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## **TOWARDS THE NEW SOCIAL POLICY: EUROPEANIZATION OF THE NATIONAL POLICY OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN**

### **Abstract**

The paper examines the policy of financial support for families with children as an integral part of social policy in Serbia. Its aim is to present and critically analyze the design, scope, and effectiveness of four key measures of the policy of financial support for families with children –maternity leave, parental allowance, child allowance, and preschool subsidies – and to compare it with contemporary European policy trends. The scientific significance of the paper lies in its contribution to understanding the transformation of the national family-oriented social policies in post-transition contexts and their political implications within social policy reforms. By integrating the political, economic, and social dimensions of financial support measures, it expands existing knowledge on how public policies address demographic challenges, gender equality,

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and child welfare. The focus is on the coverage and adequacy of targeted cash benefits as well as the development of the national design of parental leaves and its generosity in the process of harmonization with the standards of the European Union. The paper has the potential to inform evidence-based policymaking by offering recommendations for improving financial support measures, strengthening parental equality, and reducing child poverty. The comparative analysis with European Union policies highlights gaps and opportunities for policy harmonization, emphasizing the need for sustainable, inclusive, and investment-oriented approaches to the policy of financial support for families with children in Serbia.

**Keywords:** social policy, public policy, family support, child welfare, parental leave, child allowance, preschool subsidies

## INTRODUCTION – FAMILIES AND CHILDREN IN THE PUBLIC POLICIES

Policies of financial support for families with children are an important part of the social policy of each country. Traditionally, their main goals have been to encourage childbirths and to provide coverage for the risk of poverty and additional expenses associated with raising children, and over time, they expanded to empowering families through the provision of counseling and other services (Vuković 2009). At the same time, the achievements of these policies have come to include the economic independence of women and raising their employment rates, as well as promoting family-work balance. Of no less importance is the positioning of such policies within the framework of the so-called social investment paradigm, which does not comprehend benefits and services for families with children as a cost, but as an investment for the future and activation, along with the promotion of gender equality (Morgan 2012). Increasingly, policies of financial support for families with children have been coming into focus for decision-makers, but also for the general public, due to the perceived connection with the impact on birth rates and demographic trends characterized by decreased populations and their aging. In addition to modifying family dynamics and the aging, the change in the goals of supporting families with children is strongly determined by global economic competition, that

is, the resources available to states for their funding (Gurín and Hyun Kim 2025).

There are significant disagreements in theory and practice regarding the definition of the family, but also its role and place in the social structure in general, especially from a historical perspective. Personal and social importance make the family “a fundamental group in society deserving of protection” (Tryfonidou 2024, 19), whereas sociological considerations of its functions indicate the multiplicity and multiple layers of family roles and, at the same time, the need for support in performing roles and functions (Šućur-Janjetović and Rakanović Radonjić 2023). For many years, numerous changes have been noticeable in the family: it does not have to consist of both parents; parents do not have to be of the same sex, nor be married; children do not have to be biologically related to their parents; family members do not have to live in a common household, etc. (Archard 2024). All this resulted in a departure from the so-called nuclear family (consisting of a man and a woman with their biological, married children), which was at the center of the social policy throughout the post-war period. However, then, as now, the rights, obligations and duties of family members were regulated by means of family relationships, i.e. individuals have been exercising and retaining certain rights only through their status as a family member – “in most instances, legal texts employ terms that denote a familial relationship (e.g. ‘marriage’, ‘parent’, ‘child’, ‘descendant’) to determine whether individuals can derive rights or entitlements as a result of the relationship they maintain with another person. The courts are, therefore, more concerned with the interpretation of these terms than with determining the meaning of the notion of ‘family’” (Tryfonidou and Öberg 2024, 2).

Changes related to the world of the family and the recognition of their impact and significance have influenced, among other things, the transformation of the understanding of the rights and obligations of the child, by launching initiatives, at the global level, with the aim of conceptualizing a specific catalog of rights that would apply exclusively to children. As a result, the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 was created, one of the most significant international documents in the field of child rights and care, which was, among others, signed and ratified by the Republic of Serbia. This document introduced important innovations by defining the rights of the child, guided by his/her best interests and centering on the child, as well as prohibiting

discrimination against the child (Žegarac *et al.* 2021). Among other things, the Convention provides for the right of the child to social protection (Konvencija o pravima deteta [KOPD] 1989, Art. 26) and to a standard of living adequate for the child's development (KOPD 1989, Art. 27, para. 1). At the same time, it obliges states to provide support and assistance to parents in the exercise of this right of the child and provides for the provision of support measures by the state itself (KOPD 1989, Art. 27, para. 3).

The introductory part of the paper is followed by the description of the design of the policy of financial support for families with children in Serbia. After that, European Union documents of importance for this area are reviewed. The central part of the paper is the analysis of the comparability of the national and the EU policies, considering the need to harmonize national regulations with European ones, the effects of which are subject to further consideration in the paper.

## **POLICY OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN IN SERBIA**

In Serbia, the most significant influence on the current policy of financial support for families with children derives from the reforms implemented in the early 2000s. Currently, the policy is regulated by two key legal regulations: the Labor Law (Zakon o radu [ZR] 2005) and the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children (Zakon o finansijskoj podršci porodica sa decom [ZFPPD] 2017), along with their amendments. The most prominent forms of financial support for families with children, both generally and in Serbia, include wage compensation during maternity leave, parental allowance, child allowance, and preschool subsidies.

### **Wage compensation during work leave**

Combined maternity and childcare leave is provided for a total of one year for the first and second child, while for the third and each subsequent child, a duration of two years is guaranteed. Within the aforementioned leave, maternity leave lasts until three months from the date of childbirth, while the rest is leave from work for childcare. The legal formulation provides for the right of an employed woman to leave. An innovation is that the father of the child is entitled to leave

in cases of unemployment of the child's mother. In addition, the father is entitled to take maternity leave when the mother dies or abandons the child. This right may also be transferred if the mother is prevented from exercising it for a period of at least three months due to justifiable reasons, which include serving a prison sentence, serious illness, or other legally unspecified circumstances. The child's father also retains the separate right to take leave from work to care for the child (ZR 2005, Art. 94 and 94a). At the same time, the father has the right to paid leave from work for a total of up to seven working days during the year, including in the event of his wife giving birth (ZR 2005, Art. 77).

After the legal amendments in 2021, the amount of benefits during the leave was reduced by changing the rules for their calculation. The gradual reduction of the amount of the benefit depending on the length of employment before exercising the right to leave and the proposal that the maximum amount of the benefit be three times the average salary in Serbia were met with strong opposition from civil society organizations and the "Mothers are the Law" movement, especially intense during 2019. Certain legal corrections have been made, so that the base amount of the benefit is currently determined based on the sum of the monthly bases during the 18 months preceding the start of the leave, the maximum amount of the benefit cannot be more than five times the average wage, while the full amount of the benefit cannot be lower than the minimum wage (ZFPPD 2017, Art. 13 and 14). Another legal innovation is the introduction into the law of mothers who become employed after the birth of a child (ZFPPD 2017, Art. 12), as well as the inclusion of mothers (and fathers, in cases of mothers' incapacity) employed in so-called atypical forms. The above applies to other benefits in cases of, among other things, performing temporary and occasional jobs, as well as on the basis of a contract for work and on the basis of an author's contract (ZFPPD 2017, Art. 17). The amount of the benefit is calculated in the same way as the amount of benefit paid in cases of standard employment.

### **Parental allowances**

The right to parental allowance was introduced in 2002 (Vuković 2002). Until today, it has been largely transformed, but has retained its distinct characteristic of a population policy measure of universal coverage. It is currently exercised by the mother for the first, second,

third, and fourth child if she is directly caring for the child. The father may also exercise the right to parental allowance if the mother is a foreign citizen, is not alive, has abandoned the child, has been deprived of parental rights, or is prevented from caring for the child for objective reasons (ZFPPD 2017, Art. 22). The amounts of the benefits are fixed, but are conditioned by the order of birth of the child, and, with the exception of the first-born child, are paid in 24 (for the second child) or 120 equal monthly installments (for the third and fourth) (Table 1). In 2024, the benefit amounts ranged from 371,614 RSD for the first child, over 329,643 RSD for the second, and 1,977,861 RSD for the third, up to 2,966,792 RSD for the fourth (Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju [MBPD] 2024). Amendments to the law adopted at the end of 2024 apply to children born after January 1, 2024, when the amounts were increased for the first child to 500,000 RSD, and for the second to 600,000 RSD (Zakon o izmenama i dopunama Zakona o finansijskoj podršci porodici sa decom [ZIDZFPPD] 2024). These amendments put children born in early 2024 in a more favorable position than children born before the aforementioned amendments to the Law (ZIDZFPPD 2018).

*Table 1.* Nominal amounts of parental allowance and trends in the number of children, 2018–2024.

Year	2018.	2019.	2020.	2021.	2022.	2023.	2024.
Amount for the first child	39,898	99,800	103,020	106,412	321,900	345,398	371,614
Amount for the second child	156,017	239,520	247,249	255,391	285,544	306,388	329,643
Amount for the third child	280,818	1,437,120	1,483,494	1,532,346	1,713,264	1,838,332	1,977,861
Amount for the fourth child	374,420	2,155,680	2,225,242	2,298,519	2,569,896	2,757,498.	2,966,792

Number of born children	63,975	64,399	61,692	62,180	62,700	61,052	60,845
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Source: Authors

## Child allowances

The right to child allowance is a social policy measure aimed at poor families. Unlike parental allowance, it is linked to one of the parents who directly cares for the child. This right may include the first four children in the family, provided that it is linked to school attendance, and therefore it can be exercised by regular students up to the age of 20. Children with developmental or other disabilities, or children over whom parental rights have been extended by a court decision, may exercise the right to child allowance until they reach the age of 26 (ZFPPD 2017, Art. 26).

This type of cash benefit is granted in equal amounts, with the introduction of new measures starting in 2018, including a 30% increase for children in single-parent families and a 50% increase for children with developmental disabilities (ZFPPD 2017, Art. 33). This was followed by an increase of up to 80% for children who meet the conditions for an increase on multiple grounds (ZFPPD 2017, Art. 33). In 2024, the benefit amounts ranged from 4,120.55 RSD to 7,416.99 RSD (Table 2).

Table 2. Nominal amounts of child allowance, 2019–2024.

Year	2019.	2020.	2021.	2022.	2023.	2024.
For a child for whom the right has been exercised	2,994.00	3,047.94	3,084.43	3,326.47	3,829.86	4,120.55
For single-parent families and guardians	3,892.20	3,962.33	4,009.76	4,324.40	4,978.81	5,356.70

For parents of a child with developmental disabilities and a child with a disability and for a child who receives an allowance for assistance and care of another person	4,491.00	4,571.92	4,626.66	4,989.71	5,744.80	6,180.83
For a child who meets the conditions for an increase on several grounds	5,389.20	5,486.30	5,551.98	5,987.64	6,893.75	7,416.99

*Source:* Authors

### **Preschool subsidies**

Preschool care for children in Serbia is a key public service that is not limited to education; it is a comprehensive activity encompassing nurturing, nutrition, preventive health, and social protection for children up to school age (Zakon o predškolskom vaspitanju i obrazovanju [ZPVO] 2010; Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja [ZOSOV] 2017).

The financial responsibility for early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Serbia follows a decentralized funding model shared between central and local government. Local self-government units (LSUs) are primarily responsible for the operational financing of ECEC, being mandated to cover at least 80% of the economic cost per child for all activities (care, nutrition, and health protection), with the option to fund the cost entirely (100%) (ZOSOV 2017). The state retains direct financial responsibility for guaranteeing full reimbursement for the most vulnerable groups, such as children without parental care, those with disabilities, and recipients of cash social assistance (ZFPPD 2017). LSUs, however, are separately tasked with providing regressive subsidies

for children from other materially deprived families. These combined efforts reflect a significant investment, with approximately €1.4 billion allocated to financing ECEC in the Republic of Serbia between 2021 and 2023 (Državna revizorska institucija 2024).

As of 2006, free mandatory attendance of a preparatory preschool program for a period of at least 6 months was introduced for all children aged between five and a half to six and a half years. Initial evaluations showed that, despite this mandate, the smallest coverage remained among children from families most at risk of poverty (Pešikan i Ivić 2009). Following this, and due to the fact that many children could not be enrolled in public facilities (Republički zavod za statistiku [RZS] 2015), subsidized funding for private preschools was introduced in 2015 for children who could not be admitted to a state-run kindergarten (Skupština Grada Beograda 2/2015).

Despite these efforts, persistent challenges related to equity and coverage have been prominently highlighted. These issues include significant disparities in the overall coverage of children between different LSUs, as well as critically low inclusion rates for children from Roma settlements. Furthermore, LSUs often fail to develop short, high-quality diversified programs – a failure commonly attributed both to a lack of financial resources and a fundamental misunderstanding of the importance of these programs in enhancing overall coverage (Vlada Republike Srbije 2021).

## **EUROPEAN UNION REGULATIONS IN THE FIELD OF POLICY OF SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN**

Policy of family support and family policies in general are the responsibility of the Member States. Since the very foundation of the European Communities, the regulation relating to support for families with children at the Community level has been set within the framework of the right to free movement (Öberg 2024; Groussot, Petursson, and Loxa 2024; Perišić 2021). It was only in the 1980s that efforts at the Union level began to be observed, directed towards the creation of a Community family policy, and in 1989 four areas of common interest for the Member States were identified: “the reconciliation of family and professional obligations and the distribution of family responsibilities; support measures for specific groups of families; protection of the most

vulnerable families; and the spreading of the impact of Community policies on the family, in particular the protection of children” (Hantrais 2007, 103).

In 1992, the Maternity Leave Directive was adopted to provide for the protection of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth, for at least 14 weeks, with two mandatory weeks before and/or after the birth of a child (Directive 1992/85/EEC). Almost two decades later, in 2010, the Parental Leave Directive was adopted to define stronger requirements for leave for the birth of a child (whether own or adopted) and for the care of that child up to the age of eight, but not only for women. Men were also entitled to this right. This Directive defined the right to parental leave as an individual right and stipulated that it should last at least four months. It also stipulated that it is non-transferable, to promote equal opportunities and equal treatment between men and women. In order to encourage both parents to take time off work for the birth of a child, it also provides that at least one of the four months is non-transferable (Directive 2010/18/EU). Finally, the issue of parental leave has been regulated by the Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers, which was adopted in 2019. In order to achieve equality between men and women in terms of opportunities in the labor market and treatment at work, it has provided for an individual right to paternity leave, parental leave, and carers’ leave (Directive 2019/1158/EU). Paternity leave is defined as the absence of “the father or, where and to the extent recognized by national law, the equivalent other parent, at the birth of a child to care for the child,” and parental leave as absence “from work for parents, following the birth or adoption of a child, to care for the child” (Directive 2019/1158/EU, Art. 3). While the period of paternity leave is provided for 10 working days, the period of parental leave is provided for a minimum duration of four months, two of which cannot be transferred between parents. It has been established that the benefit provided for during paternity leave should be in an amount that would be at least equal to the amount that the employee would receive in the event of a break in work due to illness, and the benefit provided for during parental leave should be determined in an amount defined by the Member States or social partners, but in such a way as to encourage both parents to take it (Directive 2019/1158/EU).

With the exception of directives, which are the most commonly used instrument of secondary legislation in the field of the EU social policy, and which Member States are obliged to implement by ensuring

the fulfillment of the prescribed objectives, the issue of policy of support for families with children in the European Union also represents an important segment of the European Pillar of Social Rights, adopted in 2017. Namely, childcare and support for children are envisaged as a right within the third pillar titled social protection and inclusion. Childcare and support for children is defined in terms of the following aspects: “Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care and to quality care. Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from deprived families have the right to specific measures to promote equal opportunities” (EUR-lex 2017, Art. 11). Additionally, within the second pillar (fair working conditions), which provides for the right to a balance between private and professional life, the following is regulated: “parents and people with caring responsibilities have the right to appropriate leave, flexible working arrangements and access to care services” (EUR-lex 2017, Art. 9).

In the development of the EU social policy in the field of support for children and families with children, the European Commission Recommendation “Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage” represents a significant milestone (European Commission 2013/112/EU). The recommendation emphasizes the importance of enabling access to adequate resources through support for parental employment and a combination of cash benefits, support through social services, or assistance in kind, as well as ensuring access to quality and affordable services, such as early childhood education and care and healthcare.

### **COMPARATIVE VIEW: SERBIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION**

In the EU Member States, policies of financial support for families typically cover three main areas: cash benefits to families, parental leave, and early childhood development, education, and care services. As Mary Daly shows, financial support policies are most often focused on the family as a collective unit – assistance is allocated to parents, not directly to children, thus viewing children indirectly through the needs of the family (Daly 2020). When it comes to parental leave, she identifies a trend towards the increasing involvement of fathers, with the right to leave often not being transferable, which encourages their direct involvement in child care. In terms of early childhood

development services, Daly points out that childhood is seen as a key stage for investing in human capital, and children's early development and education are recognized as the basis for long-term social and economic goals (Daly 2020).

Compared to European Union Member States, the following trends are observed in Serbia: financial support is aimed at increasing family income, with a disproportionate increase in the amounts of financial support aimed at increasing the birth rate; absence from work for the purpose of childcare is a mandatory component of labor law in which the recognition of fathers' rights to this type of support in certain circumstances is observed, but it is not implemented to a greater extent precisely due to the current design (lack of transferability); children's stay in preschool facilities is recognized as a social investment that includes investing in increasing appropriate infrastructure and professional capacities for a greater coverage of children.

In Serbia, wage compensation during work leave for childcare purposes is regulated by labor legislation, namely by the part that regulates the protection of employees. This segment, along with the regulation protecting maternity, also includes the regulation on maternity leave and leave of absence from work for childcare purposes. At the same time, the law does not recognize the terminology of the European Union, such as the right to paternity leave and the right to parental leave. Employed mothers are the holders of this right, although fathers can also have it, but in cases that are still very traditionally regulated, as stated in the paper. The non-transferability of the right as such is therefore not contained in the legislation. A major step forward is represented by recent changes and the possibility of using this right by fathers in cases of a mother's unemployment. For a long time, due to the contributory logic of the system, unemployed mothers were excluded from the benefit system and relied on the rarely available options of occasional variable-amount benefits that exist in some LSUs.

Generosity in terms of the length of leave, comparable to former socialist countries which are today's EU member states, is accompanied by a high level of benefits during leave. This, however, in combination with the non-transferability of leave, leads to the fact that the legislation represents a strong lever that disincentivizes employers from hiring young women. Patriarchal norms in society, but also the optionality of paternity leave, lead to an extremely low number of fathers taking leave, with mothers predominantly exercising their rights. The unequal distribution

of household chores, including childcare responsibilities, which is also targeted by European regulations, has negative consequences for women's engagement in paid work in Serbia. This can also be illustrated by the reasons why women are outside the sphere of work. For example, in 2022, among the reasons why men and women work less than full-time employed, women were dominated by caring for children or other family members who cannot take care of themselves, with 93.7%, compared to 6.3% of men who cited this as a reason (RZS 2024).

The parental allowance was conceived as a population measure in Serbia, motivated by the fact that the reproductive norms of the population are characterized by low fertility rates, and that they need to be encouraged by monetary initiatives. In this regard, the expected results have largely been missing. In the ten-year period since the introduction of this measure (i.e., from 2002 to 2011), the fertility rate fell from 1.6 to 1.4, only to increase to 1.5 in 2019 and remained unchanged for the next two years (RZS 2022). After that, it increased to 1.63 in 2022, decreased to 1.61 in 2023, and then returned to the 2022 level (RZS 2025), which indicates fluctuating and unstable changes. As a result of concerns about Serbia's demographic future, innovative approaches were announced for the beginning of 2022, but no measures have been proposed in the meantime.

Instead of innovative measures, 2019 was marked by a jump in the amounts of parental allowance – the parental allowance for the first, third, and fourth child has been increasing several times compared to the previous year: 2.5 times for the first child and more than 5 times for the third and fourth child. In addition, despite the increase in the amount of parental allowance from 2019, in 2022, the one-time amount of parental allowance for the first child was increased three times (Perišić 2023). However, the above changes did not lead to a real increase in the number of newborn children on an annual basis. In the period from 2019 to 2024, slight fluctuations were recorded, so in 2019, 64,399 children were born, while in 2024, 60,845 were born (Table 3).

*Table 3.* Number of children born, 2019–2024.

Year	2019.	2020.	2021.	2022.	2023.	2024.
Number of children born	64,399	61,692	62,180	62,700	61,052	60,845

*Source:* Authors

Given that the means-test as the basis for exercising the right to parental allowance is set high, this benefit represents an almost universal population measure. At the same time, it represents the most generous monetary incentive (especially compared to the average salary in Serbia) and indicates that it is necessary to develop a number of additional mechanisms (apart from monetary ones) in order to encourage parents to change reproductive norms. Compared to our country, there is a wider range of models at the European Union level – from Scandinavian high-paying systems (Sweden, Norway), through flexible systems (Germany, Denmark), to countries with multi-year absences, but low benefits (Italy).

Child allowances, as a measure directed at low-income families, are designed to support only the poorest among the poor, with the eligibility threshold falling below both the at-risk-of-poverty line and even the absolute poverty line. Making the exercise of the right conditional on school attendance and limiting the right to four children per family is the subject of frequent criticism in society, primarily taking into account that Roma families, who are most exposed to poverty, have more than four children and face numerous obstacles to education.

The coverage of children with child allowance is continuously declining – in 2019, it covered 226,289 children, but in 2020 it decreased by 13 percentage points, and in 2021 by an additional 10 percentage points, covering 175,769 children (RZS n.d. a). According to data for 2023, the number of child benefit beneficiaries fell to 148,407 (RZS n.d. a). The number of beneficiaries of the increased child allowance has increased slightly, from 51,268 in 2022 to 52,391 in 2023 (RZS n.d. a). Despite the right to child allowance, children in Serbia represent the age group that is most and above average exposed to poverty.

The nominal value of the child allowance is indexed twice a year. Looking at the ratio of the nominal and real amount of child allowance in the period from 2018 to 2024, it is noted that inflation is growing faster, so the real purchasing power of the allowance is significantly decreasing. Thus, the real value of child allowance in 2024 is about 33.8% lower than its nominal amount (Table 4).

Table 4. Nominal and real value of child allowance, 2018–2024.

Year	HICP	Nominal value	Real value
2018.	106.8	2,788.56	2,611.01
2019.	108.8	3,044.90	2,798.62
2020.	110.7	3,090.61	2,791.88
2021.	115.2	3,192.39	2,771.17
2022.	128.7	3,569.30	2,773.35
2023.	144.2	4,059.65	2,815.29
2024.	151.1	4,215.32	2,789.76

Source: Authors

Although child allowance in Serbia is granted per child, so families with multiple children can receive a higher total amount, its adequacy remains limited when compared to the real cost of living. Using the OECD equivalence scale, it is estimated that the minimum needs of a family of four (two adults and two children) in December 2024 amount to around 64,017 RSD, while for a family of five (with three children) it amounts to around 73,162 RSD (Authors' calculation based on three-person household data from MUST, 2025). At the same time, the total amounts of child allowance for two and three children (8,241 and 12,361 RSD) cover only 12.8% and 16.9% of the minimum consumer basket, respectively. These data indicate that, although child allowance can alleviate the financial burden in families with multiple children, its role remains symbolic in terms of meeting basic living needs, which calls into question its real function in the fight against child poverty.

Finally, the coverage of children aged 0 to 3 in preschool education is increasing, but still amounts to a modest 39% in 2023 (RZS n.d. b). The coverage of children in the mandatory one-year program, before starting school, was 97.3% in the same year (RZS n.d. b). Although the overall ECEC attendance rate for children aged 36–59 months saw a significant increase from 50% in 2014 to 61% in 2019, persistent inequities remain a serious concern (UNICEF and Svetska banka 2022). Specifically, only 10.5% of children from the poorest wealth quintile and a mere 7% of children from the Roma population are enrolled in these programs (UNICEF and Svetska banka 2022). This disparity is primarily

driven by an uneven distribution of preschool facilities, high costs, and significant differences in accessibility between urban and non-urban areas (UNICEF and Svetska banka 2022).

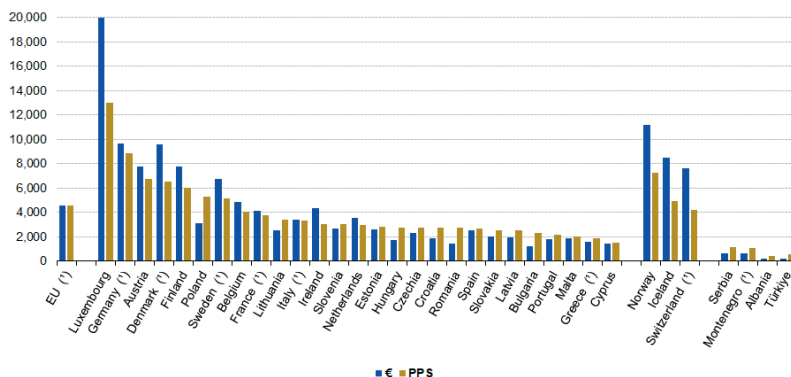
Improving ECEC in Serbia as a priority in the Reform Agenda of the Republic of Serbia from 2024, which represents a key strategic document for accelerating reforms on the path to membership in the European Union, corresponds to the strategic direction of the European Union in the field of education. The Agenda pays special attention to the development of infrastructure for ECEC, and out of a total of eight indicators in the field of education, two are directly focused on early development, education, and childcare – increasing the coverage of children up to 3 years of age and children aged 3 to 5.5 years in preschool education. The document states that Serbia still lags behind the EU average in preschool attendance rates, and one of the key goals is to increase coverage in order to improve the educational foundation and reduce inequalities at an early age. At the same time, the Agenda also highlights the importance of preschool education for gender equality, as greater coverage can contribute to increasing female participation in the labor market, thereby improving their social and economic position. However, girls are still underrepresented in the system, accounting for only 48.5% of enrolled children (Vlada Republike Srbije 2024). It is critically highlighted that preschool education in Serbia is still too often seen as a childcare system, rather than as a key foundation of the education system and an instrument of social and economic transformation (Vlada Republike Srbije 2024). These national priorities largely reflect the European strategic framework established by the 2021 EU Council Resolution, which defines the objectives of European education and training policy until 2030. Within the framework of that document, a goal was established (also known as the Barcelona Goal) that at least 96% of children aged three years and up to the start of compulsory primary education be included in the early childhood education and care system (Council of the European Union 2021/C 66/01).

Finally, developed with the aim of international comparability, the European System of Integrated Social Protection Statistics (ESSPROS) allows for the comparison of European countries' expenditure on financial support and in-kind benefits aimed at families and children. The function "family/children" within the ESSPROS system includes financial support to households for raising children, financial assistance

to persons supporting relatives (not only children), as well as social services intended to support and protect the family, especially children. According to the ESSPROS classification, expenditure on family and children includes periodic cash benefits: (1) income maintenance in the event of the birth of a child, (2) benefits during parental leave, (3) child and family allowances and (4) other periodic payments; in-kind benefits: (1) day care for children, (2) accommodation, (3) home help and (4) other forms of assistance; lump sum cash benefits include three categories: (1) birth allowance, (2) parental leave benefits and (3) other lump sum payments (Eurostat 2022a). The largest share of allocations in the EU is directed towards child and family allowances (42.6% of total expenditure), and it is the most dominant category in 18 EU Member States (Eurostat 2024). Child care costs account for 25.2% of total expenditure on family and child support and are the second most common type of support in the EU (Eurostat 2024). In countries such as Finland, Denmark, Spain, Sweden, Slovenia, and Croatia, they account for the largest share of expenditure on families and children (Eurostat 2024). One-off cash benefits, although present in most countries, account for a very small share of total expenditure, each individually less than 2% of the total amount at the EU level (Eurostat 2024).

For the purposes of international comparison of allocations for family and child support, the average amount of public spending per child, i.e., per person under 18 years of age, can be used. This indicator enables direct comparison between countries, whereby purchasing power standard (PPS) is applied instead of nominal euro values in order to eliminate price level differences. According to Eurostat data, in 2022, the average allocation in the European Union was 4.598 PPS per child, while Serbia allocated only 1.173 PPS, which indicates a significantly lower level of public financial support for families with children compared to the European average. In Germany, for example, the allocation was 8.881 PPS per child, almost eight times more than in Serbia. It should be noted that for some countries, the reported figures may overestimate the actual level of expenditure per child, as they may include support for children over 18 or other dependents (Eurostat 2024).

Chart 1. Family and child expenditure per child, 2022.



Source: Eurostat 2022b

## CONCLUSION – THINKING ON FURTHER POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Globalization and intense competition, demographic change and migration, increasing inequalities and social spending, are some of the challenges that modern social policies face and need to respond to. Based on the assumption that some of these responses are more effective if coordinated at the international and regional levels, numerous nation-states have begun to redesign their own social policies. To a large extent, the new designs have begun to rely on the principles of personal responsibility of the individual, a limited role of the state in protecting the population, etc. The global economic and financial crisis of 2007, the migration “crisis” of 2015, and the health crisis caused by COVID-19 put under scrutiny austerity and reductions in the public sector, the withdrawal of social functions from states, and ultimately point to the extremely fragile, yet central role of families in ensuring child welfare. In the context of overcoming the consequences of these changes and crises, the intensity and dynamics with which they unfold, it is necessary to further strengthen and ensure the coordinated activities of the state, local communities, and the non-governmental sector, as well as to encourage intersectoral cooperation. In this regard, support measures for families with children, including financial measures, are particularly important.

The pre-transition legacy of contemporary measures to support families with children in Serbia is very influential even today. Despite its numerous shortcomings, which primarily relate to the traditional conceptualization of the role of women-mothers and the suppression of fathers from the sphere of parenthood encouraged by the state with its policies and measures, it certainly represents a good foundation that needs to be built upon. Positive improvements were lacking during the transition period. To the extent that family policy was in line with pro-natalist measures, it was developed. However, once again, true emancipation of women was lacking, and the opportunity for fathers to gain their place alongside newborns was missed. Therefore, it is important to implement legislative changes that would include the non-transferable right of parents to leave during childcare. The experiences of individual EU member states suggest that many of them have only relatively recently introduced paternity leave, in the sense that Serbia has realistic possibilities for its introduction. However, it seems that there are no voices in society advocating the introduction of non-transferable paternity leave. The same applies to parental leave. However, a step has been taken by adopting regulations on the possibility of fathers taking leave if the mother is unemployed. The fact that the number of fathers taking leave, when recorded at all, is extremely low is illustrative.

Improving national measures of financial support for families with children requires broad consultative and participatory approaches. The reason for this is the need to create an environment that would be supportive for families with children and empower parents to care for their children. Of no less importance is reaching a social agreement on the ways in which the state should and can encourage and “educate” about parenting styles, about including both parents in the child’s world from the earliest age, and overcoming family, gender, and other stereotypes. In this sense, it would not be good to lower the existing national standards related to mothers. On the contrary, they should be further strengthened, with a corresponding substantial redesign of paternity and parental leave. A desirable direction of development would be to adopt regulations on a fairer distribution of childcare responsibilities and the introduction of rights that are not transferable from one parent to another, as well as increasing the coverage of children in preschool facilities. Improving the system of subsidies for children in preschool facilities should be a complementary policy direction. Fairer and more generous child allowances, however, should be an equally important segment of future reforms.

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## **КА НОВОЈ СОЦИЈАЛНОЈ ПОЛИТИЦИ: ЕВРОПЕИЗАЦИЈА НАЦИОНАЛНЕ ПОЛИТИКЕ ФИНАНСИЈСКЕ ПОДРШКЕ ПОРОДИЦАМА СА ДЕЦОМ**

### **Резиме**

У овом раду тематизује се политика финансијске подршке породицама са децом, с обзиром на њен значај у оквирима националне социјалне политике и потребу за усклађивањем са европским стандардима. У уводном делу рада нагласак је на еволуцији циљева породичних политика, из аспекта теорије и праксе: од подстицања рађања и заштите од сиромаштва до промовисања усклађивања радних и породичних обавеза и економског оснаживања жена. Посебан нагласак је на улози социјалних инвестиција и променама концепата породице и родитељства, уз уважавање диверзитета породичних форми. Промене у домену права детета, уз ослањање на Конвенцију о правима детета, коју је Србија ратификовала, подвлаче обавезу државе да обезбеди подршку родитељима у реализовању права детета на адекватан ниво стандарда живота и развоја. Централни део рада представља анализу домаћих прописа и пракси, и то у поређењу са политикама и прописима Европске уније, нарочито у светлу процеса приступања Србије Европској унији. У њему се из вишеструких аспеката разматрају најважније мере политике финансијске подршке породицама са децом у Србији – материнско одсуство, родитељски додатак, дечији додатак и

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субвенције за дневно збрињавање деце. Презентован је и анализиран њихов дизајн, а затим је елаборирана имплементација релевантних правила, те њихова приступачност, адекватност и коришћење. Упркос снажном основу који национална политика финансијске подршке породицама са децом поседује, њени основни недостаци односе се на традиционалну конципираност улоге мајке-жене и неукључивања очеве у сферу родитељства кроз јавне политике и мере. Основни налази компаративне анализе указују на неколико суштински важних закључака. Прво, национално законодавство о одсуству у сврху бриге и неге детета, иако великодушне дужине, не препознаје терминологију Европске уније о родитељским одсуствима и нарочито је упадљиво непостојање непреносивог права родитеља на одсуство. Стога је важна имплементација регулативних измена којима би се елемент непреносивости увео, што би побољшало постојеће стандарде за мајке, док би истовремено проширило права и обавезе на очеве. Друго, родитељски додаци установљени су као готово универзална популациона мера, док су дечији додаци, као циљана мера социјалне политике усмерена према сиромашним породицама, повезани за врло ограниченом адекватношћу. Анализа је показала да је стварна куповна моћ дечијих додатака, додатно и знато опала као последица инфлације, те да велики број деце у Србији живи у сиромаштву. Поред тога, ограничења која се између осталог односе на искључивање породица са више од четворо деце, утичу на неадекватан обухват нарочито вулнерабилних породица, пре свега ромских. На крају, национална политика знатно заостаје са просеком ЕУ у погледу стопа обухвата деце у установама за њихово дневно збрињавање, нарочито деце млађе од три године и деце из ромских насеља. Унапређење система субвенција трошкова дневног збрињавања деце треба да представља комплементаран и суштински правац развоја политике. У закључку, поређење националних и европских политика указује на то да Србија обезбеђује знатно нижи ниво јавне финансијске подршке по детету, у односу на европски просек. Стога се у раду указује на хитну потребу за унапређењем мера финансијске подршке породицама кроз правичније и инклузивније дечије додатке, реформу система субвенција за дневно збрињавање деце, те усвајање законодавства које афирмише равноправност родитеља и њихово активно учешће у раном развоју детета.

**Кључне речи:** социјална политика, јавна политика, подршка породицама, дечија заштита, родитељско одсуство, дечији додатак, субвенције за дневно збрињавање деце

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