

Family policy debates in post-state socialist Hungary: from maternalism to gender equality

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Abstract

The post-state socialist transformations have led to the re-structuring of the welfare systems in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe amid intense debates. The paper analyzes how the discursive framing of Hungarian debates on family policies has changed since the early 1990s, paying special attention to the influence of the country's European Union accession, and the process of women's organizations gaining voice in the debates.

The paper makes three related arguments. First, I argue that the 'maternalist' tradition of state socialist policymaking continues to shape the policy debates on family provisions even today. Second, there has been a clear shift in Hungarian policy debates, signalled by the appearance of the women's inclusion frame and the norm of gender equality, proving the influence of the European Union on national level policy debates. Finally, I argue that women's organizations strategically use the old 'maternalist' frames together with the new, EU- inspired frames in order to mobilize against the plans for reducing state spending on family provisions.

I Introduction

One of the most often discussed processes of the post-state socialist transformations in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is the re-structuring, or rather, the reducing of the state socialist welfare systems. While an extensive body of research concentrates on the newly emerging post-state socialist welfare and family policies themselves (Deacon 1992; Fodor et al 2002; Gedeon 1995; Lukács and Frey 2003), others focus on the discursive framing of the debates around the restructuring of welfare policies (Goven 2000; Gal and Kligman 2000; Haney 2002, 2003; non employment issue of the QUING project¹). This paper contributes to the second set of literature by answering the following research question: How have the conceptualization of parental leave policies been changing in Hungarian policy debates since the beginning of the post-state socialist period? In particular, I examine how the framing of parental leaves has been influenced by Hungary's EU accession, how women's civil society organizations contributed to the debates. By focusing on the discursive frames used by women's organizations to formulate redistributive claims, I aim to contribute to the literature which links welfare regime research to theories of social movements (Hobson 2003, 2006; Szalai 2003).

In order to answer the questions outlined above, I examine a variety of policy texts about family provisions: laws, policy plans, transcripts of parliamentary debates and civil society documents. This paper also draws on the results of the FP6 comparative project *Quality in Gender+ Equality Policies in Europe* (QUING), in particular the results in the field of Non-

¹This paper draws on Research reports written within the framework of the FP6 comparative project *Quality in Gender+ Equality Policies in Europe* (QUING) - www.quing.eu. I am very grateful to all the researchers for their valuable work which enables me to write this paper.

Employment. The method of critical frame analysis, used in the QUING project, defines a policy frame as the “organizing principle that transforms fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful problem, in which the solution is implicitly or explicitly included” (Verloo 2005: 20). An important methodological note is in order here: in the QUING project policy frames are identified following the rigorous coding of policy texts and with the use of an elaborate database. The majority of the texts analyzed for this paper are not included in the database of the QUING project, thus they and have not been coded, my analysis is based on the close reading of the texts.

The paper is organized as follows: the next chapter gives a brief overview of Hungarian family provisions, followed by an analysis of family policy debates from the early 1990s to the present. The analysis is organized in three sections: debates 1992-98, debates in the early 2000s, and the latest debate which took place in the spring of 2009. In the concluding discussion I outline my argument in full and discuss its theoretical relevance.

II Overview of Hungarian family policies

The system of parental leaves in Hungary is complex: I will not describe it fully, only outline its main elements following the chronological order in which the leave policies were introduced.

The flat-rated paid parental leave allowance (GYES) allows parents to stay at home until the child’s third birthday. The amount of the benefit paid to those on leave is rather low²: although at its introduction in 1967 it was equal to approximately 40% of the average female wages, it started to lose its value do to inflation as soon as 1978 (Haney 2002). The leave was originally insurance based, and only mothers could claim it, however, eligibility was extended to married fathers in 1982, and since 1998 the leave is universally available, not insurance-based. The jobs of those on parental leave are legally protected throughout the leave period, and for an additional 30-day period after returning to the workplace.

The second type of parental leave (GYED) was introduced in 1985: the payment is earnings-related and it currently replaces 70 % of the parent’s previous wages until the child’s second birthday.³ This policy was created in the hope of making the option of parental leave more attractive to professional women for whom the flat-rate parental leave benefit meant a significant loss of income, thus encouraging the ‘right kind of’, that is educated and ethnic Hungarian parents to spend more time with their young children as opposed to the uneducated and Roma women (Goven 2000, Haney 2002).

The third type of paid leave (GYET) was introduced in 1993 by the first democratically elected government after 1989. The child raising benefit, commonly knowns as ‘full-time motherhood’ is available to parents⁴ who raise at least three children, the youngest of whom is aged between 3 and 8 (Lukács and Frey 2003). The payment is the same as the flat-rated parental leave benefit, that is, the policy practically extends the universally available parental leave until the eighth birthday of the youngest child for families with more than two children.

Paid paternity leave was introduced in 2003 by a decree of the socialist-liberal governing coalition, without a parliamentary debate. Fathers can stay at home for five days after the birth or adoption of a child, and their wages are paid from the central budget during this period. Although such a short leave does little to promote a real sharing of care work between parents, the leave does have symbolic value in the Hungarian context.

² Approximately 100 Euros per month.

³ Although originally GYED was available to mothers only, eligibility was extended to fathers very soon, already in 1986.

⁴ At its introduction it was only available to mothers, but it was equalised in 1998

The system of Hungarian family policies also includes the family allowance, a cash payment to families raising children. Its origins go back to the 1930s, and it became available to an increasingly large segment of families throughout the state socialist period. The amount of the allowance and its eligibility criteria have been debated a number of times since the mid 1990s, as it will be discussed in more detail in the analysis section.

III History and framing of Hungarian family policy debates until the 2000s

The 'maternalism' of state-socialist parental leave policies

Although sources disagree on the main motivation behind the introduction of GYES, it is generally accepted that there were three main factors: demographic fears, the high cost of establishing day care institutions for children under the age of three, and the threat of female unemployment, as the need for uneducated female workforce began to decline with the period of intensive industrialization under state socialism was coming to an end (Gábos and Tóth 2000). The introduction of GYES signalled a new, 'maternalist' phase of state-socialist family policies (Haney 2002): home-based childcare was promoted over public daycare for under-three-year-olds and 'protective' legislation prevented women from entering the hardest, most prestigious and thus, best paid occupations in the industries. Thus, from the 1960s Hungarian women were increasingly included in the labour force as *different* from, rather than *similarly situated* to men, and their difference was understood not only as the biological differences of pregnancy and childbirth, but also the socially constructed difference of women's larger share in care work in the family (Fodor 2003). In other words, women's identities as mothers were increasingly emphasized over the worker identity, even though the discourse of women's emancipation through paid work, and the Marxist-Leninist ideal of women's full-time and life-long employment was upheld until the end of the state socialist period.

The early post-state socialist period: 1992-1998

Even though international financial institutions started to criticize what they argued to be a 'too generous' system of paid parental leaves as early as in 1992, the Hungarian government avoided restructuring family policies in the first years of the post-state socialist transformations. The conservative government in office between 1990 – 94 refused to cut social spending, fearing the electoral consequences of such decisions at a time of a deep economic recession (Gedeon 1995, Goven 2000, Haney 2003).⁵ On the contrary, a new type of parental leave (GYET), commonly known as 'full-time motherhood' was introduced in 1993, allowing women with more than two children to stay out of the labour market for eight years following the birth of the youngest child.

The governing parties concentrated on the role of the family in providing social welfare, and encouraged women's 'return to the home'. Their language was rich in nostalgic images of the family and men and women's traditional roles (Gal and Kligman 2000, Verdery 1994, Haney 2003). The government's justification for the introduction of the new maternity leave policy was "the responsibility towards the next generation, giving an opportunity to women with more [than two] children to choose between work at home and in the workplace" (Pusztai, Parliamentary debate, October 28, 1992). That is, the government frames the introduction of the extremely long and low-paid maternity leave as a choice that empowers

⁵ However, due to the high rate of inflation the real value of benefits did decline significantly, Gedeon 1995.

women by offering them the opportunity to choose. Also, child care in the home was viewed as a type of work – thus, the proposal could even be interpreted as the fulfilment of the feminist demand for paid housework. However, the most important underlying norm is the interest of *children* (the next generation), that is, the boosting the birth-rate and improving the demographic balance of the country. The 1994 policy plan, titled *Governmental Decision on the Principles of Long-term Demographic Policy* also supported the ideal of the male breadwinner family and proposed that women should be able to look after their children and elderly family members as a ‘profession’, that is, for pay. At the same time, other governmental decisions made ‘choice’ between paid work and family responsibilities very difficult, even impossible for some women, as day care institutions for children under the age of three did not receive any funding from the state budget under the conservative government, which prompted several local governments to close their nurseries, thus forcing women to stay out of the labour market until their children were old enough to go to kindergarten.

The lack of childcare places and the future problem of women not being able to return to the labour market after decades of staying at home with children were only pointed out by the then liberal party of the Young Democrats (Frajna, Parliamentary debate, October 28, 1992). They were the only participant of the debate who discussed women as potential employees, rather than mothers only. The Socialist party focused on ‘children’ and ‘families’, rather than women, and argued that instead of favouring large families by allowing mothers of three or more children to stay at home, the family allowance, which is paid to all families raising children should be increased as a way to reduce social inequalities (Csehak, Parliamentary debate, October 28, 1992).

Thus, these early debates reveal the trend which has been characteristic of Hungarian family policy frames ever since. Right-wing parties use frames based on the norm of demographic balance, arguing that the appropriate family policy can influence demographic trends and stop the decline in the size of the population. In addition, right-wing governments and parties regularly propose family policies which favour medium-income families, i. e. those, who can afford the luxury of a stay-at-home mother. Left-wing parties on the other hand tend to treat family provisions as a means to reduce social inequalities, that is, to focus on disadvantaged groups on the basis of class and frame their arguments around the norm of social justice.

When the Socialist-liberal coalition (1994-98) introduced an austerity package in 1995, proposing significant cuts in family provisions, the Parliamentary debate was dominated by the basic dichotomy outlined above: should the policies support ‘needy’ children and their families (reducing social inequalities along the axis of class and Hungarian/Roma ethnicity) or should they aim to ‘save the nation’ and boost the birthrate in ethnic Hungarian families (distinction along the axis of ethnicity). However, it is important to emphasize, that the issue of ethnicity was not discussed explicitly, only through references to the “neediest families” (Szabó, Minister of Social Welfare, Parliamentary debate, February 28, 1996) for whom “this allowance makes a significant contribution to the expenses of child-raising” (Filló, Parliamentary debate, March 12, 1996).

It is worth pointing out that the norm of social justice was used by the left-wing parties to argue for more social spending in 1992-93, however, the same frame was also useful in arguing for the cuts in family provisions in 1995. By this time, rather than being dependent on the paternalistic state, families were supposed to be self-sufficient (Haney 2003, also see Eyal et al 1998 for a discussion of the ‘rituals’ developed by the post state socialist political elite). The left-wing government argued that ‘needy’ families could count on the state’s continued support, and the proposed cuts took money away from those who did not really need the state’s support.

In the 1995-96 debates women were mentioned only as mothers, rather than (potential) members of the labour force, and there was no discussion about the provision of daycare for children under the age of three either. According to Goven (2000: 301), the debate revolved around 'rights':

among the many rights cited were children's rights to equal opportunity and to a stay-at-home mother, the right of stay-at-home mothers to social recognition, the right of previously unemployed stay-at-home mothers to equal treatment under the pension regulations, and a foetus' right to life.

Another right is worth mentioning, although it remained implicit in the debate: men's right to employment, which overrides women's right to paid work, that was not even mentioned in the debate. A number of MPs explicitly argued for the male-breadwinner family, claiming that this would reduce men's unemployment (Mrs Torgyán, Parliamentary debate, February 28, 1996). Others added that this would rectify the problem of unemployed men being dependent on their working wives, a situation that was argued to destroy families (Mrs Szabó, Parliamentary debate, February 28, 1996).

The changes proposed to the system of family policies were introduced only in 1996 due to the decision of the Constitutional Court, and revoked as soon as the new, conservative government was formed in 1998. The debates that took place in 1998 - 2000 continued to revolve around the two positions discussed above: left-wing parties argued that family provisions are a means to reduce social inequalities, while right-wing parties upheld that all children should be supported, regardless of the economic situation of his/her family, as children and childraising are "basic values of society which must be supported" (Harrach, Parliamentary debate, March 26, 1999).

The historical overview of the debates that took place in the 1990s is restricted to Parliamentary debates, because the already existing civil society institutions, including feminist groups had very little say in the decisions (Goven 2000). However, there was widespread popular objection to the cuts in family provisions in 1995, especially among women clients in welfare offices, who made redistributive claims on the state based on their identity as mothers, as the 'maternalist' framing of state socialist family policies strengthened women's identities as mothers (Haney 2002).

Based on the above the most common frames in the early and mid 1990s were the demography, social justice, the maternalist frames, while the economic competitiveness frame was practically missing, and the gender equality frame completely missing from the debates. The state-socialist concept of women's emancipation through paid work disappeared from public discourses, and no other discourses emerged about gender equality yet. In fact, large segments of the population welcomed the end of women's compulsory employment. According to international surveys taken at the time, many more Hungarian women wanted to be stay-at-home mothers than women in Germany or Austria (Tóth 1995). Thus, the idea of 'full time motherhood' was welcomed by many, or at least, seen as an alternative to unemployment. The strong emphasis on the 'family' was also shared by the liberal parties: although they did not share fears about demographic decline, according to liberal "antipolitics" the realm of the family was to be autonomous from the influence of the state (Gal and Kligman 2000).

In the next section I analyze the debates that took place in the 2000s, and follow the slow shift in the framing of family policies.

IV Family policy debates in the 2000s

In view of the demographic arguments underlying the Hungarian parental leave system, namely that birth rates can be boosted by long, paid parental leaves, it is rather ironic that the first shift in the framing of family policies can be detected in a policy plan titled *The Principles of the Governmental Programme on Demographic Policies*⁶, which was published in 2003. The document contains a number of new elements: first, that governmental policies cannot directly affect demographic processes, therefore it proposes to improve birth rates by creating better conditions of childbearing, including the elimination of discrimination against women in employment and redesigning family provisions in a way that fits the changing patterns of childbearing. The text also links the welfare of children to the exclusion of mothers from the labor market, which is a new element in Hungarian policies. Third, the text refers to several EU documents, all of which are concerned with gender equality⁷, as well as to best practices in providing day care to young children.

In sum, it is a groundbreaking document in the history of Hungarian policy debates: it links demography and the labour market, overcoming the deadlock of previous debates. Women are spoken about mainly as working women, who face the problems of reconciling paid work and family life, and not as 'mothers'. What is more, the document directly refers to the norm of gender equality. The timing of the text is important in explaining the appearance of EU references: the policy plan was published only a year before Hungary joined the European Union.

The trend of framing family policies in the context of employment and economic development continued in the next debate, which took place in 2005, prompted by the socialist-liberal government's (2002-2006) proposal to restructure system of family provisions. Parents on the flat-rate parental leave (GYES) were given the opportunity to work full time after the first birthday of the child while they continue to receive the parental leave payment. In the speech announcing the changes in Parliament, the Prime Minister explained the decision about combining paid leave and full-time work women were discussed as workers and mothers, and not only mothers.:

We leave it up to women, or parents, to decide if they want to stay at home until the third birthday of the child, and claim the [parental leave payment] in its original form. If it is important for them to go back to work, either because they want to keep their jobs or because they need the additional income, we should let them claim the parental leave benefit as well, let's not take it away from them, so that they can use the money to pay for child care services (Gyurcsány, Parliamentary debate, May 23, 2005).

This speech signals a shift in the framing of family policies. First of all, not only mothers, but *parents* are mentioned: the use of the gender neutral term implies that fathers may want to provide care to their children. Second, in the quotation paid work is seen as a burden on parents of young children, something that is done under the threat of job loss or financial necessity, not out of ambition or interest.

⁶ A Népesedéspolitikai Kormányprogram Koncepciója, created by the Governmental Committee on Demographic Policy. The Committee was established by the previous, conservative government.

⁷ 76/206/EEC on gender equality in the labour market, 79/7/EEC on gender equality in matters of social security, 86/378/EEC on gender equality in occupational social security schemes

The shift in policy texts described above is restricted to left-wing voices: right-wing voices continued to discuss family policy relying on the norms of demographic balance and the maternalism. The framing used by the representatives of the socialist party has not changed entirely either, the rest of this debate continued along the divide between the right- and left-wing positions present since the early 1990s.

What explains the appearance of new frames in policy debates? Hungary's EU accession process had a clear influence on the government's framing. Starting from 2001⁸ a number of agreements and action plans came into force which all had equal opportunities between men and women and/or gender equality among their horizontal principles. Also, as a member state, Hungary is expected to meet the EU employment targets for women⁹.

In sum, as the date of Hungary's EU accession was approaching, the framing of family policy debates showed a shift: motherhood is not the common denominator of right- and left wing political parties any more, as left-wing arguments are increasingly framed around women's employment as an important factor in economic development. However, men's care work is present in the government's framing of family policy in a very weak form, and the norm of gender equality continues to be absent from the government's framing. This is consistent with the findings of the QUING research project which analyzed the framing of a wider selection of Hungarian policy documents in the field of employment and social policy from the time period 1995-2007, and compared them to the frames of the EU debates.¹⁰ In the next section I discuss how the EU frames have been adapted to the Hungarian context drawing on the findings of QUING project.

The translation of EU frames on employment and social policy into the Hungarian context

In this section I refer to QUING analysis which compares the policy frames of Hungary – among other member states - and the EU in four issues: general gender equality, non-employment, intimate citizenship and gender-based violence. It is the issue of non-employment, at the intersection of employment and social policy that is relevant for the focus of this paper. The analysis of Hungarian policy texts and their comparison to the EU policy frames revealed a number of differences. The dominant frame in EU non-employment policies¹¹ is based on the norms of economic development, employment and gender equality. This frame is absent from Hungarian texts. In the frame that dominates the Hungarian policy discourse¹² the norm of care is present together with those of economic development and employment. The second important difference is that frames which put families at the heart of their argumentation and proposals are significantly more common in Hungary than in the EU. The focus on families does not acknowledge the highly gendered division of labour in families, and these frames often have demographic balance or nationalism as their underlying norm. These two differences point to the continued influence of what I have named the *maternalist* frame: in the Hungarian context it seems impossible to discuss women's employment without mentioning motherhood and/or carework. The third main difference is the frames which

⁸ in 2001 the government prepared a Joint Assessment of the country's short term employment and labour market policy priorities (JAP) in co-operation with the European Commission's DG for Employment and Social Affairs

⁹ Lisbon (2000) and Barcelona targets (2002) specified in the European Employment Strategy

¹⁰ QUING LARG Comparative Country Studies – Hungary, 2008, the section on the issue of non-employment

¹¹ Full employment for women

¹² Women's inclusion in the labour market, workers and mothers subframe

express a structural understanding of gender inequality¹³ are significantly less common in Hungary than in the EU policy texts.

Vega et al (2008) found that the EU frames in non employment documents show the dominance of the sameness vision about gender equality: men and women are seen as similarly situated in the context of employment and social policy. In contrast, Hungarian policy documents are dominated by the vision of men and women's difference, as signalled by the overwhelming presence of care norms in discussions about women's employment. These characteristic differences between the EU and the Hungarian frames support Hobson's (2006) argument that the 'translation' of EU frames is influenced by the national context, that is, path dependencies and political cultures interact with the influence of EU frames on national debates.

Discussions about family policies in the 2000s have come to be characterized by a combination of old and new frames: the old ones bear the legacy of state socialist policy making and with it the principle of men and women's difference, while the new ones are closer to the principle of men and women's similarity. The concept of gender equality and the EU requirement of gender mainstreaming have changed the language of policymaking, if not necessarily its practice.¹⁴ Another important change in the 2000s is that feminist women's organizations and a handful of experts became more and more vocal in their critique of family policies and their criticism was framed around gender equality and equal opportunities. In the next section I focus on how women's organizations contributed to the debates.

Voice and participation of women's organizations

In the 2000s women's NGOs started to be involved in the policy created substantial policy documents: the first texts written by women's and human rights NGOs were the Shadow Reports submitted to the CEDAW Committee in 2002 and in 2007. The 2007 report dealt with issues of family policy and employment substantially.¹⁵ Both shadow reports criticized the government for not involving women's organizations in policymaking according to the requirements of the Convention. The Hungarian Women's Lobby (HWL), the umbrella organization of Hungarian feminist organizations¹⁶ also prepared a document critiquing the Act on Equal Treatment and Equal Opportunities (2003), which engaged with the parts of the Act regulating discrimination against women in employment.

The formation of a state-civil society interface began with women's NGOs delegating experts to participate in the work of the monitoring committees of the National Development Plans.¹⁷ These committees are assigned to oversee the strategy formulation and operational activities of the five program areas spending EU funds on social and economic development. Within the framework of the EU Roadmap 2006-2010 the Hungarian government formed a series of working groups in all areas of the Roadmap, e. g. the reconciliation of work and family life, equal pay for women. In the committees and the working groups NGO and government experts work together, which enables participants to develop regular working relations with each other. Thus, these bodies are important locations of the civil society/state

¹³ such as Transform the division of labour

¹⁴ It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the transposition and implementation of EU policies at the intersection of social and employment policy. For such a discussion see the QUING Country Study for WHY – Hungary, 2008.

¹⁵ Hungarian Women's Lobby, Shadow Report submitted to the CEDAW Committee 2007

¹⁶ the HWL became a member of the European Women's Lobby after Hungary's EU accession

¹⁷ National Development Plan 2004-2006, New National Development Plan 2007-2013. It is compulsory to invite representatives of civil society organizations into these bodies.

interface, permitting and deploying civil society engagement in policy development and implementation.

In view of the above, the following analysis of the latest family policy debate in Hungary is particularly interesting. It provides another example of the co-existence of old and new frames, and there has also been an unexpected shift in terms of which actor expresses which frames.

V The family policy debate in 2009

The latest episode in the history of family policy debates started in the spring of 2009, when the government proposed major changes to the existing system of parental leave policies¹⁸. I do not give a comprehensive list of the proposed changes, only of those that had the strongest impact on the ensuing debates. The most contested plan is shortening flat-rated parental leave until the 2nd birthday of the child, instead of the 3rd birthday. As for the earnings related maternity and parental leave, the insurance period required for eligibility is planned to be raised to 365 days from the current 180-day period. In addition, the amount of the family allowance will not be raised for at least two years.¹⁹

The main explanation for the proposed changes, similarly to the 1995 austerity package is the dire financial state of the country. In particular, the Hungarian government negotiated and received a substantial loan from the International Monetary Fund in late 2008 on the condition that the country will reduce the expenditure of the budget. Although the economic crisis is often referred to in the government's justification for the proposed changes, the Minister for Social and Labour affairs claims that the main motivation is not to save money, but to increase women's employment. His statement fits into the emerging trend that started in the early 2000s: mothers on parental leave are discussed not only as mothers, but also as potential employees, who are now 'encouraged' to return to the labour market.²⁰ This trend is particularly clear in the speech made by the state secretary for social and labour affairs in the Parliamentary debate, which was framed around increasing women's employment and employability. Although he did not quote the EU employment targets, his references to reconciliation of work and family life and to women's human capital show a clear influence of the EU discourse. The most novel element of his argument was the claim that the Hungarian policies should move towards the Scandinavian model, where fathers are actively encouraged to take a share of the parental leave – although this is not included in the proposal (Korózs, Secretary of the State for Social and Labour Affairs, Parliamentary debate, May 11, 2009). In response to the predictable demographic, and maternalist framing used by the right-wing opposition in the Parliamentary debate, the state secretary quoted research data which questions the direct link between the birth rate and the length of parental leave or the amount of family allowance. In sum, the government's justification for the proposed changes strongly resembled the arguments of expert working for feminist women's NGOs.

It may come as a surprise then, that in the few weeks that elapsed between the government's announcement about the proposed changes and the Parliamentary debate, a coalition of women's organization worded a petition to the government, demanding that the plans to be withdrawn. I now turn to the analyzing the framing of the petition: again, only the most relevant elements will be discussed.

¹⁸ The changes are planned to affect children born after May 1st, 2010.

¹⁹ This is not without precedent, the conservative government did not raise family allowances between 1998 and 2002.

²⁰ Even the word 'mother' is rarely used in the speech of the government representative.

The petition claims that after the proposed changes the parental leave system “continues to be discriminative against women and contributes to the poverty of women and children”. Much of the petition concentrates only on proposed changes to the earnings related parental leave, the only comment about the flat-rated parental leave, which is used by the majority of parents, is that the amount of the payment is low. While there are two references made to EU norms, to gender mainstreaming and to the Parental Leave Directive. At the same time frames which are characteristic of right-wing, conservative voices can also be found. First, the petition claims that the proposed shortening of the paid parental leave is against the Hungarian constitution which states that all children have the right to the protection and care necessary for their adequate physical, mental and moral development.²¹ Second, the demography frame is used to claim that the government’s proposal will lead to further decline of the birthrate. The unusual combination of the EU antidiscrimination frame with the demographic framing can be understood better, if we examine the organizations forming the coalition. All three Hungarian women’s umbrella organizations have signed the petition: the Hungarian Women’s Lobby, the Association of Hungarian Women and the conservative women’s association²². It is likely that the conservative frames were included in order to achieve the joined action of all Hungarian women’s umbrella organizations, thus, the combination of the frames described above is likely to be an example of strategic framing from the point of view of all the organizations involved.²³

A few days after the petition was published, the Ministry of Social and Labour Affairs initiated a meeting with the organizations signing the petition, and asked for concrete recommendations from the petitioners.²⁴ Expert members of the HWL continued to work on the issue, prepared, signed and presented a document to the Ministry which is completely free of the strategic framing. Although it states that the organization does not agree with the government’s proposal, they take part in the negotiation process to minimize the damage the changes may cause, and because they agree with the government that there is a need for a restructuring of the parental leave system.

Based on my analysis of the latest family policy debate I have found that the government’s justification of changes to family policies is framed around women’s employment – this is a major shift compared to earlier debates. Although the government’s proposal presented a political opportunity for feminist organizations to gain a voice and act as the representatives of women in the debate, women’s NGOs cannot use the same frame to mobilize against the government’s proposal. Thus, in the process of mobilization and coalition building women’s organizations strategically use the maternalist frame, proving that the framing of state socialist family policies is effective in uniting women’s organizations even two decades after the end of state socialism. This finding is consistent with Hobson’s argument (2003) that gender distinctive frames make it easier for women’s groups to formulate claims as ‘women’. Using the demographic frame was necessary to get the support the conservative women’s organization in the mobilization.²⁵

²¹ According to the proposal the flat rated parental leave can then be used until the child’s second birthday, which is still a long leave in an international comparison.

²² Magyar Asszonyok Érdekszövetsége

²³ Ilona Ékes, the leader of the conservative umbrella organization, who is also a right-wing MP, argued against gender mainstreaming in newspaper interviews a few weeks before signing the petition.

²⁴ The author has access to this information as she is a member of an NGO within the HWL

²⁵ The conservative women’s organization and the conservative political opposition also called a street demonstration against the proposed cuts.

VI Concluding discussion

In this paper I have traced the history and framings of family policy debates in post-state socialist Hungary looking through the lens of gendered frames. I have found that in the 1990s policy debates were characterized by distinct, yet, unchanging framings of both left- and right-wing political parties. These framings bear the influence of the maternalist framing expressed in state socialist family policies as well as the conservative, nationalist arguments formulated in opposition to the former. Parallel to the EU accession process the frame of women's employment and the norm of gender equality have gradually appeared in the policy documents, however, there are characteristic differences between the Hungarian and the EU policy frames. These differences prove that the Hungarian policy debates continue to be influenced by both the 'old', maternalist framings as well as by the 'new' EU initiated framings.

The most important development in the history of debates is that women's organizations has recently formed a coalition and mobilized against the proposed changes in family policies. The composition of the coalition (right wing/catholic organizations, feminist organizations, self-help groups of mothers) and the nature of the frames present in the texts produced by the coalition is consistent with Haney's argument (2002) that the maternalist discourse of state socialist family policies enables women to mobilize as 'mothers'. The framing used in the petition issued by the coalition of women's NGOs supports Hobson's argument (2003) that gender distinctive frames are more likely to enable women to stage recognition/redistributive struggles as 'women' than frames formulated on the vision of men and women's similarity.

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