

### **PUBLIC OPINION FOCUS ON FAMILY BENEFITS IN THE CONTEXT OF DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS**

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***Summary.** This paper aims to reveal people's attitudes and expectations toward family policy, in particular family benefits as instruments for policy implementation during the period of significant social changes over the last 20 years. We keep in mind that the subjective ingredient of policy analysis, i.e. people's evaluation depends on socio-political and economic context that defines the frames for social policy functioning. The authors' analysis is based on (has ) two tasks: 1) to outline some main findings from recent national and international surveys focused on the topic of people's evaluation of social policy measures; 2) to present online forums analysis using media data collected during the period 2011-2013. Through analysis of internet forums and thematic analysis the main topics, principles and differences in people's attitudes toward parental leave have been demonstrated in forums discussions. The mixed picture of opinions is in line with the contradictory (changes initiated in the social policy after 1990) acts social policy has initiated after 1990. The analysis indicates that people's discourses on social and family policy are very important in a process of construction of evidence-based policy and its efficacy.*

**Key words:** family policy, family benefits, parental leave, assessment of the social policy measures, online forums analysis, thematic analysis

The aging of the population and the persistent low fertility rates in the recent decades in Europe, make the policies and measures that governments create and implement in support of families, children and parents more and more significant. Turning away from the explicit pro-natalist goals, since the mid-90s of the past century more and more European governments implement policies that are directed at improving the well-being of families and children, which indirectly aims at increasing birth rates. The policies that benefit families and children are conceptualized and realised through the policies for gender equality, securing a balance be-

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tween work and family life and a longer paid maternity and parental leave, accessible network of high-quality institutional childcare and, not least, direct financial benefits, related to monthly allowances for children, once-off payments, etc.

The philosophy behind the policies that families and children benefit from is directed towards a comprehensive change of the environment, in which young generations live and work, so that they can accomplish their full potential, including in family life and in their role as parents, which in the end would lead to the “demographic renewal” of Europe.

## **FAMILY SOCIAL POLICY – EFFICIENCY PRINCIPLES**

In the specialised literature there are various and often contradictory standpoints about the effects of family policies on fertility rates (Neyer & Andersson, 2008; Gauthier & Philipov, 2008). For example, the higher birth rates in France and the Scandinavian countries in recent decades have been explained mostly with the generous social policy directed at families and children in these welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Hoem, 1990; Castles, 2003; Pailhe, Rossier & Toulemon, 2008). Others, however, argue for the marginal effects of family intervention on the birthrate levels (Demeny, 2003, 2007; Hoem, 2008).

In a new study of the effects of the package of measures, including significant financial incentives for increasing the fertility rates in Russia (the so called “maternal capital”), Frejka and Zakharov demonstrate that reproductive intentions have not changed since 2007, when the new measures were introduced. They draw the conclusion that the pro-natalist measures of 2007 have produced the effect of decreasing the reproductive age and the intervals between the births, which increases the periodic birth rates, but does not lead to an increase of the fertility rates of the cohort women born after 1970 (Frejka & Zakharov, 2013: 641-643). Still, whether supportive or skeptical of the positive effects of social policies on birth rates, many researchers highlight the need for specialized macro- and micro-, as well as comparative international studies on family policies and reproductive attitudes and behaviour of people (Aassve et al, 2006; Andersson, 2004; Frejka et al, 2008; Gauthier, 2007, 2008; Neyer, 2003; Hohn, Avramov & Kotowska, 2008; Thevenon, 2008). This need is without a doubt dictated by the social concern over the seriousness of the demographic problem that has been increasing in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Family policy is viewed as a significant part of social policy and is defined as social security, and protection of families through a broad set of instruments and measures in support of family values (Stoyanova, Fileva, A. Kirova, K. Kirova, Gocheva, 1997; Keremidchieva, 1998; Fileva, 2013). The terms that are used are similar or identical, such as “family policy”, family social policy”, “policy for the family”. The end goal of family social policy is focused on the well-being of families as a whole and their members in particular and on decreasing the social inequalities. In Bulgaria the number of children who are brought up in families turns out to be one of the most significant factors for differentiation of the material and general social status of families, particularly for the reproduction of poverty (NSI, 2003).

In a broad sense, family policy includes measures that are related to health, education, social security, transport, consumption etc., which directly or indirectly influence families’ standard of living. In more specific terms, family policy is limited to