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**“Solidarity between Generations” in the Family: Opportunities and Obstacles**

**Abstract (German) –** Das Thema „Intergenerationelle Solidarität in der Familie“ erscheint oft als eines der Themen, das von Sozialethikern vernachlässigt wird, weil sie zu sehr im sozialen Nahbereich verortet und deshalb als möglicher Gegenstand für die Sozialethik abgelehnt wird. Der Rückgang von Solidarität in der Gesellschaft scheint allerdings mit der Krise der Familie parallel zu verlaufen.

In diesem Aufsatz wird die Bedeutung der Solidarität in der Familie mit besonderem Hinblick auf ihre intergenerationellen Aspekte untersucht. Dabei geht es um den inneren Zusammenhang der Begriffe „Solidarität“ und „Familie“, um die Chancen und Hindernisse der Solidarität, die aus der Situation der Familien in der westlichen Welt folgen, um intergenerationelle Solidarität in der Familie als ethische Norm, die möglichen politischen Implikationen dieser Konzepte und schließlich die wichtigsten Elemente einer europäischen Familienpolitik.

Familie gilt als ein grundlegender Ort für gesellschaftliche Solidarität überhaupt. Jedoch wird heute solidarisches Verhalten in der Familie von gesellschaftlichen Phänomenen wie der starken Trennung zwischen Öffentlich und Privat, der Pluralisierung von Familienformen, der Veränderung der Altersstruktur oder dem Funktionsverlust der Familie behindert. Diese sind aber auch Chancen für den Aufbau einer neuen Struktur der Solidarität. Gesellschaftliche Veränderungen öffnen neue Wege für solidarisches Verhalten. Gesellschaft und Politik müssen erkennen, dass das Schicksal der Solidarität mit dem Schicksal der Familie zusammenhängt. In Familien zu investieren bedeutet schließlich, in Solidarität zu investieren.

**Abstract (Français)** – Souvent, le thème de la « solidarité intergénérationnelle dans la famille » apparaît comme un des thèmes négligés par l’éthique sociale, parce-que il appartient à un espace de proximité social refusé comme objet de réflexion structurelle en éthique sociale. Mais le recul de solidarité en société paraît se développer parallèlement avec la crise de la famille.

Dans cet article on étudie l’importance de la solidarité en famille dans la perspective particulière de ses aspectes intergénérationnels. Il s’agit d’expliquer la relation intérieure des concepts de la « solidarité » et de la « famille », de présenter les opportunités et les obstacles de la solidarité comme conséquences de la situation de la famille en Occident, de justifier la norme de la solidarité intergénérationnelle en famille, d’en tirer les implications politiques et, finalement, de présenter les éléments les plus importants de la politique familiale au niveau de l’Union Européenne.

On dit, que la famille est le lieu fondamental de toute solidarité. Mais aujourd’hui, la solidarité en famille est entravée par des phénomènes socials comme la forte séparation entre le public et le privé, la pluralisation des formes de familles, le changement dans la structure des groupes d’âge et la perte de fonctions de la famille. En même temps, ce sont aussi des opportunités pour construire une nouvelle structure de solidarité. Les changements socials ouvrent les chemins à des formes nouvelles de solidarité. La société et la politique doivent reconnaître, que le destin de la solidarité el le destin de la famille sont reliés. Investir dans des familles, c’est investir dans la solidarité.

**Introduction**

“Without father without mother

without God or homeland either

without crib or coffin-cover

without kisses or a lover”

(Attila József: With a pure heart)

The lines above were written by a twenty-year old young man in 1925 in Hungary. This catalogue of “withouts” gives us the major data for a certificate of relational poverty. Its owner’s parents are dead, he has few religious and cultural bonds, he has lost his roots, he cannot count on the next generation, and he lacks any intimate relationship. Someone who speaks this way must have lost his bearings. The problems mentioned in these lines not only distressed this poor poet in the first half of the past century, but they also make visible the troubling questions of today’s western world. It is sufficient to point at such frequently discussed problems as “the disappearance of fathers”, the increase of “anonymous funerals”, the rapid growth in the number of people with a “privatized religiosity” and without a bond to any religious community, and the category of “involuntary singles”. These terms come from the vocabulary of sociology and could easily serve as substitutes, when it comes to translating the poem into contemporary academic language. This shows that these problems are still present in our western societies: family bonds, religion, a sense of community and intimate relationships are still “scarce commodities”, or at least “goods in always shorter supply”. They are goods which are communicated more or less through the family and between generations.

The reason for choosing these lines as the introduction to this article is that they show emphatically the different dimensions for what we call “intergenerational solidarity in the family”. When it comes to social ethics, this topic seems to be rather neglected, even avoided. Solidarity in the family is considered too particular, and as such is quickly turned down as a possible topic for social ethics.

However, despite the social processes supporting individualization in western societies, the family turns out to be a decisive factor in determining one’s social role and “destiny”. Family solidarity shows itself to be even more important in the post-communist societies of Eastern Europe, since macro-level solidarity is often short of sufficient economic, political and social resources (Utasi 2002). Family and kin relationships are able to compensate for these deficiencies of macro-level solidarity to a certain extent. Despite its obvious importance for the individual, family solidarity needs a closer examination as an ethical question. Family solidarity is not just a descriptive term, a neutral term that sounds positive, but is also an ethical principle, which needs further concretization. The question is not just what makes family solidarity, but also its relation to fairness and justice. It turns out to be even more difficult to answer it when we look at the changes in contemporary European societies and the transformation of the role and shape of the families. European integration complicates it even further, since different countries and regions bring their own different problems, situations and practices to the table. Thus it is no wonder that the concept of solidarity (in the family and between generations) happens to be opaque.

The aim of this paper is to examine in five steps the meaning of solidarity in the family, with special respect to its intergenerational aspect: first, exploring the interconnectedness and interdependency of the terms in question – solidarity, family, and generation; second, exploring the meaning of intergenerational solidarity when it comes to the situation of families in modern western societies; third, expounding the norms that intergenerational solidarity in the family entails; fourth, looking at the possible political implications of family solidarity; and finally sketching out in broad lines the major elements of a European family policy promoting intergenerational solidarity.

**1. Solidarity, family and generations**

Possibly the shortest definition of solidarity is “standing on the same ground with other people” (Baumgartner 2004, 283 – tr. G.K.). This statement can be read as an insight, which says that we are “all in the same boat”, that we are connected to each other, depend on each other, and our lives are bound together in a thousand different ways (Baumgartner, Korff 1990, 238 – tr. G.K.). That is the *descriptive* side of solidarity. Today it is not hard to conceive the fact of this interconnectedness: the great crises, such as the nuclear, ecological and global crises have shown us how close we are connected to each other, even when living on opposite sides of the world. This interconnectedness was unambiguously illuminated by Ulrich Beck’s term of a “world risk society” (Beck 1998).

But here we are rather interested in the *normative* meaning of solidarity. To understand it we need to ask the question about its origins. The term itself comes from legal vocabulary (*solidarité* fr.) denoting corporate bodies of debtors, whose members all take full responsibility for paying the loan back (Sokol 2012, 69-70). If they failed to do so, they were all individually liable to the law. So they had no choice but to trust each other and act reliably, paying the sum back (if the situation demanded it) as far as it was possible for them to do so. Hence the term “solidarity” postulated morally responsible behaviour from the very beginning. Trying to find a definition for solidarity based on this example we could say that it is “a mutually binding identification between the individual and the particular group he belongs to” (Baumgartner 2012, 60 – tr. G.K.).

Thus all actions taken on the ground of solidarity presuppose something common in those who are involved: it can be spontaneous, as in the case of an accident, or it can be conscious and planned, as in the case of solidarity between colleagues in the workplace. However, there is always something common that results in community between those affected, usually a situation or an event. However there is something even more fundamental, namely the shared underlying experience of being a member of the same human race. (It is important to note here, that this “experience of being a member of the same human race” is strongly connected to the concept of the family, since it is mediated by the fact that every human being is the progeny of previous generations.)

In contrast to the “spontaneous and emphatic” or “conscious and planned solidarity”, in the case of the family we may talk about an “underlying family solidarity”, which differs from the former in being constant and influential throughout the whole life-span. This “underlying family solidarity” is not a concrete norm yet, but rather indicates the common ground for actions of solidarity within the family. It is based on the sense of being bound together by family-ties, which is a major and inevitable part of everyone’s identity, independent of whether family members are bound together by genetic ties or by free choice, as in the case of adoptive families, for example. (No one can say: I used to be a member of this or that family, as one can say of a club, party or a firm.) This “underlying family solidarity”, being strongly connected to personal identity, has above all affective foundations, which makes it less a norm, but rather an inclination for actions of solidarity.

Family relations are thus characterized in the first place by solidarity. The long lasting philosophical debate about whether we should view the family through the moral categories of love or justice (Honneth 2005), is put in a new and different light when the family is understood as a community experienced by its members as the place of “underlying family solidarity”. Secondly, by the fact that this “underlying family solidarity” manifests itself in the net of intergenerational relationships, where the different generations both determine and rely on each other. It is a basic anthropological fact that the different generations are dependent on the acts of solidarity of the earlier (and the next) generations from the very beginning (and to the very end) of their lives.

This sense of dependency serves as the basis for solidarity in the family. This is the primary reason for solidarity preceding justice in the case of the family. It is obvious that families need justice (Sedmak 2003). Solidarity on its own does not tell us how to shape our personal relationships. It needs to be informed by the category of justice. But when it comes to the underlying relations between members of the family, their common source is not competition or the struggle for life-chances, but solidarity. It is not about competing individuals joining together and giving up certain benefits to earn the biggest possible profit, but rather persons experiencing their relationships as given, and their life as inherently bound together with others.

In contrast to the factual asymmetry between family members from different generations, their fundamental equality becomes visible when looking at their relationship through the category of solidarity. The duty to care for each other manifests itself in different ways at each singular stage or situation in life. Moreover, the non-reciprocity of intergenerational solidarity, its altruistic nature, unfolds itself best when observed within the family (McCormick).

As the family and solidarity interweave, it is the same with the concept of generation. The connection becomes evident when looking at the commonly used definitions. According to one definition, generation “can be defined as a cohort that for some special reason such as a major event (war, pestilence, civil conflict or natural catastrophe such as an earthquake) develops a collective consciousness that permits that generation to intervene significantly in social change” (Archer 2004, 122). So there is a certain shared experience that motivates common action, just as in the case of solidarity. The other definition views generations as “chronologically defined”, as people living in the same period of time (Archer 2004, 123). It should be noted that solidarity in the family is not primarily intra-generational but rather inter-generational. There are always generations who fall back upon actions of solidarity to a greater extent, such as children and the elderly. The basis for the identification that serves as the basis of solidarity is the experience of intergenerational belonging. Thus solidarity within the family has to be understood basically as intergenerational solidarity.

**2. The obstacles to and opportunities for intergenerational solidarity**

When looking at the position of families in western societies, the following facts have to be taken into consideration: the bond between the public and the private, the pluralisation of family forms, the reshaping of the age-structure diagrams, the rearrangement of the functions of the family, and increased social mobility (Kovács 2009, 181-238).

First, the modern family came into existence with the division of the public and the private, affected by all the inconsistency and conflict of this separation. As for today’s people, the public sphere often appears as confused, chaotic, ruthless, and inhuman; it is the sphere of the private that provides a counterbalance.

The major role of the private sphere, i.e. the world of intimate relationships and the family, is to provide the individual with a sufficient framework for the construction of *nomos*. It should serve as a space where family members can obtain, or rather regain, the so much needed meaning and perspicuity of their lives (Berger / Kellner 1965). However, the dissonance between the public and the private spheres – with *chaos* on the one side, *cosmos* on the other – can easily lead to an inadequate understanding of solidarity. When the family is conceived in isolation and brought into contrast with the public sphere, solidarity can easily be misunderstood as the duty to represent and satisfy the demands and interests of family members, without regard for others who are not members of the family, or to social justice in general.[[1]](#footnote-1) (The practice of nepotism is one example of misunderstanding family solidarity.) Still, the stability of the private sphere, with all its potential for experiences of solidarity, can serve as a major source of solidarity, reaching beyond the barriers of the family.

Second, in our contemporary western societies it is hard to find a proper and general definition for the family. A pluralisation of family forms is clearly observable (Beck-Gernsheim 2010; Spéder 2005). A number of social phenomena such as separation, divorce, remarriage, children born out of wedlock, single parents, and the appearance of three- or four-generation families seem to make all efforts to define the family even more hopeless. As a consequence of these, the system of solidarity within the family becomes more and more ambiguous. This carries the danger of the evaporation of the solid basis of natural solidarity. The order of solidarity can easily cease to be transparent, and the capacity of family members for actions of solidarity can be seriously damaged. Simultaneously, this makes the need to expand solidarity beyond the borders of consanguinity even more compelling. Different generations are bound together not only by ties of blood, by biological descent, but also by social or acquired bonds. Thus families with members who are not blood relatives are able to create and cultivate new, quasi-natural solidarity-bonds, and see them as a chance to experience solidarity in a new way.

Third, it is especially the reshaping of the age-structure diagrams in the western world that demands a restructuring of solidarity between generations (Monostori 2009). There is a constant rise in life expectancy, especially for women. At the same time there is a drastic decrease in the number of childbirths, to an extent that in most parts of Europe they don’t match the number of deaths. This demographic crisis eradicates the precondition for actions of solidarity between the different generations, which is a balanced between the different age groups. There is an increase in the number of people living alone in a single household, often deprived of the chance to put their solidarity potentials into action, with weak or even nonexistent family bonds. Few people live in extended families in western societies. Because of the increase in life-span and the decrease in birth rates, more old people provide for a smaller cluster of the younger generation. At first glance this seems to benefit the younger generation: they receive more material goods, care and attention. But later, as the pattern of care changes, this will turn out to be a great burden on the shoulders of those who are now young. However, these changes in age-structure diagrams carry considerable potential for solidarity, which needs to be harnessed creatively.

Fourth, solidarity has to be redefined by the fact that the higher, institutionalized levels of society now carry many functions for which families were originally responsible, such as the raising of children and care for the elderly (Mitterauer 1991, 125). Today the foremost function of the family is the maintenance of emotional and mental stability. Depriving the family of many of its functions brings both threats and opportunities. It can lead to desolidarisation, to the disintegration of the family and solidarity between generations. It can make people less willing to accept the burden of raising children and caring for the elderly, neglecting those who are inconvenient, especially children and the elderly. However, with the principle of subsidiarity in mind, the transfer of responsibilities to higher levels of society can provide a much needed support for families to strengthen their inner solidarity. It can relieve families of burdens that neither the individuals, nor their network of solidarity are able to carry any longer. In this sense institutionalized support for the family can free its members for solidarity.

Fifth, the formulation of family solidarity is complicated by geographical and relational mobility. Despite the fact that the average geographical distance between family members seems to have been constant in recent decades in Europe, emigration has become a serious problem for many families in the economically disadvantaged regions of Europe (Utasi 2002, 391; Gödri 2012, 145). Family solidarity is indeed significantly reduced by geographical mobility, even when we take new ways of telecommunication into consideration. Although solidarity must be universally valid, in reality we are better able to put solidarity into practice with those who are closest to us. Geographical mobility significantly reduces that option. At the same time, the distance from one’s natural family carries the possibility of building up new networks of solidarity between generations. Moreover, constraining mobility can become an important source of ever-changing, yet long-established communities of solidarity.

**3. The norms of intergenerational solidarity within the family**

Social changes and the transformation of the role and form of family-life make it necessary to put solidarity into practice in new and different ways. However, the norms implied by intergenerational solidarity within the family do not follow directly from the sociological facts mentioned above. They describe the role of and the opportunities for solidarity but they do not provide us with a detailed description of what is entailed by the norm of solidarity in the case of intergenerational relationships within the family. “The sociological description of the phenomenon is unable to show what makes the concept of solidarity a keyword of social ethics.… Solidarity gains its principal ethical claim by its orientation to the human person” (Baumgartner 2012, 64 – tr. G.K.). Thus we have to consider all the principles that derive from the personal-being of all members of the family, and all the other actors the family is connected to. When viewing these with respect of the family, one important insight arises: intergenerational solidarity not only involves the actual members, but also past generations and the generations to come. We are not only standing on the same ground as those actually present, but also the generations of the past and the future. It is clear that the presence of these generations is limited, but the fact of the interconnectedness of different generations is evident. The major challenge here is to explain the norm of solidarity in the family with special respect to its intergenerational nature.

First of all, the norm of *solidarity can never ignore the personal being of family members*, but rather has to aim at its realization and respect. As mentioned above, a family is not a community by choice, but is conceived as natural. We are all members of our family without requesting it, irrespective of our personal qualities or achievements. This makes an essential feature of personal being visible, namely its validity without respect to any external factors. This personal being and dignity must be respected in all interaction, thus also in the relationship between parents and children (Kovács 2010). Although its basic nature appears to be asymmetrical, on the grounds of being persons, there is an underlying symmetry between parents and children. Children need care, especially the very young, but it has to be provided with respect to their personal dignity. The efforts made in our western societies made to standardize the qualities of future children, their social roles and path of life subsuming them in to the plans and desires of today’s adult generation violate the personal dignity of future generations. The solidarity between parents and children cannot depend on personal qualities, since the norm of solidarity entails respect, which is independent of qualities or achievements. Nevertheless, it is also true the other way round: solidarity between parents and children does not end when parents do not support their children anymore, especially when they grow old and sick. Solidarity manifests itself at its best when it is the parents who are in need of support.

Respect for personal being is the key to the stability and persistence of solidarity independent of the qualities of the individual. This is supposed to characterize intergenerational relationships and provide their constancy in the always changing systems of solidarity within the family. However, when it comes to particular actions of solidarity, idiosyncratic characteristics and factual asymmetries need to be taken into consideration. The norm of solidarity can only be turned into action with respect to factual situations, first of all with the knowledge of the fact that somebody is in need of our help. Children, the elderly, men or women may stand in need of different forms of help due to their different situations, and different forms of help are needed in unexpected situations, such as illness or unemployment. Solidarity has to be put into action with respect to the particular situations that jeopardize human dignity.

Another consequence of this respect for personal being is that no one can be put to the service of the family simply through a radical claim of solidarity. Enforcement is against the true nature of solidarity. Today it is especially important to stress the moral nature of solidarity, since detraditionalisation has made existing family values and expectations invisible, making it difficult to take a critical stance. Thus it is important to stress that the claim to disproportionate actions in the name of solidarity is a corruption of the norm, and can throw an obstacle in the way of true solidarity.

*Secondly, solidarity in the family has to be open to universal solidarity and to aim at the common good.* As mentioned, solidarity in the family can be misunderstood when it is conceived as the duty of representing the interest of the family as a whole or that of its members, without respect to the needs and interests of others. In this case solidarity is simply degraded to group-egoism. Families need to be open to the needs of others, to non-family members, to other groups in greater need. True solidarity does not stop at the borders of the family, but needs the mentality of a “trespasser”, going beyond the usual wellknown barriers. Moreover, solidarity in the family needs to be practised with respect to the common good, taking self-interest into account. Although family solidarity is *de facto* a particular solidarity among the members of the family, this commitment that has grown out of family bonds needs to be integrated in a universally open solidarity towards all who are in need of our help.

*Thirdly, the chance to participate in solidarity actions has to be shared among the members of the family proportionately and subsidiarily.* When it comes to solidarity in a family, it is not only about receiving help but also about being active. Real solidarity entails the willingness to participate when it comes to action. It is important, especially in the family, to provide everyone with the chance to participate in actions of solidarity according to their best abilities. True solidarity provides everyone, even the smallest, the most underprivileged, with a chance to provide help for those in need, and hence to strengthen the sense of solidarity. However, nobody can be expected to make sacrifices which surpass their potential.

*Fourthly, solidarity has to be practised with respect to its sustainability.* The best way of expressing our solidarity with the next generation is when we are engaged in creating the necessary bases for solidarity in the future. It is especially important that families keep this aim of solidarity in sight. It is important to provide future generations with the chance to establish and nurture ties of solidarity. As already seen, the primary condition for that is being able to acquire and practise solidarity in the framework of the family. Thus today’s families need to sustain a sense of solidarity that is open to others beyond the barriers of the family, and is open to the future, enabling members to run their sense of solidarity on a long term basis.

**4. Investing in families is an investment in solidarity**

The general principle of solidarity has an anthropological basis, and as such it needs constant revision with respect to the developments in society. As we have seen, the family is a crucial place for the manifestation of solidarity. However this can be corrupted by a misunderstanding of the term or confusion about its implementation in everyday life. Moreover, even a proper understanding of solidarity can be impeded in practice, when it comes to the difficult situation of families in today’s society. It is not only hard to keep the balance between the interests of its individual members and the family as a group, but also to cultivate solidarity in such a manner that it stays open to those outside the family. Solidarity in the family needs to be interpreted in the light of the principle of universal solidarity, and the family should serve as an important source for putting it into practice.

However, families are less and less able to fulfil this role. Now the question is how families can be integrated into society again, whether they can serve again as important channels of communication between different generations. Society and politics have to recognize the need of solidarity with the family; otherwise this important source of solidarity may become totally exhausted. It is clear, that sustaining and strengthening families has its costs. But investing in families is an investment in the future, the generations to come.

**5. European family policy promoting intergenerational solidarity**

Even though there is no such thing as a common family policy in the European Union, as it is part of the competence of the member states, the promotion of family-friendly policies in EU countries seems to have become a “pan-European” issue. This is clearly observable in new word-formations, such as “family-mainstreaming”, – a term modelled on gender-mainstreaming, aiming at pushing the interests of families into the spotlight in the process of political decision-making. The EU had already formulated directives serving the interests of families, as in the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, and supporting the harmonization of the private sphere and the world of work. An unambiguous determination to promote family-friendly policies across the EU became even more apparent in the Commission papers published in the second half of the last decade: in 2005, a green paper, “Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations”; in 2006, “The demographic future of Europe – from challenge to opportunity”, and in 2007, “Promoting solidarity between the generations”. It is obvious that the reason for the publication of these documents with exceptional focus on family policies is the demographic crisis present throughout Europe. They acknowledge that reasons other than the demographic crisis may inspire family policies, such as moral, political and religious ideas; still they identify declining birth rates, and the growing population of the older generation as the most urgent challenges. The “comprehensive family policy” outlined in these documents provides a list of measures that are well known as tools to encourage the willingness to have children: “tax measures, family benefits, measures to encourage equality at work between women and men, care and support services for children and other dependents, family rights in old-age pension schemes and work-life balance measures, such as parental leave and the option to work part-time.” (European Economic and Social Committee 2011, p. 8, point 4.1.)

However, the above mentioned documents go further, focusing not only on the issue of the willingness to have children, but also discussing the question of how the different generations can live together and cooperate in the long run in the family and broader society. This was signalled by the 2005 green paper titled “Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations”. It pointed out the need to develop “new forms of solidarity (…) between the generations, based on mutual support and the transfer of skills and experience” (Commission of the European Communities 2005, 6). Even though the final conclusions of the paper are rather general, using key words such as “return to demographic growth”, “balance between the generations”, and “find new bridges between the stages of life”, they obviously confirm the intention to assert not only economic aspects, but also family-oriented ones, such as the aim to provide the different generations with the necessary social frameworks to spend more time with each other.

The 2006 Commission Communication “The demographic future of Europe – from challenge to opportunity” provides more concrete directives (Commission of the European Communities 2006). First, it clearly names the major aspects of a family policy supporting those who wish to have children: “(i) reduce the inequality of opportunities offered to citizens with and without children, (ii) offer universal access to assistance services for parents, in particular for education and care for young children, and (iii) manage working hours to offer both men and women better opportunities for lifelong learning and for balancing their private and working lives”. Secondly it argues for the promotion of employment, campaigning not only for more jobs, but also for “longer working lives”. Thirdly it speaks up for “adequate social security and equity between the generations” (Commission of the European Communities 2006, 7, 8 and 12).

The 2007 Commission Communication (Commission of the European Communities 2007) touches upon the topic of “intergenerational solidarity” once again, and pushes the improvement of European family policies further, mainly on the basis of the goals pinned down in the Lisbon Strategy, emphasizing “the participation of women in employment, the need to do more in terms of balancing professional life, family life and private life, and the employment and inclusion of young people” (ibid., 3). It stresses the importance of the European Alliance for Families, as it can serve as a platform supporting “exchanges and knowledge concerning pro-family policies and best practices in the Member States, with a view to meeting the challenges of demographic change” (ibid., 7). It lists three key policies applied by the member states to support families: “compensation for direct and indirect costs associated with the family”, “parent help services in the form of education and care for young children, care and supervision for older children and, increasingly, services for dependent people in an ageing society”, and “the organization of working and employment conditions and access to services at local level” (ibid., 4). It stresses that the further improvement of these measures should happen as “part of a broader set of public measures” (ibid., 4), education, housing, employment, etc.; taking individual rights and motivation into consideration, and promoting the balancing of gender in the private and the public both.

The novelty in the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on “The role of family policy in relation to demographic change with a view to sharing best practices among Member States” (European Economic and Social Committee 2011) is that it not only speaks about European family policies in general terms, but highlights the major characteristics of different regions, which are “oriented towards different types of families” (ibid., 218/8), and tries to find best practices by comparing them. It demonstrates the way that could lead to them through examples from Western European countries. The Scandinavian model is discussed first, stressing the importance of the promotion of “equality between fathers and mothers” (ibid., 218/9) and the balance in their social roles both at home and at work. This aspiration became evident in their system of family-support: “actual direct support for families, support for working parents in the form of paid parental leave and the sharing of the entitlement to paid parental leave between both parents”, which resulted in a “high female participation in the labour force”, “more involvement in the care of young children on the part of fathers”, “a fertility rate higher than the EU average” and “a drop in child poverty” (ibid., 218/9). “Increase in part-time work”, and the harmonization of work and the raising of children are the key concepts in the Netherlands (ibid. 218/9), while in France it is the long-term stability of the family support system, uniting “family benefits, an equitable tax regime for families, provisions in the pension system, labour law provisions establishing specific types of paid leave, child-care for children up to the age of three and free nursery school provision from the age of three” (ibid., 218/9). Concerning Germany, the political efforts made to change the negative attitude towards working parents, and the “ambitious policy to achieve a balance between work and family life” are mentioned as positive.[[2]](#footnote-2) (ibid., 218/9)

The documents discussed here signify important steps made to improve and optimize family policies in Europe. However, the ideas listed create the impression of a patchwork. This is understandable, since they had to find a way to discover and promote the best practices of family policy in Europe without losing sight of the diversity of the different systems that are present in member states. What is more important, they did not stop at the question of how to increase birth rates, and how to support parents in raising their children. It is not by chance that “solidarity between the generations” is a key concept in these documents, since “family” is a term which needs to be embedded in its broader context and understood in a broader sense. Every responsible family policy is aware of the fact that the future of Europe is unthinkable without the cooperation and solidarity between the different generations. They have to create a framework and open a space for solidarity in families and between different generations. By doing so relational poverty can be turned into relational wealth.

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1. Plato in The Republic supported the idea that the guardians had wives and children in common. The aim of this was to make everybody consider their fellow citizens as family members, thus supporting social solidarity in contrast to favoritism towards family members, yielding social dissension. (cf. Republic V. 463e - 464b) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Unfortunately the report did not touch upon the family policies of the post-communist regions, perhaps because it considered their family policies to be still “in transition”. However, the traditions of family support in Hungary from the 1970s, for example, clearly demonstrate that a well organized system of child-care institutions, combined with financial support and the option to stay at home with young children for a longer period of time can increase birth rates. This can be observed in the demographic history of other Eastern European countries as well (Tárkányi 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)