

Fertility in Europe: What Influence of Family Policies?

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Fertility in Europe:
What Influence of Family Policies?

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www.population-demographie.org/revue03.htm ;
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Levels of fertility widely vary across European Union countries: from 1.23 to 2.05 children per woman according to Eurostat. What can explain such a large gap, of 40%, within a same regional group? Can this be only the result of different cultural attitudes towards the arrival of a child within a family? Could differences in the level of family and children benefits across countries play a role in family choices regarding the number of children?

By Gérard-François **Dumont**



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A Eurostat study[1] gives, for each EU country, the share of total social benefits allocated to old age pensions, benefits linked to health care, unemployment, housing and social exclusion, as well as family and children allowances. The study also shows the total amount of social protection benefits in each country, adjusted for purchasing power levels in order to allow comparisons. It is therefore possible to infer the expenditures per capita allocated by individual EU countries to the family and children function and compare them with their fertility level.

This comparison reveals four types of countries.

- Six countries show both a fertility level significantly above the EU average (1.57 children per woman) and larger budgets for family benefits. These are four northern (Denmark, Finland, Ireland and Sweden) and two western (Belgium and France) European countries.
- Conversely, in seventeen countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain) fertility rates are lower than average, and even much lower for some. These countries also have significantly smaller than average budgets allocated to family protection.

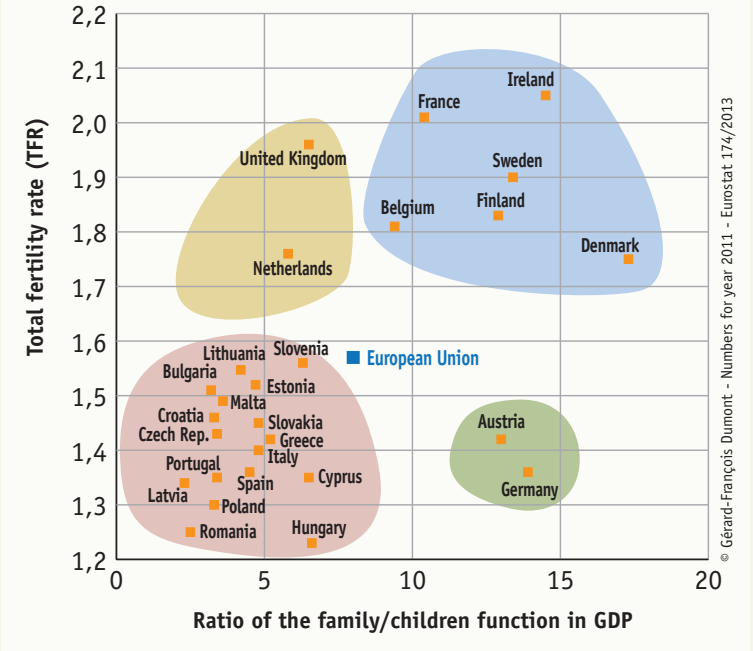
So for three EU countries out of four[2], there is definitely a correlation: those countries which devote more resources to family benefits have the highest level of fertility. On the other hand, those whose family policies are very limited register a very low fertility.

However, such a correlation is not validated in two types of countries.

- First, Austria and Germany allocate higher budgets to family benefits than the EU average, but their fertility level is lower. Their budgetary choices, such as the granting of allowances already for the first child in Germany, do not seem optimal, while other elements, of a cultural nature, contribute to a weakened fertility.
- Second, two countries (Netherlands, United Kingdom) have a higher than average fertility in spite of lower than average family protection budgets[3]. However, their budget allocations are probably more efficient and fertility levels are higher in some parts of their populations.

Overall, it cannot be denied that family protection budgets are not neutral, since they play a role in explaining the differentiation in fertility levels within Europe. Moreover, another element tends to confirm the correlation between fertility and family policy, and that is the fact that it could already be observed in previous years[4].

Family benefits and fertility in European Union countries



(Translation: Sylvie Vanston)

1. Eurostat, 174-2013, 21 November 2013.

2. Luxembourg is excluded from the analysis, in view of its very specific economic system.

3. This relatively low level might also be explained by the way it was calculated, in spite of efforts made to harmonise statistical methods.

4. Cf. Dumont, Gérard-François, "Politique familiale et fécondité en Europe", *Population & Avenir*, n° 681, Jan-Feb 2007. This is also demonstrated in Thomas Fent, Belinda Aparicio Diaz, Alexia Prskawetz, *Family policies in the context of low fertility and social structure*, which concludes: "family policies have a positive and significant impact on fertility" and "family policies can only be successful if they are designed to take into account the characteristics of the society in which they are implemented." www.demographic-research.org/volumes/vol29/37, 13 November 2013.