

Grandparental childcare across Europe

Isabella Buber-Ennsner

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Isabella Buber-Ennsner

Wittgenstein Centre (IIASA, VID/ÖAW, WU)

Vienna Institute of Demography/Austrian Academy of Sciences

Wohllebengasse 12-14

1040 Vienna, Austria

isabella.buber@oeaw.ac.at

Tel.: 0043-1-51581-7726

Fax: 0043-1-51581-7730

Abstract

Using recent data from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe and the Generations and Gender Survey grandparent-provided childcare is studied in 23 European countries, distinguishing between occasional and regular care. Intergenerational support is high: 63% of grandmothers and 53% of grandfathers aged 50–79 years provided care for at least one grandchild aged 15 years or younger. Countries are grouped in low, medium and high level of engagement. Provision of childcare is highest in northern and western Europe as well as in Russia, and lowest in southern and eastern Europe. But conditioned on the provision of childcare, regular grandchild care is highest in southern and eastern Europe as well as in Russia, but lowest in northern and western Europe. Eastern European countries are—despite substantial variations—similar to southern European countries, with low levels of overall but high levels of regular grandparental childcare, Estonia being a notable exception. Employment has no statistically significant effect on the provision of grandparental help among women, but it does among men. For the provision of regular care, the most important predictor is local proximity (ideally, living together), but labour market participation and the age of the grandchild are crucial as well.

Keywords: Grandparental childcare, intergenerational relations, SHARE, GGS, Europe

1. Introduction

Life expectancy has increased remarkably during the last century. Whereas the current grandparent generation normally knew their own grandparents only from pictures, photos or family stories, today's children often enjoy a much longer lifetime period with their grandparents. During the years of shared lives of three generations—children, parents and grandparents—intergenerational bonds and intergenerational support are an important aspect and have gained increasing attention in family research and sociology (Bengtson 2001).

Grandparental help is central for intergenerational solidarity and has received increasing attention in the European context due to recently launched cross-national panels (Aassve et al. 2012; Albertini et al. 2007; Arpino and Bordone 2014; Danielsbacka et al. 2011; Hank and Buber 2009). Using recent data from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) and the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), this study analyses cross-national variations in grandparent-provided childcare in Europe (including eastern Europe and the non-EU countries). The current study extends earlier research on grandparental childcare, now capturing 23 countries all over Europe.

2. Literature review

Intergenerational relations are strong across a wide variety of family systems and welfare regimes (Attias-Donfut et al. 2005; Brandt et al. 2009; Frankenberg et al. 2002). From a global perspective, Settles and colleagues (2009) characterize grandparental childcare within the European Union countries by a large variation in intergenerational transfers and caregiving, with a focus on emotional ties. In China, responding to the one-child policy and economic change, grandparents are a good source of childcare when both parents are working; grandparents often act as substitute parents there. In the US, grandparents more often serve as a safety net for high-risk situations, whereas handling the collapse of nuclear families and communities under the challenges of both HIV/AIDS and armed conflicts is the crucial role of grandparental childcare in Kenya and South Africa (Settles et al. 2009).

Albertini and colleagues (2007) provide a comparative study of financial transfers and social support at the European level and reveal the existence of a common transfer pattern: although its amount varies across societies, there is a net downward transfer from the older to the younger generations, both regarding monetary and non-monetary supports. Transfers from elderly parents to their children are much more frequent and substantial than those in the opposite direction (Albertini et al. 2007). Country-specific transfer patterns follow the typology of welfare regimes. Transfers from parents to children are less frequent but more substantial in the southern European countries than in the Nordic ones, with the continental European countries being somewhere in between the two (Albertini et al. 2007; Attias-Donfut et al. 2005; Hank and Buber 2009). Public assistance provided to citizens and investments in childcare are associated with differences in grandparental childcare (Brandt and Deindl 2013; Glaser et al. 2010; Igel and Szydlik 2011).

It has been argued that the lack of involvement in regular transfers is likely to result from the availability of public transfer programs (like social benefit programs) and public childcare for young children which decrease the need of family members for support (Aassve et al. 2012; Glaser et al. 2010). Generous parental leave has lessened the need for grandparents to directly care for young grandchildren especially in northern Europe. However, grandparents may step in for childcare when parents are not available due to employment or illness (Settles et al. 2009). Family and state complement one another, with grandparents taking over sporadic, less time-intensive care while public institutions provide regular, time-consuming childcare services (Igel and

Szydlik 2011). In contrast, the southern European countries show a much higher level of regular transfers, in particular between parents and adult children and the level of public assistance is considerably lower in southern than in northern Europe. Moreover, in Britain, another country with relatively low provision of childcare services, almost one-quarter of working mothers depend on their grandparents in childcare (Gray 2005). In the new EU countries, which had fairly well-developed childcare systems before the fall of the iron curtain, some of the cuts in service and a new rhetoric of familialistic policy couched as offering “choice”, but usually fewer services have resulted in more stress for working families (Settles et al. 2009; Szelewa and Polakowski 2008).

3. Data and method

This study uses the most recent available data on two European panel studies, the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), and the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS). As age ranges differ (SHARE 50+; GGS: 18–79), we concentrate on the age span 50–79 years. When combining the two surveys, availability of most recent data was the criterion for selection. We concentrate on grandparents with at least one grandchild under the age of 16 (Gray 2005; Hank and Buber 2009). In total, 27,708 grandparents aged 50–79 years are included in the pooled sample (Table 2, last column). Data stem from SHARE in: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. Involvement in grandparental childcare is based on wave 4, carried out in 2011, with the exception of Greece and Ireland, where wave 2 (in 2007) was used (Börsch-Supan et al. 2013a; Börsch-Supan et al. 2013b; Börsch-Supan et al. 2008; Malter and Börsch-Supan 2013). Moreover, information from previous waves on children and grandchildren was merged. SHARE is complemented with GGS data on Bulgaria, Georgia, Lithuania, Romania and Russia, collected between 2004 and 2009.

The combined data sources allow to analyse 23 European countries with a population of 577.7 million inhabitants in 2011 (VID-IIASA 2012). Both surveys provide weights adjusting for age and sex and additional weights were calculated so that all countries have the same weighted size in the pooled sample. We opted for this strategy as the size of the countries ranged from 1.3 million (Estonia) to 141.9 million (Russia) (VID-IIASA 2012). A different strategy would have been to have each country be represented by its relative number of inhabitants which would have resulted in a dominance of data for Russia.

Wording of questions on grandparental childcare is not identical in the two surveys. SHARE: “During the last twelve months, have you regularly or occasionally looked after your grandchild(ren) without the presence of the parents?” Respondents answering with “yes” were further asked “On average, how often did you look after the child(ren) in the last twelve months? Was it (1) almost daily, (2) almost every week, (3) almost every month, or (4) less often?” GGS: “How frequently do you help to look after your grandchild(ren)?” Answers were captured via “___ times per: week/month/year”. As GGS neither restricts to the last twelve months nor to the absence of the parents, involvement of grandparental childcare is supposed to be generally higher in GGS countries which has to be kept in mind throughout the paper.

For analysing the intensity of help, the first two and the last two SHARE categories were collapsed, thus distinguishing between providing grandparental help “regularly” and “occasionally”. Information in GGS was coded correspondingly. The study design follows Hank and Buber (2009): if a person reported to have looked after more than one grandchildren, the analysis is restricted to the youngest child with the greatest frequency of care. If a respondent had several grandchildren but did not look after any of them, the youngest one was selected for comparison.

We provide descriptive results for an overview on grandparental childcare by countries and then estimate two logit models for provision of any care and for regular care. In the first model, the binary dependent variable equals 1 if the respondent reported to have provided any childcare, 0 otherwise. In the subsequent model, the sample is restricted to grandparents who did look after a grandchild and the binary dependent variable now equals 1 if childcare was provided regularly, and 0 if occasionally. To facilitate the interpretation of the country coefficients in the regressions, we use effect coding that tests deviations from the grand mean (Wendorf 2004). Models are run separately for grandfathers and grandmothers. The explanatory variables include information on the grandparent and the grandchild. Grandparent characteristics are age (50–59, 60–69, and 70–79 years), partnership status (living with or without partner), employment status (working vs. non-working), health (binary indicator on ADL limitation) and local proximity to the grandchild (grandchild living vs. not living in the same house/hold). The only available characteristic of the grandchild is age (0, 1–2, 3–5, 6–10, and 11–15 years). In SHARE, information on geographic proximity is more detailed (living in the same household, living in the same house, less than 5 km apart or more than 5 km apart), and available for the middle generation as well (sex and partner status of the parent of the grandchild). Therefore, further regressions were run for the SHARE countries (tables available on request).

4. Empirical findings

4.1. Descriptive findings

An examination of the overall level of grandparent-provided childcare reveals a generally high prevalence: Across all 23 countries, 63% of grandmothers and 53% of grandfathers aged 50–79 years provided some kind of care for at least one grandchild aged 15 years or younger in the period under review (Figure 1). The lowest shares of grandmothers providing childcare are found in Lithuania, Romania, Portugal and Spain (less than 50%), followed by Germany, Austria, Estonia, Bulgaria, Italy and Poland (56%–59%). Georgia, Slovenia, Greece, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Switzerland follow with a proportion of two-thirds. Prevalence of grandmothers' care is high in France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Ireland and Belgium (71%–77%) and highest in Russia (81%).

As expected, grandmothers are more often involved in grandparental childcare than grandfathers. Gender differences are most pronounced in Portugal, Poland and Estonia (around 20 percentage points), followed by Georgia, Italy, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Greece, Sweden, Bulgaria and Ireland. In these countries grandmothers look after their grandchildren substantially more often than grandfathers. On the contrary, in Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Lithuania, the share of grandparental involvement is about the same among grandmothers and grandfathers.

[Figure 1 about here]

Not only the provision of any help, but also the intensity of this help is relevant. We distinguish three categories: “never”, “less than almost weekly” and “almost weekly or more often” and denote them as “never”, “occasionally” and “regularly”. Across the 23 selected countries four out of ten grandparents never looked after a grandchild (in the last twelve months), one out of four helped occasionally and one out of three at a regular basis. Among grandmothers, only 37% never looked after a grandchild, one out of four provided childcare occasionally and four out of ten regularly. Grandfathers provided childcare less often, and that also less regularly: About one half of grandfathers provided no childcare, one out of four helped out at a regular basis and one out of four occasionally.

When restricting to those grandparents who provided any help, Romania takes a leading position: among grandparents providing any help, almost all of them did so regularly (grandmother: 85%, grandfathers: 76%). Also in Russia, Georgia, Bulgaria and Italy regular childcare was dominant (72%–85%). Sweden and Denmark remain at the lower end of the ordering: in these two countries, grandparents who helped out rarely did so on a weekly basis (only one-third or fewer) (Figure 2).

[Figure 2 about here]

4.2. Multivariate analyses

Multivariate analyses estimate the propensity to provide any grandchild care (Table 2, Model 1) and to provide regular care (Table 2, Model 2), analogous to an earlier study on grandparental childcare in Europe by Hank and Buber (2009). The results of the control variables are similar in both models and in line with the earlier study, with some minor deviations. Age of the grandparent, existence of a co-residing partner, health (i.e. limitations in activities of daily living), the grandchild's age and local proximity are crucial for providing any grandparental childcare. Overall, labour market participation is not associated with provision of any grandparental childcare, but an interaction between age and employment revealed that among men aged 60–69 employment is relevant. According to the size and statistical significance of the estimated coefficients, living together with a grandchild is the most important predictor.

[Table 1 about here]

The estimated country coefficients for provision of any grandparental help were ranked by size and statistical significance, allowing to identify three broad groups, representing high, medium and low levels of involvement. For lack of space, the focus is on grandmaternal childcare (Figure 3). Romania, Lithuania, Portugal, Poland, Spain, Bulgaria, Georgia, Austria, Estonia, Slovenia and Italy are well below mean European level. Germany, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Greece are around mean level. Grandmothers in Switzerland, France, Ireland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden and Russia provide significantly more often grandchild care. Lithuania and Romania have outstandingly low levels whereas Sweden and Russia have the highest ones.

[Figure 3 about here]

For the intensity of care (regularly vs. occasionally), age plays a minor role, affecting only the regular help of grandmothers aged 70–79 years (less often help at a regular basis) (Table 2, Model 2). Living with a partner has no influence on the provision of regular childcare among grandmothers, but it is associated with more frequent regular childcare among grandfathers. Whereas health is important for providing any help, once the health status allows looking after children, it does not further significantly influence the provision of regular care. Age of the grandchild and local proximity, but also labour market participation, turned out to be crucial. As for provision of any care, the estimated coefficients for local proximity are largest in size and significant at high statistical level in the intensity model. Grandparents with grandchildren below school age provided regular care more often than those with grandchildren at school age and employed grandmothers looked after their grandchildren significantly less often at a regular basis. Among grandfathers, in the overall model employment has no explanatory power. An interaction between grandparents and employment revealed that both employed grandmothers and grandfathers aged 50–59 years provided regular care less often than their non-employed peers.

Also for intensity of childcare, countries were grouped into high, medium and low levels of regular grandmaternal childcare (Figure 4). Denmark, Sweden, France, Estonia and the Czech Republic are the countries with significantly lower levels of regular help. Germany, Switzerland, Slovenia, Poland, Hungary, Ireland, the

Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Portugal and Lithuania are about the mean European level. In Georgia, Austria, Greece, Russia, Bulgaria, Italy and Romania grandmothers provide regular care significantly more often and help out almost once or even more per week. The estimated coefficients reveal that especially Denmark, Sweden and France are characterized by very low level of regular grandmaternal help, whereas Romania, Italy and Bulgaria have outstandingly high levels of regular care. Compared with first descriptive findings (Figure 2), the ranking of the countries based on multivariate analyses is similar in the multivariate framework. Both in the descriptive and the multivariate analyses, Romania has the highest provision of regular care by grandmothers. Interestingly, Russia changes position: in descriptive analyses it occupies the second highest position, in multivariate context it comes “only” fifth, indicating that the demographic and socio-economic situation of Russian grandparents partly explains the high provision of regular help. Sweden, Denmark and France remain the countries with lowest provision of regular grandchild care in the multivariate context as well.

[Figure 4 about here]

Information included in SHARE allows to capture in detail local proximity on the one hand and characteristics of the middle generation, such as sex and partner status, on the other (results available on request). The likelihood of caring decreases clearly with increasing geographical distance between the older and the youngest generations, particularly so if regular grandchild care is considered, which confirms an earlier study (Hank and Buber 2009). Moreover, gender-specific analyses revealed differences in kin support. Maternal grandparents are more likely to be involved in both occasional and regular childcare, in particular grandfathers substantially more often provide help in rearing the children in the families of their daughters than of their sons. These findings are in line with earlier research which was mainly restricted to western, northern and southern Europe (Danielsbacka et al. 2011; Hank and Buber 2009).

The estimated country coefficient in the extended model and further stepwise analyses reveal that Sweden’s leading position becomes even more prominent. Although direct comparison with Russia is not possible for an extended model, the results indicate that Sweden is—among the 23 selected European countries—the leading country for providing grandmaternal childcare.

4.3. Discussion

The current study extends earlier research on grandparental childcare, now capturing 23 countries across all over Europe. The differentiation between prevalence and intensity of childcare reveals significant variations. The inclusion of another three western, northern and southern European countries (Belgium, Ireland and Portugal), as well as the addition of numerous eastern European countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia and Slovenia) allows to get a broader picture on grandparental childcare across Europe. Among the 13 countries added for the current study, there is Lithuania with the lowest level of grandparental involvement on the one hand and Russia with the highest level on the other.

Provision of some kind of childcare is highest in northern and western Europe as well as in Russia. It is lowest in southern and eastern Europe. But conditioned on the provision of any childcare at all, southern and eastern European as well as Russian grandparents exhibit the highest, and those in northern and western Europe the lowest levels of regular help. North-south differences in prevalence and intensity have been found in an earlier study arguing that variations in childcare and female employment regimes in Europe might be connected to these differences (Hank and Buber 2009). Eastern European countries were still an unknown terrain in this respect. It

turned out that eastern European countries are—despite substantial differences—similar to southern European countries, with low levels of prevalence and high levels of intensity, Estonia being a notable exception.

The country ranking based on multivariate analyses deviates from first descriptive findings: in particular, local proximity was a crucial factor. Poland, Georgia, Russia and Sweden are given as examples for illustration: in Poland and Georgia, the provision of grandmaternal childcare is around average, but further analyses showed that in these countries a high share of grandparents share house(hold)s with their grandchildren. When controlling for local proximity, the overall level of grandmaternal childcare is well below average. Russia has by far the highest share of grandmothers looking after grandchildren (81%) and Sweden occupies rank four with 75%. But whereas in Russia 28% of grandparents co-reside with a grandchild, this is only the case for a minority of 1% in Sweden. When controlling for co-residence with a grandchild and further demographic characteristics, Sweden exhibits almost the same high propensity as Russia.

Several limitations have to be mentioned. First, when combining the two data sources, the age range was limited to 50–79 years. Additional analyses based on the 18 SHARE countries showed a substantially lower involvement at higher ages, amounting to 24% in the 80–84 age group and 7% to 15% for grandparents aged 85 and above. Although fewer persons aged 80 years and more had minor grandchildren, compared to younger grandparents, the overall engagement in grandparental childcare is supposed to be somewhat lower. Second, the wording of questions was not identical in the two surveys, and involvement of grandparental childcare turns out to be generally higher in countries where data stem from GGS, i.e. Bulgaria, Georgia, Lithuania, Romania and Russia. Third, attrition across four waves in SHARE may have led to biased estimates (Buber-Ennsner 2014; Miller and Wright 1995). Future detailed analyses of attrition by factors related to intergenerational solidarity might yield valuable insight.

Acknowledgements

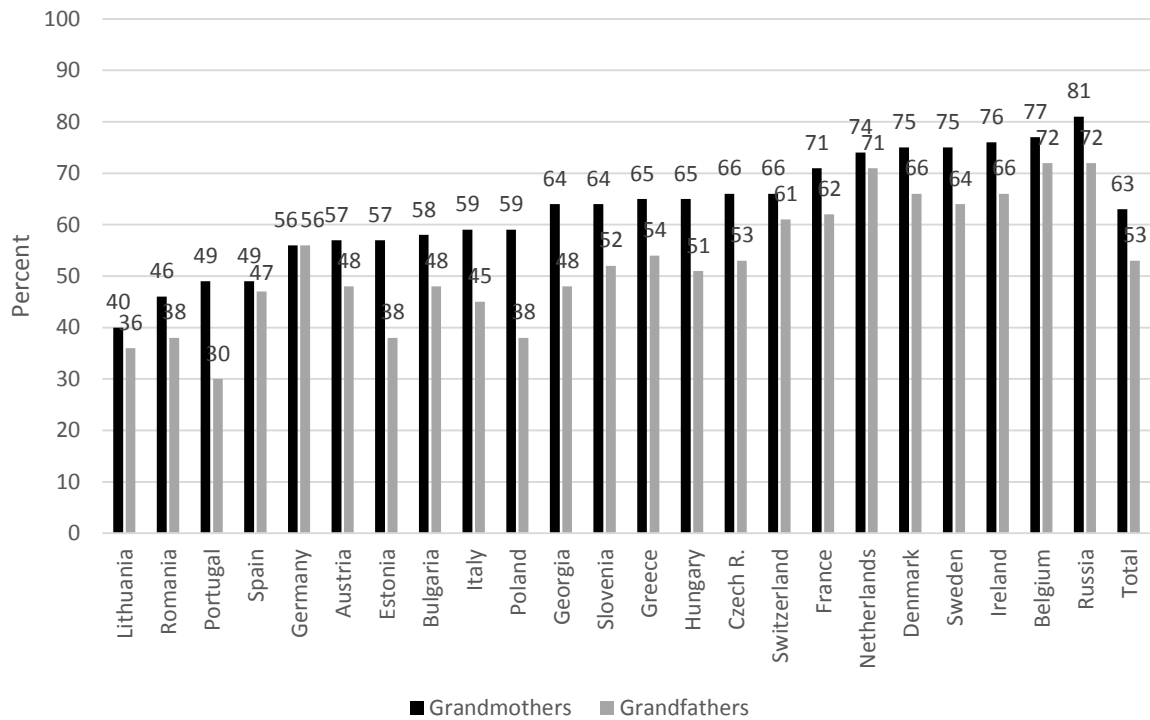
An extended version of this paper was prepared for the project Gender and Care Issues in Europe and Central Asia, supported by the World Bank Group's Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality. I would like to thank Beth Zikronah Rosen, Victoria Levin and Ana Maria Muñoz Boudet for valuable comments on an early version of the paper, Jakob Eder for producing the maps and Werner Richter for language editing.

This paper uses data from SHARE wave 4 release 1.1.1, as of March 28th 2013 (DOI: 10.6103/SHARE.w4.111), SHARE wave 1 and 2 release 2.6.0, as of November 29 2013 (DOI: 10.6103/SHARE.w1.260 and 10.6103/SHARE.w2.260). The SHARE data collection has been primarily funded by the European Commission through the 5th Framework Programme (project QLK6-CT-2001-00360 in the thematic programme Quality of Life), through the 6th Framework Programme (projects SHARE-I3, RII-CT-2006-062193, COMPARE, CIT5-CT-2005-028857, and SHARELIFE, CIT4-CT-2006-028812) and through the 7th Framework Programme (SHARE-PREP, N° 211909, SHARE-LEAP, N° 227822 and SHARE M4, N° 261982). Additional funding from the U.S. National Institute on Aging (U01 AG09740-13S2, P01 AG005842, P01 AG08291, P30 AG12815, R21 AG025169, Y1-AG-4553-01, IAG BSR06-11 and OGHA 04-064) and the German Ministry of Education and Research as well as from various national sources is gratefully acknowledged (see www.share-project.org for a full list of funding institutions). Moreover, this paper uses data from GGS. Funds for financing the surveys were raised within each country.

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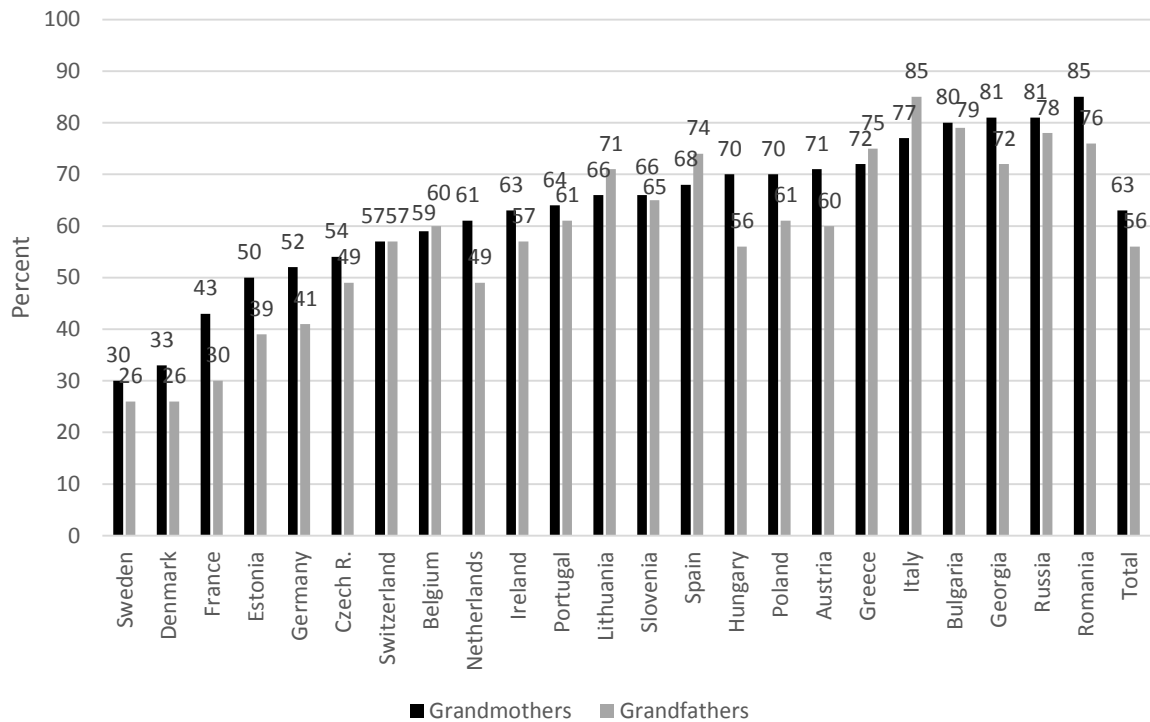
Figure 1: Grandmothers and grandfathers who provided any childcare, by country (in %)



Source: SHARE wave 4 (AT, BE, CH, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FR, HU, IT, NL, PO, PT, SE, SI) and wave 2 (GR, IE). GGS wave 1 (GE, RO, RU) and wave 2 (BU, LT). N=27,708 grandparents aged 50-79 with at least one grandchild under the age of 16 years.

Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order for grandmothers.

Figure 2: Grandmothers and grandfathers who provided childcare regularly, by country, share among those grandparents providing any help at all (in %)



Source: SHARE wave 4 (AT, BE, CH, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FR, HU, IT, NL, PO, PT, SE, SI) and wave 2 (GR, IE). N=16,360 grandparents providing any grandparental childcare at all.

Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order for grandmothers.

Table 1: Estimated coefficients for providing of ‘any grandchild care’ and ‘regular grandchild care’ using effect coding

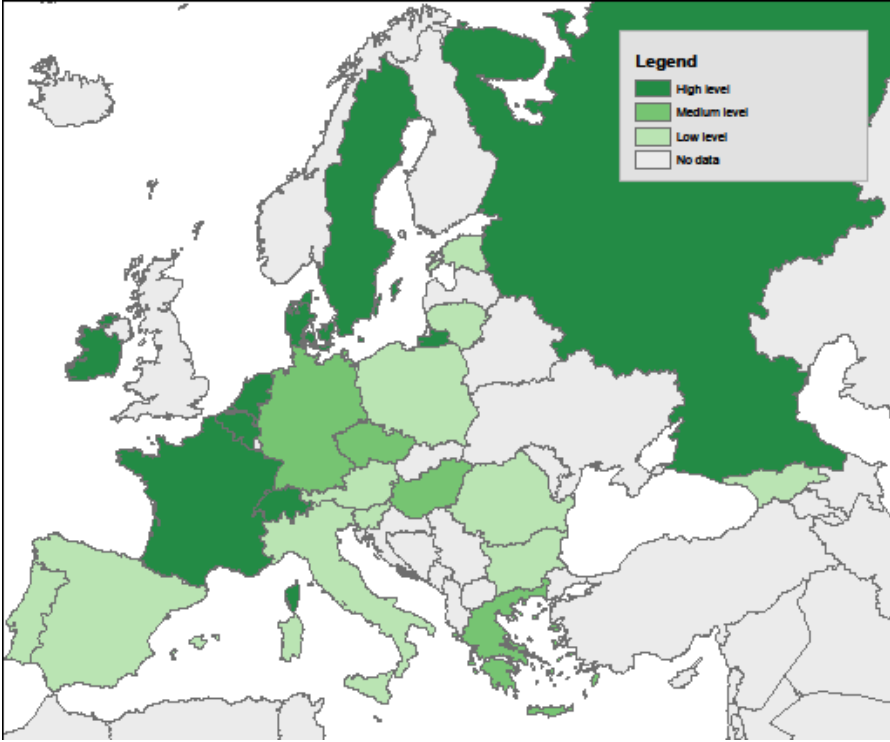
	<i>Model 1:</i>		<i>Model 2:</i>		Sample (unweighted)
	<i>Provision of any care</i>		<i>Provision of regular care</i>		
	Grandfathers	Grandmothers	Grandfathers	Grandmothers	
<i>Grandparent characteristics</i>					
<i>Age</i>					
50-59 ^a	0	0	0	0	8,960
60-69	-0.00	-0.14**	0.03	-0.03	12,088
70-79	-0.45***	-0.91***	-0.04	-0.29***	6,660
<i>Partnership status</i>					
Living with partner ^a	0	0	0	0	19,398
Living without partner	-0.52***	-0.14***	-0.26***	-0.03	8,310
<i>Employment status</i>					
Not working ^a	0	0	0	0	21,509
Working	-0.08	0.03	-0.13	-0.26***	6,199
<i>Health</i>					
No ADL limitations ^a	0	0	0	0	24,562
1+ ADL limitations	-0.37***	-0.51***	-0.05	-0.13	3,146
<i>Local proximity to grandchild</i>					
No grandchild living in house/hold	0	0	0	0	23,001
Grandchild living in house/hold	0.94***	1.23***	1.69***	1.90***	4,255
<i>Grandchild characteristics</i>					
<i>Age</i>					
0 years	-0.57***	-0.55***	0.29+	-0.13	1,434
1-2 years ^a	0	0	0	0	5,728
3-5 years	0.29***	0.19***	0.01	-0.06	6,704
6-10 years	0.20***	-0.03	-0.03	-0.25***	8,030
11-15 years	-0.48***	-0.72***	-0.33**	-0.49***	5,769
<i>Country</i>					
Austria (AT)	-0.15+	-0.26***	0.10	0.30**	1,406
Belgium (BE)	0.95***	0.71***	0.14	0.09	1,550
Bulgaria (BU)	-0.61***	-0.43***	0.90***	0.74***	1,410
Czech R. (CZ)	-0.03	0.03	-0.26*	-0.34***	1,899
Denmark (DK)	0.64***	0.61***	-1.26***	-1.16***	688
Estonia (EE)	-0.63***	-0.26***	-0.80***	-0.57***	2,113
France (FR)	0.54***	0.41***	-1.01***	-0.87***	1,704
Georgia (GE)	-0.51***	-0.35***	0.15	0.22*	2,286
Germany (DE)	0.12	-0.15	-0.71***	-0.21	421
Greece (GR)	0.03	0.19	0.53**	0.30*	591
Hungary (HU)	0.15	-0.01	-0.22	-0.07	920
Ireland (IE)	0.41*	0.53**	0.23	0.05	322
Italy (IT)	-0.24*	-0.15+	1.14***	0.86***	905
Lithuania (LT)	-1.00***	-0.85***	0.50*	0.17	597
Netherlands (NL)	0.86***	0.68***	-0.47***	0.06	868
Poland (PO)	-0.70***	-0.53***	-0.05	-0.08	568
Portugal (PT)	-0.56***	-0.55***	0.59**	0.16	662
Romania (RO)	-0.81***	-0.87***	0.59***	0.90***	2,842
Russia (RU)	0.72***	0.79***	0.73***	0.58***	2,590
Slovenia (SI)	-0.12	-0.18*	-0.05	-0.10	1,012
Spain (ES)	-0.29*	-0.49***	0.56**	0.14	812
Sweden (SE)	0.78***	0.76***	-1.33***	-1.03***	645
Switzerland (CH)	0.45***	0.36***	0.00	-0.13	888
Constant	0.93***	1.15***	0.58***	0.72***	
Pseudo R ²	0.1036	0.1170	0.1322	0.1278	
N (unweighted)	11,350	16,315	6,020	10,297	27,708

Significance: + p<0.10; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001.

^a Reference category.

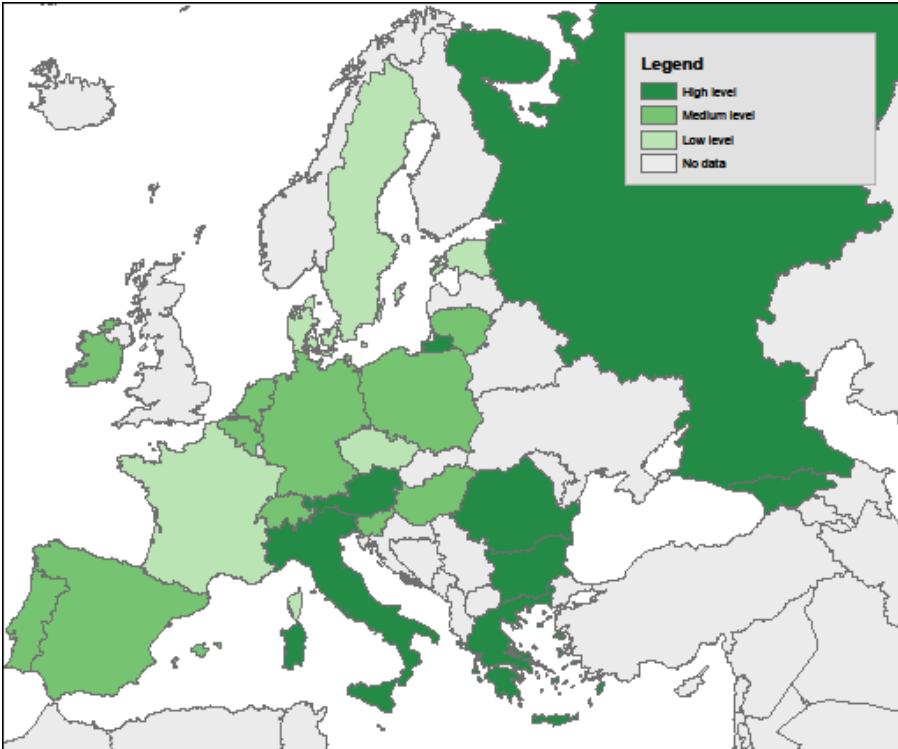
Source: SHARE wave 4 (AT, BE, CH, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FR, HU, IT, NL, PO, PT, SE, SI) and wave 2 (GR, IE). GGS wave 1 (GE, RO, RU) and wave 2 (BU, LT). N=27,708 grandparents aged 50-79 with at least one grandchild under the age of 16 years.

Figure 3: Provision of grandmaternal childcare in the multivariable framework



Source: SHARE wave 4 (AT, BE, CH, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FR, HU, IT, NL, PO, PT, SE, SI) and wave 2 (GR, IE). N=16,315 grandmothers with at least one grandchild under the age of 16 years. Ranking based on logistic regression models.

Figure 4: Provision of regular grandmaternal childcare in the multivariable framework



Source: SHARE wave 4 (AT, BE, CH, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FR, HU, IT, NL, PO, PT, SE, SI) and wave 2 (GR, IE). N=10,297 grandmothers providing **any** grandparental care at all.