

Family Policies in Eastern Europe: A Focus on Parental Leave

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Abstract Family policy is an issue of concern for many Governments. Family policies are organized around the four main functions of the family: marriage, childrearing, financial support and family care. Eastern Europe is an area with significant socio-economic and political changes in the last decades that determined revisions of social policies. The goal of this article is to review the most relevant family policies in this region. Using feminist and family systems theoretical perspectives the paper also provides an in-depth examination of childcare policies with a focus on parental leave. Maternity, paternity and parental leave and child care services in the region are explored. Recommendations for family policy development, implementation and evaluation in Eastern Europe are provided.

Keywords Family policy · Eastern Europe · Families · Children · Parental leave

Introduction

An explicit family policy addresses the problems that families experience in society and has as its goal the advancement of family well-being (Bogenschneider 2006). It is constituted of a series of separate but interrelated policy choices that address issues such as family care, poverty, domestic violence, and family planning. As such, family policy assumes a diversity and multiplicity of policies rather than a single monolithic, comprehensive

legislative act. A system of explicit and institutionalized family policy implies legal recognition of the family as a social institution playing a major part in the maintenance of social cohesion (Zimmerman 2001). Family policy can be defined as government activities that are designed to support families and their well-being. Family policy focuses on the family as a social entity, not as individual members, deliberately targeting the concerns of the family group in terms of educational, economic and social aspects.

The post-communist transition in Eastern Europe has been associated with massive sociopolitical and economic changes, which in turn have shaped the social policies impacting families. The fall of the totalitarian political systems in the area provided autonomy and determined a widening variation in the economic and social reforms in the region (Robila 2004). As such, currently there are significant differences among the economic development of the different countries, with the Gross Domestic Product per capita varying between \$2,300 in Moldova, \$6,300 in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and \$6,400 in Ukraine to \$27,000 in Slovenia, \$25,100 in Czech Republic and \$21,000 in Slovakia (U.S. GDP per capita: \$45,800) (See Table 1; CIA 2010). The unemployment grew significantly in the region while the market economies emerged. Some of the highest unemployment rates have been experienced by Bosnia/Herzegovina (40%), Macedonia (32.3%) and Latvia (17.1%) (CIA 2010). These economic and social changes had complex implications at the family level, such as, the reduction of fertility rate or increase in international migration across the area (Robila 2009b, 2010). Total fertility rate (children born/woman) is low at about 1.24 in Lithuania, 1.25 in Belarus and Czech Republic, or 1.26 in Bosnia/Herzegovina and just a little higher at 1.58 in Macedonia and 1.43 in Croatia and Estonia (See Table 1; CIA 2010). International migration is significant, with for

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Table 1 Socio-economic and demographic context

Country	Gross domestic product per capita (US \$)	Unemployment rate (%)	Total fertility rate
Belarus	11,600	1	1.25
Bosnia/Herzegovina	6,300	40	1.26
Bulgaria	12,600	9.1	1.41
Croatia	17,600	16.1	1.43
Czech Republic	25,100	8.1	1.25
Estonia	18,700	13.8	1.43
Hungary	18,600	10.8	1.36
Latvia	14,500	17.1	1.31
Lithuania	15,400	13.7	1.24
Macedonia	9,000	32.2	1.58
Moldova	2,300	3.1	1.28
Poland	17,900	8.9	1.29
Romania	11,500	7.8	1.4
Russia	15,100	8.4	1.41
Serbia	10,400	16.6	1.39
Slovenia	27,900	9.2	1.29
Slovakia	21,200	11.4	1.36
Ukraine	6,400	8.8	1.27

Source: Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (2010)

example, about 17% of Moldova's population having left the country in search of work (Lozinski 2006), and about 30% children living without one or both parents (Sarbu 2007). Similarly, in Romania, about 20% of the children between 10 and 15 years old have one or both parents working abroad (Toth et al. 2007).

Developing and revising family policies to address these socio-economic transformations need to be at the forefront of the policy making agenda. The goal of this article is to examine family policies in Eastern Europe, focusing on parental leave and using feminist and family systems theoretical perspectives. The importance of using these theories in family policy development is delineated throughout the article. The paper has several sections, the next one including a review of family policies organized around the family functions as well as of the socio-economic and political factors impacting them. The following section is on child care policies and provides an in-depth analysis of parental, maternity and paternity leave in the region. The last section of the article includes conclusions and recommendations for family policies development, implementation and evaluation.

Theoretical Perspective

The article uses family systems and feminist theoretical perspectives to examine family policies in Eastern Europe

since they offer the conceptual tools to assess the implications of family policies for families. Family systems theory suggests that individuals cannot be understood in isolation from one another—families are systems of interconnected and interdependent individuals, none of whom can be understood in isolation from the system (Zimmerman 2001). Hill's family systems theory (1971) assumes that the family, as other systems, is characterized by four properties: (1) The task it performs to meet the need of its members and the environment; (2) the interdependence of its component parts (e.g., family roles, positions); (3) the boundaries and boundaries maintenance that differentiate it from other systems and from the environment; (4) the equilibrium and adaptive capabilities for its viability. From a family systems perspective, family well-being could be assessed in terms of the effectiveness with which "policy solutions facilitate the performance of family tasks and functions at different life stages" (Zimmerman 2001, p. 301). The implications of policies for families can also be analyzed in relation to the positions and the roles that make up the family structure (e.g., parent role) and the support the policies provide for effective role performance. In terms of family boundaries, the implications of family policies and programs are assessed regarding their provisions for protecting family boundaries and the rights and safety of individual members at the same time. Family equilibrium and adaptation are a base for family wellbeing, and family policies can be assessed in terms of the extent to which they contribute to this equilibrium and adaptation, or not (Zimmerman 2001).

Feminist theory focuses on the hierarchical nature of male–female relationships and the subordinate position of women in families and larger society, bringing up the awareness of the conflict between the interests of women as autonomous individuals and the interests of families as collectivities (Zimmerman 2001). The family is the central organizing concept of the family systems framework, while gender is the central organizing concept of feminist theory (Osmond and Thorne 1993). Feminist theory considers gender as a social structure and a fundamental basis for social inequality and stratification, gender relations being viewed as power relations, with women being devalued and subordinated to men when, on the other hand, women are not passive victims but active actors in the society and as such gender equality should be promoted (Osmond and Thorne 1993). Feminist theory uses gender to demonstrate the "social construction and exaggeration of differences between women and men and the use of such distinctions to legitimize and perpetuate power relations between women and men" (Osmond and Thorne 1993, p. 593). Sometimes this has been done through family policies and programs that might not be supportive of women (Zimmerman 2001). This article uses family systems and

feminist theories to examine family policies in Eastern Europe and encourages the use of these theories in policy development.

Family Policies in Eastern Europe

Family policy is organized around the four main functions of the family: marriage, childrearing, financial support and family care (Bogenschneider 2006). The main provisions of family policy legislation are family cash/financial benefits and family social services. This section explores family policies in Eastern Europe organized around these four family functions, focusing on the ones that are most relevant for the region.

The *importance of marriage* and family in society should be recognized by providing *family life education*, *promoting gender equality* and *eliminating domestic violence*. In Eastern Europe the number of *family life education programs and services* is very small (e.g., Robila 2004). While social work departments have been introduced at several universities in the region, programs focused on families, such as Family Studies, Family Psychology, or Family Counseling, are very limited, resulting in a shortage of local family scholars and practitioners. To address this, family life education should be introduced at different instructional levels (e.g., university, schools, community centers, hospitals) as both prevention and intervention strategies and services are needed in promoting gender equality, effective conflict management, and a general high marital and parenting quality.

Legislation on *domestic violence* is a major component of family policy. Many Eastern European countries are still struggling to have domestic violence recognized by their societies and to develop and enact policies to address it. For example, Johnson (2007) examined domestic violence policies in Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia, and revealed that while there were several legislative proposals in Russia, Ukraine is the only one which approved a national domestic violence legislation. Considering the cultural resistance to confront domestic violence, legislation is significant in defining the problem and setting prevention and intervention strategies.

In the fight against domestic violence the non-governmental organizations could play an important advocacy role, encouraging their governments to develop appropriate legislation. In both Romania and Bulgaria organizations that provide services and assistance to victims of violence helped raise awareness, conducted campaigns to inform the public and advocated the adoption of domestic violence laws. In Romania the “Law on the Prevention of Family Violence (217/2003)” (ABA/CEELI 2007) was adopted in 2003—and in Bulgaria the “Law on Protection against

Domestic Violence” was approved in 2005 (Women’s Human Rights Report Series: Bulgaria 2008). Similarly, in Armenia, the Women’s Rights Center (WRC), one of the organizations involved in the fight against domestic violence, developed and submitted a Draft Law on Domestic Violence to the Ministry of Labor and Social Issues for further consideration in 2009 (Women Rights Center 2009).

There are a number of programmatic documents adopted at the international level that could assist governments in defining their policy on domestic violence. For example, the work of the United Nations, particularly the Platform for Action adopted at the 4th World Conference on Women Issues (1995) states that violence against women is an obstacle in guaranteeing women’s rights as well as a violation of human rights. Policies for early detection, reporting, and intervention in domestic violence should set severe consequences for the perpetrators (e.g., judicial sentencing). The legislation should also sanction law enforcement agencies if they do not follow through with policy implementation. The policy should provide social services for the victims, such as hotlines, shelters, individual/group counseling, job training, financial/legal advice. It is very important, especially from family systems perspective that services are provided for the perpetrators (e.g., mandatory conflict management training, individual/group counseling, and job training), so that the incidence of violence declines.

The second function of families is *childrearing*, providing a safe and thriving environment for raising children. Family policies are conducive to maintaining family values by creating an environment favorable for children. Lack of *family planning education* and *birth control*, misconceptions and insufficient provisions of contraceptives determine the former socialist countries to still have a high number of unwanted pregnancies. For example, teenage pregnancy rates are four times higher in Romania and three times higher in Estonia, Lithuania, and Hungary than in Western Europe (Kontula 2008). Armenia has one of the highest abortion rates in the region (2.6 abortions per woman) and one factor contributing to this is the low use of modern contraception, abortion being a major method of birth control (wrcorg.am 2006). Family planning/birth control education needs to be approached at different levels (e.g., university, high schools, hospitals, libraries, community centers) in order to prevent unwanted pregnancies and children being abandoned in orphanages. Increasing levels of subsidized contraceptives might also reduce the incidence of unintended pregnancies.

Closely related to unwanted pregnancies is the *child abandonment* phenomenon which is still widespread in Eastern Europe. Education on the consequences of child abandonment and living in orphanages on children should

be provided in order to educate parents that the child might not “fare better in the orphanage”, a misconception often present in Eastern Europe since communism. For example, in Armenia, where 48% of families with infants are living in extreme poverty, there is an alarming growing trend of parents abandoning their children and placing them in institutions, such as orphanages and boarding schools (Annual Statistics, Armenian National Statistic Agency 2004). These parents feel they are unable to raise their children, give proper attention and direction, and provide food, clothes and schooling and they are under the impression that the children would receive better treatment and care in an institution than at home.

The legislative system also needs to be modified ensure child’s safety and well-being (“safe haven laws”). Small family-type structures should be developed to replace the old large orphanages/institutionalized centers. Developing and improving the foster care system in the region should be another priority. Foster care system has been developed in several countries, such as Romania, where a child-oriented foster care system has been developed and its positive impact has been documented (e.g., Zeanah et al. 2009). The Armenian Family Code has been recently revised to include recent changes such as provisions for the foster care system (Armenian Family Code 2004).

Another function of the family is *family care*, referring to the *care for members with disabilities and chronic illnesses*, and for elderly family members. The number and quality of services supporting people with disabilities or chronic illnesses (e.g., AIDS) and their families are very limited in Eastern Europe and consequently most of the care is provided by family members. Family policy should make provisions to set budgetary allocations targeted towards these families in terms of both financial means to support the care they provide (subsidizes, allowances to the family, use the years for retirement/pension) and for developing and providing support services (e.g., respite care, counseling, support groups). Developing inclusion schools and job training programs targeted for children and adults with disabilities, providing tax reductions to companies who hire them, and providing job placement support should also be part of policy provisions. In Eastern Europe there is still stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities. Family life education should teach people about different types of disabilities and national campaigns are recommended to educate people about this topic, to reduce discrimination and to inform families of available services.

High *quality services for providing care to elderly* citizens are limited in Eastern European countries, which leads to a lack of trust in the public institutions targeting this age group. This situation together with the cultural scripts suggesting that the best care is provided by family

members (and stigmatizing the use of institutional care), determine that most care to elderly is provided by family members. As such, caring for the elderly family members in Eastern Europe is perceived as a sign of love, respect and family duty. However, caring for elderly parents could put pressure on the middle generation (“sandwich generation”) required also to care for their children. Family policy should provide social protection by compensating financially this care-giving process, thereby contributing also to increased intergenerational solidarity. This will also be cost effective for the society since caring for elderly in an institution will be more expensive.

Another function of the family is providing *financial support* to its members. A goal of family policy is facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life and promoting gender equity through improving both parents’ opportunities to take part in working life and in caring for their children. Parents have the primary responsibility for their child’s development and the society should support them in their endeavors. Parental leave provisions and public childcare arrangements have been recognized as the two most important components of childcare policies, and are usually evaluated in terms of their extensiveness, quality, generosity and universality (Szelewa and Polakowski 2008). *Maternity, paternity and parental leave* to care for a biological or adopted child are important parts of family policy and are explored in depth in the following section.

Parental Leave in Eastern Europe

In Eastern Europe, during communism, women were encouraged to join the labor force through incentives such as public affordable childcare services. After the fall of communism, there has been less emphasis in this area on policies enabling women to combine maternal and professional roles, the focus being on providing cash benefits and expanded parental leave, encouraging women to stay at home. (see Table 2). Many of the governments opted for a male-breadwinner model, closing many childcare centers and withdrawing the financial support, developing a new “refamilization” trend, emphasizing that maternity and rearing children are a woman’s role, encouraging women to leave the labor market to raise children (Saxonberg and Szelewa 2007). “Defamilizing” policies on the other hand, shift the responsibility for care away from the family, by providing accessible and affordable child care services, enabling women to join the labor force. As such, an imposed home care model seems typical for former communist countries, with economic hardship and high unemployment rates imposing home care without public support (Kontula 2008). A majority of the countries

Table 2 Parental leave provisions in Eastern European countries

Country	Maternity length	Benefit (% of wages)	Paternity leave	Parental leave
Belarus	126 days	100	NA	NA
Bulgaria	410 days	Minimum salary	15 days	Up to 2 years
Croatia	24 weeks	100	NA	Up to 1 year
Czech Republic	28 weeks	70	Yes	Up to 4 years
Estonia	140 days	100	Yes	Up to 575 days
Hungary	24 weeks	70	5 days	Up to 2 years
Latvia	112 days	100	10 days	Up to 1½ year
Lithuania	126 days	100	30 days	Up to 1 year
Macedonia	9 months (plus 45 days before birth)	100	Yes	Up to 9 months
Poland	20 weeks	Flat rate	5 days	Up to 2 years
Romania	18 weeks (126 days)	100	5 + 10 (if takes child care course)	Up to 2 years (85% paid)
Russia	194 days	100	Yes	Up to 1½ year
Slovenia	105 days	100	90 days (15 paid)	Up to 260 days
Slovakia	28 weeks	55	Yes	Up to 3
Ukraine	126 days	Flat rate	NA	34 months

Source: European Alliance for Families (2010)

NA Not available

promote explicit and implicit familism-pursuing policies to support the traditional family model (women as carers of children), with longer paid parental leaves (2–3 years), but not providing subsidized child care centers (the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia) while few support a more comprehensive model, the family receiving support in combining paid employment with high quality child care and a generous parental leave (Hungary, Lithuania) (Szelewa and Polakowski 2008). The return of pro-natalism is perceived in Poland, Hungary and Estonia where there are greater benefits for larger families, while universal family allowances are seen in Hungary, Romania and Baltic countries (Rostgaard 2004).

In Eastern Europe re-institutionalization of gender—segregated employment and care-patterns was regarded as a means of reducing unemployment, by enabling mothers to provide care themselves rather than to enable them to participate in the labor market (Neyer 2006). The majority of the countries support private care by mothers through long parental and care-leaves mostly until the child is 3 years old, the benefits being usually flat rate at the level of the minimum wage (Neyer 2006). An examination of the developments of family policies in Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary indicates a tendency of implementing familist, gendered policies that encourage women to leave the labor market to raise children (Saxonberg and Sirovatka 2006). Similarly, since the 1990s, Russia experienced significant reforms of its socio-political and social systems which were associated with

important ideological changes and in terms of childcare, these changes transformed the Russian welfare system towards a neo-familism model of care (Teplova 2007). Fodor et al. (2002) conducted an analysis of family policies in Hungary, Poland, and Romania and concluded that the three countries differ significantly in the ways which they handle parenthood and gender issues. Poland welfare state restricts eligibility to family and maternity benefits, encouraging women to go out of labor force and be dependent on their spouses for their wellbeing, while Hungary is more supportive of a balance for women between paid work and family. Romania allows more freedom for women to pursue work outside home, but it does not provide enough sustenance so women can establish independent households.

As suggested by feminist theory, family policy should promote *gender equality* in family and society by changing the gender contract and gender division of work through policies that better reconcile work and family life. Although governments in Eastern Europe are trying to ensure “gender equality”, significant differences still exist between men and women especially in the labor market, with wage gaps based on gender, access to better and higher positions available only to men, and a lack of recognition of unpaid work (See Table 3). Countries such as Estonia, Czech Republic Slovakia and Lithuania experience high gender pay gap of 28, 23, 23 and 20%, respectively, while Slovenia and Romania are among the countries with the lowest gender pay gap at 8 and 13%,

Table 3 Parental employment and child care services

Country	Women part time employed (%)	Men part time employed (%)	Working mothers with children under 6	Working fathers with children under 6	Kids under 3 in formal care (%)	Kids 3–6 in formal care (%)	Gender pay gap ^a (%)	% of GDP for families
Bulgaria	2.7	2.2	48%	NA	NA	NA	12.4	1.1
Czech R.	8.7	2.2	34.7	NA	2	69	23.6	1.4
Estonia	10.4	4.1	53	95	15	86	28.2	1.5
Hungary	6.2	3.3	32.6	85.1	8	79	16.3	2.8
Latvia	8.1	4.5	62	91.5	16	52	NA	1.2
Lithuania	8.6	4.9	71.6	NA	4	56	20	1.1
Poland	NA	NA	58.9	NA	2	31	NA	0.8
Romania	10	NA	63.1	NA	6	62	12.7	1.4
Slovenia	11	7.1	83.4	NA	27	69	8.3	2
Slovakia	NA	NA	37.3	87.3	2	75	23.6	1.2

Source: European Alliance for Families (2010); Platenga and Remery (2009)

NA not available

^a The gender pay gap is the difference between men's and women's average hourly earnings for the economy as a whole

respectively (European Alliance for Families 2010). Achieving gender equity in income is a goal that all of the governments should strive and develop policies to meet it. In order to promote gender equality, specific policies are recommended on paternity leave, parental leave (with special provisions for fathers), family medical leave to take care of an ill/disabled family member (with specific provisions for men), and flexible work hours to facilitate childrearing and equal pay for women and men. A family-friendly environment, including an increase in flexible working schedules for parents of small children, should be provided by employers.

Maternity Leave

In Eastern Europe, the maternity leave is generally longer than in the western countries, in some countries 100% of salary being covered while in others the amount is lower (See Table 3). Among the former communist countries, Slovenia is one with a relatively well-developed family policy aimed at reconciling the professional and family life. For example, the Parenthood Protection and Family Benefits Act of 2006 provides 105 days for maternity leave (full salary); 260 days of parental leave (or 530 if half-time leave) (full salary); and 90 days of paternity leave (15 days full salary; then social security) (Stropanik and Šircelj 2008). The Czech Republic, where the leave was relatively long (4 years) introduced policies to shorten the use of leave, in order to increase female labor participation after having children. In 2008 a “multi-speed parental allowance term” was introduced and parents can choose from three speeds of parental leave with a certain level of monthly

payment: faster—for 2 years (EUR 460), normal for 3 years (EUR 300), or slower for 4 years (EUR 300 for the first 3 years and EUR 140 for the last year) (European Alliance for Families 2010).

Paternity Leave

Paternity leave promotes fathers' involvement with the child from the beginning. It is a recognition of the important role that fathers play in the family and a symbol of the equilibrium that needs to be achieved between work and family life. It also contributes to the development of a gender equality perspective in family life as well as in the workplace. Unfortunately, in many Eastern European countries (e.g., Czech Republic, Poland), family benefits continue to embody a model that does not include incentives being offered to change the stereotypical division of labor between men and women (Steinhilber 2005).

In 2009 European Commission adopted a proposal to increase the existing right to take parental leave from 3 months per parent to four months per parent of which at least 1 month in strictly non-transferable between parents (European Commission 2009). Due to European Council Directive, all countries grant fathers the right to parental leave; some countries have reserved part of the parental leave for fathers: Slovenia grants fathers 90 days extra leave. However, the levels of parental-leave benefits, employment restrictions during parental leave and income gaps between women and men, and gender norms regarding employment prevent fathers to uptake the leave (Neyer 2006).

The length of the paternity leave varies (see Table 2), between 5 days in Hungary and Poland, to 10 days in

Latvia, 15 days in Bulgaria, 30 days in Lithuania and 90 days in Slovenia (15 paid) (European Alliance for Families 2010). In Romania the paternity leave is 5 days and the father receives 10 more days if he enrolls in a child care course. The percent of fathers taking advantage of the paternity leave is very small, only 5% of Estonian fathers, 2% of fathers in Czech Republic; 80% of Slovenian fathers are taking the paid leave and 9% the unpaid. Given the wide gender gap in wages it is not surprising that men are less likely to take the paternity leave. A feminist perspective should be used in developing these policies so that the income gap is reduced, which might in turn encourage more men to take the leave.

Policies to promote father involvement in family life and parenting are strongly recommended (Robila 2009a). Fathers play an important role in the emotional and cognitive development of their children and encouraging father involvement with the child from birth increases the likelihood for further paternal involvement in childrearing duties and bonding with the child (e.g., Lamb 2004; Martin et al. 2007). The right and responsibility of fathers to make a commitment to family life should be recognized and supported in society in several ways, such as increasing father involvement in the child-birth process, providing paternity leave, and developing father support groups (e.g., for teen, first-time or single-parent fathers).

Extended Family Leave: Grandparents Leave

In Eastern Europe, extended family members, especially grandmothers and grandfathers, are very involved in the childrearing of their grandchildren. When available, families prefer to involve the grandparents in childrearing due to trust, convenience, and financial reasons, but also to strengthen family ties and to increase the child's attachment to his/her grandparents. It is strongly recommended that financial allowances be provided to support the care provided by grandparents, increasing thus the opportunity for social protection and intergenerational solidarity (Robila 2009b). In Hungary there is a child home care allowance for parents and grandparents caring for children under two while in Bulgaria parental leave can also be taken by one of the grandparents until the child is two (European Alliance for Families 2010).

Child Care Allowances and Benefits

Family policy should help alleviate the direct and indirect costs of raising children for families through family allowance and family cash benefits for caring for a child. It needs to compensate for the economic costs of rearing children and to give people the economic resources to have children.

Eastern European countries inherited a relatively extensive system of family policy in terms of the coverage and benefits granted to families (Cerami 2008). For example, in most of the countries child raising allowances are offered until the child is 2 or 3 years old and child benefits until the child has completed secondary school or university (up to 18–26 years old). However, the benefits are relatively small in value and should be increased. Moreover, most benefits are linked to employment, while at the same time finding and keeping a job is more challenging in the market economy.

Examples of child benefits in Eastern European countries vary for the first child, between 47 Euros (€) per month in Hungary, 26€ in Slovenia to 11€ in Bulgaria and 10€ in Slovakia (IFP 2008). The average of family financial benefits provided by family policies also vary from those provided in Slovenia—278€ per month; Hungary 222€; Czech Rep. 172€, Slovakia -131€; Estonia—125€; Latvia—74€, Lithuania—72€; to Poland—54€; Romania—50€; Bulgaria—30 € (Institute for Family Policies (IFP) 2008).

It is recommended that family policy promotes universal family assistance practices. Universal actions are directed at every family with no exclusions or restrictions. States should recognize and promote the family as a common good and, therefore, supports all families and not be exclusively welfare-based, aimed only at disadvantaged families. However, income-tested benefits have been replacing the universal benefits in several countries, such as Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, where the higher income families are excluded from receiving the leave benefits (Rostgaard 2004). Low-income women are thus encouraged by these benefits to withdraw from the labor market while the higher income women are encouraged to re-join the labor market sooner. Unfortunately, a consequence of this could be an income-selective approach to daycare that results in the exclusion of children from low-income families from early childhood education programs.

Early Childhood Education and Care Services

Early childhood education and care services represent another important dimension of family policy. Family policy needs to allocate funds for the development of a variety of high quality public and private child-care centers. European Council (2002) recommended that member states should provide childcare to “at least 33% of children until three and to at least 90% of children between age three and mandatory school age” (p. 12). The percentage of children in preschool programs varies greatly among the countries (See Table 3), with the percentage of children under three being significantly lower than the one for children between 3 and 6 years old. In terms of children

under 3 years old, only 2% of them are enrolled in child care service in Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, with Slovenia, Latvia and Estonia having the highest percentage: 27, 16, and 15, respectively. For children between three and six who are in formal care the percentages vary from 31% in Poland, and 52% in Latvia to 86% in Estonia, 79% in Hungary and 75% in Slovakia (Platenga and Remery 2009).

There is a wide variation among the Eastern European countries in terms of subsidies; for example, in Hungary there is more public spending for child care services and coverage for preschool children (87% of children) than in Poland (36%) (Thévenon 2008). Eastern European countries have pursued a policy of re-institutionalizing familial care and have cut back their publicly funded childcare provisions. Latvia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic re-structured their childcare policies and have reduced their programs especially for children under three (Neyer 2006). Subsidized public childcare (no fee/low fee) has two main objectives: to assist parents who are economically active, and to give all children equal opportunities, irrespective of their social background, since the services for children below compulsory school age involve elements of both care and education.

Early childhood education and care services are recommended to include a wide range of part-day, full-school-day, full-work-day programs offering flexible and extended hours to accommodate working parents. It is recommended that an allowance for individualized child-care arrangements or an allowance to employ an “approved child-minder” (Family Policy in France 2005) or a private individual (e.g., family member–grandparent) be provided to allocate funds to childcare carried out by individuals. This would increase parental employment, provide jobs to childcare providers (fight unemployment), compensate for shortage in childcare centers, and give parents choices and financial support for the diversification of childcare arrangements. The child-care sector has a considerable job-creating potential and thus family policy could be used as a tool to fight unemployment and give free choice for parents and diversification of childcare arrangements.

Most of the Eastern European countries experienced a downward tendency regarding childcare facilities during the 1990s and shortages persist in the recent years mainly due to ideological reasons and lack of financial resources. The cutbacks in support nurseries confirm the anti-feminist ideological legacy, since these were intended to support women to return to the home (Saxonberg and Szelewa 2007). Moreover, since their main purpose during the communism was to enable women to work, the nurseries had a poor reputation (e.g., overcrowded conditions). In most of these countries, before the transition to democracy, the state and the employers were primarily responsible for

social services, while now these responsibilities are divided between families (mainly), the state and municipalities. Sometimes the division of these responsibilities creates tension that could interfere with providing high quality childcare. As such there is a need for improved coordination in providing childcare services.

Availability of child care varies greatly in the region. Platenga and Remery (2009) conducted a comprehensive examination of child care services in Eastern Europe. Their report indicates that in Czech Republic, like in other countries in the region, an important cause of the shortage is the conviction that the care for very small children (under 3 years old) should be done by the mother. Similarly, in Lithuania the conviction that children should be cared at home while they are young and the high prices of child care determine a low demand and supply of childcare. In Estonia, one of the main obstacles to improving the availability of childcare is the insufficient funding for the development of public child care facilities (Platenga and Remery 2009). In Slovakia family policy emphasizes the role of women as a mother and caregiver, and as such childcare is supported at the family level. In Latvia there is a lack of policy regarding child care and provision of child care is low especially for the youngest children. Both, in Bulgaria and Romania, the services have been reduced, and revisions of legislation regarding child protection and institutionalization are necessary. In Armenia there is a low enrollment of children in pre-school (e.g., in 2003 only 25% of 3–6 years old children were in preschool; only 7% of children in rural area go to pre-school) due to lack of resources (<http://www.aniedu.am/>; McLean 2006).

A positive change is noted in Hungary where there is a strong commitment to increase the availability and quality of childcare (Platenga and Remery 2009). In Poland there has been an increased interest in the education of young children at the pre-school level, although the financial resources for this are limited (European Alliance for Families 2010). Policies need to coordinate the provisions of parental leaves to correspond to the child care regulations. For example, since 2004 Estonia provides parental leave of 1 year, while most of the crèches were available for children 1.5 years and up, leaving a gap of half a year between leave and childcare facilities (European Alliance for Families 2010).

Part-time work is seldom used by mothers or fathers as part of reconciling family and work spheres, in Bulgaria being 2.2% for men and 2.7% for women, in Estonia 10.4% for women and 4.1% for men, in Latvia 8.1% for women and 4.5% for men (European Alliance for Families 2010). According to Euro-barometer data 72% of Hungarians put a high priority on obtaining part-time employment (European Alliance for Families 2010). Local-level policies are also important, besides the national level ones, in

increasing the families' quality of life and family-work balance. For example, since 2000 Hungary has a family-friendly workplace award to give recognition to companies that support a family-work balanced life (about EUR 11,250) paid by the Ministry for Social Affairs and Labor (European Alliance for Families 2010).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Family systems and feminist frameworks offer conceptual tools that can be used in assessing how well family policies address family problems and advance family wellbeing, which is in fact the goal of family policies (Zimmerman 2001). Family systems theory suggests that individuals cannot be understood in isolation from one another since families are systems of interconnected individuals (Hills 1971). Feminist theory considers gender as a social structure and a fundamental basis for social inequality and stratification gender relations being viewed as power relations, with women being subordinated to men, and as such a gender equality perspective is promoted (Osmond and Thorne 1993).

It is recommended that the promotion of the family as an institution be done through setting up a Ministry for the Family with sufficient organizational and budgetary capacity to promote the family as a policy priority, to develop family protection measures, and to ensure that all legislation considers the roles and rights of the family (IFP 2008). Several Eastern European countries have incorporated the "Family" as part of their Ministries: Ministry for Children and Family Affairs (Latvia), Ministry of Labor, Family and Equality of Opportunity (Romania), Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family (Slovakia), Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Affairs (Slovenia) (IFP 2008). Several countries in the region have been preoccupied with developing comprehensive family policies that would coordinate with other social policies. For example, the basis for the Slovenian Government policy on the family is a document called the "Resolution on the grounds for the formation of family policy" which includes strategic planning for the development of individual parts of family policy by the individual ministries concerned. Slovakia updated its State Family Policy Strategy in 2004 by adding the goals of addressing the issues of aging population and reducing the risk of poverty for families (European Alliance for Families 2010).

Family policy promotes the establishment of family protection measures. Most countries set aside a certain percentage of their GDP for social expenditures (e.g., Sweden 33%, Latvia and Estonia 12.5%) (IFP 2008). As a recognition of the importance of the family, it is recommended that 2.5% percentage of the GDP should be set

aside specifically for the family (e.g., Sweden 3%, Italy 2.1%) (Thévenon 2008). Eastern European countries vary in their percentage of GDP targeting families between 0.8% in Poland, to 2% in Slovenia, or 2.8% in Hungary (see Table 3).

The main provisions of family policy are the financial benefits and the family social services. Family social services consist in family life education as a prevention mechanism and in family counseling as a prevention and intervention strategy (Robila 2009a). These services are mainly dependent on having qualified personnel and high quality facilities. However, having the qualified personnel and state-of-the-art counseling facilities is a serious challenge in Eastern Europe.

Instituting family life education and family counseling as fields of study at different instructional levels (e.g., university, high school, community) is highly recommended, along with the development of family counseling centers. Family life education provides opportunities for individuals and families to enhance and improve their lives by providing the "knowledge and skills needed for effective family living" (www.ncfr.org). For example, parent education serves as both a prevention and intervention strategy, including classes on child development, child care, nutrition, and effective discipline techniques. Highly recommended are child birth education classes, especially for first-time parents and teenage parents, for both mothers and fathers. Family life education is a multi-disciplinary area of study, focusing on prevention and taking an educational rather than therapeutic approach. The areas of focus of family life education include human development over the life span, interpersonal relationships, human sexuality, family resource management, parent education, families relationships to other institutions, family policy, and methodology (program planning, implementation, and evaluation) (ncfr.org).

There is a great need to continue developing family policy in Eastern Europe. Decisive are the political will to develop and enact it, available budgetary allocations and family social services to implement it. While the budgetary concerns are difficult to resolve due to the high economic struggles present in the region, there is a great potential to develop the family services through which family legislation could support families, without necessarily requiring extreme financial efforts. Developing these family services would be avenues through which family policies would reach their intended beneficiaries: the families. Creating interdisciplinary teams of policymakers and including family science scholars as part of such teams will promote addressing families' needs. The research on families should be used as a scientific base in developing these policies. Conducting family impact analysis of family policy is necessary in assessing the effectiveness of these policies.

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