An EU home-run against all odds: the case of the work-life balance directive

Caroline de la Porte, Professor, Copenhagen Business School, Trine Larsen, Associate Professor, Copenhagen University and Dorota Szelewa, Assistant Professor, University College Dublin

This paper analyses the why, how and with what consequences for member states political agreement was reached on the work-life balance directive. Focusing on improving the balance between working and family life, the directive intends to lead to upwards social convergence, which challenges conservative family values and norms that prevail in many EU member states. We argue that the EU has, against all odds, developed far-reaching social legislation in this area that is closely guarded by member states due to politics and knowledge. From a political perspective, after almost a decade of austerity policies in the EU following the 2008 financial crisis, EU leaders wanted to add a strong social dimension to the EU, focused on improving working and living conditions for citizens, which included the work-life balance directive. Secondly, there is extensive knowledge about the effects of work-life balance policies for children, including the effects of paternal leave for families and for the labour market. Based on these two points, political agreement on the directive was reached among member states because work-life balance is politically difficult to agree on in member states, making it easier to reach agreement at EU level and then to implement ‘at home’. We also analyse the potential effects of the proposed directive in four countries, with different work-life balance policies and traditions: Sweden, Denmark, Ireland and Poland. Sweden is a pioneer of work-life balance, and has been among the member states pushing for this at EU level, on the basis. Denmark provides a wide range of work-life balance policy measures, however, with a smaller emphasis on fathers’ engagement, since Denmark is the only Nordic country without statutory parental leave quotas for fathers. Instead most social partners have introduced collective agreed earmarked parental leave for fathers within their collective agreements from 5 weeks or more with full wage compensation. Ireland and Poland have both conservative and less developed work-life balance policies, so for these countries adoption of the new directive would lead to a more significant change, although differences exist. Politically, the climate for progressive direction of policy changes is better in Ireland than in Poland recently dominated by right-wing populism. However, since Poland did not suffer from the economic crisis to the same extent, the country had capacities to develop work-life balance policies quite recently, including fully-paid paternal leave, which made it easier for the current government to agree on the new directive. For Ireland, the context of Brexit is also important, since Ireland would be even more committed to the EU-level initiatives.