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## Private Choice, Public Care— Procreation Choices in the Discourse on Family Policy in Poland

*Abstract:* For the purposes of this article, I looked at which private choices concerning family life are supported and which are negated in the public discourse on family policy. The lack of a publicly published report summarizing the changes in family policy in recent years has contributed to the use of reports written by the opposing ruling camps in 2015 and 2017. Especially in the case of the Law and Justice report, the discourse on choice is based on the responsibility of parents to meet the needs of their children with little interference from the state. This is in line with the idea of familism, which puts the family at the center of interest of politics as an entity entitled to various types of services, and supports the caring functions of the family/woman at the expense of formalized and institutional care.

*Keywords:* family, discourse, choice, family policy

In European countries, family policy is the part of state social policy dealing with family-related affairs (cf., e.g., [Balcerzak-Paradowska 2009: 19](#)). Policy-makers aim to create conditions in which families can form, develop, function, and perform roles that are deemed socially relevant (cf. [Kurzynowski 1991: 8](#)). In the Polish public discourse, however, discrepancies can be observed between family policy and the reality of the choices families make. On the one hand, this is related to the value judgements inherent in family policy in regard to certain family-related decisions, and on the other, to the acceptance or rejection of these value judgements by the (potential) beneficiaries of the policy. In this article, the argumentation of the former will be examined. One question to consider in this context is which private family-related choices are supported and which are negated in the public discourse on family policy. Additionally, what means are used to achieve this support or negation?

When considering the notion of family, reference is often made to social unrest on a broader scale, while the building of family relationships and the meaning attached to such activities has been combined with political practices ([Rose 1987](#)). From this perspective, choices related to family life are not just personal decisions and the private behaviors of individuals but are situated in the political arena, where regular battles over the acceptable form of family take place and state intervention in family life (in the context of decisions about having children, the economic functioning of families, and divorces) is becoming the norm. For the purposes of this paper, I assume that the idea of a family is a normative ideal upheld by the authorities regardless of the identity of the dominant political party,

and it is through representatives of the authorities that the shape or internally undertaken practices of that ideal can be endorsed or discouraged. The legitimizing practices of the official discourse on family policy, to which I devote attention in the first part of this article, seem to be crucial here. Subsequently, I present analyses that indirectly correspond with my research project and then proceed to describe my research concept and research problems, as well as the corpus of data: official reports on family policy produced by representatives of opposing Polish governments. The results of the analyses are presented with an awareness of the diversity of categories and subcategories used to legitimize private family choices in the public discourse on family policy. The narratives about families in the reports reveal not only how public and private choices in the family context are organized but also point to tensions that appear to be embedded at two poles: the transfer of power versus the transfer of benefits.

### Literature Review

“Family policy” is a term that was first used in European discussions on social policy regarding families and children in the 1940s (Myrdal 1941). Its use continued in subsequent years (Kuusi 1964; Wynn 1970). In accord with a distinction proposed by Marek Rymsza (2016: 55–76), family policy may be perceived narrowly, as one of specific social policies, or horizontally, as types of activities that influence the situation of families to a certain extent, if indirectly. The division is between *direct* family policy (public programs and their accompanying legal regulations addressed directly to families) and *indirect* family policy (all the other activities of the state and its agencies that can impact families as a “side-effect”) (ibid: 58–59). For the purposes of this article, family policy will be defined in more general terms: as a public policy directly affecting families and having various potential purposes, including, for instance, limiting poverty, supporting employment, improving gender equality, supporting early childhood development, and increasing the fertility rate (Thevenon 2011: 57–87; as cited in: Niewenhuis and van Lancker 2017). Political actors have raised some of these issues publicly and the credibility of their narratives has been confirmed by authoritative sources and formal contexts. As such, they represent an official institutional discourse, and its alleged authenticity justifies further activities (Martín Rojo and Van Dijk 1997: 530). In this regard, it is difficult not to agree with the assumption that legitimization is the primary purpose of the discourse sought by political stakeholders (Cap 2008: 39), including in regard to family policy, because legitimization makes it possible to present the objectives of family policy as the objectives of its beneficiaries (Joseph 2006: 13).

Studies that have focused on discursive aspects of legitimacy have so far looked at politics (Cap 2008, Reyes 2011), migration (Rojo, van Dijk 1997), ethnic conflict (Al-Tahmazi 2017), the practices of international organizations (Vaara, Tienari 2008), and even pandemics and lockdowns (Yu, Yan 2021), among other things. In regard to family policy issues, only a couple of such studies have been done: one on the use of ideological representations of the family to legitimize policy positions related to gender and sexuality, that is, abortion and same-sex marriage (Pilecki, Hammack 2015); and another on the

strategies used by Finnish governments to legitimize unpopular family policy reforms (Nyby et al. 2017). The absence of analyses of the legitimization of private family choices in the public discourse on family policy prompted the research discussed in this paper.

### Methodology

The analyses I undertook were intended to reconstruct the legitimization of private family choices in official Polish documents on family policy. In this regard, I formulated my research problems as follows:

1. which private, family-related choices are supported and which are negated in the public discourse on family policy?
2. by what means (legitimation) is this support/negation achieved?

Analyses of legitimization have a rich history, which contributes to the multitude of potential interpretations of the term, yet in each case, reference is made to the justification of individual or group activities. In the present analysis, in accord with Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966: 110–111), legitimization is understood to be a process of explanation and justification in which individual versions of reality are *normalized*. However, in order to legitimize particular activities, broader social practices and power relations engaging specific individuals are essential (cf. Martin-Rojo, van Dijk 1997; van Dijk 1998; Szeffińska, Baran 2002). When legitimization is placed in the context of power relations, it is treated as a tool of power—which creates favorable conditions for maintaining the *status quo* or for the introduction of social and political change (cf. Habermas 1976).

Legitimation may take different forms while remaining related to conventional discourses that include or exclude a certain range of meanings in regard to family-related choices, justifying only some of their constructs. Hence, the representations that occur in the reports take on the sensible, common-sense, or natural form. And only critical reference to these representations contributes to reconstruction of the legitimations that sustain them and to determining what meanings they may carry for families living in Poland. According to the text-analytic approach of Critical Discourse Analysis that I have adopted for my research, certain linguistic practices are invested in power relations and ideological processes (Fairclough 1989: 7). By power relations, Norman Fairclough (1989) means the assumed roles of the author(s) and reader(s) of texts and the positioning of certain values within them. As part of this orientation, texts are always shaped by social practices, but they also affect the practices to which they refer. The latter take place thanks to institutions that shape discourse and vice versa (cf. Fairclough 1995: 55; as cited in: Wodak, Krzyżanowski 2011: 54; cf. Duszak, Fairclough 2008: 8). Legitimation practices often make it possible to present an ideological position on a specific issue and justify certain actions or lack thereof. In the present study, issues concerning legitimization will be analyzed using Theo van Leeuwen's methodological concepts (2008; as cited in Oakley 2013).

In accordance with my methodological approach, I made an initial selection of items for analysis from among texts on the website of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy/Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Policy that contained references to family

policies implemented between 2011 and 2019. The choice of this period was dictated by the fact that it coincided with two terms of government, in which power was held first by the coalition of Civic Platform and the Polish People's Party (PO-PSL), and then by the Law and Justice party (hereafter PiS), which governed independently. First, 119 eclectic documents were obtained (including reports, press releases, and interviews given to leading Polish media by individual ministers of family-related ministries). Open coding was conducted (cf. Babbie 2008; Konecki 2000) to identify recurring family-policy words and themes on the aforementioned website. The selection of categories subject to further analysis involved isolating those areas of family policy that appeared with the greatest frequency. The central category turned out to be choices regarding procreation. With regard to this category, selective coding allowed its properties to emerge until they were saturated (Charmaz 2009; Konecki 2000). Justifications (legitimations) proved specific to this category. According to van Leeuwen (2008: 106), the first step in the process of identifying legitimations is to ask the question: *why should one act in this specific way?* In this study, possible answers to this question were formulated within legitimizing categories (moral evaluation, rationalization, mythopoesis, authorization) and subcategories (evaluation, abstraction, analogies regarding moral evaluation, rationalization by reference to what is natural, instrumental rationalization regarding rationalization, moral tales and cautionary tales, mythopoesis, personal authority, expert authority, role model authority, impersonal authority, the authority of tradition and the authority of conformity in connection with authorization) described in Table 1. Finally, van Leeuwen's categories, along with the subcategories, were used as themes in feedback for the category of choices relating to procreation, and their relationships are presented in the section of the paper on the research findings. The MAXQDA program, which allows specific categories in texts to be sought and counted, and relations and patterns between categories to be captured, was used for the analysis.

A text was classified as suitable for appropriate analysis if it met two criteria:

- (a) it contained the maximum and complete saturation of categories concerning procreative choices;
- (b) it contained statements indicating the generation of specific solutions by ministry representatives.

The final corpus of data consisted of two official and comprehensive reports constructed by representatives of the ruling parties between 2011 and 2019, organizing the cacophony of voices on procreation choices into a coherent narrative. The first of these documents, "New Family Policy in Poland 2011–2015: A Report of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy", E. Dabrowska, C. Gaweł, M. Siergiejuk (authors), Ministry of Labor and Social Policy in Poland, 07/2015 (hereinafter referred to as NPiP 2011–2015), was created on behalf of the PO-PSL coalition just before the next parliamentary elections (which, as it turned out, they lost). With the deepening demographic crisis (GUS 2012) destabilizing social and economic development, politicians were focused over the course of their term, according to their official messages, on implementing the principle of subsidiarity, increasing the fertility rate in society, supporting familialism, and internationalizing family policy (Szczepaniak-Sienniak 2024: 3). The second of the documents, "Family as the Best Investment: Published as Part of the Celebration of Family Rights Day under the Honorary Patronage of the

Table 1

Legitimising categories and subcategories (prepared based on van Leeuwen 2008; as cited in Oakley 2013)

Legitimising categories	Legitimising subcategories	Justification (Why should one act in this specific way?)
1. Moral evaluation (reference to value systems which constitute the basis for the legitimization of the given phenomena or practices)	1. Evaluation	Because... this is proper/typical/moral
	2. Abstraction	Because... this is desirable/important/valuable
	3. Analogies	Because... this is just like a different phenomenon/different activity which is considered as positive
2. Rationalisation (reference to specific phenomena/activities based on knowledge considered as common-sense)	1. Instrumental rationalisation	Because... this is a means to achieve a higher purpose
	2. Rationalisation by reference to what is <i>natural</i>	Because... this is a <i>natural</i> course of events, the way things are Because... this type of conduct is relevant to the <i>nature</i> of certain people
3. Mythopoesis, building narrative structures making it possible to determine in what way the issue discussed refers to the past or the future	1. Moral tales	Because... it is enough to take a look at the benefits/profits to persons/groups for acting in a certain way
	2. Cautionary tales	Because... it is enough to take a look at the suffering/punishment for nonconformity to certain rules
4. Authorisation by reference to power, custom, law or person	1. Personal authority	Because... I said so Because... “they” (significant authority) said so
	2. Expert authority	Because... this is what experts say
	3. Role model authority	Because... this is what experienced people who deserve to be distinguished among others say
	4. Impersonal authority	Because... this is in line with the guidelines/procedures
	5. Authority of tradition	Because... this is the way it has <i>always</i> been Because... this has been part of human activity ( <i>since time immemorial</i> )
	6. Authority of conformity	Because... this is what most people do Because... this is what anyone would do if they were in your shoes

President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda”, [no author], Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Policy in Poland, National Committee for the Celebration of Family Rights Day, Warsaw, October 2017 (hereafter referred to as **FatBI 2017**), was produced during the period of political change initiated by the 2015 parliamentary elections and the victory of PiS. The new ruling coalition openly criticized the previous government’s modernization approach, while also declaring support for a conservative understanding of the family (**Kotowska 2019**).

The selected reports are specific discourses that give a range of meanings to issues concerning family life in Poland and that can be placed in a broader social context. They also constitute a form of text with a specific audience: the beneficiaries of Polish family policy. It can be assumed that the authors of these documents included and excluded a certain range of meanings in regard to family-related choices, justifying only certain representations of them. In this paper, the reports are used to reconstruct the sustaining legitimations and to determine what meanings they may carry for those affected and impacted by family policy.

## Presentation of Results

Society is supplied with diverse discourses on family policy, and with them ideologies and visions that can be weaponized in struggles over specific values. The context of the discussion presented here is the period of political transformation in Poland, which after 1989 took the form of a significant socio-political division between Solidarity and the post-Polish People's Republic (cf. e.g., Grabowska, Szawiel 2001: 215). The ensuing pluralism of ideas began, at times, to be associated with threat, chaos, or disorder in the public sphere. In the source literature, collaborating evidence can be found that the center of the social division shifted toward a conflict between “conservative” and “liberal” circles after the year 2005—a turning point for the Polish political party system (cf. Jakubowski 2011). The existence of dichotomized and opposing camps is suggested, yet the issue appears to be more complex and the divisions themselves more ambiguous. Undoubtedly, the main political divisions in Poland at the time could be observed in the differences between two post-Solidarity parties: Civic Platform, a party described as conservative-liberal, social-liberal, or Christian democratic (Tyrała 2018: 65), and Law and Justice, described as conservative, Christian democratic, social, national-Catholic, and pro-independence (Tyrała 2018: 65). It seems that the ideological distance between entities in the political party system, and in social groups representing disparate ways of perceiving reality (cf. Sanecka-Tyczyńska 2015: 99), increased in 2010 after the crash of the Polish Air Force Tu-154 plane in Smolensk, Russia<sup>1</sup> (Klepka 2013: 69; Piechocka, Królicka, Sojak 2018: 128). It appears that it was after this event that political polarization, which had until then been oriented toward a struggle for power, began to spread gradually to society, along with a division into “perpetrators” and “victims.” Some social analysts have observed that the state fell hostage to particularistic ideologization (both in the context of history and the present) in the shadow of the Smolensk crash (Markowska et al. 2018).

For the purposes of this article, two key periods in the Polish political sphere are noteworthy. The first is the period between 2011 and 2015 when for the first time in the Third Polish Republic there were no changes to the ruling party (which had been in power from 2007 to 2011) (Zaręba 2012: 75). The coalition government was founded on popular, national, and Christian values by representatives of the Civic Platform party and the Polish People's Party. Subsequently, in December 2015, Law and Justice won the presidential and parliamentary elections and became the first party since 1989 to gain a parliamentary majority, which allowed it to form a government on its own.

The reports analyzed in this study, “New Family Policy in Poland” (Dąbrowska, Gawel, and Siergiejuk 2015) and “Family as the Best Investment, The Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy” 2017, describe activities of the Polish government between 2011 and 2015. The word “family” was added to the name of the ministry in 2015, on the initiative of the Law and Justice government. This “was not just...cosmetic ...this symbolic change was

<sup>1</sup> On April 10<sup>th</sup> of that year, a Tupolev Tu-154 aircraft of the Polish Air Force crashed near the Smolensk North Airport. There were 96 passengers on board, including the president of the Republic of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, and his wife Maria. There were no survivors of the crash. The Polish delegation was on its way to attend a commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre, a series of mass executions of Polish military officers and intelligentsia carried out by the Soviet Union, specifically the NKVD (the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, the Soviet secret police) in 1940 (Gliński, Wasilewski 2011).



[according to the party leader] a harbinger of a true revolution in family policy in Poland” (Gov.pl 2019).

Based on the manner of titling the reports alone, it may be assumed that they were intended as texts presenting, respectively, a new approach to family policy in Poland (NFPiP 2011–2015) and the indisputable importance of family, which in itself legitimizes investment (FatBI 2017). An initial analysis of the reports ascertains that the aim of their creators was to present the current state of family policy in Poland, including measuring its improvement in comparison with previous years. The differences between the texts are especially noticeable in terms of authorship and the legitimation of their content. NFPiP was endorsed only by the then minister of labor and social policy, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, whilst FatBI includes an introduction (and recommendations for administering the family policy described in the report) authored by three politicians (Prime Minister Beata Szydło, Minister of Family, Labor and Social Policy Elżbieta Rafalska, and Chairperson of the National Committee for the Celebration of Family Rights Day MP Tadeusz Woźniak). The inclusion of an introduction by these three could be interpreted as reinforcing the message of the report.

For this study, my explorations involved isolating passages within the reports. Passages were qualified for analysis if they made reference to private choices supported or negated in the public discourse on family policy. I assumed that family policy always involves value judgements in regard to family-related choices. I also assumed that the public discourse includes diverse constructs concerning private (family-related) choices, which have an effect on the public sphere (social, demographic, etc.). In the context of this discourse, it is crucial to acknowledge that individual entities are to a certain extent responsible for meeting their own and other entities’ needs (in connection with their choices and a prescribed range of state interference). This interference sometimes involves formulating recommendations (an extension of interference). The relations between individuals/groups and the state may be situated on a continuum, depending on the level of private responsibility and public interference, where the ends of the continuum are marked by the most extreme variants.

In the initial analysis of the texts it was noticeable that the reports “create” social knowledge about families differently, yet in each the language reproduces the social hegemony of a certain vision of possible choices for families living in Poland. In the case of the first report (NFPiP 2011–2015), both the fertility rate and individual parental experiences are the main categories shaping the discourse of choice. The specific positioning of the latter is related to the fact that, as a ministerial authority declares (4.1) “Children are a great joy to their parents, but also a huge responsibility. Polish families, in particular, know this” (NFPiP 2011–2015: 3). The suggestion is that the state’s role is to encourage citizens to take this responsibility. The state’s task is not only to

...create better living conditions for Polish families. It should provide a sense of security and stability, support families in difficult times, encourage activity. Solve real problems. Only then will...Poles be willing to start families here, in this country, not abroad as emigrants (NFPiP 2011–2015: 3).

This reference (legitimation by instrumental rationalization, 1.2.) was related to the trend in fertility rates among Polish migrants that was observable at the time (see, for example, the situation in the UK: Waller et al. 2014). It should be borne in mind that external

factors—such as migration-induced change in one’s environment and opportunities in the new country—can affect personal motivations and reproductive choices. This perspective can in fact explain such phenomena as the increase in fertility rates among Polish women living abroad compared with those in Poland during the period considered in the report (Duszczyk 2014).

A reference to conditions is accompanied by a cautionary tale (3.2). As Kosiniak-Kamysz observes,

My goal from the very beginning was not just the simple equation: we provide more money to families and automatically more children are born. This way of thinking will lead you astray. Short-term tricks do not work, as was perfectly illustrated by the introduction of the “becikowe” newborn allowance<sup>2</sup> (NFPiP 2011–2015: 3).

According to the Ministry’s narrative, choices related to procreation are affected not by short-term initiatives but by long-term, large-scale, and well-thought-out policies. Thus, offering people financial incentives to become parents would have no causative power in the context of pro-reproductive choices. It should be noted separately that these choices are directly related to the construct of individual (though vague) parental responsibility. Treating the first year of a child’s life as a period of particular ministerial care seems to embrace this description of parenthood. The area of *choice* for parents involves the prolongation of paid parental leave after the child’s birth from 26 to 52 weeks and the need to decide whether and how the leave will be shared (NFPiP 2011–2015: 4). This also applies to taking advantage of the two-week paternity leave. It is emphasized in the report that this is a benefit to which only fathers are entitled (NFPiP 2011–2015: 8), and its advantages are highlighted in quotations from beneficiaries of this kind of leave, who are presented as personal authorities (4.1). Parents instrumentally rationalize (2.1) their greater participation in caring for the child. They stress the importance of thus gaining expertise in activities benefiting the child, because “The more time we spend with the child, the easier things are for us” (NFPiP 2011–2015: 8). Forming a bond with the child is considered to be no less important, as “... a small child is constantly exposed to new experiences, each day brings new skills, and the bond becomes stronger” (NFPiP 2011–2015: 8). In another example of instrumental rationalization, a father observed that

Thanks to the leave, I have formed a very strong bond with my baby son, which is paying off now. I take care of him more often even now, when both my wife and I are working again and my son goes to a nursery. Even my wife notices that I am the one who has a better relationship with Igor (NFPiP 2011–2015: 9).

The point of departure for justifying the taking of paternity leave is therefore also a man’s relationship with his wife, because, as one of the fathers noted “I can see...[her] happiness, because she can feel my support. She has time for herself and is not worried when she leaves the child in my care” (NFPiP 2011–2015: 8). Yet the woman—the wife in this case—is still considered to be the “parent-in-chief”: “Mothers are usually better informed” (NFPiP 2011–2015: 8). In the next quotation, taking parental leave is encouraged because “It helps build the son–father–mother relationship in an incredible way” (NFPiP 2011–2015: 9). Meanwhile, yet another benefit is related to the (temporary) professional

<sup>2</sup> A one-off payment to which every family is entitled when a child is born into it; the legal basis for the payment is the Act of November 28, 2003 on family benefits (Matela-Marszałek 2018).



deactivation. The time of the leave is “...a good time to take a break, rest, and put things into perspective” (NFPiP 2011–2015: 9). The perspective-creating function of parental leave is confirmed by another beneficiary: “You may finally see what is worth changing. I want to go back to work, but gradually, because now, the time I spend with my child is what counts most” (NFPiP 2011–2015: 9). The representations of involved fatherhood presented in the report, which are legitimized as instrumental rationalization, in some way broaden the scope of Ella Kahu and Mandy Morgan’s (2007: 135) claim that government policy affects how women’s identities are discursively constructed—in the case of the analyzed report, this also applies (to a certain extent) to men’s identities.

Meanwhile, the issue of financial support only applies to those in the most difficult financial situations, which prevents them from *proper* involvement in the process of raising and caring for a small child. The report also emphasizes the ministerial contribution to the formation of a care network for the youngest children, as it is “...crucial from the point of view of the parents who want to return to work after parental leave.” In order to “make up for years of neglect,” the “‘Toddler’ program [was introduced] to support existing nurseries and to fund the establishment of new ones” (NFPiP 2011–2015: 10). The importance of this initiative is highlighted by the debasement of—and a cautionary tale (3.2) referring to—the activities of the previous government (or actually its lack of activity). Using the voice of impersonal authority (4.4), further crucial solutions ensuing from the Act on nurseries (in 2013) are listed, including new forms of care for the youngest children, kids’ clubs, and family child-care homes where the provider takes care of several children in their own home (NFPiP 2011–2015: 12). However, it is not clear from the report whether the aims adopted in 2013—lower fees, more places in kindergartens, and local government support—were achieved (NFPiP 2011–2015: 20).

In the NFPiP, the special circumstances of those in the most difficult financial situations are stressed. The decision “...to take up work or leave the gray area” (NFPiP 2011–2015: 6) could be motivated by the “penny for penny” principle introduced to the philosophy of assisting Polish families. With an increase in income, and as the income threshold was exceeded, the financial benefits for parents would be gradually reduced but not taken away altogether. In the voice of ministerial personal authority (4.1), it was recognized that the “Regulations cannot make parents’ lives more difficult but rather should make them easier” (NFPiP 2011–2015: 6), and, using instrumental rationalization, “Family policy should encourage people to take up work, not discourage them from it” (NFPiP 2011–2015: 6).

The discourse of choice presented in the report is based on the premise that the government’s involvement in issues of early childhood care and education should not be preferential in nature with reference to the existing options. Instead, it should encourage parents to make “responsible” choices. Theoretically, the discourse of choice could further the decision-making power of parents by enabling them to “privatize” early childhood care and (sometimes) preschool education, and also by creating room for the engagement of public institutions in these processes at the right time. Thus, deinstitutionalization could be institutionalized as part of voluntary individual choices. In this case, however, it seems crucial to ensure that preferences can be reflected in the choices provided, such as the provision of access to various kinds of options in the area of early childhood care. While the government provides parents with additional time for childcare and childrearing, and the

available public resources are not redirected toward specific benefits, there is no guarantee that the government activities will cause parents to act in accordance with the best care- and education-related interest of the state.

In contrast, in the second report (FatBI 2017), we can observe an interesting tactic: as a priority of the government, it does not so much point out choices as a range of activities for families—by analogy (4.3), the best “...possible investment...for the future” (FatBI 2017: 5–6). In view of the above, it may be assumed that practices related to family policy are considered an effective investment of public resources to achieve specific goals. In the introductory part of the report, the then prime minister, Beata Szydło, observes “evaluatively” and based on her “personal authority” that “all...Poles should take advantage of our homeland’s economic growth, especially because they are the ones creating it” (FatBI 2017: 5). In narratives of this type, the nation seems to be based on similarity and solidarity, and the articulations of family appear in the context of concern for the nation’s future. This is accompanied by reinforcing what could be described as a sense of false pride in enigmatically expressed intimations of economic progress. Consistently, and using instrumental rationalization, it is also stated that “...the aim is to continue to strive to make *all* [italics mine—BJ] citizens richer. Thus...ambitious projects...[are] introduced, aimed at creating opportunities for everyone willing to invest in their *future* [italics mine—BJ]” (FatBI 2017: 5). The issue of the potential area of choice related to these projects is not specified. The improvement of family situations is instrumentally rationalized, alongside the acknowledgement that “...in 2016, households had higher incomes and incurred higher expenses” (FatBI 2017: 20). The source of a real increase in incomes—in line with the report’s narrative—was primarily the child-support benefit from the Family 500+ program (FatBI 2017: 20). This was a payment of an untaxed PLN 500 per month for every second and subsequent child, without an income threshold.<sup>3</sup> As the report emphasized “...it was introduced primarily in order to counteract the negative demographic situation.” It was supposed to be an incentive “to decide to have more children” (FatBI 2017: 6). Thus, the opportunity to become richer seemed to be related to choices concerning fertility (FatBI 2017: 5). The incentive was supposed to contribute not only to making “...parents happier but also to our country being able to develop in a stable manner.” For, as it is observed using the legitimization of abstraction (1.2) and a moral tale (3.1), “The fate of our homeland lies in the hands of Polish families” (FatBI 2017: 5).

It is emphasized in the text that contrary to the forecasts of the “total opposition,”<sup>4</sup> in the case of the flagship program of Polish social policy, Family 500+, it is not possible

<sup>3</sup> Since July 2019, all children up to the age of 18 are entitled to the benefit, regardless of the family’s income (Gov.PI 2024).

<sup>4</sup> The term “total opposition” was originally used by the leader of Civic Platform, Grzegorz Schetyna, during the party’s National Council as an expression of objection to the ruling party (because, as he announced at the time “... we will be the total opposition! The toughest possible opposition! We will fight against total power in a total manner”—cf. w.Polityce.pl Team 2016). Currently, it may be assumed that “total opposition” is a buzzword replacing a number of other synonyms, at the same time constituting (in the political context, especially in the narratives of the followers of the Law and Justice party) a concept marked by negative connotations (Malinowski 2018). This is due to the fact that the expression was adopted as a form of accusation against Civic Platform and another opposition party of the time, Nowoczesna (Modern). In such a perspective, the phrase “total opposition” is a criticism of the ruling party for its actions and lack of a positive alternative program. Such an opposition brings people into the streets and makes use of shouting and accusations. It acts in a destructive, anti-state manner

to speak either about families' wasting the money nor about its deactivating effect on the labor market (and so blocking the possibilities of *choice*). This is the first and only time that entities potentially thwarting the new government's plans for "good change" (as it collectively called its programs) are so explicitly named. The use of the term "total opposition" reveals a dichotomy in which "we" (the current ruling party) and "they" (the previous ruling party) are marked as two "diametrically opposing" camps. In this context, it is pointed out that the introduction of the Family 500+ program could also have indirect effects, contributing, for instance—particularly in the case of women performing *simpler* work (italics mine—BJ)—to the possibility of a better negotiating position when talking to an employer about salary. This could lead large retail chains, for instance, to increase their employees' remuneration (FatBI 2017: 14). In a passage beginning "The Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Policy has been receiving reports..." (op. cit.), it is not clear on what basis such claims are being made. They are accompanied by further claims about a decrease in women's professional inactivity. In this case, there is a reference to expert (4.2) statistics, according to which "in the first quarter of this year, the number of women who are professionally inactive for family-related reasons amounted to 1.57 million. Compared to the end of the year 2016, this is about 30,000 fewer" (FatBI 2017: 6). In the proposed narrative, women are placed in the economic domain when they are not involved in reproduction. This contributes to the creation of an obvious center for rhetoric about maintaining and consolidating the reproductive social order through family policy. In this context, much less attention is dedicated in the report to the development of the care- and education-related services initiated by the previous ruling party (see the "Toddler" program, p. 13), although its presence is not omitted.

Consistently creating the image of a government involved in dynamic changes to meet the needs of Polish parents and using generalizing instrumental rationalization, the report further emphasizes that "Parents want their children to be well-educated. Taking this into account, we have decided to introduce a reform of the education system" (FatBI 2017: 5). Government interference is therefore *normalized* here by the preferences displayed implicitly by parents. Ideas about what parents want are not, however, supported here by parents' opinions, statistical survey results, or other qualitative or quantitative evidence. The report does not discuss the characteristics of the educational reform in a broader context nor is it possible to read a critical assessment of it. Instead, it is emphasized that a regulation of the amended Act on the education system has made it possible to meet other demands of the parents. This time, increasing the mandatory preschool age to six was considered. The text stresses that the changes enacted on the initiative of Beata Szydło's government were intended to "restore the possibility for parents to be able to make decisions concerning their children and their education" (FatBI 2017: 12). Such an approach to *choice* may be interpreted as being not only related to the restoration of parents' decision-making power but also aimed at convincing readers of the report that parents are the ones who decide what is good for (their) children.

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and does not care about the national interest (cf. <https://www.salon24.pl/u/stanislaw-aniol/736729,opozycja-musi-byc-totalna>).

## Conclusions

Undoubtedly, both reports reveal which private family choices are favored and which are undermined in the public discourse on family policy. In the case of the report created by PiS, the reinforcement of one-dimensional ideals can be observed—if a couple is referred to, it is a married couple (implicitly with children or open to parenthood). The man is seen as the primary earner and the woman as the secondary earner. This is not conducive to the transition to a dual-earner/dual-career model and greater partnership-type sharing in the context of domestic and caring responsibilities. The proposed solutions are not linked to any recognition of the complexity of how parents function in the labor market, or to parental identity and different experiences of it. Due to direct financial transfers these solutions may indirectly encourage women to (temporarily) withdraw from the labor market. In the case of the report created by the PO-PSL coalition as well, non-marital unions seem to be absent from the dominant discourse. Paradoxically, however, this omission is not combined with support for practices inhibiting the transition to a partnership family model, as the report treats the flexibility of solutions as key to extending parental rights.

Both texts present a vision of citizens who can make certain decisions to manage their lives (including their reproduction) on their own—especially those that are in line with the interests of the authorities (cf. [Rose 1996](#); cf. [Meczowska-Christiansen 2015](#)). The political normalization of concern for the procreation, care, and upbringing of the next generation of Poles becomes significant here and furthers the paternalistic nature of the two texts analyzed. However, as the reports show, the normative meanings assigned to the choices made in families marginalize (and at times exclude) some of them.

The main axis of argumentation observable in the reports relies on instrumental rationalization, treating the solutions that have been implemented as serving forward-looking choices. Personal or impersonal authority, cautionary tales, or analogies and moral tales were used less frequently. Sometimes (in particular in the report signed by the majority government of Law and Justice) the choice of legitimation seems to be based on the criterion of being *against* activities of the previous government<sup>5</sup> or in contrast with what was being proposed in a broader cultural context. In general, tensions concerning the area of choice in both reports seem to be set at two opposite poles: the provision of rights (PO-PSL report) versus the provision of benefits (PiS report). On the one hand, this may illustrate the competing interests of these governments in regard to responsible reproductive choices or achieving certain fertility rates. On the other hand, assertions related to the policies of supporting children and parents are sometimes founded on generalizations and visions that do not fully correspond to reality. Thus, in spite of a broad consensus on the prioritization of certain solutions supporting fertility, Polish family policy is still limited by legislative and structural deficiencies, which are usually camouflaged in the content of the reports. Additionally, their authors consistently point out that families living in Poland are, by implication, complete Polish families, which creates an impression of the invisibility of other forms of family (cf. [Bogensneider 2006](#)). Family practices are organized around

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the report prepared by the representatives of the government of Law and Justice may also be perceived as a record of the results of the transformation of family policy from an unfavorable into a particularly favorable one.

heteronormativity, which provides the conditions necessary to fulfil family functions. The absence in the reports of an understanding of the complexity of real families may, however, deprive family policy of valuable analytical perspectives. Rather than privileging a specific definition of family, a useful starting point might be to reference the practices, discourses, and policies relevant to each group described, and the interventions related to them (Furedi 2008; Lind and Keating 2008). Awareness of the multiple determinants of family policy would be essential here. The procedures for establishing common ground in the case of issues considered sensitive and at risk of social intervention take place not only with the participation of politicians, but also with representatives of the Catholic Church, social organizations working on behalf of families, and family experts. Thus, the order adopted in the reports on family policy only gives the appearance of being transparent.

In the case of the report prepared by the Law and Justice government in particular, the discourse of choice is based on the assumption that parents are responsible for meeting their children's needs with as little interference as possible (mostly financial) on the part of the state. The consequence of this state of affairs is the legitimization of government intervention largely oriented toward benefits provided directly to parents. This is in line with the idea of familialism that focuses on the family as an entity entitled to various types of benefits and services, and supports the family's/woman's caregiving functions at the expense of formalized and institutional care. In the case of the version of familialism proposed in the report, it may be assumed that it is intentional in nature (explicit familialism): it directly supports care provided at home through payments to families (Szelewa, Polakowski 2008; Saraceno, Keck 2011). Familialism seems to be related to the process of creating and consolidating a modern nation state here (Haney, Pollard 2003). From this perspective, choices concerning family life are not strictly private in nature but constitute an element of regular battles for the accepted form of family (including in the context of fertility). On account of the above, families are lexicalized through the use of words that place emphasis on issues concerning children or women. This practice may contribute to the depreciation or even removal of other categories of family life (for example, care for aging family members) from the horizon of family policy and make the discourse of choice only seemingly liberating, and *de facto* a discourse of only apparent decision-making.

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