

## POPULATION'S PERCEPTION ON FAMILY POLICIES IN ROMANIA AND ON THEIR ROLE IN SOCIETY DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract:** *In the context of recent crises (the economic crisis of 2007-2010, the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic), which had an overwhelming impact on all social subsystems (including the family), many states in the European Union concentrated their efforts and adopted a series of policies aimed at ensuring the good functioning of family structures, in order to overcome crisis situations. Such states have correlated subsidies and financial transfers with well-developed systems in terms of social services for children and their families, so they have adopted numerous programs related to socio-pedagogical support for children, have focused on programs to support future fathers, took measures for those parents who did not get their children admitted to municipal kindergartens, facilitated access to parental education during pregnancy or implemented flexible work schedules to allow parents to fulfill their family duties. All these measures had the main objectives of facilitating the formation of new families, strengthening the stability and well-being of the family, increasing the fertility rate, strengthening marriage and promoting its values. The present article presents, in a systematic manner, the results of a sociological research, the purpose of which was to see how the population relates to the family policies implemented in Romanian society.*

**Keywords:** family, social policy, social benefits for families, parental leave.

### 1. Introduction

The interest in defining family policies has been in the foreground for the European Union, since its foundation until the present moment, so this type of policies represents a sub-field of government policies in the social sphere whose main objective is the state of good of families, paying special attention to families with children.

The changes that have taken place over time on the institution of the family lead to the need for modernization of family policies that are in accordance with the specifics of each country. Considering these changes, the states of the European Union and beyond are faced with a drastic decrease in the birth rate, against the background of the aging of the population and with an inadequate approach to family policies, aimed at strengthening and improving the ties within the family.

According to M. Jean-Claude Barbier, family policies can be defined in 3 ways: a process of elaboration by the state of specific actions and programs intended for families and their members; the materialization and institutionalization of these actions (programs, budgets, specific administrative and management bodies, in the public framework); the existence of non-governmental social activities (Barbier, 1990; Racoceanu, Matei and Sanduleasa, 2012: 6).

Some institutions and organizations use the term "family policy" to refer to any policy that provides financial assistance to families with dependent children, such as exemption from paying taxes and fees for dependents. On the other hand, other family policies focus on reconciling family and professional life, by providing daycare services or parental leave regulations.

Some scholars have defined family policies as deliberate government actions taken in favor of the family. In other words, the family must be the main objective of the policies to merit the association of the family with politics (Daly and Clavero, 2002: 16; Daly, 2010; Daly and Ferragina, 2018).

Family policies usually include a variety of policies related to different aspects of the family. In general, these involve regulations of partnership and maternity, as well as how states recognize the obligations and responsibilities arising from these relationships.

Peter McDonald placed family policies into three broad categories:

a) Financial incentives: periodic cash payments, lump sum payments or loans, tax reductions and credits, free or subsidized services for products intended for children;

b) Initiatives regarding family and work: maternity and paternity leaves to raise and care for children, flexible working hours and short-term leaves to meet family needs, anti-discrimination initiatives and legislation regarding equity gender in employment practices;

c) Social changes aimed at supporting children and parents: initiatives and work opportunities, environments conducive to children's development, gender equality, support policies regarding family relationships and marriage, the development of positive social attitudes towards children and parents (McDonald, 2002: 335-340).

Pierre Bourdieu points out that since family policies are directed at the family, they also build the family. In his opinion, family policies are those activities of the state that aim to favor a certain type of family organizations and strengthen the position of those who conform to this form of organization" (Bourdieu, 1996: 19-20; Neyer and Andersson, 2007 : 5).

Today the states of the European Union are facing a major problem, namely the dramatic decrease in the birth rate against the background of the aging of the population, although in the first decades after the war we were witnessing a real baby boom.

Family policies have undergone changes in time and space, being different from one country to another, and women's access to the labor market and the principle of gender equality have been the main elements of the decrease in fertility. However, half a century ago, the main concern of family policies was centered on the patriarchal model in which the majority of women in many industrialized countries took care of the household while the man was the main breadwinner of the family (Basten and Frejka, 2015: 39).

In the last half of the 20th century, the more women were engaged in gainful activities and the more feminist movements took on a greater scope, the more the principle of gender equality gained greater importance, thus family policies were oriented towards supporting families where both spouses have a job.

From the point of view of the public policy documents developed at the European level, we can see that the typologies of family policies differ according to the criteria used as a basis for identifying problems, as well as according to the specifics, history and needs of each country.

## **2. Literature review**

### *Ecological systems theory*

One of the theories we can refer to when analyzing family policies, in general, and their impact on the development of communities, in particular, is the *ecological systems theory* (Dale et al. 2009: 31; Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This theory focuses on the individual, as an integrated part in other systems, and is based on the belief that people are in constant interaction with their environment, being surrounded by networks that can affect an individual or a group both positively and negatively. Thus, this theoretical perspective analyzes how the individual or family adapts to their environment, starting from the premise that when an individual or a group is connected and involved in an environment, its good functionality increases.

Ecological systems theory places a strong emphasis on existing social policies that serve and protect individuals, groups, the environment, and the interactions between them, and calls attention to the revision of such policies given that the population and its structures are in constant change, more chosen by the fact that the number of elderly people is growing rapidly.

"In order to improve the well-being and functionality of the family, programs are needed that involve the elderly in various activities that correspond to their individual needs, and more than that, finding ways for people to want to participate in such initiatives" (Reed Wilder, 2010: 23-24).

The life and decisions of a family are influenced by the economic, educational, religious, cultural and biological environment and this perspective draws attention to the risk factors that can cause changes in this institution. Currently, and not only in Romanian society, but many families also encounter problems in terms of the ability to support themselves, the education of their children, access to health services or access to housing that would provide them with safety and allow their children to develop in a way harmonious. Poverty is a real problem for many families and studies have shown that its presence since childhood directly affects the educational course, and not only, of the child (Ferguson, Bovaird and Mueller, 2007; Lacour and Tissington, 2011; Niță, Motoi and Goga 2021). Families whose children grow up in deprived areas or marginalized neighborhoods are at risk educationally, economically and healthily and are exposed to violent behaviour, low education or an environment where parents do not have a stable job and live on social benefits.

Ecological systems theory encourages family researchers and policymakers to create an environment that improves the quality of family life, develop programs that support marriage, fathers' involvement in the household, child rearing and education, and facilitate mothers' access alone in the labour market.

#### *The sociological perspective of the theory of elites*

This theory conveys the idea of ranking: individuals and groups rank higher or lower relative to one another in terms of influence, wealth, status, and power. The position that the elites occupy in the structure, but also the individual interests help to outline a perception in relation to family problems and how to solve them and because they differ, despite shared common values such as freedom, equality or opportunity, enter often in conflict. From the perspective of elite theory, those who implement social policies related to family issues pursue the interests and preferences of elites and not those of interest groups.

The fundamental assumptions underlying the theory of elites are: a) policies and programs reflect the values and interests of elites, in a hierarchical society; b) the elites share the same ideas regarding the institutional aspects and the values that underlie them; c) the complexity of modern society excludes the active and full participation of all in the political process, leading to the need for a division of force in this process; d) this division creates a class of elites who have the role of leading and governing. (Zimmerman, 2001: 264)

#### *The functionalist perspective in sociology*

From the functionalist perspective, normal society is built on harmony and consensus and on common values shared by members of society, without being dominated by conflict and riots. Functionalists believe that the state acts in the interest of society and social policies are made for the good of all and, more than that, they believe that policies intended exclusively for the family help this institution to perform its functions much more easily and provide its members with a lifestyle qualitative (Dermott and Fowler, 2020).

An example of this is the opinion of Ronald Fletcher (1962: 161) who argues that the introduction of health, education and housing policies in the years after the industrial revolution gradually led to the development of a welfare state which aimed to support the family in performing its functions more effectively. Also, the existence of a health sector implies that with the help of doctors, nurses, hospitals or medicines, today's family can take care of its members when they are sick. Also, Fletcher points out, with the growth of welfare services the function of the family in contemporary society has changed by adding more responsibility onto the family. For example: parents' supplement learning in schools by providing advice and help more effectively than in the past; an increased knowledge of diet and exercise means that the

family plays a greater role in health; the family must make certain their children are at school and if there's any sign of families neglecting children then social services intervene" (Fletcher, 1956: 31-46)

### *The New Right Theory*

In the 1980s the followers of this theory argued that government policies weaken the institution of the family and therefore major changes are needed at this level, so that between 1979 and 1997 this perspective dominated the development of family policies (Taylor-Gooby, 1989: 432).

There are four main features of this theory: an emphasis on individual freedom and choice, reduced government spending, free markets that encourage competition, and the importance of traditional institutions and values.

This perspective refers to the family as "natural" and based on fundamental biological differences between men and women, with a clear division of labor between man, as provider of services and goods, and woman, as breadwinner of the household. It also supports the idea that children should have a stable family environment, where the parents are married and the wife only has household and child-rearing responsibilities (Abbott and Wallace, 1992)

Charles Murray (1988) argued that if welfare benefits were less generous, couples would stay together and preserve the nuclear family, which according to the New Right is 'the building block of society'. The views of these scholars are in line with those of the functionalists and consider the nuclear family to be the ideal type in society, opposing many changes in modern society, such as the decline of the nuclear family, the increase in the number of cohabiting couples or the number of marriages taking place ends in divorce.

### **3. Methods**

The research method used was the opinion survey, based on a questionnaire that was made up of 32 identification, closed, open and matrix questions that focused on capturing people's perception of existing family policies in Romania and how they meet the needs and expectations of citizens.

The questionnaire was applied in Dolj county, Craiova city, to an exploratory group consisting of 152 people, 64.7% female and 35.3% male, of which 47.1% with higher education and 52.9% with high school graduates who worked in various fields of activity including: trade, security, healthcare, education, legal, construction, human resources, etc.

In the research undertaken by us, we set the following objectives: to capture the way in which people relate to the policies intended for the family and to establish the degree of satisfaction with them; capturing the citizens' perception regarding the degree of involvement of the leading institutions and the Romanian state in terms of family policies as a factor in the development of communities.

In order to achieve these objectives, we started from the formulation of three hypotheses:

- Citizens' trust in the family protection system and in the management institutions with attributions in this field is weak.
- Females tend to consider the costs of raising and educating a child as difficult to bear, to a greater extent than males.
- Graduates of higher education tend to claim that the 2-year period of parental leave is sufficient, to a greater extent than those with secondary education.

### **4. Results**

More than half of the respondents (56.9%) claim that the policies centered on the institution of the family, in Romania, are insufficient, 34.3% choose the middle option according to which this type of policies are neither sufficient nor insufficient and 8.8 % say that in our country there are enough policies aimed at the family.

**Table 1: Depending on your level of knowledge and informations, family policies currently existing in Romania are..... (%)**

1.	Insufficient	56.9
2.	Neither sufficient nor insufficient	34.3
3.	Sufficient	8.8
	Total	100

Moreover, the results of the research undertaken by us are also in accordance with the results of other studies which highlight the fact that over 30 years after the anti-communist Revolution of 1989, it is not so easily understandable why the current national poverty rate is still close to 30%. Also during this whole period, social services, education, health and social work remained underfinanced, at a level far below that of other European countries” (Niță and Pârvu, 2020: 107). These factors are important factors to take into consideration when a decision to migrate abroad is to be taken. Studies are pointing out that “For middle-aged people, who have family and children, the education of children, health services, existing opportunities, etc. are important in the case of a decision to emigrate” (Pricină, 2020: 10).

**Table 2: What is your opinion regarding the family protection system in Romania? (%)**

1.	Bad	56.9
2.	Very bad	22.5
3.	Good	13.7
4.	Very good	2.9
5.	I don't know/I can't appreciate	3.9
	Total	100

The opinion of the respondents regarding the family protection system in Romania is as follows: 56.9% state that they have a bad opinion about this system, 22.5% a very bad opinion, 13.7% a good opinion and 2, 9% a very good opinion. 3.9% cannot decide on this aspect.

**Table 3: On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest value and 5 the highest value, how important is family to you? (%)**

1.	Very important	91.2
2.	Important	8.8
	Total	100

Asked how much importance respondents give to their families, 91.2% claim that family is very important and 8.8% important. And these results are important, if we are taking into consideration that It is known that „family, profession/occupation and job, social group represent that main factors on which the individual rely on, as a social being”. (Otovescu et al., 2015: 37)

**Table 4: On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represents the lowest value and 5 the highest value, how important is the family for the leading institutions of the Romanian state? (%)**

1.	Little important	40.2
2.	Not important at all	24.5
3.	Important	20.6
4.	Very little important	11.8
5.	Very important	2.9
	Total	100

While the respondents attach great importance to the family, in their lives, the state, according to their statements, gives little importance (40.2%) to this institution. Also, a percentage of 24.5 are of the opinion that, for the Romanian state, the family is not important at all, 20.6% place the family as important for Romania, 11.8% as very unimportant and 2.9%

as being very important. 42.2% of respondents claim that the main aspect on which the state's efforts to support the family should be focused is the reduction of poverty among needy families. Financial benefits granted to newly formed families are second in the list of respondents' preferences, respondents placed high-quality child care services in third place, promotion of gender equality in fourth place, support for abandoned children, followed by increased birth rates, support for single mothers or fathers, aged care services or parenting support programs. The last two positions are occupied by psychological support for young mothers, respectively easy access to certain goods.

**Table 5: To what extent do you agree with the following statement:  
*Family policies are a necessary factor for the development of society?***

1.	Largely	47.1
2.	To a great extent	44.1
3.	To a small extent	5.9
4.	Not at all	2.9
	Total	100

47.1% of the respondents state that family policies are necessary for the development of a society to a large extent, 44.1% to a very large extent, 5.9% are of the opinion that this type of policies contribute to the development of society to a small extent and 2, 9% not at all.

**Table 6: To what extent do you agree with the following statement:  
*Family policies are a topic often discussed in the public space in Romania?***

1.	To a small extent	46.1
2.	To a very small extent	22.5
3.	Not at all	15.7
4.	Largely	11.8
5.	To a great extent	3.9
	Total	100

Asked to what extent they agree with the statement that family policies are a topic often discussed in the public space in Romania, most of the respondents, 46.1%, state that these policies are brought up to a small extent, 22.5% to a very small extent, 15.7% not at all. A percentage of 11.8 believe that in the public space in Romania family policies are discussed to a large extent and 3.9% to a very large extent.

**Table 7: To meet the needs of citizens, the child allowance should be... (%)**

1.	Much bigger	70.6
2.	Bigger	24.5
3.	The same as until now	4.9
	Total	100

Regarding the child allowance, 70.6% of the respondents believe that they would be satisfied if this allowance were much higher, 24.5% believe that the allowance should be higher and only 4.9% the same as so far. This opinion is overwhelmingly shared by people from rural areas, the area where financial possibilities are more limited „the living cost is expensive, the paid work is very rare, the unemployment has high rates and many people are dependent by welfare benefits, like social aid and family allowance” (Sorescu, 2015: 370-371).

**Table 8: Currently, parental leave is 2 years. To meet the needs of citizens,  
parental leave should be..... (%)**

1.	The same as until now	59.8
2.	Bigger	26.5

3.	Much bigger	6.9
4.	I don't know/I can't appreciate	6.9
	Total	100

If with regard to the child allowance and the maternity allowance, the respondents argued that it is necessary for them to be much higher, respectively higher, regarding the maternity leave, most of the respondents are of the opinion that the 2-year period related of this leave is sufficient, so that: 59.8% opted for the "same as before" option, 26.5% chose the "bigger" option, 6.9% focused on the "much more" option higher" and 6.9% could not appreciate it.

**Table 9: Perception on childcare allowance, by gender (crosstabs)**

In order to meet the needs of citizens, the childcare allowance should be:		Gender		Total
		Masculin	Feminin	
1.	Much bigger	24.3%	75.7%	100%
2.	Bigger	39.3%	60.7%	100%
3.	The same as until now	55.6%	44.4%	100%
Total		35.3%	64.7%	100%

Regarding the opinion of the respondents regarding the increase or maintenance of the child-rearing allowance, women were oriented towards its increase to a greater extent than men, registering a percentage of 75.7 for the option "much higher" and 60.7 for the "higher" option, compared to men who recorded, for the same answer options, 24.3 and 39.3 percent respectively. The answer variant "same as before" was among the preferences of men to a greater extent than among women, 55.6% compared to 44.4%.

**Table 10: Perception on parental leave, by level of education (crosstabs)**

Currently, parental leave is 2 years. In order to meet the needs of citizens, parental leave should be..:		Level of education:		Total
		Higher education	Secondary school	
1.	Much bigger	28.6%	71.4%	100%
2.	Bigger	40.7%	59.3%	100%
3.	The same as until now	57.4%	42.6%	100%
4.	I don't know/I can't appreciate	-	100%	100%

One of the issues covered in the opinion survey refers to the increase or maintenance of parental leave. While respondents with secondary education register values of over 50% for the variants according to which this type of leave must be much longer (71.4%), respectively higher (59.3%), most of the respondents who have completed higher education are of the opinion that the 2 years of parental leave are sufficient.

Also, regarding the opinion of the respondents regarding the increase or maintenance of the child-rearing allowance, women were oriented towards its increase to a greater extent than men. The same aspect can be observed when we discuss about the costs of raising and educating children, with women experiencing these difficulties to a greater extent than men. These results can be explained by the fact that, in general, the involvement of women in family life and in raising and educating children is greater compared to that of men.

According to the research results, people who have followed a form of higher education tend to consider, to a greater extent than those with secondary education, that the period related to parental leave is sufficient. Given that those with higher education generally have jobs that provide them with a certain professional status and prestige they tend to want to re-enter the labour market earlier than those with secondary education who may have less jobs attractive, which do not give them the same satisfaction.

## 5. Conclusions

Against the background of the changes that have occurred within the family over the years, the modernization of societies and the crises present among many countries, there is a need to implement effective policies that are focused on increasing the quality of life in the family and ensuring protection against certain risks. For a better management and implementation of family policies, it is necessary to understand the needs of the citizens, to know their perception regarding the already existing family policies, to identify the difficulties they face or to know the expectations they have from the leading institutions whose main objective is the protection and support of families.

All these aspects, together with the current fragility and instability of the family, make this theme one that deserves to be addressed in order to know how the existence/non-existence of such policies affects people's lives and implicitly their families.

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