

Problematic 'Family Policies' in CEE



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For the lack of a better word, social policy can be *tricky* – not only to create and implement, but also to discuss. Even the main purpose of social policy is unclear. There seem to be three main schools of thought. According to one, it is meant to protect human dignity and help disadvantaged groups rise, a goal which could be summarized as ‘social security’. Another common view is that it is primarily meant to ensure a durable and well-functioning economy in the face of changing demographic trends. The third – and perhaps the most cynical view – is that, just like all policies, it is a tool used to win elections and stay in power.

These policy goals are not mutually exclusive, of course, as all three are desirable for the decisionmaker. However, focusing on just one of these three goals is likely to negatively affect developments towards the other two. Upon the close examination of different social policies of Central Eastern Europe (CEE), as we did in this issue of the *4liberty.eu Review*, it appears that, often, social policymaking is motivated mainly by the third goal (the preservation of power). As Maciej Chmielewski writes in his article, instead of adapting policies to the changing reality, governments try to reshape reality based on their political motivations, which leads to a wide array of problems.

Firstly, it may lead to the century-old dilemma of short-term benefit versus long-term development. The effects and impact of social policy take many years (even decades!) to show, while the political cycle lasts only a couple years. Similar to education reforms, social reforms are, therefore, intimidating to politicians, considering that by the time the results become visible, they may no longer be in office. Unfortunately for them, as another author in the issue, Máté Hajba, indicates, it seems that regardless of whether politicians want to or not, radically changing

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CITIZENS OF THE CEE REGION GENERALLY WANT EXTENSIVE SOCIAL BENEFITS

the welfare system might become a necessity sooner than later.

Speaking of politically motivated policy decisions, it is important to note that citizens of the CEE region generally want extensive social benefits – in no small part due to the post-soviet tradition of strong state presence. This desire incentivizes governments to implement more and more benefits in order to stay in power – especially when elections are coming up.

The same vote-maximizing rationale dictates that universal benefits which reach a wider voter base should be introduced, even though, as Adrian Nikolov points out, means-tested benefits are considered to be more efficient and desirable for a well-functioning country. This way, social spending targets the majority society, therefore, minorities and disadvantaged groups are further segregated. Filip Blaha observes that several groups on the margins of society are ‘invisible’ to policymakers who fall through the cracks of the safety net. Not only is this social policy discriminative, but it is also often paired with legal and political discrimination of minorities (such as LGBTQ people, ethnic groups, and women), depending largely on the ideology of the decisionmakers. In Poland, for example, ‘non-traditional’ families are discriminated against by the government, both

in narrative and policy, says Milosz Hodun. According to Karolina Mickute, in Lithuania, the lack of political will to acknowledge unconventional families hampers their constitutional right to security.

Other problems may arise when social policy is implemented as an economic tool. This is the view that considers social policy a means to ensure the long-term economic stability by maintaining labor supply in the aging European societies, generally by trying to influence demographic trends. In most countries, this is dubbed 'family policy'. Even though the goal of ensuring economic stability is more noble than merely trying to win elections, there are many possible obstacles to the process. In most cases, it turns out that family policies in CEE are legally and financially discriminatory.

In practice, these 'family policies' usually focus on the singular goal of boosting birth rates – one way or another, often overlooking the wide range of factors that influence the decision of having children (such as future prospects, infrastructure, or education). Oleksandra Betlii reminds that without considering these infrastructural needs, social benefits will not be enough to reach the desired effects. Even though these policies are hyper focused on boosting birthrates, as Radovan Durana points out, we are yet to see undisputable evidence that current practices are effective, let alone sufficient to counteract demographic trends (especially in countries that are unwilling to rethink their pension systems out of fear of losing popularity with voters). Moreover, family policy is meant to be about more than just boosting birthrates. A functioning family policy should at least try to address all major issues related to family life, such as generational poverty or domestic abuse, a prime example of untreated problems getting out of hand, and one that burdens many CEE countries, including Hungary – a case explored in Veronika Konstek's article.

Thirdly, there are social policies that aim to boost social security and improve standards of living. On the bright side, such programs are more likely to be proportional and means-tested, as they target disadvantaged groups. However, these policies have inferior economic returns, lead to severe information deficit which goes both ways (decisionmakers are uninformed about recipients, whereas potential recipients lack access to information about opportunities), the incentives are weak or faulty, and there is a high administrative burden and the potential for a stowaway problem. These problems are present in CEE countries too, according to Daniel Hinšt.

It is unreasonable to build robust policies on two-dimensional goals – such as having more babies – without considering the greater picture. Namely that the focus should be on the desired impact. Good social policy ensures both social security and economical longevity, as they are crucial building blocks of a free, European democracy.

In the current issue of *4liberty.eu Review*, our authors present Central-Eastern European social and family policies, problems, and possible solutions from refreshingly differing perspectives. This publication is a great starting point for anyone who wishes to familiarize themselves with this ever-relevant topic. Looking at social spending across Europe, it becomes clear that decisionmakers are willing to devote considerable resources to social policies, making it very important to ensure that money is spent correctly, which requires information, communication, and heavy debating.



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