

FEATURE

# Policing the Womb 2.0

## Why Hungary and Poland's pro-natalist policies won't work

February 28, 2019

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Fifty years ago, neo-Malthusian demographers and politicians warned that overpopulation would wipe out all efforts to modernize the world, especially the postcolonial Global South. Rapid population growth in India, Nigeria, Brazil, and Iran were depicted as impediments to development. Republicans (Richard Nixon) and Democrats (Lyndon B. Johnson) worked with Planned Parenthood and the United Nations to tie funding for projects to modernize the economies and infrastructure of newly independent states to policies to control birth rates in those countries. In essence, as biologist Paul Ehrlich argued in his best-seller *The*

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*Population Bomb*, if women in these countries did not curb their fertility, they were acting against the common good. The actual needs of those societies, especially of women, were not of interest to external reformers from the UN. White feminists either played along or were simply used as tools by a variety of international institutions to justify coercive policies towards indigenous women in developing countries.

Fast forward to 2019. In Europe fertility has dropped to alarming levels. Young women are choosing to have one, sometimes two children, but very seldom more than that. In the European Union, access to jobs across national borders has generated a shift in populations of young and well-educated people — especially in post-communist countries where the promise of prosperity and freedom has remained unfulfilled. With corruption running high in places like Bulgaria and Romania, doctors, engineers, software designers, architects, and plumbers are voting with their feet and taking their families to brighter shores. Sometimes they are successful in making a better life in Spain, France, Germany, or Sweden. Sometimes they return home. But overall, the brain drain has become a matter of national concern in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. What is to be done?

Most of these governments, regardless of their political orientation, tend to be populist nationalist and have set themselves up as the defenders of their nation against real or imagined immigrant threats. Augmenting the labor force and economic growth by inviting or allowing migrants and refugees to settle in these countries has not been a policy favored in any political circles. Hungary, especially, has made a point of pride out of rejecting the notion that people who are not Hungarian have any place in the country, treating Syrian and other refugees who sought to reach Germany or various Scandinavian countries like undesirable pests. The Hungarian Supreme Court recently [acquitted a journalist](#) of any criminal wrong doing after she claimed she had kicked a defenseless refugee child “out of fear.”

The same governments realize that their diminishing tax base is creating real difficulties in two connected directions: without a populous educated young generation of ambitious and hard working citizens, the economy cannot grow sustainably and investment is difficult to attract. Without those people spending money and paying taxes, the government cannot take care of the aging population that has accrued pensions for which there isn't enough revenue. Ten

years ago, when I did an [oral history project](#) in rural Romania, 86-year-old grandmothers grasped this crisis with great lucidity. If there were only four million people working and eight million retirees, one peasant woman asked: “Who is going to pay for our pensions?”

The solution that Poland and more recently Hungary have proposed is to enhance fertility by incentivizing women to have more children. These ideas are not new and mirror various current policies in other countries, like France. In Poland, for two years now, under the Family 500+ program women receive a salary for bringing up more than one child. All parents who apply receive 500 zloty (\$130) per month for each additional child, which amounts to 12% of the average wage in Poland. For families living in extreme poverty, these funds have provided important sources for covering basic needs. But the policy hasn't led to a spike in birth rates. And for women, especially among the poorest Poles, it has led to lower employment rates. A [recent study](#) found that the employment rate among young mothers would have been 2.5 to 3 percent higher in the absence of this program.

In short, the Polish state has decided to grapple with low fertility by trying to outsource childcare to mothers for salaries that represent a small fraction of a living wage. I use the term “outsource” here because in the twenty-first century, though childcare is dealt with by many governments as a “private” matter, there is nothing inherently private about it, especially when the state controls everything from access to birth control to childcare. Parenting is non-stop consuming effort; it is exhausting multi-tasking; and it is skilled labor — according to Forbes magazine, a stay-at-home parent should earn around \$115,000 per year. In addition to offering an extremely meager compensation for this work, the Family 500+ program is not increasing the tax base but shrinking it, because fewer women are working outside the home. Its long-term cost is compounded by the loss of wages and revenue not generated by stay-at-home moms.

More recently, at the beginning of 2019, the government unveiled a [new policy](#) to enhance this pro-natalist strategy by offering stay-at-home mothers of four children an almost \$300 monthly pension in recognition of their contributions to population growth. For women who did not previously qualify for any benefits after working a lifetime to raise four children, this can be considered a gain. One could also charitably call this a belated acknowledgement of the gender

differentials in terms of poverty levels among the elderly. But most women will be excluded from the policy. Mothers who raised three children or fewer and stayed home or were out of the workforce for a significant part of their productive years would receive no additional benefits from the state. So the policy cannot be said to solve the problem of poverty among elderly women, nor does it adequately reward the full-time job of parenting. In short, it is a supplement, a gesture, a symbol, and not a sustainable program.

Meanwhile, in a staunchly anti-migrant [speech last week](#), Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán introduced a new policy meant to restore high birth rates among Hungarian-born women: raise four children and you pay no income tax. In addition, special low-interest loans for young families with children will be made available, and grandparents (read grandmothers) will be able to share the maternity leave benefits of young mothers. The wider plan to enhance fertility also includes opening up more spots for preschool care.

Generous as they sound, these measures are problematic and insufficient. First, the state is foregoing tax revenues from stay-at-home mothers who are unlikely to work and therefore do not really produce much in the way of income tax in the first place. The only real contribution by the state may be in the form of preschool subsidies. But it is not clear how any of this will be funded, to what extent these benefits would be means-tested, or how generous the promised loans will be.

Will mothers decide to have one or two additional children for the sake of not paying income tax or receiving a pension in the distant future? It seems improbable that this is an incentive of any sort. It may constitute some kind of relief for people paying high income tax, but those are the very families most likely able to afford raising four children and having a stay-at-home mother. For those who need to work in order to make ends meet, even if some additional childcare benefits are made available, it is not clear whether they will be sufficient.

While the Polish and Hungarian measures are foregrounded as an attempt to incentivize women's desire to have more children, they serve other important ideological goals. To begin with, though never expressed directly, the nuclear heterosexual family is assumed to be the foundation of these policies. It is also assumed that in these couples the man would work and the woman would be the primary caregiver. At a time when the number of single parent households is

growing everywhere around the world and women make choices to have fewer children and delay having them because they wish to be active in the workforce, these policies do not consider the underlying reasons for these shifts in family formation. Instead, they want to turn back the clock.

Second, these ideologies divide the female population between those who have served the state's pro-natalist interest adequately and those who have not. One can only speculate how meaningful these divisions will prove, but it is clear that policy makers view certain kinds of mothering as more valuable and presumably more patriotic, while others, such as full-time working women who see no incentive in having more than one or two children, are considered less worthy of reward.

This sort of differential policy that invests little of the state's revenues but seeks to control behavior through divisive incentives strikes me as the epitome of the neo-illiberal state. Back in the 1920s and 1930s, illiberal and largely antisemitic governments in Europe created policies meant to celebrate motherhood among "desirable" populations. They sought to incentivize higher birth rates through propaganda that depicted Christian motherhood as a national duty and a point of pride. Little was offered by way of support for raising these children, as that was considered the responsibility of patriotic mothers. At that time women were also barred from entering many professional fields and received discriminatory pay in the workplace. A century later, these eugenicist ideas about motherhood are being bottled in shiny new containers, but they are also confronting a very different public. For several generations under communism, women worked in all fields open to men, and today they are voting citizens with full rights, with access to education and the same jobs as men. In short, the maternal prerogative may strike a chord with some men and even women. But the traditional family ideal of 100 years ago is now history. It is no longer a predominant reality and it is not coming back.

Rather than actually enhancing the fertility of the population, then, the Polish and Hungarian governments are trying to articulate a new gender regime built on political polarization and the vilification of feminist ideas about motherhood and birth control. In view of the recent closing down of all gender studies programs in Hungary and their replacement with "[family studies](#)," this seems like

a reasonable conclusion to draw. Whether this vilification is intended or not, the outcomes of these policies are likely to be polarizing. They are also likely to be ineffective in actually resolving any long term demographic decline problems.

Of two things I am sure in this regard. One: women tend to engage with reproductive control in ways that make sense to them personally, in the immediate circumstances that affect their wellbeing and their goals as adults. No political regime thus far — democratic, autocratic, or theocratic — has been able to control their behavior on the long term, short of genocide. Therefore, comprehensive and positive incentives are more likely to work, especially if they are pitched at the actual needs and interests of women, rather than at the male-dominated political establishment. Two: in the European Union, especially in the Schengen Space of which both Poland and Hungary are members, young women will go where opportunities for them exist. In short, enhancing economic opportunities will go a long way towards encouraging young wombs to stay put and to become both productive and reproductive. Affordable childcare and living wages for mothers are likely to produce the right incentives for those who wish to have children to do so in a sustainable fashion.

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