

How did we get the ‘magic 3’? The timing of parental leaves and child care services in the Visegrád-countries

Introduction

We only find three countries in today’s developed world where paid parental leaves last as long as three years: Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.² In these countries, the leave is predominantly taken by mothers who are consequently out of the labour market for three or, in case of subsequent births, four, five or even more years causing the lowest employment rates of mothers in the OECD (2007). The situation in Poland is somewhat different as this country only provides a long unpaid parental leave after paid maternity leave expires. In all the four countries publicly organized child care starts mainly with the age of three³, thus Polish mothers have to rely on private and family arrangements, while Slovakian, Hungarian and Czech mothers are paid by the state to stay at home with their kids under three.

Despite of the fact that children need publicly organized care from varying ages, and mothers also wish to return to the labour market in varying pace, the flexibility to acknowledge these needs lacks from the childcare policies of Visegrád countries. The governments in these countries, overall, firmly insist on public care provided from age three, and motherly (or familial) care before that. Although we find some signs of change the time-policy of child-care and early education (Hagemann et. al. 2011), as well as the system of leaves seems to be almost petrified.⁴ This is all the more surprising that both the European Union and the OECD stresses the need for change in these countries away from familial care and promotes a move towards increased maternal employment (see e.g. the Barcelona and Lisbon targets of the EU).

In this paper we take a historical-institutionalist (Pierson 2004; Thelen 2004; Cerami and Vanhuyse 2009) view on child-care and investigate the historical development of time-policies in the Visegrád-countries. When and how was the time-frame of maternity and parental leaves set in the Visegrád-countries? In other words: How did we get the “magic three” years that seems to be so difficult to change? The timing of child-care is similarly important, and at times is corresponding to the timing of leaves. Thus we also ask how the age limits of publicly organized child-care were set in the Visegrád-countries. We argue that the length of leaves together with the age-limits and availability of child-care facilities set the frame of work-family policies that directly influence the possibilities of parents to work, care or have free time. We also think that the sharp divide at the age of three has been especially strong in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. The timing of maternity and parental leaves does not correspond with the available possibilities of publicly organized child-care

¹ The authors are grateful to Dorota Szelewa for providing widespread information on Polish family policies.

² In this paper we distinguish between „maternity leaves” and „parental leaves”, the former referring to a social insurance based paid leave, provided for a few months before and after the birth of a child. Maternity leave is paid as a percentage of the previous wage paid mostly to mothers at around 60-100% in Visegrád countries. Parental leave can be insurance based as well as financed from the central state budget, is paid for a longer period (12-24 months or more) but on a lower level and can be used by either of the parents. „Paternity leaves” that are non-transferable leaves to fathers are not analysed in this paper given their very small significance in the Visegrád countries (from none up to 7 days in the Visegrád countries).

³ Daycare coverage of children under the age in Visegrad countries is the lowest in Europe, covering only 3-7% of children under the age of three (Eurostat 2009).

⁴ E.g. small home-care centres in Poland and kindergartens accepting younger children in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

facilities especially in Poland, but there is a significant gap between paid maternity and parental leaves and publicly organized care in the former countries of Czechoslovakia as well. This gap is covered by private arrangements in higher income families, whereas in poor households, where buying care is not an option, mothers' unpaid work and unemployment is the "solution" causing long-term negative effects. We hereby take the timing of child care services and leaves as the focus of our investigation by country to country followed by a comparative discussion of the four countries.

The Czech Republic

Most of today's Czech Republic was part of the Habsburg Monarchy and later (from its formation in 1967) the Austro-Hungarian Empire's Austrian territory and thus followed Austrian legislation for decades. This way, paid maternity leave, as part of the first Bismarckian sickness insurance legislation was introduced as early as 1888. This legislation provided several weeks of paid leave and also medical assistance for factory workers. Agricultural workers were left out of the sickness insurance scheme though. The first child-care facilities were set up in Prague. In documents from as early as the 1850s, we find rules for a facility (*vychovatelna*) in Prague in which they indicate that it is serving 2-5 year-old children. In 1869 rules for the first kindergarten (*mateřská škola*) in Prague were set, which repeat the age limit between 2-5 years. In the same period, different facilities opened under different names, connected to, besides other reasons, the German-Czech language fight and also the nationalist fight for the possibility to educate children (e.g. *mateřská škola*, Kindergarten, *dětská zahrádka*, *opatrovna*). Only a few years later, in the decree from 1872 (no. 4711), it is indicated that children should be in kindergartens from the started fourth year of life until completed sixth year of life. In the same law nurseries are for children up to the age of 3 and also that children who did not start fourth year of life are forbidden to enter kindergartens. Another type of childcare facilities for children of mainly employed parents is named in the decree (*opatrovna*) – these were for children from the age of 3. Even after the formation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, proposals to regulate kindergarten set the age-limit to be ended third year of child's life, above which children would be eligible.

In the new communist regime, the "magic three" was firmly established: In the act from 1948 (Act No. 95/1948 Coll.) it is indicated that kindergartens are for 3-6 year-old children. Nurseries were regulated in 1951-1952 (Act No. 103/1951 Coll. and Act No. 24/1952 Coll.) where it is stated that they are "especially for children from 3 months up to 3 years". This happened – similarly to the other state-socialist countries – alongside with the transfer of nurseries to the Ministry of Health, while kindergartens to the Ministry of Education. The core Education Act of 1960 tried to break with this path: nurseries also qualified as "pre-schools" and a new type of joint institution of "kindergarten-nurseries" was set up under the Ministry of Education. However, the supervision of nurseries even in these joint institutions remained with the Ministry of Health, making the administration of these newly established institutions extremely complicated. Thus the efforts to create such unified facilities failed, i.e. the number of these facilities remained always very small and they were cancelled at the beginning of the 1990s (Hašková 2011: 393-394). Thus the main pattern remained that education-oriented kindergarten *de jure* served children above, while health-oriented nurseries, below the age of three. In practice, however, there were also some 2 year-old kids registered in kindergartens and there were some 3 year-old kids attending nurseries – it reflected the local situation and the months in which the children were born.

Meanwhile, the length of maternity leave was extended from 18 to 22 (1964), and later to 26 weeks (1968) and 28 weeks (1987). In the 1960s the system of lengthy maternal (and

later parental) leaves was also introduced: First, an unpaid extended maternity leave was introduced in 1964 until the first birthday of the child, extended until the second birthday in 1970. Within the latter legislation a payment (allowance) was granted until the first year of the child – but only for mothers with at least two dependent children. It provided for approximately 26-62 per cent of the average gross monthly wage depending on the number of children. The paid parental leave was soon extended to two years (1971) and it was further extended during the last years of state-socialism so that all mothers could use a three-year-long leave in 1989. One year later the parental allowance covered already all three years of the leave in case of all mothers on the leave without regard to the number of their children. Similarly to what happened in Hungary, during the transformation crisis of the early-mid 1990s the parental allowance was further extended, reaching the record-length of four years in 1995. Similarly to the introduction of early retirement, the lengthy parental allowance was used as a buffer against sudden increase in female unemployment. While the long parental allowance indeed brought some income to mothers who would find themselves otherwise unemployed during the turbulent times of the transformation, at the end of the 1990s it was indisputably clear that the long time these mothers spent out of the labor market contributed to their further marginalization on the labor market. While no radical step against this pattern was taken, the system was made somewhat more flexible in the last years. From 2008, Parents (still overwhelmingly mothers) can choose between a higher-level payment for two or a lower payment for three or four years and since 2004 they can earn unlimited income while taking the parental allowance. Moreover, since 2012, they can even use public childcare facilities while taking the parental allowance, but only when their child reaches the age of two. Since there are almost no public childcare facilities for children younger than three years of age, these “flexibility” changes cannot be utilized by most of the parents. In fact only wealthy parents who are able to hire a private nanny can fully utilize the new options.

Alongside with the extension of parental allowance the provision of public facilities for children under the age of three has collapsed during the 1990s. While there were almost 20% of children under the age of three in nurseries at the end of the 1980s (Bulíř 1990), there were only 45 nurseries in 2010 that covered much less than one percent of children under the age of three (Institute of Health Information and Statistics of the Czech Republic 2011). Some parents try to solve the lack of nurseries by sending their children younger than three into kindergartens that may accept them if they have vacancies. However, since the number of declined applications to kindergartens climbed up to almost 50.000 in 2011, the percentage of children under the age of three attending any type of formal care remains very low in the country, at about 3 % (Eurostat 2010).⁵

We might argue that the system of nurseries were in a somewhat unstable position since the 1960s. They were ranked as “pre-schools”, thus in connection to the Ministry of Education, but controlled by the Ministry of Health. Consequently, after 1989, when new laws on education and healthcare were to be prepared, the Ministry of Education quickly left out nurseries out of “preschools” and cancelled the hybrid institution of nursery-kindergarten. However, the Ministry of Health has not wanted any expenditure on nurseries since they do not provide healthcare but childcare. Moreover, more than a quarter of nurseries were

⁵ In 2011 more than a quarter of two years old children were registered in kindergartens (Institute for Information on Education 2011) although not all of them attended them. Many kindergartens allow parents to register their child in September or January but if the child turns three only in e.g. November, the child is allowed to attend the kindergarten only from the age of three, i.e. from November. This practice is confirmed also by a survey among kindergartens by Nešporová et al. (2009) that showed that representatives of two thirds of kindergartens declared that they allow children younger than three to register but out of them 40% also declared that they apply a criteria that a child may start attending the kindergarten only when it reaches the age of three.

established by factories and cooperative farms that stopped their operation or at least very quickly reduced their employee welfare programs, such as provision of childcare facilities, after 1989. The lack of unified administration and rather large percentage of nurseries established by large companies that had to be restructured after 1989 might have contributed to the quick dissolution of the system of nurseries in the country.

However, this is just a part of the story. The three-year long paid parental leave and the four-year long parental allowance gave incentives to mothers to stay at home up to their child's age of three or even four, especially when the company they worked for closed down or went through a significant restructuring and they had no workplace to return.

The Slovak Republic

Since Czech and Slovak Republics comprised the same country from 1918–92 (with the exception of the war years 1939–45) and since even before they both belonged to the influence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, during these years their legislation that regulated childcare was largely similar. After the Czechoslovakia split, some differences emerged. Shortly after the split, the Czech Republic moved into more gender conservative direction than Slovakia because it significantly decreased the maternity leave benefit to 67% of the mother's previous daily wage base while increased the length of low flat-rate parental allowance so that parents (usually mothers) can stay at home being paid by the state as much as four years.⁶ Since parental leave was not extended up to four years in the Czech Republic, mothers who stayed at home taking the parental allowance for four years lost their right to return back to their workplace. The idea that a three-year-old child (in contrast to two-year-old child) needs some education and interactions with other children probably led to the fact that a full-time parent who received the parental allowance in the fourth year was allowed to use childcare facility for its three-year-old child on a part-time basis (four hours a day). In Slovakia, parental allowance was not extended from three to four years but it paid relatively more than in the Czech Republic. While it paid monthly 1.1-fold of minimum living expenses of an adult person in the Czech Republic, it paid monthly 1.65-fold of minimum living expenses of an adult person in Slovakia. Consequently, Czech mothers gained longer time to stay at home with their children in mid-1990s but they received relatively lower monthly income than Slovak mothers.

The most important difference between the Czech and Slovak childcare legislation happened in the new millennium though. In 2007 the Czech Republic increased the parental allowance to nearly double the level by increasing it to 40 % of average wage in public sector, making its parental allowance much more generous than in Slovakia, but still not generous enough to encourage fathers to share in taking leaves. Thus, it rather encouraged mothers to take it. On the contrary, in 2008, Slovakia introduced childcare allowance for working or studying parents whose children younger than three attend childcare facility, nanny etc., Czech Republic has not yet introduced any special payment for working parents with a child younger than three, explicitly because its National family policy plan declares that the Czech Republic would prefer childcare provided by parents when it comes to children younger than three.

Similarly to Slovakia, the Czech Republic allowed the parent on parental leave to gain unlimited amount of money and made the leave more flexible but once again, Slovakian parental leave became much more flexible – it allows parents to interrupt parental leave and use it for a maximum of three years until the child's age of five.

⁶ However, in 2008, the Czech Republic increased the maternity leave benefit up to 69% (and later up to 70%) of mother's previous daily wage base while Slovakia decreased it in 2003 to 55% and then increased it to 60% in 2011.

When it comes to the decline in nurseries and the percentage of children under the age of three registered in kindergartens, the situation is similar to the Czech Republic in Slovakia. Slovakia was only few years quicker in leaving nurseries out of the facilities under the Ministry of Health. As Daniel Gerbery wrote in his chapter in Manka goes to work: “Nurseries were removed from the list of health care facilities and they have not been included into any other system. This state has persisted up to this day. As result, nurseries are not part of the healthcare system, nor the educational (or welfare) system. The main responsibility for their establishment and maintenance lies with the local municipalities. As there is no central government body responsible for nurseries, there is no general regulatory framework which would specify and regularly update basic curriculum requirements and standards in this area. During the last two decades no organisation was established which would set up standards on a regular basis in order to respond to the changing social and educational environment. This situation has further negative implications. The data on nurseries (their numbers, regional distribution, basic parameters) are not collected at the central level and thus monitoring of their performance and quality is very limited.” (Gerbery 2011:111).

Hungary

The beginnings of social insurance and cash benefits for families date back to the late 19th century Austro-Hungarian Empire. Following the adoption of Bismarckian social insurance system in 1891 insured female workers got eligible for maternity leaves and benefits, which was in 1927 set at the length of 12 weeks with a compensation corresponding to the 100% of the previous wage and additional 12 weeks of “breastfeeding leave” (Szikra, 2011). (The 24 week-long maternity leave has been kept until recently.)

In 1912 family allowances were introduced for civil servants and their families, which were only later extended to industrial workers (1939) and agricultural workers (mid 1940s) as well (Szikra, 2011).

As an other element of family support, childcare institutions were established relatively soon, especially on a Central European average. The first nursery (bölcsőde) started its functioning in 1852 in Pest devoted to care of infants from the age of 14 days to 2 years (Bölcsődék története). The first kindergarten (óvoda) were established as early as 1828 and were intended for children between the age of 2 and 6. Regulations governing kindergarten services were set in 1891 altering the eligibility to children above 3 years. Furthermore, this act, which closely followed the first social insurance legislation, made the establishment of childcare facilities compulsory for communities counting more than 40 children in need for care during the day (*1891. évi XV. tv. A kisedővásról*). The services were restricted to care and had not concerned education. Public kindergarten, set up according to the new legislation, intended to serve children of factory workers. In 1938 1 100 kindergartens functioned throughout the country reaching 26% of children of the above indicated age cohort. In sharp contrast to it, only 37 nurseries with altogether 1070 attendees were maintained accessible exclusively to urban population primarily in Budapest (Tokaji, 2012).

The involvement of women in the labour market was more and more required as well as wide-reaching “population-regulation” measures were launched in the early 1950s, following the communist take-over. This was reflected in the strengthened accent on the need to set up nurseries, too. In 1950 a government decree prescribed funding of “small crèches” (“mini-nurseries”) for factories employing more than 250 persons. Amendments of the labour code also prompted use of childcare services as after the expiration of the 12 week long maternity

leave mothers got eligible for the additional 12 weeks of unpaid leave only if nurseries were not available (Inglot et al., 2011). In the upcoming years the government intended to double the number of nurseries and reach 6% coverage, which was fulfilled only in the early 1960s. For the same purposes eligibility to kindergarten was changed. Accordingly two and a half years old children could be admitted, if both parents were employed (*Act No. 3 of 1953 on protection of children*).

In nurseries the number of attendees increased from year to year except for a small-scale recession following the introduction of a new flat-rate parental leave in 1967, the so called “gyermeknevelési segély”, GYES (Tokaji, 2012). The leave was intended to facilitate increase in fertility rates and responded to the changed demands of the labour market. The allowance reached approximately the level of 30% of the previous salary and mothers were eligible to it until the child’s third birthday. However the expectations had not come true as fertility rates started to drop in the early 1970s. As a response childcare benefits were universalized for all and the amount of all cash benefits including maternity allowances and birth grants were increased (Inglot et al., 2011).

In 1982 a new regulation was adopted allowing mothers to get employed if the child reaches the age of one and a half. The mothers’ activity was limited at four hours per day. This opportunity generated higher demand for day-care services. In 1983 the coverage reached its peak – 15.7% of children in the age cohort used these services (Inglot et al., 2011).

While political elites were highly pre-occupied with the need to increase fertility via various types of cash transfers, development and modernization of childcare services was not a priority. In order to facilitate the childbearing of women with higher qualification a new insurance-base parental leave was introduced in 1985 (gyermeknevelési díj, GYED) offering more generous benefits in comparison to the flat-rate allowance, for one year after the child’s birth. Its length was soon – in 1986 – increased to two years (Inglot et al., 2011). In the second half of 1980s there was a considerable decline observable in use of childcare services.

The negative tendency intensified after the fall of the regime. In the 1990s the relatively generous, long-term parental leave system was kept and firmly fixed in the wider welfare system. It served to moderate the impacts of multi-dimensional recession as well as to keep mothers out of the growing group of unemployed. During the transformation period several changes were adopted varying the types of parental leaves and the amount of entitlements related to them. None of these measures supported work-care reconciliation purposes. On contrary, it enhanced maternal care in the first three years. Therefore the relatively well-developed network of nurseries shrank in terms of number of institutions and thus availability. Moreover it further sharpened the differences between the services provided under and above the age of three. Due to the low birth rates the coverage of nurseries remained around 10% in the early 2000s, while in kindergartens’ coverage almost reached 90% (Transmonee, 2012).

The need to develop and propose new alternatives in childcare services was acknowledged in the early 2000s. In 2002 so called family day-care centers were introduced (Government Decree No. 259 of 2002). The centers function as mini-nurseries intended for children from the age of 20 weeks to 14 years. In the family day-care centers a trained adult person may take care of 5 children, in the presence of an assistant two more children can be admitted. As part of plans to increase the number of nurseries, municipalities with more than 10 000 inhabitants became obliged to ensure nursery services in 2005 (Inglot et al., 2011). However, many of the localities are not able to finance such a service as the central state only covers part of the costs. Later on, in 2008 a possible solution was initiated for smaller municipalities as well in form of unified kindergarten-nurseries (Act No. 31 of 2008). In case there are free capacities in municipal kindergartens kindergarten-nurseries can be created, where age limit is decreased to two years.

The length of both insurance-based and flat-rate parental leaves were reduced to two years in 2009. However, due to the change in government in 2010, the three-year long flat-rate parental leave was reintroduced in 2010. According to the recent regulation mothers receiving flat-rate benefit are allowed to work 30 hours per week, but limited access to childcare services puts a burden on mothers willing to return to the labour market.

Poland

Poland clearly belongs to the countries where kindergarten serve educating functions, just like in the other Central and Eastern European countries (Hagemann et al. 2011). It is also true that kindergarten operate from the age of three, and the stress has been on preparation to school. However, Poland is different from the other Visegrád-countries in that all-day school and kindergarten system have not developed as much as other state socialist countries. Afternoon care at schools is still not considered as part of the public school system, and all-day kindergarten coverage lags behind Hungary and the former Czechoslovakia. And although there has been a long parental leave lasting since 1968 it has never been a paid parental leave, contrary to the other three countries. This way it has never become so widespread, and has also not served as much the “channelling” of female unemployment as there.

The first act on welfare, including social insurance legislation, was accepted very soon after the unification of Poland. According to the 1923 legislation includes a broad statement whereby the Ministry of Welfare takes responsibility of “infants and youth” no age limit is set for younger children. A more specific legislation was issued next year on Youth and Female Labour, which indicates that every employer with more than 100 female workers needs to settle down a crèche “for infants”. The precise age of the children is not given, but based on the administrative literature, crèches were infants under 18 months (Szelewa 2010). The first time where an official division is made between crèches and kindergarten came relatively late (compared to e.g. Hungarian legislation in the 1890th), in 1935, when “social crèches” are explicitly mentioned, meaning “factory-run crèches”, and the age limits are defined “for infants younger than 12-18 months”. The so called “mixed” crèches were more like the “crèches” mentioned in the other Visegrád-countries’ legislation as these are “for children under 3”. The age group of children between 18 months to 3 years olds are specifically mentioned here, often cared for in special divisions of kindergartens or crèches for infants. In the same legislation kindergarten are defined as institutions for children between 3 and 7 years of age (Bogdanowicz 1935; Szelewa 2010) While there is a similarity here, Poland also establishing kindergarten for the 3+ age group, there seems to be more flexibility in the system already at this stage, that is not found in the Czech, Slovak and Hungarian institutional setting as children between 18 months and 3 years can be provided care in either nurseries or in kindergarten. It must be noted, however, that institutionalized care for under three years olds in general operated only in very few industrial cities (Szelewa 2010; Inglot et al 2011).

Following the communist take-over, responsibility for care and education of children aged 3 to 18 was moved from the Ministry of Welfare to the Ministry of Education, just like in the other communist states. Again, a similarity with the development elsewhere is that the responsibility for care for children under three was taken over by the Ministry of Health in 1950, including the organisation and development of (all) crèches. According to the 1961 law on the education system kindergarten are to be available for children from the age of 3 till school age, which is the age of 7. After the fall of state-socialism, the 1991 legislation set children’s age in kindergarten from 3 to 6 explicitly, with the right for the six year olds to attend “zero classes”, which is a pre-school class organized either in kindergarten or in

schools. More than a decade later, this possibility was made an obligation: The 2003 law introduced the obligation for each 6 year old to complete a “zero-class”. Another milestone in the history of child care in Poland was marked by the 2011 law on care over children under 3. The Law was the first one to formalize the already existing public, private and non-profit forms of crèches in Poland: “toddler’s clubs”, nannies, and municipality crèches have been defined, and quality standards were set for establishing such institutions. What is path-breaking in this legislation, even if compared with other post-socialist countries, is that for the first time it broke with the idea of a crèche as a health-care institution. According to this law, administration and quality-control of child-care for under-3-year-olds has been moved to the Ministry of Welfare (Inglot et. al. 2011).

Talking about maternity and parental leaves we must note that the Polish social policy was never focused on paid leaves as much as the other Visegrád-countries, and especially Hungary (Szikra and Szelewa 2010). Maternity leave, set at 8 weeks and 100 % of the previous salary of the mother, was introduced in the early 1920s, and became the firmest pillar of the Polish family policy system (Inglot et.al. 2011.) The length of the benefit was increased to 10 weeks in 1924 but replacement rate was cut to 50 % according to the 1933 social insurance legislation. According to the 1946 government-decree replacement rate for the maternity benefit set back to 100% while the leave was extended to 12 weeks in 1948. The early 1970s saw a differentiation and extension of the leave. Such differentiation has been a peculiarity of the Polish system: 16 weeks in the case of the first birth, 18 weeks for every subsequent baby, and 26 weeks in case of the multiple births. Having modified the legislation several times during the 2000s Poland now has the longest maternity leaves among the three countries for two and more children: 20 weeks are provided for one child, 31 weeks for the second child, 33 for the third and 35, 37 for four and five children. Furthermore, fathers can take the leave since 2001, and they have an additional (non-transferable) paternity leave for a week since 2010. The relatively long maternity leave especially for families with 3+ children somewhat compensate for the relatively weak system of parental leaves. Although Poland, alongside with Hungary, introduced a long childcare leave in 1968, it has been unpaid. The leave, lasting for 12 months initially, was lengthened to three years in 1972. Women could take the leave if they had 6 months of previous employment. Men, just like in other state-socialist countries, were only allowed to take the leave when it was impossible for a woman to take care of the child.

A childcare allowance was introduced in the politically turbulent year of 1981 (Inglot et al. 2011) but paid only to poor families, as a means-test was attached to it. Fathers were granted the right to share the leave in 1996. Child care institutions are to a large extent private by the 2010th and the Polish state has been reluctant to fully finance such institutions. Neither do Polish families receive widespread financial support from the state for their care work. Although the issue of fertility gained importance recently, political will still lacks to prioritize family policy. Polish families bear a larger burden of child-bearing than Czech, Slovak or Hungarian families. Neither are age-limits set so rigidly. The recent reform of early childhood care shows that the flexibility of the system is larger here than in the other Visegrád-countries.

Conclusion

Child-care and primary education is divided into three major types according to their time politics by Hagemann et. al. (2011). The first is the edu-care model of the Scandinavian countries, where care and education together is provided to children between 1-7 years, with a focus on the child’s needs at a certain age. The other two types have a sharp division at a

certain age, usually 3. Visegrád-countries belong to the second category, which provides all-day education and care for children, with a sharp division at the age of 3. Children below the age of three are “cared for”, children above that age are “educated”. In this paper we argued that in three out of the four Visegrád countries, mothers are encouraged to stay at home with their children by long parental leaves. In these countries the institutional education of children above 3 years of age seems to be particularly important for the state historically. Poland is an exception: Although kindergarten starts at the age of 3, mothers are not provided incentives to stay at home and care for them. Rather, the whole arrangement is left to private arrangements: family members, nannies, private nurseries etc. Our paper has shown that in countries with a strict division of “education” and “care” and an emphasis on motherly duties for children below the age of 3, this age limit is very difficult to change. We also found that there is a strong correlation between labour market surplus and the introduction of long paid leaves: This was the case of Hungarian family policies in the late 1960s, and also in the early 1990s in the newly created Czech and Slovak Republic. In Poland, however, policy makers decided to have a higher unemployment rate of women during the 1990s, and did not “push” women out into maternity and parental schemes. A more flexible labour market and child-care scheme has been developed in this country, with more reliance on market forces. In the other three Visegrád-countries the state continues to play a larger role in financing home-based child-care for the under-three year olds in forms of parental leaves, and this situation seems to be difficult to change in a short time.

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