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Varieties of Autocratic Family Policy Expansion: Hungary, Poland, Russia and Turkey

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Abstract

Protecting and promoting the family is at the heart of most autocratising regimes throughout the world. Yet, what kind of family policies do these regimes actually pursue? In this exploratory paper, we shed light on the differing pathways of four autocratising regimes with a similar familialistic outlook: Russia, Turkey, Hungary and Poland. We do so by tracing with qualitative methods the development of family policies in terms of their legal structure and distributive implications. Our analysis is placed in a wider institutional context considering a broader range of social policies that affect women and families. The impact of policies is studied beyond the intended and (over-)politicised fertility rates.

Our analysis reveals that the four regimes share a common vision of the role of the family and maintain a pro-natalist and anti-gender discourse. In the name of celebrating the sacred family all of them initiated new policies to protect families, including flagship programmes launched with much fanfare. Yet, a closer analysis of a comprehensive range of family-related policies reveals that they used different policy tools, including universal, social insurance- and tax-based programs, and social policy “by other means”. The configuration of these programs have clearly distinguishable distributive profiles benefitting distinct strata of women and families. This comparative study contributes to our understanding of the redistributive causes behind the long-term popularity of third wave autocratizers also among women.

Introduction

In the Global South and North alike, democracy is ‘under siege’ (Repuccia and Slipowitz, 2021) while autocracies are on the rise (Boese et al., 2022). Today’s ‘third wave autocracies’ (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019) or ‘illiberal regimes’ (Zakaria, 1997) differ from their predecessors as they rarely use outright, mass violence and make strong efforts to maintain the facade of democracy. Parliamentary elections are regularly held, even if not under fair or free conditions, and some checks and balances are, at least formally, in place. The playbook of autocratizers is strikingly similar in Putin’s Russia and Orbán’s Hungary, in Bolsonaro’s Brazil and Modi’s India. Ruling governments first attack the media and civil society, and polarise societies. They ‘disrespect opponents and spread false information, only to then undermine formal institutions’ (Alizada et al., 2021: 7). But given their intention to remain seemingly democratic, modern autocrats ‘mix and match’ a variety of different tools, including media control to shape public opinion, to ‘leverage persuasion and fear, hope and apathy’ (Sharafutdinova, 2020: 1). Economic and social policies play a central, although often overlooked, role in popularising illiberal regimes, and keeping third wave autocrats in power (Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa, 2021; Orenstein and Szikra, 2022; Scheiring, 2020).

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In our recent study comparing Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Hungary under Viktor Orbán we found striking similarities in the content and the procedures of social policy reforms as well as the discourses accompanying them (Öktem and Szikra 2022). Within the wide range of social policy fields, family policies stood out in terms of discourse and, especially in Hungary, in the content and direction of reforms. The findings of the Hungarian-Turkish comparison gave impetus to study family policy developments in a wider set of countries under democratic backsliding.

Among the various policy areas, family policy appears to occupy a special place in autocratizing regimes especially since the mid-2010s. Governments launched new programmes with much fanfare in this policy area and maintain a high-profile familialistic discourse, extolling the virtues of the traditional family and promoting natalism (Korkut and Eslen-Ziya, 2016; Cook et al. 2022). Against this backdrop, this paper aims to explore what kind of family policies these regimes actually pursue? Is there a common family policy agenda or do we see a variety of family policies in third wave autocracies? To this end, our paper aims to shed light on the family policy pathways of four autocratizing regimes with a similar familialistic outlook: Russia, Turkey, Hungary and Poland. We do so by qualitatively exploring the development of family policies in terms of their legal structure and distributive implications.

Our paper goes beyond existing scholarship in three respects: First, it compares family policy developments in four of the most steeply autocratizing countries in the past decade(s): Russia, Turkey, Hungary and Poland. Second, we take a comprehensive family policy approach, and include important changes related to women outside of the traditional scope of family policies. Reforms benefiting women in the pension system and social assistance are cases in point. We reveal that third wave autocratizers support traditional families and motherhood in a broader institutional context. And third, we focus on the changing target populations within female constituencies, especially in terms of class. Our research shows a universalizing shift in some countries, whereas a focus on poor or middle-class families in others. Understanding *what kind of* families and women are the prime beneficiaries of programs is particularly important in understanding the political role family policies play in autocratizing countries. Our research contributes to the understanding of the striking longevity of right-wing populist and autocratizing regimes as it sheds light on the importance of women-centred family policies in building up core constituencies and class coalitions.

This paper is structured as follows: We first explain our methodological approach and case selection. We then turn to examine welfare effort, i.e. public expenditures devoted to family policy under autocratizing rule in Russia, Turkey, Hungary and Poland. In a second step, we conduct a qualitative analysis of key reforms in family policies and other social policy areas that directly target women. Throughout our investigation, we primarily focus on the *content* of policy changes, that is, the direction of change. Our prime interest is to see which social groups benefited or lost out with reforms. To do this, we apply an intersectional approach, and highlight changing emphasis on different female constituencies regarding class and age. We conclude by outlining key similarities and differences between welfare reforms directed to families and women in the four selected countries under democratic decline, and highlight some of the possible political and social implications of feminizing illiberal welfare states.

Family Policy, the Welfare State and Autocratic Regimes

While still a relatively small share of welfare spending, family policy constitutes an increasingly important part of European welfare states and beyond (Eydal and Rostgaard 2018; Gauthier and Koops

2018; Daly 2023). various structural and political factors drive this tendency, including the increasing share of the female labour force and the related gender equality agendas since the 1990s. Early childhood education and care and social investment also helped to put family policy and especially child care services in the centre of policy-making in the Eastern and Western parts of Europe alike (Moss 2018). Supranational actors, including the European Union, the OECD and the World Bank have played an important role in promoting the agenda of gender equality, social investment and child well-being, while recently also demography entered the EU scene as one of the mega-trends related to the change of welfare states (Jenson, 2020). These trends all point to the expansion of this policy area (Inglot et.al. 2022). Analysing family policy reforms of the late-2000s in Western European countries Morgan (2013) went as far as talking about the “feminizing” of welfare states. During our research into autocratizing welfare states in Eastern Europe and Europe’s periphery, we recognized that a similar tendency has occurred during the mid-2010s in countries like Turkey, Poland, or Russia (Öktem and Szikra 2022; Inglot et.al. 2022).

Since the seminal comparative volume of Kamerman and Kahn (1978) family policies have usually been defined as all programs and services that, explicitly or implicitly, target families, parents, and children (Kamerman and Kahn 1978, 3; Hantrais 2004, 132). In their comparative monograph Inglot et. al. (2022) chose a middle-range conceptualization that contains a larger set of benefits and services including conventional cash transfers such as maternity, parental and child-care leaves and benefits leaves, family (child) allowances, and child-care services. They incorporate in their study tax deductions for working families, as well as social assistance programs targeting poor families. In our research we expand this scope even further and incorporate policies that are explicitly targeting women or mothers, like social assistance programs in Turkey focusing on female labour market participation, or the preferential treatment of women in pension systems. This leads us to more fully explore the growing attention of autocratizers to women and families, and understand the new, often innovative solutions they pursue that cross conventional borders of policy (sub)fields. One such novel area we reveal is the growing emphases on “social policy by other means” in family policy making under autocratizing rule. Special loans targeting married couples and (large) families in Hungary since the mid-2010s, and the novel tool of “maternity capital” (MC) in Russia starting in the mid-2000s are illustrative cases in point. Our analysis thus also contributes to the exploration of the changing configuration family policy tools in our select countries and beyond.

The affinity of autocratic political systems to family policies, and motherhood is not new. National socialist and fascist regimes were famous for pursuing selective pronatalist policies intertwined with eugenic ideas (Varsa and Szikra 2020). The state socialist regimes pursued full employment, including women, which inevitably demanded the development of child care services (Saxonberg 2014; Inglot et.al. 2022). While propagating pronatalist goals, long parental and child care leaves since the late-1960s were often used to hide rising unemployment - a phenomena that was illegal in communist and state socialist regimes (Saxonberg 2014; Szelewa 2020; Inglot et.al. 2022). Given these well-known affinity between autocracy and family policy in historical autocracies it makes sense to ask whether family policy occupies a similar place in the agenda of contemporary autocratizing regimes.

The policy making of autocratizers and right-wing populist leaders is increasingly in the focus of research (Woods and Frankenberger 2018; Szelewa and Szikra 2022). These states typically engage in full-fledged populist governance style with specific policy content, procedures and discourses (Bartha et al., 2020). They have a strong traditionalist vision about the ‘good society’ that also affects policymaking (Szikra 2018). They typically display right wing, nativist politics (Mudde, 2016, 2019; Enyedi 2022), thus aim at

the protection of what they see as the native population as opposed to changing 'intruders' and 'others' who are not part of the imaginary nation. 'Enemies' of such regimes range from local ethnic and religious minorities to supranational organisations, immigrants from the global South, and LGBTQ+ communities.

Population and family policies play a central role in nativist politics of 'protecting' and promoting the population that their leaders define as the nation (Doğangün, 2020; Inglot et al., 2022; Korkut and Eslenc-Ziya, 2016; Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa, 2021; Mudde, 2016; Szikra, 2019; Varsa and Szikra, 2020). Celebrating the traditional (heterosexual, patriarchal) family and mothers as bearers of the nation (Albanese, 2006; Koven and Michel, 1993; Yuval-Davis, 1997) strengthens the ideological bases of right wing, illiberal regimes, who often define such traditionalist values in their constitutions (Inglot et al., 2022; Mudde, 2016, 2019; Müller, 2016; Szelenyi and Csillag, 2015; Szikra, 2019). Besides symbolic gestures, like including female politicians in highest political positions, social- and economic policies have increasingly targeted women. For example, in their recent comparative study Cook et.al. (2022) show how the Hungarian, Polish and Russian governments "have concentrated monetary and rhetorical investments in pro-natalism, traditionalism and familialism" (ibid:17).

When investing in family policies in a traditionalist ideological setting, women (as mothers and as potential mothers) are increasingly targeted by redistributive policies. But autocratizing regimes have an ambivalent relationship with female constituencies. While ruling elites discursively engage in celebrating traditional gender roles and issue anti-gender campaigns, they often promote women's role as workers and carers (Fodor, 2022; Gwiazda, 2021; Szikra, 2019). And by expanding related policy areas, illiberal leaders paradoxically contribute to the financial well-being and economic independence of masses of women (Fodor, 2022; Gwiazda, 2021; Inglot et al., 2022; Orenstein and Szikra, 2022). Focusing on women seems to be rewarded by increasing popularity of right-wing regimes among female constituencies in the countries analysed here (Colton and Hale, 2009; Goncharenko, 2018; Grzebalska and Kováts, 2018, Konda 2018).

There is thus ample grounds to assume that family policy plays an important role in the governing agenda of third wave autocratizers. But given the unclear boundaries and institutional diversity of family policy it remains largely open what kind of family policy they pursue? Do we see an across the board pro-natalist expansion through similar reforms, as the common discourse would suggest? Or is there a variety amongst third wave autocratizers? And what is the distributive profile of these family policies?

Methodology and Case Selection

We employ a sequential mixed method approach (Creswell, 2013) combining quantitative and qualitative tools. First we assess social expenditures and inquire whether the four autocratizing governments retrenched or expanded their welfare states in general, and spending on families in particular. In the second stage, we conduct a qualitative analysis to explore the trajectory of family policy reforms. We focus on the direction of reforms and are particularly interested in changes to target populations. Our database includes extensive information on political and social policy developments in the four countries like major political events (local and parliamentary elections, demonstrations, major changes to democratic institutions), the most important social policy changes, and the direction of these reforms (expansions or cuts). We focus on the density of changes and their relation to political events. To put changes in a structural context, we also analyse data on female and maternal labour market participation.

We rely on international datasets (Eurostat, OECD and IMF), primary policy documents and legislation including those in native languages. We also utilized secondary literature to identify important reforms. We need to be cautious regarding data in autocratizing countries. As noted by Weyland (2009) and Forrat (2012) national data on social policy is often scarce or distorted, and populist and autocratizing governments often influence statistical offices. Getting access to basic information about legislative changes is difficult or impossible. The decision making process is non-transparent. Furthermore, most relevant international datasets do not include all four countries of investigation. Policy analysis in these countries is also somewhat distorted because scholars tend to focus on areas that the government identifies as flagship social policy fields while other fields often avoid scrutiny. Such distortions made us double-check data and use a mix of primary and secondary sources.

We selected four cases that are frequently debated in the literature on recent democratic backsliding: Russia under Vladimir Putin and the United Russia party (Всероссийская политическая партия “Единая Россия”) since 2000, Turkey under the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, since 2002, Hungary under Fidesz (Fidesz - Hungarian Civil Alliance - *Fidesz Magyar Polgári Szövetség*), led by Viktor Orbán, since 2010, and Poland under the Law and Justice Party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS), led by Jarosław Kaczyński, since 2015. Our analysis ends in 2020 before the Covid crisis.

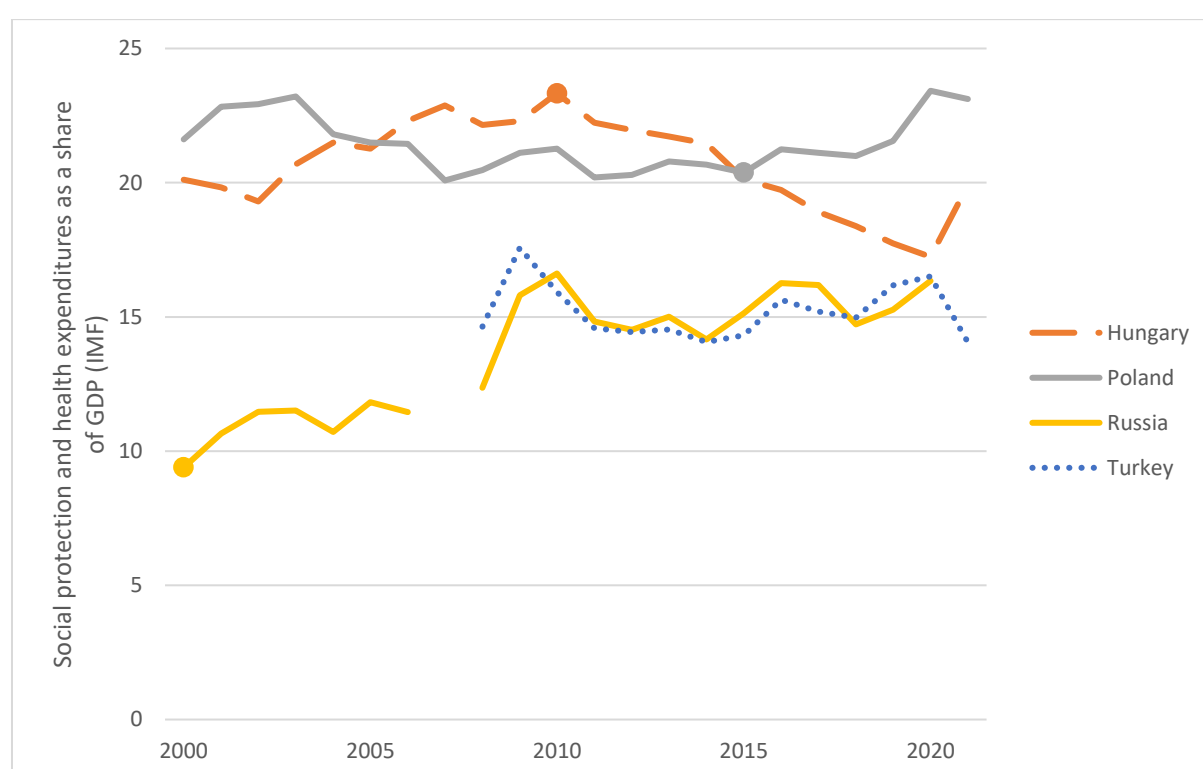
These four countries represent different stages in the process of democratic backsliding. Russia is probably the most prominent case of autocratization in the 2000s, whereas Turkey, Hungary and Poland are among the leading autocratizers of the 2010s (Alizada et al., 2021). Russia and, to a lesser degree, also Turkey are autocracies where no opposition party can get to power, checks and balances are weakened or fully eliminated, media and civil society are almost fully under governmental control (Esen and Gumuscu, 2020; Krastev and Holmes, 2018; Lewis, 2020). Opponents of the regime risk imprisonment and direct state violence. Hungary is the first undemocratic country within the EU according to major think tanks (Csaky, 2020). It is however still an “externally constrained” hybrid regime (Bozóki and Hegedűs, 2018) where the EU acts as a major force of preventing complete autocratization. Poland is still a democracy (Alizada et al. 2021) although illiberal (Zakaria, 1997) because checks and balances are mainly emptied (even if still existent) and civil society and media are increasingly under governmental control. As a defining feature of third-wave autocratizing countries, elections are regularly held in all four countries where rulers maintain the facade of democracy.

Elections are important because rulers strive at maintaining popular support, and social and family-policies play an important role in this. In countries with no violent suppression, like Hungary and Poland, soft tools may be more important to maintain legitimacy. Our countries not only differ in their political regime type but also EU-membership (Poland and Hungary are members since 2004, and Turkey is an accession candidate). Social- and family policy making in these countries are influenced not only by internal political struggles but also by soft and hard pressure coming from the EU. Russia, Poland and Hungary, at the same time, have a common, state socialist welfare state trajectory with some important similarities in terms of female labour market participation and family policy arrangements (Cook, 2011). Differing political, economic, and social circumstances allow us to examine the trends of family policy reform under democratic decline in starkly different geopolitical settings.

Welfare State Effort and Family Policy Spending in Russia, Turkey, Hungary and Poland under Democratic Backsliding

Comparing the development of welfare effort in Russia, Turkey, Hungary and Poland is fraught with difficulties. Welfare effort is usually operationalised through public social expenditures that are measured differently in various databases. There is no single database that includes data for our four countries for the respective time periods. Eurostat's ESSPROS contains detailed data on the development of social spending in Turkey, Hungary and Poland, but not Russia. OECD SOCX features similar data, but does not contain the most recent years. The IMF's Government Finance Statistics (GFS) includes data for all four countries, but there are missing years, which makes a conclusive analysis difficult. Therefore, we explore ESSPROS, SOCX and GFS data in this section to obtain a fuller understanding of changes in spending in general and family policies in particular.

Figure 1. Government expenditures on social protection and health as a share of GDP



Source: IMF Government Finance Statistics. Available at: <https://data.imf.org/?sk=a0867067-d23c-4ebc-ad23-d3b015045405>

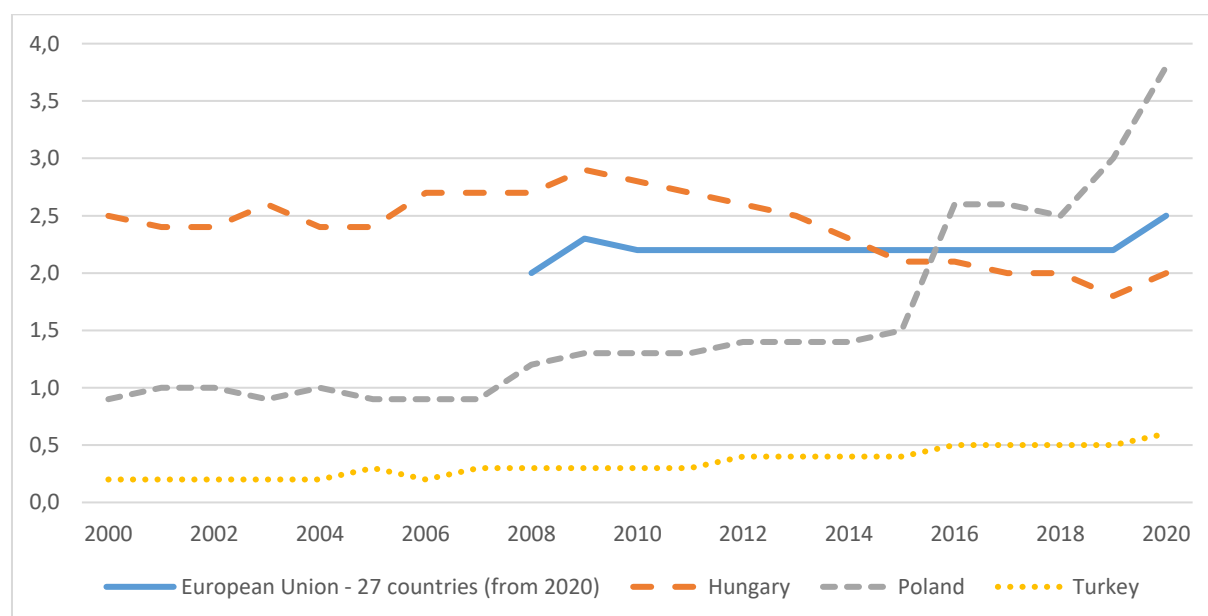
IMF's GFS differentiates between ten main functions of government² out of which we focus on health and social protection (Figure 1). While we need to keep in mind the different timeframes of our analysis in each country - depending on the start of the process of democratic backsliding, this data reveals diverging trajectories in terms of overall public social expenditures. In Russia we find a strong expansion of social spending, from below 10 percent of GDP, when Putin became president in 2000, to more than 15 percent in 2019, despite a strong increase in GDP, the denominator. Most of this expansion took

² General public services, defense, public order and safety, economic affairs, environment protection, housing and community amenities, health, recreation culture and religion, education, social protection.

place around 2009. In contrast, social spending in Hungary declined from around 22 percent of GDP in 2010, when Fidesz came to power, to around 17 percent in 2019. Social spending in Poland increased somewhat from around 20 percent in 2015 to nearly 22 percent in 2019. Finally, social spending in Turkey slightly increased from close to 15 per cent in 2008 to 16 per cent in 2019. Data is missing for the years before 2008. The trends we identify with GFS data are broadly confirmed by ESSPROS data. In addition, ESSPROS contains data for Turkey since 2000, showing that in the early years of AKP rule spending increased significantly.

ESSPROS also features detailed data on disaggregated expenditure, allowing us to zoom into family policies. Spending on family policies (Figure 2) increased most dynamically in Poland under PiS according to ESSPROS. This country was a long laggard in this welfare area until the end of the 2000s and got a boost during the period of democratic demise (see Inglot et.al. 2022). Notably, the Polish GDP increased quite dynamically also throughout the subsequent crises years. Hungary, being a long-term leader in family policy spending in the region, surprisingly cut its spending under Orbán. Increased tax-related welfare is however not included in Eurostat statistics, only in the OECD's database (see below). In Turkey the development started from a very low level of 0.2 of the GDP and increased to 0.5 per cent in the past decades. Thus, in terms of spending, Erdogan did not prioritize this welfare area. Incomplete Russian data from the IMF suggests that spending increased only slightly after 2014. All these developments can be compared to a moderate increase to family policies among the EU-27 countries. Notable, Polish spending surpassed EU-average by 1.3 per cent. Spending in terms of PPS confirms these findings and shows an even more impressive improvement in Poland, a country with a steadily growing economy and excessive nominal spending.

Figure 2. Public social expenditures on family/children as a share of GDP

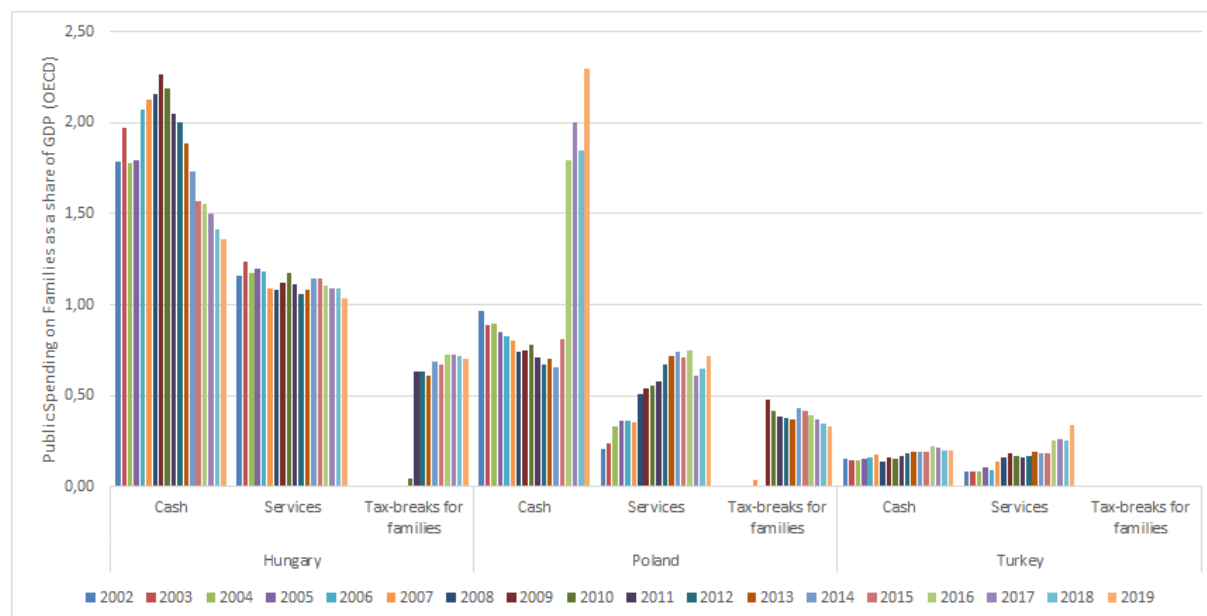


Source: Eurostat ESSPROS. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/social-protection>

OECD disaggregated family policy expenditure data only shows development until 2019 (Figure 3). Even in this short period we see the spectacular overall increase in Poland from 1.8 to 3.3 per cent between 2014 and 2019. The bulk of this boost is due to the more than doubling of spending on cash benefits, from 0.8 to 2.3. Hungary contrasts this trend with a substantial decline in spending on cash transfers for families from 2.3 to 1.4 percent of the GDP between 2009 and 2019. Meanwhile tax expenditures in this

field increased from zero to 0.7 per cent (contrasted to a stagnating 0.3 per cent in Poland). This signifies a rapid fiscalization of family policies where declining spending on direct transfers (overwhelmingly on universal family allowance) was replaced by tax credits. Meanwhile, in Turkey the overall spending doubled from a meagre 0.2 to 0.5 per cent, and this increase was due to an increase in spending for services (from 0.1 to 0.3 per cent), although on a comparatively very low level, differentiating this country from the European trends.

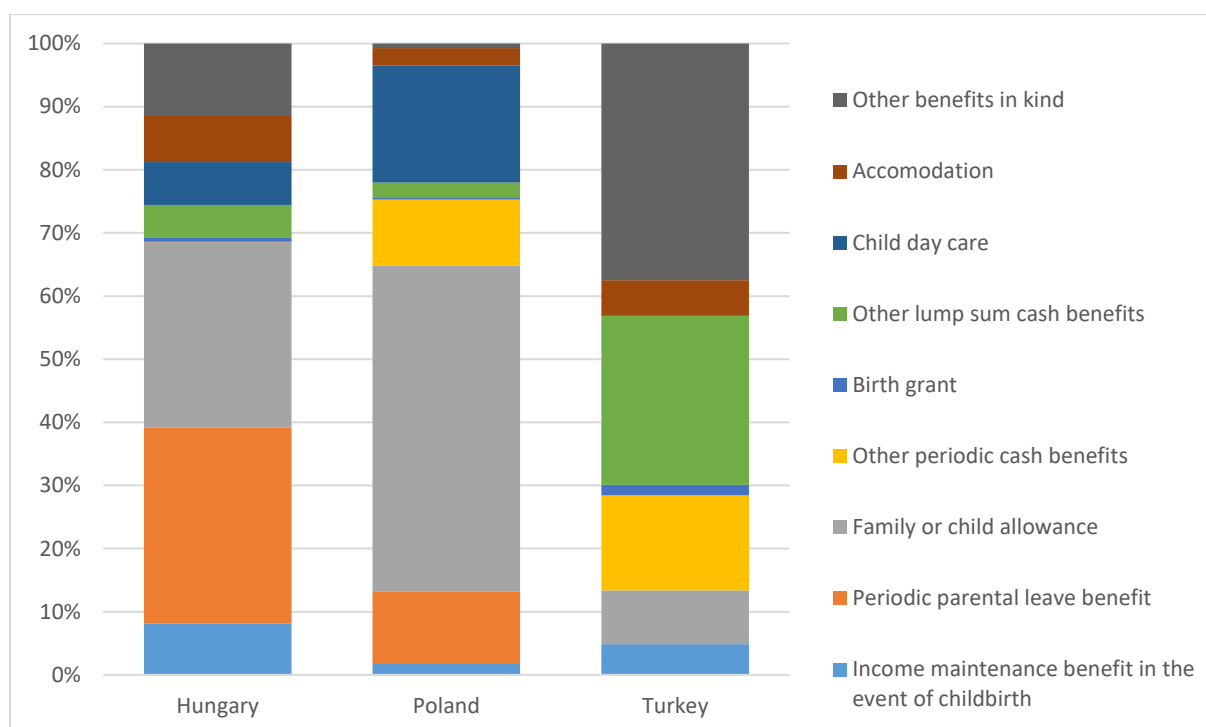
Figure 3. Public social expenditures on family benefits as a share of GDP



Source: OECD Family Database

Disaggregated family policy spending data from Eurostat's ESSPROS database provides further insights into differences between family policy in Poland, Hungary and Turkey. Whereas nearly all spending in Turkey is means-tested, i.e. targeted to the poor, only around 5 percent is means-tested in Poland and Hungary. Comparing spending by program type however reveals differences between Poland and Hungary (see Figure 5). Poland heavily focusses on family or child allowances which constitute half of all family policy spending. In Hungary, family allowance spending is on a similar level as the periodic parental leave benefit: together both account for 60 percent of spending. The EU average would be in-between the two, with family/child allowance being the number one spending item, but accounting for less than half of all family policy spending. In contrast, Turkey's spending patterns are difficult to interpret as most spending (nearly 80 per cent) is in residual categories (other). This suggests that Turkey's family policies are difficult to categorise within ESSPROS' analytic classification.

Figure 5. Share of program category in all family policy spending, 2020.



Source: Eurostat

In a more dynamic perspective, and comparing spending patterns in time and within countries, we observe the quite drastically changing emphasis of various policy tools within each of the countries. These changes reveal clearly the shifting of target populations of family policies in each country.

In Hungary, the main trend is the steady decline of family allowance spending, while in Poland we see an opposite trend: the drastic increase of family or child allowance spending. In both countries developments in other programme categories are secondary. In Poland the rise of family allowance also brings an increasing share of cash benefits (vs in kind and services) and a rise of periodic cash benefits as opposed to lump sum, one-time benefits. And while earlier in history means testing played a central role in Polish family policies (Ingłot et al. 2022), we see a decline in the weight of this benefit type now. In Turkey, changes are hard to interpret due the importance of residual categories. The share of means-tested benefits is extremely high, and there is no shift between cash and in-kind benefits. Within cash benefits however, the share of lump-sum benefits (vs periodic cash transfers) increased, which may be read as a sign of de-institutionalization in this policy field.

To sum up, our four countries under democratic decline show a mixed pattern in terms of the development of welfare and family spending. Whereas in some countries, such as Poland, we see increasing spending, in others, such as Hungary, we observe a decline. Zooming in on family policies we find that this divergence applies also here. Notably, the countries diverge not just in the overall amount devoted to family policies, and in the trend towards higher or lower spending, but also in terms of what type of benefits the countries focus on: Fiscalization of family policies in Hungary, universalization in Poland, and a continued emphasis on relatively cheap means tested benefits in Turkey.

Family Policy Reforms under Democratic Backsliding

Russia

Russia under Putin pioneered in publicly committing to protect and support families and going beyond conventional family policy measures. We could observe the expansion of earlier family policy benefits and the adoption of new programs since the mid-2000s. During the late-2010s family policies increasingly targeted the poorer social strata. By the end of the decade women became an explicit target group of social policies.

Since 2007 a package of incentives has been developed to counter declining fertility, which is assumed to be grounded in economic uncertainties that prevent women from having more children. As Inglot et al. (2022) find in relation with other post-communist countries, the adoption of family policy “packages” comprising various policy tools, shows states’ explicit commitment to promote families and child bearing. Such packages are nearly always driven by demographic concerns and intend to increase fertility rates. As the central program of the 2007 package, the “Maternity Capital” (MC) was introduced that became Russia’s flagship family policy program (Cook et al. 2022). MC offered a significant one-time financial support on the occasion of birth (or adoption) of a second or any subsequent child. While initially announced for a 10 year period, it regularly got prolonged until 2026 (Alontseva et al., 2021). The discourse on MC delineated families with married parents and three or four children as the socially desirable family type (Chernova, 2012). At the same time, eligibility criteria are fully focused on mothers and requirement of Russian citizenship of the mother and children. Fathers (as single parents) are eligible only in the absence of the mother as the key beneficiary. While single mothers as a subgroup of beneficiaries is not specified, they are formally not excluded. These rules suggest that while discursively the government promotes the traditional family, it does not restrict access to heterosexual, married couples.

The support can be utilized for 1) mothers’ pensions, 2) children’s education or (3) for house purchase, since 2015 (4) purchase of goods and services for adaptation and integration of children with disability or since 2018 (5) reception of monthly benefit after the birth of the second child (Alontseva et al., 2021). The support amount increased from 250 thousand RUB (appr. 7100 EUR) in 2007 to 453 thousand RUB in 2017 (appr. 6885 EUR) (Rivkin-Fish, 2010; Rostovskaya et al., 2019). In response to the financial crisis, for a limited period, families were allowed to use a small proportion for immediate needs (Elizarov and Levin, 2015). By 2012 only one-third of eligible families used MC, mostly to improve their housing conditions (Borozdina et al., 2016). As of 2010 regions were encouraged to introduce regional MC programmes, which mostly targeted families with three or more children (Sorvachev and Yakovlev, 2019). However, the adoption, implementation as well as the amount of these regional programmes greatly varied and depended on the region’s financial resources (Sorvachev and Yakovlev, 2019). The initial bureaucratic barriers causing differences in the utilizations of MC by families - resulting in the dominance of middle class families as key recipients - have been gradually removed (Cook et al. 2022). Data from 2017 shows that MC accounted for no less than two-third of Russia’s overall spending on family benefits (0.61 percent of the overall 0.93). This reveals the importance of this flagship program (Yemtsov et al., 2019).

As part of the 2007 family policy package the amount of childcare allowance increased with special attention to minimum payment rates (Kingsbury 2019). A progressive subsidy of day-care costs, depending on the number of children in the family, now supported access to child care services (Elizarov

and Levin, 2015). Furthermore, since 2018 MC can be utilised for pre-school education payments right after receiving the entitlement (without the three year waiting period) (Alontseva et al 2021).

In his third presidential term (2012-2018), Putin (by decree) granted means-tested benefits for every third and subsequent child (up to the age of 3 three years) for families in need. The level of the benefit was set at the regional minimum subsistence level (Bluhm and Brand, 2018). The implementation of the policies was at the federal level and by 2017, 60 out of 85 of them introduced it (Bluhm and Brand, 2018). These changes already signalled the shift of family policies towards low-income groups. In the run up to the 2018 presidential elections, Putin turned his focus to poor families. In this campaign, he explicitly and firmly addressed women. This is a very similar discursive turn to Orbán's at the 2018 elections in Hungary . But in contrast to Orbán, Putin turned his attention to low-income families and announced a set of pro-family measures for them. The new programs included a monthly benefit for families under 150% of the subsistence level until the first child reaches 18 months. Similar to the Hungarian CSOK program families with two or more children now could access mortgages on preferential terms (Bluhm and Brand, 2018; Rostovskaya et al., 2019). Furthermore, as of 2018, low-income families can access MC in the form of monthly benefits from the birth of their second child (Pension Fund of RF), which shows that the government became attentive to the needs of socially more vulnerable families - corresponding with and favouring Putin's and United Russia's rural electoral base (White, 2016).

The centrality of pro-natalist policy aims and public recognition and reward of childrearing influenced changes in other policy areas as well. This is evidenced in the pension system, targeted social assistance for low-income families, and expanding maternity healthcare services (Shuvalova et al., 2015). In 2015, the government introduced a new pension formula that increased the weight of child rearing, in line with the pronatalist, expansionary family policy measures. Taking into consideration years of care-work in the pension formula is not evident in many liberal democracies, especially not those that heavily rely on private pension schemes. As we will see, Poland and Hungary too, positively discriminated women in the pension scheme under their right-wing autocratizing governments. In Russia, the 2018 pension reform aiming at increasing the pension age stirred widespread demonstrations. This reform was critical as it affected not a less resourceful minority group but Putin's core electorate (Paneyakh, 2018). Protests however achieved concessions only in the case of women's retirement age (60 instead of the planned 63 years) which again illustrates the central importance of women to the Russian government, as well as the complementarity between the two priority areas of pension and family policies.

The issue of poverty became a strategic goal of the Putin-regime in the late 2010s. The federal government committed itself to halve poverty by 2024 and allocated more resources for means-tested benefits, expanding support for low-income families with children, subsidies for maternal employment, increasing access to day-care services, advancing self-employment and improving accuracy of targeting (Yemtsov et al., 2019). These labour market and social assistance measures again are complementary to the core family policies. The ideal of traditional families with 3+ children are discursively strongly present which also implies the traditional caring role of women (Rostovskaya et al., 2019). We can observe, however, that the above described policy changes came with an increase of maternal employment from 71 to 75 percent (OECD) between 2009 and 2019 which means that the Russian government, however traditionalist in its rhetoric, remained committed to the full-time employment of mothers.

A shift towards women in policies and efforts to influence female popular support has clearly manifested since 2007, which was marked also by increasing representation of women in politics (Johnson 2016). While women started to take high-ranking positions (e.g. head of Central Bank of Russia), female politicians' substantive influence tends to be limited (Johnson 2016, Cook and Nechemias, 2009). Increasing the representation of women in politics served to strengthen popular support without the aim of promoting gender equality. On the contrary, emphasis on the traditional gender roles and “protection of motherhood” became more articulated as middle class support for Putin lessened after the financial crisis (Sperling 2015). Electoral campaigns explicitly address women (Goncharenko, 2018) and election results show women’s support for Putin (Colton and Hale, 2009).

Just like in Turkey and Hungary, the government formed alliances with civil society organizations and government-promoted non-governmental organizations that received high levels of funding and provided legitimacy to the governmental discourse and programmes (Höjdestrand 2017; Doğangün, 2020; Johnson et al., 2021). From the late-2000s anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda featured high on the agenda, which materialized in a related act in 2013, forbidding the presentation of “homosexual propaganda”. This legislation served as a blueprint for the similar Hungarian act in the early-2020s.

Turkey

As in Russia, Hungary and Poland, family policy has been a key policy field throughout the AKP era. However, compared to the other three regimes, the AKP’s family policy has been more focused on maintaining a discourse of demographic crisis and ‘sacred familialism’ (Akkan, 2018) than on establishing a comprehensive set of substantial policy measures. AKP’s ‘discursive governance’ (Korkut and Eslen-Ziya, 2016: 555), especially after the more moderate first term, has been more radical than that of its peers. Although the three children family is central, Erdoğan sometimes called on couples to have even five children. His natalist discourse not just involves demonizing abortion, similar to Kaczynski in Poland, but also any form of birth control and even caesarean sections (Erten, 2015). Just like in the other cases, LGBTQ+ are vilified, but so is extramarital cohabitation in general. In the spread of this discourse, government organized non-governmental organizations (GONGO) are ‘important conduits’ (Diner, 2018). This strong and divisive discourse has, however, not been accompanied by a transformation of family policy (Korkut and Eslen-Ziya, 2016). To be true, AKP did launch family policy reforms, often with much fanfare. Yet, these initiatives remained mostly piecemeal and did not entail expenditures commensurate to the accompanying government rhetoric.

At first glance, the list of family policy initiatives launched by the AKP governments over the course of two decades looks impressive. Immediately after coming to power, the AKP increased the flat rate monthly child allowance for civil servants. In 2004, it rolled out a nationwide conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme, devised and funded by the World Bank. This programme provides monthly cash benefits for more than a million poor families with the amount depending on the number, gender, age and educational status of children. Overall, however, Turkey does not yet have a nation-wide family or child allowance scheme, the existence of which often marks the modernization of family policies in Europe (Gauthier 1998; Inglot et al., 2022). Instead, focus has long been on civil servants for whom the government substantially increased the value of the flat rate birth grants in 2005.

In 2007, the government started a new programme that benefitted mainly women in vulnerable situations: a cash-for-care scheme that provided monthly payments to caregivers of severely disabled people. Very much alike the “carefare” regime of Hungary (Fodor, 2022), this program was designed in

a familialistic manner through tying eligibility to familial relations between the carer and cared person. Most of the around half million beneficiaries are presumably women from poor households.

In 2008, AKP reformed the income tax legislation to create tax credits for children. Although the value of these tax credits was quite low, Turkey, similar to the other three countries, moved slightly towards the fiscalization of family policies (Inglot et al., 2022; Morel et al., 2018).

In 2008 (and again in 2014) opportunities for early retirement for mothers were increased. However, this did not come with any financial benefits, as mothers had to pay extra contributions in order to become eligible for early retirement. Furthermore, it contrasted with the IMF and EU-promoted increase in and equalisation of retirement ages for women (from 58 to 65) and men (from 60 to 65) in 2008. This move is in contrast to Hungary and Poland, where the equalisation of retirement ages was carried out to similar pressures during the EU-accession process but were (partly) reversed under PIS and Fidesz, fitting their familialist “carefare” agendas.

In line with the promotion of families with three or more children, the government extended the child allowance for civil servants in 2011. While previously benefits were only paid for the first two children, the reform ensured that larger families would receive benefits for all children.

As a symbolic gesture, but also marking the institutionalization of family policy in Turkey, days before the 2011 general elections the government created a Ministry for Family and Social Policies. This Ministry was merged with the bigger Ministry for Labour and Social Security to become the Ministry for Family, Labour and Social Services in 2018. However, in 2021 this super-Ministry was divided again into two separate parts. The Ministry for Family has always been headed by a woman. Considering that virtually all other ministers of AKP governments were men, this can be read as symbolizing a traditional division of labour, with women (only) in charge of the family. This shows striking similarity with the Hungarian case where Orbán appointed women with (at least) three children to important positions in the related ministry, including Katalin Novák, the future President herself.

In 2015, as part of its election campaign the government announced a “Program to Protect the Family and the Dynamic Population Structure”, a set of reforms resembling “family policy packages” in Hungary, more recently Poland (Inglot et al., 2022) and also Russia (see previous section). Most importantly, the birth grant, a flat rate one-time payment provided for mothers after birth, was made universal, replacing the previous benefit that was only available to civil servants. Tax credits for children were raised, and a new marriage benefit was adopted, which is a similar construction to Fidesz’ program for newlywed couples. In both cases eligibility is linked to contributions. But in Turkey, the program remained a non-starter.

All these reforms show that AKP did initiate expansionary reforms in family policy. However, one should be careful to not misread them as constituting a comprehensive expansion of family policy. In practice, most of the reforms did not live up to their promise. The real value of benefits tended to decline instead and, in some cases, programmes were even scrapped.

Benefit amounts in the CCT scheme, for instance, that provides payments to millions of poor families, were rarely updated to keep track with inflation. Especially after the World Bank funding for the programme ended, the benefit value significantly decreased. Even using official data, which is widely assumed to downplay inflation, we calculate that the real value of benefits has declined by about two-thirds since the beginning of the programme.

Similarly, the universalization of birth grants in 2015 was poised to be an ambitious measure. Yet, the amount of this benefit was never too impressive to begin with and has been left untouched ever since. When AKP created it in 2015, the programme replaced the birth grant scheme for civil servants. But as opposed to that one, the new, universal scheme did not keep up with inflation. This meant that the real value of the benefit has declined by 80 per cent.

Finally, tax credits for children that had been launched in 2008 did not become a substitute for an encompassing child allowance. Instead, AKP recently abolished these tax credits. This shows that such initiatives are still contingent on opportune moments, and tend to be forgotten later.

One important socio-economic issue in Turkey is the very low labour market participation of women. After a decline in the early years of AKP (reaching 25 percent in 2005 according to OECD), the government implemented some measures to reverse the decline. It started active labour market policies that provide mostly temporary and insecure jobs and primarily target women. In 2016, AKP also created a new part-time work benefit for women returning to work after giving birth. However, the benefit amount remained low and only very few mothers participated in the program (Öktem, 2020). Nevertheless, all these measures helped to improve female (and maternal) employment rates. Yet, it still lags far behind the three post-socialist countries and any other European country.

Overall, AKP's family policy did not coalesce into a comprehensive institutionalization of family policy, and thus lagged behind the governmental discourse of 'sacred familialism' (Akkan, 2018). This may be contrasted to what happened in the sphere of health care and pensions where a universalization and unification of the systems finally embraced nearly all Turks under one institutional setting (see Öktem and Szikra 2022). Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that some segments of the population - primarily lower income families with many children, a vital part of the initial core base of AKP support - did benefit from the reforms.

Overall, family policy constitutes an important policy area for the AKP and programmes often target women. On the political level, this approach seems to be paying off as AKP enjoys higher female than male support. Among women the main group of supporters are housewives (Konda 2018). Given the low female labour force participation rate in Turkey, housewives are a very large constituency. Considering how close the outcomes of some elections have been, one might argue that housewives' electoral support was crucial to keep AKP and Erdoğan in power.

Hungary

Similar to Poland and Russia, family policy has been Fidesz' flagship area of social policy. The Orbán-cabinets initiated more reforms in this field than in any other social policy area (Öktem and Szikra, 2022). What is more, nearly all reforms meant extensions of earlier policies or the adoption of brand new, "flagship" programs on top of the old ones. How does this development make sense in the light of the decline in family policy spending, outlined in the previous section? The answer lies in Fidesz's divisive social policy that promotes those with stable labour market attachment (the "working" insiders), and neglects people who are marginalized "outsiders". Orbán's aim to build a "work-based society" (*munka alapú társadalom*) is a strong ideological underpinning of not only labour market but all other social policy fields, including family policies (Öktem and Szikra, 2022; Szikra, 2018, 2019). Thus the decline in spending was due to the "starving" of the most important universal family policy benefits, notable family allowance formerly available to all families, and the universal parental leave scheme, available to all

mothers without formal employment records. Meanwhile payments closely linked to employment and earnings were upgraded and extended. The family allowance had been substantially increased by the previous Socialist government in the mid-2000s. Fidesz did not directly cut the benefit amount but rather, it did not adjust it to inflation or with the increase of wages. Meanwhile the government also restricted access for the most vulnerable (often Roma) families when it linked eligibility criteria to behavioural conditions. Parents whose children missed 50 or more classes a year from school or kindergarten, did not receive the benefit since 2012. Furthermore, since 2013, family allowance has also been withdrawn from unemployed parents who do not accept public works.³ These subtle cuts meant a sharp drop of over 30 percent of the real value of family allowance and a decrease of appr. five percent in the number of eligible families. The other major universal benefit, the popular 3-year-long parental leave GYES (available for non-working mothers and to working mothers after earnings-related parental leave period exceeds) also lost one-third of its real value due to no indexation since 2009. Targeted social assistance benefits for poor families have completely ceased meanwhile.

Overall, all extensions benefitted middle and upper classes with stable employment. The most notable example of the change of target groups of family policies is the boost of family-related tax credits promoting especially families with high income and three or more children, with no upper ceiling (Inglot et al., 2012). As the earlier tax-benefits for low income earners were ceased and the zero tax rate for minimum wage earners stopped, these changes meant a direct redistribution from poor to rich families (Scheiring, 2020; Szikra, 2018). New grants and loans for families were announced with great fanfare in 2015 (family-housing program called CSOK) and in 2018 (loan for newlywed couples, grant for large families to purchase cars, and the complete exemption of mothers with four or more children from personal income tax). Fidesz excluded unemployed parents (including those on public works) from new loans and grants. The aim of family policies thus changed vastly: it now served the boost of fertility rates of middle- and upper-class families. Preventing child poverty, decreasing inequalities between families, as well as gender equality completely vanished from the agenda (Szikra, 2014, 2019).

Notwithstanding the starving and eliminating of cash-transfers to non-employed parents, the Orbán-cabinets championed some of the services for children. Nursery/crèche coverage for under three-year-olds was gradually increased from a persistent 10 percent throughout the post-communist years (including when the left was in power) to 17 per cent by 2019. A legislation in 2016 ensures the establishment of childcare services even in the smallest settlements. Kindergarten attendance was made compulsory from age three (instead of the earlier five), and free meals are provided from the youngest age throughout the primary school system to all poor families, families with three or more kids, and children with disabilities.

In 2018, when Fidesz won the third election in a row, Orbán announced the so-called demographic governance, placing fertility rates and family policies at the center of the governmental agenda. In this announcement the prime minister talked about a “new contract” he wishes to make with Hungarian women because, as he said, they are the ones making decisions about child bearing (Medvegy, 2018). This announcement is in line with Fidesz’s traditionalist ideology that views the issues of the family and care as women’s task where men are nearly invisible. The postponement of the implementation of the EU’s reconciliation directive (Directive (EU) 2019/1158) that aims at a more equal share of care work

³ On public works programs in Hungary see Vidra (2018); Szombati (2020); Molnár (2020).

between women and men, fits this line. Despite external pressure and the increasing share of mothers on the labour market, paid paternity leave has not been extended from the initial five days, set in 2002.

Governmental discourse about the traditional family notwithstanding, female and maternal employment rates have been on a significant rise under Fidesz. Besides the upheaval of the economy since 2014, various policies helped motherly employment, including subsidies to social security payments for employers, boosted parental benefits linked to stable work-record, tax credits and loans, as well as increased availability of child care services. And while the Orbán-government aimed at increasing employment of young mothers, it offered early retirement opportunities to elderly women since 2013. The goal was, just like in Russia and Poland, to promote the care-role of grandmothers in a traditionalist way, but at the same time, to allow young couples to have children *and* work at the same time. The result is visible in the maternal employment rate. According to OECD data, maternal employment increased from 52 percent in 2010 to 63 percent in 2019.

Women could rarely occupy the highest political position in the Orbán-administration. This situation changed at the end of the decade with Katalin Novák becoming a Minister of Family and Youth in 2019 (in line with the agenda of “demographic governance”), and somewhat later Judit Varga appointed to the position of Minister of Justice. The recent elevation of Novák to become the first female president of Hungary shows that Fidesz realized the symbolic importance of including young female politicians into leading positions. It is notable that Orbán prefers to appoint mothers with several children to positions above the vice-secretary of state – a criteria that is not present in the case of men.

Poland

Family policy has been a key policy area of PiS. The centerpiece of PiS’ welfare reforms has been the Family 500+ programme, which is a universal child benefit (amounting to 500 PLN/110 EUR per month) for the second and subsequent children. The universalistic approach is a pathbreaking feature among the four countries analysed and also within the history of the Polish welfare state, where family allowance and the childcare leave⁴ have been means-tested and linked to work-record (Inglot et al., 2022; Szikra and Szelewa, 2009). Also, the timeframe offering monthly benefits up to the children’s age of 18 is generous. Governmental discourse more generally, and around the new program reinforced the “ideal” Polish family, which builds on the traditional family model. Still, eligibility criteria were set so that they did not actually impose any implicit or explicit stigma or limitations on how the benefit can be used and who could claim it in terms of e.g. marital status. At the time of its introduction in 2016, low-income families (income/person below 800 PLN/180 EUR) were eligible to receive this benefit also for their first child (Szelewa, 2017). In the run-up to the 2019 parliamentary election this was extended to all families. The timing of this extension was striking: eligibility for additional benefits started in July, but benefit payments (lump sum for three months) were made in October right before the parliamentary election (Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa, 2021).

While the principal aim to boost fertility has not been fully achieved, the flagship programme had significant poverty-reduction effects and continues to enjoy high public support. In families most at risk of poverty, the Family 500+ constitutes roughly 20% of the monthly household income. The rate of people in extreme poverty significantly reduced from 16.7% in 2015 to 6.8% in 2019 (Kazmierczak-Kaluzna and Pokrzynska, 2021). While many scholars draw attention to the programme’s negative impact on female employment (Magda et al., 2018; Myck and Trzciński, 2019), data shows no striking

⁴ 36 months to be used until the child is 6 years old.

negative effects (Karwacki and Szlendak 2020). Overall, employment rates slightly increased between 2015 and 2019, with a bit of a drop for smallest children, and slight increase in the case of women with children above 6 years of age (OECD Family Database). Reduced incentives to (re)-enter the labour market have only been notable in the case of low-skilled women (Magda et al., 2018; Vandeninden and Gorau-Tanska, 2017). For them, the amount of the benefit was a generous replacement of their low incomes. At the same time, it is also important to note that reception of Family 500+ directly by women also contributed to having a more stable income and more independence to exit abusive relationships (Inglot et al., 2022). In line with the increased focus on supporting low-income families, a new maternity benefit was adopted for mothers without sufficient employment records (1000 PLN per month), which is also unprecedented in the Polish welfare state (Suwada, 2019).

Besides the outstanding increase in cash transfers, more moderate, but still important developments were made in the field of child care services as well under PiS. Complementing cash benefits, PiS further developed the “Maluch” (Toddler) programme to encourage extension of public and private childcare services (Inglot et al., 2022; Szelewa and Polakowski, 2020). Financial support as part of the Maluch+ programme was guaranteed to municipalities without childcare facilities for children under 3 years and to those in regions with high unemployment. As further social investment measures, municipalities were required to guarantee places to 4-years old in 2016, which was extended to 3-years old in 2017. Those municipalities which cannot guarantee placement in a public childcare facility, need to cover the difference in the costs of public and private childcare services (Suwada, 2019). By 2019, 22.5% of children up to the age of three were enrolled in childcare compared to 12.4% enrolled in nurseries in 2014 (Inglot et al. 2022).

Furthermore, PiS made efforts to change the wider institutional context to encourage childrearing: Positively, time devoted to childrearing was recognised in retirement policy; negatively, women’s reproduction rights and abortion were vilified and deserving and undeserving women were discursively differentiated. Like in the other countries analysed, anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ discourse heightened in Poland (Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa, 2021), which were clearly manifested in banning gender studies and sex education in school, ceasing the recognition of trans people or introducing gender-free zones (Gwiazda, 2021).

In contrast to EU-induced trends, in 2017 PiS, similar to the Hungarian changes in 2013, re-introduced the gender-differentiated retirement age – 60 years for women and 65 years for men. The reversal to the pre-2012 retirement age followed popular preferences and was a clear demonstration to demarcate the PiS government from the previous cabinet, depicting it as prioritising people’ interests over fiscal considerations. Furthermore, and again similarly to Hungary and Russia, this change was linked to the aim of “releasing women’s caring capital” (Ambroziak, 2017; Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa, 2021). It effectively reinforced the traditional gender role of women, while also underlining the deservingness of caretakers. A new parental supplementary benefit called Mama 4+ was introduced targeting women (or single fathers) at retirement age who raised four or more children and did not meet the minimum employment requirement to receive the lowest level of retirement pensions. This non-contributory benefit intends to compensate for the loss of employment due to childrearing and tops up their access to benefits to the level of minimum retirement pensions. This benefit exemplifies the efforts of the government to recognize unpaid care work, in a similar vein as what Fodor (2022) described as an anti-liberal “carefare” regime in Hungary. While overall we can clearly observe a step back in terms of women’s rights and gender equality per se, there are multiple new supportive measures that directly or indirectly improve the socio-economic status of families and women. The most ambitious Family 500+

benefit has become a clear political tool to win support and the data show that a higher proportion of women support the leading government than men (Grzebalska and Kováts, 2018).

Conclusions

With this paper we explored what lies behind the similar traditionalist, and increasingly women- and family-focused discourses of four autocratizing regimes. We asked the question: What kind of family policies do these regimes actually pursue? By analysing related policy change, we focused on the target groups of family policies. We asked: Who are the main beneficiaries of family policies under autocratizing context? How does this change over time? With answering these questions we aimed to contribute to the understanding of the role social policies play in popularizing third wave autocracies. We argue that welfare reforms in general, and family- and women-related social policies in particular have been an important part of the toolbox of third-wave autocratizers. We selected four cases, Russia, Turkey, Poland and Hungary, countries that similarly experienced a period of democratic transition during the 1990s- early 2000s, which was followed by a U-turn when their democratic institutions were rapidly dismantled. We argue that during the process of autocratization governments have increasingly focused on families and women both in terms of discourse and in terms of policy reforms.

By focusing on women and families, autocratizers achieve two aims. On the one hand, they strengthen the normative foundations of their political regimes. Discourse over the heterosexual married family and increasing fertility rates perfectly fit their nativist ideology. By designing policies targeting mothers and female carers they send the message that they care about the future and the growth of the nation. On the other hand, however, there is also a pragmatic consideration: To increase their electoral bases especially in times of crises. Through policies and discourses targeting women, autocratizers successfully attracted female constituencies: The popularity of the ruling party increased among women, and is outweighing that among men in all the four countries under observation.

We identified a twofold strategy in family policy expansion. Autocratizers extended already existing programs on the one hand, and issued flagship programs that were new and innovative solutions on the other. This finding especially applies to the three post-communist states, Russia, Poland and Hungary. In Turkey promises of the new programs were not followed by substantial welfare effort and implementation. The new, flagship programs in Russia and Hungary can be considered innovative elements of “social policy by other means” (Seelkopf and Starke, 2019) as they consist of larger grants, “capitals” (MC in Russia; grants to buy cars or build houses in Hungary) or loans, the provision of which often involve banks. These three countries also featured what we call a comprehensive family policy approach which means that policies stretched beyond the conventional scope of family policies, typically to pensions and social assistance programs. Pension reforms positively discriminated women regarding retirement age. Our findings confirm those made by Fodor (2022) regarding the anti-liberal state of Hungary: Women have been granted a privileged position not based on gender equality but based on their assumed role as caregivers.

Illiberal regimes have thus expanded family policies, although, as data on expenditure revealed, to varying degrees. With the exception of Turkey, expansion typically involved new, path-breaking programs with considerable funding attached, allowing governments to go beyond targeted and conditional measures. These programs, however, embody different ideological leanings beyond traditionalism; cater to different social groups; and thus, reflect varying electoral bases. In Poland PiS aimed at ensuring universal access to benefits to all families, while also strengthening old programs,

including parental leaves. In Hungary Fidesz focused on middle- and upper-class families, in line with its workfare ideology, while also pleasing its initial electoral base. In Russia we can observe an expansion with a firm shift towards low-income families and women. In Turkey, we find a shift of focus towards low-income families.

Overall, we found that the four governments were torn between their firm traditionalist ideology, and economic necessities and pressures to increase the labour market participation of women. Thus while they emphasised and promoted the care-role of mothers, they also encouraged labour market participation of women. We observed an increase of maternal employment that was most striking in Russia but also notable in Turkey and Hungary. And while rulers without exception emphasised the importance of marriage and the three-child family model, most benefits were in fact granted also to single mothers. This suggests a pragmatic self-restraint of autocratizers in translating their normative prescriptions into restrictions in the distributive profile of family policies.

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