

Tomasz Inglot, Minnesota State University

Abstract

Our disaggregated analysis of family policy developments since 2000 (Part Two of this study) reveals new opportunities for path departure in all three countries, with political actors (and policy entrepreneurs) and ideational shifts playing a major role. Individual and group policy entrepreneurs in Poland, organizations of large families in Poland and Hungary, and local government activists and middle class women in Romania skillfully exploited domestic political channels and newly available international assistance from the European Union to influence policy change in family allowances, childcare, and social assistance. Still, Poland represents the only example of an attempted “paradigmatic” shift in family policy across the board, dealing with several major program areas at once. Even there, however, the proposed changes fall short of a dramatic overhaul of the core programs such as the major cash transfers for the families and children. In all instances, the most powerful players faced formidable obstacles in the form of institutional legacies of preexisting programs. The most successful reforms such as the introduction of new benefits (tax credits) in all three countries or recent expansion of kindergarten services (early education) in Poland and Romania have taken place on the margins of national family policy. We suggest that only when family policies become significantly less reliant on the historically most entrenched pillars of social insurance, and in case of Romania and Hungary also equally well-consolidated employment-related budgetary cash transfers such as family allowance and childcare leaves, and focus more on non-traditional policy goals, now supported by the new middle classes, such as the well-being of children and care opportunities for working mothers, we might witness significant cumulative path departure. Finally, since 2000 we observe an accelerated merger of conservative, pronatalist ideologies with a neoliberal emphasis on individual rights reserved primarily for working families, emerging urban middle classes, and individual workingwomen across all three countries but with varied intensity and effect. Poland serves as the best illustration of this trend; followed by Romania. Hungary under the second Orbán cabinet exemplifies the lasting power of traditional state paternalism, reinforced by the failure of previous social democratic and neoliberal reforms. Finally, the continued salience of demography has bolstered the influence of many pre-existing institutions and patterns of family policy across the post communist region, with Hungary as the leading example, followed by Romania, and lastly by Poland where for the first time ever population concerns elevated this category of social policies, targeting the young rather than the elderly, to the very top of the national agenda.

