



# Improving access to formal childcare for children under three in Slovakia

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*Slovakia has, for a long time, performed poorly in providing formal childcare for children under three. It also has low levels of maternal employment and high wage penalties upon returning to the labour market. Recent legislative measures have established conditions for systematic development of childcare facilities for children under three. Conditions governing childcare provision have become a subject of public debates, focusing on the reasonableness of some requirements and their costs.*

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## Description

Children younger than three are very rarely placed in formal childcare in Slovakia. According to the EU SILC data, only 0.5% attended formal childcare in 2016, well below the EU average (32.9%) and the lowest share in the EU. The vast majority of children of this age are cared for by parents (79.8%, compared to 47.3% in the EU as whole). (Source: Eurostat)

Provision of formal childcare for children under three relies on municipalities and private providers. High costs of private childcare services along with limited provision (concentrated in big towns and cities) and the long-term underdevelopment of the public sector result in low accessibility and affordability of formal childcare. The inadequate supply of public providers stems partially from the fact that childcare facilities for children under three are not a formal responsibility of any of the ministries, in contrast to kindergartens for older children of preschool age, which are part of the educational system. As a result, facilities for children under three have not been included in policy planning, and their development has not been supported or even recognised as a public policy issue.

This unfavourable situation was partly offset by the opening up of kindergartens to two-year-olds since the mid-1990s. But their enrolment rate has remained low. In 2016, 15.3% of two-year-old children attended public

kindergartens, compared to 68% of children aged three, 78.7% of children aged four and 84.2% of five-year-old children (Herich and Kováč, 2018). Moreover, placement of two-year-old children is difficult: many applications for places in kindergartens are refused, putting pressure on kindergartens to continue to prefer older children. 12,486 applications were rejected in 2016 (8 rejected applications per 100 children in kindergartens), compared to 13,482 in 2015 (9 rejected applications per 100 children in kindergartens).

The very low use of formal childcare for children under three is also influenced by parental leave arrangements. Parents in Slovakia are entitled to parental leave until the child turns three. If the child has a long-term health problem or disability, parental leave is extended to the age of six. A parental allowance, funded from general taxation, is provided to one parent in the household regardless of whether or not s/he works. Although fathers can also claim parental leave and allowance, most parental allowance recipients are mothers (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, 2017). According to the OECD Family Database, Slovakia has the lowest employment rate for mothers with the youngest child aged less than three among the OECD countries. The effective length of parental leave is determined by previous income, education and job history: mothers with a higher previous income, higher education and longer job history tend to

exit parental leave earlier (Institute for Financial Policy, 2018). The number of children, and single parenthood, are also important factors.

These gaps have been acknowledged in several strategic documents, including the National Reform Programme and documents relating to the use of European structural funds. One of the most important steps was in 2016, when new legislative conditions for the provision of childcare for children under three were introduced, in amendments adopted to the "Social Services Act No.448/2008". The amended Act adds to the list of services a "service for reconciliation of work and private life in childcare facilities for children under three years" and defines the conditions and requirements. This was the first explicit legal definition of childcare for children under three as a social service (till then, care for small children could be provided under a trade licence – as an "au pair", "daily centre", etc.).

However, the amended Act has faced strong criticism. It has been criticised for introducing overly strict standards and norms for childcare facilities, with the risk of increasing providers' costs. Critics have also focused on the fact that the Act only allows parents who work or are in education/ training to use such services. This has been seen as a form of discrimination, as the situations of unemployed or economically inactive parents, or parents caring for disabled family members, are not taken into account. The critics have also emphasised that childcare facilities provide only care, neglecting the need for education.

Based on these arguments, the president of the Slovak Republic vetoed the approved amended Act in December 2016; it was then again approved in its unamended form by the parliament in January 2017. In 2018, due to persistent discontent of private providers and other stakeholders, new amendments to the Act have been prepared. These amendments, based on discussions between representatives of private

providers and the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, contain three important proposals. First, the obligation to ensure accessibility for disabled persons and other persons with health difficulties should be relaxed to cover only newly established facilities. Secondly, payments for children who interrupt their use of the services due to sickness should not be repaid to parents, in order to ensure the economic stability of facilities. Thirdly, newly hired staff should be given more time to meet the qualification requirements. The new proposal for the Act on Social Services is still being discussed and is expected to be adopted in autumn 2018, coming into effect from January 2019.

## Outlook & commentary

The legislative developments regarding childcare facilities for children under three reflect intensive discussions among stakeholders on the conditions for such childcare. Two different views have been raised. On the one hand, public bodies aim to promote high-quality, safe childcare facilities. On the other hand, some providers see certain requirements as too demanding and costly, limiting their possibility to provide childcare services. These two arguments must be reconciled for formal childcare facilities for children under three to develop further.

However, other issues need to be addressed in the near future. First, systematic data collection is urgently needed. Although the lack of places in public childcare facilities for children below three is well-known, systematic empirical evidence is missing, as administrative data have not been collected at central level. The obligation to register opens up an opportunity to create an up-to-date database.

Secondly, the current approach to childcare for children under three as a service for "reconciling family and working life" is quite limiting, as discussions on the earlier

versions of the Act on Social Services showed. The focus should be broadened to address also other situations requiring formal childcare, including inclusion of children with vulnerable backgrounds.

Thirdly, the development of public facilities should be supported, as the private sector services are very costly and unaffordable for most families. Hand in hand with support for public facilities, attention should be paid to geographical distribution, in order to avoid their concentration in major agglomerations.

### Further reading

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Institute for Financial Policy (2018), Women Still Can't Have It All. Barriers to Higher Maternal Employment in Slovakia. Economic Analysis – Policy Paper 48.

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