



## CHAPTER 4

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# Conclusion

**Abstract** This chapter is a brief summary of the main arguments and a development of the point that carefare policies form an integral part of the political success and legitimacy of the anti-liberal regime. The chapter also shows how selective and exclusionary the policies are.

**Keywords** Anti-liberal • Hungary • Gender inequality • Class inequality • Carefare

“God created men and women so they together may form a whole, which—when complemented by children—we call a family. In the family and in society women embody gentleness, devotion, care, empathy, beauty, complementing men so they together can show the way to the next generation. Mothers are the heart and soul of families, the whole society and the nation.”  
(Official Facebook post by MiklósKásler, Minister of Human Resources, March 7, 2021)

To mark International Women’s Day in 2021, the European Commission issued a statement which enumerated women’s multiple contributions to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic: their work as doctors, nurses, teachers and shop assistants. The communiqué emphasized the European Union’s commitment to gender equality and listed a

range of measures to be introduced in the near future to this effect.<sup>1</sup> The Hungarian Minister of Human Resources, for his part, took a rather different angle. In a statement on his Facebook page quoted at the top of this chapter, he chose to greet heterosexual mothers only on International Women's Day and laud them for their gentleness, caring and kindness. He emphasized the fact that women's role was to complement men's work and reminded us that women's contributions to families, society and nation all belong to the realms of the heart rather than to the material world. The contrast between the two approaches—the European Commission's and the Hungarian government's—could not be sharper and could not illustrate more clearly the main arguments in this book.

A new type of political order has emerged in Hungary since 2010: a form of authoritarian capitalism with an anti-liberal political and social agenda. An important part of this agenda directly targets gender relations, specifically women and women's work. To conclude and summarize the points I made in the previous chapters, let me start with Gabor Scheiring's (2019: 254) analysis of social and political developments in Hungary. Scheiring calls the post 2010 Hungarian state "accumulative" and shows how FIDESZ and its cadres are deeply involved in reshuffling the existing class structure: they are creating their own politically loyal and economically powerful bourgeoisie through the process of state-assisted, dubiously legal, capital accumulation. The expropriation of resources, however, is taking place at the expense of those in the lower half of the social hierarchy. Scheiring points out that this is bound to lead to polarization and social tension, which may explain the authoritarian turn in Hungarian politics. Authoritarian rule, specifically authoritarian populist strategies are being deployed to retain the support of the economically disadvantaged. The government's discursive construction of "moral panics" successfully transforms conflicts about widening economic inequalities into disagreements about cultural and ideological issues (*ibid.*). Indeed, one key example of such a moral panic has been the government's purported struggle against what they call the international "gender lobby". As I pointed out

<sup>1</sup> See *Statement by the European Commission ahead of the International Women's Day 2021*. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_21\\_890](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_21_890). Numerous critiques question the EU's commitment to and limited conceptualization of gender equality (see, e.g., Repo 2016). The point here is the contrast between the messages directed at women in Hungary and in the European Commission only.

in Chap. 1, this has been sustained, if with slightly modified content, by the government-friendly media for the past four years.<sup>2</sup>

Starting in the mid-2010s Hungary's anti-liberal political regime began to deploy an even more spectacular strategy to ameliorate social conflict around redistribution: pronatalist family policies. The decrees passed from 2014 onward provide a significant amount of cash support—some earmarked for specific purposes, others freely usable—to families with children. Better-off families receive and can utilize a larger share of the subsidies but even lower-class, working families are able to access several of the newly introduced tax credits, baby loans and mortgages. This may open new financial possibilities for eligible families among the roughly one-third of Hungarians who had been unable to set money aside as savings and for whom investment in housing, for example, may have seemed like a hopeless goal. In other words, the financial rewards of the newly introduced family policies reach social groups in the lower half of the social hierarchy, many of whom had been losing hope when faced with the difficulties of finding decent, stable jobs which pay a living wage, and the sluggishness of the rate of intergenerational upward mobility (Huszár et al. 2020). The “family protection measures” of the recent Orbán government guarantee that some limited resources trickle down to this group, who are a crucial part of FIDESZ's electoral base (Róna et al. 2020). The process does not ameliorate class inequalities because of the highly selective targeting of the rewards of family policies, but the measures have, nevertheless, impacted and partially reorganized not only gender relations but also the stratification order. Hungary's anti-liberal government has utilized the re-regulation of gender relations to modify socio-economic inequalities in a politically efficacious way.

<sup>2</sup> The most recent variety of the “gender panic” at the time of writing this chapter is related to homosexuality and the supposed threat it poses to the future of the Hungarian nation, Christian civilization and/or the morality of children. In the first three months of 2021, *Magyar Nemzet* [Hungarian Nation], the vehemently pro-government online daily I described in Chap. 1, published 79 articles containing the term “LGBTQ”. (Of the roughly similar number of articles on “gender” in the same period almost half contained the term LGBTQ and many more lamented the threat of non-heterosexual forms of sexuality without explicit reference to the term.) Nothing proves better the fact that this is a “moral panic” artificially created for political reasons is the admission of the Hungarian Minister of Family Affairs, Katalin Novák, herself who pointed out that issues related to non-heterosexuality, specifically gay adoptive parents, is not among the “top 100 problems of Hungarian people” (February 20, 2021). It is nevertheless kept on the political agenda by the government-controlled media.

The principle of “divide and conquer” is part of this political strategy. Not everyone is eligible for the tax benefits or the child allowances. First, the vast majority of funding is tied to sustained participation in the formal paid labor market, and more than one income within the family which is above the national minimum. In 2018, 73% of the working age (20–64 years old) population was employed for wages. Although employment rates have increased most among the least educated social groups in recent years, vast inequalities among the Roma ethnic minority and the non-Roma majority remain: in 2018 the employment rate of Roma men and women was 44% and 23%, respectively, compared to the employment rates of 81% for non-Roma men and 65% for non-Roma women. Most of the Roma population are thus simply excluded from the government windfall, notwithstanding the fact that they are more likely to have children than the majority of the population and certainly are more likely to be in need of support in order to move out of poverty. In addition, according to recent estimates, close to 40% of all employees are contracted to work for the minimum wage, reducing the possibility for other groups to partake of the newly available resources. Second, even among those who are employed and financially eligible, the majority do not have children in their households: about 22% of those employed have one child, 17% two children and only 6% have more than two (Bakó and Mészáros 2019). This means that only about 40% of the population between 20 and 64 years of age are eligible to apply for the subsidies which are tied to both labor market participation and the presence—or promise—of children. It is these white, heterosexual, working families—constructed as “deserving” by mainstream political propaganda—who are targeted by the recently passed measures.

The benefits received via the wide range of pronatalist policies and related measures do not guarantee long-term compensation for raising children. However, in the late 2010s, when paid work was plentiful, the primarily one-off benefits allowed a respite, offered new opportunities to buy a larger house, to renovate a home and to spend a little more money on necessities, which might not have been possible otherwise. In addition, those at the bottom of the income distribution saw a proportionately larger increase in their wages, thanks to the tax credits, than those at or above the average.<sup>3</sup> This potential upward mobility is quite fragile: in the

<sup>3</sup> If you are a member of the “deserving” families and you are employed and make the minimum wage and together with a spouse can claim tax credits for two children, your joint

case of someone losing their job they also lose eligibility, yet loans still need to be paid back. A divorce—not a rare occurrence in Hungary—may leave women especially vulnerable, and a variety of life events may prevent a family from having the number of children they had promised when they signed up for the government’s loan. The positive impact of these policies may last until the next election in 2022 but the risks involved for individual people are numerous.

Anti-liberal rule is thus built on the backs of women, especially on the backs of hard-working, ambitious, lower-class women. Women’s work burden is likely to increase if families are to access the tax credits, the baby loans, the cheap mortgage and other subsidies. The funding is available on condition that they have more children, and—given the typical division of labor within households—take on more care responsibilities, dedicate more time to care work. At the same time, they will continue working for wages too. But employers in the Hungarian labor market—both state and private, domestic and international—operate by regulations which largely ignore care responsibilities and thus disadvantage women. Alternatively and increasingly, the carefare state offers job opportunities in the care industry specifically for mothers—such as fostering as Chap. 3 demonstrated—with the typically appalling work conditions that approximate those available to live-in migrant care workers in other parts of the world. Should women accept these conditions, their families may access these precarious “gifts” endowed by the government, but should they reject any parts thereof, they immediately become second-class social citizens. Furthermore, the participation of eligible women and families in the programs lends legitimacy to the government policies’ singling out and constructing the “deserving”, working, heterosexual family with children as the social group responsible for the country’s future and the only true hope for it.

I have called this set of policies “carefare”. Carefare policies, like workfare or prisonfare, are designed to discipline vulnerable workers into doing

net monthly salary increases from 220,000 HUF to 260,000 HUF, which is an increase of 18%. But if both you and your spouse make the average wage and receive 560,000 HUF a month, the additional 40,000 HUF tax credit for two children amounts to a mere 7% of your income. In other words, those at the bottom receive a higher increase relative to their wages through the child tax credit system. Similarly, a “baby loan” of 10 million HUF is of significantly more value to those at the bottom of the social hierarchy than to those whose regular income is higher. If, however, low-income families do not produce the required three children, the burden of paying back the loan is also much heavier.

vastly undervalued work in exchange for claiming their social citizenship rights. Even though its elements are familiar from welfare policies elsewhere, Hungary's carefare regime represents a novel response to what has been called the care crisis emerging in financialized global capitalist economies: the conflict between the intensification of claims made on workers' energies by their jobs and the simultaneous necessity to provide intensive parenting to children and care for others in need in local communities (Fraser 2016). Hungary's anti-liberal government has not fully resolved the conflict but it is experimenting with a new solution. The incentive structures of carefare policies, government propaganda which sentimentalizes women's work and sets it in contrast to remuneration, the lack of feasible and enforceable gender equality measures and economic alternatives, and the non-existence of woman-friendly trade union or women's rights movements all work together to force women into having to increase their work burden and accept inferior and thus more vulnerable positions in the paid labor market.

This book has described Hungary's gender regime. There may be an elective affinity between anti-liberalism and pronatalist "family protection" policies or the rejection of the principles of gender equality, but the relationship is certainly not deterministic or causal. Hungary's geopolitical position, its economic dependence on foreign investors and EU structural funds, its history of failed modernization projects tied to a variety of women's emancipation agendas, the underdevelopment of democratic institutions, the recent trauma of social upheaval and numerous economic crises, as well as the history of authoritarian leaders and centralized propaganda, all add up to a confluence of conditions that lead to unique outcomes. Anti-liberal, authoritarian-leaning political rule is spreading fast in every part of the world; thus Hungary's carefare regime should serve, if nothing else, as a framework to guide future comparative work on gender, social citizenship rights and the conditions of paid and unpaid work.

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