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Work-life Balance and the Gender Regime after the  
Economic Transition<sup>1</sup>

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Work-life balance (WLB) is a key issue in our societies in which there is increasing pressure to be permanently available on demand and to work more intensively, and when due to technological change the borders between work and private life appear to be dissolving. However, the social, institutional and normative frames of a region have a huge impact on how people experience work and private life, where the borders between these spheres lie and how much control individuals have in managing these borders. Based on these arguments, this editorial to the special issue *Work-life balance/imbalance: individual, organisational and social experiences* in *Intersections. EEJSP* draws attention to the social institutions, frameworks and norms which have an effect on experience, practices and expectations about work-life balance. Concerning the time horizon, this editorial focuses on the change of regime as a reference point since socialist and post-socialist eras differ significantly, although there is still some continuity between them. The authors of this introduction offer an overview of the situation in CEE (Central and Eastern Europe) based mainly on examples of Visegrad countries.

The following section starts with a short overview of the economic and social consequences of the transformation in general. Next, we focus our attention on its effects on the labour market. This is followed by a discussion of gender, which is unavoidable when considering the issue of work-life balance. Subsequently, we connect these issues together by discussing how the socialist legacy appears in gender relations in the CEE region. We then briefly touch upon the initiatives of the European Union that are designed to influence gender equality models and work-life balance. After elaborating upon these social and economic frameworks for work-life balance practices in CEE countries, we briefly introduce the main topics that are addressed in the papers included in this special issue.

### *Peculiarities of CEE countries in connection with the transformation*

One of the most important characteristics of the CEE region is that their forms of capitalism were not built up from the inside in a step-by-step process through social and institutional reforms, but emerged as a result of a sudden change in political systems - even if there were some antecedents in most of the countries affected. Countries coped with the difficulties that arose from this process in a diverse manner,

determined by their internal and external peculiarities (King and Szelényi, 2005)<sup>2</sup> and the different choices of their political elites (for further details, see Bohle and Greskovits, 2012; Bartha, 2015).

As for the CEE countries, King and Szelényi created the expression 'capitalism from without' to characterise their regional development (King and Szelényi, 2005: 206).<sup>3</sup> This conception refers to the special process of transformation whereby former state bureaucracy lost its power to enlightened technocrats (from within the communist party) and critical intellectuals (King, 2007: 322). In Poland this was accompanied by the power of the working class; however, in other countries this additional source of power was lacking (King, 2007). Nonetheless, these new elites were limited both in number and in power. Accordingly, multinational companies became the dominant 'class-formation power' (King and Szelényi, 2005: 213), serving to underpin the dominance of foreign capital and its power to determine new forms of economic cooperation. This process was further strengthened by early and rapid modernisation, in parallel with significant amounts of privatisation and support for industrial policy (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012).

After the political transformation, it became essential to establish the basic components of a capitalist economy; namely, free market competition and private ownership. This process involved an influx of varying amounts of foreign investment to CEE countries (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012). This significant exposure to foreign influence became a fundamental and common characteristic of the post-socialist economies, particularly those of the Visegrad group. This phenomenon can be traced not only through recognising the role of foreign capital as the primary source of investment, but also as the second most important source of credit. In addition, foreign capital (channelled through multinational companies) gained an important role in other segments of the economy. Multinationals became not just the biggest investors, but the leading companies in terms of employment and financial performance (Géring, 2015). However, the total share of employment of foreign-owned companies was highly variable (35 per cent in Hungary, 14 per cent in Poland and 15-20 per cent in Slovakia as of 2006), although it is clear that multinational companies substantially increased the employment rates of all post-socialist countries of the time (Eurofond, 2009: 4). The moderately well-qualified labour force of the countries, in combination with their reasonably highly developed technological status and level of modernisation (promoted by foreign company headquarters) created a comparative advantage for these economies.

However, we should not forget the role of the state. Although its size remained moderate, the state played a vital role in providing public goods, and even now

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<sup>2</sup> These include, for example, their geographical situation (e.g. proximity to the EU) and historical and cultural heritage (such as the rate of economic development, and the existence of private property in a planned economy) (King and Szelényi, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> In contrast to two other forms of capitalism classified as 'capitalism from above' (characterising Russian developments) and the Chinese model of 'capitalism from below' (King and Szelényi, 2005).

remains a significant employer through major state enterprises.<sup>4</sup> It should also be emphasised that the state plays a crucial role in supporting caring functions.

It is important to mention here that progress in these societies was only achieved alongside a major increase in social tension since it had strongly asymmetrical impacts: in comparatively advantaged industries the present wages, working conditions and job opportunities now significantly exceed the average which can be obtained in other areas. This is one of the major problems regarding the labour situation in the region: the considerable variability creates high level of tension (Greskovits and Bohle, 2007: 26-27).

The economic trajectory of transition countries has been uneven and strongly influenced by the economic crisis and the austerity experienced in the post-2008 years across Europe. Countries have been hit by the economic downturn in different ways, although we may note that it is particularly countries in the semi-periphery that suffered most from the recession (Fodor and Nagy, 2014). Both the recession and the period of austerity have had a gendered character. At the beginning of the crisis women enjoyed relatively protected status because of the gender segregation of the labour market, yet over time, and during periods of austerity, they lost this relative protection.

These phenomena signify the importance of the concept of gender regimes, which 'are seen as the key policy logics of welfare states in relation to gender' (Pascall and Lewis, 2004: 373). The idea of gender regimes sheds light on how policies for gender equality concerning employment, care work, income, time and voice - which are strongly interrelated - are framed and shaped by the state (Pascall and Lewis, 2004).

### *Labour markets in CEE countries*

The above-described process of transformation following regime change has had ambiguous impacts on the labour market. Whereas the changes in the economic and political system brought in a basic freedom for members of society and shored up fundamental rights in terms of employment opportunities, access to full-time employment and job security dissolved rapidly. This restructured both employees' access to work and bargaining power in relation to employers, and at the same time increased the vulnerability of employees and their defencelessness against work regimes. Because of the shock of the transformation that was experienced in the early 1990s across the region, the level of employment of the working age population declined dramatically in all post-socialist countries.

After the full employment of the socialist regime, countries suffered from a deeply depressed labour market situation: the employment rate of the eight post-

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<sup>4</sup> These dual forms of dependency are connected in the conception of 'double dependency', especially in Hungary. The concept of 'double dependence' (Lengyel and Bank, 2014; Lengyel, 2016) draws attention to the fact that the two most influential actors in the economic sector are the state and foreign capital. In describing this situation utilising the concepts of Greskovits and Bohle (2007), it can be argued that in these Central Eastern European countries the protection of both economy and society have been ensured, and there is a constant balancing act between the two spheres. Because of this dual form of protectionism, the authors call these democracies 'dual democracies'.

socialist new member states (NMS) which accessed the European Union in 2004 remained below the average of the old member states (the employment rate for women aged 15-64 years in NMS was 52.6 per cent vs. 52.9 per cent for old member states, and for men 65.6 per cent vs. 72.0 per cent. By 2003 the figures were 50.2 per cent vs. 56.0 per cent in the case of women, and 61.6 per cent vs. 72.5 per cent for men.)<sup>5</sup> This means that the employment gap increased over the period investigated (European Commission, 2004: 10).

The households of post-socialist countries show considerable polarisation and may be categorised into two primary groups: households in which members work intensely, which may be termed 'work rich' households, and households whose members have been excluded from accessing legal and protected employment, or 'work poor' households (Bukodi, 2006). As the aforementioned author concluded 'a wife with an employed husband is more likely to be an active participant in the labour market than a woman whose husband is unemployed or otherwise inactive. This relationship is also valid vice versa, i.e. from the husband's point of view.' (Bukodi, 2006: 39-40).

The above-described processes occurred in parallel with the world-wide spread of a post-Fordist employment system (Rubery, 2011). This system attaches high value to those employees who are constantly available, flexible in terms of working hours, workplace and type of employment contract, and who are generally willing to work long hours. However, post-socialist workplaces typically remained inflexible, particularly disadvantaging employees with caring responsibilities (Medgyesi, 2001), especially those expected to engage in family-related care work (looking after children, the elderly or the sick).

Moreover, this new situation significantly reduced the ability of such employees to enforce their interests with reference to these responsibilities (Hobson and Fahlén, 2009). Even in those countries where flexible employment opportunities (for example, telecommuting) were relatively widely available, they played only a marginal role in the reconciliation of paid work and private life (Plomien, 2009). Consequently, working arrangements developed according to which a significant proportion of the workforce, particularly those with a low level of education, were marginalised and completely excluded from the formal labour market. At the same time, even those who managed to retain their place in the labour market experienced long, unsocial working hours and became less well protected than under the previous regime, very often taking on more than one job.

This trend is well documented by statistics which indicate that employees work many hours per week (typically full-time, and even overtime) and show the lack of availability of part-time employment in all the CEE countries, even for female employees, resulting in low fertility rates across the region. As discussed by researchers, the conditions are particularly striking when compared to those of Western European countries (Oláh and Fahlén, 2013). Despite the fact that there has been a generational turnover since the system change, labour market statistics continue to indicate that the segment of the population with only a basic level of education is being reproduced in post-socialist countries on an ongoing basis, and

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<sup>5</sup> In the latter comparison, data from Cyprus is also included.

both the opportunities for social mobility and their bargaining power of this group remain limited (Scharle, 2012). In the midst of the above-described economic and social environment, and considering the importance of reconciling work and private life, investigation of the interaction between these two spheres over the last few decades – and particularly the preservation of the private sphere – becomes more important than ever.

### *The relevance of gender*

The changes delineated above have generally affected men and women differently. As far as transformative processes are concerned, developments in Western Europe demonstrate widespread change, and from the 1960s onwards an unmistakable revolution in terms of gender (Goldscheider et al., 2015; England, 2010; Esping-Andersen, 2009). This gender revolution not only increased female labour market participation (and the acceptance of such), but also affected men's participation in the family. Despite these changes, it is important to note that the household division of labour in general, and caring responsibilities in particular, remain gendered. The phenomenon of an ageing society will further increase the importance of this issue and significantly explain gender-specific variability in work-life balance in the future (Bartha et al., 2014).

These considerations are also reflected in the focus of WLB research itself. McDonald and Jeanes (2012) highlight that, before the 1990s, WLB academic literature mainly focused on the concerns of employed women. However, the authors emphasise that balance for women cannot be achieved without taking into account the position of men and fathers (McDonald and Jeanes, 2012: 1) since the decisions men make about their involvement in paid and care work are the unspoken flipside of women's choices (Stephenson, 2010: 237). In a similar fashion, numerous scholars emphasise that the gender revolution will only be successful if it also includes men (England, 2010). As Esping-Andersen (2009) puts it, a new equilibrium can only be achieved with the feminisation of male life-courses and with the widespread acceptance of a model of caring fatherhood. However, this new equilibrium involves raising the importance of the issue of equality and should also allow for the higher-level integration of work and life, which in turn will increase fertility rates and the stability of families (Goldscheider et al., 2015).<sup>6</sup>

It should also be mentioned that the tendency for men to have less stable relationships with their children is strengthening, since they are increasingly less likely,

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<sup>6</sup> It should be mentioned that new models of fatherhood are also crucial as far as children's well-being and development are concerned. In their review, Rohner and Veniziano (2001) argue that psychology and child development studies initially focused on mothers because their relationship with children seemed more important than the fathers'. Nevertheless, evidence shows that when fathers are both supportive partners and caring fathers, mothers are also better parents. Consequently, children benefit greatly if they have not only one but two parents with whom they have a loving relationship (Rohner and Veniziano, 2001).

as biological fathers, to live in the same household as their children.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it is also important to highlight that the strength of the relationship between fathers and their children is greatly affected by the nature and existence of the institutions in a given country. These not only affect the financial background of a family and its access to child-care facilities (Oláh et al., 2002), but also legitimise some fatherhood practices, ideologies and identities, while marginalising others (Hobson and Morgan, 2002: 14).

Even the Western European models demonstrate considerable diversity in terms of which type of family model can be used to characterise them. While there is a wide range of different typologies and classifications, the most important difference is captured in the dichotomy of the *male-breadwinner* and *worker carer* models coined by Oláh and colleagues (2002). The male breadwinner model reinforces gender inequality through public policies which incentivise women to stay home and provide them with little job security when they attempt to return to work. In contrast, worker carer models support gender equality since the custodial parent is at the centre of family support systems and parental leave is coupled with job guarantees (Oláh et al., 2002: 26).

Apart from the effect of public policy incentives, the transformation of social norms is also an important driver of changes. Changes in traditional gender roles mean that female participation in the labour market is now not only a possibility, but increasingly appears to be a societal expectation (Goldscheider et al., 2015). Nevertheless, other voices highlight that even if the male breadwinner model was never widespread – but instead tied to specific historical eras and even then to specific socio-economic statuses – it is by no means dead. While it has been weakened considerably, directly or indirectly, it still affects thinking about the family and gender relations (Hobson and Morgan, 2002: 15).

The processes delineated above increasingly often touch upon issues such as how different family policies and the given welfare state/regime shape the way family caring tasks are accomplished in general, and what specific ideal types exist in terms of family care systems in particular (i.e. varieties of familialism) (Leitner, 2003). In relation to familialism, Leitner raises the question (in connection with Esping-Andersen's work) to what extent public policies treat families as units that accomplish caring tasks. The author criticises Esping-Andersen's concepts of familialistic and defamilializing welfare regimes and instead of these concepts defines 'policies which explicitly support the family in its caring function as an indicator for familialism' (Leitner, 2003: 354). Concerning defamilialism, the question raised by the author is to what extent access to public or private services in welfare regimes can relieve families of the burden of caring tasks and thereby weaken dependency on family ties.<sup>8</sup> (It

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<sup>7</sup> As Oláh and colleagues put it, 'parenthood has become a much less central and stable element in men's lives, not only compared with the past, but particularly as compared with its role in the lives of women' (Oláh et al., 2002: 25).

<sup>8</sup> The matrix of familialism/defamilialism demarcates four ideal types: explicit familialism (strong familialism or weak defamilialism); optional familialism (strong familialist care policies, weak defamilialism: only for those who have access to child-care facilities); implicit familialism (neither familialism nor defamilialism is strong, yet since there are no alternatives to family care, tasks are ultimately carried out by the family); and lastly, defamilialism (with a strong tendency towards defamilialism and a weak tendency towards familialism) (Leitner, 2003: 358).

should here be mentioned that Leitner only examined Western European societies utilising these ideal types, and the experiences of CEE counties with de/familialism were developed a little later, as shortly described below.)

Familialistic policies have a strong gendered character, as it is mainly women who are responsible for carrying out caring duties. These policies may directly strengthen traditional attitudes towards gender, although in certain cases they can also 'ensure that care provision is shared on equal terms among male and female family members' (Leitner, 2003: 367), thus they can be de-gendered. The empirical analysis referred to explored both gendered (e.g. France, Germany, Italy) and de-gendered (Denmark, Sweden) variants of familialism in Western countries.

### *Re-familisation in CEE countries*

The regime change created a somewhat different scenario for post-socialist countries in terms of gender equality which was fraught with ambiguity (LaFont, 2001; Křížková et al., 2010). The socialist emancipatory project's main characteristics were the high female employment rate, relatively easy access to childcare facilities maintained by the state or employers and the system of 'support' services aimed at females (Pascall and Kwak, 2005). The need for social policies to support employed women, especially mothers, arose from this lopsided emancipatory project. In the socialist era full female employment was the social norm, supplemented by the fact that household chores were almost totally carried out by women (LaFont, 2001; Pascall and Kwak, 2005). This means that emancipation occurred in way in which the participation of men in household tasks was not even considered. This dual burden became a permanent feature of everyday life, since women were required to meet both obligations: 'traditional motherhood and maternal responsibility were simultaneously idealised and sustained' (Pascall and Kwak, 2005: 17).

While in Western European societies gender relations developed according to the gender revolution discussed briefly above, in the post-socialist countries a conservative turn (a so-called backlash) occurred in response to the prescriptive form of emancipation that characterised the socialist era. Socialist emancipatory politics in general delegitimised the issue of equality later in time (LaFont, 2001). This backlash was expressed both in the dramatic drop in female employment rates discussed above and in the reinforcement of traditional social expectations (Křížková et al., 2010; Klenner and Hašková, 2010). Moreover, the situation can also be characterised by a decrease in state support for care in the CEE context.

This does not mean that this unequal situation automatically favoured men in general, and fathers in particular. For example, Hobson and colleagues (2011), when comparing Swedish and Hungarian fathers, emphasise that this conservative normative context provides little guidance or support for men who would like to engage with a different form of masculinity and fatherhood. The result is a situation of limited agency and a lack of feeling of entitlement of Hungarian working fathers, even if the legal and policy background for better supporting them does exist and may be utilised to exert pressure on employers (Hobson et al., 2011).

Regime change was accompanied by the partial disappearance of job opportunities and limitations on access to child-care facilities, especially for children

under three. Data demonstrate that access to formal childcare for children under 3 is limited (i.e., below 20 per cent) in many post-socialist countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria). None of the CEE countries except Slovenia reached the Barcelona target of providing at least 33 per cent of all children of up to three years of age with childcare by 2010 (European Commission, 2014: 6).

Moreover, social expectations were reinforced, emphasising different social roles for men and women. These processes gradually turned re-familisation into an accepted and crystallised norm in these countries (Saxonberg and Sirovátka, 2006). (This can be contrasted with the de-familisation process which occurred in Scandinavian countries accompanied by greater access for females to paid labour, better general access to welfare services and the more active role of fathers in child care.)

In a paradoxical fashion, this process of re-familisation reinforced the male breadwinner model and, in turn, strengthened the legitimacy of the notion that undervalued, household-related labour is carried out by women. Accordingly, for women, reconciling work and private life became an even more complicated task (Plomien, 2009). This is especially true of women with small children (Pascall and Kwak, 2005), who face the effect of a 'penalty for motherhood' in the labour market (Glass and Fodor, 2011) alongside their requirement to juggle work and private life obligations. This motherhood penalty is increased through the institution of the long period of parental leave which is typically taken by mothers (Fodor and Kispéter, 2014).

Numerous authors have argued that the culprit is not the social policies that affect women, but the competitive market which puts females at a disadvantage. Among other reasons, this is because they have caring responsibilities. Pascall and Kwak, following an analysis of countries which underwent regime change, expressed this situation as follows: 'At work, women's position has been weakened, but more through the new competitive context than through changes in social policy affecting them as women.' (Pascall and Kwak, 2005: 66).

At the same time, the institution of parental leave might be thought to have a balancing effect on the reconciliation of work and private life. However, since fathers are rarely able to (or actually do) take advantage of this leave, their ability to participate in family life remains limited (Plomien, 2009). Nevertheless, the role of fatherhood has become ambiguous and often contradictory in the CEE context.<sup>9</sup>

If parental leave is too short, it hinders parents from spending enough time with their children. If longer, parents may risk losing their jobs. At worst, faced with a lack of opportunities to reconcile work and private life, parents with small children may completely exit the labour market. The other side of the coin is when parental leave is too long and is only taken by mothers – as in the Czech Republic with its four, and in Hungary three years of maternity benefit – which often makes returning to the world of paid labour impossible. This is how inflexible, maternal responsibility-oriented

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<sup>9</sup> While having a loving and warm relationship with children is considered one of the most important tasks of fathers, providing material security for children is still highly ranked, showing the strength of the traditional, main breadwinner type of fatherhood identity (Spéder, 2011). This ambiguity might partly explain fathers' resistance to taking parental leave.



family policies implicitly hold back women from working and having children in CEE countries (Krizková et al., 2010; Plomien, 2009). The situation is exacerbated by the limited access to child-care facilities (Scharle, 2007).

According to several studies (Saxonberg and Sirovátka, 2006; Szikra and Szelewa, 2010; Klenner and Hasková, 2010; Křížková et al., 2010; Plomien, 2009) in all post-socialist countries except Slovenia familialism is dominant and can be identified in the poor availability and insufficient quality of childcare and care for the elderly. Long parental leave schemes, as mentioned previously, might also serve as a double-edge sword when it comes to the return of mothers to the labour market. These factors all contribute to the low fertility rates of the region. According to Szikra and Szelewa, the low level of willingness to have children can be explained by the dominance of familialism both in Hungary and in Poland (Szikra and Szelewa, 2010). It can thus be seen that, after the regime change, different forms of gender regimes became established although all countries seem to be strongly predisposed towards familialism, the policy support for which has significantly contributed to women's marginalisation in the labour market (Fodor and Kispéter, 2014).

However, in recent decades some changes have been witnessed, with considerable variation across the countries under investigation. The historical legacy in the Czech Republic and Slovakia supported traditional work-care regimes with long parental (maternal) leave, as opposed to the situation in East Germany, where public childcare remained a more important part of the welfare regime. These distinct models (interrupted vs. continuous dual-earner model) have been supported by attitudes towards gender roles as well (Klenner and Hašková, 2010). Hungary followed the model prevalent in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Křížková et al., 2010). Moreover, changes in the micro sphere can also be identified: the younger generation of men seem to be more equality-oriented regarding their participation in household activities (European Commission, 2015b: 23).

### *The role of the European Union*

As outlined above, a welfare regime based on post-Fordist principles tends to disadvantage employees who are responsible for bringing up children and for taking care of dependent family members. As Hobson and Fahlén (2009), among other scholars, have emphasised, two competing scenarios can be identified in the labour market. On the one hand, there are 'disembodied' workers who are unencumbered by care-related responsibilities, while on the other there are embodied workers who have to reconcile having and caring for children with employment. This is the reason for another type of movement which seeks to reconcile this situation in the countries of the EU: to establish a sustainable national framework for maintaining both private and working life, the EU is attempting to support the process with various initiatives, guidelines and policies.

As Walby stated, developed countries follow a path which leads to the emergence of a public gender regime. According to her typology, countries may be differentiated by the model they follow to create this public gender regime; either through a social democratic public service route (Nordic countries), a market-led public service route (US) or a regulatory route (EU countries) (Walby, 2004: 11).

Approaching the topic from either the direction of employment, population or gender equality policies, the basic dilemma remains the same: namely, how to meet simultaneously the targets of increasing the birth-rate and employment. The European Commission is attempting to facilitate these changes through the application of various strategies and guidelines.

These initiatives aim at the removal of discriminatory practices and the regulation of working time in order to facilitate the management of care-related responsibilities and facilitate social inclusion (Walby, 2004: 11). Especially in employment-related issues, the EU-policy initiatives typically go beyond simply regulation and refer to the importance of gender equality, thus contributing to the effective building of gender regimes across member states (Walby, 2004). We may argue that the emerging gender regimes become catalysts for an increase in employment, and later (more indirectly), address employment-related issues such as gender-based violence or care duties. EU directives about gender equality focused more intensely on the reconciliation of work and private life and caring responsibilities from the 1980s onward (Walby, 2004). Although there is a considerable theory-related framework for both gender equality and work-life balance, the applied concept of WLB relies mostly on a pragmatic approach whereby affordable quality childcare, paid leave for both parents and flexible working arrangements play a crucial role in releasing working people from their family-related burdens (EC, 2015a: 9).

Despite these initiatives, one can still recognize the tensions that manifest within individual families: the new rights for parents have emerged from an era of insecure and unstable employment conditions (Hobson and Fahlen, 2009: 215). Moreover, contradictory expectations concerning parenting and paid work characterize the situation of embodied workers. The above-mentioned European guidelines can be regarded as clearly innovative in terms of work-life balance and gender equality in post-socialist countries as such reconciliative policies are extended to women and men alike. However, as described in earlier publications, EU accession first involved the *de jure* harmonisation of legal legislation with EU directives (before accession), while later on the integration of policy initiatives (such as reconciliation policies) became dominant (Krizsán and Zentai, 2006; Křížková et al., 2010). In the field of gender equality these policy initiatives were typically designed to decrease the gender segregation of the labour market, to promote reconciliation between work and family spheres, and at the same time address the increasing prevalence of familialism, as discussed above in detail.<sup>10</sup> Experiences with the implementation of gender equality policies indicates the importance of national gender machinery and political will. CEE countries have not made an obvious effort to develop a permanent gender equality framework (Krizsán and Zentai, 2006).

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<sup>10</sup> The EU accession of transition countries explicitly contributed to the establishment of gender equality machinery and a policy framework to some extent as this process intensified the spread of policy approaches, if in some cases only temporarily, declaring and demonstrating the importance of gender equality in all areas of society and economy. Consequently, it maintained the very central issue of gender equality on the policy agenda (Křížková et al., 2010).

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***Work-life balance/imbalance: the topical issue for IEEJSP***

Taking everything into account, these are the main economic and social forces and factors by which different organisational and individual work-life balance practices are framed in the CEE region. The articles in this special issue bring forward topical WLB issues that are deeply embedded in this environment.

In line with this, in the very first article Dóra Bari and Péter Róbert compare eight of the region's countries (Czech Republic, East Germany, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine) in terms of perceived tensions in work-life balance and satisfaction with life. One of their assumptions – which proves to be verified by their data – is that satisfaction with work-life balance increases overall satisfaction with life. Furthermore, the authors pay special attention to examining the gender perspective and differences in satisfaction with life among the countries examined.

One instructive example of the application of the gender perspective is Iva Šmídová's analysis about the pervasive effect of gender regimes in Czech Maternity Hospitals. As the author points out, individual work-life balance choices are tightly constrained by the heavily gendered organisational operations of the hospitals. Furthermore, by defining the structural mechanisms which reproduce these regimes she touches upon the broader social mechanisms which have a role in this process of reproduction, such as professional and seniority issues.

Another component of the effects of organisational structure on individual WLB strategies is presented by Henriett Primecz and her colleagues who examine how Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) affect employees' work-life balance opportunities and experiences. The authors target so-called 'Employee Friendly Workplaces' in order to relate the characteristics of organisational employee-friendliness to work-life balance issues. Their analysis pays special attention to the transformative effect of ICT and provides a detailed account of individual coping strategies as they correspond to the opportunities and difficulties inherent in the flexibility of working time and space.

The issue of flexible working space is the main focus of the article by Jacek Gałdecki and his colleagues who illustrate how the boundaries of work and home became blurred by the (technological) opportunity to work from home. The authors turn their attention to understanding the choices of individuals who are by definition most exposed to these difficulties (namely, teleworkers) by analysing what individual coping strategies can be identified among teleworkers in Poland and what differences can be traced back to diverse factors such as gender or caring responsibilities at home, etc.

As delineated above, the entire work-life balance theme is highly gender-influenced. Some of the before-mentioned gender factors appear in an article by Mária Neményi and Judit Takács, and in another by Nikolett Geszler. These papers may be seen as two sides of the same coin because they deal with the gender aspects of WLB in relation to the main breadwinner but take a different focus: Neményi and Takács analyse the WLB-related strategies of women who are the main breadwinners in their families, while Geszler pays attention to examining the conflicts manager fathers experience between their roles as ideal managers and as involved fathers.

When Mária Neményi and Judit Takács take into consideration the roles women play, a further gender layer is added to the issue; namely, the modern notion of women as the main breadwinners in the traditional gender context of CEE countries. The authors elaborate four models of family relationships in connection with work-life balance issues in those families in which the female partner is the primary breadwinner. The models are based on two dimensions: role expectations regarding family-related tasks, and the voluntary or forced nature of the reversal of the role model.

As described earlier, fatherhood has undergone a significant change involving a move from a focus on the role of father as breadwinner towards father as carer. Nonetheless, in the CEE region this change is a lopsided one, although – as Geszler demonstrates – it is palpable. The male breadwinner model has not disappeared, leading to conflict between these role patterns. Geszler's analysis examines the different forms of this conflict and highlights the fact that the issue plays a smaller part in the struggle between work and family obligations than time- and strain-based problems do.

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