



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 autocratizing regimes. Yet, what kind of family policies do these regimes actually pursue? In this exploratory paper, we shed light on the differing pathways of four autocratizing regimes with a similar familialistic outlook: Russia under Vladimir Putin and the United Russia party, Turkey under the Justice and Development Party, Hungary under Fidesz and Poland under the Law and Justice Party. 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-)politicized 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 they initiated new policies to protect families, including flagship programs that were 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.

KEYWORDS

family policy, autocratization, illiberalism, right-wing politics, welfare state

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, and Modi's India. Ruling governments first attack the media and civil society, and polarize 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, and to 'leverage persuasion and fear, hope and apathy' (Sharafutdinova, 2020: 1). In this toolkit, economic and social policies play a central, although often overlooked, role as they popularize illiberal regimes, and keep third wave autocrats in power (Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa, 2021; Orenstein and Szikra, 2022; Scheiring, 2020).

In our recent study comparing Turkey under Recep Tayip Erdoğan 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 (Szikra and Öktem, 2023). 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 provided the 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 programs with much fanfare in this policy area and maintain a high-profile familialistic discourse, extolling the virtues of the traditional family and promoting

natalism (Cook et al., 2023; Korkut and Eslen-Ziya, 2016). 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 under Vladimir Putin and the United Russia party, Turkey under the Justice and Development Party, Hungary under Fidesz and Poland under the Law and Justice Party. We do so by qualitatively exploring the development of family policies in terms of their legal structure and distributive implications up to 2020.

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 there is 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 for 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-centered 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 the 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 (Daly, 2023; Eydal and Rostgaard, 2018; Gauthier and Koops, 2018). This tendency is driven by various structural and political factors, including the increasing share of the female labor force and the related gender equality agendas since the 1990s. Early childhood education and care and social investment have also helped to put family policy and especially child care services at the center 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. Recently demography also 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). Analyzing 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, and Russia (Chandler, 2013; Chernova, 2012; Inglot et al., 2022; Szikra and Öktem, 2023).

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 (Hantrais, 2004: 132; Kamerman and Kahn, 1978: 3). 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 include policies that explicitly target women or mothers, like active labor market programs in Turkey focusing on female labor market participation, or the preferential treatment of women in pension systems. This leads us to more fully explore the growing attention of autocratizers towards women and families, and to 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 of family policy *tools* in our select countries and beyond.

The affinity of autocratic political systems for family policies and motherhood is not new. National socialist and fascist regimes were famous for pursuing selective pro-natalist 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 (Inglot et al., 2022; Saxonberg, 2014). While propagating pro-natalist goals, long parental and child care leave since the late-1960s was often used to hide rising unemployment – a phenomenon that was illegal in communist and state socialist regimes (Inglot et al., 2022; Saxonberg, 2014; Szelewa, 2020). Given the historical link between autocracy and family policy, 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 the focus of research (Szelewa and Szikra, 2022; Woods and Frankenberger, 2018). These states typically engage in a 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, 2019). Third-wave autocratizers typically display polarizing, right-wing, nativist politics (Enyedi, 2023; Mudde, 2016, 2019), thus aiming to protect what they see as the native population as opposed to 'intruders' and 'others' who are not part of the imaginary nation. 'Enemies' of such regimes range from local ethnic and religious minorities to supranational organizations, 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 Eslen-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 the highest political positions, social and economic policies have increasingly targeted women. For example, in their recent comparative study, Cook et al. (2023) show how the Hungarian, Polish, and Russian governments "have concentrated monetary and rhetorical investments in pro-natalism, traditionalism and familialism" (Cook et al., 2023: 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 run anti-gender campaigns, they often promote women's role as workers and carers (Fodor, 2022; Gwiazda, 2021; Szikra, 2019). 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 the increasing popularity of right-wing regimes among female constituencies in the countries analyzed in this paper (Colton and Hale, 2009;

Goncharenko, 2018; Grzebalska and Kováts, 2018; *Konda Temmuz' 18 Barometresi*, 2018).

There are 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, what kind of family policy they pursue remains largely open. 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 data 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 analyze data on female and maternal labor 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 the early 2020s and before the change of government in Poland in 2023. We did not include measures related to 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, and media and civil society are almost fully under governmental control (Esen and Gumuscu, 2018; 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 in preventing complete autocratization. Poland under PiS was still a democracy (Alizada et al., 2021) although illiberal (Zakaria, 1997) because checks and balances were mainly emptied (even if still existent) and civil society and media were increasingly under governmental control. As a defining feature of third-wave

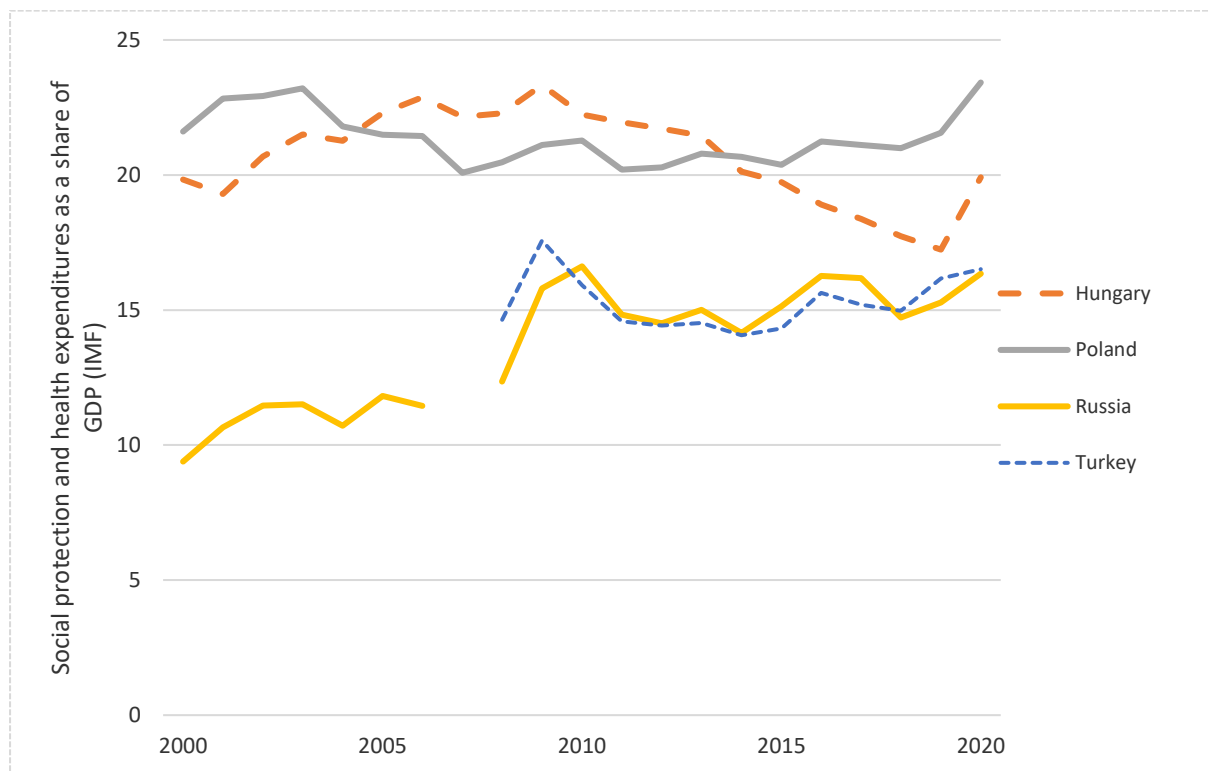
autocratizing countries, elections are regularly held in all four countries where rulers maintain the facade of democracy.

Elections are important because rulers strive to maintain 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 labor 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 efforts in Russia, Turkey, Hungary and Poland is fraught with difficulties. Welfare efforts are usually operationalized through public social expenditures that are measured differently in various databases. There is no single database that includes data for all of 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. The 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>

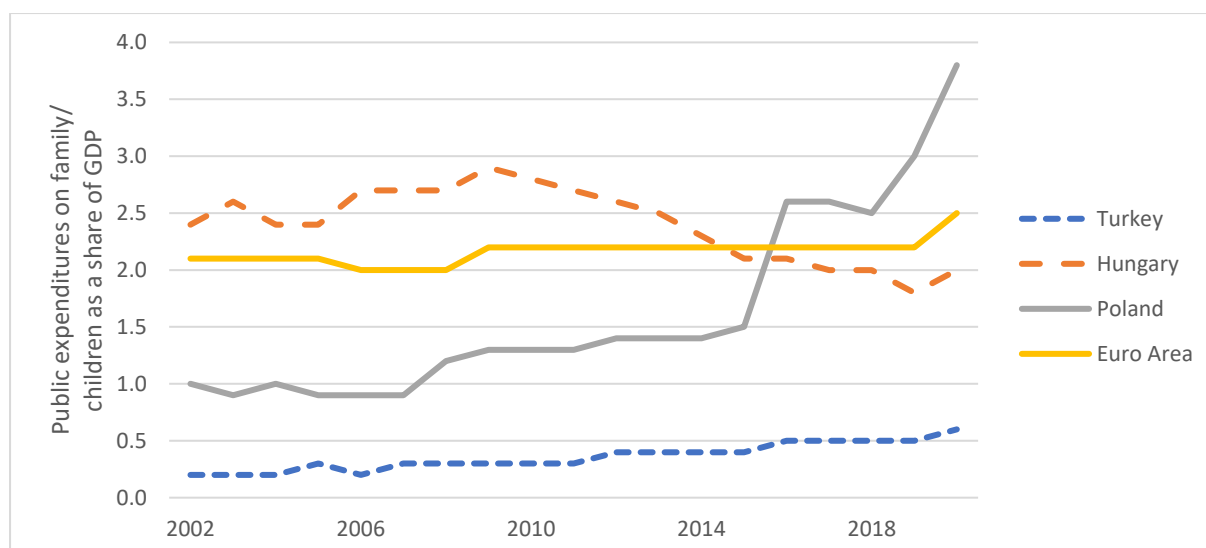
The IMF's GFS differentiates between ten main functions of government¹ out of which we focus on health and social protection (Figure 1). While we need to keep in mind the different timeframes of our analysis in each country, depending on the start of the process of democratic backsliding, this data reveals diverging trajectories in terms of overall public social expenditure. 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

¹ General public services, defense, public order and safety, economic affairs, environment protection, housing and community amenities, health, recreation culture and religion, education, and social protection.

GDP, the denominator. Most of this expansion took 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 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 per cent of GDP and increased to 0.5 per cent in the past decades. Thus, in terms of spending, Erdoğan did not prioritize this welfare area. Incomplete Russian data from the IMF suggests that spending increased only slightly after 2014. All of these developments can be compared to a moderate increase in spending on family policies among the Euro area countries. Notable, Polish spending surpassed the 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.

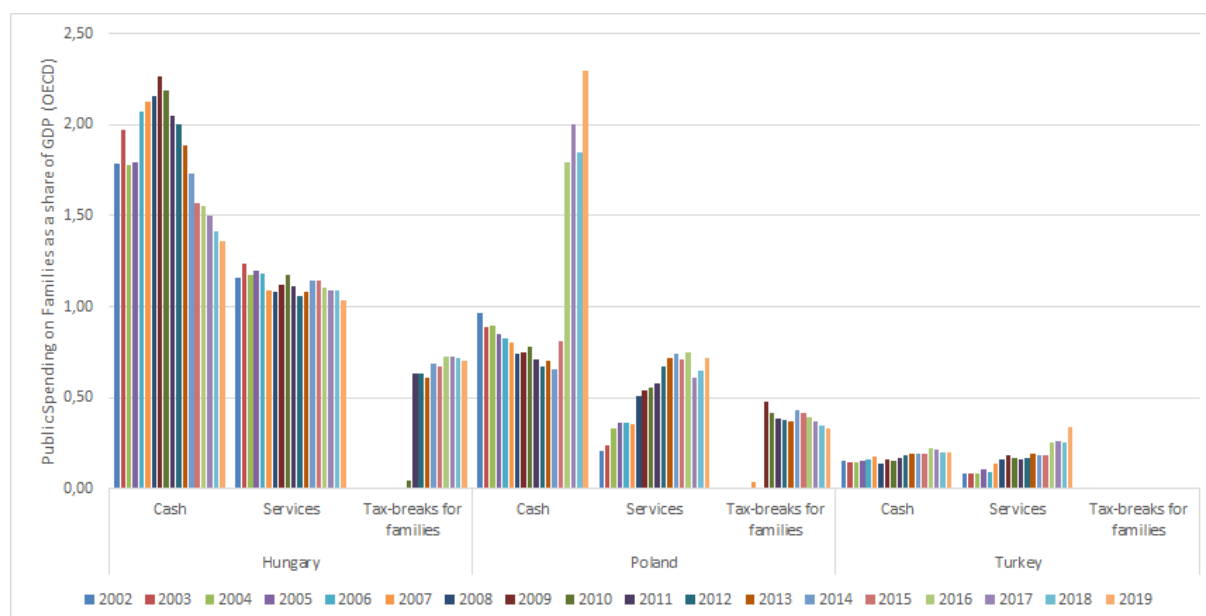
Figure 2 - Public social expenditures on family/children as a share of GDP



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

The OECD's disaggregated family policy expenditure data shows changes to the most important family policy sub-fields – cash-transfers, services, and tax breaks – between 2002 and 2019 (Figure 3). We observe the most spectacular overall increase in Poland – from 1.8 to 3.3 per cent between 2014 and 2019, the bulk of which is due to the more than doubling of spending on cash benefits from 0.8 to 2.3 per cent. 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 expenditure for families 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. 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 per cent is means-tested in Poland and Hungary. The high share of means-tested benefits in Turkey means that family policy is still primarily a tool for alleviating poverty, rather than a transfer for wide segments of the population, including the middle-class. Comparing spending by program type also reveals differences between Poland and Hungary (Figure 4). Poland heavily focuses on family allowances, which constituted half of all family policy spending by the end of the decade. In Hungary, family allowance spending is on a similar level as parental leave benefit: together both account for 60 per cent 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 categorize within ESSPROS' analytic classification.

From 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 for family policies in each country.

Figure 4 - Share of program category in all family policy spending, 2020



Source: Eurostat

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 spending on this category. In both countries developments in other programs are secondary. In Poland the rise of family allowance also brings an increasing share of cash benefits (vs in kind benefits and services) and a rise of periodic cash benefits as opposed to lump sum, one-time benefits. 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 to 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 a sign of de-institutionalization in this policy field.

To sum up, our four countries show a mixed pattern in terms of the development of welfare and family spending under democratic decline. 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 also applies. 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. Having discussed the development of spending patterns in our four countries, we now turn to a qualitative policy analysis to explore the trajectory of family policy reforms. We pay special attention to the specific policy tools autocratizing governments utilize and the target groups (family types) they intend to please with their reforms.

FAMILY POLICY REFORMS UNDER DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

RUSSIA

Russia under Putin pioneered publicly committing to protect and support traditional families, often surpassing conventional family policies. We 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 to 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. The central program of the 2007 package,

“Maternity Capital” (MC) became Russia’s flagship family policy program over the years (Cook et al., 2023). MC offered a significant one-time financial support package on the occasion of birth (or adoption) of a second or any subsequent child. While initially announced for a 10 year period, it was regularly prolonged until 2026 (Alontseva et al., 2021). The discourse on MC targeted married parents and three or four children as the socially desirable family type (Chernova, 2012). At the same time, eligibility criteria fully focused on mothers and required 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 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 purchases, and since 2015 4) for 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 changed from 250,000 RUB (approximately 7100 EUR) in 2007 to 453,000 RUB in 2017 (approximately 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 programs, which mostly targeted families with three or more children (Sorvachev and Yakovlev, 2019). However, the adoption and implementation, as well as the amount, of these regional programs 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., 2023). 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 per cent). 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 utilized 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 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 this policy was at the federal level and, by 2017, 60 out of 85 of the federal institutions had introduced it (Bluhm and Brand, 2018). These changes already signaled 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 focused on low-income families. 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 could access MC in the form of monthly benefits from the birth of their second child (Pension Fund of RF). These changes suggest that the government became attentive to the needs of socially more vulnerable families corresponding with and favoring Putin's and United Russia's rural electoral base (White, 2016).

The centrality of pro-natalist policy aims and public recognition and the reward for child-rearing influenced changes in other policy areas as well. This is evidenced in the pension system, targeted social assistance for low-income families, and expanding maternal 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 pro-natalist, 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 also positively discriminated in favor of women in the pension scheme under their right-wing autocratizing governments. In Russia, the 2018 pension reform aiming to increase 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 the accuracy of targeting (Yemtsov et al., 2019). These labor market and social assistance measures again are complementary to the core family policies. The ideal of traditional families with 3+ children is discursively present in these policies, implying the traditional caring role of women (Rostovskaya et al., 2019). We can observe, however, that the policy changes described above came with an increase of maternal employment from 71 to 75 percent (OECD) between 2009 and 2019 which means that the Russian government, notwithstanding its traditionalist 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 the Central Bank of Russia), female politicians' substantive influence tends to be limited (Cook and Nechemias, 2009; Johnson, 2016). 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 programs (Doğangün, 2020; Højdestrand, 2016; Johnson et al., 2021). From the late-2000s, anti-LGBTQI+ 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 in Turkey under AKP. However, compared to the other three regimes, 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 only involves demonizing abortion, similar to Kaczyński in Poland, but also any form of birth control and even caesarean sections (Erten, 2015). Just like in the other cases, LGBTQI+ people are vilified, but so is extramarital cohabitation in general. In spreading this discourse, the 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). It is true that AKP did launch family policy reforms, often with much fanfare. Yet these initiatives remained mostly piecemeal and did not entail expenditure 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 government increased the flat-rate monthly child allowance for civil servants. In 2004, it launched a nationwide conditional cash transfer (CCT) program, originally devised and funded by the World Bank. This program 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, 1999; 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 program that benefitted mainly women in vulnerable situations: a cash-for-care scheme that provided monthly payments to caregivers of severely disabled people. Very much like 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 person for whom they cared. Most of the c.500,000 beneficiaries are presumably women from relatively poor households.

In 2008, AKP also created tax credits for children. Although the value of these tax credits was quite low, similarly to the other three countries Turkey moved slightly towards the fiscalization of family policies (Inglot et al., 2022; Morel et al., 2018). Also in 2008 (and again in 2014) opportunities for early retirement for mothers were increased. However, this did not come with any financial benefits (as it did in Poland and Hungary), because mothers had to pay extra contributions in order to become eligible for early retirement. Furthermore, this change contrasted with the IMF and EU promoted increase in and equalization of retirement ages for women (from 58 to 65) and men (from 60 to 65) in 2008. This move contrasts with Hungary and Poland, where governments equalized retirement ages due to similar pressures during the EU accession process, and reversed it under PiS and Fidesz, thus 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 Labor and Social Security to become the Ministry for Family, Labor 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 position symbolized the traditional division of labor, with women (only) in charge of the family. This shows striking similarities with the Hungarian case where Orbán appointed women with (at least) three children to important positions in the related ministry, including Katalin Novák, Minister for Family Affairs and later also President.

In 2015, as part of its election campaign, the government announced a “Program to Protect the Family and the Dynamic Population Structure”. This set of reforms resembled “family policy packages” in Hungary, more recently Poland (Inglot et al., 2022), and also Russia (see previous section). Fidesz’s 2019 program was entitled “Family Protection Action Plan”, showing a great similarity in the discourse of the government protecting the traditional family. In the Turkish family policy plan 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, due to the low rate of formal employment, especially of women, very few couples in fact received this marriage-related benefit.

All these reforms show that AKP did initiate expansionary reforms in family policy. However, one should be careful not to 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, programs were even scrapped.

For instance, benefit amounts in the CCT scheme, which provides payments to millions of poor families, were rarely updated to keep track with inflation. Especially after the World Bank funding for the program 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 program.

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 program replaced the birth grant scheme for civil servants. But, as opposed to that scheme, the new universal scheme was not designed to keep up with inflation. This meant that the real value of the benefit had declined by 80 per cent by the early 2020s. Finally, tax credits for children that had been launched in 2008 did not become a substitute for an all-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 labor 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 labor 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 2023). Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize 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 family policy reforms.

Despite their pitfalls, social policies in Turkey often target women, and family policy constitutes an important policy area for the AKP. 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 Temmuz' 18 Barometresi*, 2018). Given the low female labor 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

Similarly 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 (Szikra and Öktem, 2023). 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 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 labor 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 the labor market but all other social policy fields, including family policies (Szikra, 2018, 2019; Szikra and Öktem, 2023). Thus the decline in spending was due to the “starving” of the most important universal family policy benefits, notably 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 was substantially increased by the previous Socialist government in the mid-2000s and Fidesz did not directly cut the benefit

amount but instead it did not adjust the value of the benefit to inflation. Meanwhile the government also restricted access for the most vulnerable (often Roma) families when it linked eligibility criteria to behavioral conditions. Parents whose children missed 50 or more classes a year from school or kindergarten did not receive the benefit from 2012. These behavioral conditions resemble the conditional cash transfers designed by the World Bank that were implemented in Turkey with great success. Furthermore, since 2013, family allowance has also been withdrawn from unemployed parents who do not accept public works.² These subtle cuts meant a sharp drop of over 30 percent of the real value of family allowance and a decrease in the number of eligible families by about five per cent. The other major universal benefit, the popular 3-year-long parental leave GYES (available for non-working mothers and working mothers after the earnings-related parental leave period is exceeded) also lost one-third of its real value due to no indexation since 2009. Meanwhile targeted social assistance benefits for poor families have completely ceased.

While cuts hit poor families, extensions benefitted the middle- and upper-classes with stable employment. The most notable example 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). The government announced new grants and loans for families with great fanfare in 2015 (a family-housing program called CSOK) and in 2018 (loans for newlywed couples, grants 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 (and also those on public works) from new loans and grants. The aim of family policies changed vastly: Instead of decreasing child poverty (as the main aim under the previous Socialist cabinet in the mid-late 2000s), it now served to boost the fertility rates of middle- and upper-class families. Preventing child poverty, decreasing inequalities

² On public works programs in Hungary see Vidra (2018); Szombati (2020); Molnár (2020).

between families, as well as gender equality completely vanished from the agenda (Szikra, 2014, 2019).

Notwithstanding the elimination 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 gradually increased from a persistent 10 per cent throughout the post-communist years (including when the left was in power) to 17 per cent by 2019. Legislation in 2016 ensured the establishment of childcare services even in the smallest settlements. Kindergarten attendance was made compulsory from the age of three (instead of the earlier five years old), and free meals are provided from the youngest age throughout the primary school system to all poor families, families with three or more children, and children with disabilities. Notably, most of the nurseries and kindergartens in Hungary are publicly financed and run, and operate full-time. Kindergarten coverage reached close to 100 per cent under Fidesz.

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. When he announced the related Child Protection Action Plan, the prime minister talked about a “new contract” he wished to make with Hungarian women because, as he said, they are the ones making decisions about child bearing (Medvegy, 2018). Such discursive framing of family policy reforms is in line with Fidesz’s traditionalist ideology that views the issues of the family and care as women’s tasks where men are nearly invisible. The postponement of the implementation of the EU’s reconciliation directive (Directive (EU) 2019/1158), which aims at a more equal share of care work between women and men, fits this line. Despite external pressure and the increasing share of mothers on the labor market, paid paternity leave was finally extended from the initial five days to ten, but was still administered separately from all other family-related benefits. Paternity leave payments are still pre-financed by employers who receive compensation from the state. These procedural issues demonstrate that payments to fathers are not prioritized as part of family policies by the Orbán cabinet, demonstrating that Fidesz explicitly negates this area of gender equality.

When it comes to female and maternal employment, however, Fidesz has been proactive and has reached a significant rise within a decade. According to OECD data, maternal employment increased from 52 per cent in 2010 to 63 per cent in 2019. Despite the upheaval of the economy since 2014, various policies helped the employment of mothers. These include subsidies to social security payments for employers, boosted parental benefits linked to stable work-records, tax credits and loans, as well as increased availability of child care services. Together with Fodor we can interpret these changes as part of Fidesz's carefare regime that, similarly to the state socialist period, promotes a double-burden of women who are encouraged to both work *and* care (Fodor 2022). Indeed, while the Orbán government aimed to increase employment of young mothers, it has 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.

Meanwhile, women could rarely occupy the highest political position in the Orbán administration. This situation changed at the end of the decade with Judit Varga appointed to the position of Minister of Justice in 2019, followed by Katalin Novák becoming a Minister of Family and Youth in 2020 (in line with the agenda of "demographic governance"). The elevation of Novák to become the first female president of Hungary shows that Fidesz realized the symbolic importance of including young female politicians in 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. But the rapid fall of both female politicians in early 2024 shows that these positions are very fragile and only serve the actual political interests of the party. The anti-LGBTQI+ policies of Fidesz during the Covid-19 crisis were directly copied from the 2013 legislation in Russia. In this case, however, homosexuality was linked to pedophilia and included in the related child protection act. Accordingly, "homosexual propaganda" is forbidden and sanctioned in the country. All in all, Fidesz boosted family policies in a highly exclusive manner, favoring heteronormative families where parents are working and earning at least the average income. All others

(poor families, as well as non-heterosexual couples) were effectively excluded from family policies. The latter are not even considered “families” by the Orbán regime.

POLAND

Family policy has been a key policy area for PiS. The centerpiece of PiS’ welfare reforms has been the Family 500+ program since 2016, which is a universal child benefit (amounting to 500 PLN/110 EUR per month) for the second and subsequent children until the age of 18, which was extended to all first children from 2019. The universalistic approach is a path-breaking feature in the history of the Polish welfare state, where family allowance and the childcare leave³ have always been means-tested and linked to work-records (Inglot et al., 2022; Szikra and Szelewa, 2009). 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 per person below 800 PLN/180 EUR) were eligible to receive this benefit also for their first child (Szelewa, 2017). The timing of the extension to all families was striking: Eligibility for additional benefits started in July, but benefit payments (a 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 program 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 per cent of the monthly household income. The rate of people in extreme poverty was significantly reduced from 16.7 per cent in 2015 to 6.8 per cent in 2019 (Kazmierczak-Kaluzna and Pokrzyńska, 2021). Although some scholars were worried about decreasing female employment (Magda et al., 2018; Myck and Trzeciński, 2019), data shows no striking negative effects (Karwacki and Szlendak, 2021). Overall, employment rates slightly increased between 2015 and

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

2019, with a bit of a drop for youngest children, and a slight increase in the case of women with children above 6 years of age (OECD Family Database). Reduced incentives to (re-)enter the labor market have only been notable in the case of low-skilled women (Magda et al., 2018; Vandeninden and Gorauš-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 the receipt of Family 500+ directly by women 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, PiS made more moderate but still important developments in the field of child care services. Complementing cash benefits, PiS further developed the “Maluch” (Toddler) program started by the previous left-liberal cabinet to encourage the extension of public and private childcare services (Inglot et al., 2022; Szelewa and Polakowski, 2020). Financial support as part of the Maluch+ program was guaranteed to municipalities without childcare facilities for children under 3 years and to those in regions with high unemployment. In line with the EU’s social investment strategy, municipalities were required to guarantee places to 4 year olds in 2016, which was extended to 3 year olds in 2017. Municipalities that 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 per cent of children up to the age of three were enrolled in childcare compared to 12.4 per cent enrolled in nurseries in 2014 (Inglot et al., 2022).

PiS also made efforts to change the wider institutional context to encourage childrearing: Positively, time devoted to childrearing was recognized in retirement policy; negatively, women’s reproduction rights and abortion were vilified. Like in the other countries analyzed, anti-gender and anti-LGBTQI+ discourse heightened in Poland (Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa, 2021), which was clearly manifested in banning gender studies and sex education in school, ceasing the recognition of

trans people, and introducing the so called gender-free zones in various localities (Gwiazda, 2021).

In contrast to EU induced trends, and similarly to the Hungarian changes in 2013, in 2017 PiS 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 differentiate the PiS government from the previous PO-cabinet, which depicted it as prioritizing 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). This change 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 mothers (and single fathers) 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 parents' benefits to the level of minimum retirement pensions. Such changes plausibly exemplify the efforts of the PiS cabinet 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 in Poland under right-wing rule, there are multiple new supportive measures that directly or indirectly improve the socio-economic status of women. Notably, the most ambitious Family 500+ benefit is a political tool to win support and the data show that a higher proportion of women supported the government than men (Grzebalska and Kováts, 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we explored what lies behind the similar traditionalist, and increasingly women- and family-focused, discourses of four autocratizing governments. We asked the question: What kind of family policies do these regimes actually pursue? By analyzing related policy change, we focused on the target groups of family policies and were interested in uncovering who are the main beneficiaries of family policies. In the case of the more established

autocratizing regimes we also scrutinized the changes in target populations over time. From a wider perspective, we aimed to contribute to the understanding of the role social policies play in popularizing third wave autocracies. Our research shows 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. Our four cases, Russia, Turkey, Poland and Hungary, are 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 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 on the heterosexual married family and increasing fertility rates perfectly fit their nativist ideology. By designing policies targeting mothers and female carers they discursively focus on the future and the growth of the nation. They also have a pragmatic consideration: To increase their electoral bases especially in times of crises. Through policies and discourses targeting women, autocratizers successfully attracted female constituencies. Although further research needs to explore the details, it seems that the popularity of the ruling party increased among women and outweighed 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 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

involves banks. These three countries also featured what we call a *comprehensive family policy approach*. This means that policies stretched beyond the conventional scope of family policies, typically to pensions and social assistance programs. Pension reforms positively discriminated towards 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 to ensure universal access to benefits for all families, while also strengthening old programs including parental leave. 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 labor market participation of women. Thus, while they emphasized and promoted the care-role of mothers, they also encouraged labor 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 emphasized 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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