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Support for large families in Lithuania: challenges and situation in the context of the European Union



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22 Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: “Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality “. The principle of equality presupposes that such rights belong to every person and that the degree of their implementation does not depend on the

size or structure of the family to which the person belongs. However, statistical data show that the guarantee of ensuring the above-mentioned rights in Lithuania decreases significantly with each additional child in the family. According to statistics, the at-risk-of-poverty rate is highly dependent on the type of household: in a household consisting of two adults and one child, it was 9.5 per cent, two adults and two children – 16.9 per cent, two adults with three or more children – 25.3 per cent (Statistics Lithuania, 2019). These significant differences, first, confirm Gataūlinas¹ (2013) statement that “as the number of household members increases, the financial resources available to the household member decrease” (p. 50), second, this presupposes that the need for support increases with the birth of each child due to the distribution of income among a larger number of people (Letablier et al², 2009), third, this shows that this need is not fully met in our country.

A closer look at the at-risk-of-poverty rates in different countries of the European Union after social benefits in house-

holds, which consist of two adults and three or more children, shows that the amplitude is quite wide. In 2019, the lowest at-risk-of-poverty rate was in Germany (10.6%), Slovenia (11%), Hungary (11.4%), Denmark (12.3%) and Finland (12.7%), while the highest was in Bulgaria (62.3%), Romania (61.3), Spain (42.4%), Luxembourg (35.1%) and Malta (33.1%) (Eurostat, 2019). Meanwhile, Lithuania's rate (25.3%) is slightly lower than the EU average (24.9%) and lags far behind the other two Baltic countries, Latvia (16.7%) and Estonia (15%) (Eurostat, 2019). Given that both the Scandinavian welfare states, Denmark and Finland, and the post-socialist countries, Hungary and Slovenia, are among the countries with the lowest at-risk-of-poverty rate in this type of household, and the fact that Lithuania has a much worse rate than Latvia and Estonia, what causes these differences? The amount or the profile of support? What is the difference between a package of support measures for families with three or more children in countries with the lowest and highest at-risk-of-poverty rates? Which support measures most effectively contribute to the well-being of large families? All of these questions compose a research problem.

Novelty and importance of the topic

The few studies on support for large families lead to the conclusion that the state lacks attention to solving the problems of this group of families, which requires a systematic state approach and an appropriate legal framework.

Looking at the development of this field of research in the international academic arena, it is obvious that it is only in an initial stage. Till this day, studies in several European countries have been carried out at national level, and the only study carried out at the European level has not included all countries to such an extent that general comparative conclu-

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sions can be drawn. Therefore, this dissertation not only evaluates support for large families and reveals its problems at the national level, but also answers an important scientific question at the European level: in which countries and groups of countries, depending on the family policy model and chosen support measures, support for large families is best.

Relevance of the research

There is a constant discussion in society about large families, in which the views of politicians, non-governmental organizations representing such families and professionals working with some of these families, usually those at social risk, quite differ. As the terms of the Seimas change, the laws regulating support for such families often change, but usually the essence remains the same - the focus is on financial benefits, forgetting the importance of services and tax benefits. With the exception of the supplement to the child benefit paid from 2018 for all children growing up in large families, other support measures for this group of families are linked to the level of income and are targeted at low-income families. Such a design of support measures is likely to be dictated by the desire to reduce the risk of

poverty and social exclusion among large families, but this is ambiguous. According to Kavoliūnaitė-Ragauskienė³ (2010), social guarantees for the family should not be provided as additional support to the poor, because in this case raising children automatically becomes a means of receiving benefits.

Linking support measures for large families to the problem of poverty is a bad practice for a number of reasons. The constant support of the most vulnerable families with direct benefits becomes a source of livelihood for some of them, as people lose the need and motivation to participate in the labour market, are no longer able to take responsibility for themselves or their offspring. It is like turning a vicious circle: social risk is growing, social exclusion is increasing, and the large family is automatically identified with a lack of social skills and social support, although far from all Lithuanian large families are like that.

Laumenskaitė⁴ (2011) states, that “the economic basis of a family is strengthened not by state benefits, but by enabling

the family to create its own well-being” (p. 28). Therefore, the question arises as to whether it would not be necessary to move from the support provided to large families in Lithuania, which is currently primarily focused on poverty reduction, to the empowerment of such families.

The aim of the dissertation is to evaluate support for large families in Lithuania, revealing its problems and situation in the context of the European Union, based on the classical typologies of welfare state and family policy models.

The objectives set to achieve the aim are as follows:

1. To analyse family policy and family support models and measures.
2. To analyse the peculiarities of the large family as a social group: the concept and importance of the large family, its stigmatization, need for support and its impact.
3. To compare the support provided to large families in the countries of the European Union, grouping them according to the types of family policy.
4. To analyse the support provided to large families in Lithuania and the problems arising from it.



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Statements to be defended

1. The aim of support provided to large families in Lithuania is to solve the problem of poverty among the least wealthy large families by ensuring their basic needs, but not to promote the birth rate by creating more favourable conditions for raising more children. The predominant income-based support measures for large families in Lithuania presuppose that such families are seen as a socially vulnerable social group and that such support measures are aimed at reducing poverty and social exclusion in it. Our country does not have policies that favour large families, when support measures focus on enabling such families to participate in the labour market and reconciling family and work, in order to encourage more families to cross the third child barrier, or increase the birth rate.

2. Poverty-oriented design of support for large families contributes to the stigmatization of this social group. When support measures for large families are linked to tackling or preventing poverty, i.e. support measures are provided through

income testing, the perception of the large family in the consciousness of society is also beginning to be associated with poverty. This becomes the basis for prejudice and stereotypes about large families.

3. The lack of support in the broadest sense, including both moral support and financial measures, is compensated by large families by forming organizations, that unite them. They provide material support in the form of mutual assistance, as well as cooperation with various organizations, and moral support is obtained both by being among the same families and by organising various events or even lobbying.

Conclusions

The conclusions of the research reflect the solutions of goals formulated in the introduction of the dissertation, and the defensive statements:

1. The state, through its family policy, seeks to model family life and thus obtain the desired result. Modern states aim to reduce poverty, ensure the well-being of children, establish gender equality, and promote the birth rate. The latter goal is becoming a priority in Europe, experiencing a demographic crisis. Research has shown that one of the main causes of falling birth rates is the disappearance of large families. The visible links between the rates of third and subsequent order births and the total birth rate confirm the demographic significance of large families. Both statistics and research show that this social group plays a crucial role in the demographic development of countries and is important for ensuring demographic sustainability.

2. As the number of children in a family increases, its subjective and objective well-being weakens - this circumstance dictates a greater need for support among large families. This support covers a wide range of measures: financial incentives, support for parents to combine work and family, forming a positive attitude towards large families, creating a family-friendly environment, etc. All types of support measures are important, and what family support measure is most important depends on both the number of children in the family and the socio-economic status of the family, which is an important factor in choosing the design of support measures for large families. With this in mind, the support package for large families is modelled accordingly.

3. The comparative study of the European Union countries showed that there are two possible ways to meet the support needs of large families: targeted support measures for this social group (this is the path taken by continental European states and the three post-socialist countries examined) or universal generous support that provides well-being for all families, including the larger ones (the Scandinavian states follow this path). The latter model has the advantage that

the absence of special measures does not create the conditions for a stigmatization effect. In such countries, families may have the desired number of children without experiencing potential societal pressure because of their procreative decision, creating additional burdens on the budget borne by taxpayers. This presumption is confirmed by the fact that large families are not defined in the legislation of the Scandinavian states, as they are not considered different from families with one or two children.

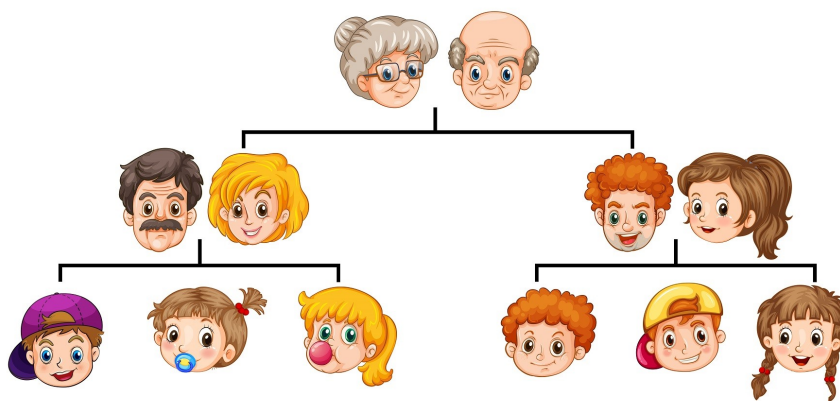
4. The comparative analysis of the situation of large families in the countries of the European Union, grouping them according to the types of family policy, showed that the profile of support for large families depends on the goals of the state family policy. Income-tested support measures for large families in southern Europe and the Anglo-Saxon countries (especially the United Kingdom) presuppose that the state considers such families to be the most socially vulnerable and aims to reduce poverty and social exclusion among them. Meanwhile, in the compared continental (Belgium, France and Germany) and post-socialist (Estonia, Latvia and Hungary) European countries, policies favourable to large families aim not only to ensure their well-being but also to promote fertility. States that exploit the pronatalist effect of family policy by means of support measures for large families, enable families to fully realize their procreative intentions, as evidenced by higher rates of third and subsequent order births and total birth rate.

5. In the context of the comparative research of European Union countries, the empirical research of support for large families in Lithuania and the analysis of support measures for large families in our country showed that we are on the path of southern European and Anglo-Saxon countries, when the main purpose of support provided to this social group is to reduce or prevent poverty and social exclusion in it, ensuring the basic needs of the families. In this sense, Lithuania differs from the post-socialist countries examined in the comparative research and the continental countries that have chosen a similar model of support for large families, where support measures aim not only to ensure the well-being of such families, but also to increase the birth rate. This is reflected in the rate of third and subsequent order births in Lithuania and confirms the first defensive statement.

6. Lithuania, which has chosen the path of targeted support measures for large families due to objective reasons - first of all, insufficient financial resources - has no other choice yet, but the current nature of support for this social group, focusing exclusively on solving problem of poverty and social exclusion, is ambiguous. While the state's willingness to help overcome poverty is understandable, this is not the goal of family policy, but of social policy. Even the most economically advanced countries have a package of social support measures for the poorest, but it is not linked to the status of

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the large family and only applies to those whose needs are not met by a predominant family policy focused on gender equality, work-life balance and child welfare. Meanwhile, support focused exclusively on poverty reduction and prevention, as shown by the empirical research of support for large fam-



families in the European Union and the empirical research of support for large families in Lithuania show that in order to make progress in welfare, the transition from “passive” welfare, when basic family needs are met, to “active”

welfare, not only pushes financially stronger large families to the margins of support, but also contributes to the stigmatization of this social group. This way the perception of the large family in the consciousness of society is also beginning to be associated with poverty and this becomes the basis for prejudice and stereotypes about large families. This confirms the second defensive statement. The radically opposite situation of large families in France and the United Kingdom is excellent evidence that the support package for large families presupposes the state attitude towards this social group and at the same time at least partly affects public attitudes towards large families. While in France large families have become part of the culture as a result of the state's approach to it and the course of family policy chosen, in the United Kingdom, where support for each subsequent child is reduced, large families are pushed to economic and social margins.

As can be seen from the European context, the application of tax incentives and linking them to the number of children usually work

7. The empirical research of support for large families in Lithuania allowed to make an important conclusion of this dissertation - non-governmental organizations of large families are a consequence of the lack of support from the state and society. Such families form the organizations that unite them, to compensate for this deficiency. Here they organize support both within the organization, in the form of mutual assistance and support, and outside the organization, forming a more favourable public attitude, organizing support projects and engaging in lobbying activities. This confirms the third defensive statement. The network of non-governmental organizations of large families in Lithuania is really large, so this conclusion of the dissertation presupposes that support for large families - both moral and material - in Lithuania is still insufficient.

8. Both the comparative research of the situation of large

welfare, when through gender equality and the reconciliation of work and family, the family is empowered to take care of itself, is needed. Although the European Union does not have a common family policy, similar demographic processes in all its countries are leading to a convergence of family policy trends: direct social support is gradually being replaced by social inclusion through employment. All countries, even southern European countries, still loyal to the traditional family model, are slowly turning this path.

9. In the transition to “active” welfare provision, the good practice of other countries, the opinion of experts working with large families in Lithuania and the position of ELFAC leaders testify the importance of tax benefits as a priority support measure. This measure, unlike direct payments, provides financial benefit only for working families. This is an essential reason for determining the advantage of tax benefits over direct

payments when deciding which one to choose. Tax benefits are important for two aspects. First, the previous tax benefits converted into child money were a more attractive measure for many families, as their financial benefit was identical, but their moral benefit was higher, i.e. large families feel better when they “earn” a tax benefit than simply receive a direct payment. Second, tax benefits favour working families, so there is a growing likelihood of increasing the birth rate among employed and socially responsible people. As can be seen from the European context, the application of tax incentives and linking them to the number of children usually work: countries that apply them to large families, such as Belgium, Estonia, Latvia, France or Hungary, are the ones with the highest rates of third and subsequent order births. Therefore, it can be concluded that this support measure is one of the most beneficial, both for large families and for the state itself.

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