

# THE CURRENT 'BABY BOOM' IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND FAMILY POLICY<sup>1)</sup>

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**Abstract:** In the past four years, the Czech Republic experienced a rapid surge in the birth rate as well as total fertility from the level called extremely low to 1.44 children per woman. The author analyses the context of the recent development of reproductive behaviour, connected with a change in the character of family policy in the Czech Republic after 1990. She outlines the measures adopted within family policy since 2000 and examines their influence on the change in the population climate in the Czech Republic. She uses a normative approach which stresses the vital harmony between the preferences of the public and adopted measures.

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The effect of family policy on fertility continues to be an important subject of research. In fact, since the 1990s, as the differences between the fertility rates of European states have grown, and as some states have persistently experienced an extremely low (lowest-low) fertility rate, there has been a substantial increase in the number of studies focusing on the links between family policy measures and individual behaviour. The results of so-called micro-level studies have produced the more consistent findings and give evidence that a state's pro-natalist measures have an impact on fertility (*Neyer and Anderson 2007*). It is important to remember that this kind of research suffers from a number of methodological drawbacks, and one, for example, is the method used to conceptualise family policy. However, it is impossible within the scope of one short article to cover this problem in its full breadth. This article is based on the so-called normative approach, according to which patterns of family behaviour can be influenced by policy measures adopted by the state. The potential effect of these measures then primarily stems from the extent to which the adopted measures correspond to public expectations and to what extent people are willing to adapt their behaviour to the behavioural norm advanced by the state. At the same time, it is necessary to take into account that within the framework of a given family policy individual measures operate in conjunction with other, already existing or newly introduced measures. This article refers only to the most important changes that have occurred since the 1990s, which primarily involved changes affecting the financial support designated for families with children and the provision of child day-care.

## Trends in fertility and the conditions for fertility since 2000

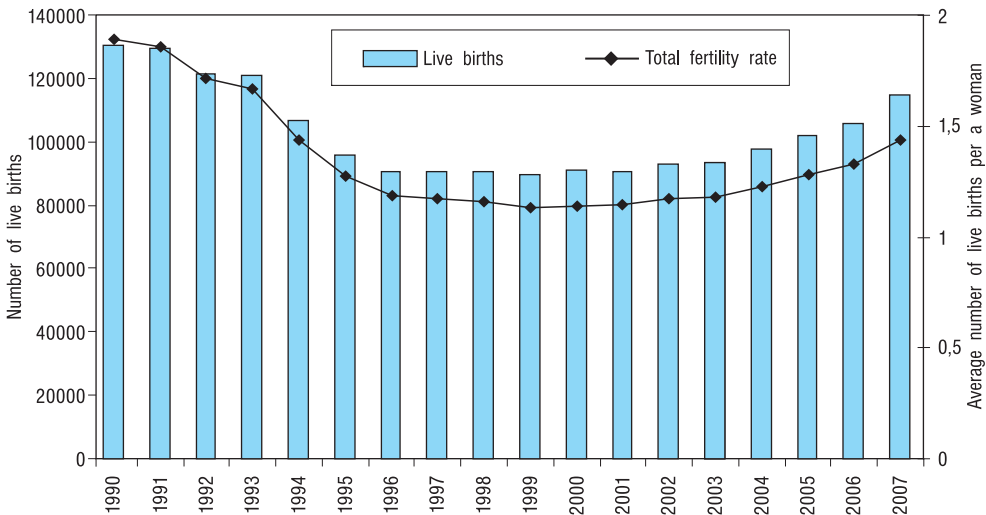
In the past four years there has been a substantial increase in the number of live-born children in the Czech Republic, often described by the media as a 'baby boom' (Fig. 1). Fertility began rising in 2002, but since 2005 the annual number of live-born children has clearly accelerated (*Štyglarová 2008*). According to the most recent information from the Czech Statis-

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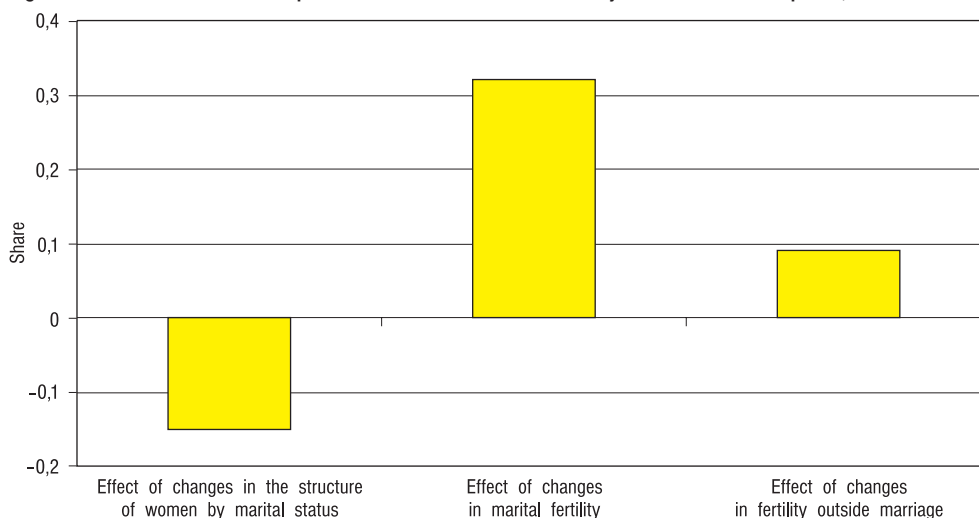
Figure 1 Development of live births and of the total fertility rate



tical Office, more children were born in the first quarter of 2008 than during the same period in 2007, yet the inter-year change was not as pronounced as it was at the start of the year 2007. So in 2008 it is possible to expect decelerated growth and in the next two years a halt to growth. An eventual decrease in the annual numbers of live-born children will be unavoidable because the number of women of reproductive age, in particular women aged 25–34, is gradually decreasing. Therefore, this recent increase is genuinely a population wave, the main cause of which, however, is not that women born in the large population cohorts in the 1970s are having children. Indirect standardisation showed that in 2007 only 1530 more children would have been born than in reality were the specific fertility measures of women from 2007 applied to the age structure of women in 2003. The generation of women born in the population wave of the 1970s were already reaching the age of highest fertility at the end of the 1990s. However, the larger number of women of reproductive age only became apparent in increased fertility intensity in the past four years. The effect of changes in the number of women of reproductive age as a result of the population wave of the 1970s will be more apparent in the near future, when the annual numbers of live-born children will decrease, even if total fertility rate remained unchanged. Nevertheless, the speed of the decrease in the number of live-born children will depend on the trend in total fertility rate.

For an entire decade total fertility rate in the Czech Republic was at level called lowest-low fertility, and for this reason the increase to 1.44 children per woman in 2007 warrants attention. Nevertheless, it still has not reached the level of 1.5 children per woman, which some demographers describe as critical in order to maintain the population balance (*Lutz and Skirbekk 2005*). The decomposition method indicates that the increase in total fertility rate by 0.26 between 2003 and 2007 was mostly influenced by the increase in marital fertility (Fig. 2). The trend in the structure of women by marital status worked against any increase in total fertility rate. The reproductive behaviour of the population in the Czech Republic changed dramatically compared to the start of the 1990s. The so-called timing effect is sometimes mentioned in this regard, where in total fertility rate remains at a low level owing to the shift in women's fertility to a later age (*Sobotka 2003; Rabušic 2006*). It is expected that fertility will return to a higher level on its own following an increase in the fertility intensity of older women. The

Figure 2 Contribution of three components to the increase in total fertility rate in the Czech Republic, 2003–2007



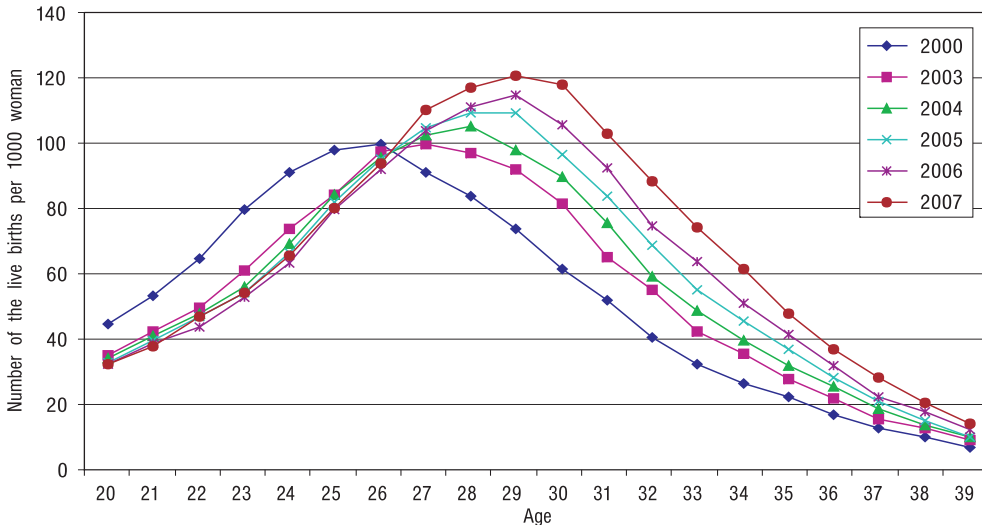
Note: The decomposition method is based on the following relationship:  $TFR = \sum f_x^m \cdot p_x^m + \sum f_x^n \cdot (1 - p_x^m)$  where  $f_x^m$  is marital fertility rate,  $f_x^n$  nonmarital fertility rate, and  $p_x^m$  proportion of married women.

compensational effect of the shift in fertility to a later age in the Czech Republic can be seen in the fact that since 2004 the fertility intensity of older women aged 33–37 has increased. These are women who were born in the first half of the 1970s, who had thus far been postponing having, in most cases, a second child, probably owing to unfavourable conditions. Higher fertility intensity has also been recorded since 2004 among younger women aged 28–30. The generation of women born in the second half of the 1970s is already showing higher fertility intensity (aged 25–29) than women born in the first half of the 1970s did at that age.

The recent increase in total fertility rate can thus be regarded as a result of the coincidence of two phenomena: the delayed compensation effect, and the emergence of a new regime of reproductive behaviour. Until 2003, the fertility curve, i.e. the distribution of fertility rates by age, was only moving towards a later age (Fig. 3). The increase in the fertility intensity of women around the age of 30, which has been apparent since 2004, is a distinct indicator of the formation of a new model, the so-called model of delayed fertility. In the period between 1990 and 2007 the peak of the fertility curve shifted by eight years to reach the age of 29. While women in the generation born in the first half of the 1970s can be regarded as the initiators of the changes in reproductive behaviour, women born in the second half of the 1970s are already behaving according to the new reproductive regime.

The question arises of whether we would be recording a similar increase in fertility intensity if in 2001–2005 the Czech Republic had not adopted a set of measures designed to support families with children as part of its family policy. The possible effect of these measures coincides strikingly in timing with the recent revival of the fertility rates of women in the Czech Republic. There are two points that can be mentioned that indicate a change in the population climate. First, the onset of compensation for the extremely low fertility recorded in the second half of the 1990s could have been expected around five years earlier, when women born in the population wave of the first half of the 1970s were reaching the age of 25–29. Second, it is found that when the right conditions are created for starting a family there are many women who probably have no intention of postponing motherhood until after they reach the age of 30. Of course, it is necessary to assess the improvement of living con-

Figure 3 Women's age-specific fertility rates



ditions for families in the Czech Republic in a wider context than merely the adoption of new family policy measures. The creation of a more favourable population climate has also been significantly influenced by recent economic growth<sup>2)</sup> and the development of housing policy measures and greater access to mortgage credit. This confirms the first hypothesis that without improving the conditions for starting a family it is not very likely that total fertility rate would have risen beyond 1.5 children per woman on its own (*Rychtaříková* 1999, 2000; *Kučera* 2001, 2002; *Širovátko* 2003; *Kocourková* 2006b).

### Family policy in the Czech Republic before and after 2000

Since the start of the 1990s Czech society has undergone a dramatic transformation that has affected many areas related to the living conditions of families with children and the factors that impact starting a family. Yet, until almost the end of the 1990s, Czech politicians paid little attention to family policy. Change only occurred once the Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) formed the government, in which the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, *Vladimír Špidla*, initially tried to resurrect some measures that had existed earlier, such as universal benefits. Only later were proposals for new measures put forth. From a political perspective the course of development of support for families over the past fifteen years can be described as unstable and primarily oriented towards strengthening financial support for low-income families with children. Most measures were adopted as asystemic steps<sup>3)</sup>, usually as the outcome of the often disparate approaches of the three main political parties – the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), the Social Democratic Party, and the Christian Democrats-Czech People's Party (KDU-ČSL). In the 1990s the discussions in expert circles focused on the very need for a family policy and were eventually replaced by debates about the character of family policy in the Czech Republic (cf. *Kuchařová* 2007). On the whole it is only in 2001–2006 that we can

<sup>2)</sup> After overcoming economic decline in 1997–1998 the economy of the Czech Republic began to grow continuously (*Jahoda and Kofroň* 2008). GDP has grown at an increasing pace since 2003 and in 2005 reached 6.1%. Wage trends responded to economic growth, as in the given period both nominal and real wages grew.

<sup>3)</sup> Many measures were not adopted as government initiatives but as MP initiatives.

begin to speak of any advancement of measures designed to support families with children, especially from the perspective of expanding opportunities for individual solutions. When ODS returned to office the primary objective was to cut back on state budget spending, and in 2008 that primarily affected benefits intended for families with children: the child allowance, the birth allowance, and the parental allowance.

Although the fertility rate fell sharply during the first half of the 1990s, the key period in its later development came in the second half of the 1990s. It was possible to explain the cut-backs to support for families at the start of the 1990s in relation to the fact that the system designed before 1989 was untenable in the new social conditions and that it was necessary to create a new system. However, this new system focused only on families in social need, and no new measures in support of families with children were adopted. The Czech Republic had to cope with economic difficulties, and there was no effective housing policy or family policy. Given the unfavourable conditions, in the late 1990s there was still no sign of any compensation for delayed fertility, despite the fact that such compensation might have been expected if the change in reproductive behaviour had occurred mainly as a result of the onset of new social conditions and the related valued changes among the young generation. It was only with the turn of the millennium that a gradual improvement in conditions occurred and subsequently there was some compensation for the previous low fertility among women at the age of highest fertility. It appears that young women who postponed motherhood in the 1990s began to have better conditions for starting a family once they reached the age of 33 and over. It can also be assumed that once women are older they become aware that their last chance to have a child is approaching, as most women want to have children.

A number of policy measures were introduced after 2000 and their main goal was to ensure financial assistance for families and support individual/parental care for children under the age of 3 within the family (Kocourková 2006a). Recent analyses have shown that the rise in income from employment had the biggest impact on the financial situation of households with children (Jahoda 2006). The Czech Republic employs two instruments to provide financial assistance to families with children: state social benefits and tax relief. However, a feature of development to date is that there is little interconnectedness between these two instruments and their impact on the financial situation of families is fragmented. The increase in the amount of some benefits – for instance, in 2001 the birth allowance increased from 6400 Czk to 8450 Czk and in 2006 to 17 500 – may have created the impression that social support for families increased, but the main trend in recent years has been a real decrease in benefits for children. The child allowance in particular has been affected, as it has become gradually targeted to just the lowest-income households (Jahoda and Kofroň 2007). The only exception is the parental allowance, which since 2005 has been the most important benefit paid to parents with children.

What proved to be a significant measure was the elimination of a cap on earnings for parents collecting a parental allowance, the objective of this being to increase the living standard of families and at the same time to help mothers to remain in contact with the employment sector (this measure came into effect on 1 January 2004). However, according to studies only less than one-fifth of mothers took advantage of this possibility in different (including short-time) forms. The parental allowance was also increased several times. The first important increase, by 40%, was passed on 1 May 2004. The next substantial increase was made in connection with the pre-election political-party contest, when effective 1 January 2007 a doubling of the parental allowance effective was passed, raising it to an amount equal to 40% of the average monthly wage in 2005. Another measure introduced was the extension of the amount of time a child can be in day-care without the parent losing entitlement to receive the parental allowance. Since 1 February 2006 a child over the age of 3 can be in day-care for up to four hours a day.

Unlike benefits targeting children, tax support for families with children has grown in significance in recent years<sup>4)</sup>. An important basic tax instrument is the child tax credit, which between 1993 and 2004 took the form of a tax deductible item for each child; in a progressive tax system that means greater effective support for higher-income taxpayers<sup>5)</sup>. From 2005 this was replaced with a tax advantage for each child, which can take the form of a tax allowance or a tax bonus of 6000 Czk per year per child raised. This targeted the financial support more towards low-income families because it resulted in a progressive income tax. At the same time, since 2005 joint taxation of spouses was introduced as an option, the objective being to strengthen the financial self-sufficiency of families. However, this modification, which gives an advantage to families in which the mother is either at home or has low income, applied for just three years<sup>6)</sup>. A new tax system has been in effect since 2008, which increases the tax allowance for children and a spouse living in the same household if their income does not exceed a certain limit. Joint taxation can no longer be used, but as *Höhne* (2008) notes, changes in the tax and benefits system introduced in 2008 may help increase the motivation to participate in the labour market, reduce dependency on social benefits, and indirectly help support the traditional family model.

In the first stage of social reform in the Czech Republic, a change was made to the system of parental leave. In conformity with the trend in Europe, the main objective of this reform was to make the duration of parental leave more flexible. Now parents can choose one of three parental-leave regimes differentiated by the duration of leave. The main change was the introduction of 'short-term' parental leave, according to which a higher allowance (11 400 Czk) is paid for a two-year period; this measure is designed for women who want to return to work earlier than the standard three-year period.<sup>7)</sup> The traditional parental allowance (7600 Czk) is paid for a period of three years. With long-term parental leave, 7600 Czk is paid for just 21 months and then 3800 Czk is paid for the next 48 months. In the next step of reform, the current government intends to expand the spectrum of care services for pre-school-age children, for instance, by supporting the development of in-company day-care and the option of personal care by a non-parental figure. However, a less auspicious change was the reduction of two benefits intended for families: the birth allowance and the child allowance. Since 1 January 2008 the birth allowance has been reduced to 13 000 Czk. Also, the range of parents eligible to receive the child allowance became smaller, and the child allowance is now more like a social benefit intended for families with low per-capita income. More than ever before, this benefit is now like a kind of 'poor benefit', and that could be reflected in an increased risk of child poverty and material deprivation (*Hora, Kofroň and Sirovátka* 2008). The changes that have been ushered in since 2008 through simultaneous tax and social reform have served more to exacerbate the instability of the conditions generated by the state for families with children and may be viewed negatively by the wider public (*Kocourková* 2007). Previous studies that have examined the relationship between financial support and the fertility rate have revealed that limiting already existing advantages more often has a stronger (negative) effect than the small, often negligible (positive) effect of increasing financial support for families.

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<sup>4)</sup> R. Bláha of the Czech Ministry of Finance wrote in a paper he presented at an international conference on family policy in 2006: '...following all sorts of legislative amendments benefiting the family it finally pays in the Czech Republic to start a family and have children, even from a tax perspective...', cited in proceedings from the conference 'Complex Family Policy as a Priority of the State – Is the Czech Republic Family-Friendly?', November 2006, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs Prague.

<sup>5)</sup> In 2004, 25 560 Czk per child was annually deductible.

<sup>6)</sup> In advanced countries it has been possible to observe somewhat of a departure from joint taxation, as in a long-term perspective it can have a negative impact on women's employment.

<sup>7)</sup> Only a parent whose financial assistance in maternity is equal to at least the amount of the parental allowance as calculated at this higher level, i.e. 380 Czk a day, is eligible to take up short-term leave.



The current level of support for families in the Czech Republic can be said to have reached the European standard. A specific feature of family policy in the Czech Republic remains its preference for personal parental care over other forms of care for children. The country has one of the longest periods of maternity and parental leave, but with an entitlement to average financial compensation during this period. Paternal leave has not yet been established in legislation, though a proposal for its introduction has already appeared in the plans of the current Minister of Labour and Social Affairs. Parental leave does not stipulate any 'quota' for fathers, i.e. a requirement that a certain amount of leave be taken by fathers. Although men in the Czech Republic have had the same entitlement to leave since 2001, they very rarely take advantage of it. Less than 2% of fathers in the Czech Republic take parental leave (Nešporová 2006). However, the nature of parental allowance in the Czech Republic is different from what would correspond to the allowance parents are entitled to in other European countries. Given that parents are entitled to work without any restrictions while collecting this allowance and can under certain conditions also place their child in day care, it is essentially a benefit for caring for children up to the age of 4. There has been a clear shift in the area of financial support away from family benefits and more towards tax benefits. Nevertheless, families still take advantage of tax credit options to less of an extent; for instance, it is not possible to deduct expenses for the education of a child. The child allowance, which used to be the most important benefit targeting families with children, has assumed the character of a social benefit<sup>8)</sup>. However, this trend is rather unique in Europe, as in most states the effort is to retain the universal character of this benefit (Kocourková 2004).

### **The problem with the normative character of family policy**

When studying the effect of family policy measures on the population's reproductive behaviour it is necessary to consider to what degree the adopted measures correspond to public expectations. Bourdieu (1966) points out that through its family policy the state can play a role in shaping certain norms of family behaviour. Family policy can also include measures that favour a certain type of family behaviour. The impact of these measures depends on how they are viewed by the public and to what extent people are willing to adapt their behaviour to the norm established by the given state. Since the 1990s the main trend in the EU has been towards transferring care for children up to the age of 3 partly outside the family. At the same time, individual EU Member States have proposed and gradually adopted measures aimed at furthering greater gender equality in the labour market and in childcare. In the Czech Republic, like most post-communist states, the change in political regime was followed by a swing towards more traditional values. The new governments in these states showed less support for gender equality and made little effort to promote economic activity among mothers with young children. Recent studies have shown that this largely conformed to public expectations. The public expressed strong support for financial benefits and a long period of parental leave, and, conversely, showed little interest in state childcare facilities for children up to the age of 3<sup>9)</sup>.

Since the start of the 1990s relatively strong emphasis has been put on moving childcare into the family in the Czech Republic, without any support for gender equality. Sirovátka and Bartáková (2008) claim that this was probably the replication or even the continuation of a model that had already been established under socialism. They conclude that the so-called re-

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<sup>8)</sup> M. Kudlová of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has said that out of the total state material support for families only 58% is provided in the form of family benefits, while 42% is provided to families owing to their low income, i.e. as poverty assistance. The share of expenditures on family policy has been decreasing in recent years, while the share of expenditures on poverty has been increasing.

<sup>9)</sup> The harmful effect of nurseries on the psychological development of children was identified back during their widespread development in the former Czechoslovakia: Nováková 1957; Landmeier and Matějček 1964).

familisation process enjoyed strong support within Czech society. The process entailed adherence to the traditional gender division of labour in the household, a strong preference for caring for children under the age of 3 at home, and little support for the economic activity of women with young children in the labour market. For this reason the Czech public preferred childcare-related financial compensation for families over support for women's participation in the labour market. Nevertheless, *Sirovátka* (2008) has shown that the general values of Czech society are to some degree at odds with traditional gender arrangements. For example, men and women with higher education prevalently favour an egalitarian family model. Gender arrangements are significantly influenced by the given institutional and structural context. For example, given the continued gender pay gap in the Czech Republic, family policy's focus on financial compensation seems the most appropriate solution. Only a departure from the traditional institutional context might contribute to a shift in preferences relating to family policy measures.

The Czech public still strongly favour various forms of financial support for families with children. It seems that this fact was underestimated in the 1990s and may have contributed to prolonging the unfavourable population climate. As some survey results have shown, measures adopted in 2001 and aimed at improving the conditions of parental leave largely conformed to the Czech public's expectations. For example, according to the results of the Population Policy Acceptance (PPA) survey in 2001 the majority of the population would most welcome measures aimed at improving the financial situation of families (*Kocourková* 2006b). One of the possible explanations for the recent increase in fertility intensity could be the greater financial support given to families with small children as a result of a simultaneous increase in the birth allowance, the introduction of the joint taxation of spouses, and the doubling of the parental allowance. Among families in which one parent was on parental leave for at least three years many may have experienced financial difficulties. In this context, the financial compensation of women on parental leave is viewed as much more important than the adoption of measures supporting the development of extra-family childcare.

Given that Czech society still favours traditional gender roles in the family, the reform of parental leave that came into effect in the Czech Republic on 1 January 2008 can be regarded as reasonable. This reform marked the start of the gradual transition from the model of long parental leave to a model more oriented towards women's employment. This constituted a rejection of a more radical approach that would have involved cutting the length of parental leave and introducing quotas for fathers. In terms of typology (*Wall* 2007), the newly introduced 'three-speed' system of parental leave in the Czech Republic brought it closer to a model 'oriented towards parental choice', which can be found in France, Norway, and Finland. A shorter period of paid parental leave and the prioritising of childcare outside the family, which is typical for Sweden, Ireland, Denmark, and Slovenia, appear to be less acceptable to the Czech public. Nevertheless, Germany, for instance, which until recently typically represented a parental leave model supportive of the traditional family, has headed down the 'Swedish' path<sup>10</sup>. Germany has long ranked among the countries with the lowest fertility rates. *Neyer and Andersson* (2007) note that one of the reasons for this was the persistent imbalance between development in society and the orientation of family policy. Until recently Germany supported the traditional male-breadwinner model of the family. As the rate of women's employment rose and the need for two incomes in the household grew stronger, and as consensual unions became more widespread, the nature of the state's family policy ceased to meet the expecta-

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<sup>10</sup> The length of parental leave in Germany was shortened in a Reform introduced in 2007. Parents now have the opportunity to decide whether to take one-year leave with financial compensation at 67% of their wages or two-year leave with financial compensation at 33.5% of previous wages. In addition, two months were added for fathers in the case of one-year leave and four-months in the case of two-year leave. At the same time steps were adopted towards fulfilling the Lisbon requirement that by 2013 one-third of children under the age of 3 should be in a day-care facility.



tions of young people. This discord was perceived as an obstacle that had a negative impact on the population climate, as the share of deliberately childless women grew.

One of the models currently being promoted at the EU level is 18-month parental leave, 6 months of which is for the mother and 6 months for the father, and in the other 6 months both parents can take up leave according as arranged between them. The argument is that only by setting quotas for men will any real change in the behaviour of parents come about. Nevertheless, the policy of the current government in the Czech Republic suggests that they have no intention of replacing the current practice of favouring individual childcare in the family with a new practice aimed at transferring care for children under the age of 3 outside the family and significantly involving fathers in caring for the family. The aim is more towards expanding the range of options to choose from and respecting the different strategies used to organise family life. According to the current Czech government, it should not be the aim of family policy to 'force' mothers to go back to work earlier at the expense of family life. Czech society still takes a critical view of institutional care for children up to the age of 3, owing to the situation before 1990, when employment was mandatory, so women were forced to leave very young children at a nursery so that they could work. A lack of knowledge about the specific features of the Czech environment and the country's historical context often lead foreign experts to make misguided conclusions in their recommendations for the Czech Republic<sup>11)</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

While in the 1990s the role of family policy was often called into question in the Czech Republic, and not just by representatives of right-wing politics but also some Czech experts, at present it occupies an important place in family policy. It is increasingly more apparent that the functioning of the family is a key issue for society. Family policy has gradually become an important issue in the electoral contest between political parties. The discussions about the pros and cons of family policy and how much the state should interfere in family life have been replaced with reflections about what approach family policy should take to support families. An important role in this was played by the adoption of the Concept of Family Policy in the Czech Republic in 2005. Its significance lies in the fact that it is the first explicitly formulated family policy in the Czech Republic and the first acknowledgement of the state's responsibility for creating the conditions for families with children. Although subsequently this Concept was partly revised by the newly elected right-wing government, its existence may help secure family policy a necessary level of stability.

Creating a stable pro-family environment should be the primary goal of family policy, because, as has been found in other European states, long-term, systematic attention to families with children by the state can positively influence the trend in fertility. Family policy's next steps should be directed towards the further development of proven instruments, adapting them to the new circumstances, and expanding the range of options for individual solutions. There is no need to experiment or to get rid of effective instruments and introduce new ones. It is better to start out from an existing, proven system and create the possibilities for other solutions. The question remains to what extent promoting a specific European model should be the objective and to what extent the specific circumstances in this state should be taken into account. The Czech government very deliberately refuses to submit to some EU requirements. In its view the model currently promoted at the EU level is very normative and aims to promote the Swedish model on a Europe-wide level.

Although the adopted concept of family policy in the Czech Republic is regarded as inter-ministerial, in institutional terms it falls within the scope of social policy, which to some ex-

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<sup>11)</sup> For example, Klasen and Launov (2003), based on their own analyses, one of the key factors behind the low fertility rate in the Czech Republic is the shortage of available places in institutional childcare.

tent limits its further development. Unlike social policy, which mainly targets low-income families, family policy ought to create a wide spectrum of instruments designed to support all families with children, regardless of their income level. The primary goals of family policy current include creating conditions that will allow parents to better combine work and family. In this context, it is difficult to comprehend the current government's decision to separate equal opportunity policy from family policy.

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