

**Beata GUZIEJEWSKA, Associate Professor**  
Faculty of Economics and Sociology, University of Lodz  
e-mail: beata.guziejewska@uni.lodz.pl  
ORCID: 0000-0002-0814-5066

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## **INTERDISCIPLINARY INTERPLAY BETWEEN GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS, POLITICS AND DEMOGRAPHY AS EXEMPLIFIED BY THE POLISH FAMILY 500+ PROGRAM: ASSUMPTIONS AND FIRST EXPERIENCES<sup>1</sup>**

### **Summary**

*Purpose* – In 2016 the Polish government launched the Family 500+ program. This family policy instrument is regarded as a unique but debatable measure. The paper assesses the program in terms of interdisciplinary relationships between public programs, politics, sociology and demography.

*Research method* – The research for the paper was carried out using a qualitative case study-based method. A critical analysis of the relevant legislation, public policy assumptions, reports, and earlier studies was performed. The data contained in the *Demographic Yearbook of Poland* [2018, 2019, 2020] published by Statistics Poland and simple methods of descriptive statistics were also used.

*Results* – The conclusions from the research are that while the program's effect on the demographic situation in Poland is limited, it helps reduce poverty, supports families and politically benefits the ruling party. They also suggest that the current sociological, social, cultural, historical, and political factors have an essential influence on how this type of programs is received by voters and on their success.

*Originality / value / implications / recommendations* – The program has prevented the demographic gap in Poland from widening. A new study using simulation modelling will seek to determine whether it also reduces poverty among families with children. The program's demographic effectiveness and its effect on the female labor market should be further studied in the future.

**Keywords:** public programs, family planning, Family 500+ program, public finances

**JEL Classification:** H53, I30, J13

### **1. Introduction**

Social welfare programs are one of the more important instruments used to complement the redistributive function of the state and public finances. At the same time, however, the large-scale social and welfare projects aimed at specific groups of beneficiaries invariably lead to heated debates and a dissonance of opinions.

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The reason why researchers, practitioners, and politicians vary significantly in their conclusions regarding this type of policies and measures is the use of explicitly economic, social, political, etc. criteria, which are hardly reconcilable. The Family 500+ program that the government formed by the Law and Justice party introduced in 2016 to improve the demographic situation in the country and families' welfare was promoted as a unique solution and has the status of a feather in the government's cap. The program itself and its effects are highly debatable. Inevitably, it has had distinct political coloring since it was launched.

The added value of using qualitative analysis to assess economic, social and welfare programs run by public authorities is that it enables the identification of social, psychological, and political factors involved and the description of interdisciplinary relationships in the triangle of public finances, politics, and sociology. This study examines public discussions of the Family 500+ program and its general assessments in the wider context of the effectiveness of welfare programs and political and sociological factors. One of the more controversial aspects of social programs is the form of assistance (monetary or in-kind) and the use of potential beneficiaries' financial and wealth status to determine their eligibility. Although the Family 500+ program drew criticism from many experts and opposition politicians, it has been effective in winning wide public support for its creators. An interesting question is, therefore, what factors contribute to the popularity of the program and firm support for the ruling party when even its authors have admitted that it has failed to significantly improve the demographic situation. In the early 2020 the government representatives acknowledged for the first time that the program had not increased the number of births and was not likely to increase it in the future [www 1]. This leads to yet another question about how to assess the effectiveness of demographic, social, and educational programs run by the public authorities? To what extent does it depend on the sociological and historical factors and the specifics of the country? These questions are important in mature democracies where the rule of economic law coexists with the welfare doctrine emphasizing social needs and citizens' preferences.

This study has shown that the introduction of the Family 500+ program was well-timed and harmonized with the prevalent social moods. Its political context as well as the need to empower and restore dignity to social groups that did not benefit from the transition processes in Poland after 1989 were also important.

## 2. Methodological approach

The performance of the Family 500+ program was assessed using a qualitative case-study-based method and simple methods of descriptive statistics. The critical analysis of pertinent legislation, public policy objectives, reports, and earlier studies was performed. The majority of statistics in this paper were sourced from the *Demographic Yearbook of Poland* [2018, 2019, 2020] published by Statistics Poland to present the number and structure of births and the demographic structure in

Poland. The objectives of the Family 500+ program, the key themes in the public debate, and the program's early effects are examined from the triple perspective of public finances, politics, and sociology. The timing of the program, the country's characteristics, and the psychological factors are also analyzed. This type of analysis involved the use of a qualitative analysis rather than a quantitative one, as the latter tends to produce inconsistent results.

### 3. Literature review

Researchers have long been pointing to the relationships between economic, political and administrative sciences. Investigations into the influence of political factors on the economy and public finances have become an almost classical strand of research known as the new political economy. With the deepening realization of the role of sociological and even psychological factors in the economy, a new strand of financial research called behavioral finance has emerged.

Demography, too, critically determines contemporary socio-economic policy, also in the broader sense of sustainable development and public health [Bloom et al., 2003; Grundy, Murphy, 2015, pp. 718-735; www 4]. By allowing for demography and globalization, it is possible to better understand the worldwide economic processes, as well as differences in how national economies develop and change [Hulme, 2005, pp. 417-425]. A special challenge that many countries are currently faced with is the aging of their populations and ethnic or racial diversity problems [Bloom, Luca, 2016; www 3]. All the problems have global as well as regional consequences [www 2]. It has also been known for quite a time that the assessment of social programs in welfare states is problematic, one methodological problem being, for instance, exogenous variations [Moffitt, 1989, pp. 237-250]. Chinese scientists have observed that, although sociology and political and administrative sciences are treated as separate disciplines these days, they are all rooted in philosophical sciences, and all center around studying human activity and nature, society, culture, and the practical aspects of the functioning of state institutions and societies [Chanthamith et al., 2019, p. 353]. With the inclusion of the sociological perspective in administrative science and public management science, their scope has been extended to social and anthropological analysis. Sociology studies individuals against the background of interactions taking place in political and institutional-organizational environments. "Sociology is the equivalent of a "catalyst" or "stepper" for public administration. Sociology takes "the social man" as a premise of the human nature hypothesis, emphasizing the cultural function and social structure, explaining the individual's self-consciousness, identity and role playing, and considering the complexity of various behaviors in social activities" [Chanthamith et al., 2019, pp. 355-356]. According to these authors: "Political science provides a meta theory and method for the theory and practice of public management, which can guarantee the core value orientation of the development of public management theory and practice, and at the same time, the research of the theory and practice of public

administration is positioned in the direction of public interest as the core orientation, so as to prevent the corresponding value”.

Therefore, sociology can offer a new perspective, theories, research methods and inspiration to political, public finance and administrative sciences. This role is important as economists in representative democracies have a problem deciding which redistribution channel is the most suitable for delivering particular social services and goods. Whether redistribution should take place between citizens or rather between local communities is also an issue [Stiglitz, 2000, pp. 880-900]. According to the existing literature, governments can redistribute wealth through cash transfers to citizens (benefits, pensions, scholarships, etc.) and/or by delivering concrete goods and services by means of the public sector. There is also the question about the ratio between the state and market mechanisms in the economy [Landsburg, Feinstone, 1997, p. 149]. Cash transfers tend to be used less often today on account of problems with defining who the beneficiaries should be and with monitoring their spending. Social programs in developed and developing countries differ in their scope, objectives, and the types of benefits offered. In developing countries, they play a vital role as a means of reducing poverty and crime rates but show a strong dependence on the character of the political regime. In developed countries, the decisions on public finances are markedly influenced by political budget cycles [Dodlova et al., 2017; Dodlova et al., 2018].

The use of cash and in-kind transfer schemes is by no means limited to developing countries. A. Aizer et al. [2014] have estimated that in the USA more than one in five children is affected by poverty. After analyzing the cash assistance programs such as the Mothers' Pension ran between 1911 and 1935 in terms of their effect on children's life expectancy, they concluded that they extended it by one year on average. Despite the lack of wider empirical studies of in-kind assistance programs conducted in recent years, it is believed that they can be a valuable supplement to tax systems and make the scarcity of borrowing options, imperfect agent information, and the labor market problems easier to bear, thus contributing to the establishment of a fairer and more effective system of social transfers [see: Currie, Gahvari, 2008]. In-kind transfers cannot be used by beneficiaries as freely as cash benefits, but both instruments are an element of the welfare role and function of the state. Their short-term effects can be different from long-term ones, and their performance depends on the circumstances and the situation in the country. The social effects and effectiveness of both approaches are difficult to measure empirically because of the limited availability of the data on their users.

The role of the public sector is to provide society and particular social groups with services in quantity and quality appropriate for their needs. The needs and preferences of the public are difficult to measure and analyze. The Polish experience provides evidence, however, that scientific and professional analysis of citizens' preferences is not always necessary for social programs to be perceived by the public as attractive and welcome. In Poland, it was rather a good understanding of political moods and public expectations, the use of subtle national, historical, and class arguments invoking national pride (outside the country) and the feeling of exclusion

(inside) that worked. The transition to a market economy caused more inequalities in the country and many social groups found themselves unable to cope with the new social and economic reality. Their feeling of abandonment was strengthened by comparisons with social elites reaping the fruits of political and economic transformation. The decision of the Law and Justice Party and its leader to appeal to people who had low incomes, few assets, and felt excluded showed that they aptly recognized the feelings of people living in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas. E. Wnuk-Lipiński [2008, p. 65] used in his book the term ‘relative deprivation’ to describe a state in which the experience of social disadvantaged ness and the inaccessibility of some goods is more painful when people compare their situation with some reference group, e.g. with people living in other parts of the city, the residents of large cities, other social groups, or the new or old elites. Elites are perceived as a social group that has too much control and access to different types of tangible and intangible goods. In many cases, the scope of the redistribution function of public finance is decided by elites. Studies on elites are frequently equated with investigations into power structures and social inequalities [Khan, 2012, pp. 361-377].

In both theory and practice, the problems with evaluating public programs pursuing demographic and social goals are emphasized. In the case of demographic policy, its long-term goals, the characteristics and aspirations of the young generation in the existing historical and economic circumstances are especially important. Because public programs are frequently influenced by a wide range of circumstances, it is sometimes difficult to tell exactly what needs they address, as it happened in Poland where the authors of the Family 500+ program initially emphasized its demographic goals but in time turned the spotlight on its advantages as an instrument improving families’ well-being and social stability. A.H. Gauthier [2001, pp. 1-45] has noted that public policy significantly shapes the situation of families and the country’s demography. Her analysis of public programs and social policies made from a broad sociological perspective has shown that they influence the lives of families by determining their chances and limitations. Having examined the effect of demographic programs on fertility, family structure, and the labor force participation of mothers, Gauthier concluded that the effect was complex, related to the specifics of the country, and hard to measure. Earlier studies have shown that it may also depend on the prevailing family model, women’s aspirations, and the strength of Catholicism in the country [Chesnais, 1996, p. 729].

Demographic programs are long-term, which contributes to the fact that implementing them and measuring their performance is difficult. A group of Swedish researchers has looked at how a family policy shapes women’s decisions to have first and second children [Billingsley et al., 2018], which are made on a case-by-case basis. The decision to have a first child is usually made out of a sheer desire to have an offspring, but later decisions are more dependent on the government family policy and, quite frequently, on the parents’ wealth and level of education. The researchers distinguished between investment-oriented family policies and traditional, protection-oriented family policies. They concluded that the higher support through both types of family policy was correlated with the postponement of first births, and that

the considerations for postponement might be different. The greater support from investment-oriented policies (earner-carer support) was positively correlated with second births [Billingsley et al., 2018, pp. 26-28].

One of the first reports which assessed the “Family 500+” program concluded with the following findings [Magda et al., 2019]:

- the program was to improve the financial standing of families and to increase the number of births; while it did manage to reduce the level of poverty among families with children in the three years it had been in use, the same result could have been achieved at a much lower cost. Furthermore, an increase in the number of births in 2017 and a decrease in 2018 cannot be attributed to the operation of the program. Therefore, the economic effectiveness of the program is very low compared to its outcomes;
- the program is not a part of the wider family policy and lacks a coherent vision of goals, premises, and strategies of action;
- the labor market effect of the program is negative – it has reduced the labor market activity, especially of women;
- because only some families are eligible for the benefits, the situation of the other households (single parents, low-income working parents with one child, parents of children with disabilities) deteriorated in relative terms;
- the program uses funds that could be spent on projects that would be more beneficial for the general public (education, health care) or for the overall development prospects of the country (public infrastructure, including transport, air quality, etc.).

The “Family 500+” program has enabled many families to improve their living standard, but there is nothing to suggest that it has already contributed to a significant and permanent increase in fertility rates. The program’s limited effectiveness coincides with other problems, such as the ambiguity of the financial support system for families and the existence of three equivalent measures (tax reliefs, family allowances, and the 500+ benefit) at the same time. The issue of impact on poverty is very complicated and debatable [see: Myck et al., 2019, pp. 1-23].

The demographic situation and trends are important not only for public health, healthcare availability, and social structures, but also for the economy, labor market, and the sustainability of development. Therefore, the analysis of the “Family 500+” program must also consider the current demographic situation in the country and the number of women of childbearing age, which has drastically decreased.

## 4. Research and results

### 4.1 The legislative and political background of the Family 500+ Program

The Family 500+ program has been a politically contentious issue since it was promised by the Law and Justice party during the election campaign in 2015. Opposition politicians, mainly the Civic Platform, criticized its authors of tantalizing

voters with projects that were infeasible for a number of reasons, not least because of budget constraints. Nevertheless, the new Sejm dominated by the Law and Justice party passed on February 11, 2016, a statute establishing the Family 500+ program, a form of state support for persons raising children under 18 years of age. Contrary to the original promise that each child in Poland would receive a tax-free benefit of PLN 500, the statute excluded firstborn children in families with per capita income exceeding PLN 800, or 1200 PLN, if the child had disabilities, until 2019. One of the more important amendments to the statute that became effective on July 1, 2019, revoked the income criterion and thereby extended support also to firstborn children [Act, 2019].

In the statute, a child-raising benefit is defined as a partial reimbursement of costs involved in a raising a child, including expenses necessary to provide care to a child and meet his or her life needs. The persons eligible to receive benefits are:

- the mother or the father if the child lives with and is maintained by them (where child care is split between them, each parent is entitled to half of the benefit), or
- the actual guardian of the child if the child lives with and is maintained by the guardian, or
- the legal guardian of the child, or
- the director of the residential care home who has custody over the child.

The Ministry of Family and Social Policy [www 5] emphasizes that the Family 500+ program is an investment in Polish families and that it has already encouraged childbearing (the national fertility rate increased between 2015 and 2017 from 1.29 to 1.45) and has lifted families from poverty, particularly families with children (the extreme poverty rate decreased between 2015 and 2017 from 6.5 to 4.3%). The amended version of the program raises the living standard of all Polish families with dependent children and enhances the government policy for families. To prove the program's effectiveness and raise its ratings, the government uses data from different years. The analysis of the demographic data presented below leads to somewhat different conclusions, pointing out that they should be viewed from a broader and long-term perspective rather than selected to promote specific conclusions.

The first opinions on the program were presented in the mass media and had distinctly political overtones. The program was criticized for a 'carefree distribution' of public funds as it ignored the potential beneficiaries' income status as well as the budgetary constraints. The members of the previous government formed by the coalition of the Civic Platform and the Polish People's Party that lost power in November 2015 claimed that the program was a pork-barrel project unaffordable for the state. It also drew criticism for concentrating on financial support for Polish families while ignoring other vital needs, such as greater availability of nurseries and kindergartens. The opponents of the program also pointed to its potentially adverse impact on employment among women and their labor market status.

It is fair to note, however, that even broad comparisons showed that before 2015, Poland's expenditure on cash family benefits was much below the EU average. In 2014, for instance, Poland and the EU allocated to them an average of

0.8 and 1.6% of their respective GDPs. The introduction of the Family 500+ program increased the rate to 1.85% of Poland's GDP, with the total expenditure on family benefits rising from 1.59% in 2015 to 2.6% in 2016 [Hagemejer, 2017 pp. 4-5]. Even if we factor out different wealth levels in Poland and the EU, the Polish rates were significantly lower than the EU averages. The authors of one of the first studies evaluating the effects of the Family 500+ program established that it had improved the financial situation of Polish families, particularly of families with more than two children and those living in rural areas and small towns and had slightly increased the number of births in the better educated and better-off families. However, they also observed that it was likely to have a negative influence on employment among women [Golinowska, Sowa-Kofta, 2017, pp. 7-12]. The results of other research indicated that even though the program had a positive effect on families' incomes and redistribution of wealth in the short term, its long-term consequences could be expected to be negative [Brzeziński, Najsztub, 2017, pp. 16-24]. The program's demographic effectiveness, costs-benefits analyses and especially its effect on the female labor market in the future, should be considered by economists.

Contrary to the experts' and demographers' opinions, the government representatives consistently claimed until the end of 2019 that the program helped improve the demographic situation in Poland. It was only in early 2020 that they admitted that it did not contribute to the noticeably higher birth rates and that it should rather be considered in terms of the question of how bad the demographic situation would be had it not been implemented.

#### **4.2. Analysis of selected descriptive demographic statistics and Poland's demographic situation**

Because of the relatively short length of time since the initiation of the Family 500+ program, the evaluation of its demographic effects must be very tentative. It is also important to remember that, as has already been mentioned, the short-term and long-term effects of such programs need to be considered taking account of the specifics of the country and the current demographic situation. In Poland, the 2018 populations of women aged 20-24 years, 25-29 years, and 30-34 years were estimated at 1,035,200, 1,275,400 and 1,490,400, respectively. Women born during the baby bust will soon reach peak fertility age – data published by Statistics Poland show that in the same year the populations of girls aged 18-19 years and 15-17 years totaled 368,300 and 521,400, respectively [*Demographic Yearbook ...*, 2019, p. 139].

Table 1 shows births in Poland in the selected years. Between 2016 and 2017 their number slightly increased but then it declined in 2018 and 2019. For the sake of comparison, the numbers of women aged 25-29 and 30-34 years fell respectively to 1,317,700 and 1,546,300 in 2017 and to 1,275,400 and 1,490,400 in 2018. In the years after 2000, a considerable increase was recorded in the number of illegitimate births, but total births did not follow any specific trend.



TABLE 1

## Births

Year	Total	Live births			Live births as % of total births	Illegitimate births as % of total live births
		Total	Legitimate	Illegitimate		
2000	380,476	378,348	332,451	45,897	99.4	12.1
2010	415,030	413,300	328,215	85,086	99.6	20.6
2016	383,404	382,257	286,704	95,553	99.7	25.0
2017	403,083	401,982	305,115	96,867	99.7	24.1
2018	389,455	388,178	285,594	102,584	99.7	26.4
2019	376,192	374,954	279,791	95,163	99.7	25.4

Source: [*Demographic Yearbook ...*, 2018, 2019, 2020].

One of the more interesting aspects in evaluating the effects of the Family 500+ program is the occurrence of second and later births that, unlike the majority of first children that are born because their parents simply want to have offspring, can be attributed to the motivating role of social programs. In table 2, total live births and births by order in the selected years are shown. Unfortunately, the unavailability of the 2018 birth order data prevented a deeper evaluation of the program. In 2019, the number of births decreased.

TABLE 2

## Live births by birth order

Year	Total	Birth order					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
2000	378,348	189014	114843	46533	18865	8400	4330
2010	413,300	207124	145256	41064	11989	4274	1789
2016	382,257	175888	146967	42524	10735	3589	1353
2017	401,982	172642	161272	49965	11896	3780	1387
2018	388,178	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
2019	374,954	160077	134014	57630	16255	4274	1238
<b>Total</b>		<b>%</b>					
2000	100.0	47.8	30.4	12.3	5.0	2.2	1.1
2010	100.0	50.1	35.1	9.9	2.9	1.0	0.4
2016	100.0	46.0	38.4	11.1	2.8	0.9	0.4
2017	100.0	42.0	40.1	12.4	3.0	0.9	0.3
2018	100.0	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
2019	100.0	42.7	35.7	15.4	4.3	1.3	0.3

The seventh and later births have been omitted.

Source: own elaboration based on: [*Demographic Yearbook ...*, 2018, 2019, 2020].

The small increases in the numbers of second and third-order births in 2017 (table 2) lend some credibility to the claims that the program may have encouraged parents to have more children. Even so, the share of first births, although slightly smaller, continued to be the largest, meaning that the program's effects were rather unspectacular (for the reasons mentioned above).

Another element that needs to be considered is the age at which women have children, as it determines their further professional careers. According to the data of *Demographic Yearbook of Poland* [2019, 2020], the highest fertility rates occur among women aged 25-29 and 30-34 years. Fertility rates for urban and rural areas are marginally different and show that urban women tend to have first children at a slightly older age. The 2017 and 2018 fertility rates imply a slightly greater effectiveness of the program in rural areas than in towns and cities where most Poles live. From the sociological standpoint, women living in big cities can have different aspirations and goals than those living in rural areas and small towns. For young women living in cities their professional careers are important, so they are more probable to postpone family formation decisions. It can also be assumed that the urban family model is less traditional. It is, therefore, necessary for social programs addressing demographic issues to contain instruments improving access to public nurseries and kindergartens, protecting women returning from maternity leave, promoting flexible forms of employment, and supporting mothers in the labor market. Not only financial but also the non-financial means of support are important.

The natural increase data in table 3, reveal differences between urban and rural areas. The Polish countryside is characterized by higher natural increase and lower emigration rates that influence its total population growth rates. The national natural increase rate slightly improved in the years 2016-2017, but in 2019 its value was lower again.

TABLE 3

## Population balance

Years	Actual increase in thousands							Population as of Dec. 31
	Total	Vital statistics			Net migrations			
		Vital increase	Live births	Deaths	Total	Internal	International	
2001-2005	-96.8	-26.1	1,793.6	1,819.7	-70.7	x	-70.7	38,157.1
2006-2010	43.0	117.8	2,007.5	1,889.7	-74.8	x	-74.8	38,529.9
2011-2015	-92.6	-30.2	1,888.8	1,919.0	-62.4	x	-62.4	38,436.2
2015...	-41.4	-25.6	369.3	394.9	-15.8	x	-15.8	38,437.2
2016...	-4.2	-5.8	382.3	388.0	1.5	x	1.5	38,433.0
2017...	0.6	-0.9	402.0	402.0	1.4	x	1.4	38,433.6
2018...	-22.4	-26.0	388.2	414.2	3.6	x	3.6	38,411.1
2019...	-28.6	-34.8	375.0	409.7	6.1	x	6.1	38,382.6

Urban areas								
2001-2005	-247.4	-62.5	1018.9	1081.4	-184.9	-128.7	-56.2	23,423.7
2006-2010	-226.3	36.7	1173.3	1136.6	-263.0	-208.9	-54.1	23,429.1
2011-2015	-279.9	-67.1	1098.2	1165.4	-212.8	-166.1	-46.6	23,166.4
2015...	-60.7	-24.7	217.4	242.1	-36.0	-24.1	-11.9	23,166.4
2016...	-34.8	-10.5	226.3	236.7	-24.3	-25.0	0.7	23,129.5
2017...	-36.4	-11.2	236.1	247.3	-25.2	-25.9	0.7	23,109.3
2018...	-52.6	-26.6	228.7	255.3	-26.1	-28.3	2.2	23,067.2
2019...	-58.3	-32.9	220.3	253.2	-25.4	-29.4	4.0	23,033.1
Rural areas								
2001-2005	150.7	36.4	774.7	738.3	114.3	128.7	-14.4	14,733.4
2006-2010	269.3	81.1	834.2	753.1	188.2	208.9	-20.7	15,100.8
2011-2015	187.3	36.9	790.4	753.7	150.3	166.1	15.7	15,270.8
2015...	19.3	-0.9	151.9	152.9	20.2	24.1	-3.8	15,270.8
2016...	30.5	4.7	156.0	151.3	25.8	25.0	0.8	15,303.5
2017...	37.0	10.3	165.8	155.5	16.6	25.9	0.8	15,324.3
2018...	30.2	0.5	159.5	158.9	29.7	28.3	1.4	15,343.9
2019...	29.7	-1.8	154.7	156.5	31.6	29.4	2.2	15,349.5

Source: own elaboration based on [*Demographic Yearbook ...*, 2019, pp. 80-81; *Demographic Yearbook ...*, 2020, pp. 80-81].

The introduction of the Family 500+ program has not made the population balance in Poland look more optimistic, but a more categorical evaluation of its outcomes should be postponed for several years. It is a prudent approach given that the demographic situation has changed to some extent after the program was launched, that it is highly rated by the public, and that it has been operating for a relatively short period of time (in demographic terms).

The Ministry of Family and Social Policy<sup>2</sup> view the Family 500+ program as the key element of financial support for families. According to the Ministry's estimates, in 2019, the extended program was to consume approx. PLN 31bn of taxpayers' money and to benefit around 6.8 million children. Its cost in the next years was estimated at about PLN 41bn annually. Therefore, the Family 500+ program is a welfare project in addition to pursuing demographic goals, which contradicts the ruling party's early declarations that it was intended to increase the number of births in the country. Even though the total fertility rate rose from 1.289 in 2015 to 1.435 in 2018 and 1.42 in 2019, the goal has not been achieved, and the differences between annual fertility rates do not show any specific pattern (the minimum value of the fertility rate for generational replacement is 2.10). The long term distribution

<sup>2</sup> Until October 7, 2020 Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Policy.

of first-, second-, and later births should be analyzed more thoroughly. The current decline in the number of women of childbearing age is due to the aging of women born during the baby boom in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This is a natural demographic process that cannot be changed overnight. It also explains why the number of births has not increased considerably in Poland and why the demographic gap is the largest after World War II. A simple comparison of the number of births between 2016 and 2019 is insufficient to conclude about the effectiveness of government programs, particularly because the number of women of childbearing age decreased in that period by an estimated more than 300,000.

## 5. Conclusions

The introduction of the Family 500+ in Poland was a response to the feeling of exclusion experienced by social groups rejected by economic transition after 1990 and the public's reluctance, or even resentment, towards the elites (the judiciary were called caste and the opposition party was labelled as the party of the elites). From a broader perspective, it can also be seen as an effort to empower and restore dignity to the local-income social groups, particularly families with children. The employment of social factors in politics will certainly be studied further by political scientists in the future. In the meantime, attempts are being made to assess the short-term effects of this particular social technology and of the Family 500+ program in political and demographic terms. The significance of sociological and psychological considerations in designing this type of programs is well illustrated by the high ratings of the Polish program and public opinion polls consistently indicating strong support for the ruling party. As it appears, when it comes to evaluating the program, emotions override its actual demographic effects, which are not very impressive, as the data show.

While the size of Poland's population has basically been the same for years, it is progressively aging and life expectancy in the country is increasing. Both these phenomena and the recent COVID-19 pandemic will create more challenges for public authorities to deal with in the future. There is a growing indication that the solutions to the looming problems will be even more determined by the combination of public funds, sociology, and politics. Sociologists believe that while the exact nature of social changes following the pandemic and the time of lockdowns cannot be predicted, they are certain to come. It can also be assumed that many future decisions on the economy, public finances, social transfers, and welfare will have a political context. If the economic problems necessitate cuts to the Family 500+ program, the role of political and sociological considerations may even increase. What makes the future course of the program interesting to watch is the fact that it is one of the largest cash assistance projects in the world. The program itself and its effects are highly debatable, as the demographic data show. The main and substantive goals of the program were not achieved. It will certainly be analyzed and cited as an example in the studies to come.

The Family 500+ program has prevented the demographic gap in Poland from widening, as shown by general statistics only. A new (future) study using simulation modelling will seek to determine whether it also reduces poverty among families with children. The program's demographic effectiveness and its effect on the female labor market should be further studied in the future. Because of the short length of time it has been operating, trying to judge its outcomes now would be premature in many cases, especially that its very nature imposes the adoption of a long-term perspective. Therefore, this study was aimed to give a broader context to the research problem under consideration. It will be followed by a more detailed analysis making use of quantitative research tools.

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