The institutional-ideological legacy of communism

Institutional path dependency from the communist era strongly influences post-communist family policy, but it does not determine it altogether. It is still possible for policymakers to choose other options. The fact that few policymakers support degenderizing policies does pose a major obstacle to the achievement of gender equality, as does the inability of the women’s movement to influence policy and the lack of interest in the population at large in pressuring governments to change direction. Furthermore, the communist legacy accounts in large part for the genderized values of policymakers and the anti-feminist atmosphere among citizens.

However, it is too simple to say that the population in the region shares “anti-feminist” views. This chapter shows that, due to the communist legacy, citizens in these countries are skeptical of feminist ideas on an abstract level. Yet, on the concrete level of daily experience, people in the post-communist countries are just as supportive of gender equality on most issues – and sometimes even more so – than their counterparts in Western Europe. The one really important exception is on the issue of whether children suffer if mothers work. Taken by itself, one might think this implies that many Central Europeans want to return to the male-breadwinner/female-housewife model (MB/FHW). Such an interpretation would not hold water, however. Surveys show that Central Europeans are supportive of gender equality on many other issues (such as whether fathers should share more equally in child-raising and household tasks), and the vast majority believe women should work and contribute to the family income. The belief that preschool children suffer if mothers work makes much more sense if seen
in light of the negative image of communist-era nurseries. The population thinks, after all, that nurseries for children under three offer very poor services, and that children are likely to be sent to such nurseries if mothers work (since fathers cannot be expected to stay at home with the children). In view of these assumptions, it makes perfect sense for citizens in these countries to believe – even when they are not against gender equality – that children will suffer if mothers work.

Thus, the norm of “threeness” plays a very important role here. As long as the population, policymakers and even many civil-society organizations believe it is “natural” for mothers to stay at home during the first three years, governments are unlikely to campaign for degenderizing policies that would increase gender equality and make it easier for women to balance work and family. Instead, popular discourse depicts feminists as placing the needs of mothers above the needs of children. This differs greatly from the situation in Sweden. Popular discourse in the latter country largely supports increased access to daycare, because it is deemed to be good for children. Furthermore, Swedes tend to regard the participation of fathers in parental leave time as valuable for children, on the grounds that children have a “right” to both parents. The Swedish case shows that women’s interests in achieving gender equality do not necessarily conflict with children’s interests. However, the Central European cases also show that, as long as the population believes there is a conflict in this respect, women will have difficulty in fighting for degenderizing policies that would increase gender equality. Unfortunately, it is difficult to show directly with the available survey data that the population believes in the norm of threeness. It is only possible to show it indirectly, with such measures as those showing that support for gender equality is lowest on the issue of how pre-school children are affected if mothers work. However, interviews with policymakers and persons active in civil-society organizations show a belief in the norm of threeness to be common among them too. I will examine this question in greater detail in later chapters.

This chapter concentrates on the attitudes of the population. Attitudes are not static, though. Support for feminist ideas is increasing, a greater number of women’s organizations regard themselves as feminist or at least supportive of gender equality, and policymakers are starting to question whether it is really “natural” for mothers to stay at home during the first three years.

Yet, despite the popular support for increased gender equality in many areas, communist rule left a general anti-feminist ideological legacy. Several different explanations have been offered for this. Unlike