

COFACE Families Europe and Family Initiative
European Expert Meeting

The position of larger families with children in society: strengths and barriers

15TH MARCH 2022 - LJUBLJANA, SLOVENIA



Key reflections and findings

May 2022

Background

About the hosts

COFACE Families Europe is a European civil society network representing families (all types, without discrimination), through its 50+ organisations across 23 countries, shaping EU policy and legislation which impacts families: www.coface-eu.org. COFACE monitors a wide range of policies which impact the lives of families and children including worklife balance, disability, education, consumer policy, migration and digitalisation.

The Family Initiative is an association for a family-friendly society that connects primarily parents and other people who consider for family's needs. They have combined knowledge and influence since 1998 to make Slovenia a family-friendly society. They monitor what the government does or not in the field of family policy and inform the wider community about families and their needs. Family Initiative also work with government to improve family policy on national level, and is a full member of COFACE.

The approach of the meeting

Using the COFACE Child Compass as a starting point, this European Expert Meeting focused on the features of large families and the challenges they experience in Europe today, taking stock of the situation in different countries and collecting good practices.

The reflections were based on the premise that all children must have equal opportunities and be treated equally regardless of their family settings, and modern 21st-century family support systems should be able to factor in this diversity of needs without discrimination.

This European Expert Meeting was held in hybrid format (offline/online) for COFACE members, local participants in Slovenia, and EU stakeholders working on similar goals.

The objectives of the meeting

- Connect the Slovenian and European realities on families;
- Build on the findings of the 2020 COFACE expert meeting on single parent families and large families;
- Collect information on changing patterns in large families of today, including blended and recomposed families;
- Consult national/regional/local level civil society on innovative practices in supports to large families;
- Encourage knowledge transfer across EU countries on promoting the rights of families and children;
- Develop common actions and positions, to mainstream the family perspective in EU policy discussions on the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the EU Child Guarantee, the transposition of the EU Work-life balance directive, the EU Child Rights strategy and more.

The keynote presentations are available on the COFACE website: www.coface-eu.org

Programme

Moderators Elizabeth Gosme, Director of COFACE Families Europe and Tomaž Merše, President of Family Initiative

9.00-9.30 Welcome by COFACE and aims of the expert meeting

Tomaž Merše, President of Family Initiative

Annemie Drieskens, President of COFACE Families Europe

Toma Sutic, Member of Cabinet of European Commission Vice-President Dubravka Šuica

9.30-10.00 Overview of the Slovenian context for large families

Janez Cigler Kralj, Minister for work, family, and social affairs, Slovenia

10.00-10.45 Interrelated well-being of children and their families in a changing world

Dominic Richardson, Chief, Social and Economic policy, UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti

10.45-11.15 Tea break

11.15-12.15 Families with more children and the education system

Anton Meden PhD, a father of five and former president of Association of Parents' Council Working Groups of Slovenia, Slovenia

Antonia Torrens, Director of KMOP Greece and COFACE Vice-President

12.15-13.15 Family-friendly housing policies

Luciano Mafer, Director, Agenzia per la Famiglia, Trento, Italy

Peter Grabner, Member of Family Initiative and COFACE board member for Slovenia

13.15-14.15 Lunch break

14.15-15.15 Attitudes and perceptions of large families

Balázs Molnár, Vice-President of Maria Kopp Institute for Demography and Families, Hungary

Amaia Echevarria, Director of UNAF Spain and COFACE board member for Spain

15.15-16.00 The role of Europe to support large families

Annemie Drieskens, President of COFACE

Stefan Iszkowski, Policy Officer, Child Guarantee, DG Employment and Social Affairs, European Commission

16.00-16.15 Conclusions and next steps

Elizabeth Gosme, Director, COFACE Families Europe

Welcome and context

The European Expert Meeting was introduced by *Tomaž Merše, President of Family Initiative* who welcomed participants, European and Slovenian, on behalf of the co-hosts highlighting the need to study the situation of large families of today within a broader European context, and to develop strong policy responses to support families to have the number of children they want.

Annemie Driessens, President of COFACE Families Europe thanked the hosts, the representatives from across Europe, and Minister *Janez Cigler Kralj* for participating in the meeting. For over 60 years COFACE, a pluralistic network, has been standing up for families, including large families in all their diversity. Based on the interrelated well-being of children and their parents, as highlighted in the COFACE 2030 Child Compass, she called on Europe to invest in European and National Policies to empower the inherent capabilities of families and to ensure the wellbeing of both children and families through a systemic 2 generational approach.

Toma Sutić, Member of Cabinet of European Commission Vice-President Dubravka Šuica referred to different societal transitions taking place: the green, the digital, but also the demographic, and families are at the core of this last transition. He referred to the need to create a culture of support for family members, from youngest to oldest, especially in these challenging times of the pandemic and recent invasion of Ukraine. While Europe is playing its role through policy frameworks like the EU Strategy for the Rights of the Child, and legal frameworks like the EU Work-life balance directive, the Commission also looks for local solutions and welcomed therefore exchanges planned in the European expert meeting, and also engages with European citizens panels in the framework on the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The context for large families in Slovenia

Janez Cigler Kralj, Minister for work, family, and social affairs, Slovenia opened the first session of the expert meeting referring to the demographic winter affecting Slovenia and other European countries as well. He highlighted the fact that families with many children are key for sustainable demographic, economic and social development. He mentioned surveys conducted a few years ago showing that, on average, every second couple in Slovenia would like to have one more child than they actually have – confirming the need to consolidate policies and services to support families of today, to prevent poverty, to ensure well-being and work-life balance for families. The Minister highlighted a wide range of such measures available in Slovenia e.g. long and adequately paid family leaves (maternity, paternity, parental), financial allowances for mothers, child benefits (which increased during the COVID-19 pandemic), quality and accessible pre-school care and education (with extra measures to support large families), child benefits and tax credits (which are progressive according to the number of children), subsidized meal systems for pupils and students, state scholarships geared to lower-income families, part-time work opportunities, social security contributions for stay-at-home dads and mums, and more.

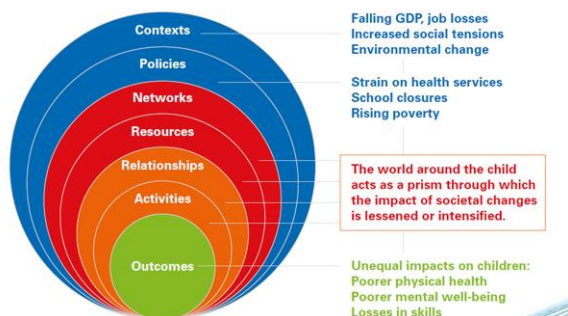
Yet, despite this wide range of measures, the Minister highlighted some remaining challenges impacting families and especially large families in Slovenia today. Housing is an important factor which can delay decisions to start a family life or have more children, and solutions are needed to address housing market failures to make homes affordable (including a savings guarantee scheme for people who wish to buy a home, or making rental housing more affordable). The Minister also mentioned the need for measures in pension policy, but also at the level of employers through flexible working arrangements and promotion of more family-friendly workplaces.

Interrelated well-being of children and their families in a changing world

After Minister Janez Cigler Kralj set the Slovenian context for discussions, *Dominic Richardson, Chief, Social and Economic policy, UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti*, set the discussions on supports to larger families in a wider global context.

How does children and family well-being interrelate?

When shocks happen, they are fed through different lenses: policy action, family context and actions, and more. So that the outcomes of shocks on children will vary and are unequal: some policies are better than others, some family conditions are better, and so forth.



How has the crisis affected children and families?

After the lingering impact of the global financial crisis and austerity measures leading to cuts in supports to families and growing inequalities, the recent pandemic has added another level of pressure on children and their families, especially on large families given the difficult housing conditions under lockdowns and school closures across the globe. This latest pandemic crisis can be seen as an opportunity to reset the public policy discourse on how to build stronger and more resilient societies and families, even if in a challenging context of economic constraint. OECD figures indicate that child poverty is likely to increase by 3% on average, and will stay high for at least 5 years.

What works for addressing the needs of families? UNICEF collected global evidence on effective family policies in 2020, matching this to different Sustainable Development Goals.



unicef for every child
Office of Research-Innocenti

In observing the SDG connections via family focused policy and programming, the following mapping took place:

- Family cash benefits consistently reduce poverty and deprivation – and can promote employment and gender equality (SDG 1).
- Family focused health approaches are effective – behavioral interventions need family therapists as well (SDG 3). Evidence shows that health challenges (nutrition, mental health) are best addressed as a family rather than as individual.
- Parental factors are key to education success, family policies can work for access to education – less so learning (SDG 4).
- Family policies need to be gender neutral in outcomes (SDG 5). The importance of this SDG is essential for managing positive family outcomes, e.g. through promoting family leaves for men. There is a need for gender sensitive policies, with women requiring more support than men around birth, but further adequately paid leaves are needed for men at a later stage.
- Violence prevention by conditions and education (Nurse-Family-Partnerships are considered essential pre and post-birth) (SDG 16)

In reference to the COFACE reconciliation policy mix of measures based on access to resources, services, and time arrangements, Dominic referred to two other key dimensions he considers important: **access to information** (knowing your social rights) and **access to agency** (representation to ensure family-focused approaches are adopted, but also to ensure that children can also fully participate in decisions which affect them).

What have countries been doing to address the impact of the latest crisis?

Huge investments were made in response to COVID-19, but not a huge amount invested in families. While schools closed in most countries, workplaces stayed open. The lack of investment in children and early years throughout this pandemic is not only impacting children, with costs for their health and education, but also for families (affecting their work-family balance and mental health) and more broadly on society (with long-term costs, possibly welfare dependency, poor educational outcomes and more).

Measures which match the needs of families, with positive outcomes

After analysing qualitative and quantitative data on crisis response measures over 20 years, mapping economic and social protection measures, UNICEF highlight measures with positive outcomes (using a traffic light system from green most positive to red less positive) for children and families, in different areas: income, health, education/childcare, work, safety.

POLICY RESPONSES TO CRISES & THEIR IMPACTS		Income	Health	Education & Childcare	Work	Safety
Fiscal Measures	Stimulus	Green	Green	Red	Orange	Red
	Austerity	Green	Red	Red	Orange	Red
Social Insurance	Health Insurance	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
	Unemployment Insurance	Green	Green	Green	Orange	Green
	Weather Insurance	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
Social Transfers, Social Services, & Job Programmes	Cash Transfers	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
	Food & School Feeding	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
	School & Health Subsidies	Green	Green	Orange	Green	Green
	Social Services	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
	Job Programmes	Green	Green	Red	Green	Green

Overall, austerity is not having positive outcomes for families in terms of health, education, childcare, safety. On the other hand, cash transfers, social services appear to have many benefits for families.

Families with more children and the education system

Anton Meden PhD, a father of five and former president of Association of Parents' Council Working Groups of Slovenia, gave an overview of the state of play in Slovenia. He looked at both the challenges and benefits of being a large family in the education system in Slovenia.

Challenges

While large families are not mentioned explicitly in national education legislation and may have fewer special needs compared to other types of families, any challenges related to large families in the education system may be addressed through other policy measures as well (fiscal, social affairs) or can also be solved individually at school level. Anton referred to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union Article 14 on the right to education, and namely the right to free compulsory education - this was the basis for a European survey of parents on **schooling costs and realities**. The overall conclusions of the survey were the following: compulsory education is *actually not free*; with more children in school the costs grow and may become an issue even for economically well-situated families; nowadays it is to some extent addressed by social legislation (certain schooling-related costs are subsidized by the state for children from economically weaker families). However, rather than subsidizing large families (which are not all in need of extra financial support), Anton advocates for true free education for all children.

He highlighted another challenge for large families in the school system: **participation of parents**. It is well known that collaboration between parents and teachers is a key to the successful educational process. Yet having more children in school can hinder the possibility to interact with the teachers of each child; if parent class-meetings are all in the same time slot it may become impossible for 2 parents to attend meetings for 3 or more children; individual meetings with teachers and participation at other events can also become a logistical (unsolvable) problem for parents; experience shows that such problems can be well overcome if the parents

clearly state these problems and the school management and teachers show some flexibility and good will.

Benefits

While costs and participation of parents are part of the challenges, there are still some benefits for large families in relation to both these dimensions. Regarding costs, there are not so many benefits of being a large family in the school system, but one clear benefit is that some school material can be used by younger brothers and sisters. The same can be said for participation: parents learn how to play their role in their children's schooling, and can improve for each child; and the parent-teacher interaction period is longer, hence they know each other better and can develop better collaboration.

He also highlighted social opportunities linked to being a large family in the school system. For instance, the fact that older children benefit from the experience and grow in their self-esteem and responsibility for younger ones; while younger children can benefit from the psychological and learning support they receive from their older siblings. As regards the benefits for schools, family members in different classes can help create cohesion in the school community (for pupils, parents and teachers). Finally, Anton highlighted opportunities for the local and broader community: school is the place where families meet. It can be a place where integration begins and where the people can identify their common interests and start acting to achieve them.

Antonia Torrens, Director of KMOP Greece and COFACE Vice-President, responded to the presentation with some reflections from a Greek perspective.

The widespread closure of early childhood education and care services and broader school closures affected especially extended low-income families. According to a 2020 EU survey, only 12,6% of households had 3 or more children. In Greece they represented only 9,8%, which means that less than 1 in 10 households had more than 3 children. There are a number of policies across the EU addressing gender equality, family leaves and childcare, while there have been changes to the benefits and social assistance available to families.

But more needs to be done. Policy-makers should also focus on reducing the gender gap and it is an opportunity now - in times of social adjustment - to re-design family policies, which may offer people more choices to reconcile family and professional life, and at the same time allowing men and women to get equal access to all professions.

During the pandemic and the extended lockdowns, large families faced great difficulties, as COVID-19 pushed children to attend school lessons from home. Families were forced to take a very active role in their children's everyday school attendance and duties, since to a great extent they had to help them adjust to technology, as well as to undertake a tutorial role during the time of the school lessons and the extra effort that was needed to convince them about the necessity for doing all these unusual things. Blended learning has become the norm, with teachers uploading material on on-line platforms instead of distributing photocopies with exercises and additional reading material as it was the case the past. This was a challenge for large families and families with low income as many of them did not have digital equipment at home, proper telecommunication lines which is expensive, and higher consumption of power for all these equipments to work several hours a day; obviously energy poverty has also an educational impact given the high degree of educational dependence on digital equipment.

In order to support these families - unfortunately with a long delay - Greece opened in April 2021 a special platform in which eligible students could apply, so as to receive a voucher of 200 euros to buy a laptop or a tablet. Beneficiaries were families with an income of up to 6,000 euros, who received the check for each child aged 4-24 years studying in an educational structure in Greece.

Children at home need enough space for studying. Family organisations in Europe, based on international studies, estimate the necessary surface for each individual, adult or child, to be at least 25 sq.m. for decent living conditions. Therefore, for a family of four children (2 parents with four children) an area of 150 sq.m. is necessary for children to be able to study at home. However, property tax has no provision for large families in Greece, imposing the same tax on house property on single persons and on large families.

For final remarks, Antonia referred to some key questions to consider together during the meeting and beyond, namely in relation to the digital divide in education, affecting all families:

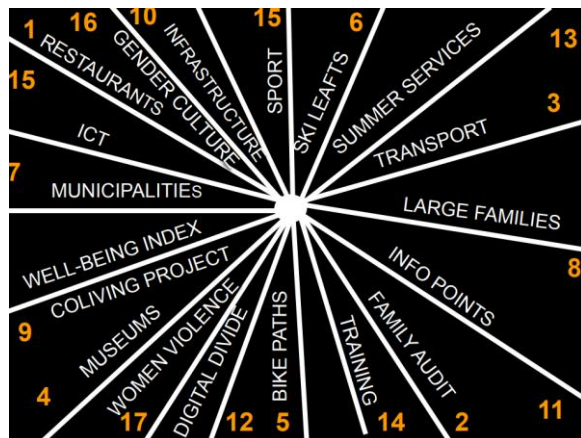
*Which children have access to a rapidly changing society, using the full benefits of technology?
Which children have access to a society of knowledge, and what can this entail for the future lives of children and our societies?*

Family-friendly housing policies

Luciano Mafer, Director, Agenzia per la Famiglia, Trento, Italy, highlighted family-friendly policies in the region of Trentino.

Radical shift in policy-thinking

Well-being policies for families have been implemented in Trentino in innovative ways compared to traditional approaches, in order to achieve the well-being of families and citizens. Luciano called first for radical change in thinking, namely that family policies are not social policies, and that family policies do not operate based on family problems. Family is not a problem but an opportunity. All government ministers make family policies either directly or indirectly – in other words, all the government policies can be redirected towards the well-being of families.



He introduced the spider model, whereby all policies contain family components or in other words where families are at the core, as a way to create interconnections between transport, work-life balance, tackling violence and more.

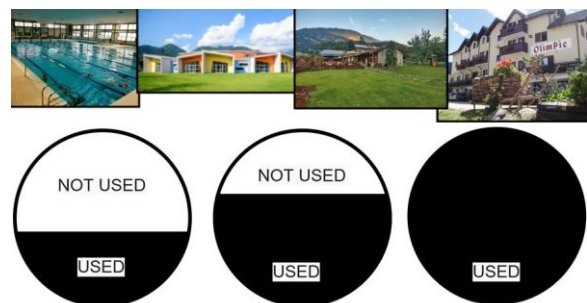
This broader approach is now also reflected in the way the Agenzia per la Famiglia functions: it is now no longer agency for the **family** but agency for **social cohesion**.

Family-friendly audits and certification

Is it possible to create a certified territory as a friend of the family? A territory where all public organisations and private companies can be family-friendly? A family district? In response to this challenge, the agency has created a Trentino Family Quality System based on a new public policy approach: new public *family* management, using new public management as a starting point, for instance building family impact assessment (not only quality assessment, sustainability) into public procurement criteria. Moreover, the agency certifies organisations for their family-friendliness, and not only in the region of Trentino but across Italy, aiming to export this model in order to increase the connections between public and private organizations to increase relations on the territory to develop a family-friendly culture and develop new services for families.

Improving policies for families without additional public investments

Is it possible to increase local sustainable development by promoting the idea of family well-being without public investments? How to get more with less..for more. Luciano shared his reflections on the circular economy (green economy) and more specifically the **saturation economy**. For instance, the case of housing: the idea is to look at the underused stock and land – these underused resources are crucial to create new services and housing for families.



With this approach, harnessing the full potential of networks and underused resources, in Trentino they were able to create different resources and services without extra investments: for public transport, housing, culture.

Peter Grabner, Member of Family Initiative and COFACE board member for Slovenia responded to this presentation with reflections on the situation in Slovenia.

Innovative approaches to family policies that intertwine with traditional policies are making a great contribution to a family-friendly environment. The innovative solutions of Trentino on how to improve the housing situation for families through rural settlement and full use of existing and underused resources, is also interesting and applicable to Slovenia. The lack of housing for families, especially large families, is an important gap in family policy in Slovenia. The good practices of the Trentino case show that there are reserves in the system, that there are empty dwellings that need to be activated. In Slovenia, too, on the one hand, there are many empty dwellings, but on the other hand, there is a serious housing shortage in the country and, as a result, many families are without adequate housing.

In practice, the general housing shortage generates high house purchase prices and high rental prices. Unfortunately, the state does not provide sufficient incentives for landlords to rent out empty flats. Many landlords in Slovenia are comfortable with the current situation of high demand on the market, as it increases the current resale value of their property. Housing has become the subject of long-term financial investments without the owner's willingness to rent out their property. In addition, property owners in Slovenia have relatively low costs for vacant dwellings, thus creating a disparity in the market.

Over the last 10 years, the number of households has increased by 6%, while the population has increased by less than 3% over the same period. The number of newly built housing units has not kept pace with market demand. In relation to the growth in the number of households, only 65% of the new housing needed in Slovenia has been built over the last 10 years.

The existing housing policy in Slovenia is purely socially oriented. There are no specific family policy measures in this area. On the basis of low income, all persons in Slovenia are entitled to state rent subsidies. Since families share income with all family members, families may therefore be more likely to qualify for a rent subsidy.

Housing policy in Slovenia also includes the possibility of living in social housing. This measure is mainly the responsibility of local authorities. Some municipalities take into account the number of children in the family when allocating social housing, while other municipalities have different criteria. What is common in all municipalities is that the number of applicants is disproportionately higher than the number of available housing units.

Non-profit housing is the next housing policy measure in Slovenia. Here, families with children are the first priority group. However, the income census for eligibility for non-profit housing is set more in favour of singles and couples without children, as they may have a higher income per member to still qualify for non-profit housing, which is especially true for singles. According to statistics, the number of non-profit rental housing in Slovenia is declining (in 2011 there were still 45,400, but in 2018 there are only 39,800). This is certainly not enough to address the needs.

There is also a problem of too little housing for large families. In the past, mainly relatively small dwellings have been built, which are difficult to live in with more than one or two children, so there are often no suitable dwellings for large families. Today, however, larger dwellings are also being built, which are unfortunately often unaffordable for large families due to the high prices they command on the market.

Recently, there has also been a problem of declining creditworthiness of larger families. Parents' incomes in large families are often not sufficient to meet the banks' creditworthiness criteria for housing loans. This is due to the new requirements of the banks, which take into account all family members when determining the creditworthiness of an applicant, thus reducing the creditworthiness of an applicant at the expense of a larger number of family members.

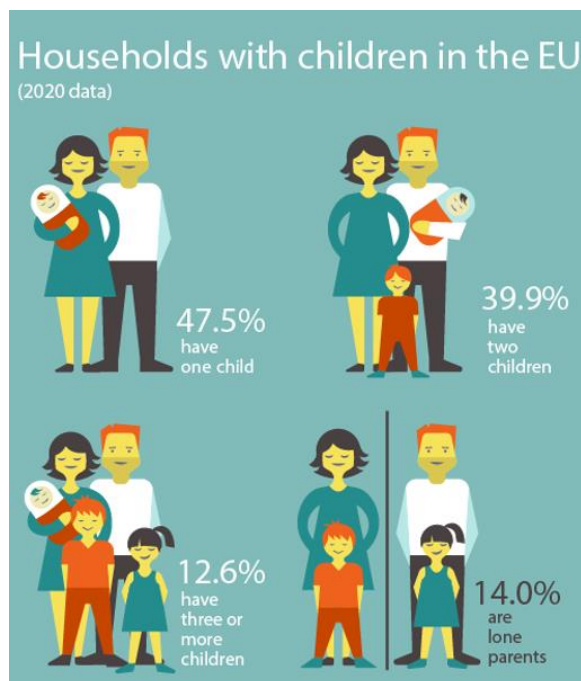
In short, innovative approaches to tackling family policy are urgently needed to meet the housing needs of large families in particular. The exchange of good practices from individual European countries would be very welcome.

Attitudes and perceptions of large families

Balázs Molnár, Vice-President of Maria Kopp Institute for Demography and Families, Hungary, presented reflections on the demographic relevance of large families and targeted measures for them.

A European overview

According to a 2020 EU survey, 12,6% of households in the EU are raising 3 or more children.

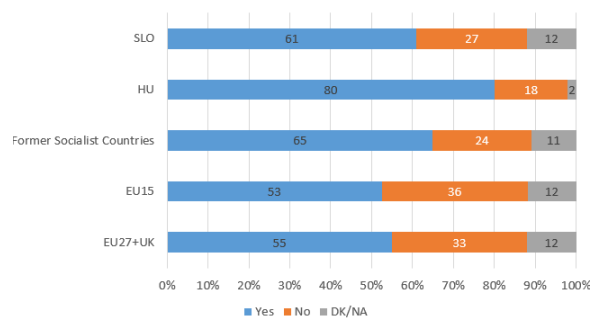


He shared some data on EU trends in large families between 2007 and 2017, which indicated that only few Member States have seen an increase in the proportion of large families over the 2007-2017 decade.

Perceptions of large families in Europe

Further data was shared regarding a European survey conducted by the Maria Kopp institute across the EU and the UK. He focused on two areas. The **needs and desires** of Europeans: 58% say they wish to have 2 children, and 21% say they wish to have 3 or more children. As concerns Hungary, 48% wish to have 2 children, and 46% wish to have 3 or more. The second area discussed was data based on the question: Do you think **support for large families should be a priority** in Europe? There is a mixed picture, with 55% in favour of supporting large families, and 33% not in favour. For Hungary however, the data shows that 80% are in favour.

Do you think that support for large families should be a priority? (EUROPA PROJECT, 2021)

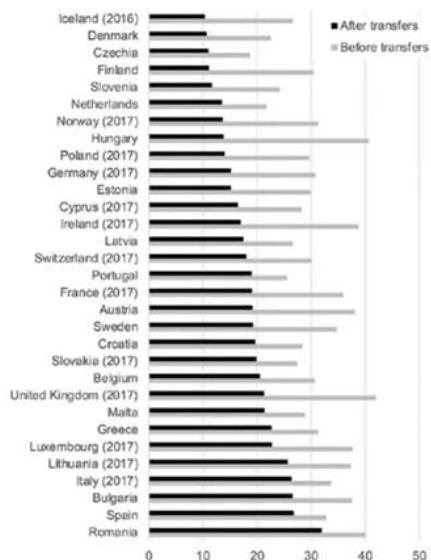


Trends and measures in Hungary

A family-friendly shift in policy took place in 2010 in Hungary. Family policy measures include a broad mix of **financial measures** (e.g. housing finance like subsidies for home creation, subsidies for goods like cars, elimination of student loans for mothers of large families, social security for stay-at-home mothers although with low payments of 100 euros/month, discounts for public transport and more), **employment measures** (e.g. supporting the active employment of mothers, work-life balance for families with small children), and **taxation** (e.g. tax cuts for every child and not just large families, as well as reducing income tax for large families and for youth under 25 to support their transition to independent living. It is important to note that most of these measures are available to families linked to employment and social security contributions, even if some universal measures do exist as well.

Cash transfers as effective anti-poverty measure

Eurostat data confirms the effectiveness of cash transfers to tackle child poverty. The table below shows the different rates of child poverty before and after transfers. The grey line shows the extent of poverty without transfers.



At risk of poverty indicator for children under age of 18.
Source: Eurostat 2020

In the case of Hungary, the child poverty rates are effectively reduced by 50% thanks to different family policy measures, including cash transfers. In 2010, 33% of Hungarian families were at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and this was reduced to 16% in 2020, which was the second largest poverty decrease among Member States, and in line with Hungary-specific 2020 targets to lift families out of poverty. The 2020 employment targets were also fulfilled, and Hungary is above the EU average of employment rate for men and women.

Attitudes to families and family life

5% of Europeans see a world without children, and that is their right, and the reasons for this can sometimes be for **environment protection**. Data was shared on Hungarian large families and their desire to raise their children as environmentally conscious. The more parents raise their children in an environmentally conscious way, the more they believe that individual responsibility is important to the Earth. Hungarians were the least able to identify themselves with the statement

that it is not worth bringing a child into this world because of the climate catastrophe, while others strongly reject such a linkage between having a child and the environmental catastrophe. The data indicates that large families wish to have an ecosystem which is liveable and diverse for their children and future grandchildren.

Transformation of mindset

A general objective in Hungary is to change the typical association of large families with poverty risk. This is done both through strong family support measures (financial, employment, taxation) to prevent poverty, but also through **awareness raising initiatives** (e.g. dedicating a specific year to family life and the benefits of having children, promoting the social recognition of motherhood and fatherhood), and **investing in studies** on the physical and mental health benefits of family life for women and men, the community (e.g. see the longitudinal Hungarostudy).

Amaia Echevarria, Director of UNAF Spain and COFACE board member for Spain responded to this presentation. In Spain, one in three large families are at risk of poverty, compared to 1 in 8 of all families. This means there is a real need for helping them through strong legislation and policy.

She was interested to hear about the number of desired children throughout the EU, and considers that laws should also enable families to have as many children as they want. In Spain this is a real and urgent problem to solve, as it is the country of Europe with a wider gap between how many children families want, and the number they finally have. It is really quite sad that in Spain 35%, over one third of women over the reproduction age say that they would have liked to have more children. And in a country with a reproductive emergency and a rate of only 1,3 children, it affects not only the wellbeing of families, but also the country's generational replacement.

On the other hand, she thinks it is also very interesting the focus on employment activation approach in Hungary. This is key to help families financially, and also to contribute to reduce the gender gap, especially among mothers of young

children which in many countries, such as Spain, are excluded from the workforce. Something else she thinks needs to be considered when discussing large families is how we define them. What is a large family today?

In Spain, when the Law for large families was created in 1941 large families were those with at least 4 underage children. This was much more common then, as women remained at home and did not have much access to paid jobs, and there was no contraceptive health. As society changed, women massively joined the workforce, and there was progress in reproductive health which meant families grew smaller. The definition was reviewed, and since 1994 in Spain, large families are those with at least 3 children underage. Since then, there have been new changes in society, with still smaller families, and a raise in non-dual parent families. So there is a need for further review of the definition of large families, as the aim of the large families law must be to protect children at risk of poverty and support families, so that new family structures and characteristics need to be taken into account.

Amaia focused on the needs of some specific types of families, that face some challenges as to how and why they could or should be considered "large families" with less than 3 children, and the challenges they face.

Multiple births families. Having two or more babies at the same time creates an increased financial and emotional burden in families. Furthermore, this is an unexpected event, families cannot plan to have a multiple birth and they only know about it a few months before the birth. This makes it very difficult for these families to accommodate the needs of two babies or more. Sometimes they do not have enough income to raise two children at the same time, and they even need to adapt their living or transport facilities, which is an extra cost. The cost of early childhood care also increases so sharply that on many occasions one of the parents, usually the mother, has to take unpaid leave off work or stop working altogether, widening the gender gap and putting these families under financial strain. And, as said before, as one of the aims of Large Families Law (LFL) is to help financially families with several children in order to prevent poverty, multiple birth families as large families (LF) with only two children should be considered closely.

Single parent families. We know that children from single parent families are at a much higher risk of poverty than children from dual parent families. In Spain 53% of them face poverty, compared to under 28% of general population. In order to protect children in these families and give them equal opportunities, the large families law should be adapted to consider the number of children per adult. Therefore, single parent families with at least 2 children should be considered large. Up to now, the Spanish large families law takes this into consideration, but only for widowed families. This should apply to all types of single parent families. This long-standing demand from family organisations has finally had a response from the Spanish government, and this should be reflected in a new Families Law that will be released in the next months. UNAF is waiting to see how this will be reflected in the new Law, especially regarding the definition of single-parent families, which has always been an issue.

Families with persons with disabilities are also considered an exception to the general rule of 3 underage children in the Spanish large families law. Families with two children and with either at least one of the children with disabilities, or if at least one of the parents has a disability, should be considered a large family under Spanish large families law.

Divorced or separated parents also face a challenge as to the how the break-up of a large family affects the couple. According to the Spanish law, only one of the household members can keep the large family status and its advantages. This is considered unfair, especially in households with joint custody where both parents support children financially, and it creates an extra strain on the parents' relationship.

Finally, **reconstituted or blended families.** It is quite common for blended families to be large families, as there are both children from previous relationships and common children. However, they also face specific challenges. On the one hand, according to the Spanish large families law, blended families can be considered large if there are at least 3 children in the household, no matter whether they live together and whether they have joint custody, as long as the parent holding this status supports them. If the parent asking to be considered a large family does not hold the custody, they will need the other parent to sign a document, which can create a huge strain on the relationship. If both parents have joint custody,

large family accreditation will be given automatically to the first parent who demands it, and if the other parent asks for it at a later date and there is no agreement, it will be a judge who decides which of the two families will be considered large, as children cannot be part of two large families. Usually, they take this decision based on the risk of poverty for each household or based on the time of cohabitation.

In summary, it is necessary to redefine the characteristics of a large family in the Law in order to be able to truly help all families equally and putting children and their needs at the heart of legislation. It is also important to find new ways of helping all families have as many children as they want with new initiatives, and take children and their families out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion. As mentioned, in Spain there is a new Family Law in preparation with exactly this objective in mind: to take into account the different needs of diverse families. This will be studied by COFACE in detail in 2023.

The role of Europe to support large families

Annemie Drieskens, President of COFACE shared some key points raised during the meeting discussions, making links with the EU policy context.

Adequately paid parental leaves (as is the case in Slovenia) should serve as inspiration for the transposition of **EU work-life balance directive**. The same can be said for access to affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) for large families in Slovenia, with proportionate measures and fee reductions according to the number of children in a family requiring ECEC. This is relevant for the upcoming **EU Care strategy**, and more specifically the revision of the EU Barcelona targets on ECEC. The Care Strategy is also an opportunity for the caregiving role of families to be recognised, and the importance of supporting families in a gender sensitive and gender equal way.

Family-friendly workplaces and the important role of employers to support large families was highlighted in discussions, and this will be further explored and developed in the next COFACE European expert meeting planned in Amsterdam in June 2022, focusing on work-life balance measures in the workplace.

The housing shortage was referred to as a challenge for young parents, for large families, as well as barriers to accessing mortgages for housing. The Slovenian measures to address the problem of creditworthiness of large families (where the state repays a part of the debt at the birth of each new child) could be explored further, as well as the good practices from Trentino on the reuse of empty dwellings/underused resources, as well as mobilizing all partners and networks, according to the spider model where everything is interconnected with families at the core. These challenges can be linked to measures under the **European Child Guarantee**, where access to housing is a key priority, and the upcoming national action plans on the Child Guarantee are expected in the next months. Furthermore, access to social housing will be on the agenda of the COFACE expert meeting on single parents taking place in Prague in October 2022. Another topic related to the Child Guarantee is access to quality education, with specific proposals made in the session on families with more children in the education system.

Family taxation and employment measures in Hungary highlighted in the session on attitudes and perceptions of large families, are essential poverty prevention measures. In that sense, it will be interesting to examine more closely the upcoming new Families Law in Spain to learn from this experience of defining large families in the light of new societal trends and changes. This could inspire all to review family laws to cater for family diversity. Access to resources and poverty prevention could also be supported through the **new EU legislation on VAT reduction** – now in force – for children products such as nappies, car seats, clothes, which no longer should be considered luxury products but can now benefit from reduced VAT rates.

A few general take-aways include:

- The need to mainstream the family dimension in all areas of policy;
- The reconciliation policy tool mix of access to Resources, Services and Time, and the need to potentially expand to access to Information and access to Agency as important tools to support families;
- Automatic rights for families through systems of proportional universalism, making measures accessible to all and progressive, so that those families who are most in need have specific targeted measures;
- Families should not be seen as a burden, but an opportunity. So there is a need to better recognise what families offer society, including the different competences acquired at home, which can be useful both in life and at work.

Annemie invited all to continue working together openly and brainstorming, while pinpointing some key areas to focus on, in order to pave the way for coherent European and national policies for families.

Stefan Iszkowski, Policy Officer Child Guarantee, DG Employment and Social Affairs, European Commission responded with some information on key EU frameworks which aim to provide supports to families and the goals for the next years.

It has been 5 years since the EU (including the European Council - all EU leaders) adopted a guiding document for EU social policies: the European Pillar of Social Rights. It contains 20 guiding principles divided into three separate chapters: equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, social protection and inclusion. All 20 principles are relevant for families living in Europe, using a cross-cutting approach, but Stefan highlighted some principles he considers particularly relevant for families and in light of the discussions during the expert meeting in Ljubljana: 1 (education and training), 2 (gender equality), 9 (work-life balance), 11 (childcare and support to children),

16 (healthcare of good quality), 19 (access to housing), 20 (access to essential services).

The publication of the European Pillar of Social Rights was followed-up by specific policy instruments, including a piece of legislation: the EU work-life balance directive. This directive is to be transposed into national legislation by the end of July 2022, and it introduces measures including minimum standards for paternity leave, parental leave, carers leave and flexible work arrangements. In 2021, an action plan for the implementation of the Pillar was further adopted, with three overarching targets to be met by all EU countries by 2030, including the reduction of child poverty.



To support the child poverty target, the Council of the EU adopted a Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee – this was announced pre-pandemic by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and has become even more relevant with the multiple crises faced by Europe today. The key objective of the Child Guarantee is to ensure that children in poverty and social exclusion get effective access to early childhood education and care; to high quality education and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal each school day; effective access to housing of decent standard for families; to mention a few key areas covered under this policy framework. Member States are now expected to publish their national action plans for the implementation of the Child Guarantee in their country with a 2030 timeline, but so far not all countries have submitted their plans within the deadline of mid-March 2022. New challenges are emerging with migration flows linked to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, leading to increasing numbers of children migrating and in precarious family situations – they should be covered by the Child Guarantee as well, which will in some cases lead to an increase of the target group of the national action plans.

The European Commission will monitor closely the process with implementation reports to be sent by Member States to the Commission every 2 years (with the first reports planned for 2024). Additionally, the European Commission was asked by the Council to prepare an overall report on implementation of the Child Guarantee 5 years after the adoption of the Recommendation (so by 2026) to assess progress towards the 2030 targets.

Concluding remarks

Elizabeth Gosme, Director, COFACE Families Europe briefly concluded the expert meeting, thanking all speakers and participants in Ljubljana and EU countries (joining remotely) for the collective effort and useful discussions.

The escalating crisis in Ukraine requires COFACE members and partners to regroup energies and resources, hence the importance of holding the European expert meeting in Ljubljana co-hosted with Family Initiative.

It is in this new and evolving context that COFACE will use the results of the expert meeting today to shape EU and national policies to ensure they fully acknowledge the changing patterns of large families of today, fully acknowledging their challenges and strengths.

Further reading

COFACE resources

[COFACE expert meeting on the position of larger families with children in society: strengths and barriers](#) (2022)

[COFACE assessment of the EU work-life balance directive](#) (2019)

[Meeting report from the COFACE expert meeting on families in vulnerable situations](#) (2020)

[Child Compass 2030: Shaping a healthy society, environment and economy fit for children](#) (2020)

European Union resources

[European Pillar of Social Rights](#)

[European Pillar of Social Rights action plan](#)

[Council Recommendation \(EU\) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee](#)

[EU work-life balance directive](#)

[Child Guarantee action plans](#)

[Child Guarantee coordinators](#)

[Council Directive \(EU\) 2022/542 of 5 April 2022 amending Directives 2006/112/EC and \(EU\) 2020/285 as regards rates of value added tax](#)