

A stylized illustration of several tall, thin stems with circular, textured heads, resembling flowers or seed pods, rendered in black and white. The stems are of varying heights and are clustered together on the left side of the page.

Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Family Affairs

29th
session

National position papers

Summary

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Introduction

This document is based on the national position papers¹ received on the theme of the 29th session of the Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Family Affairs. It provides a snapshot of recent developments in the member states and identifies points relevant to the discussion at the Ministerial Conference. Member states prepared their national position papers following indicative guidelines and were free to address some or all the issues identified. Therefore, the fact there is no reference to a country under a heading does not mean that this country does not have a policy on the subject.²

The first chapter of this document outlines short summaries of the main challenges in the field of family policy, which member states consider important in the context of people's wish to have children and other demographic developments. In the second chapter, an overview is given of the main policy measures taken by member states to improve the situation of families with children. Finally, chapter three summarises member states' contributions as to which family policy areas should be particularly addressed by the Council of Europe in the future.

1. Main challenges for family policy linked to people's wish to have children

Austria

In light of the recent demographic developments in Austria, the main challenges are associated with supporting young people to start a family and making communities including towns and cities liveable places for all generations. Strategies employed to tackle these issues aim at providing financial security and fostering poverty reduction. Major family policy goals in Austria include reconciliation of work and family life and encouraging fathers to assume an active parental role in the family. Additionally Austria pursues a programme which covers up to 70% of the costs of in vitro fertilisation to help couples who are involuntarily without children.

Azerbaijan

The birth rate in Azerbaijan dropped in the early 90s following a war that resulted in thousands of deaths, millions of refugees and economic decline. The situation has since improved due to numerous policy initiatives causing a higher life-expectancy and an increase in birth rates. There is an increase in the number of women in employment and a preference for smaller families with two children, a trend resulting from demands of the market economy. The government recognises the need to strengthen family planning efforts and improve reproductive health. Additionally, abortions within the 25 to 29 age-group have increased to a point of concern. The government is therefore focusing on family planning through relevant state programs, in particular in the area of reproductive health.

¹ Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

² The national position papers have been produced in a single document (MMF-XXIX-HF (2009) 4 prov.1).

Belgium

Overall, the fertility rate is not a major government concern in Belgium. Family allowances remain comparatively generous for parents, especially for families with 3 or more children, irrespective of income level. Parenting support is a priority family policy issue. Belgium combines preventive actions with efforts to aid families experiencing difficulties such as divorce and housing problems. The government is investing, as a priority, in family support services and programmes to empower families in need.

Bulgaria

The demographic situation in Bulgaria reveals a drop in the population growth, decrease in birth rate, an ageing population and a high mortality rate. Children born out of wedlock are becoming commonplace. In response to the current situation, a national strategy constituting of action plans has been adopted with emphasis on increasing birth rates, offering families support and achieving a high quality level of human capital. As the population ages, the number of elderly people having lost their independence and in need of intensive care, in particular those over the age of 70, is increasing. Therefore plans to develop the social services further in order to foster solidarity among generations are being considered.

Croatia

In contrast to a large number of European countries, over 90% of births in Croatia occur within marriages. There is a decline in birth rates which can be partly explained by an imbalance in the gender distribution resulting in a number of people failing to find a partner. The highest concentration of unmarried people is found in big cities. To some degree, Croatia is still suffering the consequences of the war such as infrastructure damage, leading to a change in the social and economic system and increased social insecurity. Young people who wish to have children are hindered by the country's insufficient social support, inadequate housing and a drop in employment rates. Those in employment having difficulty reconciling family and business are reluctant to get married. Therefore policy implemented is directed towards child welfare, successful parenting and better quality of family life.

Cyprus

Challenges that have risen from demographic and socio-economic changes in Cyprus include the changing family forms. With the rise of divorce, re-marriages and single parent households, families receive less support from extended family. Other issues are the changing individual roles within the family such as care obligations, and the complexity of family problems which have negative effects on children. National priorities are family and child protection and welfare, including issues such as, reconciling work and family life, and reducing the number of children in households suffering unemployment.

Czech Republic

Single parenthood is becoming increasingly common. The Czech Government is striving for real parental choice which considers different preferences of parents. It not only promotes working parents, but has an allowance for parents who chose to stay at home to care for their children as an alternative to employment. The Czech

Government is focusing on amending legislation in areas of childcare and employment in order to promote competent parenthood.

Denmark

The Danish welfare state and the high level of gender equality enable Danish families to combine men and women's participation in the labour market, family obligations and having children. The result is not only high activity rates among women, but also – in a European perspective – relatively high fertility rates. Recently published figures show an increase in fertility rates in Denmark in 2008. Danish family policy aims to ensure flexibility and freedom to plan family life as the families wish, promote the balance between family life and working life, and ensure that family policy and social policy are interconnected to benefit socially disadvantaged families.

Estonia

The birth rate has increased from 1.3 children per woman in the 1990s to 1.7 in 2008. Current priority in Estonian family policy is to improve the living environment of children, supporting parents through reconciliation of work and family life, and further development of the family benefits' system. Within recent years, an increasing attention to positive parenting can be seen in the government's policy formation and Estonia is working towards prohibiting corporal punishment.

Finland

A growing proportion of women are giving birth at a later age or remaining childless. The decision to have children is influenced by the uncertainty of the labour market and the financial status of families with children. The main challenge in Finland is the reconciliation of working life/ studying and family. More children and young people are at risk of poverty. Significant developments in family policy in Finland concern financial benefits for families, parental allowances and the new Child Welfare Act.

France

The fertility rate in France is one of the highest in Europe and the rate of female participation in the labour force has risen in the space of 30 years. Nearly 60% of children under the age of six have two working parents. Parents, in particular couples who are both in employment, very young couples, and lone parents, are finding it difficult to balance work and family life. Access to childcare is still a major factor in the decision to have a child. Therefore, France has set about improving childcare provision for young children, on the basis of a diversified approach encompassing both collective facilities and individual childminders. A strategy to increase childcare provision between 2009 and 2012 has been adopted together with reform of existing facilities, for example, forms of leave and the benefits system.

Germany

Seeking a sustainable family policy, Germany adopts a three dimensional approach which focuses on financial support of families, promotion of family-friendly infrastructures and a flexible work environment that allows sufficient time for parents to take care of their children. The most recent figures prove that three quarters of people in Germany consider the recently introduced well-paid parental allowance during 12

months to be a good thing. This view is shared by a number of professionals. Therefore the government intends expand on this policy.

Greece

Rapid demographic changes in Greece have resulted in an ageing of the population, decline in birth rates, social marginalisation of vulnerable groups such as women and immigrants, unemployment and destabilisation of the family unit. Unemployment is significantly higher in rural areas than the larger cities. Supported by various policy frameworks and legislation, the government focuses on family well-being through financial support, service provision and promoting flexibility in the workplace. A network has also been established to encourage family friendly practices in companies.

Hungary

Population decline has become a priority issue in Hungary. There is a trend of postponing marriage to the age of 25-29 and fertility among women in their 20s decreased by one third in the most recent one and half decades. The Hungarian family support institutions target not only at the promotion of having children, but also at the reduction of poverty. The proportion of budgetary costs paid for supporting families is relatively high, which shows that safeguarding the existence of families is as a priority in Hungary. Reconciliation of work and family life is seen as a key element both for increasing the employment rate and for improving the financial situation of families.

Ireland

Fertility rates in Ireland are amongst the highest in the EU and have increased since 1994, after a long declining trend. This is despite the increased labour force participation rate of women, increased housing costs and child care supports that require further development. Women in Ireland have traditionally had a late childbearing age. A striking feature of family life in Ireland over the past ten years has been the increase in the formation of 'new' families, as indicated by the increase in the numbers of first births. The traditional larger family has declined and children in Ireland are now more likely to grow up in small families. The approach adopted by the Irish Government to support people who have and who wish to have children includes statutory provisions such as entitlements to benefits and leave from employment to care for children e.g. maternity leave, parental leave.

Italy

The number of Italian families with a single child tends to be higher than in other countries, although the two-child family still prevails. Concerns include the declining birth rates, an ageing population and a significant decrease in the working age population. The limited number of children per woman is seen as the result of women's full participation in the labour market and their great difficulty in balancing work and family life. A low youth employment rate and a high cost of housing make it difficult for young people to do without their parents' support. Measures considered include increased social protection expenditure, reconciling family and working life and promoting formal and informal childcare networks.

Latvia

Birth rates in Latvia are particularly low, although there was an increase in 2007. Consequently Latvia is experiencing a population decline. The number of families

subject to poverty is high, particularly single parent families. Large families are equally at risk. A relevant survey revealed that people's hesitation in having children is mainly due to financial insecurity. Families with children find it difficult to access services such as pre-school educational establishments. Therefore the main challenge faced by the Latvian Government is associated with improving the financial situation of families and their access to support services. The National Development Plan 2007-2013 has integrated plans to support families with children and encourage an increase in birth rate.

Lithuania

One of the major family policy priorities in Lithuania is the creation of a family-friendly environment. The aim is to support the family's functions through the development of diverse family support services and programs which encourage positive attitudes towards the family. Measures were introduced to develop the provision of family-oriented services, reconcile work and family responsibilities and the social integration of children with disabilities. These measures also seek to consolidate the family unit, help those that want children and reduce the threat of demographic disproportions arising from the falling birth-rate.

Luxembourg

Although the amount of households in Luxembourg is diminishing, they are becoming increasingly diverse. There is a growth in population while the fertility rates continue to drop. A major component driving population growth is immigration. With a blooming economy which attracts employees from across the borders, the unemployment rate is significantly low and there is a decrease of households that live on a single income. In order to facilitate a greater freedom of choice for families, the government prioritises the creation of policies aimed at supporting children and reconciling family and work life through benefit and service provision.

Norway

In the Norwegian case, figures show that parents spend less time at work today compared to the early 1990s. However, women are still the main beneficiaries of parental leave schemes. Norway's challenges in family policy are three-fold. The main one being, to get fathers involved in childcare. Secondly, achieving good quality and affordable day care coverage for parents and thirdly, creating the possibility for parents to balance family and work. Coupled with other legislative amendments, an extension of the quota reserved for fathers is being considered while a cap has been placed on parents' contribution to day-care.

Poland

Polish women have expressed the desire to have more children; however the fertility rates are still low. According to demographic projections, the number of the inhabitants of Poland will decrease and there will be an increased gap between the number of deaths and births. With more people in employment, issues related to the reconciliation of work and family life have become a Polish government priority, and consequently measures such as additional leave options have been introduced. Furthermore legislation reform has occurred to allow shared responsibility between parents in child-rearing. Poland has adopted a strategy to ensure that legislation amendments are accompanied by media campaigns that contribute to promoting equality and improving women's image in the society.

Portugal

Considering the current demographic trends towards a significant reduction in the birth rate, the Portuguese Government has chosen to structure a set of incentives to promote a higher birth rate and to provide support to children, with a strategic dimension of intervention for the economic and social development of the country. In effect, various efforts have been implemented to reverse the trend of decreasing birth rates. The Government's strategy is based on reinforcing intervention for all kinds of families, keeping in mind the growing number of single parent families, mostly headed by women. It also seeks to provide support for better family planning and reinforce support to the income of families who decide to have children.

Romania

Since the 1990s, Romania has experienced a decline in population, the most significant being between 1992 and 2002 when the number reduced by 1.1 million. This was mainly influenced by a continual decrease of the birth rate and external migration. Another concurrent decrease was that of the young population aged under 14, while the percentage of the population aged over 65 increased. Today, the majority of households consist of families without children, and households with only one child are becoming commonplace. With the uncertainty of the current labour market, issues such as childbirth postponement to a later age, child abandonment and childlessness by choice are more prevalent in the Romanian society. These issues constitute the dominant challenge for family policy in Romania. Current government policy aims towards the provision of increased financial security to families, protection of children, establishment of greater work-life balance and overall modernisation of the family support system, for example, development of childcare services.

Serbia

Low birth rate has had an impact on Serbia's socio-economic development. Facilitating the reconciliation of professional and family life is a specific challenge. Serbia recognises the need for local communities to participate in actions aimed at encouraging young people to create a family and have children. A national strategy includes the definition of objectives and appropriate measures to support parenthood. Other supportive policies include the provision of in vitro fertilisation to all eligible childless couples.

Slovenia

In recent years, there has been a slight increase in fertility, a possible consequence of a decrease in the number of people who postpone childbearing to a later age. In spite of this, birth rates continue to be insufficient for population replacement. A further decline in birth rates is projected in approximately ten years, partly driven by the decrease in number of women of reproductive age. Achieving equal sharing of household duties between partners, enabling young people to give birth at an earlier age, creating a more family-friendly society, and increasing treatment availability for involuntary fertility, remains a challenge for Slovenia. A Children and Youth programme established in 2006 enhances the government's capacity to tackle these challenges better.

Spain

In the last 25 years, Spain has witnessed a decline in birth rate coupled with an ageing population. This is partly due to the integration of women in the labour market, changes in family models, periods of economic crisis and a shortage in accommodation and employment. In recent years, policy has focused on family support. Various plans have been adopted with a view to improve the protection of the family, guarantee equality of men and women and ensure adequate support to families.

Sweden

Sweden is facing an ageing population which is projected to accelerate over the coming years. However the birth rates are comparatively high, which partly is due to an ambitious and flexible family policy model that has been conducive to keeping birth rates stable even though the rate is closely linked to the employment rates. There is a cross cutting political consensus on the fundamentals of the family policy model which makes the system predictable and secure. The government recognises the importance of creating pre-conditions needed for parents to "take the plunge and become a parent or have another child". There has been considerable progress in creating suitable policies resulting in greater female participation in employment. Focus is now placed on the promotion of choice, flexibility at work and equal opportunities for women and men.

Switzerland

The average number of children per female is increasing, including those born to non-Swiss mothers, although it still insufficient for generation renewal. With more women in employment, there is a shortage of childcare facilities. More couples with three or more children are vulnerable to poverty. A significant number of women are without children, which is a trend more apparent in the German and Italian speaking regions compared with the French speaking regions. Therefore, challenges represented are associated with improving the work life balance, providing better compensation for family-related expenditure, and helping people wanting children by means of medically assisted procreation or adoption, with due regard for the best interests of the child. Swiss family policy offers an appropriate framework for people wishing to have children rather than encouraging people to have children. More money is directed towards creation of childcare facilities.

Turkey

In Turkey, there is a diminishing trend in the wish to have children. An increasing number of men desire financial security before starting a family. More women are participating in employment and therefore postponing marriage to a later date. Consequently the need for social services and assistance has increased. Therefore national priorities target, among others, educational programs for families and access to childcare.

Ukraine

In comparison to the rest of Europe, Ukraine has a significantly high marriage and divorce rate. The percentage of births outside marriage is increasing. The total fertility rate is especially low. A state programme to support the family has been established and government efforts aim at encouraging the growth of large families. The unemployment rate is high and this particular affects women. Policy objectives include legislation amendments that strengthen the lawful, moral and material bases of family

life to increase the economic independence and improve the social welfare of families with children.

United Kingdom

Along with its devolved administrations, the UK Government is committed to eradicating child poverty by 2020. The Government believes that work is the most sustainable route out of poverty, and jobless parents, including some single parents, are expected to actively seek work. The potential number of teenage fathers in the United Kingdom is high, and there are policies and strategies which address the needs of young fathers and tackle barriers to involvement in their child's upbringing. The Government has opened "Sure Start" Children's Centres in England to help parents with information, advice and child care services, and most schools provide child care and activities for children before and after school hours. Other important priorities include targeted support to families at risk, enabling parents to have flexible working arrangements and reducing the number of teenage pregnancies.

2. National priorities and policy responses to support people who have and who wish to have children

Attempts to improve living conditions for families and to support people to have as many children as they wish are being made across member states and across the devolved administrations through legislative and policy developments. Many governments recognise that the burden of family obligations still lies with women and there is a determined focus to create incentives for increased work activity and decrease dependency on social benefits within broad family policy across Europe.

A snapshot of the current practice and legislation supporting families and people who wish to have children is presented in the following section. For reasons of space, it is not possible to include every policy detailed in the various national contributions in this document. However attempts have been made to highlight the main family policy challenges and areas of concern within member states.

Nearly all member states invest in the following policy areas:

Reconciliation of work and family life

Initiatives to support a balance of work and family life are based on a suitable arrangement of political and corporate aspects. They include effective financial support combined with incentives to work, a family-friendly working environment and an affordable needs-based childcare provision. In a Bulgarian project, for example, childcare is provided by unemployed women who, in doing so, gain a paid job, while at the same time helping other mothers balance their work and family life. A number of states recognise the need for sufficient day-care and are directing funding towards it. For example, Switzerland increased funding towards childcare facilities, while Estonia implemented 'A day care place for every child' programme which has resulted in the creation of more day-care places for children. Numerous leave allowances are being provided. Similarly in Denmark, day-care is available for all children from six months to

school age and the Luxembourg Government plans to gradually introduce free childcare. In the case of Austria, for instance, extended payments are offered when both parents, including adoptive and foster parents, take turns in receiving childcare allowance, thus allowing parents to choose a more suitable option for their personal circumstances.

In some cases, businesses have been assisted to establish a family-friendly work environment. This has been the case in states such as Germany where a family friendly business programme involving over 2000 companies has been launched. A similar programme exists in Austria which implies the assessment of company practices to encourage businesses to develop family friendly work conditions.

Family support initiatives

The comparative analysis also shows an increase in the support for families as a means to improve their living conditions and possibly address the trend to postpone childbearing.

A few legislative amendments such as the National Population Policy and the Act on Maternal and Parental benefits have brought improvement to the Croatian family benefit system and created opportunities for better parenthood. Other types of supportive policy in Croatia include the family centres, whose activities focus mainly on responsible parenthood. In Cyprus, the Public Assistance and Services Law (2006) has been revised to include increased activation incentives for single-parents and people with disabilities. Finland, on the other hand has made a significant increase to the child benefit for single parents.

Employers, who hire unemployed women with at least two children in Greece, are provided with an incentive. The Czech Government intends to introduce mutual parental assistance by legalising the already existing situation of parents receiving parental leave care for their own child and those of other parents, while getting moderate remuneration. In the UK, a one-off, tax free pregnancy grant is paid to women who are 25 weeks pregnant or more, who have been given health advice from a midwife or doctor. Additionally, most people living in the UK can claim Child Benefit.

Romania has introduced a one-off benefit for Romanian residents experiencing their first marriages. This has an effect of legalising relationships irrespective of the spouse's citizenship. Thus Dolj County, an area populated mainly by a Roma community, records the highest number of beneficiaries. Other initiatives are Ukraine's introduction of birth grants which has caused an increase in birth rates.

Equal opportunities and promotion of a positive role of fathers

Many member states attempt to equalise the status of parents through equal sharing of family responsibility, including the promotion of a positive role of fathers within the family.

For example, the Norwegian Government plans to extend the already existing quota reserved for fathers under the parental scheme, allowing fathers more time for childcare. Sweden recently introduced a gender equality bonus to promote equal sharing of parental leave between spouses. The bonus constituted of a tax relief, is paid to parents who share their paid parental leave equally.

Early this year in Bulgaria, new legislative changes concerning paternity leave were enacted ensuring a father's presence for 15 days following the birth of the child. Additionally, by reserving a part of the whole child care allowance for the second

parent, fathers in Austria are encouraged to participate in family life and to take over more family responsibilities. Other efforts include Latvia's wish to appeal to men as well as women by introducing a parent's benefit which enables eligible parents to receive a full wage equivalent to the previous salary, for a year after the child is born. In Poland fathers have a right to time off work following the birth of their child.

Furthering intergenerational solidarity

A number of states are using financial means as a way of diminishing constraints on the caring capacity of family members including grandparents. Slovenia has a system whereby one of the child's grandparents is allowed to take leave if the mother is a student below the age of 18. In Austria, on the other hand, an audit process is applied in the development of family friendly municipalities, fit for all generations.

The promotion of child friendly communities

Governments are recognising that the development of child friendly policies and a more structured approach to the provision of play and recreation needs to be supported. In Ireland, for instance, over 500 play facilities exist following the publication of a National Play Policy which provides a framework for the development of public play facilities, to ensure that children have access to a range of quality play opportunities to enrich their childhood.

3. Suggestions for further action by the Council of Europe in the field of family policy

Listed below are some general suggestions made by member states for further intervention and action by the Council of Europe:

- Provide a platform for exchange of innovative developments, experiences and learning in the family policy.
- Assess existing family policies executed by governments and those provided by non-governmental bodies.
- Provide knowledge based support including methodological expertise and disseminate information on best practice.
- Activities in the following areas: reconciling work and family life; supporting families with children; securing real equality between the sexes; meeting the challenge of ageing; violence against children and women and the role of the mass media in helping overcome domestic violence; development of standards regarding the support of infertile couples; promotion of family and child friendly policies.
- Promote family support initiatives, not only in social policy, but in other fields such as employment, health, education and environment.