

The first decade of building a family-friendly Hungary

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ABSTRACT

There is no single member state in the European Union where the number of births would reach the replacement level. Hungary herself is facing severe demographic challenges as the country's population is declining since 1981. The Hungarian government decided to address these demographic challenges and committed herself to building a country based on a comprehensive family policy, by mainstreaming and prioritising family issues since 2010. Therefore, family has been anchored in the newly drafted Fundamental Law of the country as the basic building block of society. Hungarian family policy provides a real option for parents, mothers in particular. They might stay at home with a baby for 3 years and receive extensive maternity benefits, or may just as well decide to return to the labour market, which is assisted by a network of quality public nurseries and several financial incentives.

The overarching family policy that has been created and implemented by the government in close cooperation with family organizations, Academia and Churches shows encouraging results in the last decade. The total fertility rate increased by 24%, marriages nearly doubled, the rate of abortions and divorces decreased by 41% from 2010 to 2020 (Eurostat, Fertility indicators). In parallel, the female employment rate has grown significantly by almost 13%. The rate of children born within wedlock is increasing again contrary to European trends. According to the recently published Human Fertility Database study of the Max Planck Institute, the only European Union country was Hungary where despite the Corona pandemic more babies were born in 2020 than in 2016-2019, proving that with extensive family policies, it is possible to counteract negative demographic tendencies in times of the Pandemic.

A wide-ranging family taxation system reaches all parents raising children, the government is assisting family home creation and renovation in a generous manner. Several overarching measures aim at the better reconciliation of work and family life. The well-being and financial situation of families has constantly been raised. The most important factor nevertheless when creating a family-friendly country is concerning the perceived image of families in society. Hungary is constantly working for the elevation of the social standing of parenthood, in particular motherhood and childrearing in the last decade.

KEY WORDS:

Demography, Family, Marriage, Work-life balance, Fertility rate

1. Introduction

Hungary was facing severe economic and demographic challenges in 2010. The total fertility rate reached a historic low, families were not deciding to have the number of children they wished for often due to the unstable economic circumstances, the high level of unemployment and the effects of wide-ranging austerity measures destructively affecting family benefits as well. These negative demographic tendencies projected significant sustainability challenges mid-term already. In 2010 a family centred governance building on the pro-family and pro-child convictions of Hungarians was introduced. “The declared objective of family policy is to improve the demographic situation, primarily through supporting women’s fertility plans and incentives to have children. The law lists a number of actual areas to be supported, and according to the specialized literature, a number of these areas do in fact support fertility: the reconciliation of work and family life; children’s day care possibilities while parents are at work; support for creating homes and housing; reduced administrative burden related to the use of benefits and services. Apart from the actual fields of support, emphasis is placed– in both the law and the everyday rhetoric of the government –on supporting marriage and family values, and on a family-friendly way of thinking.” (Makay, 2019)

The possibilities of family benefits have constantly been upgraded since, addressing various needs of all families, always taking into account the capabilities of the more and more sound Hungarian economy. A wide-ranging family taxation system reaching all parents raising children was reintroduced. Family taxation motivates parents in taking up legitimate employment. It exempts mothers with four children from paying any personal income tax throughout their career, young Hungarians under 25 will be exempted from paying PIT as of 2022 as well. Hungarians define stable relationships, employment and adequate housing as the three most important factors when deciding about the number of their children. The country could register a significant increase in the employment and activation levels. The government is assisting family home creation and renovation in a generous manner, in order to help families to adequate housing. Several overarching measures aim at the better reconciliation of work and family life. The network of available and quality public nurseries has constantly been expanded. Large families as well as single parent families are given special attention. Couples experiencing infertility challenges are assisted in an increased fashion. Social inequalities are mitigated by an additional 2 years of compulsory kindergarten, free and heavily subsidises child catering as well as free textbooks for all pupils in public education. The well-being and financial situation of families has constantly been raised. The most important factor nevertheless when creating a family-friendly country is concerning the perceived image of families in society. Hungary is constantly working for the elevation of the social standing of parenthood, in particular motherhood and childrearing in the last decade.

The Hungarian government decided to address these demographic challenges and committed herself to building a country based on a comprehensive family policy, by mainstreaming and prioritising family issues since 2010

2. Methodology

The article aims to provide an adequate measurement framework that shows the variety of relevant matters and areas in the field of family policy. The article intends to add empirical research results to the analytical background in order to better reflect on current issues of Hungarian family policy and benefits. The article will use a mixed methodology. First, the article is mostly qualitative in nature, it builds upon desk research including laws and legislative text-analysis, meaning that legal and policy documents will be regarded as the primary sources the article is relying on. Necessarily, the legalistic method cannot be isolated from other methods, especially from presenting the societal context and the quantitative aspects which are complementary and interdependent for the adequate analysis of the law. Thus, the article is backed-up by statistical data which are both flow and stock data, including national and EUROSTAT data, which mirror the practical implementation of the law. The authors also attempt to review selected articles and research papers published in relation to the examined topic. The methodology is thereby also supplemented by doctrinal research.

3. Results

The overarching family-policy of the last decade shows encouraging results. Families, childrearing and marriages enjoy constitutional protection. Hungary may register a positive trend in all demographic indicators. The total fertility rate increased by 24%, resulting the highest increase among European Union Member States, marriages nearly doubled, whereby both the number of divorces and abortions decreased significantly. Contrary to trends observed in the developed world, the rate of children born within wedlock increased. These positive demographic results happened hand in hand with the increase of the female employment rate. Despite the fact that the number of women in childbearing ages decreased significantly in the last decade, more babies were born in 2020, than in 2010. The network of quality and affordable public nurseries enabling the better reconciliation of work and family life have been constantly enlarged. The financial possibilities of families raising children has improved significantly. Family related expenditure had been raised significantly to approximately twice the OECD average. The pro-family policies of Hungary were upheld and expanded during the Covid 19 crisis; these could not only mitigate, but also counteract the negative demographic side effects of the Pandemic, making Hungary the only European Union country where more babies were born in 2020, than in 2016-2019.

4. Discussion

4.1. Context-setting

The proportion of Europeans steadily declines within the world population. In 1960 the population of EU-27 made up about 12% of the world's population. That is down to about 6% today, and is projected to fall below 4% by 2070¹. As a result, in this new international order, the influence, competitiveness, economic strength and the room for manoeuvre of the ageing Europe are deteriorating.

¹ European Commission: Report on the Impact of Demographic Change. 17 June 2020, [demography_report_2020_n.pdf \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/~/media/10162020/10162020_demography_report_2020_n.pdf)

The most important factor nevertheless when creating a family-friendly country is concerning the perceived image of families in society

Recognizing these worrisome European tendencies, and being aware of the country's own demographic challenges, in 2010 Hungary decided to address these by supporting families. The focus of public policy has been reverted from the individual towards the community, and family has been anchored in the newly drafted Fundamental Law of the country as the basic building block of society.

4.2. Fundamentals of family policy

Hungary committed herself to building a country based on a comprehensive family policy, by mainstreaming and prioritising family issues. The Hungarian Government regards family policy as investment, as an investment into the wellbeing of families, as an investment into the preservation of the nation, and also as an investment into the sustainability of the social security schemes. Hungary believes in the mobilising effect of family policy, therefore, the eligibility of receiving most of the family support measures is linked to legitimate employment. In 2014 family affairs were separated from social affairs since the linkage of these two areas used to convey the message that having children equals poverty. The country is convinced that the main task of family policy is not combating poverty, but helping individuals to have as many children as they wish for. Nevertheless, family policy must also focus on underprivileged and disadvantaged families.

The family support system has been gradually expanded always taking into account the financial capabilities of the more and more sound Hungarian economy. Between 2010 and 2020 the government more than doubled the financial resources spent on family policy, which is currently 4,6% of our GDP, roughly twice the OECD average. The budget allocations for 2022 foresee a further increase to 6,2% of the GDP. The decisive factor is stability, as parents have to be certain that they can rely on the support for raising children at least throughout the upcoming two decades. The national family policy system, thanks to its complexity, assists families in various ways with an emphasis on offering each family an opportunity that is most suitable for them in terms of raising their children. The Hungarian system is unique, as a number of policy measures directed towards children are shaped in a way that the eligibility is granted from the foetal age: this is the case for family taxation, housing support, mortgage exemption for example.

4.3. Demographic tendencies

Similarly, to the previous decades, Hungarians continue to remain pro family and pro marriage. According to the research of our Institute from 2020, those in childbearing ages would like to have 2,37 children in average². In line with this outcome, in the past 10 years, the Hungarian family policy reached encouraging results: The fertility rate increased from 1.25 in 2010 to 1,55 in 2020 (Eurostat), which is the highest value since 1996. Since 2010, a favourable trend can be detected in terms of marriages and divorces. Marriages are at historical high (more than 67 300 in 2020), highest number since the eighties, divorces have decreased by 30%, abortions are at historic low (25 000 in 2020). Hungarian families could welcome 130 000 more new-borns due to the increase in fertility during the last 10 years. The proportion of babies born in wedlock increased by 11% since 2010. According to the recently published Human Fertility Database study of the Max Planck Institute the only European

Another element of the family support system is the child care benefit, which is granted to all mothers without eligibility testing from age 2 until the age 3 of the child

² Intergenerációs kutatás a reprodukciós kort meghaladott idősebb generáció és a reprodukciós korban lévő fiatalok körében, KINCS 2019. 10. oldal (www.koppmariaintezet.hu)

countries were Iceland and Hungary where despite the Corona pandemic more children were born, than in 2016-2019, proving that with extensive family policies, you can mitigate or even counteract the negative effects of the Corona Pandemic.

HUNGARY	2010	2020
Population	10 014 324	9 769 526
Number of Live Births	90 335	92 233
Total Fertility Rate	1,25	1,55
Number of Abortions	40 449	25 900
Number of Marriages	35 520	67 301
Number of Divorces	23 873	15 200
Female Employment (age 20-64)	54,6%	67%
Children born in wedlock	52%	61%

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office, Eurostat

In parallel, one may observe a significant increase of almost 13% in female employment as compared to 2010, only Malta could do better in the European Union. Total employment rate is at 75%, unemployment rate, is among the lowest in the EU at 4,2%. 850.000 more people are working and paying taxes in Hungary today than in 2010.

4.4. Work-life balance, a real option for childrearing

One of the largest achievements is, that Hungary provides a real option for young parents, mothers in particular, so that they can stay at home with their babies even for 3 years if they wish so and receive maternity/childrearing support, or return to the labour market part time or full time and place their children in publicly financed, available and high-quality nurseries. By these Hungary sends the key message that motherhood and childrearing are a value for the entire society, nation per se. In addition, in 2014 the child care allowance extra programme was introduced. Due to the programme, parents may take up employment full time or part time when their child becomes 6 months old without losing their eligibility for the child care allowance. The Hungarian Government's aim was to ensure that having

children does not exclude individuals from the labour market. A second aim was to make part time work pay as well, given that atypical working conditions, even part time employment is not yet very widely spread in our country. The COVID19 crisis certainly has significant effects on atypical working conditions, that will most probably fuel the employability of mothers with young children in particular.

4.5. Family taxation, the flagship of Hungarian family benefits

In accordance with the newly drafted fundamental law of Hungary a constantly growing number of measures aid families in their everyday life. The flagship of Hungary's family support system is the family tax benefit, introduced in 2011. It provides working parents with the opportunity to reduce their personal income tax. The amount of the reduction depends on the number of children. Due to this measure, the majority of families with 3 or more children do not have to pay any personal income tax in Hungary. In order to allow the full use of the tax relief for the lower income groups, the tax relief may be deducted from social security contribution payments as well. In the period of 2016-2019, the family tax benefit for families with two children has doubled. As of 2020 mothers with four or more children are exempted from paying any personal income tax throughout their career. As of 2022 Hungarians under the age of 25 will be exempted from paying personal income tax (income cap applies), this measure will help approximately 300 000 youngsters to start their career and family. The family tax relief left altogether 700 million EUR at the disposal of families in the last decade.

All mothers are eligible for a benefit called “maternity support”

4.6. Family benefits

All mothers are eligible for a benefit called “maternity support”, which is a one-off payment of approximately 200 € offered when the child is born. If the mother has had social security coverage before the child was born, infant care allowance is offered for half a year, amounting to 100% (as of 1st July 2021, previously 70%) of the salary earned prior to the child was born, no cap applies. By this increase, mothers giving birth to a new-born will be in a more favourable situation compared to those earning the same, but not receiving a child, as taxation of the infant care allowance is lower. Child care allowance is available until the child reaches the age of two. Its amount is 70% of the salary earned prior to the birth of the child, but is capped at 665€/ month. Another element of the family support system is the child care benefit, which is granted to all mothers without eligibility testing from age 2 until the age 3 of the child. The amount of the child care benefit is approximately 92 € per month.

One of the leading reasons why couples do not have as many children as they would desire is the significant postponement of childbirths. Hungary tries to address that by helping young families in various ways. One is that university studies are taken into account as social security contributing periods, despite the lack of earnings in these years, meaning that the full amount of family support is granted for young mothers and fathers who decide to have their first child during or right after their studies. Another measure targeted towards the younger generation is in connection with the student loans. The State reduces by 50% the student loans of mothers at the birth of their second child, and takes over the redemption of the entire outstanding amount at the arrival of their third child. By this measure the government would like to reduce the negative financial consequences of motherhood many well educated young women are afraid of.

It is furthermore important to mention the so-called Baby Bond, which enables parents to save money for their children with state support until they turn 18 years of age. These bonds also contribute to the favourable tendency, that Hungarians, and Hungarian families finance the national debt (Hungarian State Treasury, 2021).

As a result of the Government's measures, the family allowance includes two benefit types: child-raising benefit and schooling support. The child-raising benefit is granted for non-school-age children while the schooling support is given for school-age children or older children who continue their studies in institutions of public education, up to the child reaching 23 years of age. Schooling support is tied to school attendance, thereby incentivising families to keep their children in education. Since the introduction of this measure, absenteeism has been reduced by 64%.

4.7. Day-care for children, extensive nursery development

The timing of taking up employment after the birth of a child is strongly determined by the availability of day-care facilities for young children. The government has introduced some overarching reforms in this area as well. The conceptual transformation of the public day-care nursery system for children under the age of 3 aims to abolish the regional inequalities. The new system is more demand-driven, and gives families the opportunity to choose among the different new forms of day-care services. The number of public nursery day-care places has continuously increased by more than 30% in the last decade. The aim of the Government is to reach 70 000 places until 2022, that would address all demands. These public nurseries are available for a very modest contribution from the parents, making them affordable for all. From 2019 those parents who could not find a public nursery place for their children are entitled to a monthly contribution of 100€ towards the fee of a private nursery.

The program named "Women 40", an old age pension for women having a 40-year entitlement period without age restriction was introduced in 2011. The aim of this measure is to give an opportunity for grandmothers to provide active support to their children primarily in looking after their grandchildren.

4.8. Housing

According to our research, following physical and mental health and stable employment, adequate housing is the third most important factor in the decision of families about the number of their children. In 2015, the government introduced the system of housing allowance for families (CSOK), which is available for purchasing or building a new house or apartment and also for purchasing and enlarging used properties. Basically, the amount of the subsidy depends on the number of children. Families that are currently raising three or more children, or that undertake to raise at least three children in the future (including the children they already have) may receive a one-off in-cash support of approximately 33 000 € for a new house or apartment. In addition, they are eligible for another 47 000€ residential loan with a state-subsidised interest-rate. This cash support may even cover a significant part of the price of the apartment or house in question, making it a very significant incentive. One of the biggest results of CSOK can be attributed to the number of children undertaken, which by 2021 will exceed ten thousand. If the commitments made under

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the CSOK are fulfilled, the fertility level in the families using the CSOK will be well above 2.1, based on the data of the period under review (Papházi – Nyírádi - Pári, 2021).

Last year the Hungarian Government decided to extend the housing allowance for families with two children. These families may receive a support of approx. 8400€ for a new house. In addition, they are eligible for another approx. 33 000€ residential loan with a state-subsidised interest-rate. Red tape had been constantly reduced since the start of the programme. Social security contributions paid in other EU Member States and the UK are taken into account as well, in order to help mobile workers return to Hungary.

Starting in January 2021 the Government launched a significant housing programme in order to help families maintain their living standards throughout the COVID19 epidemic and in parallel boost the investment in the construction sector. The VAT of newly built houses will be reduced by 22% (27%-5%); the government will reimburse that 5% VAT as well for families purchasing such houses/apartments within the CSOK housing programme. The 4% levy of buying a house/apartment will be abolished for CSOK properties. Families building a two-generation house by creating an individual apartment in the attic will be eligible for the full amount of CSOK. Any family raising a child under 25 years of age will be eligible for 50% of the cost (maximum 8600 €) of any renovation work done on the apartment. The corresponding fees charged by the public notaries will be maximised as well. These overarching housing programmes not only help families with children but in parallel have a direct positive impact on the construction sector's growth and contribute to the growth of employment in this sector as well.

The State reduces by 50% the student loans of mothers at the birth of their second child

4.9. Poverty reduction

The exposure to the risk of poverty gradually increases with the number of children within a family. Therefore, social policy tools are implemented to make sure that having children does not constitute a risk of poverty. The Hungarian government has extended the opportunity for free or subsidised child catering. As of September 2015, free catering in nurseries and kindergartens is extended to almost 60% of children, because the measure does not stigmatise any child. In those families, where 3 or more children or disabled children live, or where the average income per capita is less than approximately 400€ monthly, parents do not have to pay for their children's catering. Free meals are also available during holiday periods. In the framework of the free supply of school textbooks, as of the academic year 2017/2018, primary school pupils receive their textbooks free of charge. The government introduced the so-called Elizabeth Programme to ensure that those in need also have holiday opportunities. The main target groups include pensioners, large families, persons with disabilities and children with a disadvantaged background. Closures due to the pandemic had been used for a complete modernisation of the facilities.

4.10. Transformation of mindset

The Hungarian government proclaimed 2018 as the Year of Families. With over 1,500 programmes and several hundred thousand participants, the subject has proven to be a huge success, showcasing that living in a family even in a large family is fun and actually perfectly normal. We believe that it is very important that we provide for a positive counter narrative against the negative public image of families broadcasted by many Media actors.

4.11. Family Protection Action Plan

The Hungarian government initiated a series of measures addressing many different situations of family life, “The Family Protection Action Plan”, came into effect in July 2019, and January 2020 with the overarching aim to reach the ideal 2.1 fertility rate until 2030.

- **Subsidy for young married couples:** any married couple, where the wife is between the ages of 18 and 40, is eligible for an interest-free loan of max. 30 000€. If the couple has a child, repayment will be suspended for 3 years at the time of the birth of the child; while the repayment will be suspended for another 3 years at the birth of a second child with 30% of the outstanding debt released. The entire remaining amount will be released at the birth of the third child. 190 000 applications clearly show the well targeted nature of this measure.
- **Extension of interest-subsidised housing loan to buyers of second-hand housing:** besides new apartments, second-hand housing is also covered by the favourable loan with 3% maximum interest rate, with an amount of 33000 € for 2 children or 47 000€ for 3 children, when opting for the CSOK subsidy. Social security contributions paid abroad are taken into account in order to attract back the young Hungarians working in the EU. The red tape of applications has been significantly reduced.
- **Expanding the debt relief scheme for mortgages at the arrival of children:** at the birth of second children, the government will deduct app. 3000€ from the mortgages of families and 8600€ at the birth of the third child (and another 3000€ in the case of further live births).
- **Personal income tax exemption for mothers with four or more children:** From 1 January 2020, all mothers who currently raise at least 4 children or raised 4 or more children during their lifetime are fully exempt from paying personal income tax until their retirement.
- **Car purchase support for large families:** As of 1 July 2019, families with 3 or more children may apply for a subsidy of 7000€ (but up to 50% of the purchase price) for the purchase of a new car with at least 7 seats.
- **Public nursery development program:** The Government has decided that the current 50,000 nursery places will be expanded to 70 000 by 2022, so that any parent with a child aged under 3 can place their child in a nursery if they wish to.
- **Introduction of the child care allowance for grandparents:** As of January 1, 2020, non-retired grandparents can become entitled to the child care allowance with similar conditions as the child-care benefit if they undertake to care for their grandchild at home instead of the parent(s) who work. In such cases, the grandparent would be entitled to the child care allowance instead of the parent to encourage them to participate more actively in caring for their grandchildren, thereby relieving the parents.

So far, an interest beyond any expectation has manifested. More than 510 000 applications prove that the set of measures correspond to the everyday needs of Hungarian families. This is entirely in line with the research of our Institute; as the vast majority of the respondents agreed that the measures can help Hungarian families in having a predictable and secure future in the long run. Whereby each possibility is highly supported, the most popular among them is the nursery development, and the

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housing programme according to the research of the Mária Kopp Institute. Some of the respondents even said that these measures changed their life, that they became more self-confident, and that they would not have had a child without these possibilities. It is favourable that more than half of the respondents said they would like to have a child in the next five years.

4.12. Assisting families throughout the pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government extended the eligibility period of the above-mentioned family benefits that would have expired during the emergency period for families with small children. A moratorium had been introduced to any credit instalment throughout the state of emergency, that is still applicable for those in need, namely, for parents rearing children and those, whose income had been reduced throughout the pandemic.

Contrary to what had been prophesied by many, family relations did not deteriorate throughout the Pandemic but rather strengthened. According to the research of KINCS, the epidemiological emergency strengthened relationships between family members, a quarter of respondents (24 percent) reported improvements, 71 percent have experienced no change, and only 4 percent felt their family relationships had deteriorated since the outbreak of emergency. Forty-five percent of people said they could now spend more time with their family members.

4.13. International pro-family activities

Hungary is convinced that family-friendliness shall not stop at the borders of the country. According to representative research³ done in cooperation with the Mária Kopp Institute for Demography and Families, Europeans wish to have on average more than 2 children, 91% regard family as important or highly important, whereby 82% would strengthen the family friendly mentality.

The Hungarian government biannually organises the Budapest Demographic Summits, these high-level gatherings provide ample opportunity for pro-family heads of states and governments, ministers, church-, Academia, Civil Society leaders to strengthen family values and learn from each other's best practices. The Mária Kopp Institute for Demography and Families established a professional Executive Network in 2019, in order to provide a platform for sincere exchange of experiences for pro-family decision makers and influencers from Europe and the wider international environment and to create an up-to-date, pro-family network with the aim of shaping European and international policies and trends.

We are grateful that the Institute for Advanced Family Studies of the Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, is an active member of the Network, and we can work jointly for families on the bilateral and European level as well.

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³ Family - Századvég (szazadvég.hu)

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