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# More Educated than Your Grandfather? Intergenerational Transmission of Education in Europe<sup>3</sup>

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## Summary of key issues

- Education should be a pathway to a better future, not merely an inheritance of family background. However, reality often tells a different story – children from more educated families have a significantly greater chance of attaining higher education than their peers from less educated families. When educational mobility is low, inequalities persist across generations, and the education system fails in its role as a driver of social advancement. Recent research also shows that the influence of family does not end with parents – the educational level of grandparents can also affect children’s education, suggesting that change may take longer than we might expect.
- This study examines how education is transmitted across three generations in European countries and uncovers the mechanisms that influence long-term educational mobility. What makes this study particularly unique is its ability to trace family lines from grandparents born at the beginning of the 20th century, through parents born during and after World War II, to the youngest generation born around 1975. This unique perspective provides a deeper understanding of educational mobility and its persistence across generations and European countries.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This study is based on the original academic article “Multigenerational Education Mobility in Europe: Exploring the Mechanism” by Miroslava Federičová and Filip Pertold (2023).

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- Educational mobility across generations varies widely across Europe. Northern European countries tend to have the highest levels of mobility, meaning that children's education is less tied to their parents' background. In contrast, in German-speaking and Southern European countries, education levels are more often passed down from one generation to the next.
- Over the 20th century, people in most European countries gained more education—on average, more than five additional years. This increase was especially strong among women. While those born before 1920 typically completed about six years of basic schooling, people born in the 1970s reached an average of 12.5 years—roughly the level of upper secondary education. This trend is similar across all countries in the study.
- Intergenerational mobility has also increased over time. The statistical relationship in educational attainment between the generations born in the 1910s and the 1940s was significantly higher than between the generations of the 1940s and the 1970s in most European countries. The former socialist countries are exceptions, specifically Eastern Germany and the Czech Republic, where intergenerational mobility has not increased over time.
- In the countries of the former socialist bloc, we observe a strong influence of parents' education, but a significantly lower influence of grandparents' education on the educational attainment of grandchildren. This observation is consistent with the communist regime's efforts to significantly reduce inequalities in the oldest observed generation.
- After 1990, there was a significant strengthening of the link between parents' and children's education in both the Czech Republic and in Eastern Germany, indicating a decline in intergenerational educational mobility. This period in both countries is associated with transformational changes in the economy and society. Our study does not focus on the causes of this trend, and existing research does not offer a clear explanation. However, among the factors discussed are the increasing returns to education, the shortening of compulsory schooling to only the primary level, and the introduction of early tracking of students into multi-year grammar schools, which may have negatively affected the chances of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds to attain higher education.
- The mediation analysis method shows that the mechanisms of multigenerational educational mobility are fairly similar across European countries, even though the absolute level of mobility may vary. The most important factor influencing children's educational attainment is the education level of their parents, which explains 57% of the relationship between children's and grandparents' education on average across EU countries. The remaining 31% is influenced by the education and socioeconomic status of the grandparents.