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The ‘Family 500+’ Program as a Legal Instrument for Stimulating the Demographic Policy of the Country: the Example of Poland

In 2016, the ‘Family 500+’ program was introduced into the Polish legal system. According to the assumptions of this program, the money paid to its participants should be used to partially cover the costs associated with meeting the necessities of life and raising a child. In addition to improving the situation of Polish families, the program also aims to increase the birth rate. Through the analysis of legal acts, legal scholars and reports, the authors of this Article try to answer whether this program has contributed to increasing the birth rate in Poland, as well as to improving the situation of Polish society and the country.

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KEYWORDS: demographic policy, legal instrument, ‘500+’ program, Poland

1 | Introduction

The ‘Family 500+’ program was introduced based on the Act of 11 February 2016 on state aid in raising children. The aim of this child-support benefit is to partially cover the expenses associated with raising a child, including taking care of it and meeting its necessities of life. Such material support provided by the state (in the form of cash or benefits in kind) is supposed to be a specific factor stimulating the development of families and improving the situation of the less affluent part of society. Regardless of its form, direct support provided by the state is supposed to be a factor that facilitates making the decision to have children, thus leading to an increase in the country’s population. Is it possible to conclude that this program has contributed to the improvement of demographic policy in Poland? Through the analysis of legal acts, doctrine and reports, the Authors try to show in this paper the positive and negative sides of the 500+ program, not only in the aspect of Polish society, but also in the aspect of condition of the Polish state.

2 | Family policy and the instruments of family policy in Poland in the situation of demographic decline: general issues

The ‘Family 500+’ program was introduced as the state’s response to the diagnosed problem of population decline and aging of the Polish society, as part of family policy which functions in the sphere of social policy. The terms „social policy” and „family policy” are differently defined in science, due to the extensive conceptual scope, as well as theoretical and methodological orientation of the authors^[1], who represent various social sciences: economics, law, philosophy or sociology. Therefore, presentation of a coherent, universal definition of „social policy” is not possible, however

¹ Cf. the positions presented by Adam Kurzynowski, *Polityka społeczna – podstawowe pojęcia i zakres* (Warszawa: Szkoła Główna Handlowa, 2001), 10; Marek Bednarz, *Polityka społeczna jako zaspokajanie podstawowych potrzeb społecznych* (Bydgoszcz: Kujawsko-Pomorska Szkoła Wyższa w Bydgoszczy, 2008), 7.

it seems that the systemic and functional approach is usually adopted, and it will be most adequate from the viewpoint of the issue discussed in this paper. Thus, the common element is an emphasis on the role of public authority (or rather the administrative apparatus, which is engaged in the implementation of social tasks) through indication of various instruments intended for influencing society, in order to improve the conditions of its functioning. Furthermore, it can be assumed that 'social policy' means the activity of a state, self-governments and non-governmental organisations, the objective of which is to improve the material situation, as well as to protect against life risks and to ensure equal opportunities in life for the weakest (in economic and social terms) groups in society^[2].

Family policy constitutes a component of social policy. It is focused on family and on activities aimed at improving its living conditions, as well as development. The term 'family policy' was used for the first time during European discussions on social policy, in relation to families and children. They have been started as early as in the 1940s^[3]. This term began to be identified with the government activities in the scope of children and their families, particularly a state policy aimed at influencing families with children or individuals in their family roles. Professor A. Kurzynowski defines „family policy” as „the entirety of legal standards, activities and measures undertaken by the state in order to create appropriate conditions for a family to form and to properly develop, as well as to fulfil all socially significant functions”^[4]. The paradigm of family policy is the society's need for children who are healthy, well-educated, and who could work efficiently in the future, be citizens and parents^[5]. The main object of state interest within the family policy is children and their development.

The primary condition for the existence and development of families is the maintenance of a positive birth rate (increase in the birth rate), which

² Julian Auleytner, Katarzyna Głąbicka-Auleytner, *Polityka społeczna pomiędzy opiekuńczością a pomocniczością* (Warszawa: Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna im. Janusza Korczaka, 2000), 16; Jolanta Supińska, *Dylematy polityki społecznej* (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Aspra-JR, 2014), 35.

³ Arkadiusz Durasiewicz, „Instrumenty polityki rodzinnej”, [in:] *Biuletyn Informacyjny Polityki Społecznej*, ed. Katarzyna Głąbicka (Warszawa: Polskie Towarzystwo Polityki Społecznej, 2009), 57.

⁴ Adam Kurzynowski, *Problemy rodziny w polityce społecznej, Centralny Program Badań Podstawowych 09.09 „Polityka Społeczna w Polsce”* (Warszawa: Ośrodek Badań Społecznych, 1991), 96.

⁵ Sheila B. Kamerman, „Rodzina: problemy teorii i polityki”, [in:] *O polityce rodzinnej: definicje, zasady, praktyka* (Warszawa: IPiSS, 1994), 12.

ensures the replacement of generations, and in the case of Polish society this rate is alarmingly low. Similarly to many other Western European countries, the main trends that shape the demographic situation of Poland include a decrease in childbearing (expressed by a low birth rate) and an increase in the average life expectancy of population. These two factors result in the aging of Polish society. While observing the current and predicted age structure, a decrease in the Polish population should be expected. Furthermore, foreign migration accelerates this process. At the same time, since 1997 it has reached values that characterize the phenomenon of low fertility (below 1.5), and since 2001 it has fluctuated around the value of 1.3. In 2014 the birth rate in Poland was 1.29. The birth rate value below the level of about 2.1 means that the population replacement process is below the simple replacement of generations^[6]. As a result, the aging of the population and the low natural increase of the population made it necessary for the public authorities to take systemic measures to stimulate the development of families by using various instruments of family policy.

From the viewpoint of legal sciences, it is necessary to emphasise that implementation of an effective family policy, including protection of family based on the Polish legal order, has been guaranteed in Article 18 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland^[7], which defines the principle of family protection as a superior legal and political principle. This principle is primarily materialised via legal solutions contained in the Family and Guardianship Code^[8]. This act regulates family and legal relations, including marriage, the rights and obligations of spouses, regulations for exercising parental authority or alimony obligation, while the fundamental principle – used by legal institutions as basis in the scope of the Family and Guardianship Code – is the principle of child’s welfare. Nevertheless, the literature argues that ‘the issue of interference of legal instruments in the functioning of family is a complex and delicate matter. Therefore, such interference is (and should be) implemented in a balanced manner, while taking into account the fundamental differences in the scope of solutions

⁶ Justification to the government draft act on state aid in raising children, Sejm paper no. 216, the Sejm of the Republic of Poland (8th term).

⁷ The Constitution of the Republic of Poland, Journal of Laws 1997, no. 78, item 483.

⁸ Act of 25 February 1964 – The Family and Guardianship Code, Journal of Laws 2020, item 1359, uniform text.

belonging to individual branches of law'^[9]. Development of family policy is (should be) based on a systemic approach and focused on establishing a system of material support for families, creating legal solutions that are conducive to family planning, increase in birth rate and raising children. These standards belong to the sphere of public law regulations that mainly constitute a part of the sphere of administrative law, which impose obligation on the state to create appropriate institutional structures, as well as to adopt adequate, diverse economic and legal instruments: family benefits and tax reliefs. Due to complex nature of the institutional family support system, it will not be the subject of detailed analysis in this paper^[10] and the attention will be focused on the system of family benefits.

Material support provided by the state (in the form of cash or benefits in kind) is supposed to be a specific factor stimulating the development of families and improving the situation of the less affluent part of society. Regardless of its form, direct support provided by the state is supposed to be a factor that facilitates making the decision to have children, thus leading to an increase in the country's population. Family benefits constitute the primary tools of family policy in Poland and they are mainly regulated in the Act of November 28, 2003 on Family Benefits^[11]. They are characterised by a series of functions: income function, compensatory function, redistributive function, equalising function and stimulating function^[12]. The system of family benefits assumes a uniform method for determining income criteria, which is based on the costs of living of families with children. Within the meaning of social security system structure, the main function of family benefits is to support families in the scope of costs of raising children.

⁹ Wojciech Michalski, Krystyna Krzekotowska, „Prawna ochrona rodziny (Próba ujęcia systemowego) *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny*, no. 1 (1980): 130.

¹⁰ On the subject of institutional system: Lucyna Prorok, *Polityka rodzinna w Polsce. Lata 1918–2020* (Łódź: Uniwersytet Łódzki, 2021), 141–188.

¹¹ Journal of Laws 2022, item 615, uniform text.

¹² Durasiewicz, *Instrumenty polityki rodzinnej*, 57.

3 | Initiators and main assumptions of the 'Family 500+' program

Nevertheless, it turns out that the above-mentioned extensive system of social benefits is not a sufficient motivator to make a decision in regard to family planning (increase in birth rate), which is clearly visible in the statistical data presented in the previous section of this paper. Therefore, a dilemma emerged in the scope of introduction of a new family benefit, which would be independent of the income criterion and focused on children.

Introduction of the „Family 500+” child-support benefit was the idea that emerged as part of election campaign of the ‘Law and Justice’ party during parliamentary elections in 2015. As one of the points of their election programs, the politicians of this party emphasised that their goal was to help Polish families, regardless of their financial situation. In her speeches, Beata Szydło declared that the „Family 500+” program is a systemic solution that is aimed at two main objectives: helping families (especially) with many children in a difficult financial situation and incentivising Polish families to have more children. At the same time, they refuted allegations of the opponents of this program, who argued that such expenditure may be an excessive cost for the state and may burden the budget. The initiators of this program presented it as an investment in development of the next generation – increasing the number of births, which in result will contribute to the economic and demographic improvement of the country. After the „Law and Justice” party won parliamentary elections, Prime Minister Beata Szydło delivered an exposé in the Polish Sejm, during which she emphasised the need for introduction of the so-called „good change”. A lot of her attention was devoted to the need to change Polish family policy, while indicating that the „Family 500+” program is a priority. During the vote of confidence in Beata Szydło’s government, 236 members of parliament supported the presented assumptions^[13].

The Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Policy prepared a draft law on state support for raising children, which introduced the „Family 500+” child support benefit, and presented it on October 27, 2015. The works on its implementation started on 1 December 2015 and the draft was submitted for

¹³ <https://pis.org.pl/aktualnosci/rzad-beaty-szydlo-uzyskal-wotum-zaufania>. [accessed: 9.06.2023].

public consultation. Every interested citizen could submit remarks, conclusions and opinions with the use of specially created e-mail address: rodzina500plus@kprm.gov.pl. In addition, in the period from January 15 to 22, 2016, field meetings were held in all provinces. The consultations ended on January 22, 2016^[14] and the draft act was submitted to the Sejm on February 1, 2016. The Act was adopted on February 11, 2016 with the support of 261 deputies, 43 deputies voted against and 140 deputies abstained. On February 12, 2016, the act was also passed by the Senate without any amendments with the support of 90 senators, 1 senator opposed and 23 abstentions. The law was signed by the President on February 17, 2016^[15].

The „Family 500+” program was introduced on the basis of the law of February 11, 2016, on the state aid in raising children^[16]. This Act specifies the conditions for acquiring the right to the benefit, as well as the rules for its granting. It was specified already in its introduction that this benefit is available mainly to the Polish citizens, however also to foreigners, provided that they meet appropriate requirements and reside within the territory of the Republic of Poland.

The program's concept is based on the assumption that this child-support benefit should cover the widest possible range of people who have children to support, by introducing equal criteria, which are not associated with financial situation of families. The purpose of this program has been determined in Article 4, section 1 of the above-mentioned act: „The purpose of this child-support benefit is to partially cover the costs associated with raising a child, including taking care of it and meeting the necessities of life of a child”. It is necessary to note that originally this postulate was not fully met, because the program did not cover the first child, if the income per person in a given family exceeded 800 PLN, and in the case of families with disabled children – 1,200 PLN. Introduction of this criterion was justified by economic issues, however it can be concluded that this was supposed to incentivise people to make a decision about having second child and subsequent children, in order to increase birth rate in the country.

¹⁴ Joanna Podgórska-Rykała, Aneta Zasuń, „Prawne instrumenty polityki rodzinnej na przykładzie świadczenia wychowawczego wprowadzonego programem „rodzina 500+” w gminie wiejskiej Lelów” *Roczniki Administracji i Prawa*, No. 1 (2018): 93.

¹⁵ <http://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm8.nsf/PrzebiegProc.xsp?nr=216>. [accessed: 9.05.2023].

¹⁶ Journal of Laws 2016, item 195.

As a result of the amendment to this Act introduced in 2019^[17] and while citing economic reasons once again^[18], Poland repealed the provisions regarding all solutions in the scope of income criterion, which entitled to this child-support benefit, that were directly related to income (e.g. income catalogue, amount of income criterion, loss and gain of income), as well as the provisions that were indirectly related to making the granting of this child-support benefit dependent on income, e.g. conditions concerning disability and definition of a family.

The introduction of the legal definition of a „child” in the legal glossary of the analyzed act (Article 2, section 5) resulted in the exclusion (from this program) of the children staying in socialization-educational care institutions, intervention-educational care institutions, specialized and therapeutic educational care institutions, regional therapeutic care institutions and interventional pre-adoption centers. The amendment to this Act introduced in 2019 removed the indicated gaps by repealing these provisions, and then the benefit was also granted to the above-mentioned children, however only from July 2019.

4 | Principles of granting the ‘Family 500+’ childcare benefit and organization of payment of funds

Presentation of the principles of the „Family 500+” program from the juridical point of view requires the presentation of normative conditions for granting the organization (structure) of the administrative apparatus involved in the process of distributing funds to entitled persons. Firstly, it should be noted that successive amendments to the act have eliminated the economic and income criteria in the family. It should be pointed out that the conditions for granting the benefit in the current form are only subjective.

Among the subjective premises indicated by the legislator, the following positive premises can be mentioned: having the status of a person entitled

¹⁷ Act of 26 April 2019 amending the Act on state aid in raising children and certain other acts, Journal of Laws 2019, item 924.

¹⁸ Justification to the draft act amending the Act on state aid in raising children, and amending certain other acts, Sejm paper no. 3387, the Sejm of the 8th term.

to receive the benefit, age of the child as well as the following negative premises: lack of circumstances specified in the act regarding the child. The subjective scope of the „Family 500+” childcare benefit is defined in Article 4 section 2 of the Act, according to which the persons entitled to the benefit are: mother, father, child’s actual guardian or child’s legal guardian, director of a social welfare home, foster family, person running a family orphanage, director of a care and educational facility, director of a regional care and therapy centre or the director of an intervention pre-adoption centre. The second criterion is the age of the child: the benefit is paid until the age of 18. The third criterion is the age of the child: the benefit is paid until the child reaches the age of 18. Negative conditions include the following: the child is married; the child is placed in an institution that provides 24-hour care; an adult child has a proven right to a care allowance for his or her own child; a family member abroad is entitled to a child benefit similar to the care allowance, unless the provisions on the coordination of social security systems or bilateral agreements on social security stipulate otherwise (Article 8 of the Act).

The wide range of options in the catalogue for guardians is intended primarily to ensure that the benefit is paid in cases where the person who actually takes care of the child has applied to the guardianship court for adoption of the child. In the event of a concurrent right of the parents, legal guardians of the child or actual guardians of the child to the childcare benefit, this benefit is paid to the parent, legal guardians of the child or actual guardians of the child who actually takes care of the child. If the child is cared for simultaneously by both parents, the child’s legal guardians or the child’s actual guardians, the childcare benefit is paid to the person who submits the application first. If the parents do not live together and the child lives with one of the parents for the first part of the month, and with the other parent for the second part of the month, then the childcare benefit is divided between the parents in proportion to the time the child lives with the given parent. If the child does not live in a common household with both parents, the childcare benefit is paid to the parent who looks after the child. If the competent authority has doubts as to who actually takes care of the child, it may ask the head of the social welfare centre to conduct a family background interview^[19].

¹⁹ Justification to the draft act amending the Act on state aid in raising children, Sejm paper no. 216, the Sejm of the 8th term.

The childcare benefit in question is a cash amount of PLN 500, paid monthly for a child up to the age of 18, i.e. PLN 6,000 per year. The benefit is granted by means of an administrative decision by the competent administration authority. Entitlement to the benefit is established for the period from June 1 to May 31 of the following year and is determined from the month in which the application is submitted until the end of this period, which allows the application to be submitted at any time during the 12-month period. From January 1, 2022, the benefit is paid cashless to the payment account number in the country or the number of the payment instrument issued in the country, indicated by the person applying for this benefit in the application.

Individual administrative proceedings concerning the determination and handling of cases in the field of granting and payment of benefits are considered by the competent administrative authorities at the request of a party. Until 2018, all cases were handled by the local authorities of the commune (head of commune/mayor/president) or voivodeship (marshal) competent for the place of residence of the beneficiary or applicant. As of January 1, 2018, the voivodes have been responsible for resolving matters relating to the childcare allowance in connection with the coordination of the security system^[20]. The voivodes took over and continued the proceedings conducted so far by the marshals of voivodships to determine the right to a childcare benefit provided in connection with the coordination of social security systems^[21]. As of January 1, 2022, the Social Insurance Institution shall conduct the proceedings concerning the child care allowance^[22]. With regard to matters related to the coordination of the social security system, the competent authorities are ZUS and the voivode. Supervision over the compliance of the activities of the Social Insurance Institution in the field of the implementation of the child care benefit with the applicable regulations is exercised by the minister competent for family affairs.

²⁰ Art.15 point 5 letter a of the Act of 7 July 2017 on changes to some acts related to the systems of supporting families (Journal of Laws from 2017, item 1428).

²¹ Marta Słowikowska in: *Ustawa o pomocy państwa w wychowywaniu dzieci. Komentarz, wyd. II*, ed. Jolanta Blicharz, Jadwiga Glumińska-Pawlic, Lidia Zacharko (Warszawa: LEX/el., 2019), art. 10.

²² Art. 10 amended by Art. 1 point 9 of the Act of 17 September 2021 (Journal of Laws from 2021, item 1981) amending, inter alia, the Act as per 1 January 2022.

5 | Impact of the child care benefit on Polish society: data analysis

The introduction of the „Family 500+” family benefit significantly improved the financial situation of families with children in Poland. In 2016, the program reached 2.7 million families and increased the total level of government cash support for families with children by as much as 140 per cent^[23]. Absolute and relative child poverty in Poland decreased in 2015 and 2019 from 9.0 per cent to 4.5 per cent and from 20.6 per cent to 16.2 per cent^[24], respectively. Family allowance has certainly contributed significantly to these reductions in child poverty^[25]. In the years immediately after the introduction of the „500+” program, a negative impact on the labour supply of mothers could be noticed^[26]. Although the program’s effect on family enlargement has not been thoroughly studied, there was no significant change in birth rates after the transfer was introduced^[27].

Reducing the extent of extreme poverty in Poland in recent years can be attributed to the good situation on the labour market (low unemployment, rising wages) as well as to many reforms supporting families. These include the introduction of a childcare benefit, but also the launch of the Good Start program, under which layettes are given to all students, the introduction of a supplementary benefit for people unable to live independently, a supplementary parental benefit (Mom 4+), or the so-called thirteenth pension, which goes to approx. 10 million pensioners. To this should be added the increase of income criteria and the indexation of the already existing benefits from the system of family benefits and social assistance, as well as the indexation and increase of the minimum old-age

²³ Michał Myck, Kajetan Trzciniński, „From Partial to Full Universality: The Family 500+ Program in Poland and its Labor Supply Implications” *ifo DICE Report*, No. 3 (2019), 36–44.

²⁴ file:///C:/Users/asus/Downloads/swiadczenia_na_rzecz_rodziny_w_2020_r.pdf. [accessed: 6.07.2023].

²⁵ Michał Brzeziński, Mateusz Najsztub, „The impact of »Family 500+« Program on Household Incomes, Poverty and Inequality” *Polityka Społeczna*, No. 1 (2017), 16–25; Jan Gromadzki, *Labour supply effects of a universal cash transfer*, *IBS Working Paper*, No. 2 (2021).

²⁶ Iga Magda, Aneta Kiełczewska, Nicola Brandt, „The Effect of Child Benefit on Female Labour Supply” *IZA Journal of Labour Policy*, No. 1 (2020): 1–18.

²⁷ Report of the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, 2021. file:///C:/Users/asus/Downloads/Raport%20Rodzina%20500+.pdf. [accessed: 5.07.2023].

and disability pension, the amount of which has increased by 42 per cent since 2015. One should also remember about changes in the tax system (including the introduction of the so-called solidarity levy, exemption from PIT for people under 26 with income not exceeding the tax threshold), or solutions related to the labour market – regular increase of the minimum wage or introduction of hourly rates for mandate contracts.

6 | Effects of the 500+ Program on the country: data analysis

The introduction of the „Family 500+” program has changed the state’s policy towards families. Since 2016, i.e. since the launch of the program, we have been talking about investing in the family, and state support not only has an aspect of dignity, but also allowed families to believe in themselves. Cash transfers for families contributed to i.e. to a significant reduction in extreme poverty. Reducing the extent of extreme poverty in Poland In 2019, the extent of extreme poverty fell to 4.2 per cent, the lowest level since 2007. The decrease in extreme poverty affected practically all socio-economic groups. However, the strongest was observed among children, single parents, families with many children, households with disabled children, households living on unearned sources, households of farmers and pensioners, as well as residents of the smallest towns and villages^[28].

The negative impact of the „Family 500+” program on professional activity is visible through insufficient flexibility (for employees) and the attractiveness of employment in Poland. On the public policy side, solutions are needed to improve the quality of jobs, their accessibility (public transport) and the profitability of professional activity (persistently high tax wedge for the lowest wages)^[29].

It is worth noting that from January 1, 2023, the service for 500+ was taken over by ZUS. The new system should be centralized and automated,

²⁸ <https://dziennikzachodni.pl/program-500-plus-aktywizuje-zawodowo-polakow-wyniki-badania-gus-zaskakuja-to-wbrew-dotychczasowym-analizom-i-ocenom/ar/c3-13779771>. [accessed: 9.07.2023].

²⁹ file:///C:/Users/asus/Downloads/press-release500-pluspdfraport500plusfinal.pdf I. Magda et al: Rodzina 500+ – ocen programu i propozycje zmian [Family 500+ – program evaluation and proposals of changes] 2018. [accessed: 9.07.2023].

which should affect the speed of the decision-making process. The change of the 500+ payer from social assistance to ZUS meant that assistance centres no longer had control over expenses in pathological families. From June 2023, all funds under this program will be paid by ZUS^[30].

Taking into account the above data, the authors of the Article concluded that, in addition to precise data, it is also necessary to analyze the behavior, feelings and attitudes of the Polish society towards the 500+ Program. What really gave the society financial support, whether it actually contributed to positive decisions about expanding the family, or maybe it was a trigger for negative opinions among Poles that it is a program that supports and deepens the pathology in families receiving the benefit.

There are often voices among the society regarding drinking money from the 500+ Program. So is it so? Well, it should be said that no, although it is known that this is not an unambiguous answer. By introducing the program, the legislator trusted the beneficiaries that they would spend the money in a reasonable way, so he resigned from controlling the expenses. It was not a stupid idea, especially if we imagine what such official control would look like and how much it would cost. Theoretically, part of the money can be spent on alcohol, after all, it is not marked money. The problem would arise when the beneficiaries would allocate significant sums from the program for stimulants. And here the power left a certain loophole. The Act on state aid in bringing up children (as this is the official name of the legal act establishing the 500+ program) gives the possibility of replacing a cash benefit with a benefit in kind (food, clothes, medicines, payment for language courses, crèche, swimming pool), if the relevant authorities there were signals about „drinking” money from the program. Usually this information is available to social workers. And it does happen sometimes. The annual percentage of replacing the 500+ with benefits in kind is 0.05%, so it is basically a negligible issue.

At the same time, it is worth noting another effect of the introduction of the „500+ benefit”, i.e. higher solvency of households. The initial lack of increase in consumption after the introduction of the child benefit is attributed to the willingness of families receiving the benefit to repay outstanding debts. Currently, after more than seven years of the program's operation, one fifth of the beneficiaries admit that thanks to the Family 500+ program they do not take loans or credits, another one fifth declare

³⁰ <https://natemat.pl/392653,500-przejal-zus-co-z-kontrola-wydatkow>. [accessed: 9.07.2023].

that thanks to this support they manage to pay their current liabilities without arrears. Importantly, as many as a quarter of the respondents admitted that they had the opportunity to accumulate savings, which was not possible before.

7 | Summary

From the point of view of the quality of public policy, the weakness of the program is the lack of consistency in what the program is trying to achieve. This makes both the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of the policy impossible to assess, as it is not clear what would be a success. However, from the point of view of party politics, broad and flexible goals are politically safer and more effective in terms of image.

The „Family 500+” program has improved the quality of life of many families, but there are no grounds to claim that it has significantly and permanently increased the fertility rate. The reduction in poverty turned out to be lower than expected and could have been achieved at a much lower cost. Thus, one of the goals of the program was not achieved, and the other – only to a certain extent (it is also necessary to emphasize that the goals set were very generally outlined, and in the declarations of politicians of the ruling party they changed over time). Apart from the low effectiveness of the program, the problem is the lack of transparency of the current system of financial support for families and the coexistence of three identical solutions (tax reliefs, family allowances, the „500+” benefit). The low redistribution of the „500+” benefit particularly affects single parents and families with children with disabilities. Spending PLN 22 billion annually on „500+” means that these funds cannot be used in other areas of public policy, potentially no less important for society in general and families with children in particular. Examples include: improving the functioning of health care or education (pre-school and school), supporting people with disabilities or building a long-term care system. There is no certainty that such an allocation of resources is in line with social preferences. Improving the effectiveness of systemic family support requires taking actions that should support the implementation of a coherent family policy, including increasing the efficiency and transparency of the introduced solutions.

The original assumptions of the program have been implemented only partially. The impact of the benefit on the demographic situation in Poland was negligible, and the economic effects were short-term – noticeable only in the period after the introduction or modification of the benefit. The clearly visible goal of the „500+ benefit”, which has been achieved, is to reduce child poverty. It seems, however, that this goal could be achieved with less resources – by profiling the aid so that it reaches those most in need³⁰. It should be borne in mind that a comprehensive analysis of the social and economic effects of the introduction of the Family 500+ program is hindered by the dynamic international situation in 2020–2022. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of war in Ukraine, together with the accompanying economic and humanitarian crisis, have a significant impact on statistical indicators and, as a result, significantly distort the interpretation of social phenomena in a broader perspective.

The respondents most often notice the positive impact of the Family 500 plus program on the budgets of households with children – the possibility of freer management of money by families receiving a child benefit (a total of 36% of respondents⁸ declare that they personally know the persons concerned or are in such a situation themselves) and a significant improvement in the situation of children from poor families (33% overall).

Organizations such as IBS or the Center for Economic Analyzes believe that it is not entirely clear what the program was really intended to serve. So he didn't have a clear goal to help him achieve. If we have a goal to achieve, we select the appropriate and most effective means to achieve it. So if the goal was to increase fertility, it could certainly be achieved with much less than the 40 billion a year. Meanwhile, 500+ has not even brought us closer to the replacement of generations.

It is clear that the 500+ program was a kind of „election sausage”. However, there is nothing wrong with this, because political parties win elections by putting forward demands that are either popular or not. In this perspective, literally every political proposal is an election sausage. This is how democracy works and very well, because thanks to this, various groups of citizens can pursue their interests.

With these reservations, in the final analysis, it is difficult to deny the absolutely groundbreaking role of the 500+ program in reducing poverty and improving the well-being of poorer households. Clearly, it would be better to have ideal, well-constructed and precisely targeted social programs. In an imperfect world, however, a program that improves the above-mentioned parameters is better than no program at all.

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