

Family Policies in 'Hybrid' Welfare States after the Crisis: Pathways between Policy Expansion and Retrenchment¹

Sonja Blum^a, Lenka Formánková^b and Ivana Dobrotić^c

^aAustrian Institute for Family Studies, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

^bThe Institute for Public Policy and Social Work, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

^cDepartment for Social Policy, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia

Abstract

The economic crisis has significantly challenged national welfare states and has often led to retrenchment. The question arises how countries have reacted to the crisis in the area of family policy – not directly connected to rising unemployment and also not as demanding for state spending as for example the pension system. This article analyzes family policy reforms during the crisis in three small European welfare states – Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovenia. Focusing on the 'rationale' behind the reforms, it aims to explore how family policy was affected by the crisis and whether the crisis gave rise to new policy pathways and ideas in the area. The exploratory case studies of reforms conducted in the three countries between 2009 and 2013 show that everywhere the pre-crisis policy pathways were also continued in the period of crisis. The reforms were framed by diverse paradigms related to national-specific contexts along with newly emerged austerity arguments. The Czech Republic shows a continued focus on a neo-liberal paradigm, utilizing the crisis to introduce further residual measures, i.e. mostly negative re-familializing reforms, mixed with de-familializing policies based on the workfare paradigm. Strong crisis-related discourse in Slovenia was accompanied by diverse austerity measures, which strengthened the social dimension of family policy and weakened a de-familialistic effect of the pre-crisis reforms. Austria, much less affected by the crisis, continues to combine social investment and 'freedom of choice' paradigms, introducing an ambivalent amalgam of positive familialistic and de-familialistic family policy reforms.

Keywords

Family policy; Crisis; Policy paradigms; Austria; Czech Republic; Slovenia

Introduction

Since 2008, the global financial crisis has created serious challenges for European welfare states. While the effects of the crisis on economic performance

Author Emails: sonja.blum@univie.ac.at; lformankova@gmail.com;
ivana.dobrotic@pravo.hr

and labour markets have been described in the literature (see e.g. Walby 2009; Vaughan-Whitehead 2012), welfare state reforms during the crises have received less attention (see e.g. Starke *et al.* 2011; Vis *et al.* 2011). Until now only few attempts have been made to explain in more detail what has happened in the area of family policy (exceptions are Gauthier 2010; Richardson 2010).

This article analyzes family policy reforms during the crisis in three small European welfare states – Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovenia. Focusing on the ‘rationale’ behind the reforms, we aim to explore how family policy was affected by the crisis and whether the crisis gave rise to new policy pathways and ideas in the area of family policy. Namely, with the increasing importance of a social investment agenda in the last decades, it might have been easy to argue for new investments in family policy during the period of economic growth. However, external ‘shocks’ like the recent crisis may bring about completely new logics into policy-making, for example an opposite demand for retrenchment. Under these circumstances the crisis-related policy responses may increasingly depend on the country-specific exposure to the negative socio-economic trends caused by the crisis (see Starke *et al.* 2011; Farnsworth and Irving 2012). Hence, it is of particular interest to further explore how the crisis affected the family policy area in different countries.

The compared countries implemented very different reforms before the crises, leading to a ‘hybridization’ of their welfare states. Austria represented a typical conservative welfare state until the 1990s, but lately has been moving to an ambivalent amalgam of traditional conservative and new social-democratic family policy measures (Blum 2012). The Czech Republic and Slovenia as formerly state-socialist welfare systems have taken different paths since the 1990s. The Czech welfare state has moved more to a liberal residual type (Saxonberg and Širovátková 2009), while Slovenia seems to maintain a combination of predominantly generous ‘Nordic-style’ family policies, including also some corporatist elements (Černigoj-Sadar and Kanjuo-Mrčela 2010).

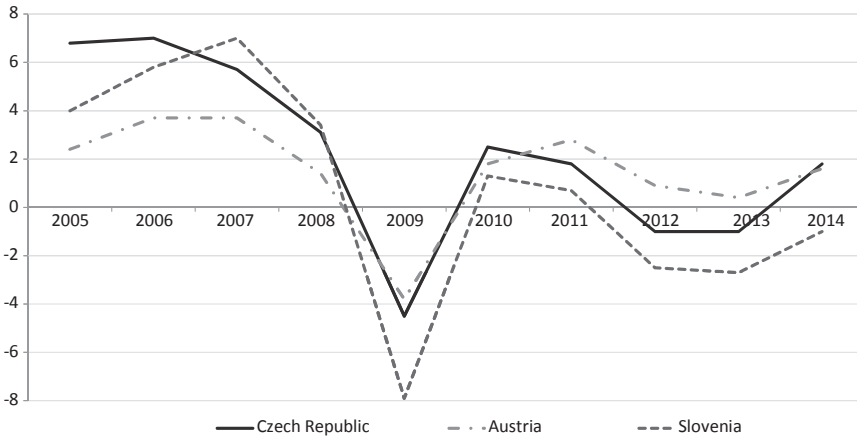
The article starts with a short literature review setting up a theoretical framework for comparison of family policy reforms during the crisis period. Following this, family policy reforms between 2009 and 2013 are analyzed by putting an additional focus on the arguments behind the reforms. The conclusions briefly summarize the main findings and discuss newly emerging, crisis-related trends and discourses in family policy.

The Severity of the Crisis

The level of exposure to negative socio-economic trends caused by the crisis differs among the European countries, resulting in different policy responses (see Starke *et al.* 2011; Farnsworth and Irving 2012). As Farnsworth and Irving (2012: 136) argue, “‘austerity’ has a distinct character depending on the particular national combination of economics *and politics*, and not necessarily a combination that fits the traditional families of nations or worlds of welfare

Figure 1

The real GDP growth (as percentage change on previous period)



Source: Eurostat 2013.

Note: forecasts for 2013–14.

capitalism'. Thus, in order to better understand and assess the family policy reforms in the compared countries, it is important to describe briefly the severity of the crisis.

When we look at the economic impact of the crises, the real gross domestic product (GDP) growth declined in 2009 in all three countries. However, Slovenia has faced the most pronounced difficulties. After a short economic recovery, Slovenia and, to lesser extent, the Czech Republic experienced a new economic downturn in 2012 (figure 1). With the onset of the crisis, Slovenia also experienced the highest growth of public debt and public deficit. These trends were of more moderate character in Austria and the Czech Republic (see Eurostat 2013). The economic downturn was followed by a reduction of available workplaces and growing unemployment rates. The pattern was similar to that of the GDP growth, with Slovenia showing the most visible difficulties (figure 2).

Welfare States and Family Policies in Times of Crisis

There are competing hypotheses and empirical findings on welfare state reactions to the crisis. At the theoretical level, the literature predicts radical reforms during times of crisis (see Starke 2008; Vis *et al.* 2011). However, there is much less agreement at the empirical level about the type of welfare reforms which can be or are actually implemented (Starke *et al.* 2011). This ambiguity applies to at least two dimensions of welfare state development. First, it applies to whether and to what extent welfare states react with retrenchment, expan-

Figure 2

Employment and unemployment rates



Source: Eurostat 2013.

sion or neither of these. Second, it applies to whether the welfare state reactions will be similar or different, for example predetermined by a country's 'regime path'. Starke *et al.* (2011) found that the crisis responses of different countries were surprisingly diverse and ranged from retrenchment to non-reaction to welfare state expansion.

In the first overviews of the impacts of the economic crisis on family policy, addressing EU27 countries, Gauthier (2010) and Richardson (2010) found that reforms varied widely between the countries and in different time periods. In the early stage of the economic crisis both retrenchment and expansion (often stimulus measures) could be found. Later stages were dominated by austerity measures which involved postponements of planned expansions, cuts in family benefits and reductions in parental leave. Crisis-related family policy reforms differed among the particular policy instruments; expansionary measures were more frequently reported in work-family reconciliation (parental leave, childcare), and cutbacks in cash benefits (Gauthier 2010).

Comparing Finland, Germany and the UK, Nygård (2012) found a misfit between the discourses and implementation level in family policy-making during the crisis. While the reforms were predominantly framed under the social-investment paradigm, the implemented policies incorporated elements of different paradigms (including workfare and familialism) according to specific national context and policy-making institutions. As it would be of particular interest to see whether a similar 'misfit' between implemented policies and the reasoning behind can be found also in other countries, we focus on both aspects in our case studies. In the following, an appropriate analytical framework for this is developed.

Figure 3

Family policy change and ideas

	(re-)familialization	de-familialization/ re-commodification
negative	e.g. retrenchment of childcare services	e.g. abolishment of coinsurance/derived benefits
positive	e.g. cash-for-care benefits	e.g. creation of childcare services

Source: adapted from Ostner 2003: 54, with own amendments.

Analytical Framework

Traditional theoretical approaches such as institutionalism or power resources have been found not to offer satisfying explanations for family policy reforms (see Blum 2012). Family policies are driven by different forces than other social policy areas (Gauthier 1999), particularly political actors' beliefs. Hence, ideational approaches are often employed to explain family policy developments (e.g. Häusermann and Kübler 2010; Mätzke and Ostner 2010). This is not striking since family policy has always been a rather normative field, marked by debates on gender roles and on various aspects related to care work. In the analysis of family policy reforms during the crisis period in the countries being compared, attention is paid to the arguments behind the reforms and to the question of whether these arguments are consistent with policy outputs. To combine both dimensions, i.e. the 'policy outputs' and the ideas drawn on to legitimize them, the following analytical framework (see figure 3) is employed.

First, applying the concept of familialization/de-familialization (Leitner 2003; Ostner 2003), family policy reforms between 2007 and 2013 are assessed, focusing on the pathways between expansion/stimulus and retrenchment/austerity measures. Depending on their character and whether they supported family care or public care, the reforms can be located between (re-)familialization and de-familialization. Also, introduced measures can be either positive or negative, based on whether they open up or delimit new opportunities for parents through public policies (see Ostner 2003).²

Second, the ways the reforms were argued for by policymakers are analyzed. In the recent family policy literature, several dominant ideas can be

distinguished – social investment, freedom of choice, workfare and austerity. The social investment paradigm that started to enter the family policy area more frequently in the 2000s corresponds with positive de-familialistic family policy measures aimed at work–family reconciliation, such as high-quality childcare (Morgan 2012). Workfare shares with the social investment paradigm the focus on activation and re-commodification, but stresses the negative elements of de-familialization/re-commodification (Dingeldey 2007), for example by abolishing benefits that enabled mothers of small children not to work. Positive re-familialistic family policy measures, on the other hand, correspond to a traditional freedom of choice paradigm, as the measures should enable parents (mainly mothers) to stay out of employment when children are small (Ostner 2010). An ‘austerity’ paradigm has been brought in through the crises and it might take on different forms between negative re-familialization and negative de-familialization.

Our analysis relies on data on family policy reforms from national legislation, official government programmes, policy statements and parliamentary protocols in the 2007–13 period. The choice of the time period allows for comparison of the pre-crisis period with the post-crisis developments. A qualitative content analyses is conducted (Mayring 2000; Gläser and Laudel 2009), where a deductive approach of categorization is used, based on the analytical framework developed above. This approach allows the tracking of changes in the area of family policy during the crisis, as well as an understanding of the shifts the countries have taken by identifying the argumentative logic or ideology behind the reforms. Furthermore, the analytical framework helps illuminate whether the policy outputs correspond to the ideas policymakers draw on or whether ‘misfits’ exist between the two, as found by Nygård (2012).

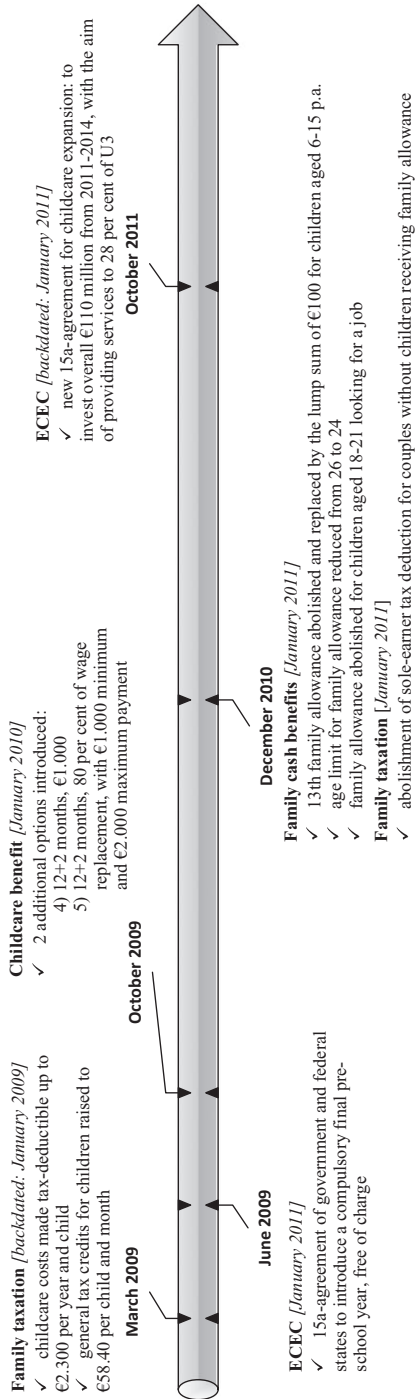
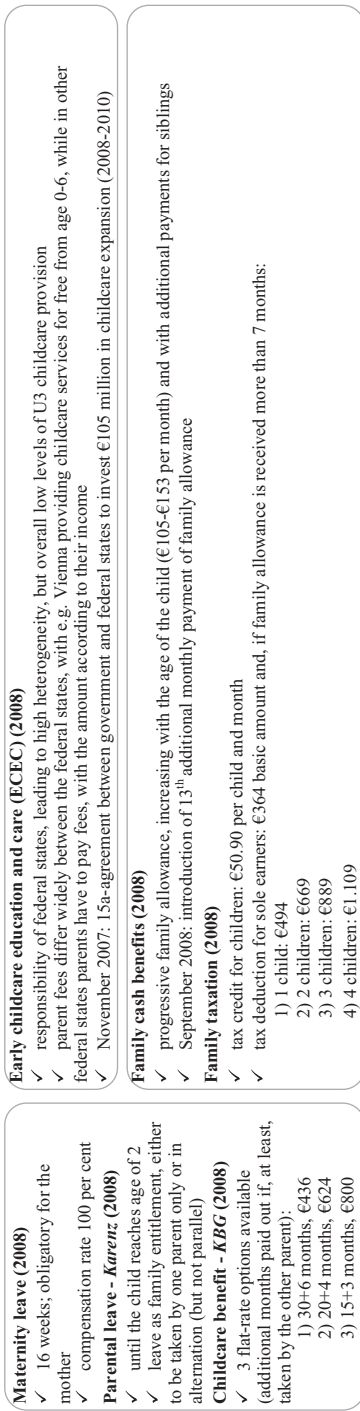
Analysis of the Country Cases

Austria: shifting family policy on an ambiguous path

Family policy in Austria has traditionally been described as familialistic, characterized by a focus on cash benefits and underdeveloped childcare services, especially for children under three (U₃) (Leitner 2003). Interestingly, the family policy reforms of the early 2000s continued and even enhanced this traditional familialistic path (Obinger 2008). Politically, this enhancement can be traced back to a governing coalition of the conservative ÖVP and the right-wing FPÖ which held office from 1999 to 2006. In 2002, this ÖVP-FPÖ coalition introduced a re-familialising ‘childcare benefit’ for parental leave (see figure 4).³ During this time, the focus on cash support for families continued and no initiatives were taken to expand the comparatively underdeveloped U₃ childcare services (8.7 per cent in 2002; Statistik Austria various years).

After the national elections of October 2006, the social-democratic SPÖ and the conservative ÖVP coalition changed the direction of this family policy path. In 2008, a reform of the childcare benefit was enacted. Parents could now choose between three different payment options of the childcare benefit, corresponding to shorter or longer parental leave (see figure 4). The

Figure 4
Family policy measures in Austria



Notes: Timing of changes as enacted is bolded ([planned] implementation start in brackets). Only family policy measures which were reformed during the crisis are included.

Source: Blum 2012; Federal Law Gazette Nos. 116/2009, 111/2010, 26/2009, 99/2009.

social democrats were the main advocates of this reform, emphasizing a quicker return of mothers into paid employment. However, the reform also fit traditional conservative paradigms, as it only introduced the shorter variants in addition to the long leave option and was therefore advocated by the ÖVP as increasing 'freedom of choice' (Blum 2012). In 2007, the government and the nine federal states – the latter being responsible for childcare – agreed to invest €105 million overall until 2010 in expanding U3 childcare facilities. Both reforms started before the economic crisis and remained relatively unaffected by its impacts.

In late 2008, in a direct response to the crisis, Austria implemented economic stimulus packages. The implementation of an already-planned tax reform was brought forward (Der Standard 2008a). Along with stimulus measures for enterprises, investments in infrastructure were undertaken (e.g. childcare) and measures to increase the disposable income for private households and enhance public consumption, for example via wage taxes, were also put into place. These measures amounted to 3.5 per cent of the GDP in 2008,⁴ making Austria one of the countries with the strongest stimulus packages in the EU (Breuss *et al.* 2009). The family policy aspects of these measures are described in more detail below.

Following the national elections of September 2008, the grand coalition of SPÖ and ÖVP agreed to introduce, from 2010, another additional variant of the childcare benefit. This newest '12+2 variant' is income-dependent⁵ and lasting only one year, plus two additional 'partner months' which – at least – need to be taken by the other parent and which expire otherwise (figure 4). This reform constituted a policy transfer from Germany, where such a regulation had just been introduced and clearly showed a focus on social investment and re-commodification of women (Blum 2012). The new childcare benefit was directed at well-earning, highly-educated women. While this fit the interests of the SPÖ, this measure was advocated during the election campaign mainly by the ÖVP in order to win the female and urban electorate for the conservatives (Blum 2012). In 2009, the government and the federal states agreed to make the last pre-school year compulsory and free of charge for all children. This measure, comprising an investment of €140 million, was part of the economic stimulus package. It showed a social-investment focus, as the main arguments were the need for early enhancement of children's language skills, particularly in the context of integration policy (Der Standard 2008b). Both of these expansionary measures – the income-dependent childcare benefit and the pre-school year – were *not* causatively linked to the crisis in the political debates.

The crisis, however, was argumentatively used by policymakers in the field of cash benefits for families. Already in late 2008, the tax reform had been introduced, earlier than originally planned. It included tax relief of €2.7 billion, €500 million of which directly aimed at families. In particular, childcare costs were made tax-deductible up to €2,300 per year and child, plus the general tax credits for children were raised to €58.40 monthly per child (Federal Law Gazette⁶ No. 26/2009). This was argued for both as a necessary relief for families and as an economic stimulus. For example, the state secretary from the Ministry of Finance stated in Parliament: 'To lower taxes, to

disburden low and medium incomes, families, as well as small and medium-sized companies – all this stimulates consumption and gives security' (Nationalrat 2009: 83).⁷

Soon thereafter, however, the economic stimulus measures were replaced by a stronger focus on saving packages. A higher budget was still foreseen for the family ministry in 2009/10 than in 2008, due to the compulsory final pre-school year and the increased family allowance (Der Standard 2009). However, in the budget for 2011 a decisive part of the overall saving measures was foreseen in the field of family policy. The recently introduced 13th family allowance, additional to the 12 regular allowances per year, was abolished (Federal Law Gazette No. 111/2010). Instead, a 'school start' lump sum of €100 was introduced, but paid only for school-age children from six to 15. Furthermore, eligibility criteria were tightened, such as the age of the child (see figure 4). In the political debates, the crisis and austerity needs were taken as an argument for these cutbacks. For example, delegates of the conservative ÖVP stated they were 'without any alternative' (Nationalrat 2010a: 37), especially in view of public debts and future generations (Nationalrat 2010a: 152). As family minister Mitterlehner (ÖVP) put it before Parliament, these cutbacks in the area of family cash benefits were a (partial) redraw of the economic stimulus measures. His statement also points to 'workfare' ideas:

It's the best family policy, when there are jobs in the economy [. . .], when men and women are able to work and the companies are successful. [. . .] In the years 2009 and 2010, we spent €940 million more for families, due to the economic crisis and because it was necessary. Now, in the budget for the next year, we are removing €234 million of these €940 million. (Nationalrat 2010b: 361)

Furthermore, the family minister argued that these measures were part of a shift from cash to in-kind benefits in family policy: 'The costs of our system bear no relation to the results. Our family policy, which is primarily focused on cash benefits, has brought us a very low fertility rate' (Die Presse 2010).

While the Conservative ÖVP did not give up its traditional focus on cash support for families, this statement shows that a more balanced distribution of cash and in-kind benefits was used as an argument for the cutbacks. Concurrently, the federal government and the federal states agreed to continue with their investments in childcare expansion in 2011. At this time, the negative impacts of the crisis had been largely overcome and Austria's situation was quite favourable, for example regarding employment data. Both the federal government and the federal states agreed to invest additional amounts in childcare facilities from 2011 to 2014 (figure 4). In 2007, U3 childcare services were provided for 11.8 per cent of children. In 2011, after the first investment programme, this quota had risen to 19.7 per cent (Statistik Austria various years).

Overall, the expansionary measures that were introduced (i.e. family tax reliefs, childcare expansion), would probably have been introduced without the crisis as well, but they were promoted in the context of the economic stimulus packages. The government rather preferred cutting cash benefits for

families than reducing investments into childcare. Therefore, the social-investment perspective has not been given up in Austria due to the crises. On the other hand, Austrian family policy is not dominated by the social-investment approach; rather, it still shows elements of familialism and 'freedom of choice'. To give an example, the SPÖ principally favours abolishment of the longest childcare benefit, while the ÖVP rejects this, pointing to the wish of many parents and particularly mothers to care for their children at home during the first years (APA-OTS 2011).

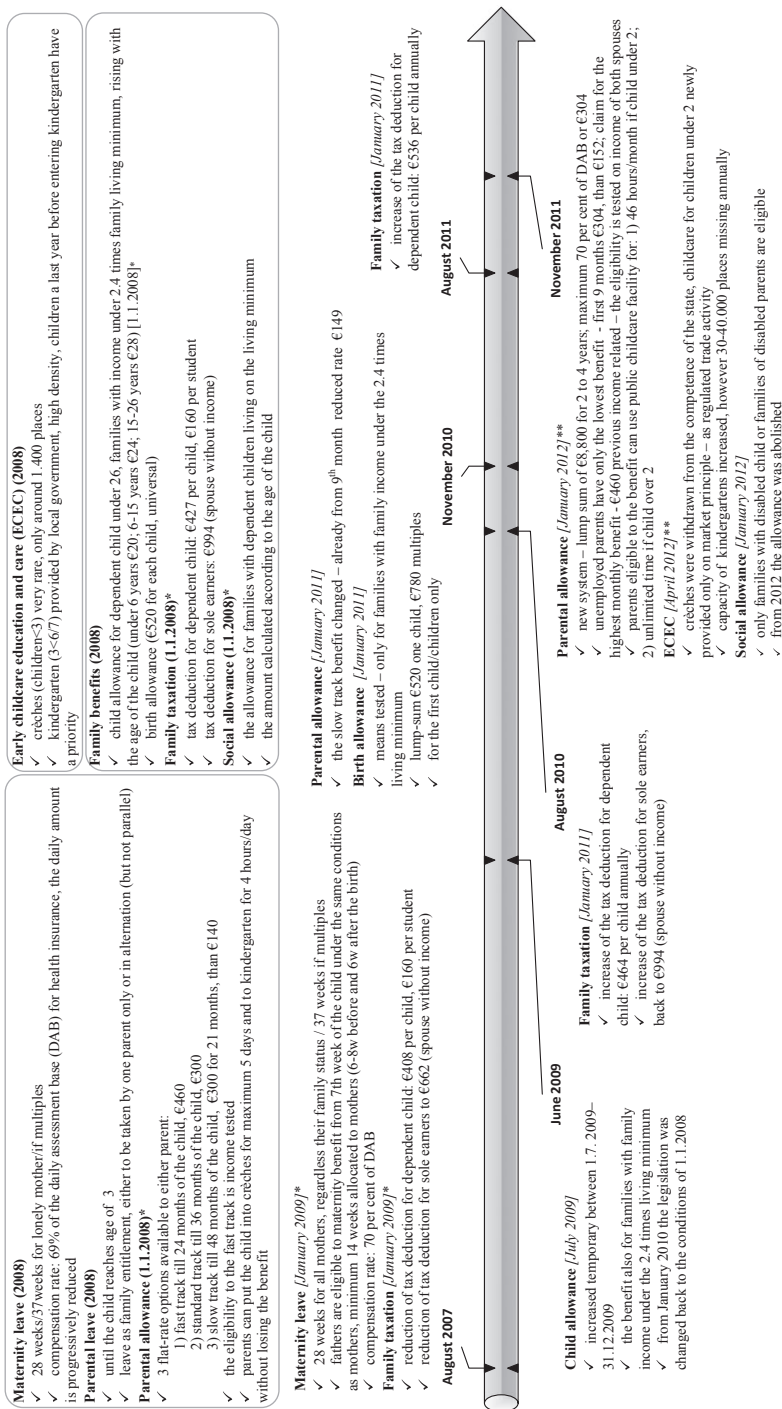
Summing up, the shifts in Austrian family policy take an ambivalent course and, in the investigated period, show an amalgam of 'social investment' and 'austerity' ideas, while the actual policy outputs have also contained elements of the rather familialistic 'freedom of choice'. In general, this ambivalence can be explained by political compromises in the grand coalition, with the social-democratic SPÖ advocating re-commodification, and the ÖVP arguing for positive re-familialistic measures, for example in leave policy/childcare benefit reforms or in its stronger focus on cash benefits. However, there are exceptions. Notably, it was the ÖVP which stood up for the shortest income-dependent childcare benefit variant in the election campaign. Furthermore, both parties have developed and have continued a focus on the importance of expanding U3 childcare in the context of work-family reconciliation and social investment. In all this, the crisis and austerity impacts on these pathways of Austrian family policy must be described as rather limited.

The Czech Republic: the shift towards severe austerity measures

The Czech welfare state has shifted to include residual welfare reforms since the 1990s (Saxonberg and Sirovátka 2009). In the area of family policy, the re-familialistic shift was typified by cutting childcare services and prolonging paid allowance (Saxonberg and Sirovátka 2006; Tomešová-Bartáková 2009; Formánková and Dobrotić 2011). Thus, the period of the crisis was utilized by the central-right (ODS, KDU-ČSL and SZ)⁸ and right-wing (ODS, TOP 09 and VV/LIDEM)⁹ governments to introduce significant cuts in the sphere of public spending. Further austerity measures were introduced throughout the system of social protection and consequently in the area of family policy. Although this trend started before the crisis, the crisis provided further justification, not only for retrenchment, but for completing neo-liberal reform of the social security system.

Retrenchment measures (see figure 5) came into force in January 2008 as part of the Act on stabilization of public budgets (Act No. 261/2007 Coll.). The main argument supporting the cuts was the need to manage the state budget deficit. It was explained as a necessary step to fulfill the commitment given to the EU to reduce the annual deficit to under 3 per cent of GDP (Malý 2007).¹⁰ The reform targeted public spending cuts and increased revenues to public budgets through higher direct and indirect taxation. Families with small children were especially influenced by the system of lump-sum tax reductions for people with dependent children and spouses without income. It brought up negative familialism as the system made it economically preferable for

Figure 5
Family policy measures in Czech Republic



Notes: Timing of changes as enacted is bolded ([planned] implementation start in brackets) Only family policy measures which were reformed during the crisis are included.
* Public Financing Reform adopted by 261/2007 Coll. Act on Stabilization of the Public Budget ** Social Reform.

Source: Act Nos. 242/1991 Coll., 455/1991 Coll., 117/1995 Coll., 561/2004 Coll., 187/2006 Coll., 261/2007 Coll., 347/2010 Coll., 364/2011 Coll., 366/2011 Coll., 372/2011 Coll.

mothers of small children with low income to stay on leave longer (Dudová 2008).

The three-track system of parental allowance (Act No. 261/2007 Coll.) came into force in 2008. The amount of the childcare allowance was connected to the length of the draw-down period. The longer the period covered, the lower the monthly allowance (see figure 5). Although the reform was framed as introducing 'freedom of choice', the unavailability of U3 childcare made it impossible for the majority of parents to return to the labour market before their children turned three. Moreover, the 'fast' option was available only to parents with a certain income. At the same time, the least economically rewarding 'slow' option, was the compulsory 'choice' for parents of low income and those who were unemployed prior to their leave. So, despite the attempt, the reform had rather negative familialistic output, leaving low-income and unemployed parents without real 'freedom of choice' and out of the labour market for four years (Dudová 2008).

In November 2008, a *Pro-family package* (MPSV 2008a) was adopted to support families with children through de-familialistic policies such as increases in childcare provision and support of flexible working arrangements. The reform, however, was never put into practice.

From January 2009, as part of the health insurance reform, fathers became eligible for maternity benefit under the same conditions as mothers from the seventh week after a child's birth (figure 5). At the same time, the benefit of longer maternity leave for single mothers was abolished (Act No. 187/2006 Coll.). Combined with lowering of the child allowance, the reforms had the greatest impact on the group of the most economically vulnerable families – single mothers. The reform aimed to counteract the increasing trend of birth out of wedlock and indicated the pressure on conservative family values (Malý 2007).

In March 2009, the opposition¹¹ succeeded in leading the lower house of the Czech Parliament to a non-confidence vote. The new caretaker government abolished the *Pro-family package*.

From August 2010, to moderate the impact of the crisis, the new right-wing government enacted further cuts, also in the area of family policy (Act No. 347/2010 Coll.). The planned reduction in spending was around 1.3 billion CZK (€52 million). In order to approve the amendments quickly and without major parliamentary debates, the government utilized the crisis to announce a situation of 'legislative emergency'.¹²

The austerity reforms came to force from 2011. First, the right to social allowance – financial transfer to children from low income families – was restricted. Second, the formerly universal birth allowance became means-tested and eligible only at birth of the first child (see figure 5). As a result, the funding distributed to the birth allowance decreased by 80 per cent (CSO 2012). Third, the childcare allowance was reduced for parents taking the 'slow' track option (see figure 5). However, prioritizing shorter draw-down of childcare allowance, the reform was not fully de-familializing as the earlier return to the labour market was blocked by the lack of U3 childcare. On the contrary, the changes brought further negative familialization of low income parents, being eligible only to the 'slow' track option (Sirovátka *et al.* 2011).

In 2012, the Czech government enacted further reform in the area of family policy as part of the Act on social reform (Act No. 366/2011 Coll.). As part of the retrenchment, the social allowance was completely abolished and replaced by social assistance schemes. On the other hand, the flexibility in drawing the parental allowance was further increased (see figure 5), which had a positive re-familialization impact. Most importantly, previous limits on combining the allowance with formal childcare have been abolished for children above the age of two. Children under two can spend 46 hours in public childcare per month without their parents losing the right to parental allowance. The government also reduced the technical and legal demands for setting up company-based kindergartens. This step was to solve the shortage of U3 childcare, which represents the main barrier to a faster return of mothers to employment (Act No. 364/2011 Coll.).

In June 2013, the prime minister abdicated after a series of scandals. As a result, the planned childcare reform, building on the social investments paradigm, was not enacted.

If we look into the way governments framed these reforms, it can be seen that austerity arguments prevailed. The strategic document from 2008 – *National Concept for Support to Families with Children* – prepared the ground for the austerity measures introduced before and during the crisis (MPSV 2008a). Stressing ‘individual responsibility’, the Ministry of Social Affairs argued in favour of the ‘independence of families’ to strengthen family cohesion and mitigate the ‘persistent inclination of the Czech population to the dependence on the state’ (MPSV 2008b: 17). In 2008, the reform of childcare allowance was framed as supporting a ‘freedom of choice’. The Minister of Work and Social Affairs from the right-wing ODS argued that the changes were ‘widening the flexibility (...) and bringing more freedom for young families’ (PCR 2007a, 2007b). Supporters of the reform argued that it would enhance the possibilities for parents to return to the labour market earlier while maintaining generous support for in-home caregivers.

In 2009, the caretaker government, in the crisis discourse, abolished the *Pro-family Package* arguing that ‘it would be an extensive burden to the state budget’ (IDNES 2009).

With the change of the government in 2010, the official argumentation shifted from stressing individual responsibility to stigmatizing social welfare beneficiaries. In the area of family policy, the focus was still on lowering the dependence of families on the state. The reforms enacted in 2010/11 were framed as necessary changes of the far too generous and costly welfare system, ‘It is not acceptable that the state takes over the breadwinning responsibility from families. This way we favor unmarried couples to married ones as most of the beneficiaries in cases of social allowance were sole mothers’ (PCR 2010). The reliance on the generous state support was framed as irresponsible, leaving debts to future generations. The framing again indicated the pressure on conservative family values that had been already set by previous governments. Families economically dependent on the state were newly framed as socially excluded and, therefore, better suited for the social assistance scheme (PCR 2011).

In 2011, the Act on social reform was framed as ‘targeting the effectiveness of the cash allowance distribution’ and ‘increasing efficiency’ (PCR 2011). The argumentation around childcare benefits shifted to support higher participation of parents in the labour market before giving birth and their return to the labour market (PCR 2011). The ‘workfare’ argumentation connected with the reforms was to some extent misfit to the idea of ‘freedom of choice’, which framed the changes in childcare allowance and support of U3 services.

To summarize, in the Czech Republic, it has been mostly austerity measures that have been introduced in the area of family policy, which were in line with the legacies of the liberal conservative parties that have led the country since 2010. The common framing of the policy reforms was:

1. the need to reduce the public debt; and
2. a desire to decrease the reliance of the Czech people on the welfare state, a reliance which had developed during the period of state socialism.

The government utilized the crisis to introduce further residual measures. Therefore, the current Czech family policy is a hybrid mix of negative familialization and de-familializing measures.

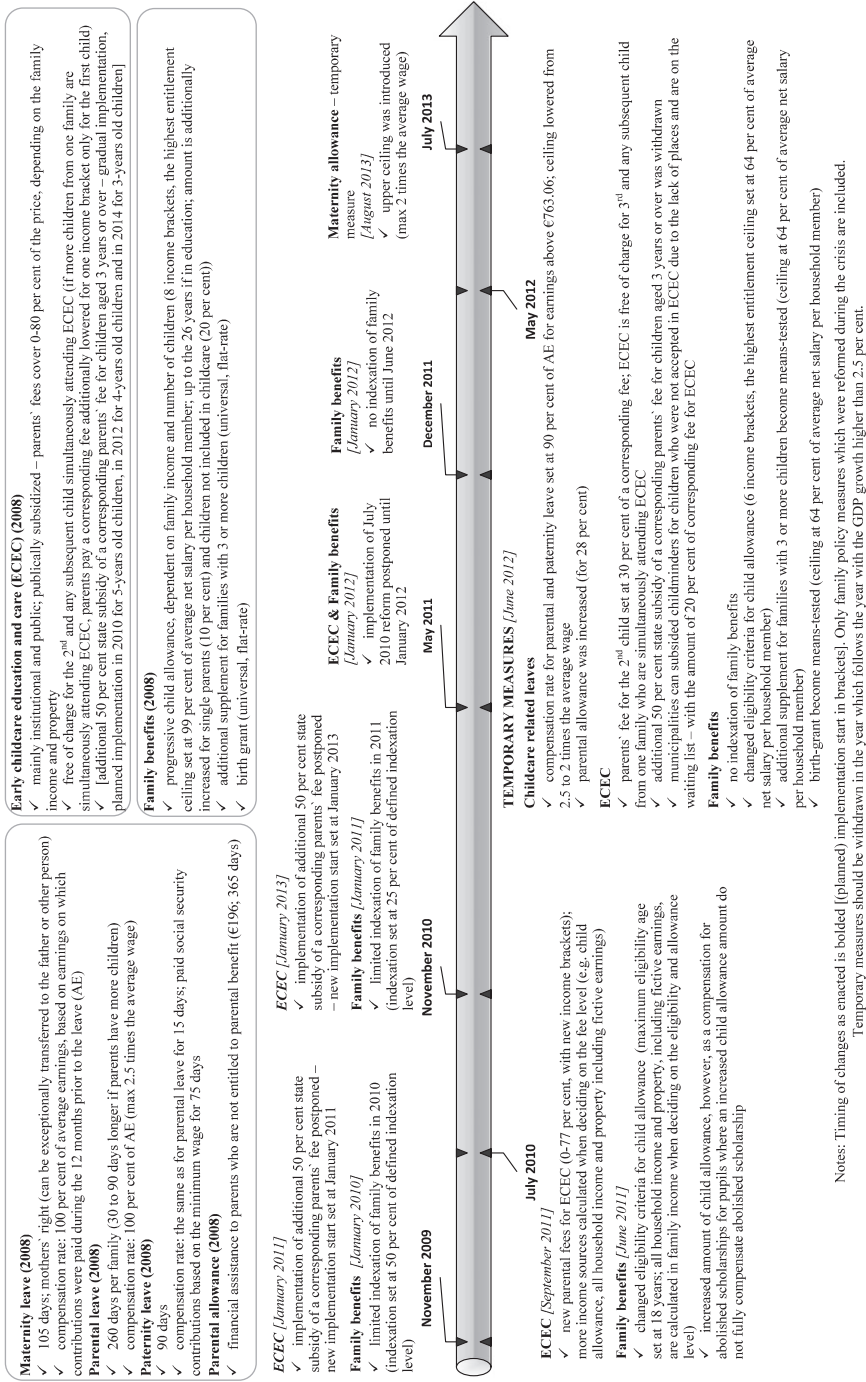
Slovenia: a few steps towards (temporary) retrenchment

In comparison to other European countries, Slovenian family policy provides a quite solid basis for a work–family balance (Černigoj-Sadar and Kanjuo-Mrčela 2010).¹³ In spite of re-familialistic intentions in the 1990s, Slovenia continued along the de-familialistic policy path of generous (but not too long) childcare leave and widespread childcare services. Moreover, new elements were added to the existing policy design such as incentives for equal distribution of care and (in)direct cash benefits primarily targeted at larger families (Dobrotić 2012), bringing in new elements of de-familialization, but also of positive familialization.¹⁴ Hence, the family policy instruments widened scope and, with the onset of the crisis, Slovenian family policy was marked by generous childcare leave, a variety of family benefits, and a relatively widespread network of childcare facilities (Korintus and Stropnik 2009; see figure 6).

Family policy remains an important aspect of the public agenda, advocated by different policy actors who all favour initiatives related to the widening of its scope. However, their arguments differ and studies (Korintus and Stropnik 2009; Dobrotić 2012) show how on the one hand centre-right political actors are more inclined towards familialistic measures justified by demographic arguments. On the other hand, other actors (e.g. social democrats, experts, some social partners) predominantly advocate the need to contribute to gender equality, active fathering and stem more frequently from the social-investment perspective.

As late as 2008, reforms which widened state support in the family policy area were still present. Namely, to enhance early childhood education and care (ECEC) affordability, the right-wing government enacted lower fees for parents with two or more children simultaneously attending the ECEC,

Figure 6
Family policy measures in Slovenia



Source: Dobrotić 2012; Act Nos. 98/2010, 94/2010, 62/2010, 62/2010, 62/2010, 110/2011, 40/2012, 63/2013.

thereby additionally strengthening a de-familialistic policy path. The main arguments behind this reform were related to EU childcare recommendations and the need to stimulate positive socio-demographic trends (MSS 2007; DZ 2008). That can be additionally seen from an interview with a representative of the then governing right-wing party:¹⁵

'We wanted to stimulate higher participation in kindergartens . . . and we wanted to motivate parents to have more children because we think that is very important, also in the long-term, for the pension system, the population is ageing and if you do not have people on the revenue side, who are employed and pay contributions, that will be a problem in the long run.'

It is interesting to note that the right-wing political parties' discourse shifted from a 1990s conservative stance which favoured re-familialization to a 'new pronatalism' (see Mätzke and Ostner 2010) which favours the labour market activation of all adult family members (Dobrotić 2012). This reform brought a higher demand for childcare (Černigoj-Sadar and Kanjua-Mrčela 2010) and the coverage rate rose from 67.2 per cent in 2007/08 to 76.7 per cent in 2012/13.¹⁶ The growth in childcare coverage amounted to about 7 per cent per year, until 2012/13 when it slowed to 2.3 per cent (SURS 2013).

With the onset of the crisis Slovenia faced also a political crisis.¹⁷ Different reforms became primarily directed towards the stability and sustainability of public finances. The first set of austerity measures in late 2008 and early 2009 aimed at the mitigation of the crisis (e.g. measures aimed at the banking sector and the liquidity of companies, stimulation of the economy, decreased public spending, maintenance of workplaces), while in the second phase, larger structural reforms were foreseen. The *Slovenian exit strategy 2010–2013* (VRS 2010) combined measures in the area of economic policy (e.g. consolidation of public finances), structural changes (e.g. adjustments of pensions and the healthcare system, labour market reforms) and institutional adjustments.

Crisis-related reforms in family policy were predominantly part of savings measures directed towards the stabilization of public finances. Reforms targeted predominantly family benefits and became more comprehensive as the crisis worsened. The first two sets of reforms introduced by the left-wing government brought restrictions in family benefits indexation mechanisms and postponement of more generous subsidies for childcare, as well as stricter eligibility criteria for child allowance and childcare subsidies (see figure 6). With the right-wing government in 2012, a wide range of austerity measures was introduced, affecting all aspects of family policy. The Act on balance of public finances (Act No. 40/2012) changed around 40 different acts to limit and reduce public expenditure. The first proposal envisaged bigger cuts in family policy; however, that was strongly opposed by trade unions, opposition parties and the public. Among others, it was proposed to permanently lower the compensation rate for parental and paternity leave (to 90 per cent of the previous earnings for the first six months and then to 80 per cent, with an upper ceiling of 1.5 of the average salary), put an end to reduced childcare fees for parents with several children in childcare and lower quality standards in

childcare (Dnevnik 2012; ZSSS 2012). After negative public reaction and through negotiations with trade unions (Dnevnik 2012; ZSSS 2012), these cuts were mitigated and were enacted as measures of a temporary character to be withdrawn following economic growth (see figure 6). Crisis-related reforms did not change the family policy path, however, they may weaken the de-familialistic effects of previous reforms and were reflected in the lower number of family benefits recipients¹⁸ and in the reduced level of family benefits for many families.

If we look into the way these reforms were framed by the government, it can be seen that austerity arguments prevailed. At the beginning, reforms introduced under the left-wing government were dominantly argued for by the need 'to contribute to the sustainability of public finances' in which it was important to maintain the existing rights ('it is important not to cut existing rights, but only to limit their future growth') and establish 'a fairer and in the long run a sustainable welfare state' (DZ 2009, 2010a, 2010b). Afterwards, new arguments related to the Maastricht criteria entered the public agenda, 'to limit public expenditure . . . and consolidate public finances and to reach the goal, introduced in the parliament, i.e., to lower budget deficits' (DZ 2011). The right-wing opposition parties disputed these reforms stressing that it 'is not appropriate to save on young families and those most vulnerable' and that savings could contribute anew to negative socio-demographic trends (DZ 2009). However, when the right-wing came into power, they continued with savings in family policy with the 2012 reform stressing that this was the only possible way to stabilize and consolidate public finances, to lower budget deficits in order to comply with EU demands and to contribute to economic growth and creditworthiness. It was stressed that the intervention in family policy could not be avoided, 'if there was an easier way, it would be definitely chosen – there is no other way' because the crisis burden should not be transmitted to future generations (DZ 2012).

In 2013, the new centre-left government set an upper ceiling on maternity leave allowance (see figure 6), arguing that this was a necessary step given the condition of the public finances and that solidarity became even more important during the crisis (DZ 2013). To harmonize with the EU parental leave directive, a new leave system was proposed (one month of non-transferable parental leave), applying gender equality and child well-being related arguments. However, as this meant fathers could transfer one month less of leave to mothers, the proposal was strongly opposed, under the freedom of choice argument, by the public, right-wing political parties, some civil society organizations and social partners (MDDSZEM 2013).

To sum up, at the beginning of the crisis, family policy in Slovenia was still the subject of increased investments, especially in the ECEC which strengthened a de-familialistic path. Reform was advocated under a social-investment discourse, but also a 'new pronatalism' which was especially stressed by governing right-wing political parties. However, the reform which enabled more affordable childcare was also a part of pre-election populism as its sustainability was questionable due to obligations related to Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) (see Dobrotić 2012). Although as the crisis worsened, different segments of family policy were affected, Slovenia continued along

the old family policy path. Still, under the austerity arguments, the reform intentions strengthened the social dimension of family policy and weakened a de-familialistic effect of previous reforms (e.g. ECEC subsidies were reduced, the expansion of new childcare places was slowed down, some family benefits became means-tested). Arguments behind the reforms were dominantly economic ones and crisis-related, mainly directed towards the need to have sustainable public finances and a lower budget deficit. Recent legal proposals aimed at fathers' quotas for parental leave indicate how support for gender equality goals remains declarative among most of the policy actors in Slovenia.

Conclusion

This article presents exploratory research on the crisis impact on the family policies in three small welfare states. Focus has been on policymakers' official rhetoric explaining and justifying the reforms. The three countries continued their pre-crisis policy pathways in the period of crisis. Their policy responses were not exclusively determined by the crisis and were also influenced by other country-specific factors (e.g. existing institutional arrangements, political ideology). Austrian family policy has remained characterized by an ambivalent amalgam of positive familialistic and de-familialistic family policy reforms. In the Czech Republic, policymakers took advantage of the crisis which served as an additional legitimizing force for already-envisaged mostly negative re-familializing reforms aimed at reducing public spending and increasing individual and the market responsibility. Although Slovenia has maintained the main features of a predominantly de-familialistic family policy path, the de-familialistic effects of previous reforms were weakened with the implementation of austerity measures.

The *intensity* of the crisis played an important role in recent family policy reforms, providing a base for justifying the policy changes. The crisis arguments were strongly pronounced in Slovenia which was most severely hit by the crisis, but were a less important driver of reforms in Austria, which experienced the fewest crisis-related difficulties in the economy and the labour market. In the Czech Republic, placed in the middle when it comes to the intensity of the crisis, the crisis served as an additional justification for right-wing governments to introduce further cuts. However, these cuts were in line with residualist reforms from the pre-crisis period, while the crisis created opportunities to introduce even stricter austerity measures. Despite the diversity of the policy paths in the three countries, we see numerous similarities in the reforms introduced since 2008. Namely, although different in intensity, the austerity measures in all three countries were directed mainly towards lowering the generosity of various family benefits.

Regarding the paradigms behind the family policy reforms during the crisis, the findings are in line with Nygård's (2012) thesis that the policy reforms were framed by diverse paradigms related to national-specific contexts and policy-making institutions. Hence, the countries kept certain continuity with the pre-crisis period along with newly emerged austerity arguments. Austria continues to combine elements of both the social-investment and the

familialistic paradigms, while the Czech Republic combines familialistic and neo-liberal framing supported by austerity arguments. An obvious 'austerity-shift' is evident in Slovenia, where economic and crisis-related arguments prevailed in the public discussions.

However, other than in Nygård's (2012) case studies, a misfit between the discourse and implementation level in family policy is not evident in all three cases. A misfit is evident solely in the Czech Republic, as the workfare paradigm failed to be realized in concrete family policy instruments (e.g. shorter leave periods vs. absence of places in nurseries) leading to negative familialization. In line with theoretical expectations (Ostner 2010; Morgan 2012), the freedom of choice arguments in Austria have continued with positive familialization (e.g. cash-for-care) and the social investment paradigm to introduce new measures of positive de-familialization, i.e. additional investment in childcare.

Regarding the newly emerged austerity arguments, some similarities and differences can be noticed between the countries. When framing reforms (mainly the cuts to and stricter eligibility criteria for various family benefits), all three countries claimed the need to reduce the budget deficit (an argument often connected with the EMU criteria), to achieve sustainability of public finances and to show 'concern for future generations'. In the Czech Republic, the austerity arguments were additionally applied to justify reforms aimed at increasing individual responsibility, i.e. at restraining the dependency of individuals on the welfare state.

To conclude, the analysis reveals how the crisis brought about a new framing of family policy reforms, which helped to implement certain austerity measures. This has been particularly the case since the so-called second stage of the crisis when austerity measures become more pronounced and it became harder to put measures expanding family policy on the political agenda. Also, as expected, the austerity paradigm went hand in hand with a different type of reform, depending on national-specific contexts and existing policies.

Notes

1. All authors contributed equally in writing this article. The order of the authors reflects the way the idea to write the article has developed.
2. Through measures such as the absence or abolition of childcare services, a negative (re-)familialization enforces care work provided within the family and hinders female employment. Positive re-familialization encourages the same goals, but through public policies such as cash-for-care benefits. By de-familializing measures, female employment and external care work is either negatively enforced (e.g. through abolishment of derived rights) or positively encouraged (e.g. through the creation of childcare services).
3. This benefit replaced the former parental leave benefit that was available only to employed parents.
4. Or even 4.1 per cent of the GDP, including the accompanying measures by the federal states (Breuss *et al.* 2009).
5. It is also available in a flat-rate form (see figure 3).
6. Austrian laws are usually cited as they have been published in the Federal Law Gazette (Bundesgesetzblatt).

7. All quotes from parliamentary protocols are authors' translations from national languages.
8. The Civic Democratic Party (ODS), the Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL) and the Green Party (Strana zelených).
9. ODS, the conservative party TOP 09 and the conservative-liberal party Public Affairs (Věci veřejné) replaced in May 2012 by the Liberal Democrats (LIDEM).
10. The milestones of the reform, which changed 46 different Acts, included changes in taxation, additional cuts to welfare provisions and new direct payments in the healthcare system.
11. The Czech Social Democrats (ČSSD) and the Communist Party (KSČM).
12. The legislation enacted during the state of legislative emergency was abolished by Constitutional Court in May 2011. However, even stricter reform was enacted in November 2011 as Act No. 364/2011 Coll.
13. The prevailing strategy for reconciliation is based on one year's paid leave, followed by the mother's return to full employment. Although fathers are increasingly using paternity leave, the gendered division of care remains widespread (MDDSZEM 2013).
14. Several reforms brought paternity leave and different measures intended to larger families (e.g. progressive system of child allowances dependant on number of children, supplement for large families, greater possibilities to work part-time for larger families).
15. Interview conducted by I. Dobrotić in May 2011 in Ljubljana.
16. In the U3 group the coverage rate increased from 43.7 per cent to 55.7 per cent, and in the oldest group (from three years up to the compulsory school age) from 82.1 per cent to 89.9 per cent (SURS 2013).
17. Different referendums (e.g. on labour market and pension reforms, family law) and demonstrations brought to frequent government changes. Left-oriented coalition government (21 November 2008 to 10 February 2012) was changed at snap elections with right-wing coalition government (10 February 2012 to 20 March 2013), due to voted non-confidence. Again, in the context of massive demonstrations against financial and political elites, the non-confidence was voted again. Centre-left government came into force (20 March 2013).
18. This is most visible in the data indicating the fall in the number of child allowance recipients – from 367,525 in 2011 to 282,220 in 2012 (MDDSZEM 2013).

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