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Family policy – variety of forms of family support/subsidies

Polityka rodzinna – wsparcia/wspierania form wsparcia rodzin

Abstract

Based on a review of the literature, the article discusses the main controversies in family policy design. The article addresses the challenges facing family policies and discusses the various forms and strategies of these policies. Family policy in social research can be the perspective through which government actions and the consequences of these actions for families are analyzed. It can be described through the assumed goals and courses of action, the structures within which it is implemented, the functions it performs, or the processes of change it initiates. In considering family policy, it is necessary to take into account activities that are directly aimed at families, as well as those that affect their condition indirectly. These are: 1) laws and actions concerning the composition of the family (issues of marriage, divorce, adoption, births, foster care), 2) economic support for families, 3) issues concerning the development of children (the ability of parents to nurture, raise and educate their children), 4) care (especially with regard to sick or disabled family members), 5) relationships, sustainability and stability of families. The purpose of the article is to point out the challenges posed by contemporary socio-cultural changes and the possible consequences of the policy models adopted.

Keywords: family policy, family crisis, family support, care.

Abstrakt:

Artykuł podejmuje problematykę wyzwań stojących przez polityką rodzinną i omawia różnorodne formy i strategie tej polityki. Polityka rodzinna zajmuje się rodziną jako pod-

stawową instytucją społeczną. Polityka rodzinna w badaniach społecznych może być perspektywą, poprzez którą analizowane są działania rządu i konsekwencje tych działań dla rodzin. Może być opisywana poprzez zakładane cele i kierunki działań, struktury, w ramach których jest realizowana, funkcje, jakie wypełnia, czy procesy zmian, jakie inicjuje. W rozważaniach na temat polityki rodzinnej uwzględnić należy działania, które są bezpośrednio adresowane do rodzin, jak i te, które wpływają na ich kondycję pośrednio. W ramach bezpośrednich działań wyróżnić można: 1) prawa i działania dotyczące składu rodziny (kwestie małżeństwa, rozwodów, adopcji, urodzin, opieki zastępczej), 2) wsparcie ekonomiczne dla rodzin, 3) rozwoju dzieci (zdolności rodziców do pielęgnowania, wychowania i kształcenia dzieci), 4) opieka (zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do chorych lub niepełnosprawnych członków rodziny), 5) relacje, trwałość i stabilność rodzin. Namysł nad polityką rodzinną wiąże się z koniecznością odpowiedzi na zasadnicze pytania. Czy ma ona służyć utrzymaniu status quo, czy prowadzić do zmiany sytuacji? Czy ma realizować strategię leczenia czy zapobiegania?

Słowa kluczowe: polityka rodzinna, kryzys rodzinny, wsparcie rodziny, opieka.

Introduction

Contemplating family policy entails the necessity of addressing fundamental questions about its objectives. Is it meant to maintain the status quo or lead to a change in the situation? Should it implement a strategy of treatment or prevention? In the relevant literature, one can come across numerous publications where authors, while criticizing the definitional chaos, ambiguity, and divergence in research results on family policy, propose a comprehensive review of previous findings, new categories, or indicators, and... conclude their discourse by stating that the assumptions, models, practices, and effects of family policy are diverse and ambiguous. This, of course, stems from the complexity of the issues at hand and the differences in political systems, social practices, and cultural traditions. In this text, I aim to focus not so much on the already adopted ways of designing and implementing social policy but on broader social phenomena that should be taken into account when constructing such policy. I do not decide which patterns are the most effective or commendable. My goal is merely to point out the questions that need to be answered today when considering the relationship between the state and the family. My reflections are grounded in a European context, and I do not refer to dilemmas present in other political regimes and cultural circles.

1. Challenges

Family policy is always a response to the existing or anticipated situation. The design of policy is a process based on analyses of the current and projected state. The chosen objectives and tools depend on the understanding of the state's role as well as on societal, political, and economic needs. In debates about school education, the argument often arises that a uniform, obedience-based, and disciplinary school system reflected the needs of the industrial society in the 19th and 20th centuries but does not fully meet the societal requirements of the 21st century. Every policy is a reflection of the interpretation and expectations of its time. Therefore, when asking about family policy today, we must inquire about its purpose. What needs does it intend to address? What future is it meant to create?

Statistics show a decrease in the number of marriages, a growing number of informal relationships, and a decline in the number of births, regardless of the type of relationship. What is changing in the perception of the family and its actual functioning? Family policy, as a rational project of a long-term action strategy, is always based on certain ethical and social assumptions. These assumptions may pertain to the family model, for example. Since we observe increasing diversity in lifestyles and forms of family life, should family policy be based on a principle of extensive voluntariness and choice, or is it permissible to promote a specific model, or is it crucial to define the main principles rigorously and be flexible in terms of how they are practically implemented?

Two phenomena characteristic of contemporary society strongly influence the family situation: individualism and the experience of risk. Individualism can be understood as an attitude, a philosophical perspective, or a characteristic of the era. The emergence of this term in the 19th century was associated with industrialization and urbanization, processes of modernization that changed working conditions, interpersonal relationships, and attitudes towards religion. Central to individualism is the awareness that individuals have the right to self-determination; their fate and place in the social structure are not predetermined by socio-economic conditions. They are not permanently assigned to any particular groups and can choose where, how, and with whom they want to live. The autonomy of the individual is one of the most important features of modernity. Individualism is sometimes perceived as a negative phenomenon, the cause of egoism and associated anti-social behaviors, ranging from political apathy and secularization to the increasing number of divorces and a lack of natural population growth (Boksański 2008, p. 54). However, it is essential to remember that there is not just one type of individualistic attitude. The de-

sire for authenticity and the aspiration to shape one's life according to personal choices do not necessarily imply a narcissistic attitude or a desire to sever all social ties. When considering the family situation, individualism is undoubtedly a perspective that must be taken into account when addressing questions such as whether people today want to create families, what kinds of families they desire, and what roles they wish to play within them.

„The modern world is a world of paradoxes, a world that seeks order and security while simultaneously descending into increasing chaos, becoming more pluralistic and risk-prone,” writes Katarzyna Suwada (2007, p. 43), reconstructing descriptions of contemporaneity presented by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Zygmunt Bauman. What new does late modernity bring? Firstly, it brings awareness, reflexivity, an understanding of the situation, which can lead to a desire for change and innovation (as described by Beck) or an acknowledgment of the diversity of the world (as emphasized by Giddens). It may also be the main cause of the aforementioned paradoxes (as noted by Bauman). Humans strive to bring order to the world and ensure security, but their actions lead to the creation of further threats. This is the second change – a new type of risk (resulting from human actions) and an awareness of its omnipresence. Furthermore, individuals, lacking previously established patterns of behavior and norms, relying solely on individual choices and an uncertain future, feel helpless in the face of this risk. „The pursuit of happiness and complete freedom in self-creation pushes a person into the labyrinth of reflexivity, which makes them more or less painfully aware that the world is not only full of opportunities but also entails dangers and the necessity to take risks. The only question that remains is how not to take risks when the flip side of risk is the hope that the world can be improved” (Suwada 2007, p. 45). Risk is also related to the third change – the possibility of choice, which is now linked to consumerism dominated by individualism and the principle of pleasure.

The definition of family is the starting point that directs the legislator's attention and indicates possible courses of action. While in science, endless debates can be waged regarding the definition of family, its characteristics, functions, and historical-cultural determinants (see Szlendak 2010, Herudzińska 2012), in the practical reality of public life, decisions are necessary to establish laws and underpin the activities of various institutions. Therefore, it is crucial to determine: does family only mean the marital union of a man and a woman? Is a lasting same-sex partnership considered a family? Is cohabitation a family? Is a childless relationship a family? Is an informal relationship where partners do not share a household but jointly raise children from previous relationships considered a family? Is a monogamous relationship the only form of family?

Equally important is the agreement on who decides on adopting a specific definition of family. Who, and on what basis, determines that, for example, the definition written in the constitution is still the appropriate point of reference or requires a change? All of these issues, crucial for family policy, somewhat fall outside its scope, requiring a broad public debate. They are strongly linked not only to global socio-cultural processes but also to the short-term goals of local policy.

Dilemmas also pertain to the design of family policy concerning the functions that families fulfill. Traditionally, in social research, the following family functions are mentioned: reproductive, socializing, caregiving, emotional, sexual, economic, stratification, identification, integrative-control, recreational, and companionship functions. However, as accurately summarized by Tomasz Szlendak, „an increasing number of these functions, such as the recreational or socializing function, are ‚delegated’ by industrial societies to other specialized institutions. Establishing a family is unnecessary today for engaging in sexual activities; various state authorities oversee individuals’ behavior. A person’s daily rhythm is determined more by their non-family obligations than by responsibilities to household members. Preschools, schools, universities, and peer groups are responsible for socializing. Economic functions can be ascribed to any place where professional work is conducted. Furthermore, some family functions become hidden, such as the stratification function” (2010, pp. 117–118).

Family can be viewed as either an interpersonal relationship or as a social institution. Each of these perspectives leads to different consequences and explanations of the current situation. „In the West, starting a family is becoming less often an act for the benefit of the group (important for a specific community) and increasingly a path to individual happiness. This is evident in the growing significance of the emotional function of the family. We establish families not to jointly generate income and provide offspring to inherit that income in the future, but to find emotional support, tenderness, and love in them” (Szlendak 2010, p. 118).

When considering changes in the family understood as a relationship, the evolution of gender roles and expected behaviors from women and men deserves particular attention. Here, issues related to cultural changes regarding lifestyle and cherished values arise. If independence, self-development, and self-discovery are the most important in someone’s life, long-term commitments like marriage or parenthood may not top their list of desires. Anxiety related to social interactions, difficulties in building relationships, and oversensitivity are other common phenomena today that may not favor family formation. The lack of a sense of stability is often cited as one of the fundamental factors influenc-

ing the decision to start a family. This stability is not only in terms of economic security (job security, income level, homeownership) or institutional care arrangements (e.g., the ability to combine work and child care) but also emotional stability (confidence in the permanence of one's own and their partner's commitment). A decrease in the sense of security is one of the key factors changing the context of thinking about the family. Threats associated with war, terrorism, climate and economic crises are sources of fears and uncertainties. One response to these threats is a focus on self-care. This rational strategy for seeking psychological survival can sometimes turn into a selfish escape from social responsibilities and long-lasting bonds.

The changing stability of social relationships, including marriage, significantly affects the condition of the family. The fluidity that characterizes modern times also extends to a new approach to commitments that were once assumed to be permanent. Therefore, traditional marriage is now just one form of family life; cohabitation, partnership relationships, single parenthood, and patchwork families are other commonly encountered models.

One of the great risks of contemporary life is emotional and psychological well-being. In public discourse, we often come across descriptions of the fragility and vulnerability of this condition, which is also associated with individualism. Therapeutic rhetoric, which focuses on analyzing individual sensitivity, emotionalism, and uncertainty, along with media coverage of statistics on the number of people in psychological crisis or struggling with depression, can pose additional challenges when making decisions about long-term commitments. Young people often feel lost in their own emotions, uncertain about what they can expect (or demand) from themselves and others.

Both ways of thinking about the family – perceiving it as a community of love or emphasizing legal and economic aspects – give rise to many difficulties and concerns, both among those faced with the dilemma of starting a family and those responsible for creating conditions conducive to the well-being of families. Family policy is conducted at various levels of social life, from the national to the municipal. Therefore, the social actors responsible for shaping it not only have various tools at their disposal but also different perspectives for analyzing the situation.

When considering the family as a social institution, it is essential to primarily examine its economic condition, the relationship between the family and the labour market, and societal expectations regarding the family's role in education or production. The family can be a significant economic entity. Family businesses are one of the substantial economic forces. Therefore, the question arises as to whether a family business should be treated differently than a business run

by non-family members. Of course, one can argue that thinking about economic or legal support for family businesses as part of family policy is an overly broad extension of the scope of this policy. However, it is not entirely unfounded. It all depends on the adopted concept. Considerations about the economic dimension of the family are an important trend in social research (Giza-Poleszczuk, 2005, pp. 172–216), and it is common to perceive family policy as a tool to eliminate economic inequalities.

Solidarity, which enabled the satisfaction of needs, was the main force uniting families in traditional societies. Being a member of a family allowed individuals to achieve their life goals. Nowadays, people design their lives as individuals. Family has become a voluntary choice rather than a necessity. Furthermore, in traditional societies, a person starting a family could rely on established patterns and rituals to determine their position and duties toward other family members. Today, it is much more complicated. People who decide to commit to a long-term relationship must put in much more effort to establish common norms, principles of living, and ways to reconcile different plans and expectations. Researchers consistently point out the consequences of individualization (Slany, 2002; Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk, 2004; Szlendak, 2010, Herudzińska, 2012).

The new family situation also necessitates establishing new rules of marital shared responsibility. Challenging cultural stereotypes associated with gender-assigned tasks results from social changes in general but becomes a specific requirement in the context of social mobility and cultural diversity, leading to an increasing number of multicultural families. Perhaps one of the goals of family policy should be the dissemination of knowledge and best practices in the everyday life of mixed families. Information about such families often reaches the public only in the context of conflicts, such as parental child abductions. Meanwhile, daily life requires partners (and their social environments) to have a wealth of knowledge and openness. It also increases the complexity of creating a new social entity, the family. Spouses from different cultures sometimes bring entirely different patterns of relationships and norms. Moreover, members of such families often encounter difficult situations and a lack of understanding at work, in school, or in healthcare settings. It is worth asking whether educational campaigns about intercultural differences or employing individuals in municipalities prepared to provide assistance (in the form of assistance or mediation) in such situations could also be considered part of family policy.

A highly significant factor shaping the family's current situation is also the media representations, images of family life depicted in the media, which

then transform into perceptions and expectations. The multitude and diversity of messages about lifestyle can sometimes create uncertainty, especially since, for the sake of dramatizing the plot, the presented situations are often exaggerated, and cases that occur very rarely are presented as typical. Furthermore, the influence of media messages does not apply solely to selected audience groups. Young people can form their perceptions of family life based on the relationships of celebrities and influencers on Instagram. The family life portrayed there – romantic vacations on tropical beaches and delightful children playing on a clean, white, fluffy carpet – may not necessarily reflect reality but can create unrealistic expectations. On the other hand, older media consumers who use social media with less intensity but watch television more frequently may, based on TV series and reality shows, become convinced that every family harbors some hidden secrets, concealed matters that destroy relationships, people are insincere and dishonest with each other. Of course, family policy cannot involve censorship or financing film productions depicting positive family life models. However, it should not be forgotten that the problems faced by family policy are part of a very complex landscape. Content in the public domain depicting the family as an authoritarian, oppressive institution that hinders the development of emotional and sexual freedom, especially for young people and women, also strongly influences social awareness. Such narratives align with a strong discourse emphasizing self-awareness, agency, self-discovery, and the pursuit of individual development plans.

The public discourse highlighting women's reluctance to have children and focusing on women's attitudes neglects the overall picture. Prospective parents live in a specific social environment, and they can achieve their life goals not only through their abilities and predispositions but also based on the conditions in which they can function. Fears about the health of the woman and the child during pregnancy, prenatal care conditions, and medical care for children are factors taken into account when women make decisions about having a child. However, questions about the sustainability of the relationship, the responsibility of both parents, and institutional and social support enabling parents to function in the labor market according to their needs are equally important.

Accompanying the family, intergenerational conflicts in the fluid modernity have never lost their traditional strength, and sometimes they are further reinforced due to technological advancements, leading to reverse socialization, where parents or grandparents learn practical skills from their children or grandchildren, necessary in the digital world. Taking care of aging parents (and sometimes parents and grandparents), which used to be naturally distributed

among several siblings, now falls on the shoulders of only children, often living far from their family home. This poses additional challenges for family policy. The dilemma faced by legislators is as follows: should the care of individuals requiring support (children, sick individuals, older people, people with disabilities) be the responsibility of public institutions (government, local, or private) or should it be the responsibility of families, with the state providing support? Resolving this fundamental dilemma is not a black-and-white issue; it is about choosing the primary direction. It is impossible to provide comprehensive care through a single type of social actor. One answer leads to further choices, such as what form family support should take: financial, personnel-related, educational, etc.

The socio-economic and cultural contexts described above create a complex picture. Many researchers and social observers have expressed the belief that civilizational changes will lead to the decline of the family. However, it seems that these predictions are not accurate. The family satisfies deep human needs, starting from the need for security, belonging, and recognition. The fact that we see many examples of individuals being uprooted from traditional communities today does not mean that humans do not need such communities. The family continues to be a place for creating, preserving, and transmitting moral and emotional resources. When we focus on the family as a community, it often turns out to be the best remedy for surviving the processes of change or the decline of other social institutions. The family is changing, just like the world in which it operates is changing. Consequently, policies aimed at supporting families often need to adapt to these changes. So, let's examine a few directions of thinking about family policy.

2. Solutions

As the literature and the analysis of specific examples demonstrate, the main objectives of family policy are: poverty reduction, compensation for the costs of raising children, employment support, gender equality, support for early childhood development, and increasing the birth rate (Thévenon, 2011).

Poverty reduction primarily relies on special benefits granted to low-income families, especially those with children. Significant in this regard is the support for housing (such as public housing or housing allowances). The costs of child-rearing are compensated through financial benefits or tax reductions, but since they are typically not dependent on a family's income level, paradoxically, they may contribute to increasing economic inequality. Employment sup-

port programs are based on the assumption that a higher employment rate leads to greater state stability, and the utilization of parents' workforce potential (including highly educated women) fosters economic growth. Family policy tools in this context include parental leave with guaranteed income and job security, childcare services tailored to working parents' needs, and a tax and social benefits system that rewards workforce participation. These same measures are aimed at ensuring gender equality. Parental leave is also a form of support for a child in the early stages of development. Regardless of the cultural differences in various countries, there is a fairly common agreement on the value of pre-school education. Therefore, it is about providing parents with the opportunity to spend time with their children (leave), but also to continue their professional work, essential for ensuring economic security. All these activities supporting families with children can also contribute to an increase in the birth rate. The aging of societies brings long-term negative consequences for economic growth and state stability. Therefore, although increasing fertility is rarely the primary goal of family policy, it is a desirable side effect (Thévenon, 2011). As is evident from the above discussion, this approach to family policy means that the family is primarily seen as an institution related to child-rearing.

The issue of defining family policy in comparative research has been a prominent concern since the 1990s. Combined with the theory of the welfare state, family policy is described through categories as diverse as pension policy or employment policy. Within the same welfare state, family policy can represent different ideas and objectives. The concepts used by researchers to determine the changing functions of the family and the expected state involvement in family life are familization and defamilization. However, even these terms are not consistently defined. Defamilization policy can be understood as state provisions (social policies and regulations) that reduce caregiving and financial responsibilities, as well as dependencies among family members. Such a definition is therefore related to perceiving family policy through its effects: how the adopted measures shape intergenerational and gender relations. Familization policy, on the other hand, refers to regulations that support family member dependencies while simultaneously aiming to eliminate potential negative consequences of various levels of these dependencies: financial dependency of women on the family breadwinner, children on parental care, and elderly individuals on their adult children. Indicators of defamilization policy may include: providing childcare for children under 3 years, access to elderly care (both in the form of external caregivers and nursing homes), and long and paid parental leave. Indicators of familization policy, on the other hand, would include shorter and unpaid maternity and parental leave, legal obligations for children to support

their parents, and universal child benefits, tax deductions, or child tax credits (Lohmann and Zagel, 2016, p. 61).

Parental leave taken by both parents has a positive impact on the relationship between partners (Goldacker et al., 2022), and comparative research results from 27 European countries demonstrate significant changes in the position of women in the labour market. This also applies to single parents. The opportunity to take paid leave improves the quality of life and well-being for such families. Statistically, single mothers work more frequently and for longer durations if they can take advantage of parental leave. Furthermore, a positive influence of such policies has been observed, even for single mothers who were not employed before giving birth because such a system facilitates their entry into the job market. This is crucial because single parenthood is associated with the risk of poverty and social exclusion (Bartova et al., 2022). The consequences of different family policy models for women's employment vary, but there is always an observable connection between state-implemented solutions and women's positions in the labour market. Lack of access to childcare facilities (nurseries, preschools) and the absence of maternity leave negatively impact women's employment. However, overly long leave periods, unconditional child benefits, and joint taxation of couples have a similar adverse effect, although the advantage of these solutions is the reduction of economic disparities. Women's participation in the labour market remains a result of systemic state actions, collective attitudes, and individual beliefs and resources (Ferragina, 2019). Similar relationships, also concerning the impact of family policy on gender equality, are shown in American research (Gao and Ruan, 2022), indicating a certain universality of these relationships.

The choice of social and economic forms of family support, especially for families with young children, is inherently linked to the explicit or implicitly assumed acceptance of certain ethical and legal principles. For instance, should financial support for families be linked to their economic status and only granted up to a certain wealth threshold? Public financial resources are always limited, and allowances, tax breaks, or subsidies must be based on selective criteria. The issue of reducing gender and economic inequalities through family policy tools has become one of the most frequently discussed topics in recent years in social policy research (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2019).

Critiques that often arise in public discourse (regardless of the country and political system) include, for example, the disconnect between declarations emphasizing the importance of family and fertility growth and the adoption of a highly liberal housing policy and acceptance of employment arrangements that hinder young people's ability to become independent.

Work conditions significantly influence families. Besides fundamental issues related to the availability of employment and wage levels, it also involves stress arising from work overload, job insecurity, and the pace of life, as well as everyday matters such as starting work, transportation options to school and work, and the feasibility of balancing parental work commitments, children's education, and family life. European countries dealing with an aging population invest in programs aimed at increasing birth rates. Comparing different models of these programs is challenging because they adopt different definitions and evaluation criteria for the key aspects of this policy. In the case of childcare, these criteria may relate to accessibility, affordability, quality, and flexibility (Yerkes and Yavornik, 2019). The key factor is the opportunities parents have to organize childcare. Nurseries and preschools remain a constant point in family policy programs. The question arises about where and by whom they should be organized. By municipalities and located close to home and school, allowing parents to leave both older and younger children in one place? Or perhaps near the workplace? Imagine a situation where parents work quite far from home, and commuting takes about an hour. Maybe they would like the preschool and school to be close to their home so they can drop off their children in the morning (in an early morning club), then use the help of a grandmother or a caregiver who would pick up the children and spend time with them at home until the parents return. However, another scenario can be imagined, where parents would like the preschool and school to be near their workplace, and the children would commute with them, and the time spent in traffic would simply be a family bonding moment. Without determining which solution would be better, it can be assumed that individual choice is crucial. Ensuring flexibility in solutions is perhaps one of the most challenging tasks facing family policy today. It seems quite obvious that such flexibility also requires rethinking the level of decision-making institutions, determining what should be the responsibility of local municipalities and what should remain under ministerial obligations.

Policies implemented in Iceland, Slovenia, or Sweden, where the focus is on the development of public services and promoting gender equality, offer entirely different possibilities for providing childcare than the policies in the Netherlands, Australia, or the United Kingdom, where commercial institutions play a primary role. Defamilization, which involves shifting some caregiving tasks outside the family, can result in reducing gender and class inequalities in balancing work and family life. However, several conditions need to be met. The opportunity for childcare means the chance to use services from public or private institutions so that parents, especially mothers, can work professionally. Acces-

sibility includes rules for allocating places in nurseries or preschools, preference rules, or determining fee amounts. Affordability pertains to the cost of these fees and who can afford to pay them. These are three preliminary conditions: opportunity, accessibility, and affordability. Only after meeting these conditions can we move on to the next evaluation criterion, which is the quality of care (Yerkes and Yavornik, 2019).

Certain assumptions made in designing family policies raise suspicion and criticism. Technological solutionism, which involves excessive reliance on technical solutions, is one such approach. This primarily concerns the ability to collect and utilize various data, especially in the case of the need to support families with dysfunctionality. When the public learns about a family tragedy from time to time, there is often an explanation that the lack of a proper response from institutions (social services, schools, police) resulted from the lack of information flow about the specific family. Therefore, great hopes are placed in technological solutions that can help integrate data. However, the mere collection of data does not solve the problem. Issues related to the security of sensitive data and the economic and human costs are important. For example, it must be determined whether it is more favorable for an experienced social worker to meet with the family or spend that time entering data into the system. The key question is whether the algorithm will accurately identify families in need of special attention and whether there will be enough qualified social care workers to carry out real interventions (Edwards et al., 2022).

Another perspective that raises objections is treating family policy as an investment, with families merely seen as places for the production of human capital. In this view, the focus is on means that allow for the reconciliation of professional and private life. Parental leave, public child care, and early education are regarded as instruments for developing human capital and supporting workforce participation. Such an understanding of social policy is criticized by both progressive and traditionalist circles. The emphasis on the labour market deepens the devaluation of unpaid care work and gender inequalities. Prioritizing human capital and labour market usefulness restricts family policy to economic and demographic matters while overlooking issues of well-being, economic security for children and women, and the welfare of all family members (Hajek 2023).

Specific implementations of family policy are the result of many factors, starting from the political system and traditions. The selected issues and research findings described above show various relationships between the goals, tools, and effects of family policy. However, all these elements stem from the adopted vision of the family and the initially assumed relationship between the state and the family, as well as their mutual obligations.

Conclusion

The nuclear family, which dominated European countries, is believed by many to be in crisis today, breaking down, and its social and cultural significance gradually diminishing. There is no doubt that current social and cultural changes require a rethinking of the characteristics and functions of the family. Consequently, this also applies to possible actions within family policy. As early as the 1970s, Christopher Lasch (1995, p. xxiii) pointed out that treating the family as a separate entity that can be analyzed in isolation is unproductive and erroneous. Ongoing globalization, increased intercultural contacts, technological developments, shifts in social awareness, and new geopolitical contexts influence the condition of contemporary societies and, as a result, the situation of families.

Family policy addressing the family as a fundamental social institution can take various forms resulting from adopted assumptions, defined objectives, and accepted strategies. In social research, it is considered as a perspective through which the government's actions and their consequences for families are analyzed. It is analyzed through assumed goals and action directions, the structures within which it is implemented, the functions it fulfills, and the processes of change it initiates. As this article demonstrates, considerations about family policy should take into account actions that are directly addressed to families as well as those that indirectly affect their well-being. Direct actions include the enactment of legal regulations regarding family composition, such as rules related to marriage (age, gender), divorce procedures, adoption rights, and foster care. Direct actions also include economic support for families, broadly understood – from tax incentives to allowances. Childcare and care for dependent individuals are integral components of family policy. As mentioned multiple times in the text, processes and actions that indirectly influence family relationships, longevity, and stability of families are also difficult to determine and manage.

In descriptions of the family, various authors often use the metaphor of a hearth. The family functions when the hearth burns, which means when the family is nourished by love, respect, and the mutual attachment of its members. However, other resources are also necessary, such as stability and security. The most important aspects revolve around the hearth. What does this flame illuminate, and who does it warm? Ulrich Beck, in his book „Risk Society” written years ago, explained that it is essentially about the prefix „post” because it is an attempt to describe a state in which we must define a new social order (Beck 2002, p. 15). Perhaps today we find ourselves in a situation where many

approaches and actions within family policy need redefinition, so that we can move from a post-family reflection (moving away from the family as a value that needs to be addressed) to a pre-family reflection (striving for the family as a value that needs to be supported).

Perhaps the metaphor of a hearth should be replaced with the metaphor of a candle. A hearth signifies that the family gathers around it, and good social policy in this context could provide a sturdy fireplace, a woodpile, and proper ventilation. A candle allows for greater mobility, is smaller, but easier to pass on, light, and share. In this perspective, family policy could provide a candlestick, a secure container for carrying the candle while traveling, and matches to be able to light it. The image of a candle that an individual can hold in their hands and, depending on their choice, share its light with others, is closer to the individualistic imagination of contemporary society than the image of a large family gathered around a hearth. The image of a candle that can be safely stowed away in one's pocket and carried to a different place in case of danger is closer to the realities of a risk society, where mobility in search of better consumer choices intertwines with the necessity to embark on a journey due to crises (economic, military, or environmental). Metaphors can be a good starting point for reflection and an impulse to change one's thinking, but they do not replace the need to determine: what are we dealing with? And what do we want to do about it?

In this article, an attempt was made to answer only the first question, indicating cultural phenomena that create the conditions for the functioning of the family: the fears and needs of individuals living in a highly diverse and risky world, who want to pursue individual scenarios, where hope for happiness, love, and security persists alongside concerns. The family is consistently among the most valued values (Eurobarometer 2021).

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