

PARENTAL MOVEMENTS WITH DISPARATE AGENDAS

The workshop “Parental Movements: The Politicization of Motherhood and Fatherhood in Central and Eastern Europe and the Post-Soviet Region” covered various movements in various post-socialist countries. “Parental movements” include struggles to influence policy and public opinion while strengthening parents’ rights, mothers’ movements for the rights of disabled children, fathers’ movements for their rights in custody disputes, future parents’ movements for the right to have children and the right to medical treatment, and movements against mandatory vaccination.

Conservative values are sometimes the basis, and movements promise to secure the survival of the nation by propagating conservative family values in the face of the demographic crisis going on in several countries in the area. The parents’ movement in Russia focuses mainly on the demographic decline of the country and on traditional Russian family values and Russian family policy. The Ukrainian case presented also stressed declining birthrates, abortion rates, and depopulation as a threat to the nation. The foremost task, some argue, is to impede this development by propagating the model of the two-parent family with children as a norm. Moreover, the movement identified the European Union, homosexuality, and LGBTQ rights as major threats to the proliferation of traditional families and to the nation’s survival.

The traditionalist perspective of parental movements in the post-socialist region was further reflected in the Czech fathers’ movement. The focus was almost solely on the issues of divorce and custody, and the movement encountered some difficulties in framing its argument convincingly: activists were challenging a norm by presenting fathers as capable of caring for their children, and at the same time arguing for conservative gender roles and limited rights for women.

ACCESS TO AND the use of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) are a subject of public debate in many post-socialist countries. In Poland, the stigmatization of children born after in-vitro fertilization (IVF) is widespread, and includes characterizations of IVF children as “monsters” and the thesis that embryos are unborn citizens with rights, and hence the freezing of numerous embryos as part of IVF is immoral. Polish parental organizations strategically shifted their line of argumentation to the question of citizenship, discussing their rights as patients or citizens in need of medical treatment. The Bulgarian mobilization around fertility and the right to ART treatments meanwhile argued that its members deserve parenthood. They make divide parents into those who do and those who

do not deserve to be parents. A concern for the purity and survival of the nation is shown. Among the underserving parents mentioned are ethnic minorities, who are seen as a threat to the nation. The issue of access to ART treatment for willing, wealthy, and responsible Bulgarians was raised in this light.

Another type of parental movement was based mainly on a division construed between parental practices in the past and in the present. Such movements promoted a more natural and humane approach to the relation between parents and children. The past was associated with authoritarian practices in medicine and health care. Among these mobilizations is the Czech movement advocating natural birth and limitations on medication and intervention in childbirth, and opposing vaccination programs. Dominant knowledge and practices in health care were also opposed by parental movements in Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. These movements focused on making the system of care for disabled persons more humane, and at the same time changing attitudes towards persons with disabilities.

Another example of new norms being developed in the post-Soviet area was the activism of fathers in “daddy schools” in north-western Russia. This activism was seen as a factor in the change of fatherhood norms in the region. The schools’ focus was to create a new norm of fatherhood in which fathers take a more active role in their children’s upbringing and care.

THERE WERE TWO DISPARATE and somehow polemic tendencies, or overarching discourses, in the presented cases. The first was the nationalist discourse, in which the interests of the nation are superior to those of parents and particularly women. The other predominant discourse was concentrated on promoting new norms in parenting.

The workshop organizers, Elżbieta Korolczuk and Katalin Fábíán, stressed that social movements have been the drivers behind the major societal changes of the last few decades in Central and Eastern Europe. 

dominika v. polanska

Note: The workshop was held at CBEEES, Södertörn University, in May 2014. A full report can be found on Baltic Worlds’ web site.



From the 13th annual “March for life” in Prague.