’s career aspirations are rising in both countries, but family policies have gone against their aspirations. University enrolment rates have increased since 1989, and younger, better-educated women are giving new meaning to education, as a way to access to high-skilled jobs and are now thinking about career opportunities, unlike their predecessors [Michon 2010].

In many cases, the parental leave system in the Czech Republic has increased the congruity between Czech mothers’ preferences and their actual experiences. While the group of Czech mothers who achieved congruity by staying at home remained fairly stable, the number of mothers who harmonised their preferences with their work statuses by working part time or full time increased (Table 3). Szelewa and Polakowski [2020] characterise recent reforms in childcare policies as an example of explicit privatisation, because efforts of the social-democratic government (2014–2017) to extend access to childcare were aimed at creating a market for childcare services. This policy made it easier for Czech mothers to combine work with access to childcare services, though on a private rather than public basis.

The Hungarian case is interesting because it shows a dichotomy between mothers: they were more likely to work more than they wanted to and to prefer to work but have not. Although the former group was more numerous than the latter, the trend over the two decades has been for the former to decrease and the latter to grow (Tables 3 and 5). The increase in congruity in Hungary was much

⁸ Other factors, especially economic ones, influence the greater or lesser difficulty mothers encounter in returning to the labour market (e.g. GDP growth, unemployment rate, wages, etc.), but it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse these.

lower than in the Czech Republic, perhaps due to the significant changes that occurred from the mid-1990s until the beginning of the 2000s and made it difficult to access family benefits, creating a 'two-track' family policy that favoured the better-off between 1998 and 2002 [Glass and Fodor 2007]. The first maternity benefit is a two-year insurance-based benefit for employed women, is linked to past income and provides wage replacement at a rate of 70%. The second tracks are both universal tracks and are less generous; one is available to all women and the second is a special track for career housewives with three or more children [ibid.]. Middle-class women benefit more from the first one, returning to work after a maximum of two years; however, many Hungarians think preschool-age children suffer when mothers work (Table 1). Poor and minority women receive a universal but less generous provision and stay at home to care for their children. Family policies in Hungary have sometimes been described as 'optional familialism', but only families with greater resources can truly choose between different childcare arrangements, as the value of family allowances decreased by half in the 1990s [Glass and Fodor 2007; Szikra and Szelewa 2010]. In Hungary, class differences intersect with ethnic discrimination of the Roma, affecting the distribution of and eligibility for social benefits [Glass and Fodor 2007; Szikra and Szelewa 2010]. This pattern of 'two-track' family policies continues nowadays and has been described by Szelewa and Polakowski [2020] as explicit public dualisation: public childcare services are predominantly used by employed women (often with higher education), and fewer options are available to excluded mothers, who have to stay at home even if they would prefer to work.

Poland occupies an intermediate position between the Czech Republic and Hungary in the degree of congruity between preferences and actual experiences but, unlike the other two, shows a decrease in the degree of congruity over time (Tables 3 and 5). This phenomenon is due to the combination of two interrelated factors. First, we can observe a decrease in the percentage of mothers who prefer to stay at home when raising a child and stay at home when their own child is born (from 38.5% in 1994 to 23.9% in 2012). Indeed, Table 5 shows that the probability of experiencing this situation has continuously been reduced between 1994 and 2012 (from .388 to .229). The second factor is an increasing number of mothers who report that they work more than they consider desirable (from 40.2% to 44.4%). Indeed, Table 5 shows that the probability of experiencing this incongruity increased in Polish mothers between 2002 and 2012 (from .355 to .404). These patterns are consistent with, on the one hand, a resurgence of traditional values and what Szelewa [2014] describes as a second wave of anti-feminism and an attack on 'gender ideology' and, on the other hand, liberal and implicitly familialist family policies. As a result, many mothers would like to stay at home to care for their children but have to work. In this sense, one possible line of research would be to analyse whether the incongruity found diminishes in the coming years when the effects of new family policies can be seen: an increase in the number of places for children under the age of three (2011), the new parental leave scheme

(26 weeks more) that considerably contributes to family support during the first year after childbirth (2013) and, above all, the impact of the new universal child allowance system (2016). With this measure, according to Szelewa [2017], family policies become explicitly familialist. Indeed, Szelewa and Polakowski [2020] highlight how recent reforms in childcare services imply an implicit marketisation with a stratifying effect.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the fall of communism has not brought about a substantial and rapid increase in the congruity between mothers' employment preferences when raising preschool-age children and their actual employment statuses. As a consequence, in spite of the implementation of family policies with pronatalist intentions, fertility continues to be lower than it was before 1989. Policymakers should take into account existing family policies and their popularity. For example, long-term paid parental leave is widely supported by the population in the three countries, and nurseries for children under the age of three still have a poor reputation in them [Saxonberg and Szelewa 2007]. Nevertheless, some changes in public opinion can be detected, particularly in the Czech Republic. According to Eurobarometer 74.1 (2010), 72% of Czechs consider their childcare services to be good, in contrast to 46% of Poles and 52% of Hungarians.

Previous research has shown that 'modern' couples are more prevalent in countries that reserve a portion of paid parental leave for fathers [DeRose et al. 2019]. However, this measure is not very popular in the countries analysed in this paper. Data from the ISSP (2012) show that two-thirds of the Hungarian and Czech populations believe that the mother should enjoy the entire parental leave period, even when both parents have the same employment status and are eligible, while less than 10% support equal distribution. In this case, Poland stands out from the rest, as its population is divided into three almost equal parts: those who believe it should be for the mother, those who believe it should be shared equally, and those who believe that some weeks should be reserved for the father. This pattern is consistent with Poland being the country with more 'modern' (egalitarian) couples [DeRose et al. 2019]. Poland is the only country of the three to have paid paternity leave for two weeks (since 2012), although only one in six fathers takes it [Szelewa 2014]. It is also the only country that reserves one month of childcare leave as an individual and non-transferable entitlement for each parent, although it is rather a symbolic than a real entitlement, as it is unpaid and no time is reserved for fathers in paid parental leave [Szelewa 2017; Koslowski et al. 2020]. The contrast (almost a contradiction) between both the explicitly maternalistic direction of Polish policies in recent years and anti-feminist ideology [Szelewa 2014] on the one hand and support for greater involvement of fathers in the care of their children on the other requires further research.

Finally, it should be taken into account that childcare policies could have unintended negative side effects. For example, DeRose et al. [2019] found that fathers' quotas are also associated with an increased probability of mothers labour participation but are less effective in promoting equal participation in domestic work, thus leaving many women with a second shift [ibid.: 1013]. They also found that couples in countries with generous parental leave are less likely to have modern labour sharing, because household specialization is encouraged when mothers take parental leave [ibid.: 1008].

Results show that many Czech and Hungarian (and to a lesser extent Polish) mothers find it desirable to work part time while raising a preschool-age child. However, most of the employment offered is full time. Furthermore, the authorities do not ensure that re-entry into their jobs is enforced without affecting their working conditions [Saxonberg and Sirovátka 2008]. Mullerova [2017b] shows the negative effect the extension of parental leave has had on the mother's probability of returning to work at the end of parental leave. Fultz and Steinhilber [2004: 259] note that in all three countries, employers discriminate against women workers with family responsibilities and limit the duration of their contracts to avoid family leave. Incorporation into the European Union in 2004 has been an improvement in this respect, as European institutions have pressed for effective equality between men and women at work and have promoted measures to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life [Mullerova 2017a].

This study has some limitations. First, the data source used does not directly measure the personal preferences of the respondents, because the item included refers to general attitudes towards maternal employment (what women should do). It would have been preferable to have information about personal preferences. Nevertheless, most studies have used general attitudes (more frequently in surveys) as proxy variables for women's preferences [Schleutker 2017]. More concretely, the same ISSP items used in this research have been used previously by Janus [2013a, 2013b], Kangas and Rosgaard [2007], Steiber and Haas [2009], and Schleutker [2017], among others.

Another limitation of using a question about attitudes is that they could change over time, and we cannot be sure whether mothers' attitudes when they answered the questionnaire were the same attitudes they had when they became mothers. We have faced this problem by limiting the sample to mothers of reproductive ages (18–49), for which the period between becoming mothers and participating in the survey is shorter than for the whole sample of mothers.

A final limitation of this study is that the preschool-age category is too broad (children below six years) and preferences and employment statuses could differ among mothers depending on the age of the children. As we have seen (Figure 1), the employment rates of mothers vary with their children's age (i.e. 0–2, 3–5 or 6–14), and the enrolment rates differ between children below three and older children (Figure 2). Unfortunately, ISSP surveys do not make further distinctions within this category.

Regarding other limitations of the analysis, some of the effects of the family policy measures are probably not visible because they were recent at the time of the survey or were approved after 2012. A final limitation is that the sample is restricted to mothers, which leaves out of the analysis all those women who have not had children due to external constraints.

The high degree of incongruity between preferences and actual experiences shown in this study is a sign of the problems faced by mothers attempting to reconcile work and family life and is connected with other phenomena, such as women's labour-market participation, gender equality at work and in the family, and fertility [Kuchařová 2009], which was shown in this section. Although recent family policies have had explicit pronatalist goals, fertility remains low. A possible line of research could analyse whether family policies have a different impact depending on the characteristics of the mothers, their number of children and how social constraints affect different types of mothers. We are aware that other factors, especially economic ones, influence the ability of women to achieve congruity, and more research is needed in this area.

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