
BOOK REVIEW

Emirhafizovic, M., Heiman, T., Medgyesi, M., Pinheiro Mota, C., Tomanovic, S. & Vella, S. (Eds.) (2022). *Family formation among youth in Europe: Coping with socio-economic disadvantages*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v1i3.1440>

Family formation among youth in Europe: Coping with socio-economic disadvantages explores the challenges and opportunities young people face in forming families across ten European countries and Israel. Supported by the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST), the book aims to inform new and improved family policies by analysing both structural and individual factors affecting family formation, particularly in ageing societies. This topic is especially pressing as Europe's demographic landscape has undergone significant changes in recent decades characterised by declining fertility rates, delayed family formation, and changing social norms.

The propensity to have children has been on the decline in developed countries, prompting governments to implement different public policy measures to counteract this trend. These family policy instruments can broadly be categorised into financial incentives and non-monetary means (such as support for reconciling work and family life and fostering societal shifts in attitudes toward parenthood) (Kristó, 2014). However, these interventions have had varying degrees of success, as demonstrated in this volume. Despite a widespread desire to have children, many young Europeans struggle with balancing career aspirations, housing constraints, and family responsibilities. In fact, a study by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2005) found that roughly one-third of European families would like to have more children but are hindered by financial, temporal, and social constraints. A need to rethink generally employed family policies – such as tax breaks and subsidies – arose in recent years to turn the tide of a looming demographic catastrophe.

In this regard, this book emphasises the urgency of rethinking existing family policies and creating new ones that respond to the unique circumstances of contemporary youth by addressing structural problems they face in respective countries. The book adopts a multidisciplinary approach to examining family formation, incorporating perspectives from sociology, demography, and social policy. It delves into both objective factors, such as income levels, access to housing, and employment conditions, and subjective dimensions, including individual aspirations, societal values, and cultural norms. By presenting an in-depth quantitative and qualitative analysis of eleven countries, the authors

aim to shed light on the structural and cultural barriers young people face while also highlighting the diversity of their experiences across regions. In doing so, they provide valuable insights not only for scholars but also for policymakers seeking to address these pressing issues.

The book is organised into eleven country-specific chapters exploring family formation across diverse social, economic, and institutional contexts: Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, and Serbia. Each chapter follows a unified structure, outlining national demographic trends, policy frameworks, socio-economic conditions, and country-specific challenges. Recurring themes include youth unemployment, housing insecurity, precarious employment, and the gap between family ideals and the structural realities that shape young people's decisions about marriage and parenthood.

The first chapter, by Mirza Emirhafizović and Andrea Puhalić, focuses on Bosnia and Herzegovina, where structural obstacles – such as “high levels of corruption, high unemployment rates, and the general lack of elaborated and secure mechanisms for the protection of human rights” (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 2) – combine with post-war demographic disruptions and widespread distrust in institutions to undermine family formation. Despite being a “family-centric society” (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 3), BiH has “one of the lowest total fertility rates in Europe (1.26 in 2018)” (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 9). The authors argue that financial incentives alone are insufficient, and policies must address insecurity, institutional distrust, and broader lifestyle factors.

In the Czech Republic, Vera Kuchařová examines how liberal attitudes – such as the acceptance of non-traditional family forms – are counterbalanced by housing unaffordability and poverty risk. While the country enjoys “favourable economic conditions” (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 32), these have not translated into higher fertility, pointing to a disconnect between values and behaviour. Policy efforts aim to “create an environment in which families can freely pursue their decisions and beliefs with regard to family values” (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 34), though practical constraints often prevail.

Germany, as analysed by Dirk Hofäcker, represents a paradox: a strong welfare state with persistent low fertility. Hofäcker attributes this to destabilised family norms, increasing cohabitation and divorce, and prolonged labour market entry for youth. Germany's legacy as a “strong male breadwinner” state (p. 48) has evolved through reforms supporting dual-earner models, yet “young people in Germany are particularly affected by insecure atypical employment up until their late-20s” (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 50), delaying life-course transitions.

In Hungary, Márton Medgyesi critiques the government's pro-natalist turn, arguing that while family benefits have expanded, they disproportionately favour those in stable employment, and “benefits available to all children, including the poor, have not been increased” (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 63). Fertility and marriage rates initially rose, but have since declined, as structural issues – intergenerational inequality, housing insecurity, and emigration – continue to shape young people's opportunities.

Tali Heiman, Dorit Olenik-Shemesh, and Merav Regev-Nevo examine Israel, where high fertility (3.11) and marriage rates (95%) persist across “all cultural and religious sub-groups” (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 67), despite economic hardship. Deep-rooted religious and cultural norms, alongside historical traumas and geopolitical tensions, foster a collective

orientation towards family. Yet rising housing costs and poverty affect young adults' ability to form families, and the notion of an "all-Israeli family" is rejected in favour of recognising social heterogeneity, with children being "a major driving force behind the demographical changes" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 79).

Rosy Musumeci's chapter on Italy highlights the disjunction between strong family values and delayed family formation. Italy has among the world's lowest fertility rates (1.32 in 2017), with young people "prolong[ing] the stay in the family of origin and by that also the process of their own family formation" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 97). Structural barriers – youth unemployment, precarious contracts, and housing costs – contribute to delayed marriage and rising childlessness. While family remains central in cultural narratives ("familialistic" orientation, p. 94), the state's fragmented policies have not adapted to modern constraints.

The chapters on Latvia and Lithuania, by Līva Griņeviča, Dina Bite, and Edita Štuopytė, depict post-Soviet societies facing demographic crises driven by emigration, declining fertility, and rising individualism. In Latvia, family remains "a crucial factor of people's well-being" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 109), but competitive market pressures lead many to delay or forgo family formation. In Lithuania, modernisation has brought increased cohabitation and voluntary childlessness, but persistent poverty and "unfavorable" socio-economic conditions (Emirhafizovic, 2022, pp. 134–135) further limit young adults' ability to start families.

Sue Vella and Joanne Cassar explore Malta's shift from a traditional Catholic society to a more secular and diverse one. Social policy has long aligned with Church doctrine – evident in Malta's late legalisation of divorce – but changing norms have made premarital relationships common. Despite economic growth, young people face mounting housing costs, high wedding expenses, and mental health challenges, all of which "further complicate their ability to start families" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 151).

Portugal, discussed by Catarina Pinheiro Mota, Helena Carvalho, and Paula Mena Matos, mirrors patterns seen in Southern Europe. Young adults often delay independence due to precarious jobs and expensive housing, with many remaining in the parental home. As the authors note, "the absence of economic opportunities has created a delay in the separation-individuation process" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 171). Gendered burdens are particularly evident, with young women disproportionately affected by work-family conflicts.

Finally, Smiljka Tomanović and Dragan Stanojević examine Serbia, where traditional family ideals persist amid institutional fragility and youth emigration. Young people often postpone family formation due to job insecurity, widespread corruption, and inadequate welfare support. As in other Southern European contexts, many continue to live with their parents until they can afford to form independent households. While familism remains strong (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 183), it is increasingly at odds with harsh economic realities.

While I believe that the book offers a comprehensive exploration of the barriers young people face when starting a family, the chapters' findings would benefit from a contextualisation within the existing body of research, drawing on key studies that align with or diverge from the perspectives offered in the volume.

The book's exploration of declining fertility rates aligns closely with van de Kaa and Lesthaeghe's work (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 15.) on the Second Demographic Transition,

which is referenced in several chapters. Introduced by van de Kaa and Lesthaeghe in the 1980s, the authors argue “that new developments from the 1970s onward can be expected to bring about sustained subreplacement fertility, a multitude of living arrangements other than marriage, a disconnection between marriage and procreation, and no stationary population” (Lesthaeghe, 2014, p. 18112). These cultural shifts, particularly the move toward self-fulfilment over traditional family roles, are evident in several countries covered in the volume, including the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, and Italy where cohabitation, delayed marriage, and voluntary childlessness are increasingly common. However, the book also highlights cases where cultural factors challenge the SDT framework, such as Israel and Malta. These chapters reveal how strong religious and familial norms can sustain higher fertility rates despite economic challenges.

The book’s focus on young people aligns with life-course approaches to fertility, such as those discussed by Huinink and Kohli (2014), cited in the introduction of the volume. These scholars emphasise the importance of understanding fertility decisions within the broader context of youth transitions, including education, employment, and partnership formation. The chapters on Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, and Serbia, for instance, demonstrate how delayed transitions to adulthood – mostly caused by prolonged education, unstable labour markets, and inadequate housing – contribute to the postponement of marriage and parenthood.

The theme of precarity, central to several chapters as seen in earlier parts of this review, echoes Guy Standing’s (2014) work on the “precariat.” Standing describes a growing class of individuals who face insecure employment, limited social protections, and uncertain futures, a “new class – the precariat” (Standing, 2014, p. 10.). This concept is particularly relevant to the book’s analyses of countries like Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where young people struggle with low institutional trust, limited job opportunities, and the need to rely on extended family networks for support. According to Standing, “one defining characteristic of the precariat is distinctive relations of production: so-called ‘flexible’ labor contracts; temporary jobs; labor as casuals, part-timers, or intermittently for labor brokers or employment agencies” (Standing, 2014, p. 10.). We could see in several chapters (Germany, Italy, Portugal) how atypical employment forms cause economic insecurity in young people, thus delaying their choices in starting a family. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the volume contributes to the literature on precarity by demonstrating how these conditions affect not only economic well-being but also the ability to form families, reinforcing the cyclical nature of disadvantage.

Moreover, the volume contributes to the policy-oriented literature on family-friendly measures. It parallels Anne H. Gauthier’s (2007) work on family policy and fertility, providing case-specific insights into how public policies and institutional frameworks can mitigate or exacerbate socio-economic challenges. For instance, the discussion of continental European (Germany, Czech Republic) egalitarian policies contrasts sharply with the fragmented welfare systems in Southern Europe, offering valuable lessons for cross-national learning. However, it is very important to note that even Gauthier herself states that “while a small positive effect of policies on fertility is found in numerous studies, no statistically significant effect is found in others. Moreover, some studies suggest that the effect of policies tends to be on the timing of births rather than on completed fertility” (Gauthier, 2007, p. 323.). This finding can be seen explicitly in the case of Israel and Malta,

where it is demonstrated how deeply ingrained cultural and religious values can counteract some of the economic challenges and lack of policies that typically suppress fertility rates.

Furthermore, the volume's comparative approach highlights the diversity of institutional frameworks across Europe and their varying effectiveness in supporting young families. The findings align with research on welfare state typologies, such as those proposed by Esping-Andersen (1990), which categorise welfare regimes based on their levels of decommodification and stratification. For instance, the chapters on Germany and the Czech Republic suggest that more comprehensive welfare systems are better equipped to mitigate the effects of economic precarity on family formation. However, the book also reveals the limitations of these frameworks, as seen in the case of Germany, where strong family policies coexist with persistently low fertility rates (p. xvii.). These findings are explicitly mentioned in the book's introductory paragraphs.

Family formation among youth in Europe: Coping with socio-economic disadvantages is a significant contribution to the academic study of demographic change, family dynamics, and different family policy measures in Europe. Through its interdisciplinary and comparative approach, the book sheds light on the complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and policy-related factors that shape family formation across eleven countries while highlighting often overlooked structural aspects that hinder young people's opportunities when starting a family. Therefore, the key contribution of the book is policy relevance. Each chapter concludes with actionable insights, offering valuable recommendations for improving the respective countries' family policies as it provides both granular national analyses and overarching trend investigations, making it an invaluable resource for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike.

However, the book is not without its limitations. While there is a summary of certain "contradictories/peculiarities that stood out" (p. xviii.) in the introductory segment of the book, there is an absence of a unified synthesis or concluding chapter at the end, limiting the book's ability to draw broader, cross-national insights. Readers are left to piece together commonalities and divergences on their own, which reduces the book's comparative potential. Also, while chapters touch upon gender roles and their influence on family formation, the treatment of these issues often feels secondary. A more robust analysis of how gender inequalities intersect with economic and cultural barriers would have enriched the book's perspectives, especially given the central role gender plays in family dynamics and policy effectiveness. Furthermore, some chapters rely heavily on qualitative narratives without robust quantitative data to back their claims. While this aligns with the book's interdisciplinary approach, it might limit its appeal to readers seeking empirical rigour. Personally, I would have loved to see specific generational analyses as well in the volume that examines how Gen Z's life choices and attitudes towards family formation differ from those of earlier generations. For instance, Gen Z's pronounced concern for global issues, such as climate change, often influences their decisions about parenthood and long-term commitments, framing these choices within a context of sustainability and environmental awareness. Given the increasing importance of sustainability in young people's life choices, this omission represents a missed opportunity to address a critical emerging factor. Lastly, although it is mentioned explicitly that "potential contributors from other European countries have been contacted, however, unfortunately, their reports

have not been submitted" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 18.), the book suffers from the absence of certain European contexts, such as Scandinavia, where family policies have been particularly effective. Including such cases could have enriched the comparative analysis and highlighted best practices.

Despite these limitations, the book is a timely and essential contribution to understanding family formation in Europe. For scholars and policymakers alike, this volume serves as a call to action: to address the structural barriers facing youth and to reimagine policies that support family formation in an era of uncertainty. By situating its findings within broader academic and policy debates, the book not only sheds light on current challenges but also charts a path forward for research and intervention in this critical area.

MÁRTON ZSURÁFSZKY

[marton.zsurafszky@stud.uni-corvinus.hu]

(PhD student, Political Science Doctoral Program,
Doctoral School of International Relations and Political Science,
Corvinus University of Budapest)

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