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ABSTRACT of the paper
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Title of the paper: The politics of family and gender after communism: comparing childcare policies in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland

Context: Childcare policies are recently seen as one of the main instruments of state's influence gender relations and especially, facilitate women's economic autonomy . While family policy or gender regimes in the Western world have received a lot of attention already, the situation of the newly democratised post-communist countries has received little attention . Instead, the picture of post-communist countries is often one-sided and goes on as the following: During socialism women were encouraged to join the labour force. Special incentives included publicly-provided affordable childcare services. After the collapse of communism, governments in most of those newly democratised states assumed that society would opt for a male-breadwinner model. Therefore, they for instance started to close many childcare centres, especially nurseries, and withdrawing from supporting them financially. Those processes did take place and no doubt those countries have a lot in common. However, if one takes a closer look at the shape of childcare policies in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, it turns out they are different to a considerable extent. After eighteen years have past from the collapse of communism, perhaps it is time to try to read the histories of those countries in a broader context than by using the simple 'mirror opposition' method (communist vs. post-communist) .

Main research questions: What are the differences between policy choices in those countries? What were they driven by?

Case selection and difference specification: These three countries are from the post-communist group, they were facing similar challenges within the same timeframes, each of them was regarded as successful in their 'unification with the West', and they were originally

in the first round for the EU membership. For those reasons, in the works on economic and social policies, they were usually put in the same cluster of countries with ‘state-socialist’ legacies and treated as monolith. Still, they have quite different childcare policies. **Residual** character of social programs in Poland leaves the sphere of care almost solely to the family, while in the Czech Republic more **explicitly conservative** policies support women’s caring responsibilities by relatively generous system of cash benefits. In the absence of available and affordable childcare services for small children, this might be strong incentive for Czech women not to engage into paid employment. In Hungarian case those two elements (universal cash benefits for longer periods and childcare services) are present, making this country a mixture of specifically ‘**women-friendly**’ policies.

Theoretical approach: This paper contributes to both the feminist literature on welfare state as well as the stream of research on post-communist countries. Therefore, first, I will analyse the main instruments of childcare policies in these three countries from the point of view of their potential ‘de-familising’ character. By careful pointing out at different elements of family policies (childcare services and parental leave arrangements), the first task will be to clearly specify the difference between these countries. Next, by emphasizing the points of political debate around the crucial policy choices, I will try to show how the debates around reforms concerning childcare policy were differently constrained by the choices made in the past. In other words, I will argue that the changes of childcare policies after the fall of communism were dependent on the policies already in place. Thus, for analysing the roots of these policies I will combine the approaches of historical and sociological institutionalism.

Analytical significance and contribution: First, the paper will present family policies in this part of Europe in a more detailed and systematic way, also bringing in and systemising past developments. Second, it will try to trace a possible explanation for the differences between the family policies of those three countries, bridging the literature on transition with the feminist scholarship in the area of studies on the welfare state. Third, the work will try to answer the question of the applicability of the Western framework to post-communist countries, as one of the basic challenges while analysing the situation in the Eastern Europe is to grasp the developments with appropriate theoretical frameworks. From this point of view this is a task for a careful application of methods of comparison. Fourth, this paper will emphasize the role of ideas in shaping the policy choices – in particular the evolution of the concepts of gender roles on the one hand, and the role of the state on the other. Finally, the

analysis of policy developments over time will show the nature of institutional development – how the institutional outcomes, in spite of enormous challenges and external shocks, tend to reproduce themselves.

Data and sources: For analysing childcare policies I need data concerning childcare services – coverage, enrolment rates, pupils per teacher ratio, fees, the modes of financing, admissions vs. places available, etc. About parental leave I need information on their duration, availability and level of benefits, availability of the leaves for fathers. The following sources are especially helpful: TransMONEE (UNICEF data base with indicators concerning childcare, MISSCEEC and MISSOC. Many demographic data are provided by the Council of Europe, Eurostat, and the UN (World Population Monitoring). There are also important institutions doing research on public opinion and covering some of the postcommunist countries like ESS and ISSP. The national sources of information would probably be most helpful where more detailed and cautious analysis can take place: National Statistical Offices as well as opinion poll centres.

To complete the picture I will need to get some more qualitative data. As mentioned above, some elements of discourse analysis will be necessary – parliamentary debates, party and civil society declarations, etc.

References: