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FAMILY POLICY WITH RESPECT TO LARGE FAMILIES IN VISEGRAD COUNTRIES

Summary: The article presents the family policy aimed at the large families in Visegrad countries. The most important instruments in terms of supporting families with many children were compared. The conducted analysis showed that the country with the weakest family policy is Poland and that the largest amount of the help offered to large families is available in Hungary.

Keywords: Visegrad Group, family policy, large families.

1. Introduction

The Visegrad Group is a regional grouping which consists of four countries: the Czech Republic, Slovakia (called Czechoslovakia until 1993), Hungary, and Poland. These countries share not only a common history and religion, but also cultural and intellectual values, which they want to further strengthen and develop. One of these directions of further co-operation is the exchange of experiences and views and co-operation in the field of employment and social policy [*Visegrad Declaration 2004; Guidelines on the Future... 2004*], including the field of family policy. Family policy in the Visegrad countries is varied, but there are also some similarities. It has undoubtedly been marked by the period of communism and the experience of a centrally planned economy. A systemic transition, however, has forced into being a new shape of the contemporary family policy and different countries have been dealing with it in varying degrees.

In the paper the Czech, Hungarian, Polish, and Slovak family policies will be presented and compared with reference to large families, treated as a specific group of beneficiaries requiring the application of specific instruments. At the beginning, the demographic situation in the Visegrad countries and for the rest of Europe will be outlined and the situation of large families in these countries will be discussed. Then, the family policy in these countries will be discussed and the appropriate instruments (or their lack) to support large families will be compared. Finally, conclusions from the analysis will be drawn and the recommendations for the four countries of Central Europe will be presented.

2. The demographic situation and large families in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia

The demographic situation of almost all post-communist countries is alarming. These countries have the lowest fertility rates in the world and these are much lower than the average for Europe. Visegrad countries are also characterised by low fertility ratios, which have remained relatively stable for many years. Table 1 shows the fertility rates in these countries and the EU average for the period between 2005 and 2009.

Table 1. The fertility rate in Visegrad countries and the EU in 2005-2009

Year	Fertility rate				
	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovak Republic	EU (27)
2005	1.28	1.31	1.24	1.25	1.51
2006	1.33	1.34	1.27	1.24	1.54
2007	1.44	1.32	1.31	1.25	1.56
2008	1.50	1.35	1.39	1.32	1.60
2009	1.49	1.32	1.40	1.41	.

Source: *Eurostat Population Statistics*.

The ratios in Visegrad countries are lower than those for the entire Union. The greatest increase in rates took place in the Czech Republic and was at the level similar to the EU average. A slightly lower increase took place also in Slovakia and Poland. In Hungary the rates were subject to slight fluctuations, but remained at the similar level throughout the period considered. The level required for population renewal is at least 2.1; EU countries are below this threshold and the countries discussed here differ significantly from it. This creates a serious risk in the form of an aging population, in which in the future there will not be enough young working people to maintain the population in non-working age (especially retired people requiring additional appropriate medical care).

Low fertility is caused by many factors [more in Balcerzak-Paradowska 2004], among which economic factors constitute an important element. During the era of transition in the Member States of the Visegrad Group, two phenomena coincided with each other. Firstly, the material situation of many households and the level of social protection offered by the state significantly deteriorated. Secondly, an improvement in the living conditions of many families and the adoption of the model of the life similar to the one functioning in more developed Western countries resulted in the reduction of the number of children (up to one, max. two) or even in the decision to remain childless [Rostgaard 2004]. Hope lies here in the area of large families having at least three children, which are contributing to a significant development

of the population of young people and which will provide future income for the whole society. In the present demographic crisis, they should be in the centre of the governments' attention.

3. The situation of large families

The status and situation of large families in the economies of the countries discussed earlier is quite varied, but some similarities can be found due to the similar levels of development in these countries. Table 2 contains selected data about the status and the situation of large families in these countries.

Table 2. Selected information about large families in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and the Slovak Republic

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovak Republic
Families with three and more children as percentage of all the households ^A	4	7	9	8
Children aged 0-14 living in a household with three or more children (as a percentage of total) ^B	19.9	33.5	31.9	31.6
Families with three and more children at risk of poverty or social exclusion ^C	26.7	48.0	46.3	32.9
Private households with three and more children, net income ^D	283.21	172.07	145.23	232.45
Private households with three and more children, net expenditures ^E	–	155.00	134.38	220.44

^A Year 2007.

^B Year 2007.

^C As a percentage of all such families, year 2009.

^D In 2009, EUR per person per month, based on average annual exchange rate.

^E In 2009, EUR per person per month, based on average annual exchange rate.

Source: author's own calculation on the basis of data from OECD Family Database [2010], Eurostat Income, Social Inclusion, and Living Conditions Statistics, ČSÚ [2010], ŠÚ SR [2010], GUS [2010], KSH [2008].

In most countries large families represent about 7-9% of all households; only in the Czech Republic are there much fewer as they represent only 4% of all households (similar to the EU average). Therefore, they do not represent the majority among all families, but they do participate more significantly in creating society than the average in Europe. Another indicator shows, however, that nearly one third of all the children aged 0-14 years (with the exception of the Czech Republic, where their share is less than 20%) is raised in large families. Thus, when it comes to the social structure,

there is a considerable similarity in the share of large families and their children in the whole of society between Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. In the Czech Republic this share is much lower, but the rate of risk of poverty varies considerably between the countries and is nearly two times lower in the Czech Republic than in Poland and Hungary, where nearly half of all the families with many children are at risk of poverty. The reason why this is so can be seen by means of analysing the level of the income and expenditure achieved and borne by large families in different countries. Incomes are much higher in the Czech Republic and Slovakia than in Poland and Hungary, and the gap between income and expenditure is higher in Hungary than in Poland and Slovakia. The presented data show that despite the small number of large families in the Czech Republic, their income and fertility rates are higher than in other countries.

Large families represent a specific group of households and therefore require special treatment. In these families many family members are dependent on few breadwinners (very often only one when a mother gives up work to raise children), and therefore the family income is almost entirely allocated to satisfying the basic needs of its members (such as food, clothing, housing). Funds are often insufficient to cover expenses needed for leisure, recreation, or the use of cultural goods (which become very expensive for a large number of family members). The family is thus deprived of opportunities to spend time together in an attractive and educational way for the youngest members. A low income, combined with the lack of participation in cultural events or sports in the community, exposes the social exclusion of large families and the hostile attitude of the rest of society towards them. An additional problem is the accumulation of all sorts of problems arising from the size of the family, financial problems, or the insufficient amount of time that the parents can spend with their children. These problems appear in various forms, such as alcoholism, drug addiction of family members, domestic violence, unemployment, mental illness, or disability and very often they represent the combination of several problems all at once. Therefore, large families need support and special care that is addressed to each family separately, especially the care needed by dysfunctional families. These are the tasks that the family policy of Visegrad countries faces.

4. The family policy in Visegrad countries

Visegrad countries do not fit the typology of the welfare state as presented by Esping-Andersen [1990]. For this reason they are treated as a separate group, i.e. the so-called “new EU member countries” (see [*Polityka rodzinna...* 2009]). The model of their family policy is characterised by low social expenditure (including the family policy) and the occurrence of various types of restrictions in access to assistance (e.g. the income test).

Family policy is considered to be one of the subpolicies of the social policy which is addressed primarily to families with dependent children. Balcerzak-Paradowska

[2004, p. 140] sees the main objective of the family policy as creating conditions conducive to families, their development, and the fulfilment of important social tasks. This policy should be focused on supporting families, irrespective of their social and material situation, and particularly in supporting poor and dysfunctional families [Kamerman 2009].

The family policy could be implemented via direct financial support aimed at families with children in the form of cash benefits, tax incentives, or services provided for families with children (e.g. care and educational institutions, health care). An allowance is considered to be the most important instrument for reducing poverty among children. It may be universal – intended for all the families with children, irrespective of their income (optional, depending on the number of children, as in France), or selective – provided after meeting specific criteria (mainly income). Table 3 presents the support for families as offered by the state in the form of cash benefits (non and means-tested) and benefits in kind *per capita* and as a percentage of GDP.

Table 3. Social protection benefits for families in 2008 in EUR per inhabitant, PPP per inhabitant and as a percentage of GDP

Benefits for families in 2008 in a given country	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovak Republic	EU (27)
EUR per inhabitant (at constant prices from year 2000)	172.35	205.86	57.01	123.09	456.58
Purchasing Power Standard per inhabitant	292.63	462.00	103.81	266.92	523.24
As a percentage of GDP	1.45	2.84	0.73	1.47	2.09

Source: Eurostat Population Statistics.

By far, the lowest share of the expenditure on supporting families in GDP is in Poland and the highest in Hungary (more than three times higher than in Poland and higher than the EU average). The levels of support in the Czech Republic and Slovakia are similar, but below the EU average. The situation is the same after conversion to the amount of support *per capita*, also expressed in Purchasing Power Standard. Polish families receive four times less support than Hungarian families do. The family policy in Hungary can be regarded as the most generous among Visegrad countries and policies implemented in Poland as the weakest in this group. It is supposed that the situation concerning the support of large families in these countries looks similar. In addition, only two of the countries concerned have a ministry of the family: Hungary (Ministry of Health, Social, and Family Affairs) and Slovakia (Department of Labour, Family, and Social Affairs).

5. Family policy towards large families

From the viewpoint of large families, the most important forms of support are:

- allowances (granted regardless of the income and increasing with the number of dependent children);
- support for poor families depending on the level of income;
- grants to raise a large number of children;
- reductions on expenditure on housing and utilities (e.g. electricity, gas);
- access to free health care;
- reductions and tax deductions (connected with the upbringing of children and for their education);
- the duration of parental leave and the right to maternity allowance depending on the number of children;
- support for the parents who remain at home to bring up their children;
- easier access to care and educational facilities, culture, sports and recreational facilities;
- easier access to psychological, educational, and legal support.

Therefore, just in this light, the review and comparison of policies implemented in the discussed countries will be made. Table 4 presents the most important forms of the support for large families available in the countries under discussion.

The presented statement confirms the previous predictions that the greatest support offered to families with many children is in Hungary and the weakest support in Poland. There is also a strong connection between the functioning of a separate ministry responsible for the situation of families in the country and the level and forms of assistance offered in it. In Hungary and Slovakia (with such ministries), the support for such families is, first of all, universal (benefits are granted irrespective of the income level) and is only supplemented by means-tested support addressed to the poorest families. A much higher level of the benefits of a universal character is granted to Hungarian families (due to the progressive rate, increasing with the number of children). This is the only country to treat raising children as work and families with many children may be paid in this respect (approx. 100 EUR per month) until the youngest child turns eight years old¹. In each of these countries, poor families can count on additional benefits and supplements for housing (and in some cases also utilities). Each country has also introduced tax breaks for raising children (at different levels) and a childbirth allowance. The access to specialised counselling is also free in all of the countries, as are the costs of various institutions (mainly kindergartens). In all of the countries these are managed locally and major decisions are taken at this level. It should be pointed out that in Hungary kindergartens are mostly subsidised by the government (for poor families), while in Slovakia the costs

¹ Under the condition that the person taking care of a child works no more than four hours a day or without restrictions at home.

Table 4. Instruments supporting large families in Visegrad countries

		Czech Republic ^A	Hungary ^B	Poland ^C	Slovak Republic
1		2	3	4	5
Parental leaves	Periods – depending on the number of children in the family	28 weeks ^D /no	24 weeks/no	20 weeks ^E /no	28 weeks ^F /no
	Level of benefit (replacement rate, in %)	70	70 ^G	100	100 ^H
	Extended leave (years)	3	8 ^I	2 ^J	3 ^K
	Entitlements and amount of benefits (EUR)	Universal 152-456 ^L	Universal 100 ^M -360	Income-tested 100	Universal 190.1 ^N
Allowance independent of the income		–	Family allowance ^O – 57 EUR per child ^P	–	Child allowance – 22 EUR per child
Allowance depending on the income (for poor families)	Child allowance	Depending on the age of the children rather than their number in the family (64-90 EUR per child)	Supplementary family allowance – flat-rate benefit	Family allowance depending on the age of the children rather than their number in the family (17-24.5 EUR)	Supplement to the child allowance 10.32 EUR per month per child ^Q
	Large family supplement	No	No	Yes, 20 EUR for the 3rd and following children	No
	Other	Social allowance ^R Benefits under Assistance in Material Need (Allowance for living, Supplement for housing, Extraordinary immediate assistance)		Permanent, periodic and intentional benefits Supplement birth grants 250 EUR	
		Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovak Republic
Allowance for expenditure on housing and utilities (e.g. electricity, gas)		Housing allowance, supplement for housing (means-tested)	Support to household-energy costs Housing subsidy scheme ^S	Housing allowance (means-tested and size of a flat-tested)	Housing allowance (means-tested)
Tax reductions		Tax allowance amounting to 408 EUR per year per child	14.3 EUR per month per child ^T	Tax allowance amounting to 278 EUR per year per child	“Children bonus” 160 EUR per child per year

1	2	3	4	5
Easier access to care and educational facilities	Run by the local authority (takes decisions independently in this regard)	Run by local governments (the government often subsidises childcare for poor families)	Run by the local authority (takes decisions independently in this regard)	Run by local governments
Easier access to culture, sports and recreational facilities	Decisions taken by local authorities	Decisions taken by local authorities (significant role of the NGOs)	Decisions taken by local authorities (Large Families Card in several cities)	Support of municipalities and Ministry of Education ^U
Psychological, educational and legal counselling	Free of charge	Free of charge	Free of charge	Free of charge
Birth grant	520 EUR	Maternity grant 229 EUR	250 EUR	Child birth grant 151.37 EUR Child birth grant bonus 678.49 EUR
Other	–	Reduction to buy school-books, ^V free school meals ^W	–	–

^A Exchange rate: 1 EUR/25 CZK; ^B Exchange rate: 1 EUR/280 HUF; ^C Exchange rate: 1 EUR/4 PLN; ^D 37 weeks for multiple birth; ^E Plus two weeks optional, 31-37 weeks plus three weeks optional by multiple birth; ^F 37 weeks by multiple birth; ^G For the uninsured: minimum pension – approx. 100 EUR; ^H Minimum 404 EUR; ^I Only for large families, the person taking up this benefit (the mother or father) can work less than four hours daily (or with no limitation if working at home) – starting from the 3rd birthday of a child, 100 EUR per month; ^J Three in the case of multiple birth, six in the case of a disabled child; ^K Six in the case of a disabled child; ^L The shorter the period of eligibility for the benefit, the higher the rate; ^M For the uninsured and between the child's 3rd and 8th birthday; ^N For a working parent – a child care supplement (up to 40-160 EUR) – paid in order to cover expenses associated with child care; ^O The rate increases with the number of children in the family (up to the third child); ^P 61 EUR if a single parent; ^Q For families that cannot use tax breaks; ^R For poor families (the amount of the benefit depends on the family income, not the number of children – but indirectly supports large families because there is usually less income per family member); ^S Administered by the local authorities in the form of cash payments and free, or heavily subsidised, rental accommodation; ^T When the total income is under 21,500 EUR a year; ^U For families with social difficulties; ^V The discount price is 50%. This field is under the authority of the local government as they can provide more reductions on the basis of local regulations; ^W Or for a discount price.

Source: author's own work on the basis of the data from Magyar Államkincstár, Ministerstvo práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny Slovenskej republiky, Ministerstwo Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, *Information about Family Policy System in the Czech Republic* [2009].

of services in state kindergartens are very small (a dozen euros a month), which also increases their availability to large families. In Hungary, the children from large families also receive discounts on school books and school meals, and in Slovakia

most books are free for all the children attending school. The last important issue is access to cultural, arts, sports and recreational goods. Here, solutions are also mainly the responsibility of the local governments as well as NGOs. Some positive trends occurring in Hungary and Poland can also be seen – in Hungary A Nagycsaládok Országos egyesület (NOE) (National Association of Large Families) plays a leading role in this field. The organisation issues membership cards, i.e. *tagsági kártya*, entitling holders to discounts in various places and in private companies taking part in the programme all over the country (including zoos, theatres, etc.). A similar solution, but to a far smaller extent, also functions in Poland, where some local governments have issued the so-called “Large Families Card” entitling its members to discounts to many sports, cultural, and recreational facilities (as well as to travelling on public transport) in the city.

6. Conclusion

Visegrad countries, although connected by a common history and cultural heritage, have different approaches to family policy. Although there are only four countries in this group, both good examples of support for families with many children (as in Hungary) and very weak models of family policy or even a lack thereof (as in Poland) can be indicated. Although large families are the greatest group in Poland (among the countries concerned), they cannot rely on state support and the only positive expression of concern about such a socially important group is the “Large Families Card”, which works in Hungary, but only in a few cities in Poland. The country should, therefore, benefit more from the experience of the group’s other countries, especially from that of Hungary in the field of family policy. The research clearly shows that the greatest results will be achieved in Poland through an increase in family benefits [Whiteford, Adema 2007] and therefore the main instrument of family policy in Poland should be family allowances.

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POLITYKA RODZINNA WZGLĘDEM RODZIN WIEŁODZIETNYCH W KRAJACH GRUPY WYSZEHRADZKIEJ

Streszczenie: Artykuł przedstawia politykę rodzinną realizowaną względem rodzin wielodzietnych w krajach Grupy Wyszehradzkiej. Porównane zostały instrumenty najważniejsze z punktu widzenia wspierania rodzin posiadających liczne potomstwo. Przeprowadzona analiza wykazała, że krajem o najsłabszej polityce rodzinnej jest Polska, zaś najlepszą pomoc dla rodzin wielodzietnych oferują Węgry.