

Extended abstract for the 2021 International Population Conference (IPC2021)

Title: Home alone: Exploring childcare options to move beyond the single child problem in Belarus

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Background: Belarus' dynamics of demographic decline & family policy

The social, political and economic transformations experienced by Belarus and other formerly socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe since the beginning of the 1990s have resulted in abrupt shifts in fertility trends (Amialchuk et al. 2014). According to the Human Fertility Database (HFD), the total fertility rate (TFR) in Belarus has consistently stayed at around 1.5 in the last 20 years, close to the lowest low TFR of 1.3. If the current trend is kept, Belarus would soon reach “the point of no return”, after which the demographic processes of depopulation will become irreversible. Thus, Belarus needs prompt solutions to sustain its population level.

The lack of evidence on effective pro-natalist family policies to tackle the demographic decline in Belarus illustrates that more efforts should be invested in regular evaluations of its family policies in order to achieve a better total fertility rate (Shakhotko, 2011). The government's current almost exclusive focus on financial incentives for childbearing is insufficient to reverse the country's below-replacement level fertility. Thus, combining findings from a comprehensive literature review and a cross-sectional analysis of the Belarusian Generation and Gender Survey (GGS), *this study will evaluate the relation between (in)formal childcare support and having two children in Belarus.*

Existing research shows the low fertility in Eastern Europe and particularly in Belarus can be primarily explained by falling second-births rates, rather than the “no family” or “late family” models that are typically used to explain fertility decline in Western European countries (Amialchuk et al. 2014; Frejka and Sobotka, 2008). Given the opposite effects of pronatalist socio-cultural norms on the one hand and macro-economic and socio-structural obstacles on the other, women tend to have only one child “to satisfy the social norm of becoming a mother, while at the same limiting the inevitable double burden of working full-time and taking care of household tasks” (Zeman et al, 2018).

Belarus introduced pro-natalist family policy measures specifically designed to incentivize second child-bearing through progressive economic benefit. The economic theory of fertility (e.g. Becker 1981) maintains that pro-natalist family policies (e.g. child benefits and allowances) can reduce the opportunity cost of having children, thus encouraging an increase in the number of births (Di Giulia et al., 1997).

However, it would be a misconception to apply these findings blindly to the Belarusian context. Moreover, fertility and family benefits tend to affect first and third but not second childbearing rates and are small in scope (Gauthier, 2007; Laroque and Salanie, 2004; Vicat 2004).

In contrast, multiple studies have shown that childcare provision could result in an increase of fertility (e.g. Del Boca et al., 2003; Kravdal, 1996). The fertility literature strongly suggests that institutional factors and gender equality may provide explanations for the quantum of fertility in Belarus as well (Basten et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2011). Women in Eastern Europe still often should choose between having a job and having children, as childcare options are often not available or affordable. Thus, there is strong reason to assume that complementing financial measures with institutional measures such as more accessible childcare will better tackle the obstacles that inhibit the fertility rate potential than an exclusive focus on financial measures.

Design and methodology

Using the first wave of the Belarusian GGS 2017, I apply binary logistic regressions to analyze the **relationship between second-order births & childcare support** in Belarus. The final sample (n=928) includes men & women aged 18-45 with one or two biological children of an age appropriate for childcare, which was set between zero and 10 years. The dependent variable is having child/-ren ("0" = has one child, "1" = has two children). The main explanatory variable is the usage of formal, informal, and mixed (formal & informal) childcare arrangements. Formal childcare includes kindergarten, crèche, after-school care, other institutional arrangements. Informal childcare is defined as regular help with childcare from relatives or friends or other people for whom caring for children is not their primary occupation. In addition, I control for respondents' sex, age, socio-economic position (education and economic wellbeing), and the employment status of the respondents and their partner.

Findings

Empirical evidence from the first round of the Belarusian GGS (2017) clearly demonstrates that regular institutional childcare doubles the likelihood of women and men between to have two as opposed to one child (see table 1). There is almost no difference between respondents who use only formal or mixed (formal and informal) childcare. However, the non-usage of institutional childcare strongly reduces a likelihood of having two children.

Table 1: Logistic regression model of having two children in Belarus (Odds Ratios)

	Having two children	
	OR	p
Socio-demographic characteristics		
Gender		
Female	1 [Ref.]	
Male	0.9	0.679
Age group (in years)		
18-25	1 [Ref.]	
26-35	2.9	0.000
36-45	4.2	0.000
Economical wellbeing		
Low	1 [Ref.]	
Medium	1	0.913
High	1.2	0.292
Education		
Medium	1.2	0.528
High	0.9	0.617
Employment status		
Both partners are employed	1 [Ref.]	
Only one partner is employed	2	0.000
Family policy variable		
Usage of childcare		
No	1 [Ref.]	
Only formal	2.3	0.000
Only informal	0.5	0.003
Mixed	2.2	0.000
N	928	
Nagelkerke pseudo R ²	0.12	

Source: Autor's own calculation on the base of Belarusian Generation and Gender Survey (2017)

Moreover, education and economic wellbeing do not have any significant relationship with having the second child. It can be inferred that economic wellbeing of Belarusian is not the most important factor in their decision making regarding having children. This result provides an initial indication that Belarus' almost exclusive focus on financial measures to increase the total fertility rate could be an ineffective policy in the Belarusian context. What is more, it is likely that day care support could be more cost-effective than child allowances (Goldstein et al., 2017), as after an initial investment, one childcare facility can reach more children over time with a limited staff and facility maintenance cost. Furthermore, more accessible childcare will allow alleviate the employment-childrearing dilemma and improve gender equality.

In sum, it can be inferred that financial measures may potentially be effective in promoting second childbearing under the right circumstances, but there is still no evidence for its effectiveness in the Belarusian context. At the same time, institutional childcare support seems to be effective in increasing second childbearing rates.

Conclusions

The Belarusian first childbearing is incentivized by socio-cultural gender norms, but second childbearing is de-incentivized by socio-structural obstacles such as limited access to childcare. The Belarusian government therefore needs to evaluate their family policy measures to effectively tackle the demographics of decline.

Building on an extensive literature review and a cross-sectional analysis of the first wave of the Belarusian GGS (2017), this research makes first steps towards evidence-based suggestions to stimulate families in Belarus to have more than one child. The analysis shows that good access to regular institutional childcare can increase the proportion of Belarusians who have two children. Given the sociocultural context in Belarus and empirical findings from other countries, Belarus would likely benefit from implementing a more pro-egalitarian model focused on institutional support to counter the childbearing-employability trade-off, such as accessible and cheap childcare.

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