Family life in Europe

Results of recent surveys on Quality of life in Europe

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Introduction

Despite many changes in family structure and a growing trend towards individualisation, the family remains a cornerstone of European society in both old and new Member States. Recently, the debate about stronger and more coherent support for the family has received fresh impetus, crossing the traditional ideological dividing lines between the ‘left’ and ‘right’ in Europe. Both sides seem to agree on the need to strengthen the family unit through specific actions and programmes. Issues that continue to reinforce the dividing lines include whether to use a wider or narrower definition of family, whether to focus intervention on family structures and resources or exclusively on family resources, whether to support families with care responsibilities (children and the elderly) by promoting an effective work–life balance for women (i.e. by making it easier for women to work) or by supporting a male breadwinner approach (i.e. making it easier for women to remain in the home) and, finally, whether to focus reconciliation activities exclusively on women or at both men and women over the whole life course.

Social policy related to family issues in Europe faces key challenges based on the rapid economic, social, cultural and political changes in recent times. The main challenges are:

- Population decline and ageing
- Increased variety – and instability – of family arrangements
- New gender relationship or contract and its impact on family life
- Changed relationship between family and paid work
- Increased individualisation as a threat to intergenerational solidarity

The family – its arrangements, condition and support – is an important component in the design of a successful economic and social policy. It is important to seek to achieve:

- A higher quality of life for all
- Increased employment levels, especially for women and older workers
- A better gender balance
- More sustainable fertility levels
- Higher levels of social inclusion
- Improved coverage and quality of care for children and for the elderly
- A more cohesive society by avoiding a ‘war’ between the generations

However, despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of the family, family policies have in many countries a low status relative to other policy domains. Family policy is often the vehicle for the delivery of the objectives of other policy areas. As many family issues are regarded as private matters, family policy has to continually work out a fine balance between private and public responsibility. It is up to governments to decide whether to intervene in response to challenging family issues, what policy options are available, and finally how those responses should be

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used, resourced and implemented. As far as the European treaties are concerned, the European Union has no role as such in the development of an EU family policy. However, it plays an important role in the closely related policies on employment, care, social inclusion, modernisation of social protection and equal opportunities between men and women. More specifically on family policy as such, it can support an exchange of experiences and policy reflections for the mutual benefit of the Member States.

Based on two recent attitudinal surveys, which were conducted in 28 European countries, I wish to look at the expectations and values of citizens in the enlarged Europe. I will explore in particular the following issues:

- How important is the family for the perceived quality of life of Europeans?
- Is there a gap between the family size people aspire to and actually achieve and can this gap be addressed through policies supporting those who would like to have more children but feel that they can’t afford them?
- How do Europeans view care for the elderly within the family?
- Do we face a ‘generational war’ and a decline of intergenerational solidarity?
- What family types are most at risk of social inclusion?
- How great are the perceived difficulties of combining work and family?
- What should be the direction of family policy from the point of view of the citizens of Europe?
- What are common points and differences between the new and former Member States of the EU?

This analysis is based on two large-scale attitudinal surveys carried out in the 25 Member States and the 3 candidate countries (the latter comprising Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey and referred to hereafter as the CC 3). The first data set is a compilation of seven Eurobarometer studies (European Commission) on quality of life carried out between 1999 and 2002. Altogether more than 100,000 respondents are included. The second data set is based on the Foundation’s quality of life survey from autumn 2003. This survey provides data collected at the same point in time and using the same research instrument. Altogether 26,000 respondents are included in the latter survey. My talk today is the first public presentation of results from this survey.

**Quality of life and family**

Let us look first at how European citizens view the importance of family for their quality of life. Family is a key facet in a multi-dimensional concept of quality of life of Europeans. Having family support is regarded in the EU 15 (the 15 Member States pre-May 2004) as the third most important determinant of quality of life, coming after ‘good health’ and ‘sufficient income’ as the No.1 and No. 2 priorities. In the 10 new Member States (hereafter referred to as the NMS) and CC 3 it is considered to be the No.2 priority, on an equal footing with ‘sufficient income’.

Living with a partner is seen by 84% of the respondents in the NMS as an essential part of quality of life; in the EU 15 the figure is slightly lower at 79%. While in the NMS this is the number 2 priority, in the EU 15 it the number 7 priority. This is a first indication that family issues have a higher importance in the NMS than in the
Having children is seen as much less important as a prerequisite of quality of life, with 73% of persons in the NMS and under 60% (57%) in the EU 15 mentioning this item. Again, there is a relatively higher relevance of family issues in the NMS for quality of life.

How does satisfaction with family life rate? Europeans have a high relative and absolute satisfaction with the quality of their family life. For example, 84% in the NMS are ‘very satisfied’ and ‘satisfied’ with family life. The high degree of satisfaction with the quality of family life in the NMS helps to counterbalance the overall lower life satisfaction in these countries, which is negatively influenced by larger degrees of dissatisfaction with income, employment and the health care system. Family is therefore an important component in overall life satisfaction in the NMS.

**Conclusion 1:** For the citizens of Europe, good family relations are key requisites for ensuring quality of life. This is more related to the availability of family support and living in a partnership than to having children. Hence, it seems to be more related to the availability of positive outcomes of family life than to the long-term commitment to family via children. However, family appears on average to be more important in the new Member States than in the former Member States. A more detailed comparison reveals a similar importance of family in the NMS and in the southern Member States of the EU 15.

**Fertility aspirations**

Decreasing fertility is seen as a key policy challenge in Europe. The EU has a longstanding disadvantage in this regard vis-à-vis other major regions, especially the US where fertility is now 40% higher than in Europe. While it is possible that this is a temporary situation, there is concern that Europe may need concerted actions to raise birth rates. At the same time, the right to control one’s birth rate is regarded as a private matter.

In the EU 15 and NMS, there has been a decline in fertility rates in recent decades across all countries and country groupings. Within the 28 countries, Turkey is the exceptional case. Although its fertility rate is also declining, it still has a current total fertility rate of 2.6 births per women, which is 80% higher than the EU average.

The particular focus in this paper is on the fertility aspirations of women in the EU 25 with completed fertility aged 40 to 64. Their stated ideal fertility is 2.34, whereas their achieved fertility is 2.05. That amounts to a fertility gap of nearly 0.30%. Within the two country groupings, 55-60% of women achieve their ideal fertility, around a third under-attain and around 10% over-attain. In consequence, a third of women would be a possible target group for additional family support policies.

Under-attainment varies strongly according to educational levels. In the NMS and EU 15, over 40% of women with the highest level of education report fewer children than desired. Concerns are raised in this respect in some countries, for example in Germany, that the low birth rate among highly qualified women will have in the long
run a negative intergenerational effect on the standard of education of German children.

The high under-attainment would make highly qualified women a specific target for policy intervention. It can be assumed for this group that the provision of appropriate childcare provisions to support a ‘normal’ career path and a more even sharing of household responsibilities inside the family could play a greater role than the level of replacement income during parental leave or the level of child allowance.

**Conclusion 2:** Under-attainment exists, particularly for highly qualified women. However, the scope of policy intervention in this field, according to the research of Hantrais and others (2003, p.23), is limited: ‘Respondents did not accept public policies aimed at influencing directly family formation, size or structure, especially pro-natalist measures’, e.g. through the prohibition of abortion, making divorce difficult, promoting marriage, etc. It seems that the only positive, acceptable pro-natalist measures in a democratic society are those which open up options, reduce constraints, and not those which close down options or enforce a certain pattern of behavior. However, even when opening up options, one cannot be sure that the desired options will be chosen.

**Intergenerational solidarity**

Due to current demographic developments (decline in fertility and higher life expectancy) and to the financial constraints of the welfare state, European societies depend largely on family support for the provision of care for the elderly. This is particularly true in welfare regimes, which are strongly based on family solidarity or which are seriously financially constrained. Thus the question is, to what extent is intergenerational solidarity in family care alive, well and sustainable?

Intergenerational solidarity is also important in regard to the spread of the costs of care between the younger and the older generations. Is there a generational conflict between young and old, as is often pointed out, or is there a ‘fair’ sharing of the burden between the generations?

Analysis of this issue reveals a remarkably vital network of informal help throughout Europe. In the new Member States, roughly 25% of the respondents give some form of regular help to someone who is ill or dependent. In the EU 15, the figure is about 21%. The similar aggregate levels conceal somewhat different structures of help. In the NMS, help tend to be concentrated within private households and within the family system. On the other hand, EU 15 citizens are more active outside their private households and outside the kinship system than respondents in the NMS.

In both parts of Europe, the informal care activities of citizens peak at prime age in the middle of the life cycle. The level of support is almost as high among economically active persons as among pensioners or the unemployed. In this sense, people outside the labour force do not effectively lower the burden for working people who frequently have to juggle work and caring roles. This puts individual caregivers under considerable strain. Relieving economically active people of some of the care responsibilities or coordinating formal employment more effectively with the
informal care activities would be beneficial for both companies and workers. This is an issue often forgotten in the debate on work–life balance.

While care outside private households is mainly carried out by people of working age, home care for co-residents is frequently given by people over 60. Older people are even more active care-givers in the new Member States than in the EU 15. Their high activity level partly reflects the absence of effective formal care arrangements. In several of these countries, about one in five persons over 60 is occupied in giving care at home. Within the EU 15, only older people in Germany report a similarly high frequency of care responsibilities.

When Europeans are asked whether they would consider it good or bad if in the future working adults had to look after their elderly parents more, different opinions about care emerge. Whereas most EU 15 citizens favour the idea of ‘intimacy at a distance’, the citizens of the NMS tend to favour immediate mutual family support. Some 75% of NMS citizens advocate extended family support in the future, whereas only 59% of the EU 15 citizens support this view.

Throughout Europe, groups known to be the present or likely suppliers of care – women and younger persons – endorse the idea of family support to a similar or even higher degree than those who are the likely recipients of care. Women who give care more frequently than men advocate extended family responsibilities even more frequently than men. Surprisingly, a majority among younger people is in favour of extended family support in the future. In general, people who are caring for elderly persons tend to express positive views about extended family responsibilities.

**Conclusion 3:** The strength of family support is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can certainly help to unburden the welfare state and find new welfare mixes. On the other hand, it also puts a heavy dual burden on the shoulders of economically active persons especially on middle-aged women, who are now expected to remain longer in the labour market.

The strength of intergenerational support is evident when Europeans are asked who should pay for the care of elderly parents. The choice was between the options ‘their children’, ‘the elderly parents themselves’ and ‘the state or other public authorities’. In the NMS and EU 15 countries, older respondents tend to be more in favour of shifting the cost of care to elderly persons than younger persons. In 24 of the 25 European countries, shifting the burden of financing to the elderly is a more popular option among older than among younger respondents.

Older citizens are willing to shoulder their part of the cost of care, and do not advocate shifting the cost to the younger generation any more frequently than do the young themselves. The younger generation, in turn, seems to be willing to shoulder care tasks and to advocate extended family responsibilities even where they would have to carry the resulting burdens themselves.

**Conclusion 4:** The results reveal a much higher degree of intergenerational solidarity than reflected in the public debate on the ‘war between the generations’ and also a realistic view concerning a fair sharing of the care burden.
In the recent Foundation survey we looked more generally at perceived tensions or cleavages in regard to differences between the younger and older generations. Europeans in the EU 15 and in the 10 new Member States (NMS) give the generational cleavage a low importance: only around 15% declare there is much tension between young and old. In a range of five major societal cleavages (rich and poor; worker and management, etc) the generational divide is accorded the second last importance. In the EU 15, nearly half of the citizens stress racial and ethnic tensions as the most important cleavage, whereas in the NMS more than half of the population perceive strong tensions between rich and poor as the main dividing line in society.

**Conclusion 5:** Among 85% of the population in the former and new Member States, no strong generational conflicts are visible. The highest level of perceived generational conflict in all 25 countries can be found in Greece and France, at around a quarter of the population.

**Family and social inclusion**

EU policy puts strong emphasis on effective social inclusion through permanent and long-term involvement in paid employment over the life course. This is also supported by the results of our surveys, which show unambiguously that unemployed and people with financial difficulties are much more likely than the population at large to feel socially excluded. However, the absence of social support within or outside the family clearly adds to the feeling of marginalisation in a situation of economic deprivation. In short, lack of social support impacts on subjective feelings of exclusion to the same degree as various economic deprivation factors.

Our research analysed the relationship between five different factors that determine social integration and the perception of social exclusion. ‘Being part of the labour market’ and ‘having control over basic financial resources’ were included as socio-economic drivers of integration; ‘social network support outside the family’, ‘family integration’, and ‘perceived participation chances in society’ were included as social factors. The analysis confirmed that solvency problems and unemployment are aggravated in respect to social exclusion if they are accompanied by lack of family support or wider social support. It also shows that economic hardship has less effect on social inclusion when social buffers such as a well-functioning family network are available.

A more complex statistical multivariate analysis identifies the influence of each of the five factors on perceived social exclusion. In the NMS, ‘feeling left out of the family’ had the by far strongest effect on perceived social exclusion, followed by the other two social factors. Income has the lowest and the experience with unemployment has no statistically significant influence. This may signal the greater importance of the shadow economy in these countries, but it could also indicate that joblessness has a different psychological impact in societies with widespread and long-lasting unemployment and limited opportunities.

In the EU 15 we find a similar but nuanced result. Exclusion from family support and participation chances in society is of similar importance for perceived exclusion. The second difference is that unemployment has a lower but significant influence on the
feeling of social exclusion.

**Conclusion 6:** Family support is, alongside paid employment, the second pillar for social inclusion in Europe. Although participation in the labour market is certainly a crucial means of social inclusion, it is not sufficient on its own. Furthermore, participation in a meaningful web of relationships, particularly in relationships with one’s own family is crucial. Furthermore, families are often a significant means of financial support, particularly where the welfare state is weak.

The degree of social inclusion can also be measured through the perceived quality of society, which encompasses the evaluation of social institutions (e.g. the existing social security system) as well as the feeling of solidarity and trust between social groups and individuals. Without going into any detailed empirical results, the figures clearly identify two social risk groups that are in danger of feeling left out from the mainstream of society: single parents with young children and the unemployed. These two groups have by far the most critical attitudes towards society.

**Conclusion 7:** Not only the lack of family support, but being a one-parent family, increases significantly the risk of objective and perceived social exclusion. Social policy needs to be finely balanced in order to provide support for the risk group of one-parent families but without creating a long-term welfare dependency.

**Reconciling work and family life**

With respect to the reconciliation of work and family life, the main focus is on the question of how to improve sustainable labour supply through appropriate measures for improving the work–life balance mainly of women with children or elderly dependents. W. Adema from OECD will deal with this later. Let me briefly look at what are the perceived difficulties in reconciling work and family and what is the influence of working time arrangements in this respect.

Two indicators have been used: ‘coming back from work too tired to do household work’ and ‘having difficulties in fulfilling family responsibilities due to the amount of time spent on the job’. The following figures cover respondents who report these difficulties several times per week. Overall in the EU 15, 22% of employed persons report coming home from work too tired to work in the household. The lowest share is found in Austria with 12% and the highest in Greece with 29%. The figures for the NMS are slightly higher with an average of 29%, ranging from 22% in the Czech Republic to 47% in Latvia.

The number of respondents claiming difficulties in fulfilling their family responsibilities due to overworking is lower: 10% in the EU 15 and 15% in the NMS. Again there are wide variations within the 25 countries, ranging from 5% in Austria, Finland and the Netherlands to 27% in Latvia. Surprisingly, there is no significant gender difference in either country grouping.

As expected, respondents with children under three years of age have most problems fulfilling their family responsibilities. Creating a ratio on reported difficulties for these persons in comparison to all employed persons shows an increase in reported
difficulties of 40% for the EU 15 and 30% for the NMS. Some country results are exceptional, reflecting the public debate in those countries: German parents with small children report 3.4 times more difficulties than the average German employee and Austria parents find it two times more difficult to fulfill their family responsibilities. In the NMS, the highest difference is reported in Estonia (2.5 times) and the Czech Republic (2 times).

**Conclusion 8:** There is a general problem with work–life balance, ranging on average between 10% and 20% of the working population. Families with small children report significantly more problems and should be a key target group of policy measures.

What is the effect of working time on perceived difficulties in fulfilling family responsibilities? In both country groupings, the share of the working population which works long working hours (48 hours and plus) reports more than twice the number of difficulties in reconciling work and family responsibilities. In this respect, part-time work (20-34 hours per week) creates a better work–life balance only for women, as men working part-time do not differ from men in normal full-time work under 48 hours.

**Conclusion 9:** Very long working hours have a strong detrimental effect on the possibility to fulfill family responsibilities.

**Policy directions for families with children in Europe**

Finally, let me briefly report how the citizens of Europe consider what is the best way that future family policy in Europe can deal with the existing challenges? Family policy is defined as a coherent set of policies, which identifies the family unit as its target. It defines specific actions and programmes which aim to have an impact on family resources and family structures. Beside these core aspects, it also targets issues such as gender equality and intergenerational solidarity. It uses explicit/direct measures such as provision of child allowance, as well as indirect measures such as privileged access to housing for families with children.

The following question was asked: 'In order to improve life for families with children, which three of the following should the government make their priority?'

- Parental leave
- Childcare arrangements
- Benefits such as child allowance
- Benefits during parental leave
- Flexible working hours
- Availability of suitable accommodation
- Lowering the cost of education
- Tax advantages
- Reducing unemployment
- Available contraception

There is, however, an important caveat in the interpretation of the results of this question: The responses for the direction of improved family-related measures have to
take into consideration the current existing government provisions. For example, if there is a full coverage of childcare provisions, this policy measure may have less importance for the improvement of the situation of families. However, this works differently from one country to another: for example, the availability of childcare, which is of nearly equal level in Sweden and in France, has for the Swedish respondents the highest priority at 64% but for the French respondents only the fifth highest at 26%. In other words, the existing level of provisions has less influence on preferred policy measures to improve the situation than expected.

Let us first look at the results for the EU 15. Based on the public debate, the expected result would be that flexible working hours, childcare provisions and the provision of parental leave (duration and payment) are seen as the most important measures to improve the situation of families with children. While the importance of the first two measures is confirmed, it is astonishing that the respondents give by far the highest priority to the fight against unemployment as the most important measure to improve the situation of families. In 6 out of 15 former Member States it has the highest priority and in 12 out of 15 it is in the top three of relevant measures to support families. The level of child allowance, lowering the cost of education, the duration and level of benefits during parental leave are for most EU 15 citizens of minor importance in terms of improving life for families and children.

The NMS show a different pattern. Here the emphasis is much more on child allowances and the level of replacement income during parental leave, i.e. on measures covering costs related to the rearing of children. The fight against unemployment moves into a shared third position (in two countries it is the most important measure) together with initiatives to contain the costs of education of children. In other words, the fight against unemployment is relatively less important in the eyes of citizens of the NMS. However, flexible working time arrangements and available childcare provisions, which were high on the agenda of the citizens in the EU 15, play almost no role.

The question is, how do these overall results for the whole population compare with the point of view of families with children in Europe? Unfortunately, we can only analyse in more detail the results for the NMS. Surprisingly, the results for respondents under 50 years of age with children are nearly the same as for the whole population. The only major change is an even higher relative emphasis on the level of child allowance as the most important mean of support for families and children. In 6 of the 10 new Member States, the level of child allowance is regarded as the most important measure for family support.

The overall results for the EU 15 are also confirmed by a comprehensive DG Research (European Commission) project led by Linda Hantrais, which deals with policy responses to socio-economically determined family changes in an enlarged Europe. It concludes that public policy in general would appear to have a greater indirect influence on decisions taken about family life than do specific family policy measures. In the 8 of the EU 15 countries, which were included in this research, ‘public provision of benefits and services for families were secondary considerations in encouraging family formation, whereas a secure income from employment, affordable housing and a sufficient standard of living were widely seen as preconditions for raising children’ (p.27).
This research also confirms in part the results for the NMS when it concludes that ‘the reduction in the provision of benefits and services previously mediated through the workplace was perceived as a disincentive for family building’ (p.28). It differs, however, from our findings by putting more emphasis on access to employment as the number one priority.

**Conclusion 10:** The preferences regarding various policy measures to support family and children expressed by the citizens of Europe re-affirm the basic rationale of the European employment strategy: the reduction of unemployment and the increase in the employment rate being the best social policies for all, including families with children. In addition, citizens in the EU 15 stress the importance of flexible working hours and available childcare provisions. The citizens in the NMS have different priorities: government initiatives which primarily increase child-related income and reduce child-related costs.

**Conclusion**

I hope that this brief analysis provides some insights into important underlying issues for family policy in the new Europe of 25. For the citizens of Europe, family support is crucial in order to guarantee a good quality of life and social integration. The research confirms that the family is functioning well in many respects, providing an important buffer for individuals and for societies in times of major challenges and turmoil. It needs, however, support, protection and the re-design of its interfaces with other parts of society, in particular with paid work. It also needs protection against the effects of long working hours and stressful working conditions; support in financial terms and in the provision of social services; and a conceptual and realistic modernisation of its interfaces with other parts of society by developing, for example, more integrated policies which take into account the whole life course and not only life-phase specific effects of family-related initiatives.

**Reference**