

The family support systems operating in the Visegrád Group countries (V4)

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Abstract

This study presents the family support systems that operate in the Visegrad Group countries: Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland. After the collapse of communism, all four countries faced difficulties regarding the willingness of the population to have children, which was due partly to financial problems and to a slow re-evaluation of traditional roles in certain member states. Statistics show that each government strives to apply a number of similar support systems to encourage people to have children. However, these measures are not always efficient, presenting lower-than-expected results. According to the statistics available, fertility rates in the V4 countries still fall below the values of the 1990s.

Keywords: family support, Visegrad countries, support systems

Introduction

This study presents the family support systems of the Visegrad countries based on Hungarian statistics and studies. Each member country experienced a significant drop in the population at the beginning of the 1990s. This was partly attributable to the transformation of the economy and the resulting economic difficulties, which

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encouraged families to have fewer children than before the regime change. Our paper is divided into three main sections. The first section presents the methodology of our comparative study. The focus of the second part is on describing and comparing the V4 countries from the perspective of our topic. The final section presents the conclusions and summary of the study. In order to accomplish the stated objective, our research on the family support systems of the Visegrad countries was preceded by a preliminary literature review.

Our study adopts a comparative approach and examines the legal framework of the V4 countries on the subject, providing an analysis of the topic from a previously unavailable perspective, i.e. the large-scale migration of the labour force after the borders were opened in 2004, which took most people of child-bearing age.

Finally, the social changes that had an impact on the gradual transformation of traditional roles, namely women having children at a later age and the modernization of both masculine and feminine roles, also need to be mentioned. The study presents the means applied by each country as well as the possible reasons.

The concept of family support systems has been widely discussed in the literature. Family policies vary in Europe as each country is based on a different ideological basis, with different historical developments in social policy (Neyer, 2003). Pollmann-Schult (2018), who has been analysing the social policy of twenty-seven European countries since 2004, found that better life satisfaction is reported in countries where families receive generous financial support, high childcare benefit and high flexibility of work than in countries with lower family benefits.

As reported by Nieuwenhuis *et al.* (2019), wage inequality is also significantly influenced by family policy. Data from eighteen OECD countries for the years 1981–2008 reveal that gender pay gap is lower in countries where there is a generous financial reward for maternity leave and where public childcare is provided. However, the research did not confirm any significant connection between financial support policies, which include parental allowances and tax benefits for families with children, and the level of wages of women. As mentioned above, the approach to family support evolves and changes over time. Dobrotic and Stropnik (2020) state that twenty-one former socialist European countries have introduced parental leave systems that differ from each other and have not led to gender equality in most of the countries studied. So far, only three countries out of the twenty-one former socialist countries have developed a parental leave system to promote gender equality, namely Slovenia, Lithuania and Romania.

In the Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), family policies are undergoing reforms and modifications. Maternity and paid employment support policies remain relatively underdeveloped. For example, in the Czech Republic and Hungary, little attention is paid to family policy for children under three years of age. Czech Republic and Hungary are setting up extensive programmes to support parental leave. In Slovakia and Poland, support for families is rather weak (Javornik, 2014). Macro-level analyses carried out in the 21st century

in Western countries confirm that family policy significantly affects fertility (see Ferrarini, 2003; Luci-Greulich and Thévenon, 2013). Gauthier and Hatzius (1997) and Ferrarini (2003) identified a positive relation between family support and fertility rates; however, the correlation is not very high.

Kalwij (2010) confirms that increasing spending on family policy increases fertility and allows more children to be born during the female reproductive period, especially at a younger age.

Sagi and Lentner (2018) state that family support policy influences the birth rate; however, the effect is not significant. While spending on family policy is rising in many economically developed countries, including Hungary and other Visegrad countries, fertility has not increased in the long run.

Ivet (2019) also states that family and social policy in Hungary in 2016-2017 failed to respond adequately to demographic challenges. However, public spending on family support was significantly higher than in other OECD countries.

Hungary still encourages mothers to stay at home with their children up to the age of three, but there is a negative impact on women's career, particularly on their financial rewards. In those years, 36% of Hungarian families with two parents and two children lived under inadequate living standards. The research below analyses family support systems in the Visegrad countries.

1. Methodology

We focus on the practice applied by the Visegrad countries by using different approaches. On the one hand, statistical data are provided to show how specific family support schemes operate in each country and what effects can be demonstrated. On the other hand, the impact of governments and their measures on key statistical indicators are also discussed. This includes, among others, the birth rate, the willingness to get married, the percentage of GDP spent on family support, the average age of women when their first child is born and trends about various forms of families.

The birth rate can give an indication about the willingness of families in the society to have children. The increased desire to get married can have an impact on having children later. Spending a certain percentage of the GDP on family support is a good indication of the financial incentives the countries are willing to spend to motivate couples to have children.

In various countries, the trends regarding the different forms of families can affect the decisions of couples. Moreover, the mixture of modern and conservative approaches can either encourage or even discourage the willingness to have children. The authors believed that descriptive statistics, different measures, and sociological characteristics could provide an informative picture of the practices and their impact in each country.

2. Numbers in the light of statistics

We first looked at what the figures say in the light of Eurostat data, and what changes can be observed in relation to having children in each country. This is followed by a detailed presentation of each country as far as family support system solutions are concerned, the first of which is the fertility rate. Data of the four countries examined and the EU average are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Fertility rate (2009-2020)

geo\ time 2000 years	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
EU (27 countries - from 2020)	1.56	1.57	1.54	1.54	1.51	1.54	1.54	1.57	1.56	1.55	1.53	1.50
Czechia	1.51	1.51	1.43	1.45	1.46	1.53	1.57	1.63	1.69	1.71	1.71	1.71
Hungary	1.32	1.25	1.23	1.34	1.35	1.44	1.45	1.53	1.54	1.55	1.55	1.59
Poland	1.4	1.41	1.33	1.33	1.29	1.32	1.32	1.39	1.48	1.46	1.44	1.39
Slovakia	1.44	1.43	1.45	1.34	1.34	1.37	1.4	1.48	1.52	1.54	1.57	1.59

Source: Authors' representation based on EUROSTAT data (2022)¹

The table shows that the EU average over the last twelve years has fallen far short of 2, the desired number. Even in the second half of the 2000s, the four Visegrad countries produced significantly smaller indicators and were far from the EU average. Towards the end of the second decade, the lag was fortunately narrowing, and, in the case of the Czech Republic, this figure is even above the average.

The numbers are surprising as the fertility value is greatly influenced by the age of the women at their first childbirth. This is set by the biological fact that for women who give birth to their first child after a certain age, the chance of having a second child is lower over time. Table 2 shows that, on average, women in the V4 countries were younger when giving birth to their first child than the EU average. In the case of the Czech Republic, this was 8–9 months on average; in Hungary, it is almost a year; in Poland, it is more than a year but typically less than a year and a half, but the biggest difference can be seen in the case of women in Slovakia the last five year.

The authors also looked at how much each country spends to support families on an annual basis. Table 3 clearly shows that, among the V4s, Hungary has supported one of the highest proportions of family incentives and home creation as 2.5% of its GDP in the last five years. This is not below the EU average. It is true that the per capita value in euros is still far behind the EU average. In all V4

¹ EUROSTAT data (retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>).

countries, the amount of family support per capita is significantly lower than the average in rich EU countries.

Table 2. Average age of women at their first childbirth (2009–2020)

geo\time 2000 years	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
EU (27 countries - from 2020)					28.8	28.9	29.0	29.1	29.2	29.3	29.4	29.5
Czechia	27.4	27.6	27.8	27.9	28.1	28.1	28.2	28.2	28.2	28.4	28.5	28.5
Hungary	27.4	27.7	27.7	27.7	27.7	27.7	27.9	27.8	28.0	28.2	28.3	28.4
Poland	26.2	26.5	26.6	26.6	26.7	26.9	27.0	27.2	27.3	27.4	27.6	27.9
Slovakia	26.7	27.0	27.4	26.8	26.9	27.0	27.1	27.0	27.1	27.1	27.2	27.2

Source: Authors' representation based on EUROSTAT data (2022)

Table 3. The family incentives as a percentage of its GDP in the 2015–2018

GEO/UNI T	2015		2016		2017		2018	
	Euro per inhab.	% (GDP)	Euro per inhab.	% (GDP)	Euro per inhab.	% (GDP)	Euro per inhab.	% (GDP)
European Union-28 countries	665.77	2.3	670.14	2.3	682.11	2.3	:	:
Czechia	258.35	1.6	270.72	1.6	285.64	1.6	328.30	1.7
Hungary	256.82	2.2	261.11	2.2	279.53	2.2	282.19	2.0
Poland	171.69	1.5	285.79	2.5	321.85	2.6	327.74	2.5
Slovakia	235.79	1.6	240.03	1.6	250.40	1.6	253.55	1.5

Source: Authors' representation based on EUROSTAT data (2019)

In the following part, the family support practices of each country and their possible effects are reviewed in greater detail.

3. Hungary

A recent Hungarian State Audit Office study (The Results of Family Support Policy)² analysing family support systems, confirms that, in Hungary, family is regarded as a national resource. Consequently, it is not by coincidence that the reduction of the population, which shows similar trends when compared to

² Hungarian State Audit Office. (2019). Családtámogatási rendszer eredményei. (retrieved from www.csalad.hu).

developed EU member states, is a key issue for the government in the economic and demographic policy.

As there are no common directives in the European Union for family support allowances, member states establish and operate their own family support systems.

In one of her statements made in 2019, Katalin Novák, Government Commissioner for Family Policy, pointed out that the government had been striving to establish a predictable family policy that facilitated planning for couples to start a family since 2010. Nearly 5% of the Hungarian budget is spent on family support, which is twice as much as the average of the OECD countries. While many countries consider immigration as one of the potential solutions for demographic problems, in Hungary, the government follows a completely different path and focuses on strengthening families to find the right answers for demographic challenges. There is a wide range of possibilities and measures already available, as summarized below. As can be seen, the most important means used in family policy are not new.

3.1. Government measures in family support

In Hungary, family allowance was already given to public service employees in 1912. This support has particularly been used to increase fertility rate since the mid-1960s, and it is no coincidence that the amount of the support was also considerably increased during this period. Nowadays, in Hungary, family allowance is granted to families where there is at least one beneficiary dependent. However, foetuses and private individuals who receive disability allowances are not entitled for family allowance. Beneficiary dependents include children under school age and school-age children (with a few exceptions) who study on a full-time basis in a public-sector school until they reach the age of 20.

Table 4. Amount of family allowance in 2022 (1 EUR is around 400 Ft)

Category	Amount
For one child	HUF 12,200
For one child, with a single parent	HUF 13,700
For two children (for each children)	HUF 13,300
For two children, with a single parent (for each children)	HUF 14,800
For three children (for each children)	HUF 16,000
For three children, with a single parent (for each children)	HUF 17,000
For permanently sick/severely disabled child	HUF 23,300
For one child	HUF 12,200

Source: Authors' representation based on Act LXXXIV of 1998 on Family³

³ Retrieved from <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=99800084.tv>.

There are several types of family care leave in Hungary. Here are some of them, without claiming to be exhaustive. All mothers are entitled to 24 weeks of unpaid maternity leave. The infant care allowance is called CSED in Hungarian. The length of leave is (before and after birth) 24 weeks, up to four weeks prior to birth. Two weeks are obligatory, with seventy percent of actual average daily earning and no upper limit on payments

There are two types of parental leave and benefit. The child benefit (GYES) was introduced in 1967, which was first granted to children until the age of 2.5, and from 1969, until the age of three (Albert, 2013). From the end of GYED (child's second birthday) until the child's third birthday, for insured parents, a flat-rate benefit equal to the amount of the minimum pension, HUF 28,500 per month, is enabled. The child-care fee (GYED) was introduced before the regime change in 1985 and was an incentive for better educated women to have children (Vida, 2019). GYED: from the end of the maternity leave period until the child's second birthday, for insured parents. The benefit of 70 percent of average daily earnings calculated for the last 180 days prior the birth, up to a limit of 70 percent of twice the minimum daily wage. The length of paternity leave is 5 days. Payment and funding 100 percent of father's average daily wage, with no upper limit on payments.

From the 1990s, there was a further decrease both in the number of marriages and in birth rate, and the real terms of certain family support measures also fell. The 'Bokros' austerity package in 1995 had a negative impact on the support system. In the early 2000s, family tax allowance was extended and a grant scheme for housing was also introduced to support families. During the second Orbán government, budget appropriations for family policy considerably increased. The 29-point government programme in 2010, the home creation programme in 2012, the family home-creation scheme (CSOK) in 2015 and the extension of the family tax allowance in 2016 show that the government has taken decisive steps to handle the problem. In 2019, the government announced a 7-point Family Protection Action Plan, including, among others, the following elements: baby loan, family home-creation scheme (CSOK) loan, mortgage loan, car purchase support for large families, exemption from personal income tax for women having four or more children, nursery development programme and child-care fee (GYED) for grandparents. Family allowance has been available for beneficiaries since 2011. The actual intention of the legislator was to grant the allowance to as many people as possible.

However, family tax allowance is largely criticised because it is not available for everyone since it is insurance-based, so the least help is provided for those who are most in need of support. For this reason, taxable income (e.g. wage, income from undertakings and income from rental of real estates) is required to take advantage of the benefits. Family allowance encourages work as beneficiaries need to work to use it. However, it does not take into due account those who do not have income from work through no fault of their own. Parents who are pensioners, live on child benefit (GYES) (without child-care fee - GYED) and unemployed persons after the 3-month

unemployment benefit cannot use the benefit either. The Hungarian government will also provide for the following in the 2023 budget: the baby allowance and the family tax credit, the home creation grant, tax credits for first-time married couples, the graduate childcare allowance.

Table 5. Family tax allowance 2022 (1 EUR is around 400 Ft)

Category	Allowance available (month)
For one beneficiary dependent (/person)	HUF 10,000
For two beneficiary dependents (/person)	HUF 20,000
For three or more beneficiary dependents (/person)	HUF 33,000

Source: Authors' representation based on Act CXVII of 1995 on Personal Income Tax⁴

Besides direct financial support, there are other measures to encourage couples to have children. An example for this is providing daily care for children under the age of 3. Traditionally, local governments and local government associations are responsible for maintaining standard nurseries; they operated 90% of these institutions. Figures from 31 March 2018 show that there were 765 nurseries with 40,648 places. During 2017/2018, there were 85 'mini nurseries' with 625 places. On 31 March 2018, the number of family nurseries was 927 offering 5840 places. There were 8 workplace nurseries in 2017/2018 with a total number of 56 places⁵. However, the aim of government tenders launched in 2019 is to considerably increase the number of private operators in nursery care provision, so, besides institutions maintained by the state or the local governments, they encourage the establishment of more and more family and workplace nurseries. One of the key elements of the family protection action plan announced in February 2019 was to increase the number of places in nurseries from 50 thousand to 70 thousand. In 2020, 45.4 thousand children were enrolled in nurseries, almost 500 fewer than in the previous year, due to the COVID pandemic. The objective is to ensure that, in 2022, practically all children can go to nursery if their parents wish to take them. In 2022, 13,000 new places are being created in the framework of the nursery developments already underway.

3.2. Mindset about family and children in Hungary and related statistical data

Early studies already showed that the Hungarian society basically supports the traditional division of roles. Several surveys in relation to work and family as well as work and women conducted in Hungary tend to show that, both before the regime

⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.lexadin.nl/wlg/legis/nofr/eur/arch/hun/cxvii1995.pdf>.

⁵ Hungarian Central Statistical Office. (2019). A gyermekek napközbeni ellátása. Statisztikai Tükör.

change and during the period since then, women have been sceptical about implementing the ideal combination of the working woman and mother that was expected during the socialist era, and it is difficult for them to accomplish this role (Juhász, 2010).

However, research of Blaskó (2005) have shown that by 2002 the view that ‘working can be a natural demand of woman’, and it does not necessarily have a negative impact on the family became slightly more widespread. While the financial situation of the families does not allow women not to work, and not to contribute to the family budget with their salaries, the acceptance of traditional gender roles have further increased after the regime change.

In a survey supervised by the Institution of Behavioural Sciences of Semmelweis University in 2013⁶, it was also verified among the respondents not older than 35 that young people in Hungary tend to follow traditional principles. According to 98.1% of the young people included in the sample, a family means when ‘two people live in a marriage and raise children’ and 91.9% were of the opinion that a family is when ‘two people of different genders live together as a couple and raise children’. Although a survey about young people conducted in 2016 in Hungary showed that the majority of them prefer to live in marriage, the number of people living alone or in cohabitation has been increasing among the population aged 15–29. The number of marriages has somewhat increased compared to 2014, but it is far below the amount of the first half of the 90s.

Birth rate is also significantly affected by the trend of many women postponing childbearing. While between 1990 and 2013 the average age of people with eighth-grade education at the birth of their first child did not change, this average age among those with secondary school graduation (but without higher education) was extended with nearly five years (Kapitány and Spéder, 2015).

According to a Eurostat report in 2015, 2.2% of the GDP was spent on family support; according to the Hungarian government, this rate is 4.5%; but according to OECD in 2013, this rate was 3.6% (no data was published regarding this topic). The difference results from the fact that, for example, tax allowances are considered as family support by Eurostat. This sum is 3.5 billion Ft, or 6.2% of the GDP in 2022. Although Hungary spends less on social policy than the EU average, 12% of the relevant amount is divided among families, that is 8.2% higher than the average in the EU. While in 2008 universal allowances were dominant, in 2019, much greater emphasis was placed on benefits connected to insurance. Universal benefits have been stagnating since 2008, and their value has significantly been deteriorated since then. Support based on reliance is often frozen for years and later on increased only

⁶ KINCS. (2019). A tervezett gyermekek számának alakulása a 2010-es években. https://www.koppmariaintezet.hu/docs/KINCS_tervezett_gyermekek_szamanak_alakulasa_20190211_v2.pdf.

with the inflation rate, which means that the situation of the poorest families does not improve either.

4. Slovakia

A frequently discussed problem in Slovakia is the issue of family support. At present, however, this issue can be considered particularly topical as we are experiencing a decline in birth rates, or the developmental trend of an aging population. Therefore, the issue of family support, especially young families, is becoming an increasingly important topic for discussion.

4.1. Government measures in the field of family support

Families with children are supported by the state with financial one-off and repeated state social benefits. These benefits are intended to help parents to bear the cost of the birth of a child or multiple children at the same time and to help them to provide care, care and maintenance for dependent children (employment.gov.sk). Providing state support to families with children does not monitor family income. Benefits provided to families with children under the state social support system are financed exclusively from the state budget and their provision is regulated by legislation.

The state provides the following allowances to families with children:

- childbirth allowance;
- allowance for more children born at the same time;
- child benefit;
- child allowance supplement;
- parental allowance, and
- childcare allowance (employment.gov.sk).

These contributions are regulated by several acts on measures of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic. The childbirth allowance constitutes a state social benefit by which the State contributes to cover the costs of providing the necessary needs of the new-born. The contribution is regulated by the Act no. 383/2013 on the childbirth allowance and the allowance for more children born at the same time and on amendments to certain laws. The law specifies the so-called eligible persons who may apply for this contribution. The allowance is granted on a one-off basis at the birth of a child of €829.86.

In the event that more than one child was born to a parent at the same time, or two children were repeated at the same time within two years, the parents are entitled to the allowance for more simultaneously born children, which is also regulated by Act no. 383/2013. The amount of this allowance is €110.36 and is paid once a year to help with the increased costs incurred in childcare.

Another government measure is the possibility of receiving child benefit, which is regulated by Act no. 600/2003 on Child Benefit and Decree of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Family on Adjustment of Child Benefit and Child Benefit Supplement. Based on this legislation, the allowance is paid monthly, at the latest until the child is 25 years of age, if it fulfils the condition of independence. The allowance is adjusted annually and currently amounts to € 24.95 per child for 2020. €25.50 per month 2021. In addition to the child allowance, a child allowance supplement can be obtained. This specific supplement applies to a parent who qualifies for a child benefit and plus, is entitled to a retirement pension, disability pension, etc. (for more details see Act No. 600/2003 and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs Measure No. 450/2013).

The last post is called Childcare allowance. The allowance is provided for the care of a child under three or six years of age, of a child with a long-term adverse health relationship.

A specific government measure in support of families in Slovakia is maternity and parental allowance. In the case of a ‘maternal’, the mother may obtain a “Maternity Benefit and Equalization Benefit during pregnancy and maternity.” A woman who was an employee or self-employed is entitled to this post. Maternity leave, Parental leave and Maternity benefit are also provided for a person other than the parent taking care of the child. The father also has the option to take parental leave and receive the ‘maternity benefit’.

Claim to Maternity Benefit has a woman who has 270 calendar days of affiliation to the sickness insurance system during the two years before childbirth or taking substitute care of a child. In case of self-employed and voluntary insured persons, insurance contributions must be paid for the same period⁷. In addition to Maternity Benefit, a woman is also entitled to Equalization Benefit during pregnancy and maternity. To obtain this benefit, a woman must meet the following conditions:

- affiliation to the sickness insurance system;
- being transferred to another job in respect of pregnancy or maternity; and
- reduced earnings as a consequence of the transfer (missoc.org).

If a woman cannot stay on maternity leave, Maternity Benefit may be transferred to the father. The condition is 270 calendar days of affiliation to the sickness insurance system during the two years before taking substitute care of a child. In case of self-employed and voluntary insured persons, insurance contributions must be paid and childcare. If Maternity benefit is lower than Parental Allowance, an additional payment is made to cover the difference.

After the end of the maternity benefit, the child can receive the Parental Allowance within three years of age and the parent terminates the maternity leave and starts the so-called parental leave. €. According to the definition of conditions in Act no. 571/2009 on parental allowance, the amount of this contribution is 270 - 370

⁷ MISSOC Mutual Information System on Social Protection, missoc.org.

In Slovakia, we do not find a comprehensive study to address this issue. However, let us say that the social situation is not very inclined to support the family and that is why we are increasingly faced with the problem of postponing the first childbirth and thus, of starting a family.

4.2. Mindset about family and children in Slovakia and related statistical data

As indicated above, the population in Slovakia is aging. In addition to the relatively low birth rate, this is also due to the fact that women want to work longer and thus, start a family later. The previous generation had the first child at about 20 years of age. Today we could say that this age has shifted to 30-35 years of a woman's life. Recent statistics from 2018 say, 'The largest group of women was women aged 30–34. Every third child was born by a woman from the given age group' (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2019). Thus, in 2018, the natural increase was 3,346 persons. From the latest data obtained as of 30 September 2019, the natural increase was 3,138 persons. Therefore, we can say that this number does not change significantly at the moment, but the forecasts point to a decrease in this increase.

The shift in the age of first-born women can be largely due to the social pressures of career development and the promotion of women in high managerial positions. This also causes a change in family roles. More and more men are leaving for maternity leave and women, mothers, are returning to work after childbirth. The reason, according to experts, is not the demolition of stereotypes, but mainly the economic advantage of the current system setup. As you can see above, Maternity Benefit is calculated from the previous year's earnings, which are often larger for men, and therefore Maternity Benefit is higher. The opposite is the fact that a woman works in a higher position than her partner does and therefore, it is more economically advantageous for the family to return to work.

Another indicator is the shift in the average age at marriage of men and women. According to the statistics, it appears that the average age is increasing. In 1990, the average age at first marriage was 24.5 years, in 2000, it was 28.01 years and in 2010, it was 31.91 (Statistical Office of Slovak Republic, 2019). Table 6 shows the average age at first marriage for women and men in the last seven years. According to the table, we can observe a significant shift in age, which has a significant impact on the number of births, fertility rate and other socio-demographic indicators.

By changing the social situation as well as legislation, Slovakia has come to a period that can be called a 'family crisis'. Many young people regard having a family more as an economic burden on their budget. At the same time, free travel, working abroad, or taking advantage of benefits in other countries may shift the age at which young people start thinking about having a family.

However, in the last two years, we have seen a renewed increase in birth rates. The latest statistics from 2018 show that 57,808 children were born this year, which represents 1.5 children per woman in Slovakia. We can see a slight increase compared to previous years. On the other hand, it is important to note that current forecasts for the development of society, as well as the birth rate itself are not very favourable and tend to have a decreasing tendency.

Table 6. Average age at marriage of men and women (2015–2020)

Year	Average age of men	Average age of women
2015	31.1	28.2
2016	31.1	28.3
2017	31.2	28.6
2018	29.2	26.5
2019	29.2	26.6
2020	31.5	28.8

Note: 1 EUR is around 400 Ft.

Source: Authors' representation based on EUROSTAT data (2022)

According to Lentner and Horbulak (2021), Pension insurance is one of the issues much more frequently addressed in relation to demographic changes. The Slovak population is aging and is becoming one of the oldest in the member states of the European Union. Demographic aging is manifested in a number and relative increase in the higher age groups of the population. Demographic aging is the result of other demographic processes that ultimately shape the age structure of the population. The year 2018 is a breakthrough in monitoring the aging population, the number and share of seniors in Slovakia for the first time ever exceeded the number and share of children and the ageing-related costs are going to increase much more strongly than in other EU countries (Hwang and Rhoen, 2022).

5. The Czech Republic

According to the Eurostat report in 2019, 1.6% of the GDP was spent on family support in the Czech Republic, which is a little bit more than the average of the EU countries (2.3%). The family support system in the Czech Republic is composed of three pillars:

- Tax allowances (tax discount for a child, for a partner who does not work or for nursery payment);
- Social support for families via allowances: child benefit, child allowance, housing allowance, social allowance, maternity benefit, allowance for foster parents (except for child benefit and allowance for foster parents, all of them depend on the income of the household. Most allowances are concentrated on parents with children younger than four years old – special child benefit);

- Services (nursery, after-school care and clubs).

In addition to these three pillars, there is an allowance for families that come from public social insurance – the maternity benefit for 22 weeks.

In 2022, all families with an annual income under 1 million CZK (40,682 EURO, by currency course of ECB on 5th August 2022, which was 24.581) can apply for a one-time contribution of 5,000 CZK (203 EURO) per child aged under 18. The reason for this support is increasing inflation. The average monthly wage in 2021 in the Czech Republic was 37,839 CZK (1,539 EURO).

In the Czech Republic, an ageing population means a great problem because of low fertility and longer life expectancy. The share of foreigners living more than 12 months in the Czech population in 2020 was 5.8% ⁸. In Hungary, it was 2%, in Poland 1% and in Slovakia 1%, respectively (Eurostat, 2021). It means that the demographic development in V4 countries cannot depend on immigration, especially when it comes to the ageing population.

The Czech Republic spent 0.87% of its GDP on tax allowance as of 0.23% OECD in 2015. For allowances in the part of social support of families, the Czech Republic spent 0.7% of GDP in 2017 as of 2.2% OECD in 2012. For services spent, the Czech Republic had 0.54% GDP in 2015 as of 0.87% OECD in 2015.

According to the record of the Governmental Council for Gender Equality meeting from 31st October 2019, the government's effort to support the increase of fertility is not directed at increasing direct financial support (allowances and tax discount) but at:

- services for pre-school children and dependent people;
- men taking a larger part of childcare (shared parental care);
- higher accessibility of part-time jobs;
- making labour return easier;
- decreasing the gender pay gap.

5.1. Government measures in the field of family support

In the Czech Republic, there was a big demographic change at the beginning of the 1970s. The communist government massively supported families during that time. Newly-weds used to receive loans, new flats in panel buildings and parents were paid higher children allowance. All these allowances generated a quick increase in fertility, which was 19.4 % in 1974. With the generation born in the 1970s, we are now at the end of this fertility period. People in the Czech Republic receive neither newly-wed loans, nor new flats from the state. Parents' allowance would stimulate them to work (e.g., a tax discount for a husband whose wife is in the household). The biggest financial allowance for parents in the Czech Republic is child benefit (34% of total social support of families by allowances in 2017). From 2008, parents could

⁸ Czech Statistical Office (CZSO), <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/home>.

choose how quickly they exhausted the amount of total child benefit (with a minimum of 6 months and a maximum of 4 years).

The amount of child benefit in 2022 was 300,000 CZK (12204,5 euros using the currency rate of ECB on 5th August 2022, which was 24.581) and the parent who provides childcare chooses the speed at which they exhaust this budget. Parents have the option to work and receive the child benefit and they can arrange childcare with another adult (such as a grandparent). If the parents wish to use the services of some public childcare institution (e.g., nursery) and the child is younger than 2 years, they have some limitations. The amount will depend on the age of the child and if it is the youngest child in the family.

Table 7. Family tax allowance 2022

Category	Allowance available (month/CZK)	Allowance available (month/ EURO by currency course of ECB on 5 th August 2022, which was 25.581)
For first child	1,267	51.5
For second child	1,617	65.8
For third and every next child	2,017	82.1
For first child with a disability	2,534	103.1
For second child with a disability	3,234	131.6
For third and every next child with a disability	4,034	164.1

Source: Authors' representation based on 586/1992 Sb. Zákon o daních z příjmů⁹

Another tax allowance is for a husband/wife whose partner is in the household, which is not included in the table.

In addition to direct financial support, there are other measures to encourage couples to have children. An example of this is providing daily care for children under the age of 3. The number of nurseries is very low in the Czech Republic although the government strives to increase them. The Czech Republic is often criticized by the EU because of the nursery gap.

5.2. Mindset towards family and children in the Czech Republic with related statistical data

Early studies showed that the Czech society basically supported the traditional division of roles. The concept of family politics from 29th May 2019 included several tools to change it. In the Czech Republic, there is the possibility for fathers to receive

⁹ Zakony Pro lidi <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/1992-586>.

child benefit although only approximately 1.81% of the child benefit is received by fathers.

Table 8. Mean age at first marriage of men and women (2015-2020)

<u>Year</u>	<u>Mean age of men</u>	<u>Mean age of women</u>
2015	31.6	28.8
2016	31.7	29.0
2017	31.8	29.1
2018	31.9	29.2
2019	32	29.4
2020	32.4	29.7

Source: Authors' representation based on EUROSTAT data (2022)

There has been a trend to postpone marriage in recent decades in the Czech Republic. The average age of single females in 1990 was 21.4 and in 2019, it was 29.8. Regarding single males, the average age was 24 in 1990 and in 2019, it was 32.1. A similar trend is reported when it comes to parenthood. The birth rate is also significantly affected by the trend that a lot of women postpone having children. The average age of Czech women having their first child in 1990 was 24.8 and in 2021, it was 28.8 (Czech Statistical Office).

6. Poland

Statistics Poland (GUS), a state agency, published in 2021 that Poland is currently inhabited by 38 million people out of which more than 9.8 million were persons aged 60 (more than 25%). Poland is characterized by negative natural growth, that is, more people die than are born. The situation with natural growth is slightly more favourable in rural areas than in cities. The vast majority of them are single-family households in Poland (13.5 million). More than 2.6 million are married without children, while almost 5.5 million couples have one or more children. The fertility rate is below the level of replacement of generations in Poland and in 2020, it was 1,378 (GUS, 2020). In short, Poland is an ageing country in demographic terms.

6.1. Marriage and family

Marriage and family are the most important values in the opinion of the Poles. After 1989, the metric age at which the first marriage took place definitely began to increase. The marriage rate decreased and reached 3.8 per 1,000 inhabitants in Poland in 2020. The divorce rate is stable, the number of children in the family is decreasing and the decision to have a child is made at the age of 27 on average (Stańczak *et al.*, 2016).

6.2. Governmental family support system

The family support system is highly dispersed and expanded in Poland. According to the data of the Central Statistical Office (GUS), in 2020, PLN 10.8 billion was allocated to family benefits aimed at providing financial support to families with children and people with disabilities. In total, 2 million beneficiaries benefitted from various forms of support.

However, one of the basic forms of support is leaves for the parents. The leave system after the birth of a child in Poland includes the following:

- 20 weeks of maternity leave, 100% paid (14 weeks is obligatory and 6 weeks can be transferred to the father);
- 32 weeks of parental leave, paid at 60% (parents can freely share this leave among themselves);
- 2 weeks of paternity leave, paid at 100%;
- 36 months of childcare leave, unpaid (one month is non-transferable, reserved for the father, the rest may be shared by the parents as they wish).

Both biological parents and other persons taking care of the children are entitled to these types of leaves. The flagship “500 Plus” child benefit scheme has come into force in 2015. The child-raising benefit under the “Family 500+” programme provides PLN 500 per month for each child below 18, regardless of the income gained by the family. Since the launch of the programme in April 2016, it has already provided about PLN 188 billion as support. As Gromada (2018) emphasizes, 500+ differs from many other public programmes as the existence of the programme is significantly commented on by all Polish citizens. One of the crucial and widely debated social projects is the “Family 500+” programme. The aim of the project is to support Polish families with the amount of PLN 500 (115 euro) per child (without financial thresholds or restrictions on parents). In 2018, the programme covered an average of 3.6 million children under 18 years of age per month. The programme, popularly referred to as “500+”, covered a total of 2.4 million families (GUS, 2019). It is the most expensive social policy instrument that has been launched in Poland.

The government will pay for the stay of a child in a nursery, a children’s club or a daily care provider to make it easier for the parents of young children to return to work. The Toddler+ programme puts into effect more childcare places for children below 3. The budget for this is 450 million PLN. “Family Welfare Capital” starts in 2022 and pays families PLN 12,000 (EUR 2,590) for each child after their firstborn between the age of 12 and 36 months. The benefit will be available to all families, regardless of their income. The government estimates that 615,000 children will be eligible for the benefit. The amount of support is about PLN 3.1 billion. The PIT-0 for the 4+ Families is for all parents, no matter if they work full-time or are self-employed, of whether they raise their children together or are single parents. The programme will cover parents who have at least 4 children. These families will pay

PIT only after exceeding 230,000 PLN annual income. The “Good Start” programme provides a one-off grant of PLN 300 for school equipment for each school-going child (website of the Republic of Poland, 2022)¹⁰.

Conclusions

This study presented the family support systems applied by the Visegrad countries. In the case of each country, it can be concluded that a wide range of incentives are applied by the governments to support families and that the rate of support is high compared to their respective GDPs. A particularly broad range of means is applied in Hungary, where the government uses both direct and indirect methods to support families. Nevertheless, fertility rates are still lower than during the period before the 1990s. In Hungary, family support systems have not been reduced, not even during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the government has prioritized support for families and couples with young children. Moreover, Hungary offers a range of incentives to mothers who want to return to work after having children. They help to make it as easy as possible for them to return to work through various financial support schemes, measures to expand day-care for children and labour law support. Such schemes motivate women to possibly have children at a later stage because they know that they will face relatively fewer obstacles if they can return to work more easily after having a second or even a third child.

The situation is similar in Slovakia where the direct impact of support is not reflected in the desire to have children. Many young people go abroad and have children and then they decide to raise them there.

Similar to the other three countries, women also tend to have children at an older age in the Czech Republic; so, the biological chance of them having more children is also lower.

A modernized view regarding the role of women and men can be seen in these countries, which means that it has become more and more acceptable for couples to have children at an older age. To mitigate the opportunity costs, women have their first child in their thirties. Although various options encourage parents to decide who stays at home with the child, it is still women who mainly take on this responsibility and men only choose this option for economic reasons.

A question may be raised in the light of the analysis above: to what extent are financial incentives enough in the Visegrad countries to encourage families to bear children? Statistics show that although it can be an important tool, it is not necessarily the only option to succeed.

Poland has seen the largest increase in the range of family support instruments in the last two years. Multi-pillar systems are the most specialized family policies in the V4 countries for increasing the birth rate. One of their main elements is to help

¹⁰ Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (retrieved from <https://www.gov.pl/>).

mothers come back into the labour market after childbirth. But it can also be argued that each country needs to develop a support system adapted to its social system and its economy; therefore, the elements of family support systems may differ from country to country.

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