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A comparative study of social policy institutional characteristics in Central and Eastern Europe

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Research question

The introduction of market economies and democratization process in Central Europe have caused significant changes in social policy programs. It has brought about risks typical for market economies (such as unemployment) which were contrasted with an institutional framework inherited from the socialist past (or lack of it at all). Thus a potential scope of social policy has been expanded. Also, the transition significantly changed the structure (by reducing the role of state owned enterprises) and logic (introduction of mechanisms meant to fit to the requirements of a market economy) of social policy provision. Exposed to various factors, both domestic and external (foreign advisors, the EU membership), the countries of the region (even though commonly perceived as the monolith) accommodated differently to this situation.

This paper aims at answering the question about trends which took place in social policy in the 8 countries which joined the EU in May 2004 (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia). More precisely, it is guided by two questions: 1) what were the institutional features of social policy in period 1989-2004? and 2) whether one can talk of more stable patterns and/or consolidation of them? This paper looks at the main institutional characteristics of three social policy areas: unemployment benefits, elderly policy (elderly care, pensions) and family policy (maternity and parental leave and benefits, childcare).

Theoretical approach

The paper focuses on the institutional design of each of the three programs and principles which govern them. This will include mode of access, funding mechanisms and distributive principles. The choice of the institutional perspective is justified by the fact that the dimensions proposed above allow for much sophisticated insight compared to the social spending perspective on the one hand, and do not carry the burden of narrow context-specificity typical for social rights approach on the other. Additionally, when combining cash benefits with provision of services and analyzing them as policy packages this perspective reveals the scope and extent of engagement of various policy actors (state, family, market). This issue is especially significant when a comparative approach to social policy analysis is applied.

Research method

This paper utilizes fuzzy set ideal types analysis which can be successfully used for studying diversity and change of social policy. The basic assumption of this approach is that empirical phenomena have a complex character. In order to catch this complexity it is reasonable to point out their constituting aspects and think about them as configurations. This characteristics fits closely to the meaning of policy package as defined by the institutional theory. The policy packages as defined by the mix of different characteristics derived conceptually will serve as the ideal types, to which social policies will be compared. By assessing relations between empirical cases and theoretically constructed ideal types, one may then infer about the nature of policy programs and synchronically compare them across time and space. This way one may argue about potential diversity, trends, patterns or consolidation of social policies in the region.

Analytical significance

The aim of this paper is to compare three social policy areas in Central Europe since the beginning of transition until 2004. The inclusion of such period allows for observing how the policies evolved, were being created and changed in the light of significant transformations taking place in the region. Therefore, one may argue about possible (dis)similarities in the beginning of this process and variety of responses to similar pressures (the EU integration for instance).

On the conceptual side, this paper includes caring services as this social policy component has been in a shadow of research. Moreover, the possible diversity among such number of

countries has never been studied before to such extent. Second, in order to overcome the problem of instability of the policy outcomes, the analysis attempts at presenting synchronic and diachronic perspectives simultaneously. Thus, it is possible to present the dynamics of changes, policy trends and the diversity among the countries. Third, the comparison is made systematic, with using the fuzzy-set method, and this way specified the difference more precisely. In other words, the great emphasis is placed on the method of comparison.

Data

The study covers the period 1989-2004, which poses serious problems as far as the information concerning social policy changes is concerned. However, the central source of the qualitative information will be the US Social Security Administration's *Social Security Programs Throughout the World* publications from years 1989, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2002 and 2004, published in co-operation with the International Social Security Association. This is the only source, which contains useful information concerning chosen eight countries for such long period. Whenever possible, the data is supported by the information coming from other sources, such as MISSCEEC, MISSOC and MISSCEO.

As for the quantitative data, the study also relies on various sources. The data on the childcare come from the UNICEF TransMONEE database and UNESCO education statistical yearbooks and on-line database. As this sort of data is characterized by many inconsistencies and gaps, it was necessary to complement them with the information from other sources, such as national statistical yearbooks, country reports produced by governments and international organizations (ILO, the World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF). The same applies to the information on the elderly care and pension policies