

PUBLIC MATERNALISM IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND HUNGARY:  
WORK-FAMILY POLICIES IN TWO POST-SOCIALIST WELFARE STATES

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ABSTRACT

This article compares the post-1989 development of work-family policies aimed at mothers of young children in two Visegrad countries, the Czech Republic and Hungary. The comparison draws on the conceptual framework of ‘maternalism’ and expands it by focusing on the similarities and differences between two welfare states which provide generous public support to the maternal care of young children; it also incorporates an analysis of policy and political documents. The paper argues that in the Czech Republic, public support is given exclusively to the maternal care of children under the age of three, while the Hungarian system offers basic public support to day care services as well. The discursive analysis has revealed the same pattern: Czech documents focus entirely on maternal care, though mothers are subsumed under the ‘family’, while Hungarian texts contain a wider range of discourses about childcare.

Key words

post socialism; welfare states, work-family policies, maternalism

INTRODUCTION

Starting in 1989, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe underwent fundamental political, economic and social changes, which had a particularly strong impact on women. One important outcome for women was that their labour market participation in these countries declined – in a period when, in other parts of Europe, women were becoming better integrated in the labour market. Welfare state arrangements also changed radically in these countries after the collapse of state socialist regimes – indeed, many analysts feared that this would lead to women becoming the losers of the transformations (see, for example, Einhorn, 1993; Funk and Mueller, 1993). However, the Czech Republic and Hungary maintained and even extended their state socialist family policies<sup>3</sup> after 1989, including the system of very long, paid maternity and parental leaves, which

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<sup>3</sup> Family policies include cash payments and tax credits to parents raising children as well as paid maternity / parental leaves designed to help parents combine paid work and caring for young children. This article refers to maternity / parental leaves and publicly supported day care for children as work-family policies, following Hobson and Fahlén, 2009 and Lewis, 2009.

promote the maternal care of young children. Thus, both countries have been characterised as ‘public maternalist’ welfare states (Glass and Fodor, 2007).

Family policies are commonly analysed in the framework of comparative welfare state research. State socialist and post-state socialist countries were first excluded from both mainstream (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and feminist welfare state typologies (Lewis, 1993; Lister, 2003; Orloff, 2009), then treated as a homogenous group (Deacon, 1992; Hantrais, 2004; Pascall and Lewis, 2004). The problem of analysing post-state socialist welfare states has been widely debated (see, for example, Saxonberg, 2000; Pascall and Lewis, 2004), and it has been acknowledged that post-state socialist policies challenge existing conceptual frameworks (Michel, 2006: 146). Over the past decade, several studies have compared the family and work-family policies of post-socialist countries, focusing on differences and similarities within this group (Fodor et al., 2002; Fodor, 2005; Saxonberg and Sirovatka, 2006; Saxonberg and Szelewa, 2007; Szelewa and Polakowski, 2008; Szelewa, 2010; Szikra, 2010; Szikra and Szelewa, 2010; Saxonberg 2014). This article aims to further our understanding of the post-state socialist work-family policy development in two countries, the Czech Republic and Hungary, which at first glance seem to have followed similar paths. Yet, as we will argue, a more detailed analysis reveals important differences, especially in the provision of publicly supported day care for children under the age of three.

The developments are analysed through the following research questions. How have work-family policies changed since 1989? In particular, how have these policies influenced mothers’ ability to maintain links with the labour market? What may explain the different trends in the two countries? Our analysis draws on the conceptual framework of ‘maternalism’ (Glass and Fodor, 2007) and expands it by focusing on two countries with public maternalist policies, and by incorporating the analysis of policy texts and political debates into the comparative framework. We argue that, while both countries can be characterized as ‘public maternalist’ welfare states, public support in the Czech Republic is restricted to the maternal care of children under the age of three. This is in contrast to the Hungarian system, which offers public support not only to maternal care but also to day care services. The discursive analysis has revealed the same pattern: Czech documents focus entirely on maternal care, though mothers are subsumed under the ‘family’; while Hungarian texts contain a wider range of discourses about childcare.

In the following section, we outline the theoretical debates related to welfare state development in post-state socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Based on this theoretical background, we then describe the structure and principles of maternity and parental leaves in the Czech Republic and Hungary after 1989, focusing on how they shape mothers’ ability to maintain links with the labour market. Then, we turn to day care services for children under the age of three, concentrating on three issues: changing policies, day care capacities and political discourses in the two countries. In the final section, we outline our arguments and their theoretical relevance in full, and recommend further research.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Most scholarship on the family policies of post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe adopted the theoretical framework of ‘familisation’ (Leitner, 2003; Hantrais, 2004; Pascall and Lewis, 2004; Saxonberg and Sirovatka, 2006, 2007; Szelewa, 2006; Szelewa and Polakowski, 2008; Szikra, 2010; Hašková and Szikra, 2012), and compared the extent to which

policies ascribe childcare responsibilities to the family or share them with public childcare institutions. Policy changes in the post-socialist Czech Republic were argued to follow the general trend of ‘re-familisation’, while those in Hungary were discussed as a slight exception to the general trends (Saxonberg and Sirovatka, 2007). Szelewa and Polakowski (2008) characterized the policy framework of caring for pre-school children between 1989 and 2004 in the Czech Republic as ‘female mobilizing’, followed by ‘explicit familialism’; and also as a succession of ‘explicit familialism’ and ‘weak comprehensive support’ in Hungary. They argued that Hungarian mothers had some freedom to choose between looking after their young children at home and using public services, though the system ultimately supports maternal care, just as the Czech policies do. While the study by Szelewa and Polakowski (2008) is so far unique in terms of their approach, the number of countries included and the time period covered, it also has certain limitations. Szikra (2010) pointed out that certain groups of Hungarian women, such as those living in rural areas and the Roma, have only a very limited choice, due to the difficulties and/or discrimination they face in securing day care for their children under the age of three. Thus, Szikra characterised the Hungarian policy regime as ‘limited optional familialism.’<sup>4</sup> Second, Szelewa and Polakowski (2008) compared childcare services for children aged 3–6, which excluded an important area for comparison: public day care services for children aged 0–3.

A smaller body of research relies on the conceptual framework of ‘maternalism’ when comparing the welfare states of post-socialist countries (Glass and Fodor, 2007, 2011). The Czech Republic and Hungary are argued to have maintained a system of ‘public maternalism’ (Glass and Fodor, 2007): after the end of state socialism, both countries continued to provide state support to childbearing and childraising through cash payments and long, paid maternity and parental leaves. This is not the case with all post-socialist countries, or even with all Visegrad countries: the maternalist arm of the welfare state has been largely dismantled in Poland (Glass and Fodor, 2007). We find the conceptual framework of maternalism more suitable for our analysis than familialism, as it highlights that parental leaves are used almost exclusively by mothers in the two countries and thus, only mothers’ / women’s integration into the labour market is affected.<sup>5</sup> As post-state socialist maternalism is a central concept of this article, we discuss it in some detail below, including its origins.

Haney conceptualized state-socialist maternalism as an assumption of policy makers that “women have special needs as – potential – mothers and thus have to be protected” in paid employment (2002: 104). Long, paid maternity leaves, introduced in the 1960s and 1970s, were designed to help mothers to ‘reconcile’ childcare and paid work.<sup>6</sup> Although these policies seem very similar to the work-life reconciliation policies currently recommended by the European Union, there are also a number of important differences.

First, in the state-socialist context, where all able-bodied adults were legally obliged to work, the long maternity leave served the purpose of *temporarily removing* mothers from the workforce. Their jobs were guaranteed, and all women returned to full-time work after a few years of maternity leave, during which they were counted as ‘employed’ in official statistics (Fodor,

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<sup>4</sup> According to the ‘limited’ optional familialism argument, poor women, the majority of whom are Romani, are discriminated against in the child care system, as the system prefers mothers with good employment records.

<sup>5</sup> The labour market effects of ‘familialist’ state policies are also explored by examining the labour force participation of mothers. See also Saxonberg (2013) for a critique of the theoretical framework of familialism.

<sup>6</sup> Maternalist movements in Western Europe and the USA in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (see for example Koven and Michel, 1993) aimed to secure state support only for those mothers who were not supported by their husbands, and thus had to work for pay.

2003).<sup>7</sup> Second, after a period in the 1950s and early 1960s, when mothers' inclusion in the workforce was attempted through a relatively short period of maternity leave and the provision of day care for all children, long leaves were seen by state socialist policy makers as a cheaper *alternative* to public day care services for infants (Haney, 2002; Fodor, 2003; Saxonberg, 2014). Third, state socialist maternalist policies were embedded in a strong discourse about children's psychological needs and focused entirely on the mother-child unit, de-emphasising the role of fathers (Adamik, 2000; Goven, 2000; Haney, 2002; Saxonberg, 2011, 2014). Finally, the policies granted special rights to mothers and constituted them as a special group of employees: 'worker-mothers' (Einhorn, 1993; Fodor, 2003; Haney, 2002).

Against this theoretical background, this article compares the development of work-family policies in the Czech Republic and Hungary from 1989 to the present, paying special attention to the political debates related to the provision of childcare services for children under the age of three.

## ANALYSIS

In this section, we compare the work-family policies in the two countries over time, focusing on maternity and parental leaves and benefits, public childcare services, and policy and political debates about childcare.

### Parental leaves and benefits in the Czech Republic and Hungary 1990–2012

A relatively short and generously paid maternity leave<sup>8</sup> has been the most stable element of the system in both countries. Mothers who paid mandatory social insurance contributions (those who were employed) before childbirth have been eligible for this leave in both countries throughout the time period.<sup>9</sup> Maternity leave can be followed by extended leaves, which have changed several times in both countries since 1989; however, their most important features have remained constant: the leaves are very long in international comparison, and the benefits are too low to maintain an independent household. Although these leaves became available to fathers in both countries in the 1980s / early 1990s, very few fathers make use of them, thus, these parental leaves effectively function as extended maternity leaves, and are regarded as such by policy makers and the general public. Let us briefly compare the changes, focusing on how parental leaves affected mothers' inclusion in the labour market.

First, under state socialism, not all mothers, only those with previous employment history, were eligible for maternity and parental leaves, in other words, the paid leaves were insurance-based. In practice, this distinction was not particularly important, as almost all able-bodied women were employed before 1989. In the early 1990s, when the level of employment declined in both countries, the leaves became available to all mothers, some of whom did not hold a paid job before childbirth. Second, after 1989, mothers in both countries were encouraged to stay outside the workforce for even longer periods than

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<sup>7</sup> In contrast, in non-state socialist countries at the time, women tended to leave the labour market after having children, and returned to work, typically part time, when their children were in school. The long, paid parental leave, introduced in Sweden around the same time as in state-socialist countries (Lewis and Aström, 1992) was designed to encourage mothers to return to work earlier, and thus to keep them *integrated* in the labour market.

<sup>8</sup> It is sometimes referred to as a 'birthing' leave. The maternity pay replaces about 70% of the mother's former wages / salary.

<sup>9</sup> In the Czech Republic, women on birthing leave are classified as employed.

before. In the Czech Republic, the period when a mother was eligible for parental benefits<sup>10</sup> was first extended to three, then to four years for all mothers, regardless of the number of children. In Hungary, a new type of paid leave was introduced for mothers with three or more children, which allowed them to stay out of the labour market until the 8<sup>th</sup> birthday of the youngest child. Thus, we argue that after 1989, parental leaves, policies which support the maternal care of young children in the home, became more extensive, and somewhat disconnected from the labour market in both countries. These changes were designed and implemented to fulfil economic and political goals: to reduce the labour supply of women and thus, the level of female unemployment (Gábos, 2000; Gyarmati, 2010; Hašková et al., 2009; Višek, 2006; Potůček, 1999). Figure 1 summarises and compares maternalist welfare policies in the two countries, as they were at the end of 2013, at the time of writing this article.

Figure 1: Maternity and parental leaves and benefits in the Czech Republic and Hungary

	Czech Republic	Hungary
<b>Insurance-based schemes</b>		
Maternity leave and pay	28 weeks, 70% of previous earnings, up to a ceiling	24 weeks, 70% of previous earnings, no ceiling
Fathers eligible?	Yes, from the seventh week after childbirth.	No
Is paid work allowed?	No	No
Parental leave and benefit	Leave: until the child's third birthday, job guarantee. Benefit: fixed overall amount in monthly payments until the child's 2 <sup>nd</sup> or 3 <sup>rd</sup> birthday; at a max. of 70% of previous monthly earnings, with a ceiling.	Until the child's 2 <sup>nd</sup> birthday. 70% of previous earnings, with a ceiling.
Is paid work allowed?	Yes, without restrictions	No
Fathers eligible?	Yes	Yes
<b>Universal schemes</b>		
Parental leave and benefit	Leave: until the child's 3 <sup>rd</sup> birthday, job guarantee. Benefit: fixed overall amount in monthly payments until the child's 4 <sup>th</sup> birthday; higher in the first 9 months.	Until the child's 3 <sup>rd</sup> birthday, job guarantee. Flat rate (same as minimum old age pension).
Does being on parental leave count towards pension?	Yes, 100% up to four years per child.	Yes, 100% up to three years per child.
Is paid work allowed?	Yes, without restrictions.	Yes, part time, after the child reaches the age of 1 year, max. 30 hours a week.
Fathers eligible?	Yes	Yes
Special parental leave and benefit for large families	No	Yes, for families with at least 3 children under 18. The same as the flat rate parental benefit between the 3 <sup>rd</sup> and 8 <sup>th</sup> birthday of the youngest

<sup>10</sup> The Czech system is special in the sense that parental leave and the parental pay are somewhat independent of each other.

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Sources: ČZZS, 2014; MOLSA, 2014a, b; Országos Egészségbiztosítási Pénztár, 2013

Another aspect of the growing distance between the parental leave system and the labour market is that although women's jobs remained protected by law during parental leave, women after 1989 found it increasingly difficult to return to the workforce when the leave ended. Many women had no jobs to return to, because companies disappeared or were completely reorganised while mothers were on leave (Frey, 2002), while others became the victims of employer discrimination (see, for example: Glass and Fodor, 2011; Hašková et al., 2009). Mothers, and to some extent, all women of reproductive age were seen as 'unreliable' employees, already under state socialism, because they could take long periods of leave. However, before 1989, all mothers were given a job when their leave ended, whereas in the newly emerged capitalist economies, employers were under pressure to keep labour costs low and had much more freedom in selecting their workers than before. In the Czech Republic, the issue became even more complicated when eligibility for the parental benefit was extended to four years, but the job guarantee for mothers on leave, included in the Labour Code, was not extended. In other words, Czech mothers who did not return to work after the child's third birthday lost their right to return to their former employer (Hašková et al., 2009).<sup>11</sup> Although both countries have anti-discrimination laws in place, their implementation and utilization lags behind, exacerbating employment discrimination.

Although long parental leaves were maintained and further extended in both countries, mothers were not treated as a homogeneous group after 1989: different 'maternal tracks' were created, based on mothers' employment status before childbirth. These tracks did not emerge at the same time in the two countries: in Hungary, a shorter, better paid maternal leave, aimed at higher-earning women was created already in 1985 (Gábos, 2000; Gyarmati, 2010; Haney, 2002). This leave remained insurance-based and better paid throughout the time period examined here.<sup>12</sup> In the Czech Republic, such 'elite' tracks were only established in 2008 and reinforced in 2012. Currently, two insurance-based (a two- and a three-year leave period) and a universal track (a four-year leave period) are available; the overall amount of the benefit is fixed, and the longer the leave, the lower the monthly payment is. Maternal tracks maintain and even increase the differences between the employment chances of different groups of mothers: those who were in an insecure labour market position, or outside the labour market before childbirth are only eligible for the universal benefits, which are lower paid and longer. In other words, these women are strongly encouraged to leave the labour force for up to three (in Hungary) or four years (in the Czech Republic), and such long breaks further reduce their chances of employment (Fodor et al., 2002; Fodor, 2005; Hašková et al., 2009; Szikra, 2010).

Paid work during the extended parental leave in the Czech Republic was strongly discouraged after 1989: mothers receiving parental benefit were allowed only a limited income from work (Hašková, et al., 2009). In Hungary, mothers on the universal parental leave<sup>13</sup> were allowed to work part-time after the child's first birthday already in the 1980s (Gyarmati, 2010), but this option was not actively promoted by the government. In 2004, at the time of joining the EU, limits on combining paid work and parental leave were completely lifted in the Czech Republic; while in Hungary different rules were applied to different types of parental leave and the regulations shifted with changing governments. Mothers on the insurance-based parental leave

<sup>11</sup> This regulation remained in place even after the last reform in 2012.

<sup>12</sup> With the exception of the time period between 1996 and 2000, when this leave was abolished (Gábos, 2000; Gyarmati, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> From January 2014, mothers on the insurance-based leave can also work for pay – it is another example of convergence between parental leave policies in the two countries.

were still not allowed to work for pay, but those on the universal leave were given this option, and between 2006 and 2010, under a socialist-led government, it was possible to work full time after the child's first birthday and receive the parental benefit. After 2010, under a right-wing government, the rules became stricter again (Gyarmati, 2010; Országos Egészségbiztosítási Pénztár, 2013). Whether mothers could take advantage of the changes and engage in paid work depended very much on the availability of day care for children, which leads us to the next section of the analysis.

To sum up, we have found that after 1989, parental leaves in the Czech Republic and in Hungary did not change radically; rather, existing state socialist policies remained in effect and became accessible to all women, and longer, though in Hungary only for those with three or more children. In the newly competitive labour markets, many mothers, especially those with limited labour market experience, found it much more difficult to return to paid work after the parental leave than under state socialism, even though the rules became more accommodating to mothers wanting to combine paid work and parental leave after 2004. At a more theoretical level, we argue, following Glass and Fodor (2007), that state socialist maternalist policies, providing public support to the maternal care of children in the home remained in effect in both countries after 1989. As for the more subtle characteristics of the two public maternalist welfare states, the Hungarian system was already differentiating between mothers in 1989 and continued to do so in the post-socialist era, on the basis of mothers' labour market position and the number of children. In the Czech system, differences in maternal policies were abolished after 1989 and the state continued to treat all mothers equally until 2008, when this egalitarian approach changed radically, and maternal tracks were created, making the two national systems very similar again.<sup>14</sup>

So far, we compared the development of maternalist policies which encourage women's temporary withdrawal from the workforce after childbirth. The other important element of work-family policies is public day care for young children, which offers an alternative to maternal care at home. Without affordable childcare services, mothers' ability to combine paid work and childcare remains limited, regardless of how flexible and generous parental leave policies may be. The provision of public day care for children under the age of three is the area where the Visegrad countries stand out among EU member states (Plantega and Remery, 2009), and where the Czech and Hungarian policies have developed in different ways.

#### Day care services for pre-school children

Public day care for pre-school children in post-socialist countries traditionally comprises day nurseries, designed for children under the age of three, and kindergartens, which provide care to those aged from three to six (or the compulsory school age). Kindergartens are widely accepted in both countries with about 90% of children in the age group enrolled (Saxonberg, 2014). Under state socialism, nurseries were not uncommon in the two countries, however, the proportion of children enrolled never exceeded 20% of those under three in the Czech Republic, and 15% in Hungary. After 1989, the responsibility of maintaining nurseries was devolved to the newly established local authorities and central government funding was withdrawn in both countries. Nurseries were claimed to be a 'communist invention', while maternal care was hailed as the only healthy way to raise children by conservative politicians in both countries (Gyarmati, 2010; Saxonberg et al., 2012; Kuchařová, 2009).

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<sup>14</sup>Haney (2003) made a similar argument, however, her analysis focused only on a short period in the 1990s.



Figure 2: Day care services for children under the age of three in the Czech Republic and Hungary (2011)

Childcare services		
Coverage	0.5 % of children aged under 3	13% of children aged under 3
Financing	Local authorities and fees, no central funding.	Local authorities, central funding, fees paid by parents.
Cost for parents	Fees are determined by the local authority, no ceiling.	Until 2012 fees covered only meals. Since 2012 optional fees, ceiling determined by national law.
Limits in access	If a parent receives parental pay, a maximum of 46 hours a month until the child reaches the age of two.	Parents on insurance-based leave cannot use public childcare.

Source: ÚZIS, 2011; MOLSA, 2014; Svobodová, 2007; HCSO, 2012

As nurseries are very expensive to maintain, local authorities began to reduce the number of available places: 90% of nurseries in the Czech Republic, and 50% in Hungary were closed between 1990 and 1997 (Saxonberg et al., 2012; Kuchařová, Svobodová, 2006; ÚZIS, 2011; HCSO, 2012).<sup>15</sup> The demand for nursery places also declined, as many women lost their jobs, birth rates dropped, and parental leave was extended, as described above. In the Czech Republic, the reduction in the number of nurseries continued until 2006, with the numbers having stagnated since: in 2011 only 0.5% of children under the age of 3 were enrolled in day nurseries (ÚZIS, 2011). The reduction in the number of nursery places was exacerbated by declining birth rates and parental leave regulations: parents receiving parental benefits were not allowed to take their children to public nurseries for more than five days a month.<sup>16</sup> Finally, as public nurseries are funded exclusively by local authorities, the fees are also established locally, and although fees vary, they are unaffordable to many parents (Saxonberg, 2014; Štěpánková and Jaklová, 2006; Svobodová, 2007; Hašková, 2010).

The story of Hungarian day nurseries took a different turn after 1997, when, under a socialist-led government, nurseries became classified as a form of basic child-welfare service.<sup>17</sup> In the same year, a central government subsidy, based on the number of children attending the nursery was introduced. The subsidy, which covers 40–70% of the running costs (Blaskó and Gábos, 2012; Reszkető and Scharle, 2010), reduced the financial burden on local authorities, but local authorities still had to spend large amounts of money on their nurseries. The number of nursery places continued to decline until 2005, when only 47% of those available in 1990 existed. In 2005, a new regulation obliged local authorities of cities with a population of at least 10,000 to provide nurseries (HCSO, 2012), and slowly, new nurseries started to open, but the number of places in 2012 represented only 60% of that in 1990.<sup>18</sup> The proportion of children under three attending nurseries reached the lowest level (9% in 1992), then started to grow again: in 2012, 13.5% were enrolled (HCSO, 2012). Parents were traditionally charged only for the meals provided, but a new rule, introduced in 2012, allows local authorities to charge higher fees: up to 25% of the net family income per person (HCSO, 2013). While it is too early to tell, low-earning parents may find the new fees unaffordable.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The less dramatic decline in Hungary was probably due to the fact that the number of available places had already been gradually reduced in the 1980s (HCSO, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> The parental leave reform in 2012 loosened these restrictions to 46 hours a month until the child's second birthday.

<sup>17</sup> 1997. évi XXXI. Törvény a gyermekek védelméről és a gyámügyi igazgatásáról [Law XXXI of 1997 on Child protection and related legal proceedings].

<sup>18</sup> There was a sudden increase in the number of places from 2009 to 2010, due to a new rule, which allowed nurseries increase group sizes in nurseries by 20%. This increase is deducted from the numbers presented here.

<sup>19</sup> Not all nurseries introduced higher fees (HCSO, 2012).

In summary, while nurseries in the Czech Republic became irrelevant, in Hungary, a basic coverage remained, and the enrolment rate among children under three is only slightly below that under state socialism. Though the coverage is far below the Barcelona targets of the European Union (33% of children under three), a basic level of support is provided to women who want to return to work. At a more theoretical level, we argue that work-family policies which allow mothers of children under the age of three to 'reconcile' paid work and childcare, have developed in rather different ways in the two countries: state support was completely withdrawn from this area in the Czech Republic, but maintained in Hungary.

### Policy debates about nurseries

To contextualize the developments of day care policies, we now turn to the analysis of relevant policy and political debates in the two countries. In the 1990s, the dominant public discourse in the Czech Republic remained focused on nurseries as a "communist invention," which had to be dismantled. Family care, especially maternal care was perceived as the only "natural" and "healthy" form of care for children under three (Saxonberg et al., 2012; Kuchařová, 2009). This discussion was dominated by the arguments of conservative, Catholic psychologists, who had good access to the media (Saxonberg et al., 2012). The arguments focused on the alleged negative effects of nurseries on children's cognitive and emotional development, shaping the opinion of policy makers and the general public (Saxonberg et al., 2012).

These arguments continued to influence Czech policy makers in the 1990s (Saxonberg et al., 2012; Saxonberg, 2014), and in the present, as reflected in the "National Conception for the Support of Families with Children", which outlines the family policy strategy of the Czech government (MOLSA, 2009). The document states that the provision of public childcare services for children under three is not a priority, and referring to paediatricians and child psychologists, claims that parental care is the best option for children in this age group. Yet, the document promises to remove barriers from the development of privately run, profit-oriented childcare services for children under three, and the organization of these services is presented as a matter of supply and demand.

These opinions were also defended at European-level debates. After the Czech Republic was criticised by the European Commission because of the lack of public childcare (Plantenga and Remery, 2009), a meeting of European ministers was called during the Czech Presidency of the European Union in 2009 to start a debate about the EU targets regarding public day care services (Vláda České Republiky, 2009). At the meeting, the Czech representative explicitly argued against day care, referring to the country's negative experiences.

*I'm skeptical about some trends in Western European countries, which, unlike us, have no experience with [...] the negative effects of an attempt by the state to take over the natural functions of the family. The new member countries can contribute their own specific historical experiences and findings on childcare (quoted in Szikra and Hašková, 2012).*

Childcare is presented here as a 'natural function of the family', which has to be defended from the encroaching state. Czech representatives at the meeting also claimed that the targets would not have been adopted in the first place had the CEE countries been EU members when the Barcelona targets were formulated.

Hungarian policy makers had a less straightforward approach to nurseries. Although the official anti-nursery discourse disappeared after 1994, when the first, conservative post-socialist government left office, nurseries were not actively promoted, and debates about family policies depicted women as mothers only (Goven, 2000). The 1997 Law on Child Protection, which raised the status of nurseries, was influenced by child-protection experts, and referred to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, when it classified day care services (nurseries, and other forms of day care for children under three, but not kindergartens) as belonging to “basic child-protection services”, and obliged all local authorities to provide such day care for children whose parents cannot look after them because they work or study.

The first policy document which endorsed day care for young children was *The Principles of the Governmental Programme on Demographic Policies* (2003). The text challenged the opinion, widely held by Hungarian demographers and policy makers, that birth rates can be boosted by long parental leaves, and argued that state policies cannot affect demographic processes directly. Instead, it proposed to improve birth rates by creating better conditions for childbearing, including the elimination of discrimination against women in employment and redesigning family policies to better fit the changing patterns of childbearing. The text referred to several EU documents on best practices in providing day care to young children (Kispéter, 2009).

The *National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2004–06*, published in 2004, explicitly stated the government’s aim to increase the number of nursery and kindergarten places (2004). Nurseries entered centre stage in family policy debates in 2009, when the socialist-led government proposed to cut parental leaves. Government representatives referred to the Lisbon and Barcelona targets and used the examples of Scandinavian child welfare and gender equality to justify the proposal to shorten the universal parental leave. Professional care was argued to contribute to children’s healthy development, at the same time that the Czech government declared the opposite, and the ‘Day of Nurseries’ was established in 2009 (SZMM, 2010). Right-wing women’s groups opposed the cuts, arguing that “families, women and children” all benefit from the maternal care of young children and this is also the best way to boost birth rates. They also referred to nurseries, but instead of pointing out their negative impact on children, they argued that it would be a mistake to cut the three-year parental leave without having enough day care places (Kispéter, 2009).

The following right-wing government, which came into office in 2010, demonstrated its opposition to the Barcelona targets by organising the ‘Week of the Family’ during the Hungarian Presidency of the European Union in 2011. The Hungarian Prime Minister defended parents’ right to choose the best care for their children, and called on the governments of member states to provide financial support to families who want to care for their children at home, rather than forcing all families to follow the same lifestyle.<sup>20</sup> This argument is close to the official Czech opinion in rejecting the EU targets, which ‘force’ families to use day care. However, the psychological discourse which dominates Czech policy texts was not invoked and the decision of the family in *choosing* day care options is highlighted, rather than openly prioritizing maternal care.

In the final turn of the story of Hungarian nurseries so far, at the time of writing this article, the same conservative Hungarian government which criticised the Barcelona targets, is proudly presenting the increasing number of nurseries in

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<sup>20</sup> Report on the Informal Meeting of Ministers responsible for demography and family policy issues, held in Gödöllő, April 1, 2011. <http://www.eu2011.hu/news/orban-eu-should-not-build-its-future-immigration>

Hungary, and higher nursery subsidies to local authorities were being introduced in the run-up to the 2014 general and local elections.

Policy debates about nurseries discussed above show important differences between Hungary and the Czech Republic. The rejection of nurseries as a communist invention, and psychological arguments about children's needs remained central in Czech political debates, and became a key element of justifying and making sense of the vanishing nurseries and the extension of parental leave. Thus, in the Czech Republic, maternalism has strengthened after 1989 not only in terms of policies, but also in the way policy discourses construct the ideal of childcare. In Hungary, the range of political discourses on early childcare has broadened, and alternative arguments, including those of children's rights, social inclusion and maternal employment have appeared.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we analysed the maternalist welfare states of Hungary and the Czech Republic, by focusing on work-family policies aimed at mothers of young children, to explore how the post-state socialist transformations have affected women's position at the intersection of paid work and the family. One group of these policies, the system of extended parental leaves, is maternalist in nature: both states provide financial support to maternal childcare in the home, which is why they can be characterised as 'public maternalist' welfare states (Glass and Fodor, 2007). Comparing the development of parental leave policies, we have found fundamental similarities: parental leaves in both countries have become more disconnected from the labour market and come to reinforce existing labour market inequalities between different groups of mothers. Comparing the development of public day care services for children under three, we have found a major difference: in the early 1990s, state funding was withdrawn from day nurseries in both countries, but then national policies developed in different directions. In the Czech Republic, day care for children under three is still not supported by the state, while Hungarian policy makers have reinstated some state funding to nurseries.

To explore the reasons behind these different trends, we turned to national policy documents and political debates, and found that the psychological arguments of children's needs for maternal care is dominant in Czech policy texts, while recent Hungarian policy texts do not refer to child psychology. Rather, they have become more open to discourses of child poverty, social inclusion and maternal employment.

Based on these findings, we argued that although work-family policies have kept their 'public maternalist' character in both countries after 1989, Hungarian policies have remained closer to their state socialist origins and provide basic state support for day care for children under the age of three, as well as for maternal care. In contrast, Czech state policies have become more maternalist, and currently give exclusive support to the maternal care of young children; parents who want to use formal childcare have to purchase it on the market. Finally, our analysis has revealed that Czech work-family policies and political discourses consistently construct maternal care as the ideal form of childcare, while Hungarian policies and public discourses are in constant flux, and lack overall consistency.

The analysis in this paper does not allow us to identify the exact reasons behind Czech policy makers' strong opposition to day care services throughout the time period examined in this article. However, the texts analysed above and existing research (Kuchařová, 2009; Saxonberg et al., 2012) suggest that the need to create a distance from the state socialist past (represented by nurseries) is a likely motivation. This need seems to have been less strong among Hungarian policy makers, who, shifting away from maternalism, reinstated state support to nurseries as early as in 1997. It is important to highlight that this move was justified by the best interests of children, referring to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, while Czech policy makers explained the rejection of day care by referring to research on children's cognitive and emotional development (Saxonberg et al., 2012). Accession to the European Union in 2004 also had different consequences on work-family policies in the two countries: while Hungarian policy documents increasingly linked gender equality and women's employment to the provision of public day care services, and nurseries were endorsed by policy makers, such developments did not begin in the Czech Republic. On the contrary, Czech political leaders openly defy the European Union's childcare policies, claiming that their aim is to protect the 'family' from the 'state'.

This article has expanded the conceptual framework of maternalism by highlighting variation within public maternalist policies, and thus, contributed to theoretical debates about post-state socialist welfare state development. We suggest further research to explore how different welfare state policies shape maternal and female employment and gender inequality in the labour markets of the Czech Republic and Hungary. Finally, we believe that comparative research on post-socialist childcare policies and welfare states in general would benefit from adopting the conceptual framework of maternalism, so that we, social scientists, no longer hide mothers behind the 'family'.

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