

„The three-year long maternity leave is very strongly petrified”

*The decrease in population, the low birth rate and the low number of day-care places are pressing problems in each of the Visegrad countries. But while in Hungary it is difficult to reach a social consensus regarding the issue, the fairer division of childcare duties and employment of women are already part of the political agenda in the other countries. We have discussed Central-Eastern European population policies with **Eszter Kováts**, project officer of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.*

Interview by András Mizsur

hvg.hu: Last week, on the Budapest Demographic Forum, Viktor Orbán said that gender debate is a “nice and relevant issue, yet still of secondary importance” because it does not solve the population problem. You are dealing with the questions of gender equality in East Central Europe. How current is this topic in the other Visegrad countries?

Eszter Kováts: In Poland and in the Czech Republic, questions of gender equality have been on the agenda for years. It has been recognized in both countries that it is not a “women’s issue” but an issue of everyone. The example of the Czech government shows that it is not even a question of being left or right wing, as the Christian Democrat-Social Democrat- ANO coalition has a common governmental gender strategy.¹ On the other hand, the example of the other Visegrad countries also shows that family policy and policies aimed at achieving gender equality do not exclude each other. What is more, the latter increases the willingness of having children by guaranteeing that women can safely return to the labour market and that men undertake a bigger share of the domestic duties. One can easily agree that it is important to support families and having children, it is, however, more difficult to discuss it as a problem not exclusively relevant to women.

hvg.hu: If we happen to talk about gender equality... Poland is having its second female prime minister in a row, while in Hungary the proportion of seats held by women in the Parliament is barely 10%. How has Poland gotten so far?

E.K.: The introduction of the gender quota in 2011 (the proportion of women on party lists must be at least 35%) was a huge thing in Poland because this was the issue that was able to bring about a broad social consensus. They have realized that the number of women sitting in the parliament is one of the indicators of the level of democracy, simply because a social group of this size cannot be left out of decision making. The debates around the quota have also changed the language that is used when talking about the political representation of women: in Poland, the discourse is no longer about whether women are ambitious enough or whether they endure the tough life of politics.

Of course, the introduction of women’s quotas in itself does not immediately solve the problem of gender inequality. When we are demanding policies that support gender equality, we have to be reflective about which groups of women we are talking about. In Germany, for instance, a cross-party women’s consensus has been established about the necessity of having a quota in the supervisory

¹ http://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/Projekt_Optimalizace/Government_Strategy_for-Gender_Equality_2014_2020.pdf

boards of companies. This was an important step, however, it responded only to the problem of women being in a better social situation anyway, and had nothing to do with the lived realities of – for instance – single moms working as shop assistants.

hvg.hu: Can you imagine that a similar consensus could be reached among Hungarian parties in any relevant issues? Recently, neither the proposal of Együtt (the party wanted to increase the capacity of the nurseries, restructure the parental leave system and introduce “daddy’s months”), nor civilians’ initiative for eliminating child hunger has been taken up by the government.

E.K.: I think we have a lot to do if we want to transcend the current logic of Hungarian politics, which uses party lines as a yardstick for everything. It is worth keeping an eye on the work of the Subcommittee for the Dignity of Women – a subcommittee of the Committee on Culture in the Hungarian Parliament – because it seems a place where consensus might form. What I see in the course of my work is that there are important questions in which there is a general agreement regardless of party affiliation. Such issues are, for instance, violence against women or undisturbed birth. The question is whether any of these issues can be turned into politics – the Polish managed to do so.

hvg.hu: Stopping the decrease in population and increasing the number of births are the most important objectives of the family policy in Hungary. How big is this problem in other countries? Are there any similarities between the family policy of Hungary and of the other members of the Visegrad Group?

E.K.: The decrease in population is an issue everywhere; statistics from 2013 show that all the four Visegrad countries rank among the last third of the EU countries in terms of fertility rate. There are concerns about the sustainability of the social security services in the neighbouring countries, too, and about the fact that people have fewer children than they would like to have. The institution of three-year long parental leave (in fact, in the Czech Republic mothers can stay at home even for four years) is very deeply embedded in the mentality of the people living in the region and women are pressured to fill these three years if they want to consider themselves “good mothers”.

Whenever anybody questions the necessity of the three-year long parental leave, they are always told – and not only in Hungary – to let the families choose, and to not force women back to the labour market. While I agree with this, it is important to look at how real this choice is: nowadays, it is impossible to provide for a family with only one income and everybody knows that there is a shortage in nursery places. It is not accidental, then, that the Czech government is already working on the transformation of the parental leave system, which is not an easy task because shortening the leave only aggravates poverty and unemployment if not accompanied with an increase in nursery places and fitting measures in the labour market.

hvg.hu: As for nursery places, what is the situation in Hungary like compared to the other countries of the Visegrad Group?

E.K.: In the other Visegrad countries, the situation is even worse. In Hungary, 16% of children younger than three can get a place. We keep saying that it is a terribly low number – which is true –, however, in the other three countries this ratio is lower than 5%. This means that only those mothers can return to the labour market who either manage to find somebody within the family who looks after the child or who can afford to pay for such a service. We can see that the Czech Republic has the biggest employment gap between childless mothers and mothers with children in Europe. This means that women with small children take up jobs in a much smaller proportion than childless women.

Everybody agrees that we need more nursery places, it is the means with which to create those places that are debated. The Polish have quite drifted to the direction of market services – the state is practically outsourcing the task, which is going to produce inequalities in the long run. The Czechs have recently accepted a law that was originally drafted by the Christian Democrats and then taken up by the Minister for Employment and Social Affairs, who, for that matter, considers herself a feminist. The bill introduces forms of day-care that are less professional and easier to set up. Many, typically leftist people, have fiercely attacked the whole idea, saying that by lowering the standards we are increasing the inequality among children, regarding the access to high quality day-care. The minister has acknowledged that the proposal has its drawbacks, but also claimed the lack of places is such a pressing problem that it should be addressed immediately.

hvg.hu: One of the key issues of family policy is how to help mothers to return to the labour market. On the other hand, however, fathers do not often opt for taking parental leave in Hungary. Is it more usual in other countries for fathers to stay at home with their children?

E.K.: It goes for the whole region that very few men make use of the opportunity, with the exception of Lithuania, where the proportion of fathers who take up parental leave is over 10%. In the Czech Republic, the introduction of “father’s months” (i.e. a share of the parental leave that only the other parent, typically the father, can take) is now on the agenda, in spite of the fact that a few years ago, when the possibility first occurred, the entire Czech media started panicking and burst into indignation, asking “Do they want men to breastfeed?”. Since then, this rush of panic has subsided and the governing coalition has recently decided to put forward the proposal.

In Hungary, men do not take parental leave because they are scared of being regarded as unmanly and because their employer would disapprove it. When LMP came forward with the idea of “father’s month” a few years ago (they suggested that at least one of the 36 months should be reserved to the father), the counter-argument was the very same as when the idea of shortening the length of the parental leave from three to two years occurred: we cannot interfere so harshly in the private life of families. I think that even the starting point is faulty here, because it would be actually the father’s months that would make it possible for the employees to enforce their rights against the employer, not to mention that more and more men want to get more involved in bringing up their children.

hvg.hu: We can often hear that atypical forms of employment could help women to return to the labour market.

E.K.: This is true, however, we have to handle this suggestion very carefully. If we look at Poland, which country has the highest proportion of fixed-term employment contracts in Europe, we can see that it markedly reduces the willingness of the couples of having children, because it makes people vulnerable in the labour market. The Czech gender strategy explicitly says that the country is lagging behind the EU average in terms of the proportion of part time employment and that this gap must be closed. To aspire to reach the EU average can be, however, highly problematic if it is exactly the high number of part time jobs that causes problems. We should not adopt the defects of the system. If a woman somehow manages to negotiate with her employer the possibility to work part-time, later she will have a much harder time getting back into full-time employment. This cements the unequal division of labour at home and increases the risk of female poverty.

hvg.hu: What can we learn from the Czech or Polish family policy measures?

E.K.: First, that family and gender equality do not exclude each other – quite the contrary! If we approach the issue from the aspect of the population crisis, the lesson may be that family policies that skyrocket the number of childbirth in a flash simply do not exist. In France, which country boasts

one of the highest fertility rates in Europe, the most important feature of the family policy is its predictability. Regardless of which party happens to be in power, there is some kind of consensus underlying their family policy. That is, when French parents decide to have children, they know exactly what they can expect in five, ten years' time. In Poland, a similar consensus has been reached in terms of the political representation of women. The example of the Czech Republic proves that issues of family policy can be indeed lifted from the political battlefield governed by the logic of party barricades if we are to make real difference in these important questions. Of course, social debates cannot be avoided.

Our interviewee

Eszter Kováts has a degree in French and German Studies, in sociology and political science. After finishing her studies she volunteered for NGOs working in the field of civic education in Berlin and Weimar. Since 2009, she has been working for the Budapest bureau of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Germany's oldest political foundation). She has been responsible for the Foundation's regional programme called "Gender equality in East-Central Europe" since 2012. This programme examines the course of the debates on gender equality in the Visegrad and Baltic countries and explores how these countries can make progress in essential issues by learning from each other.