



Czech Republic: A backwards step in work-family reconciliation policies

ESPN Flash Report 2018/18

TOMÁŠ SÍROVÁTKA – EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK

MAY 2018

In April 2018, the Czech Parliament adopted, in the first reading, a proposal to abolish the “guarantee of childcare” for 2-year old children, legislated in 2016. Currently, the employment rate of women aged 20-49 with children aged 0-6 years is considerably lower than for similarly aged women without children, due to a lack of adequate childcare facilities. This issue has been highlighted by the European Union in several Country-Specific Recommendations to the Czech Republic. However, the legislative discussions, as well as public attitudes, indicate firm support for the abolition of this “guarantee”.

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Description

An important challenge consistently included in the EU Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) addressed to the Czech Republic, is a high “child employment penalty”, i.e. a high difference between the employment rate of women aged 20-49 with children aged 0-6 years, and that of women with no children in this age bracket: 41 percentage points in 2016, which is three times the EU average (14 pp, see Eurostat database: `fst_hheredch`). Lack of affordable childcare is one of the key reasons for this (more than three out of four women mention care responsibilities as the reason for inactivity) (European Commission 2018). In 2016, only 4.7% of children under 3 were in formal childcare (*ibid.*) although this figure is disputable: the Czech Ministry of Education documents about 13-14% children aged below 3 years enrolled in kindergartens (author’s estimate based on data on the age structure of the population from the Czech Statistical Office).

Traditionally, childcare for children 0-2 years old fell within the competence of the Ministry of Health, which provided care for these children in nurseries. Under the 2012 Health Services Act, nurseries ceased to be classified as health service institutions, and no ministry has since been made responsible for their establishment and support. However, municipalities can

establish facilities for children below 3 years of age, under the 2014 Children’s Groups Act. “Children groups” are groups of up to 24 children of at least 1 year of age. The fees charged to parents cannot exceed the real costs of care. These groups are financed with support from the European Social Fund (ESF) and have provided additional Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) capacity. In September 2017, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MLSA) specified that 5,800 children were placed in 413 children’s groups; in March 2018, 600 children’s groups were recorded (MLSA press release), hosting about 9,000 children (author’s estimate in the absence of MLSA figures). No evidence was provided on the share of children aged less than 3 years in children’s groups. Still, considering the number of all pre-school age children in kindergartens (363 thousand in the 2016/2017 school year, of which 45 thousand below 3 years), children’s groups represent a rather marginal contribution and their sustainability is questionable as they are dependent on ESF support.

In this context, the most significant measure for enhancing work-family reconciliation was the new Education Act approved by the Parliament in 2016 (when the centre-left government coalition led by Social Democrats was in power). This Act introduced mandatory pre-school education (with free tuition) during the last year preceding school

education; this concerns all children aged 5 years. Furthermore, it introduced a right for pre-school education progressively, over a 4-year period: pre-school for children aged 4 years from school year 2017/2018, for children aged 3 years from school year 2018/2019 and for children aged 2 years from school year 2020/2021.

The composition of the Parliament changed following the elections in October 2017. The winner of the elections, the ANO movement (centrist movement distancing itself from traditional political parties), is currently (May 2018) negotiating a new government coalition. In April 2018, the ODS party (centre-right) proposed to abolish the guaranteed places in kindergarten for children aged 2 years; the proposal was adopted by the Parliament and proceeded to further readings (three readings in Parliament are needed in the Czech Republic for the adoption of legislative changes).

Outlook & commentary

The proposal to abolish the guaranteed places in kindergarten for children aged 2 years was first negotiated in January 2018. It was discussed again in February in public hearings in the Senate, where the majority of the participants concluded that children below 3 years should stay with their mothers, and that enrolment in kindergarten, where there were 28 children in a class, was harmful to their mental development. Furthermore, according to them, kindergartens are not a priority for the Ministry and they lack funding. Also, 15,000 people signed a petition organised by university teachers and special education teachers who insist that children under 3 need to stay with their mothers and kindergarten would be harmful to their personal development (iRozhlas 2018).

The proposal to abolish guaranteed places in kindergarten for children below 3 years was not accepted by the current temporary government (i.e. the government that did not win support of the Parliament and resigned), which recalled that cancelling the guarantee of places in kindergarten would go against the measures aiming at work-family reconciliation adopted in recent years under the parental leave scheme. However, it also recalled the consequences for the public budget of having to expand the capacities of childcare facilities. The Government Council for Gender Equality called on the Government to refuse the proposal and to ensure the necessary financial resources for kindergartens (Novinky 2018).

However, it seems that there is support for the proposal across political parties, both in the Parliament and the Senate: thus the expectation is that it will be accepted. The main arguments put forward by those supporting the proposal are rather financial than ideological: that kindergartens are not prepared to care for 2-year-old children and that municipalities do not have funding to support additional capacity for kindergartens (České noviny 2018).

The politicians supportive of the proposal have also listened to the arguments on child development and taken notice of the conservative attitudes of the public: 77% of Czechs agree with the statement that "the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family" - the fourth highest score in Europe, with the EU-28 average being 41% (European Commission 2017). Sirovátka and Válková (2017) note that, in the Czech Republic, the neglect of childcare has been accompanied and mutually reinforced by slow changes in the attitudes regarding gender equality and childcare preferences.

Further reading

České noviny/Czech News 2018 (11 April)

<http://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/snemovna-nejspis-zrusi-povinnost-skolek-prijimat-dvoulete-deti/1608059>

European Commission (2017). Special Eurobarometer 465. Gender Equality, Stereotypes and Women in Politics. Publication November 2017.

European Commission (2018). Country Report Czech Republic. Brussels, 7.3.2018 SWD (2018) 202 final. COM (2018) 120 final.

iRozhlas.cz news 2018 (6 February).

http://www.msn.com/?pc=EUPP_U E12&ocid=UE12DHP

Novinky.CZ news 2018 (21 February).

<https://www.novinky.cz/veda-skoly/464034-navrh-ods-na-zruseni-povinneho-roku-skolky-a-prijimani-dvouletych-deti-vlada-odmitla.html>

Sirovátka, T. and Válková, J. (2017). Attitudes towards childcare policies, policy feedback and path dependency: Czech Republic contrasted to Norway.

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