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## ***Large families in EU countries: a comparison of support schemes and outcomes***

### ***Abstract***

While knowledge about family policy in the European Union (EU) has increased considerably in the last two decades, we know relatively little about policies directed at large families. This paper aims to compare family support schemes affecting large families in EU countries. Based on welfare regimes and family support models (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi, 2000; Kuronen, 2010), we categorise the selected EU countries into five groups, and we explore what configuration of support measures is most effective in meeting the needs of large families, and what are the outcomes of family policy in each country and group of countries.

Our analysis is based on previous literature reviews and data from MISSOC and Eurostat.

The findings show that the needs of large families are most effectively met (as evidenced by high rates of third and higher-order births, high total fertility rates and

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relatively low rates of poverty and social exclusion), first, in the Nordic countries, second, in Continental states, and third, in the examined post-socialist ones. The support for large families is dependent on the overall design (support for families with children) and generosity (monetary inputs) of the family policy of the given country, and the differences between countries can still be explained by the ideal-typical family policy model prevailing in each country.

**Keywords:** welfare regimes, family support systems, large families, types of family policy, family support models

## *Introduction*

In recent decades, the number of large families has been declining in all European countries, but to a rather different extent. Shares of large families have declined most in Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe, but remained quite stable in Western and Northern Europe (Frejka, 2008; Oláh, 2015). The question is, why the share of large families in the total number of families varies across Europe? To answer the question, we conducted the comparative analysis of family policies and their support measures for large families by grouping selected countries into distinct ideal-typical family policy models. The major argument is that the support for large families is dependent on the overall design (support to families with children (benefits and services)) and generosity (monetary inputs) of the family policy of the given country as well as gender attitudes, and the differences between countries can still be explained by the ideal-typical family policy model prevailing in the country.

It should be emphasised that although the object of the comparative analysis is support for large families, the general context of family policy is also very important here. In other words, just as we do not see the real picture of the object without the background, it is difficult to understand the peculiarities of support for large families without the general context of family policy. Knowledge of national contexts is crucial for understanding the possible implications of demographic trends and for identifying where family policy interventions are needed (Lohmann et al., 2009).

Family policy, in this study, is understood as a government provisions (benefits and services) that contribute to the family well-being, including health care, education and housing policy (Hobson, 2018; Wendt et al., 2011; Wennemo, 1994). In this study, our focus is on support measures for families with children, which include work-life balance policies (maternity leave, parental leave, paternity leave policies and childcare services) and financial (tax deductions and various benefits for families with children) support policies (see: Esping-Andersen, 2009; Javornik, 2014; Korpi, 2000; Lohmann & Zagel, 2016; Nieuwenhuis et al., 2019; Yerkes & Javornik, 2018).

Thus, the aim of this paper is to compare the support provided to large families in the countries of the EU, grouping them according to the ideal-typical family policy models. This study seeks to answer the questions: What family policy model is the most effective in supporting large families? What configuration of support measures best meets the needs of such families? What are the outcomes of family support

measures in each examined country and groups of countries? The study was carried out using the method of comparative analysis, aiming to compare how different family policy models (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi, 2000) provide support for large families in the EU grouping them according to family policy types (Kuronen, 2010).

Seeking to achieve the aim, the tasks of the analysis are as follows:

1. To summarise the essential features of the family policy model represented by each group of the EU countries.
2. Provide examples of the most distinguished countries in terms of large families in each group of countries, examining in detail their general family policies and especially the support measures for large families.
3. Analyse the results of family policy orientation of each country and group of countries by analysing and comparing the following family policy indicators: total fertility rate, percentage of third and higher-order births, share of GDP for family/children, percentage of children under 18 at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and percentage of children under three in formal care.

The comparative analysis allows us to evaluate how different family policy models, grouping countries by family policy type, meet the support needs of large families, what design of support measures best responds to them, and what the results of family support systems are in each country and group of countries.

## ***Methodology***

The method of comparative analysis was chosen for this study, when data are collected on theoretical basis, then they are summarised, analysed, and compared. The theoretical basis of this study consists of Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology of welfare regimes and Korpi's (2000) typology of family support models, as well as Kuronen's (2010) family policy models. All these three typologies together generate the theoretical model of this comparative analysis, which helps to analyse the empirical data and achieve the tasks and the aim of the analysis.

As is well known, Esping-Andersen (1990) distinguished three types of regimes – social democratic, conservative-corporatist, and liberal<sup>2</sup> – that vary qualitatively in

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<sup>2</sup> The distinctive characteristic of the “liberal” welfare state regime typifies the means-tested assistance plan with an incorporated moderate social insurance plan. Benefits, which are mainly received by clients on a low-income, usually working-class, state dependent, are modest and have a stigma attached. This model increases the demand for subsidised private welfare schemes. In the conservative-corporatist regime, the eligibility for benefits is mainly based on labour market participation and paid contributions. Social insurance coverage plays the most significant role in providing welfare in this regime. However, the right to benefits is strongly attached to class and status. This means that different occupational groups and classes are entitled to various benefits and services. The corporatist regime is also typically shaped by the church, and, hence, strongly committed to the preservation of the traditional family. The social-democratic regime exhibits such features as high levels of universalism and solidarity. Compared to the liberal or conservative-corporatist regimes, the level of inequality and poverty is the lowest in these countries. The key criterion for access to social benefits is citizenship (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

different arrangements between the state, the market, and the family. Though Esping-Andersen's typology is evaluated ambiguously, it has been intensively exploited for several decades and has become a classic of the genre of comparative social policy analysis and a certain point of reference (Emmenegger et al., 2014).

Korpi's (2000) typology expanded Esping-Andersen's (1990) regimes with the component of gender (in)equality. In the context of family policy, Korpi's typology reflects the state-supported distribution of paid and unpaid work, that is, the extent to which a country's family policy encourages women to participate in the labour market or work for free in the family. He focused on social insurance programmes and the taxation relevant for children and parents as well as on social services for children and the elderly. Korpi identified three family policy models: general family support, dual-earner support, and market-oriented policies. 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. This model is found precisely in what is known elsewhere as social democratic welfare states. Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark are examples of dual-earner and social democratic models. Cash benefits to 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 to housewives can be expected to encourage homemaking. Childcare services are underdeveloped in this model. The general family model is usually found in the conservative welfare states and such countries as Italy, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands are examples of both models. Countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia, where maximum private responsibility for child-care prevails, are described as having a market-oriented gender policy (Korpi, 2000).

The comparative analysis is based on Kuronen's (2010) grouping of European countries according to family policy types. It is largely based on Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology of welfare state regimes, which has been expanded due to geopolitical realities. Exactly when Esping-Andersen's typology was published, the Soviet Union and the entire communist bloc collapsed, and a new group of countries not mentioned in the typology appeared – post-socialist countries. These countries were included into classification of Kuronen (2010), dividing European countries into the following groups: Nordic countries, Continental countries, Anglo-Saxon countries, Southern or Mediterranean countries, and post-socialist countries. Family policies of the Nordic countries have been heavily influenced by the Protestant church and left-wing governments, and they became gradually focused on gender equality, reconciliation, and female labour market integration through defamilialising policies. Family policies of the continental countries have been heavily influenced by the Catholic Church and subsidiarity principle, they are traditionally characterised by male-breadwinner and female-carer norms. The Anglo-American or Anglo-Saxon countries, as exemplified by Ireland, Malta and the UK, share common ground in weak state intervention, need-oriented support, and high role of the market. The Mediterranean or Southern countries are similar to the continental systems in male-breadwinner and female-carer traditions and Catholic influences, but the Mediterranean countries assign mutual obligations to the extended family, and the state only supports when these sources are

exhausted. “The post-socialist countries make most interesting cases, since they repeatedly reached ‘fundamental junctures’ and implemented dramatic institutional shifts [...]” (Kuronen, 2010, 90).

In the comparative analysis, the methods of literature review, content analysis of documents on family support systems of the countries and secondary analysis of quantitative data (total fertility rate, percentage of third and higher-order births, share of GDP for family/children, percentage of children under 18 at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and percentage of children under three in formal care) were used. To illustrate changes over time, we analysed data from 2016 and 2021 (Eurostat, 2016; Eurostat, 2021). The five-year period was marked by dramatic events in the EU: massive immigration, and Covid-19 pandemics. Therefore, we may expect changes in the indicators over time. Below is the rationale for choosing the following statistical indicators in the comparative analysis:

1. The purpose of the total fertility rate is to describe the annual birth rate of the country. This is a certain indicator of socio-demographic processes. The country’s family policy is one of the factors that may affect this indicator (Gauthier, 2007; Thevenon, 2011).
2. The share of third and higher-order births implies how the country’s family policy (although it is one of several factors) encourages going beyond the two-child norm, i.e., having more than two children. Studies (Bujard & Sulak, 2016; Fahey & Spéder, 2004; Pearce et al., 1999) have shown that the decision to have third or higher birth order children is a decisive indicator of national fertility in many European countries.
3. The share of GDP for family/children shows public spending on families, which according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2023) can be categorised into three types: child-related cash transfers to families with children, public spending on services for families with children, and financial support for families provided through the tax system. This statistical indicator reflects the extent to which the state prioritises the family when distributing public finances.
4. Percentage of children under 18 at risk of poverty and social exclusion presupposes whether the state’s efforts to help the most socially vulnerable groups are sufficient and how effective they are. Considering the fact that large families are usually classified among the most vulnerable social groups (Mynarska et al., 2015), the analysis of general family support measures and support measures specifically for large families, the comparison of the rate of third and higher-order births and the rate of children under 18 at risk of poverty and social exclusion within the group of countries and between groups of countries allows us to understand the extent to which the chosen model of family support solves the problem of poverty and social risk.
5. The rate of participation of children under three in formal care presupposes how much the state invests in early childhood care and education (ECCE). The quality ECCE, especially for children living in disadvantaged environments, leads to their better achievements in the future, but it is no less important that the participation of children in ECCE encourages participation of parents in the labour market,

promotes gender equality and dual-earner model, therefore, ensuring it is considered a significant support for families with children.

For our empirical investigation, we have chosen to analyse three countries for each ideal-typical family policy classification delineated by Kuronen (2010). Our choice of countries is based on the desire to analyse country cases which are the best representatives of the theoretical models employed in our study, and at the same time they provide diversity within the model/type.

Denmark, Finland, and Sweden were chosen as representatives of the social-democratic welfare state regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990), dual-earner family policy model (Korpi, 2010) and Nordic family policy type (Kuronen, 2010). These three countries have also significant differences as it comes to support measures to families with children (see, e.g., Aidukaite, 2021a; Hakorvita & Nygård, 2021; Oláh & Neyer, 2021).

To represent Anglo-Saxon countries were chosen the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Malta. These countries belong to the liberal welfare regime type with typical means-tested support and the dominance of market-based solutions in welfare provision (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Oláh & Neyer, 2021). The United Kingdom has left the EU in 2020, however, for our comparative purposes we keep the UK as the most prominent example of the liberal welfare state regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and the market-oriented gender policy (Korpi, 2000).

To represent the Continental group, we have chosen Belgium, France, and Germany. These countries belong to conservative welfare regime type that acknowledges men's supremacy in the labour market, it also offers women the chance to balance work and family responsibilities through family policy measures (Oláh & Neyer, 2021). At the same time, they provide diversity within the regime as France being more family friendly than Germany or Belgium (Wennemo, 1994).

Southern Europe is represented by Italy, Portugal, and Spain. They are part of the "Southern" model that has extremely limited family support and pronounced gender roles (Lewis, 2006, quoted by Oláh & Neyer, 2021, 35).

For a deeper analysis, we have chosen to analyse Estonia, Hungary and Latvia as representatives of the Central-Eastern European region, and post-socialist welfare state regime or most recently called Hybrid welfare state regime (see: Kuitto, 2016). Three countries are prominent as it comes to the state's efforts to support families with children and, at the same time, are distinct with Estonia being the most generous to families with children (Aidukaite, 2021b), Hungary staying in between with more generous support to employed parents with higher income received than to families with meagre labour market opportunities or low income (Szikra, 2018), and Latvia at the end with less public support for families and children (see: Aidukaite, 2021b; Javornik, 2014).

The MISSOC data were utilised to examine support measures for families with children in the selected 15 countries for the years 2016 and 2021 (MISSOC, 2016; MISSOC, 2021). Appendix 1 provides a summary of the measures available in the countries.

## Results

In the comparative analysis, the combination of all the five statistical indicators of the compared countries and the EU average (Table 1) provided a clearer picture of each country's efforts in the field of family policy and how they are reflected in the results of family policy. All these data allowed to compare the countries within their own group, with the EU average, as well as to compare the groups of countries.

**Table 1.** Indicators of the compared countries and the EU average

Group of countries	Country	Total fertility rate	Percentage of third and higher-order births	Share of GDP for family/children	Percentage of children under 18 at risk of poverty and social exclusion	Percentage of children under three in formal care
Nordic	Denmark	1.79 / 1.72	16.9 / 16.6	3.5 / 3.2	14.0 / 14.0	70.0 / 69.1
	Finland	1.57 / 1.46	24.6 / 23.8	3.1 / 3.1	14.1 / 13.2	29.6 / 39.1
	Sweden	1.85 / 1.67	20.8 / 20.7	3.0 / 2.8	19.7 / 19.7	51.0 / 55.8
Continental	Belgium	1.68 / 1.60	21.4 / 20.9	2.1 / 2.1	23.5 / 20.5	43.9 / 51.7
	France	1.92 / 1.84	22.1 / 23.0	2.4 / 2.2	23.8 / 22.8	48.9 / 57.1
	Germany	1.60 / 1.58	17.5 / 18.3	3.2 / 3.6	20.6 / 23.7	31.7 / 31.4
Anglo-Saxon	Ireland	1.81 / 1.78	27.1 / 26.4	1.6 / 1.1	26.8 / 22.8	20.9 / 15.1
	Malta	1.37 / 1.13	13.2 / 15.0	0.9 / 0.9	23.7 / 23.2	31.4 / 24.0
	UK	1.79 / –	22.3 / –	2.6 / –	27.9 / –	28.4 / –
Southern	Italy	1.34 / 1.25	14.1 / 14.9	1.1 / 1.2	32.7 / 29.7	34.4 / 33.4
	Portugal	1.36 / 1.35	11.8 / 14.0	1.2 / 1.3	27.5 / 22.9	44.4 / 43.3
	Spain	1.34 / 1.19	11.5 / 14.0	1.3 / 1.5	33.7 / 33.4	39.3 / 55.3
Post-Socialist	Estonia	1.60 / 1.61	22.0 / 26.9	2.1 / 2.2	19.7 / 17.4	30.2 / 25.7
	Hungary	1.53 / 1.61	20.7 / 21.4	2.1 / 1.8	38.6 / 23.3	15.6 / 13.8
	Latvia	1.74 / 1.57	20.6 / 24.2	1.6 / 2.1	25.9 / 20.1	25.9 / 29.2
European Union average		1.60 / 1.53	18.1 / 18.7	2.3 / 2.4	27.3 / 24.4	29.1 / 37.9

Source: Eurostat, 2016–2021

The comparison of family support systems in EU countries, grouping them according to the types of family policy (Table 2) revealed that the countries still maintain the characteristic features according to which they are divided into family policy models (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi, 2000; Kuronen, 2010). They determine both the differences of the main features of family support system and targeted support measures for large families.



**Table 2.** Family support systems in different groups of countries

Group of countries	Countries	Welfare regime	Family support model	The main features of family support system	Targeted support measures for large families
Nordic	Denmark	Social democratic	Dual-earner support	Universal support measures (child benefit, etc.)	None
	Finland			Gender equality: support measures encourage mothers to participate in the labour market and parents in childcare	From the second child onwards, the benefit for subsequent children increases
	Sweden			Well-developed system of early childhood education and care Special benefits for single-parent households due to the orientation of the family policy towards a dual-earner support model (except Sweden)	From the second child onwards, the benefit for subsequent children increases
Continental	Belgium	Conservative	General family support	The traditional model of a male breadwinner and a female caregiver is weakening and women are increasingly encouraged to participate in the labour market	From the second child onwards, the benefit for subsequent children increases <sup>3</sup> ; tax rebates for families with children and tax rebates for childcare costs
	France			Focus on generous financial support for families with children: benefits and tax rebates	Several different benefits; the size of the tax breaks is linked to the number of children (regardless of income)
	Germany			Considerable differences in the system of childcare services between and within countries	From the third child the benefit for subsequent children increases very slightly; tax allowances for families with children / tax breaks for childcare are available

<sup>3</sup> For children born on or after January 1, 2019, the basic amount of monthly allowance does not depend on the birth order of the child in the family but the social supplement (means-tested) is related to the size and annual income of the household.



Anglo-Saxon	Ireland	Liberal	Market-oriented policies	State provides “basic security”: family support is need-oriented  The only universal measure is child benefit but only in Ireland it is flat rate  Early childhood education and care services are underdeveloped	None
	Malta				None
	UK				None
Southern	Italy	Mediterranean	Market-oriented policies	There is a great lack of support measures for the family  There are no universal benefits <sup>4</sup> , even child benefit depends on family income  Underdeveloped early childhood education and care services that prevent women from increasing their participation in the labour market (except Portugal)	Family card as a new type of voucher for large families to be granted; discounts for expenses related to child-raising; allowance for families with three or more children, granted for a period of 13 months (means-tested)
	Portugal				The amount of the family allowance to be granted to every child shall double after the birth or integration of a second child in the family during the period between 12 and 36 months. As from the birth of the third child in the same household, that amount shall increase threefold
	Spain				€1,000 per birth or adoption in cases of large families
Post-Socialist	Estonia	Post-communist	Transit family support model	Universal child benefit  Different support measures for large families  The network of state childcare institutions is insufficient, but the state’s attention to these services is growing	From the third child onwards the amount of child benefit increases; universal large family benefit; additional amount of tax-free income applies from the second child onwards; housing programme (within the income threshold); pension benefits
	Hungary				The amount of child benefit depends on the number of children; additional benefits for parents or grandparents caring for large families at home; greater tax allowances for large families; two additional days off per child; housing subsidies; transport provision programme
	Latvia				From the second child onwards, the child benefit increases; real estate tax and personal vehicle tax rebates; additional three days of paid leave per year; pension benefits

Source: Prepared by the authors, according to Esping-Andersen (1990), Korpi (2000), Kuronen (2010), MISSOC (2021)

<sup>4</sup> As of January 2022, Italy introduced the so called Single Universal Allowance for children replacing all the family benefits which existed before.

Below, the results of the comparative analysis are presented in more detail, according to group of countries.

### *Support schemes for large families in Nordic countries*

This group of countries includes the countries of the social democratic welfare type (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and the dual-earner support model (Korpi, 2000). They have no institutionalised family policies with designated ministries; therefore, the performance of this function is delegated to several institutions of central government and self-government, none of the countries mentions the family in their constitutions (Kuronen, 2010). Nevertheless, the Nordic countries are showing rather good results in family policy: generous financial support that significantly reduces the costs of raising children, a strong commitment to gender equality and a good work-life balance. Family policy model of the Nordic countries has been experiencing transformations recently due to increasing migration and marketisation of public services (Estevez-Ave & Hobson, 2015; Grødem, 2017; Therborn, 2017), however, it is still the most defamilialising family policy model in the world with the most distinguished feature of the family support system – emphasis on gender equality and commitment to providing services instead of cash benefits (Aidukaite, 2021a; Oláh & Neyer, 2021).

**Comparison of the Nordic countries.** The comparison of the statistical indicators in this group of countries (Table 1) shows that in all three countries the birth rate declined from 2016 to 2021. The highest decline was felt in Sweden (from 1.85 to 1.67). The birth rate in Finland fell down from 1.57 to 1.46, while Denmark experienced moderate decline from 1.79 to 1.72. Despite the decline, in Denmark and Sweden this indicator is well above the EU average (1.60/1.53). Finland's total birth rate is slightly lower than the EU average and continues to decline (1.32 in 2022 (Eurostat, 2022)).

The comparison of the third and higher-order birth rates shows that this indicator is rather stable over time in Finland (24.6%/23.8%) and Sweden (20.8%/20.7%) if 2016 and 2021 data are compared, and in both countries, it is above the EU average (18.1%/18.7%). However, Denmark deviates (16.9%/16.6%) from the other Nordic countries and shows worse results than the EU average. The third and higher-order birth rates in Sweden and Finland may be explained by several factors, including gender equality in these countries, where women are encouraged to participate in the labour market and men in family life (Hiilamo, 2002; Leitner, 2003). It should be noticed that the countries that are more liberal in terms of gender roles in family life are also those with preferences for large families (Letablier et al., 2009).

Comparing the share of GDP for family and children, it is above the EU average (2.3%/2.4%) in all three Nordic countries examined, and in this respect, Denmark stands out (3.5%/3.2%). This can be explained by the large share of GDP devoted to formal care of children – as much as 1.4% in 2016 and 1.2% in 2021. Significant Danish investment in child and family policy is likely to prevent social risks, as the proportion of children under 18 at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Denmark (14% both, in 2016 and 2021) is much lower than the EU average (27.3%/24.4%). Finland (14.1%/13.2%) has a similar proportion of children under 18 at risk of poverty and

social exclusion as Denmark, but Sweden's proportion is higher (19.7% both, in 2016 and 2021). The poorer Swedish indicator may be due to the fact that Sweden does not have support measures for single-parent families which Denmark and Finland have (see: Appendix 1), so in the Scandinavian dual-earner/dual-career family support system, these families face financial difficulties, and this automatically affects the well-being of children.

The percentage of children under three in formal care is the highest in Denmark (70%/69.1%), which is approximately twice the EU average (29.1%/37.9%). Sweden (51%/55.8%) is also well above the EU average. According to this indicator, Finland ranks last in this group (29.6%/39.1%) but is still a bit higher than the EU average. Relatively low percentage of children under three in formal care in Finland may be affected by the child home care allowance paid to families who care for their children under the age of three at home or by other arrangement instead of using day care provided by municipalities (Kela, 2020). It is interesting to point out that the percentage of children under three in formal care increased over time (from 2016 till 2021) in Sweden and Finland, while remained stable in Denmark.

The comparison of the family support systems of all three Nordic countries (Table 2) shows that their most important feature is the orientation towards the empowerment of the family itself. This is facilitated by a well-developed system of ECCE, the implementation of gender equality by including women into the labour market and men into the family life. In other words, the distinctive features of the Nordic family model are the "emphasis on services and on the father's involvement in childcare" (Aidukaite, 2021a, 30).

While comparing the support provided by the Nordic countries for large families, attention should be paid to the context of the family policy in the first place. All three countries have relatively generous universal family benefit and good conditions for work-life balance, which are usually ensured by two wages. Families with only one employed person receive additional benefits in Denmark and Finland. Finland and Sweden pay additional benefits to families with two and more children, but none of the three countries have tax breaks or other targeted measures for large families (see: Table 2 and Appendix 1). This configuration of family support measures ensures a relatively high standard of living for all families, including larger ones.

### *Support schemes for large families in Continental countries*

As per the typology of welfare regimes by Esping-Andersen (1990), Continental countries are classified as a conservative model, and according to Korpi (2000), as a general family support model. Families traditionally are explicitly supported in these countries, as illustrated by high levels of transfers to families (Thevenon, 2011).

**Comparison of the Continental countries.** Comparing the statistical indicators of Belgium, France, and Germany (Table 1), the largest share of GDP for family and children is in Germany (3.2%/3.6%), which significantly exceeds the EU average (2.3%/2.4%). Belgium (2.1%, both in 2016 and 2021) and France (2.4%/2.2%) lag behind Germany but are close to the EU average. The shares of children under 18 at

risk of poverty and social exclusion are quite similar in Belgium (23.5%/20.5%), France (23.8%/22.8%), Germany (20.6%/23.7%) and Belgium are slightly below the EU average (27.3%/24.4%). These results are backed by generous financial incentives in all three countries.

In the group of Continental countries, France has the highest total fertility rate (1.92%/1.84%), while both Belgium and Germany are quite similar (1.68%/1.60% and 1.60%/1.58%, respectively) and to the EU average (1.60%/1.53%). France's leadership in this area may be due to the most generous system of family benefits in this group of countries (the only country of all examined has support measures in all categories, see: Appendix 1; Wennemo, 1994). It also explains the largest share of third and higher-order births in France (22.1%/23%). This indicator shows that France is ahead of Belgium (21.4%/20.9%), Germany (17.5%/18.3%), and the EU average (18.1%/18.7%).

Regarding the participation of children under 3 in formal care, again France stands out with the rate (48.9%/57.1%) exceeding the EU average by 20% (29.1%/37.9%). The German rate of children under 3 in formal care (31.7%/31.4%) is the lowest in this group and closest to the EU average (29.1%/37.9%). The Belgian share of children under three in formal care (43.9%/51.7%) is closer to France than Germany.

All three countries provide relatively high levels of financial support through benefits and tax breaks (see: Table 2 and Appendix 1). This support is still marked by "conservatism", however, gender equality and work-life balance are not obvious drivers of policy support (Thevenon, 2011).

Summarising the support for large families in the Continental countries, it must be noted that all of them support this group of families, nevertheless, France is the leader. This can be explained by the fact that large families have already become a part of French culture. According to Bujard et al. (2019), in France, large families have a completely different status than in many European countries. Clear incentives for large families exist not only in the tax system but also in culture – couples with three or more children are highly valued here. The tax relief for the third child is twice as high as for the first two, which is particularly attractive to middle-class families. Therefore, France can be considered the country which supports large families the most – both in this group and, perhaps, in the EU (Thevenon & Gauthier, 2011; Table 2; Appendix 1).

### ***Support schemes for large families in Anglo-Saxon countries***

Ireland, the United Kingdom<sup>5</sup>, and Malta belong to the Anglo-Saxon group of the EU countries (Kuronen, 2010). In the typology of Esping-Andersen (1990), Anglo-Saxon countries represent the liberal regime, where the state has the least responsibility for the well-being of families. According to Korpi (2000), these countries illustrate a market-oriented model of family support, where individuals are encouraged to create their own well-being. According to Thevenon (2011), the Anglo-Saxon countries

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<sup>5</sup> The initial analysis was carried out before the United Kingdom withdrew from the European Union in 2020.

lie at the opposite end of the public-support spectrum from the Nordic countries. Family policy in these countries is characterised by weak state intervention, demand-driven support, and an important role of the market. However, they also have differences, as Malta and Ireland have stronger familialist traditions than the UK (Kuronen, 2010).

**Comparison of the Anglo-Saxon countries.** The comparison of the statistics of the Anglo-Saxon group of the EU countries (Table 1) shows that Malta has the lowest total fertility rate (1.37%/1.13%) of all the examined countries, and it is well below the EU average (1.60%/1.53%). Meanwhile, Ireland (1.81%/1.78%) and the UK (1.79% in 2016) are well above the EU average (1.60%/1.53%). Probably, it is due to the share of third and higher-order births, which is particularly high in Ireland (27.1%/26.4%). This indicates that Ireland surpasses the Scandinavian countries and France and leads in the entire EU. Ireland's lead may be explained by cultural factors such as the strong influence of the Catholic Church, and the long-standing constitutional ban on abortion (see: Canavan, 2012), repealed in 2018. Compared to Ireland, Malta is more than twice behind (13.2%/15%). The UK (22.3% in 2016) is in between them.

Percentage of children under 18 at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Ireland (26.8%/22.8%) and the UK (27.9% in 2016) is like the EU average (27.3%/ 24.4%), and Malta is slightly below (23.7%/23.2%). The rate of children under three in formal care is smallest in Ireland and it dropped significantly in five years from 2016 till 2021 (from 20.9% to 15.1%). The same change is observed in Malta (from 31.4% to 24%). The share of children in formal care in the UK in 2016 was close to the EU average (28.4% and 29.1%, respectively).

Summarising the family support systems of the Anglo-Saxon countries compared (Table 2), it can be concluded that the financial incentives focus on low-income families in all three countries. Although all have a child benefit, its amount is flat rate (i.e., it does not depend on family income) only in Ireland (Appendix 1). The UK pays a child benefit, but above a certain income threshold, a part of the child benefit has to be paid back in tax (UK Government, 2020). In Malta, the amount of the benefit depends directly on the family's income (Department of Social Security of Malta, 2020) (Appendix 1).

The Anglo-Saxon countries have no support measures for large families (see: Table 2). Moreover, in Ireland and the UK, some support measures have discriminatory features towards larger families: in Ireland, the back to work family dividend, the total amount of which depends on the number of children, is paid only for four children (Irish Government, 2020), while in the UK, the child benefit from the second child onwards even decreases (UK Government, 2020). Moreover, the UK has a special attitude towards large families, as this social group is considered problematic here. Studies (Bradshaw et al., 2006) showed that children in large families are more likely to have a parent who is unemployed, low-educated, from a minority ethnic group and has other characteristics that are associated with a higher risk of child poverty. According to Bradshaw et al. (2006), the UK policies are not particularly sensitive to the needs of large families. The especially high poverty rate among large families in the UK may suggest absence of more decisive action by the state to address the problems of such families, as poverty is determined not only by the existing or implied

characteristics of the family but also by the state's family policy (Bradshaw et al., 2006). In the absence of universal benefits and lack of incentives for women to participate in the labour market, large families fall into the category of the most vulnerable social groups and risk being marginalised. This creates preconditions for their stigmatisation, and negative public opinion creates barriers for the state to try to solve the problems of such families.

### *Support schemes for large families in Southern countries*

Greece, Italy, Spain, Cyprus, and Portugal represent the group of Southern countries in the EU (Kuronen, 2010). In the original Esping-Andersen (1990) typology of welfare regimes, these countries, except Italy, were not included into the analysis. Italy was attributed to the conservative-corporatist regime. Therefore, Leibfried (1992, quoted by Arts & Gillessen, 2002) singled out the fourth welfare regime, which was named the Latin Rim. The Latin Rim/Mediterranean regime included such countries as Spain, Italy, Portugal, and France and was characterised by “the lack of an articulated social minimum and a right to welfare” (Arts & Gillessen, 2002, 145). Soon, Esping-Andersen (1999) himself agreed that the unique model of Southern Europe ultimately depends on the crucial role of families.

The Mediterranean countries share similarities with the Continental systems in male-breadwinner and female-carer traditions and Catholic influences (Kuronen, 2010), but the distinguishing feature of the Southern countries is familialism. According to Esping-Andersen (1999), familialism easily goes hand-in hand with a passive and underdeveloped family policy.

It is necessary to emphasise that these countries have the lowest birth rates in Europe. This is related to the still relevant traditional perception of the family with a male breadwinner and a female carer. According to McDonald (2000), the more traditional the society regarding its family system, the greater is the level of incoherence between social institutions and the lower is fertility. This may explain why the lowest birth rates are typical of Southern European countries and other societies with traditional, male-dominated families. State duties to protect the family are prescribed in the constitutions of all the three compared Southern countries (Kuronen, 2010). Nevertheless, Southern countries are characterised by a “deficit” of policies, whichever aspect is considered (Thevenon, 2011).

**Comparison of the Southern countries.** The comparison of the statistical indicators (Table 1) shows that Italy has a lower rate of children under 3 in formal care (34.4%/33.4%) than Portugal (44.4%/43.3%), and Spain (39.3%/55.3%). These indicators for Portugal and Spain are well above the EU average (29.1%/37.9%). Portugal's rate of children under 18 at risk of poverty and social exclusion (27.5%/22.9%) is close the EU average (27.3%/24.4%), while Spain's (33.7%/33.4%) and Italy's (32.7%/29.7%) indicators are lower.

The share of GDP for family and children in Italy (1.1%/1.2%) is twice as low as the EU average (2.3%/2.4%). The indicator of Portugal is a bit higher (1.2%/1.3%) as well as the rate of Spain (1.3%/1.5%), but it is still well below the EU average.



Meanwhile, total fertility rate in Italy (1.34%/1.25%), Spain (1.34%/1.19%), as well as Portugal (1.36%/1.35%) is well below the EU average (1.6%/1.53%). This does not necessarily mean that families in the Southern countries want fewer children. As Gauthier (2007) notices, the gap between ideal and actual birth rates is highest in the Southern countries, where families receive very limited state support. Therefore, it is very likely that the low birth rates in Southern countries are caused by their modest family policies. The same is true for the share of third and higher-order births. The indicators of Spain (11.5%/14%) and Portugal (11.8%/14%) are the lowest of all the analysed countries. The situation in Italy is slightly better (14.1%/14.9%) but its share of third and higher-order births also lags far behind the EU average (18.1%/18.7%).

Summarising family support schemes of the Southern countries (Table 2), one should agree with Kuronen (2010) that regarding family allowances, the Mediterranean countries have taken different paths but are sharing their low level. In all three states, there is a lack of support measures for family, and the existing ones focus only on lowest income families.

Although there are special support measures for large families in Southern countries, they all apply means-tested (see: Table 2) and can, therefore, reduce poverty in large families to some extent but it is difficult to expect them to serve as an incentive to have larger families. This is evidenced by the third and higher-order births rates and total fertility rates in Southern countries, which are among the lowest in the EU (Table 1).

### ***Support schemes for large families in post-socialist countries***

The group of post-socialist countries, also known as post-communist countries, includes 10 countries of the EU: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary. According to Kuitto (2016, 2), over the last quarter of a century, the social welfare system of the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has undergone a thorough transformation along with their political and economic systems: "Reforming the welfare policy arrangements and making them work effectively has been one of the central challenges for the new democratic regimes, as economic transformation has been accompanied by wide-ranging social costs".

After the collapse of the communist regime, all CEE countries started from similar position; however, the different results achieved during that time indicate that different paths had been chosen. These countries can very relatively represent the same family policy model, as their alliance is based more on the same historical experience than on the uniformity of their family policy trajectories. CEE countries are characterised by transit family policy: interim, difficult to describe and highly diversified (Stankūnienė et al., 2013). For this reason, these different CEE countries can hardly be categorised into a separate model according to their family policy, as it is a specific group of countries in the sense that their family policies are based on different family traditions, religion, and culture. The similarities between the CEE countries are more institutional in nature, they stem from similar historical experiences and challenges in the transition to democracy and a market economy (Aidukaitė et al., 2012).



However, until there is no more definite typology based on these differences, we believe that these countries have enough similarities to be classified as a general group of post-socialist countries.

**Comparison of the post-socialist countries.** The analysed post-socialist countries have a wide range of support options for large families, covering all three groups of McDonald's (2000) support measures, i.e., financial incentives, support for parents to combine work and family, and social change supportive of children and parenting (especially in Estonia and Latvia) (see: Table 2 and Appendix 1).

The comparison of the indicators of the post-socialist countries (Table 1) shows all three countries stand out for their very high numbers of third and higher-order births. Estonia (22.01%/26.9%), Latvia (20.6%/24.2%), and Hungary (20.7%/21.4%) are well above the EU average (18.1%/18.7%). It is worth noting that the percentage of third and higher-order births has increased in all three countries from 2016 to 2021. If we examine longer period, it can be observed that in Hungary, this indicator has always been high, while in Estonia and Latvia it has increased only recently. The share of third and higher-order births in the total number of births in the decade since 2011 (Eurostat, 2011) until 2021 grew by 5.8 percentage points in Estonia (from 21.1% to 26.9%) and 7.1 percentage points in Latvia (from 17.1% to 24.2%), meanwhile in Hungary, no significant growth has been recorded (from 21.3% to 21.4%), but as aforementioned, the country has a consistently high rate of third and higher-order births.

Estonia's total fertility rate (1.60/1.61) is similar to Hungary's (1.53/1.61). In 2016, Latvia was the leader of this group (1.74) and in 2021 it became the last (1.57) of the three countries. In Estonia and Hungary, total fertility rate slightly increased from 2016 to 2021, while in Latvia it has decreased. In all three post-socialist countries total fertility rate is slightly higher than the EU average (1.60/1.53).

In all three countries, the share of GDP for family and children is lower than the EU average (2.3%/2.4%), but worth to mention that in the period from 2016 to 2021 this indicator decreased in Hungary (from 2.1% to 1.8%), significantly increased in Latvia (from 1.6% to 2.1%), and remained stable in Estonia (2.1%/2.2%). Meanwhile, the rate of children under 18 at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Estonia (19.7%/17.4 %) and Latvia (25.9%/20.1%) is below the EU average (27.3%/24.4%). Hungary constitutes an interesting case as the rate of children under 18 at risk of poverty went considerably down from 38.6% in 2016 to 23.3% in 2021. In terms of participation of children under 3 in formal care, Hungary (15.6%/13.8%) lags twice behind Estonia (30.2%/25.7%), Latvia (25.9%/29.2%), and the EU average (29.1%/37.9%).

Summarising the family support systems of the post-socialist countries (Table 2), they are favourable to large families. All three countries have family benefits, the amount of which depends on the number of children, as well as tax benefits calculated according to the same principle. In all three countries, support for large families is complex, as they not only receive more generous child benefits and tax breaks (except Latvia) but can also benefit from measures such as real estate or vehicle tax breaks, pension benefits, housing or transport schemes, additional paid holidays for children

(Table 2). The share of large families in these countries is one of the highest in Europe, so it can be argued that targeted support measures for this group encourage them to have more children.

### ***Conclusions and discussion***

In this article, we aimed at comparing the family support schemes that affect large families in the selected EU countries. Based on the regimes/models defined by Esping-Andersen (1990), Korpi (2000), and Kuronen (2010), and their related guidelines, we grouped them into five welfare state and family policy models.

It is no coincidence that the analysis of the situation of large families in the countries of the EU pays considerable attention to the general context of family policy. Overall family support measures may or may not leave the need for targeted measures for large families. This is illustrated by the example of the Nordic countries. The Nordic model with its service-oriented, gender-equal, and universalist approach provides a strong foundation for supporting large families even in the absence of specific targeted measures.

The Continental countries provide substantial support for families, especially through financial measures, but France clearly stands out in promoting and supporting large families through both policies and cultural attitudes. The broadest and most generous benefits system of France is reflected in its outcomes, namely, the highest fertility rate and the largest share of third and higher-order births.

The Anglo-Saxon countries provide limited support for large families and have market-oriented welfare models. While these countries focus on low-income families with financial incentives, the support is often inadequate for larger families, which may face stigmatisation, higher poverty risks, and less access to formal childcare. Ireland stands out with its relatively higher fertility rates, but even there, the support for large families is insufficient and sometimes discriminatory.

The Southern countries are characterised by familialism and limited state support. Traditional family models, combined with limited state intervention, result in insufficient support for larger families. Although there are some means-tested measures for large families, they do not provide adequate incentives to increase fertility or improve family well-being. As a result, Southern countries have some of the lowest fertility rates in Europe, and low third and higher-order birth rates indicate a lack of significant state support for families, especially large ones.

The post-socialist countries have implemented family policies that provide strong support for large families. These countries offer a variety of family support measures in reducing child poverty and promoting family welfare, namely, investing in family-friendly policies, particularly, in areas like childcare, housing, and tax incentives, which have led to higher fertility rates and increased number of third and higher-order births.

The comparison of family support systems (see: Table 2), specific support measures for families with children (see: Appendix 1), and quantitative data (see: Table 1) of the analysed EU countries, grouping them into family policy models, allows us to conclude

that the needs of large families are most effectively met (as evidenced by high rates of third and higher-order births, high total fertility rates and relatively low rates of poverty and social exclusion) in the Nordic countries with their high economic development, strong universal family policy framework, i.e., emphasis on services over cash benefits, gender equality, and work-life balance, ensure the well-being of larger families without special targeted measures provided to them. Second are the Continental countries distinguished by generous financial incentives through child benefits, tax breaks, and other family-oriented measures for large families, where France stands out for its proactive approach to this type of families. And third are the analysed post-socialist countries providing targeted financial support, tax breaks, and additional social benefits, contributing to higher fertility rates and a growth in third and higher-order births. The post-socialist countries have measures to support large families that are not typical of other groups of countries, such as pension benefits, housing or transport schemes, additional paid holidays for children.

The comparative analysis shows that the countries of the EU still maintain the characteristic features according to which they are divided into family policy models, determining both the differences of support systems between the group of countries and the different support schemes for large families within them. This suggests that family policy does not change so quickly. Though some differences can be seen within the models, nevertheless these differences are not so significant as to fundamentally shake the foundations of the country groups they are divided into.

**Appendix 1.** Support measures to families with children in analysed countries in 2016–2021 (MISSOC)

Group of countries	Nordic			Continental			Anglo-Saxon			Southern			Post-Socialist		
	Denmark	Finland	Sweden	Belgium	France	Germany	Ireland	Malta	UK	Italy	Portugal	Spain	Estonia	Hungary	Latvia
Countries															
Categories of support measures															
Maternity leave	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/n.a.	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+
Paternity leave	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	-/-	-/-	+/+	+/ n.a.	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+
Parental leave	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	-/-	-/-	-/n.a.	+/+	+/+	-/-	+/+	+/+	+/+
Child benefit (universal)	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	-/-	+ <sup>6</sup> /n.a.	-/-	-/-	-/-	+/+	+/+	+/+
Child benefit (means-tested)	+/+	-/-	-/-	-/-	+/+	-/-	-/-	+/+	-/n.a.	+/+	+/+	+/+	-/-	-/-	-/-
Childcare allowance	+/+	+/+	-/-	-/-	+/+	-/-	-/-	-/-	-/n.a.	+/+	-/-	-/-	-/-	-/-	-/-
Free or subsidised childcare facilities	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./ n.a.	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./-	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./+
Birth and adoption grants	+ <sup>7</sup> /+ <sup>8</sup>	+/+	+ <sup>9</sup> /+ <sup>10</sup>	+/+	+/+	-/-	-/-	+/+	+/n.a.	+/+	-/-	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+
Allowance for single parents <sup>11</sup>	+/+	+/+	-/-	-/-	+/+	-/-	+/+	-/-	+/n.a.	-/-	+/+	-/-	+/+	+/+	-/-
Special allowances for children with disabilities	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	+/+	-/-	+/+	+/+	+/n.a.	-/-	+/+	+/+	+/+	-/-	+/+
Advance on maintenance payments	+/+	+/+	+/+	-/-	+/+	+/+	-/-	+/+	+/n.a.	-/-	-/-	-/-	+/+	+/+	+/+
In-work benefits (tax credits)	n.a./-	n.a./-	n.a./-	n.a./-	n.a./+	n.a./-	n.a./+ <sup>12</sup>	n.a./+	n.a./ n.a.	n.a./+	n.a./-	n.a./-	n.a./-	n.a./-	n.a./-
Tax concessions	n.a./-	n.a./-	n.a./-	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./-	n.a./+	n.a./ n.a.	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./+	n.a./-

<sup>6</sup> No variation with income, but a tax charge applies in the case of income over GBP 50,000 (£67,752) per year.

<sup>7</sup> Adoption Grant is paid only in case of adoption of a foreign child.

<sup>8</sup> Adoption Grant is paid only in case of adoption of a foreign child.

<sup>9</sup> Adoption Grant is paid only in case of adoption of a foreign child.

<sup>10</sup> Adoption Grant is paid only in case of adoption of a foreign child.

<sup>11</sup> Or larger amount of child benefit for single parent families.

<sup>12</sup> A Single Person Child Carer credit of €1,650 is available only to single parents.

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