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Editorial

Fragile Pronatalism and Reproductive Futures in European Post-Socialist Contexts

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Abstract

This editorial seeks to define fragile pronatalism by highlighting why pronatalism in the examined Central and Eastern European post-socialist countries should be considered fragile. Moreover, it aims to map desirable future changes in fertility policies in the region. Following a brief presentation of the articles contained in this thematic issue, our concluding thoughts complete this editorial.

Keywords

barriers to childbearing; Central and Eastern Europe; childlessness; family; fertility policies; fertility; pronatalism; reproduction

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Fragile Pronatalism? Barriers to Parenthood, One-Child Families, and Childlessness in European Post-Socialist Countries” edited by Ivett Szalma (Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence / Corvinus University of Budapest), Hana Hašková (Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences), Livia Oláh (Stockholm University), and Judit Takács (Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence).

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1. Fragile Pronatalism?

Pronatalism is considered to imply “encouragement of all births as conducive to individual, family and social well-being” (Heitlinger, 1991, p. 344). Based on this definition, policies in post-socialist countries are not purely pronatalist. Single parents, same-sex couples, Roma, and low-income families are frequently excluded from the circle of those who are encouraged to have children, or the policies impose explicit barriers to their parenting. The term selective pronatalism has been used to describe such policies in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries that were also present even before the 1989–1990 political system change (see, for example, Hašková & Dudová, 2020).

In addition to selectivity, the other common feature of post-socialist family policies is the way how governments encourage “desirable” childbearing. Financial measures such as generous maternity benefits, paid family leaves, and/or housing subsidies dominate among these. Another frequently used measure in this region is family taxation, which strengthens the traditional gendered divisions by encouraging men’s breadwinner roles and mothers to withdraw from the labour market to carry out full-time childcare and household activities. At the same time, support for gender equality is missing in the region. For example, none of these countries has introduced fathers’ quotas on parental leaves except Slovenia (Eurofound, 2019). Public childcare for children under the age of three is extremely limited

in post-socialist states (OECD, 2022). Generous financial measures and tax subsidies may reinforce traditional gender roles while policies that exclude particular social groups from reproduction contribute to low fertility. Consequently, pronatalism, built on selective, heteronormative, and exclusionary measures is fragile in CEE countries.

2. Reproductive Futures

In a recent overview of changing global childbearing patterns, Skirbekk (2022, p. 372) argued that today “most fertility policies primarily focus on improving reproductive autonomy and reducing unintended births, as opposed to reaching some specific, quantifiable target.” Post-socialist policies do not adhere to this completely, as seen in the restriction of abortion in Poland in 2021, or gays and lesbians experiencing (legally) “prescribed childlessness” (Takács, 2018, p. 70) in CEE countries. People, especially those belonging to under-privileged social groups fail to realize their fertility plans given insecurities related to financial difficulties or partnership challenges (as shown in the contributions by Monika Mynarska and Zuzanna Brzozowska, as well as that of Sunnee Billingsley and Livia Oláh) whereas (voluntary) childless persons are exposed to policy proposals aiming to punish childless people (as demonstrated by Dorota Szelewa).

To increase reproductive autonomy governments should aim at eliminating barriers to realizing personal fertility ideals across all population groups. Prospective parents also need adequate knowledge to achieve reproductive autonomy. Governments should secure access to evidence-based, non-biased, and up-to-date knowledge about reproductive issues, especially for young people in CEE countries, where sexuality knowledge transfers are limited and anti-gender movements have recently grown.

3. Thematic Issue Overview

Fertility decisions, trajectories, and circumstances leading to childlessness and one-child families are under-researched in CEE countries. The trends indicate that childlessness and one-child families have been on the rise in the region since the 1990s. Quantitative data help measure and compare the magnitude, speed, timing, and circumstances of such fertility changes and the relations between fertility ideals and outcomes. At the same time, qualitative data can capture meaning-construction and help to uncover and contextualize how people interpret their reproductive decisions, trajectories, and circumstances. This thematic issue, applying both quantitative and qualitative approaches, expands existing research by focusing on the region, addressing the barriers to parenthood (Billingsley & Oláh, 2022; Hašková et al., 2022; Ishchanova, 2022; Šprocha, 2022; Szalma & Takács, 2022) and attitudes regarding parenthood (Dimitrova & Kotzeva, 2022; Mynarska & Brzozowska,

2022; Paksi et al., 2022; Shpakovskaya & Chernova, 2022; Szczuka, 2022; Szelewa, 2022). These eleven articles, including two comparative studies, cover altogether 12 countries: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Slovakia.

Billingsley and Oláh (2022) studied cohort patterns of co-residential relationships as potential contributors to declining fertility in five CEE countries and six post-Soviet states. They showed that the number of years in a union before age 30 declined in the former group, due to postponement of partnership formation and increasing union instability. In Hungary, where the decrease was most pronounced, abstaining from a partnership entirely has also contributed to the decrease. No trends toward fewer years in unions were seen in the former Soviet republics indicating a limited role of early union dynamics in the fertility decline there. The authors conclude that a better understanding is needed of the relationship between unions and childbearing if partnership dynamics are to be considered in policymaking.

Šprocha (2022) analysed cohort childlessness and the prevalence of one-child families in Slovakia, linked to fertility postponement. Postponed first births were realized later to a greater extent than postponed second children, resulting in changing parity structures. The lack of comprehensive policy measures to mitigate long-term labour market disadvantages related to motherhood is suggested to shape fertility trends. The insufficient quality and availability of childcare, inflexible working hours, and the gendered division of paid and unpaid work are singled out as in urgent need of a policy response.

Ishchanova (2022) analysed second-birth intentions in Belarus given the importance of low second childbearing for the newly emerging “small family” pattern there. Relying on mixed institutional and informal childcare support was seen to be associated with higher intentions to have a second child, but being a woman, aged late-twenties or above, with a first child older than six years suppressed such intentions. The author thus argues for gender-egalitarian family policy measures beyond cash benefits along with motivating men to take a fairer share in the care of children to reduce barriers to second childbearing in the country.

Hašková et al. (2022) also examined segments of the population who face severe difficulties in becoming parents. While in most Northern and Western European countries it is possible to adopt a child as a same-sex couple and there is an increase in lesbian, gay and queer families in the CEE countries, parenthood of non-heterosexual persons lacks recognition. This article gives insight into how Czech gay and bisexual men adjust to the local conditions in their parenting desires and intentions.

The focus in Szalma and Takács (2022) is also on men. They analysed how the political regime change of 1989–1990 interfaced with the life course of Hungarian childless men over 50. To structure and understand the barriers to childbearing they applied Merton’s

anomie theory and examined the increasing discrepancy between cultural goals and institutionalized means during and after the transition period.

Paksi et al. (2022) explored barriers to motherhood in a male-dominated high-skilled profession. Their interviews with young female engineers in Hungary reveal how the pressure for high productivity from the professional and organizational culture of the field, accompanied by traditional societal expectations of women as solely responsible for childcare, prevent them from realizing their childbearing intentions.

Mynarska and Brzozowska (2022) examined how perceived costs and benefits of having children affected reproductive intentions of childless persons in Poland. The authors found that women took both costs and benefits into account while men only regarded the benefits. They pointed out that any policy measure aiming to encourage parenthood can be successful only if it addresses the main reasons (i.e., obstacles as well as motivations) people have for limiting their childbearing. Their results show that the recently emerged negative educational gradient to childlessness is not limited to behaviour, but appears also in intentions, suggesting fertility polarization is related to uncertainty.

Dimitrova and Kotzeva (2022) revealed a decrease in negative attitudes and a strong increase of neutral stances to voluntary childlessness in Bulgaria in the first decades of the 2000s. This applied especially to women, the unmarried childless, highly educated, employed, and ethnic majority individuals who also had stronger non-conformist attitudes and were more likely to reject traditional authorities. The authors point to the need for more effective gender equality measures likely to lead to greater tolerance and respect for individual reproductive choices, including the option of not becoming a parent.

Shpakovskaya and Chernova (2022) come to a similar conclusion based on interviews with Russian middle-class working mothers. In the context of pronatalist policies, which focus on financial incentives rather than gender equality and work-care reconciliation, young mothers use “pragmatic individualism” to cope with the instability of the labour market and their marriage. Based on this logic, they limit their childbearing in line with the class-based rationality of respectability.

Szelewa (2022) presents the first research study of voluntary childless persons’ views about family policies in Poland. If we consider children as a public good because of their future contribution to the workforce and to financing the welfare state, then this brings an obligation for non-parents to share the costs of raising children. If non-parents contribute to children’s welfare, it is important to know their opinions on family policies. The author’s qualitative research shows that Polish childfree persons present favourable views on state support for families, but they prefer investing in childcare services in order to enable parents to participate in the labour market, instead of providing cash benefits or mea-

asures that are perceived as a punishment for the childless persons, such as linking the level of pension benefits with the number of children.

Szczuka’s (2022) innovative research calls for more attention to a timely issue: the possible link between concerns about climate change and the ideal number of children, which she studied in the Visegrad countries. Her results reveal unexpected cross-country variations in the relationship, climate concerns being positively associated with smaller family size ideals in Hungary and Czechia, unlike in Slovakia and Poland. The author pointed to a shift needed in the environmental narrative to suit the normative context. This research raises the question of whether pronatalist family policies and green policies are at all compatible.

4. Conclusion

The articles in this thematic issue provide evidence that there are various forms of attitudinal and structural barriers and gender inequalities influencing reproductive decisions and behaviour. In addition, new aspects are raised such as reproductive rights of same-sex couples, reproductive choices of women in science, and climate-change-related anxieties affecting family size ideals.

So far, pronatalist policies in CEE countries have been modestly effective at best. In this thematic issue, many studies show that financial support is not sufficient to increase fertility rates. They call attention to the poor and inadequate provision of childcare services, difficulties in work and family reconciliation, and highlight policies that exclude certain social groups from reproduction. Promoting gender and social equality is seen as enabling the realization of personal fertility ideals, as demonstrated in Northern Europe. However, fertility rates declined even in Nordic societies in the last decade. There is perhaps no general recipe for family policies and instead of asking how to get people to have more children, governments should ask how to best adapt societies to families having fewer children (Skirbekk, 2022).

Future research should also examine the knowledge of fertile age individuals about issues of reproduction such as the relationship between ageing and fecundity decline, the drivers and prevalence of infertility among men and women, and the possibilities and limits of assisted reproduction technologies. Researchers should use multidimensional approaches taking into account, at the macro level, norms, values, structures of care, pandemics, and climate change, and, at the micro level, partnership formations, access to infertility treatment, precarious jobs, and other types of uncertainties, potentially affecting reproductive decision-making processes.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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