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**POLITIKAT DHE STRATEGJITË E RMV-SË PËR MBËSHTETJEN
SOCIALE TË FËMIJËVE**

**ПОЛИТИКИ И СТРАТЕГИИ НА РСМ ЗА СОЦИЈАЛНА
ПОДДРШКА НА ДЕЦАТА**

**POLICIES AND STRATEGIES OF RNM FOR THE SOCIAL SUPPORT
OF CHILDREN**

Abstract

The state reform dedicated to the improvement of children's conditions in North Macedonia is discussed very little, especially if we take into consideration one specific category such as, child protection. Discussions and analyses related to the support that children should enjoy in North Macedonia are rare, even among professionals. Child protection today is achieved through the provision of certain rights, means and forms of child support. This kind of support provided by the Act on Child Protection is multidimensional and it would be a very ambitious and impossible plan for us to target every aspect of the protection enjoyed by the children in our country. Given this, we must emphasize that the purpose of this research is to initially analyze our country's policies on the improvement and advancement of child protection, financial support and means that a child in North Macedonia can receive. What are the legal provisions and what are the conditions that must be met, in order for a child to enjoy this support? The exact idea is to stress out the low financial support given to children in NM. Considering the fact that the effort a parent has to put in, just for the preparation of the required papers is enormous, to not even talk about the financial burden that is inevitable sometimes and perhaps more expensive than the financial support that the child will receive.

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The most problematic issue in our country is the provisions and conditions that are associated with the rights and benefits of financial support for children, something that we strongly oppose and is the right thing to do for both the child and the parents, who for certain reasons are not in a state of need and is not their choice to be poor or in need of support.

Keywords: *Social politics, child allowance, children's rights, Committee on the rights of children, Act on Child Protection.*

Introduction

The continuous efforts of countries to eliminate social problems in society are evident. Countries with proven success in social policies and a high level of social wellbeing, find it much easier to manage them. On the other hand, there are countries with less sustainable practices, still in the process of their development, with high rates of unemployment, high levels of poverty and other phenomena, such as emigration. It is right to define social policies as a “collective strategy”! It is a “Strategy” because it includes a program, a plan and a legal project with which one or more categories of people are supported! “Collective” is a collective phenomenon because it is not only related to the state, but also to other subjects that are related to interest groups and subjects of a political nature (Jason, 1984).

The social policy system in North Macedonia underwent a significant review in June of 2019 (Economic Research and policy Institute). The legal framework of RNM provides a structure for social protection, consisting of several laws, starting from the basic legal framework of the Act on Social Protection, Act on Child Protection, Act on Social Security of the Elderly, Act on Family, as well as other acts related to unemployment, insurance in case of unemployment and employment policies. Like in any other country with a socio-economic situation such as RNM's, there has been a tendency to improve social services, to make them more accessible and to provide as many opportunities as possible for supporting specific groups or categories as well as, the mass population.

According to a recommendation of the International Labor Organization referring to the state architecture of social services, it is emphasized that the essential role in social protection is threefold, and that is primarily universal justice, economic and political inalienability. The effect of social policies in the country is achieved when protection is provided for all and when there is inclusive growth of human capital and productivity, reducing inequalities and poverty, transforming the system of the country, as a whole (World Social Protection Report, 2014).

Even though the right to social protection is a fundamental human right, according to this Report, only 27% of the global population enjoys the right

to social protection, while 73% of the population is either partially or completely excluded from government social support. It is normal to have theorists who use arguments of a "moral" nature on social support policies, namely the redistribution of income, considering this a violation of economic freedom of the individual to use their own earnings and wealth, while we have another member of society who is being lazy and making no effort to work and avoid poverty (Pigmore & Atherton, 1979). No member of the society would have chosen the "option" of being poor, much less children who are born into families and whom it is impossible to overcome this situation with, at least not until their first opportunities to work and make their own earnings.

Certainly, we support the opinion that the level of protection of social rights and responsibility for meeting social needs has an indicator and that is the relationship between the individual, society and the state, i.e. the level of social services is reflected by the level of basic values and perceptions of a society, as well as, the political and economic values of a country (Xhuamri, 2014). According to the ILO report, there have been global efforts towards extending social protection, such as in middle-income countries, but the effectiveness of social security systems in a number of countries is at risk, as a result of fiscal consolidation and adjustment measures (World Social Protection Report, 2014). According to this statement, our country is not far from this definition, since social programs themselves are not the first priority in budget planning, secondly, the socio-economic situation also does not contribute to the creation of the supportive policies, and thirdly, the efforts of pressure groups, which play an essential role in changing many directions for better social policies, are almost nonexistent.

Social Protection in North Macedonia

A child has the right to his/her personal needs and expenses being covered for, which contribute to the child's upbringing and development (Akademik, 2016). These needs cannot be ignored by an entire population. Leaving a child's fate and future to chance is an "evil" created with the contribution of the entire population, this cannot be attributed to just one government or country. Of course, we also relate to the above-mentioned facts regarding the factors that influence the creation of social policies, and we say that being well and being interested in wellbeing should be a concern of the entire society, conveying a message about the level of awareness, values and characteristics of a certain society! The protection of citizens in the social aspect normally contains philanthropic elements in itself; however, at the beginnings of social support it did not have such a character.

Since, the first laws were introduced in the 20th century, regulating worker safety by combining protection with contributions paid by workers and employers, protection from work-related injuries or even the age of the

worker, unemployment, to then start this form of support to include employees' families, etc. The area that has been short of throughout the history of all countries, generally as specific phenomena, is child protection and unemployment. Today, instead of investing in creating more encouraging policies for social services, governments generally do the opposite, limiting the funds from the country's GDP destined for social plans and policies. According to ILO, over a hundred countries are withdrawing from certain levels of social support, which has led to social exclusion of more categories, increased poverty, increased social exclusion, reduced wages, while increasing taxes (ILO Report). The government has the obligation to increase social services alongside the growth of other needs of members of the society. There must be a balance in the needs of citizens alongside economic trends and rising prices, especially when it comes to supporting families and children, as a social category.

Among the latest reports on the situation of public spending on child benefits, it is reported that support is very low and that for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe 0.8% of national production is dedicated to the children, North and Latin America 0.7% with a percentage difference, the Middle East 0.8%, Asia and the Pacific 0.2%, Africa 0.2% and Western Europe with 0.2%. All countries as a whole are represented with a percentage of 0.4% of the countries' spending dedicated to children and policies dedicated to child protection (Social protection database, 2014). The indicators are generally expected to be low, especially for Africa, Asia and the Middle East, what is most surprising is the regressive trend for financial support for children from progressive countries, with consolidated models of social policies such as Scandinavian countries. Next, we will specifically approach the movements that have been made in RNM and beyond to child support, to continue further with the concrete legislative aspects that our country foresees, just to see how much support we have for children!

Governments Tendencies on Social Policies for Child Protection

Countries are not always capable of meeting the demands of their citizens. Many OECD member states with average or low income, have started to apply benefit programs for children and families. Specifically, these are non-contributory programs for poor families, making some difference in their development. These government services are subject to one child's education, healthcare, vaccination, etc. (de Brauw & Hoddinott, 2008). Such restrictive requirements, such as, the one above is also foreseen in our Country, specifically two requirements related to child allowance are vaccination, registration and education.

Our country is not well known or at least, has shown little consistency in creating social support policies for children. We constantly talk about consistency over the years, while we see a different picture occurring in other countries, including European ones, where benefits for children are being

limited. Denmark is successively reducing child allowances, even up to 5%, while Great Britain is imposing a progressive tax on child benefits, where it was planned to cut those benefits by about 1.2 million! According to the European Commission, from 2007-2012 child poverty has increased in 19 member states of the European Union, namely in Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Spain and Italy, more than a quarter of children are at risk of poverty (European Commission, 2014), which indicates a very alarming situation for the vectors of progress of states, not only in creating but also in maintaining child care policies.

In our country, over the years, UNICEF has collaborated with the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Ministry of Health and Education to promote the creation of sustainable policies on the provision and formation of children. All this was aimed at the application of the European Child Guarantee. According to UNICEF, the measures taken in RNM are considered quite progressive and supportive for children; therefore, they will support the working group that will prepare the National plan for the development and support of children's rights (UNICEF, 2022). The opinions of professionals are scattered and provide a different picture than that supported by UNICEF. According to one of the opinions, the children's sector has many flaws, frail services; inadequate protection and insufficient coverage by social services, affecting various social groups; lack of financial sustainability for financing projects; low government support for such social services and the sector of non-governmental organizations. (Bogoevska & Trbojevik, 2017).

According to UNICEF, the child guarantee plan in North Macedonia has begun to be applied, and it should be done as soon as possible, because 9% of children under the age of 5 and 12% of children 5-7 years old are experiencing poverty! The Committee on the Rights of the Child stated that the RNM should pay special attention to Roma children who are being excluded, stigmatized and also live in poverty. The Committee recommends reforming social benefits, including child allowances, as well as improving social support and care services, decentralizing social services that correspond to the real and necessary needs of children.

Analysis of the Legal Framework in Support of the Child in North Macedonia

The Committee on the Rights of the Child in its periodic reports provides recommendations to the respective countries regarding the development of government policies towards children. The latest recommendations addressed to North Macedonia regarding legislative measures were: analyzing and implementing a wider range of legislation that affects the interests of children; applying assessment procedures for the level of respect for children's rights; ensuring that children are included in the process of drafting or eventual

revision of existing laws related to children's rights (CRC/C/MKD/CO/3-6, 2022).

In North Macedonia, the first legal matter that provides widespread support for employment, family protection, child protection, health, education and schooling (Article 3) is the Law on Social Protection. These are institutions that are established by laws and they execute specific tasks within the framework of their legal authority. According to the aforementioned law, the Center for Social Work plays a key role in providing support to overcome social problems; provides information and guidance to citizens on the realization and access to social rights; undertakes activities such as counseling to overcome problems of a social nature; supports individuals and families in overcoming problems; protects children and families; prepares and implements programs and acts for social policy; participates in the work of the Council for Social Protection of the regional plan, carries out activities, notary organizations and coordination of communication (Article 115, (Act on Social Protection, 2019)).

The Act on Child Protection regulates the ways to organize and arrange child protection, i.e. ensuring a standard of living that corresponds to the physical, mental, moral, emotional and social development of the child (Article 2 (Act on Child Protection, 2013)). It is the same legal matter that provides legal guarantees for child allowances and financial support offered to them. According to Article 6 of this Law, five categories of means (allowances) are provided by RNM, which are: child allowance; special allowance; unilateral financial assistance for newborns; parental allowance for the child and finally, participation (Article 6, Par. 1). This way, the question of covering this kind of financial assistance to the child or the parents is raised. According to the Act on Social Protection, the funds related to these five categories of assistance are provided by the government (Par. 2), while a higher amount than what is determined by the law, can also be provided by the municipality, the City of Skopje, from their own budgets (Par. 3), while the particular ways of regulating this issue can be determined by the Municipal Assembly (Par. 4, Article 6, Act on Child Protection).

The right to child allowance in RNM is regulated in accordance with the restrictions that have been provided for by most countries, both Balkan and European. The first condition is for one to be a citizen of our Country (Article 22); Be in a regular process of education in the Country (Article 22); The allowance is correlated with the age of the child and the financial situation of the family, namely the family income and the number of family members (Article 24) (all of this is divided by 12, in order to reach the mean average for each month); Restrictions in terms of age and generally, the age of 18 applies (Article 25); A foreign citizen can enjoy this right only if there is an international agreement that does not contradict constitutional principles (Article 23); A child who is educated or educated free of charge in an entity or institution or entity as well as, children whose parents receive the right to

child allowance from another country (Article 30); Getting married with a special permit means that the right to benefits as a child is cancelled (Article 51), etc.

Regarding the financial position, it is important to emphasize that when the calculation is made, all family members are taken into account and the second, requirements are as follows: salaries and related compensations; retirement assets; monetary compensation for the unemployed; social monetary assistance; continuous monetary assistance; assets based on property rights and other property rights (and the like), performing independent activities, including crafts, contracts for work, expertise, agricultural activities, compensation for part-time work abroad; not to exclude assets from alimony and disability benefits, etc. (Article 27, Par 2). The positive aspects that our law provides are the non-inclusion of special allowances for bodily injury; monetary compensation for care and assistance from another person; unilateral monetary assistance, including those for newborn children, child allowances; alimony; compensation for expenses of foster families; assistance for natural disasters; agricultural subsidies as a sole profession; etc.

What are the benefits that are considered as child allowance in North Macedonia and what is the amount of the allowance that the child receives? The amount that a preschool or primary school child can receive is 716.00 MKD; children in secondary education, up to the age of 18 receive the sum of 1,136.00 MKD, while the two specific categories are cases when the child is completely and permanently disabled. The decision is made based on the age, meaning that: the age group of 15 receives the amount which is equal to that of a preschool or school aged child and the second category is the age group of over 15, in which the child has the same psychophysical condition as in the previous case. The aspects that I think are limiting the circle of child support in our Country are, limiting the amount given per child to a maximum of 1,800.00 MKD and, another limitation that each family member's family income cannot be higher than 2,490.00 MKD, while for children with one parent it can be 4,980.00 MKD (Article 28). Based on any common sense of the daily needs that a family can and actually has today, these restrictions and calculations with paragraph precision are absurd!

A child who has developmental disabilities, but has reached the age of 26, enjoys another form of financial support. This person is acquired this right after an opinion is given by a professional board, which also assesses the degree of disability (Par 2, Article 32, Act on Child Protection). The amount of the special allowance is 4,202.00 MKD, while for children with one parent the amount is doubled to 6,303.00 MKD; for 25% of the basic compensation, the special allowance for a child who comes from a family using social assistance will be added, amount which is 5,252.50 MKD (Par. 3).

Unilateral benefits that are received by parents in RNM are those related to a live-born child or the person/parent who adopts the child, at the time of

adoption. This right is enjoyed by one of the parents who must of course, be citizens and live in North Macedonia permanently (Article 37), the amount provided by law consists of 4,829.00 MKD. What raised doubts over the years and was created as a policy to increase the birth rate in RNM was the introduction of the third child allowance! According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the birth rate was 13.3% in 2001, while in 2016 this percentage had dropped to 11.1%, so it was considered reasonable to allocate those funds to other categories, namely groups of citizens who are in a socially vulnerable situation (Antevska, 2018). The Ministry even announced that families with very good financial conditions had received assistance. 28 million Euros were spent from the Ministry's budget while it had not had any impact on reducing child poverty! Currently, the allowance for a third child is measured in the amount of 8,048.00 MKD. In fact, we consider that starting from the birth rate, from 2001 onwards, there was an exodus of the youth to European countries, with a decrease in the probability of creating a family among the new generations, measuring it only as a number is inadequate and superficial, especially since it is not transparently shown what the numbers and statistics are in general, but also as nationalities in particular, which cannot be claimed to not exist.

Regarding this type of benefit that one parent can enjoy, it is related to several conditions, namely: receiving vaccinations, continuous education (with two exceptions, when there is an injury or developmental disability), the mother being alive (the parent who receives the assistance), living in RNM, etc. Procedures for submitting a request, verification of facts, continuity in the transmission of information (eight-day deadline), or the continuity of the renewal of the information of the person who is benefiting from one of these forms of child allowances or means that the parent receives based on parental rights.

As a final form of benefit for a child is participation. This form of support is provided depending on the financial situation of the family, ensuring participation in the costs of care and education, rest and recreation of children in a public institution for children. The method of distribution is provided in the price of the service paid by the parents (Article 40, ACP).

Remarks made about poor levels of social services in our Country are not just those of a single citizen. The category of persons with a social well-being status is not being reduced, especially when considering the market and developments related to the fiscal policies of countries. Remarks regarding social benefits, including allowances and the level of social support were also mentioned in the Report of the Committee for Child Protection. In my opinion, some of the most important measures on which we hope major problems related to social support would be solved are: decentralizing social services; raising the need for social services for children to the real level of needs, making it a priority; as well as, social exclusion and stigma (CRC/C/MKD/CO/3-6, 2022). All these ways of alleviating or improving the situation in RNM are some forms that really require a lot of commitment,

starting from drafting laws in accordance with the real needs and demands that the family has (always referring to a social minimum). The second thing is that, we consider that the services provided by the centers to be more similar to the bureaucratic systems of social policies. The third one is that social services are provided only by the largest municipalities, where the flow of requests is much greater; requests are submitted from the entire surrounding area (municipalities around the region, e.g. Tetovo with all surrounding municipalities) and it is impossible for the government to recognize your need as a child, as long as there are no electronic management systems, and there are no on scene checks of the situation declared in the papers. Every municipality, no matter how small, has the opportunity to get to know each other and recognize the need that the child or family has, by decentralizing services we offer much more transparent and reliable opportunities and approaches to the way in which funds are distributed, but also to the accuracy of the services provided, eliminating the possibility of fraud and abuse! There are also other opinions according to which perhaps, the best idea is for social services to be handled not only by government institutions but, by private ones, as well, thing which increases the level of responsibility of the private entity itself that undertakes the service, assuming that their management skills and expertise may be greater than of those in government institutions. However, the process of introducing contracting in social protection requires drafting regulations for standardization, accreditation and licensing of service providers as prerequisites for the involvement in the provision of social services of various actors (NGOs and the private sector) through social contracting (Bogoevska, Trbojevik, & Georgievska).

In general, the issue of social management is a set of actions similar to a circle in which you cannot choose which part rotates and which does not. If a movement, and usually it is one referring to the legislative initiatives, moves in one direction, the whole process will go in the same direction, including implementation and distribution. Unfortunately, decision-making comes from the center, while the consequences are at the lowest levels of society, which in our opinion is the key problem in the social problems of our country. The necessary means that a parent needs for the essential needs of a child cannot be determined without a concrete analysis of all the requirements of “at least the average of a child.” The Committee on Children's Rights, regarding the management of budgetary funds, has repeatedly emphasized several key issues, including: creating a special budget for inclusive education within the Ministry; increasing budgetary funds, especially for specific categories; identifying potential areas where funds can be collected and transferred to the ones dedicated to the children and their families; establishing control mechanisms, accuracy, equity and efficiency of budgetary funds; and finally, including the non-governmental sector in decision-making that affects the interests of children and taking into account the opinion given by government institutions (CRC/C/MKD/CO/3-6, 2022).

Conclusions

The demand for progress is long-standing and ongoing. The sphere of interest for legal protection is of a very high level and as a very sensitive topic. We consider that in our legal system the reform in social policies is made with mathematical calculations, rather than with real intentions of legal protection of the children, as it should really be. Also, The essence of the problem can be solved by planning a concrete policy that touches the interest of the child or the family. The direct involvement of various associations is a sufficient experience to perceive the destiny of that plan for success or failure. The idea of involving children seems good, but in any case, not with as much relevance to the maturity that this problem itself requires. Creating a plan, regarding finding the necessary finances to support a plan is a good strategy however; this should also include forms of audit regarding management and accountability for their destination.

Analyzing the prerequisites that must be met for child allowance, it seems easy that the conditions serve more to exclude children than to include them in any of the benefit opportunities. Specifically, the mandatory vaccination requirement is an excessive condition imposed by governments, especially by not allowing the parent the opportunity to choose the path of their child. In our legal system there are multiple opportunities that a child can benefit from, but the disadvantage is the restriction that the child can be a beneficiary based on just only one basis, making the life of a child more unbearable economically. If countries have a tendency to decrease the financial means, then the question that arises is, by what means can the child live! This is a high indicator for the majority of the population, especially people who are part of these programs and are going to be put in a state of starvation and poverty! Luckily in our society non-governmental groups are always engaged in financing people in need. I consider that, unofficially, these entities are a government with plans and projects that are quite expeditious, fast and accurate in achieving concussions with the real situation, even with the closure of countless cases in the eyes of the media and the public opinion.

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