

Article

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

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### Abstract

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

### Keywords

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

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

From a historical point of view, the Slovak population has been characterized by early and almost universal marriage and motherhood (Šprocha & Tišliar, 2016). As some analyses show (e.g., Frejka & Sardon, 2004; Potančoková, 2011; Šprocha & Tišliar, 2016), Slovakia was long characterized by a very low proportion of one-child families. The period of the Communist regime strengthened these features of demographic reproduction (Potančoková et al., 2008; Šprocha & Tišliar, 2016). The collapse of that regime in 1989 and the resulting avalanche of economic, social, cultural, political, and psychological changes led to many dynamic changes in reproductive behaviour (Potančoková et al., 2008; Sobotka, 2011; Šprocha &

Tišliar, 2016). In terms of fertility, there was a decline in intensity, which was largely saturated by the process of postponing motherhood to a later age (Potančoková, 2011; Sobotka, 2004). As several scholars have shown (Kohler et al., 2002; Sobotka, 2011; Sobotka et al., 2011), the process of postponing maternity and overall fertility to an older age is becoming a universal phenomenon in Europe. Indeed, the decline in fertility in Western Europe has been accompanied by an increase in childlessness (Rowland, 2007). As research by Tanturri et al. (2015) has shown, this applies to all populations regardless of their differences in cultural or socio-economic conditions. Similarly, some studies from post-communist countries (Beaujouan et al., 2016; Sobotka, 2004) suggest that the rise of childlessness could be particularly dynamic in

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

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

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

### *2.1. The General Theoretical Framework of Demographic Change*

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

The second framework is based on values and norms. It is probably most comprehensively postulated in the theory of the second demographic transition

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Potančoková (2009) identifies the persistence of the norm of all-day childcare by mothers at home and optimally up to the age of three years as the “only proper motherhood.” During this period, the mother is supposed to subordinate her ambitions to the needs of the child; job ambitions and career-building paths are particularly problematic (Potančoková, 2009, p. 63). Moreover, as research shows (Grňo, 2006; Lukšík, 2013), women in Slovakia find it very difficult to give up their role as the primary caregivers of children, while the concept of the “irreplaceable mother” and the father in the role of helper is strongly supported in Slovak society.

Together, these factors subsequently influence women’s decision-making; for example, the purchasing of child-care services on the market is perceived very negatively (Martinkovičová et al., 2015).

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

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

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

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

### *2.3. Family Policy and Fragile Pronatalism in Slovakia*

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

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

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

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

After the collapse of the socialist system, paternalistic state interventions in the field of reproduction and the family were replaced by efforts to reduce the amount of money spent and the existing family policy instruments. Especially in the first half of the 1990s, some policy measures were abolished and the availability of institutional care for young children was reduced. As a result of these negative changes in family policy settings, personal (and especially financial) responsibility for reproduction and the family deepened (Mitchell, 2012; Vaňo, 2009). The value of direct financial support for families in relation to wages and commodity prices decreased (Potančoková et al., 2008). The lack of the construction of municipal flats, a poorly developed housing market, and the financial inaccessibility of housing—especially for young people as mortgages were only made more available from the late 1990s—meant that housing became an important barrier to starting a family (Potančoková

et al., 2008). In combination with other transformational changes and their effects (Frejka, 2008), this resulted in a sharp decline in fertility in virtually all post-communist countries (Sobotka, 2011). This put considerable pressure on political leaders and created a broader debate on the possibilities, responsibilities, and rights of society to directly influence demographic reproduction (especially in a pronatalist sense) and support the family (Potančoková et al., 2008). In 1996, the Family Policy Concept was adopted. This is a government-approved strategy, evaluated regularly, and within which the main goals of family policies are formed for upcoming years. These include achieving the relative economic independence of families from the state, the success of families in properly functioning (not explicitly defined), the stability of family relationships, the creation of optimal conditions for the self-production of society, and the successful reconciliation of parental and work responsibilities; however, for a long time these were strategic declarations rather than practices (Vaňo, 2009). As Potančoková et al. (2008) add, the emphasis in the 1990s was on economic reform and governments did not develop a welfare state or build a more coherent social policy. It was not until 1998 that the first reforms of the state social support system took place. There has been a shift from universal family allowances to means-tested benefits related to the age of the child. Further changes took place in 2002 and 2004, when family allowances again became a flat-rate benefit. A tax bonus for working parents was also introduced in 2004. At this time, there was the beginning of the second phase of the formation of family policy in Slovakia. This has been characterized by an intensification of interest in family and reproductive issues as well as a gradual effort to adopt some more advanced family policy instruments.

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3. Data and Methods

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

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

where:

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

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

$P_C$  number of women in the cohort(C)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

$$R^{i,C} = \frac{RM^{i,C}}{|PM^{i,C}|} \cdot 100$$

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

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

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

#### 4. Results

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

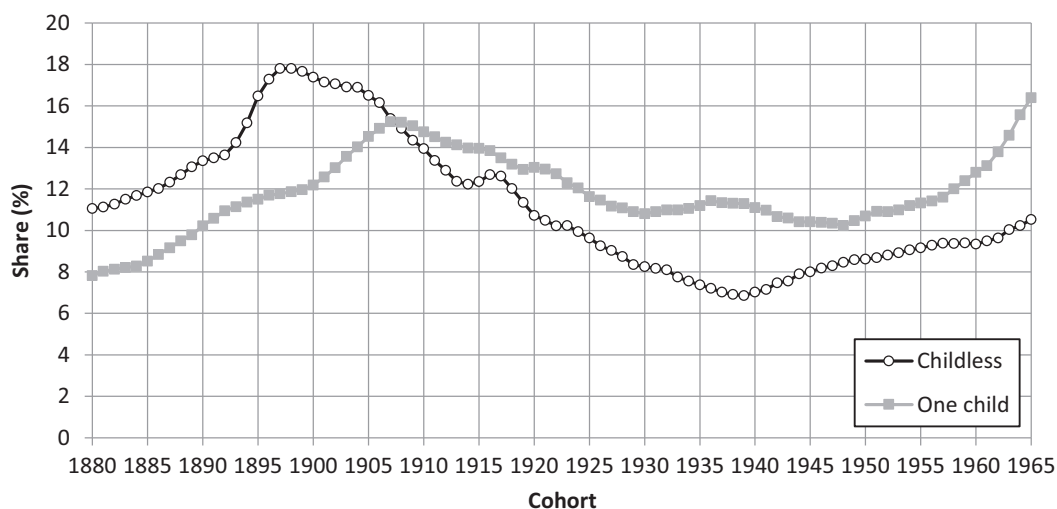
An analysis of historical data shows that the highest proportion of childless women in Slovakia (14–18%) can be identified in the cohorts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Figure 1). Cohorts from the beginning of the twentieth century were also characterized by the most frequent occurrence of one-child families (12–15%). These groups were adversely affected by the demographic crisis of the First World War, its effects on the marriage market in the interwar period, and the economic crisis in the first half of the 1930s. Among older cohorts for which there is empirical data, as well as among younger ones, the proportion of childless women and women with one child was significantly lower. From

the presented findings, it is clear that both reproductive models were historically exceptional in Slovakia and concerned only a limited group of cohorts with deteriorating reproductive conditions. The proportion of one-child families was steadily below 12% among women born in the second half of the 1920s until the second half of the 1950s.

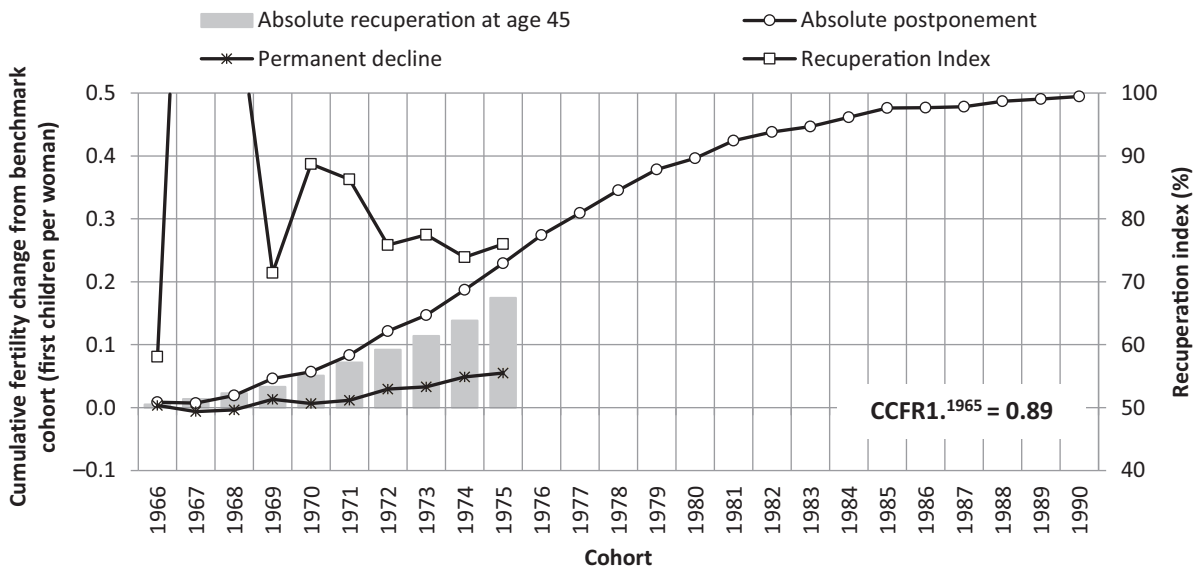
The lowest level was reached by women born in the mid-1940s, where this model represented only about one-tenth. These are cohorts that essentially experienced their entire reproductive period during the specific conditions of the socialist regime. Women’s childlessness reached an even lower level. From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

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

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



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



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

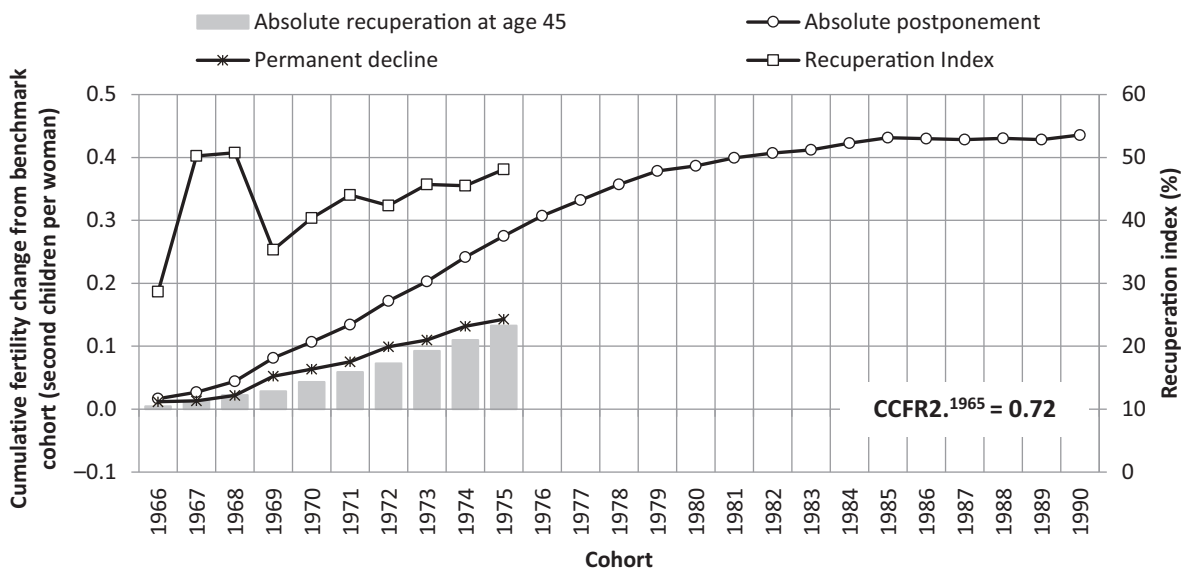
The level of postponement of second births was only slightly lower. By the 1990 cohort, it had decreased by 0.44 children (33%); however, the inter-cohort dynamics of postponement decreased significantly, especially for women born in the second half of the 1980s. It seems that the age model of fertility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

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

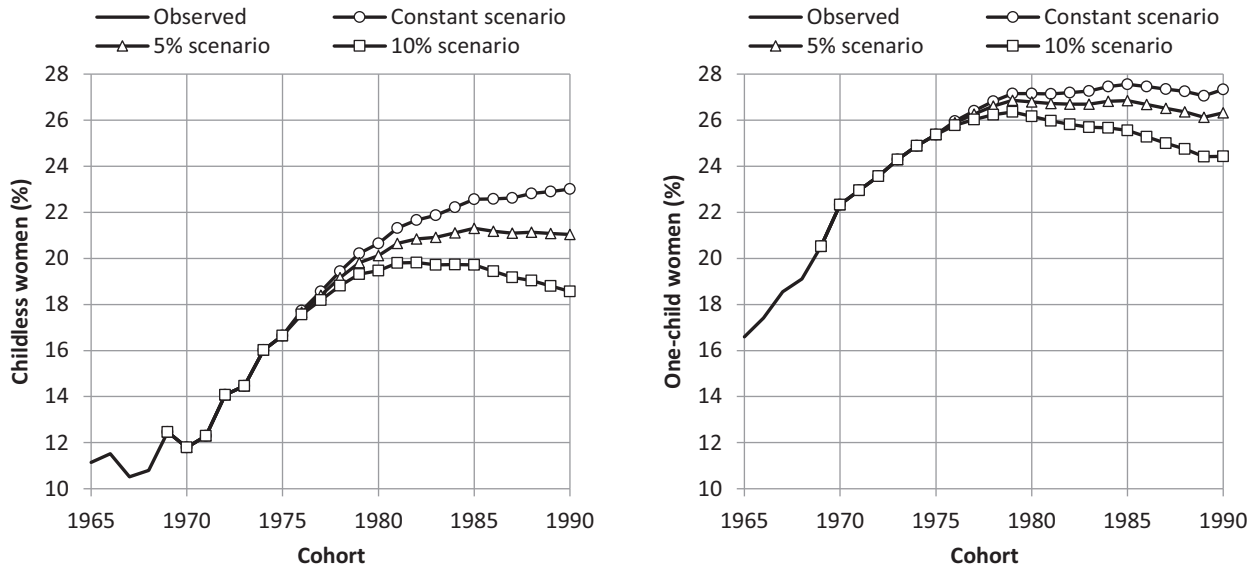
The level of the recuperation index will be crucial for the future development of the completed cohort ferti-

ty and parity structure. Since there is data on the total volume of first—and second-birth postponement among the 1966–1990 cohorts, it is possible to simulate the development of childlessness and the proportion of one-child families in Slovakia.

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



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



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

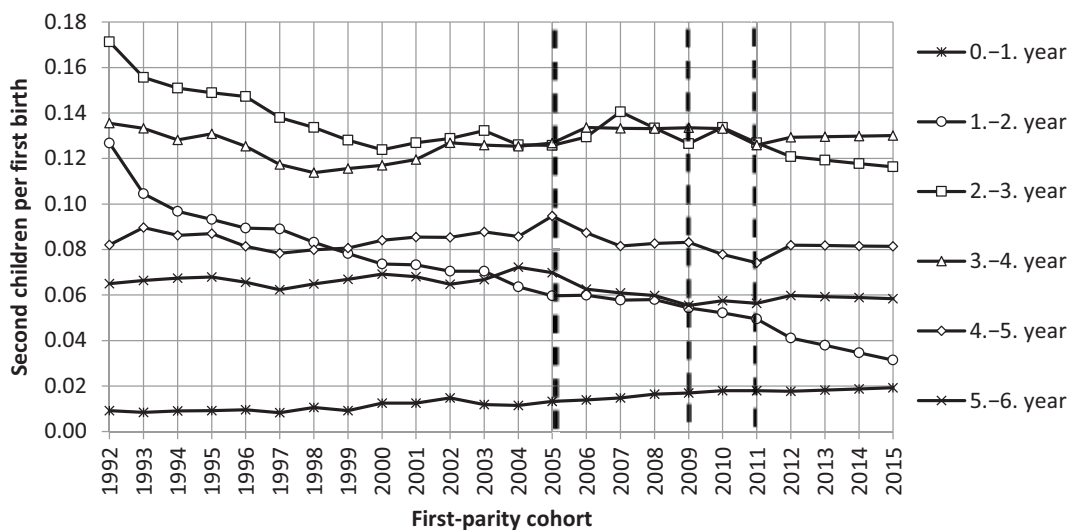
child. The growth in childlessness and the proportion of one-child families can also be identified in the case of a simulation using selected rising scenarios (5% and 10%). Only in younger cohorts could a slight decline in childlessness (below 18%) and the proportion of women with one child (24%) be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

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

The real and observed development of childlessness and the proportion of one-child families clearly points to the growth of their influence in Slovak society. The possible impact of population policy measures on the devel-

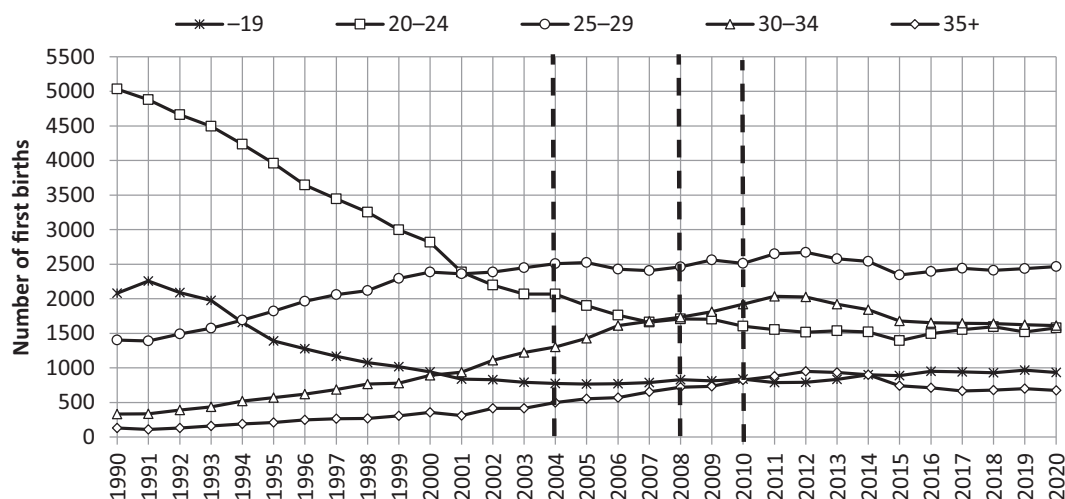
opment of childlessness and the one-child family model is very difficult to identify. The significant decline in fertility in Slovakia was associated mainly with the 1990s and with a decrease in childbearing at a younger age (up to 25 years). This development was largely associated with the process of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

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



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





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

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

### 5. Discussion and Conclusions

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

The abandonment of the socialist model of reproduction is gradually deepening across all cohorts born since the late 1960s (Potančoková, 2011; Šprocha & Tišliar, 2016). In comparison with similar research (Sobotka et al., 2011), it is interesting that the postponement process in Slovakia affected second children to a greater extent in the first cohorts that were affected by the transformational changes after 1989. A higher postponement

rate in the first children was not identified until women born in the late 1970s. It can be assumed that the cause was the significant deterioration in living conditions and that this was further aggravated by a reduction in family benefits (Frejka, 2008).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

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

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