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The family support system in Lithuania: Experts' views and citizens' evaluation

Summary

This study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges that the contemporary public family support system experience in Lithuania. It draws conclusions based on 10 expert interviews conducted with social policy makers and researchers as well as a national-wide survey conducted in December 2018. The findings show that in Lithuania, policies which address gender equality such as parental leave policies are highly appreciated and needed by the population. However, they have to be backed up by care services and other flexible work arrangements in order to make them sustainable in the future. In Lithuania, the emphasis on means-testing in family support system does not prove to be a sustainable strategy. Despite the long-lasting tradition in supporting

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families according to the proven need, the respondents view them as the least adequate support provided by the state.

Key words: family support system, Lithuania, parental leave, child allowance, family policy

Introduction

This study seeks to contribute to the literature on the sustainability of the family support system in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region with the focus on the Lithuanian case. By the family support system, we mean all policies—including provisions of care services, tax benefits and transfer benefits—directed to families effecting their immediate living conditions and possibilities. Family support systems have gone through a dramatic reconfiguration since the fall of the Communist/Soviet regimes in 1989/1990. Lithuanian case is interesting as in the recent comparative social policy literature, it is often presented as a highly defamiliarizing case of family support system development, especially if parental leave and childcare policies (from birth to mandatory schooling age) are taken into account (see Javornik, 2014; Javornik, Kurowska, 2017).

The family support system in Lithuania has undergone dramatic reconfigurations over a 30-year period, which have been described by a number of studies (see, e.g. Aidukaite, 2006; 2016; Maslauskaitė, 2004; Stankuniene, 2001; Žalimienė, 2015). Overall, the previous studies claim that it has been developed inconsistently. The means-tested benefits have been an important part of the financial support for families in Lithuania, together with earnings related benefits. The emphasis was placed on financial support, while services have been not so well developed. The general reforms' paths can be described as going from defamilialism (as Soviet system supported maternal employment through well-developed child care services) to familialism (period from 1990 till 1996 was marked by the massive decline in child care services); and from familialism again to defamilialism (the period from 1997 and onwards when emphasis was again placed on policies encouraging mother's employment). After so many reforms within a 30-year period, this study asks the following questions: what are the current challenges that the family support system is experiencing in Lithuania? Do citizens approve the public family policy system after 30 years of drastic reforms?

To answer these questions, the authors of this study performed ten semi-structured expert interviews with social policy makers, researchers and activists. Additionally, a nationwide survey was conducted in 2018 (December, in Lithuania) providing the unique information on how citizens evaluate public support to families. The semi-structured expert interviews and national-wide survey data were collected under the project "Challenges to the welfare state systems in Lithuania and Sweden" financed by the Research Council of Lithuania. The unique data collected provides a broad picture of the problems in the social policy field, which allows us to hypothesize on the sustainability of the family support system. The experts' views allow us to delineate major challenges, citizen's

attitudes allow us to test the legitimacy. According to Wendt et al. (2011), there have been limited comparative studies analysing attitudes towards public support for family policies. This partly could be explained by the lack of data. However, citizens' attitudes are an important indicator of the legitimacy of existing institutions and the citizen's dissatisfaction should be understood as a mismatch between the public's preferences and the institutional status quo (Wendt et al., 2011).

The paper is arranged as follows. First, some theoretical considerations are presented. This is followed by a short methodological note. Third, we present the overview of the family support system in Lithuania. Fourth, we analyse the experts' interviews. Fifth, we present citizens' evaluations of the family support system. Finally, we offer concluding remarks.

Theoretical considerations

CEE countries had inherited high female labour market participation rates since the fall of the communist regimes. Although, under the communist regime, women's paid work was supported and encouraged by the state, the unpaid job at home was not monetized and equally divided between the sexes, resulting in a double burden for women. They actively participated in the labour market on equal terms with men, but the unpaid household work and caring responsibilities were left to women only. Since the fall of the communist regimes, women have become even more familialised due to a collapse in social services (child care and elderly care), the decline in wages and increase in unemployment (Pascall, Manning, 2000). Nevertheless, this situation was rapidly replaced by the necessity for a dual earner family, not only due to low wages in many post-communist societies, but also due to high occupational aspirations in women and increasing gender equality values coming from the 'West' and emphasized by the European Commission³. In Lithuania, gender equality has been increasingly taken into account and has been addressed to varying extents in the systems of support to families with children since 1996s. Over the last decades, there has never been a political force to promote explicit familialism or maternalistic discourse on childbearing.

For the purpose of our analysis, we find it useful to turn to Korpi's gender/family policy models. Korpi (2000) identified three types of gender/family policy models: general family support, dual earner support and market-oriented policies. He focused on social insurance programs and the taxation relevant for children and parents as well as on social services for children and the elderly. Central to the dual earner model are care facilities, available on a continuous basis for the youngest pre-school children, as well as earnings-related maternity and paternity leave. The elderly care services are also well developed. This model is found precisely in what is elsewhere known as social democratic welfare states. Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark are examples of the dual-earner model.

³ This situation has been, however, different in various CEE countries. In Poland, for instance, one can find a stronger maternalist direction in public discourse on childbearing which emerged especially during the right-wing coalition in office since November 2015 (Szelewa, 2017).

Cash benefits for minor children and family tax benefits, given via tax allowances or tax credits, are a form of general family support, formally neutral with respect to the labour force participation of the spouses. However, tax benefits for stay-at-home parents can be expected to encourage homemaking. Childcare services are underdeveloped in this model. Italy, Germany, Austria and Holland are examples of the general family model. Countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia, where maximum private responsibility for childcare prevails, are described as having a market-oriented gender policy (Korpi, 2000). Korpi's gender/family policy typology is useful in many ways, as it shows how gender relations are produced and reproduced by various welfare policies. The availability of public childcare, elderly care services and generous maternity and paternity leaves produces the most egalitarian society as it supports female labour market participation. However, other positive outcomes could also be observed, such as a lower poverty among children and a higher birth rate compared to countries that cluster into the traditional/general or market-oriented gender/family types. Thus, there seems to be a far-reaching consensus amongst researchers that is implicitly in favour of the dual-earner family policy model. The well-being of the children often depends on that of the parents, which becomes much easier to maintain if both parents participate in paid employment (Aidukaite 2004; 2006; Ferrarini, 2006; Korpi, 2000; Sainsbury, 1996; Wennemo, 1994).

In the recent decades, the shift from dual-earner to dual earner-carer has slowly appeared in European countries. The dual-earner/dual carer model implies that not only state's support both parents (usually mother's) employment through various welfare provisions, but also encourages father's participation in child care (Saraceno, 2013). Father's participation in child care is encouraged through shared parental leave and/ or paternity leave policies design specifically for fathers.

In the Western countries, the motives behind the introduction and extension of family policy were important for the establishment of benefits systems and the mixture of various forms of support to families (Wennemo, 1994). Wennemo has highlighted four main reasons that explicitly influence family legislation: population reproduction, poverty reduction, the breadwinner ideology and gender equality. The English-speaking countries, which, according to Korpi's typology, are mainly grouped into market-oriented gender/family policy model, put strong emphasis on poverty reduction. Population reproduction is an important reason that features in the general family support model. Scandinavian countries, which are classified as dual-earner and dual-carer family support model, put strong emphasis on gender equality; another crucial role in these societies is played by poverty reduction, particularly among single mothers.

Korpi's typology allows us to observe major features of the Lithuanian support to family's arrangements and explain how these arrangements account for existing outcomes. To identify major challenges, we focus on exploring the major underlying motives behind family policy legislation in the country and how well, according to the experts, the family support system is equipped to deal with the poverty reduction among children, to solve demographic problems and to increase gender equality.

Methodology and data

This study employs both qualitative and quantitative data to reach its goals. Ten semi-structured expert interviews were carried out with the representatives from the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, Social Insurance Board (SODRA), leading scholars in the field as well as a representative from the “National Association of the Active Mothers”. The analysis of ten experts' interviews conducted in 2018 passed through major stages of the qualitative analytical process as described by Meuser and Nagel (2009, pp. 35–36): transcription, paraphrase, coding, thematic comparison, sociological conceptualization and generalization. This article displays the final stages of the interview analysis—the thematic comparisons, conceptualization and generalization. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity of our experts, we assigned codes E1, ET2... E10 to our interviews.

The citizen's attitudes (quantitative indicators) for this study come from a questionnaire implemented in Lithuania. The questionnaire in Lithuania was administered and performed in December 2018 by the “Vilmorus” Market and Opinion Research Centre. The multi-stage probability sample with a random route procedure was used; 1000 respondents were questioned. The questionnaire was collected through personal, face-to-face interviews in the homes of respondents by trained and supervised interviewers. To capture the citizens' satisfaction with the support to family policies, the respondents were asked “How are they generally satisfied with the state support to families with children in your country (very satisfied, quite satisfied, not really satisfied, not at all satisfied, don't know)?” Family support system was defined as all support directed to families with children, such as parental leave, social assistance, child allowance, preschool facilities and nurseries, sick leave due to the child's sickness and so on. Additionally, the respondents were asked to rate each family support scheme provided by the state (very good, good, fair, poor, very poor, don't know).

Family support system in Lithuania

The state support system for families with children in Lithuania comprises two main parts: universal benefits (paid irrespective of the family assets and income) and the social assistance benefits paid to poor families according to their income level. One among the important universal benefits in Lithuania is child's birth grant, which is payable in a lump sum after the child is born (418 EUR)—paid also for insured people, because it is the universal benefit devoted to every child. Other universal benefit is a child allowance, popularly called in Lithuania the “child money”. It is paid monthly per every child from birth to 18 years of age (to 21 years if a person studies according to general education curriculum) and amounts 60 euros (100 euro for a disabled child, for children from large families (raising three and more children) and low income families) (MSSL, 2020). The universal benefit was first introduced in 1997, but with the economic crises, since 2009, it was paid only to families with three and more children. Since 2010, this benefit was granted only to poor families, regardless of the number of children. As of 2017, the child

allowance was once again paid to families with three or more children, regardless of their income. Since 2018, it has become the universal once again paid to every child residing in Lithuania. Moreover, lower income families are entitled to several income-related support measures, such as an additional child benefit, social benefit for low-income families, compensations for the costs of house heating, hot and drinking water, social support for pupils from low-income families (MSSL, 2019).

Besides the financial support, there is also a network of public preschool facilities. However, the network of preschool institutions has declined significantly during the first decade of independence. This is illustrated by the statistical data. As reported by Kavoliūnaitė-Ragauskienė (2012), “between 1989 and 1990, there were 1808 preschools in Lithuania (1003 in urban areas and 805 in rural areas), while in 2003, there were only 672 (489 in urban areas and 183 in rural areas) of the preschool institutions left” (p. 26). The data provided by the Lithuanian Department of Statistics shows that the situation has improved in recent years: the number of children in preschool education has increased by several thousand from 2012 till 2018, which can be considered a positive trend. In 2012, there were about 93 thousand of children in the preschool institutions in urban and almost 12 thousand in rural areas. While in 2018, there were 105 thousand in urban and almost 16 thousand in rural areas (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of children in preschools in Lithuania

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Urban areas	92,836	96,838	99,465	100,699	101,470	103,688	105,089
Rural areas	11,694	13,287	14,192	14,875	15,344	15,648	15,763
Total	104,530	110,125	113,657	115,574	116,814	119,336	120,852

Source: Statistics Lithuania, 2019.

However, the development of these institutions in Lithuania remains uneven. If the number of preschool facilities in urban areas is growing steadily, in rural areas several such establishments are closed each year (see Table 2). During the period from 2012 to 2018, the number of preschool institutions increased from 547 to 632 in urban areas. But in rural areas, the number of preschool institutions declined from 113 (in 2012) to 99 (in 2018).

Table 2. Number of preschool institutions in Lithuania

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Urban area	547	563	581	614	633	639	632
Rural area	113	112	109	107	104	99	99
Total	660	675	690	721	737	738	731

Source: Statistics Lithuania, 2019.

Lithuania has a quite generous parental leave system. Before 2019, if 1-year period was preferred—100% of the salary was compensated. If the benefit was preferred to be received for 2 years, during the first year (until the child turns 1 year) the benefit was 70% of previous salary and 40% after (until the child turns 2 years old). According to new amendments implemented in 2019 January, a parent can choose to receive a benefit until the child is one year old (he/she will be paid 77.58 percent of the compensated recipient's wages) or a parent can choose to receive a benefit until the child is two years old—from the end of the pregnancy and childbirth or the paternity leave until the child is one year old, he will be paid 54.31 percent, and later, until the child is two years old—31.03 percent (SODRA, 2019). This leave can be used optionally by the mother or the father. Relatively few fathers take the opportunity to take parental leave instead of mothers, especially during the first year (before the child reaches one year), while during the second year (from one year before the child reaches two years) the proportion of men taking parental leave increases several times compared to the first year (see Table 3).

Table 3. Parental leave benefits' recipients by gender

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018	
	1st year	2nd year	1st year	2nd year	1st year	2nd year	1st year	2nd year	1st year	2nd year
Women	16,368	13,550	17,364	12,747	18,628	13,877	18,839	15,318	18,345	14,907
Men	1,539	4,779	1,656	6,187	1,670	7,291	1,480	8,234	1,409	8,913

Source: Statistics Lithuania, 2019.

The data in Table 3 show that by the time a child reaches one year the number of women in parental leave exceeds the number of men by 10–13 times. For instance, in 2018, there were more than 18 thousand women taking parental leave during the first year, while only 1,4 thousand men were on parental leave at the same time. In the second (from one to two years of the child's age) the recipients' distribution by gender is somewhat more even, and each year more and more men stay at home with their children till they become two. In 2018, there were about 15 thousand women taking parental leave during the second year, with almost 9 thousand men taking parental leave. This is a good tendency which allows to expect changes in society, but not as fast as one would like. According to Reingardė and Tereškinas (2006), the most common explanation by men who do not take parental leave is the financial reason, i. e. men usually earn more than women, so women stay home. But there are also deeper cultural and ideological aspects in the understanding of gender roles and fatherhood as well as motherhood. For many men, such leave is beyond the scope of understanding of their masculine and paternal identities. Childcare is generally considered to be a “woman's job”. The understanding that a mother is the main carer of children is quite strong in Lithuania (Reingardė, Tereškinas, 2006).

Still, another measure aimed to encourage gender equality, that is paternity leave, is much more popular among men comparing to parental leave. Fathers are entitled to paternity leave 30 days at any time from the birth of a child until the child reaches three months. A rising number of the recipients of paternity benefit and the amount spent by the state for this benefit (see Table 4) show that the popularity of this measure is increasing every year. There were 12 thousand of recipients of the paternity benefit in 2012, while in 2018, more than 16 thousand fathers took paternity leave.

Table 4. Number of recipients of paternity benefit and the amount spent by the state for this benefit (thousands of euros)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Number of recipients	12,124	12,642	13,476	14,933	16,277	16,002	16,355
Amount spent	8,219.1	8,375.4	9,506.9	10,876.3	12,279.8	14,173.0	15,736.3

Source: Statistics Lithuania, 2019.

Summarizing support measures for families with children in Lithuania, it can be concluded that the laws regulating family policy mostly correspond with the European standards, so we have all the conditions for reaching the main goals of family policy. However, according to Eurostat data in 2018 in Lithuania 28 per cent of children till 18 years were at risk of poverty and social exclusion and gender equality is more anchored in law than in reality. This can partly be explained by the low proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) devoted to family and children, which has amounted only to 1.2% in 2017, while the EU average is 2.3% (see Table 5). In Lithuania, the percentage of GDP dropped (from about 2% to about 1%) after the 2009–2010 economic crisis and has not yet recovered.

Table 5. Percentage of GDP for family and children

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
EU	2.1	2.4	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.4	2.3
Lithuania	1.8	2.8	2.2	1.7	1.4	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.2

Source: Eurostat, 2019.

With limited public financial resources to ensure the well-being of children and families, their optimal use is essential. This requires having of clear family policy goals and systematic pursuit of them. These two aspects guarantee the sustainability of family policy, which is still missing in Lithuanian support system for families with children.

Experts' views on challenges to family support system in Lithuania

Advantages and disadvantages of family support system

All experts emphasised that family support system is very fragmented in Lithuania, namely, it has been developed unevenly focusing on separate aspects of the family support system, but not having a systematic, long-lasting view on how family policy should be reformed and which path (universal or targeted) it has to follow. Family support measures are mostly targeted at early life (infants and pre-school children) of children and families with small children, there is little support in the later stages of life of children and little support to families having other special needs. As experts note: "There is a big problem here, because we are still jumping from one measure to another, and in reality, no one sees an overall picture." (LT1); "Another thing that hinders our system of family support is the lack of a systematic approach." (LT9)

The lack of systemic and long-lasting vision of a family policy is partly explained by the fact that there is no separate institution to take care of family matters. Family policy problems are now being addressed by several institutions, which lack cooperation and coordination of work. This situation is also confirmed by the research literature. According to Reingardienė (2004), the legal framework for family policy is in line with European standards, but it is not fully implemented. This is due to many reasons. First, there is no separate body responsible for the formulation and implementation of family policy, which leads to a lack of clear and common objectives for family policy. Second, the fragmentation and incoherence of family policy, which is often caused by the government's term of office, often lead to public distrust in the social system. Third, the orientation of family policy and its measures to families at social risk deprives other families of the feeling that the state supports them.

In the Lithuanian family support system, the means-tested benefits have paid quite significant role in supporting families since 1990s. The experts see the advantages and disadvantages of this. On the one hand, social assistance benefits help families in a social risk. On the other hand, it creates poverty traps, as in some case it is better to live on benefits than to take up paid work. The experts emphasised that the system itself does not encourage efforts to take a job as minimum wages and social benefits are similar in size: "Why should I work if I get the same pay without working?" (LT9). The widespread view among the experts expressed is that the current social support system is not effective, creates poverty traps and dependency on benefits, and does not encourage people to return to the labour market soon.

The inefficiency of social assistance is also noted in the scientific literature. Previous studies (Stankūnienė et al. 2013; Gvaldaitė, Kirilova 2014; Žalimienė 2015) stressed that while evaluating family policy measures to reduce child poverty, it should be emphasized that Lithuania does not follow the principle of universality—financial support is almost always (except a child allowance) dependent on the income of family members. Such a policy boomerangs: benefits to poor families become their livelihood and raising of

children becomes a means of gaining benefits. The financial costs the state bears and the result it gets are absolutely inadequate.

Nevertheless, the universal child allowance payed out to every child from 1 January 2018 were introduced as noted in the previous section. The experts view of this is divided. Some see it as the state's attention for every child:

<...> universal child money, I would regard this as an encouragement rather than a child support. Because it is, after all, a gesture of the state, a gesture of respect for every citizen (LT1).

Others expressed ambiguous opinion on universal allowance. The decision to introduce a universal child benefit by cutting an additional tax-free income size for working parents is called a mistake by some experts:

These are different tools. <...> These are different things, completely different. They cannot be opposed. The Tax Exempt Income is one, and if we look at all the more successful countries in the European Union that are slightly more successful, then there are the tax measures. <...> It's just that I think it's a mistake to introduce universal benefits cutting the tax free income size for parents. (LT6).

Speaking about advantages of family support system in Lithuania most experts mentioned first of all the long duration of parental leave: “<...> the childcare leave system is probably one of the best in Europe” (LT5); “We are the leaders here.” (LT10). Bearing in mind that both mothers and fathers can choose to take parental leave in Lithuania, this measure is seen by the experts as “both a family consolidation measure and a measure of increasing gender equality” (LT4). According to the latest OECD statistics for a year 2018, Lithuania offered 44 full-rate equivalent weeks' paid parental and home care leave available to mothers, while the EU average was 35.8 weeks. This is also longer than in Sweden (24.6 weeks), Norway (30.8 weeks) or Finland (27.4 weeks), who are considered to have the best parental leave policies in the world. The average payment rate was also among the highest—100%, while the EU average was 49.1 (2016).

Another advantage of the parental leave system in Lithuania, as seen by the experts, is the possibility for the grandparents to take parental leave (amendments to the law became effective from April 2018), as well as one-month paternity leave for fathers: “They contribute when it is the most difficult—just after the child's birth” (LT4).

How the family support system ensures gender equality

When it comes to ensuring gender equality, experts first of all emphasized the opportunity for both parents to take parental leave and the possibility for fathers to take paternity leave. This allows the father to participate more actively in the child's upbringing and the mother to return to the labour market more quickly. The Lithuanian experts emphasized that access to childcare and education facilities is another tool that enables women to return to the labour market more quickly, and at the same time promotes gender equality.

However, the issue of pre-school institutions is not fully resolved, this problem is particularly relevant in the largest cities of the country, where thousands of children are waiting for places in the public care institutions. Another measure to promote gender equality and women's participation in the labour market is, according to the experts, the creation of opportunities to reconcile work and family responsibilities: "It should be possible for parents raising children to choose flexible working hours, part-time work" (LT3), however, there is still much room for improvement here.

Previous studies (Bučaitė-Vilkė et al., 2012; Jančaitytė, 2006; Reingardienė, 2004) assessing the impact of family policy on women's entering the labor market concluded that measures to combine professional and family commitments are not sufficient in Lithuania. Limitation of child care services is the main concern. The conditions for parental leave are fairly good, but other family-friendly policy measures (part-time work, work from home, childcare centres at work place) are not developed for a variety of reasons (economic family status, unfavourable attitude of employers, etc.).

Several experts during the interviews, when speaking about gender equality, drew attention to the difference between the salaries of women and men in Lithuania, which, according to one interviewee, "differs even in the public sector or state institutions" (LT1). This trend leads to the fact that, for example, the mother with usually lower income is most likely to take parental leave.

And though some of the experts emphasized one, others underlined different measures of promoting gender equality in the family, almost everyone agreed on one: it is very important to change people's mentality of: to explain them what gender equality is, to emphasize the advantages of it, to develop a positive attitude towards it and to promote it.

Previous studies (Maslauskaitė, 2004; Reingardienė, 2004; Šarlauskas, Telešienė, 2014) support the experts' view. Although there are more and more men taking parental leave, the process is not as fast as expected. Faster implementation of the gender equality principle is largely impeded by cultural clichés still attributing the care for family members to women.

How the family support system reduces child poverty

Speaking about child poverty reduction measures, experts emphasized the importance of ensuring equal opportunities for children regardless of their family's financial capacity. However, the social assistance support can be stigmatizing for families receiving them. For instance, due to the fact that services such as free lunches are received by children only from poor families, children receiving them experience social stigma. As one of the expert's states:

There are certain tables in the schools' restaurants reserved for children who receive a free lunch subsidised by the state, everyone sees for whom they are. It stigmatizes. Most of those children, even if they are hungry, do not eat at school (LT4).

Free school lunches were mentioned by many experts as an important measure of child poverty reduction. But it was also mentioned that differentiation of services

stigmatizes poor children, they experience social exclusion, and this problem should be better addressed by the introduction of free meals for all pre-school children.

Although, many experts viewed the free school lunches served to poor children as stigmatizing, they also expressed negative attitudes towards social benefit recipients. The Lithuanian experts, especially those working with families at risk, were talking about “culture of poverty”. Such a view could be considered as a stigmatization of the poor families by the policy makers and practitioners themselves. Some of the Lithuanian experts draw attention to the fact that “poverty is learned, and those poor families don’t know how to live otherwise” (LT9) and called it “learned helplessness” (LT9).

Some of the experts suggested that the universal child allowance should also contribute to the reduction of child poverty, but also expressed doubts as to whether the money is used for its intended purpose in families at risk. The common view of experts was that even a small amount can be quite significant for families experiencing poverty, but when people do not have social skills, money is often wasted on secondary things and does not actually reduce poverty.

There was a widespread awareness among the experts interviewed that the problem of child poverty should be solved primarily by “enabling parents to work and earn money” (LT4). It was also proposed “to reform the tax system so that families with children would have more money to meet their basic needs” (LT6). And, as with the promotion of gender equality, almost everyone has emphasized that the problem of child poverty should be addressed through education and training. As one expert summarized, “that the culture of poverty is more dangerous than the economic poverty” (LT10).

Overall, there was a great concern among experts interviewed about child poverty in Lithuania and that family support system should somehow intervene and help families to cope. However, there is also a lack of understanding that poverty is a structural problem, not only individual one and that universal measures could solve poverty more effectively than targeted ones.

Public opinion on family policy sustainability

In this section we review citizens attitudes and opinions on family support system to see how much they correspond to the expert’s views and problems raised during the interviews. We asked whether the respondents are in general satisfied with the state support to families with children in their country. Figure 1 displays the results. In Lithuania, slightly more than one percent of respondents reported that they are very satisfied with the family support system in Lithuania (see Figure 1). Those who unsatisfied (not really satisfied + not at all satisfied) comprise slightly larger group of 35% than the satisfied group (very satisfied + satisfied) which amount to 31%. Yet, 36% of respondents reported that they do not know how to evaluate family support system.

The first data inspection tells us that the family support system is not backed up by citizens’ expectations in Lithuania, it divides society into the supporters and critics of the system. Yet, there is the third group, which is largest one, of those who have no opinion

about it. This situation could be explained by the uneven development of the family support system which was discussed in the previous sections. Family policy went through frequent reforms, small and specific parts of the population have benefited from it, mostly those living on low income. There was a little discourse on the political as well as societal level about the importance of the family policy and the results that family policy generates for families and society as the whole.

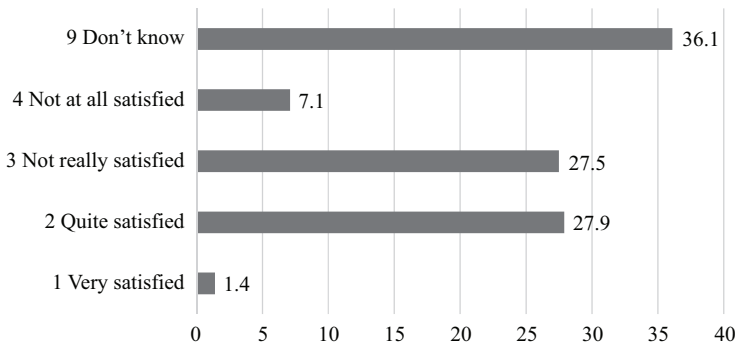


Figure 1. Satisfaction with the family support system in general in Lithuania, % (N1000, 2018 December)

But let us look at how each family support scheme is rated; this will provide us with a more accurate information on satisfaction with the family support system. The ratings of each family support schemes are provided in Appendix 1, which displays the percentage of respondents rating each scheme as ‘very good’, ‘good’, ‘fair’, ‘poor’, ‘very poor’, ‘don’t know’. Figure 2 displays the evaluation of family support schemes in Lithuania as a sum of answers in % of those who evaluated the scheme as ‘very good’ or ‘good’.

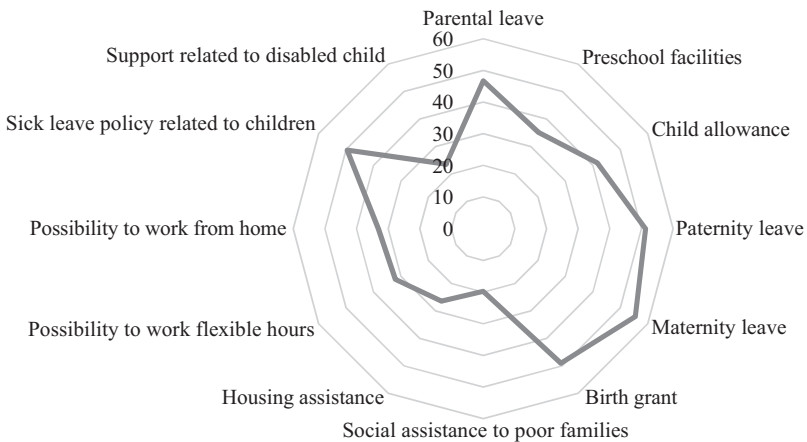


Figure 2. Evaluation of family support schemes in Lithuania (sum of answers in % of those who evaluated the scheme as ‘very good’ + ‘good’) (N1000, 2018 December)

In Lithuania, the parental (46.7%) leave, and particularly the maternity (55.5%) and paternity (51.3%) leaves were rated rather high by respondents. Together with a birth grant (49.1%) and sick leave policy related to children (49.6%), these public support schemes have rather high approval among the population. While support schemes which rated poorest are social assistance benefits to poor families (19.8%), as well as housing assistance (26.4%) and support services for a disabled child (23.5%). In the middle, we find preschool facilities (35.1%), possibility to work from home (32%) and flexible working hours (33.1%)—these are important family and work reconciliation policies.

Overall, the evaluations match well the advantages, disadvantages and problems discussed by the experts. The paternal leave policies are on the top of ratings, their importance is increasing, especially that of the paternity leave. It is possible to say that these policies are sustainable for the future. The lower rating for preschool facilities, possibility to work from home and flexible working hours show that these measures need improvements in a future and this situation was also revealed during interviews and statistical data. The social assistance benefits to poor families are at the bottom of the ratings despite the long-lasting experience of paying these benefits in Lithuania.

Conclusions

In concluding this study, let us come back to our major questions. We asked what the current challenges that the family support system is experiencing in Lithuania were. Do citizens approve the public family policy system after 30 years of drastic reforms?

Our analyses demonstrate that Lithuania is still facing its 'old' challenges: combating child poverty and helping parents to facilitate work-life balance. The major problems are the lack of childcare facilities, especially in rural areas, and of possibilities for flexible work arrangements. The Lithuanian family support system is still in the stage of transformation due to the lack of systematic approach and strategic direction. The recently reintroduced universal child allowance has given hope that the universal path is taking its roots in the family support system. Moreover, the high approval of parental leave policies (parental, maternity and paternity) both by experts and respondents' signals about a strong legitimacy of these policies and this is not going to change in a near future. Thus, the family support system strongly adheres to dual-earner family policy model, especially if parental leave policies are taken into account. Services, however, are less developed and this should be addressed in a future. The analysis of this study shows that a father's involvement in childcare is increasing, however, not enough to assign the Lithuanian family support system to the dual earner-carer family/gender policy model. When talking about gender equality, experts were more concerned with measures to ensure the mother's participation in the labour market, less concern was expressed about the father's engagement in child care. Gender equality was not mentioned as the goal of the family support system.

The major motive of family support system remains the desire to reduce poverty among children and families with children in Lithuania. However, despite the long-lasting

tradition in maintaining families according to proven need, the respondents view the social assistance benefits as least adequate support.

The findings of this study show that in Lithuania, the policies which address gender equality such as parental leave policies are highly appreciated and needed. However, they have to be backed up by care services and other flexible work arrangements in order to make them sustainable in a future.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Evaluation of family support schemes in Lithuania (answers in %)
(N1000, 2018 December)

Family support scheme	1 Very Good	2 Good	3 Fair	4 Poor	5 Very poor	9 Don't know
Parental leave	6.1	40.6	24.4	5.7	1.8	21.4
Preschool facilities	3.7	31.4	32.7	11.4	2.0	18.8
Child allowance	5.9	35.7	27.7	9.8	2.9	18.0
Paternity leave	8.4	42.9	19.8	4.7	1.0	23.2
Maternity leave	10.2	45.3	20.0	4.3	1.2	19.0
Birth grant	8.9	40.2	24.0	5.3	1.7	19.9
Maintenance support	2.5	17.3	31.2	20.3	7.6	21.1
Housing assistance	3.1	23.3	32.9	14.0	5.8	20.6
Possibility to work flexible hours	5.7	26.3	21.2	14.0	1.6	28.2
Possibility to work from home	6.4	26.7	19.8	12.5	4.4	30.2
Sick leave policy related to children	8.9	40.7	21.1	7.2	2.3	19.8
Care services and financial support related to disabled child	4.2	19.3	23.1	13.1	5.2	35.1

Streszczenie

Artykuł służy lepszemu zrozumieniu wyzwań, jakie napotyka współczesny publiczny system wsparcia rodziny na Litwie. Formułowane wnioski oparte są na 10 wywiadach z ekspertami—decydentami i badaczami polityki społecznej, a także na ogólnokrajowym sondażu przeprowadzonym na Litwie w grudniu 2018 r. Ustalenia pokazują, że na Litwie polityki dotyczące równości płci, takie jak polityka dotycząca urlopu rodzicielskiego, są bardzo potrzebne i cenione przez ludność. Jednak, aby zapewnić ich trwałość w przyszłości,

muszą być one wspierane przez usługi opiekuńcze i rozwiązania umożliwiające elastyczne warunki pracy. Na Litwie nacisk na weryfikowanie kryteriów dochodowych w przyznawaniu świadczeń okazuje się nie być podejściem, które można utrzymywać w dłuższej perspektywie. Pomimo wieloletniej tradycji wspierania rodzin zgodnie z udowodnioną potrzebą, respondenci uważają takie rozwiązanie za najmniej odpowiednią formę wsparcia ze strony państwa.

Słowa kluczowe: system wsparcia rodziny, Litwa, urlop rodzicielski, zasiłek rodzinny, polityka rodzinna