

CHILD AND FAMILY SUPPORT POLICY IN UKRAINE: IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES DURING THE WAR

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Abstract. *The ongoing war in Ukraine negatively impacts the lives of families with children and complicates the implementation of policies to support them. This study examines the state and challenges of family and child support policy during wartime. Despite difficulties, most state benefits, privileges, and services for families with children in Ukraine continue to be provided, largely thanks to international assistance. Key tools of children and family support include the childbirth grant, the "Baby Package" program, the municipal nanny service, payments to families with three or more children, single parents, and families caring for a child with a disability. However, the unchanged amount of benefits over a long period, and consequently their significant decrease in real terms, the reduction in the list of families eligible for benefits, and the cancellation of some benefits (due to the war) lead to the decreased effectiveness of the policy. The war has also caused organizational challenges related to large-scale displacement of families, destruction of service centres and infrastructure in general, a reduction in the number of employees in service institutions, and difficulties in providing services due to lack of electricity, shelling, etc. It necessitates accelerating the digitalization of child and family support services to make the system more flexible. During wartime, the role of public organizations in supporting families has increased. Their assistance is targeted and takes into account the specific needs of territories (particularly front-line areas). However, the lack of coordination between NGOs,*

irregular assistance, and insufficient scale of coverage for needs reduces the effectiveness of such family support.

Keywords: *child and family support policy, Russian war against Ukraine, social benefits, international assistance, childbirth grant, municipal nanny service.*

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Introduction. Large-scale wars have a profoundly destructive impact on the socio-demographic sphere in countries that fall victim to military aggression and where hostilities take place. Such wars are typically accompanied by extensive destruction of social infrastructure, lead to intense forced migration, result in the impoverishment of large groups of the population, and exacerbate social inequality. They significantly worsen the demographic situation due to the loss of human lives, a decline of fertility, the separation of families, and the dissolution of marriages, among other effects. Nearly all social challenges of wartime, such as difficulties in accessing basic social services (medical, educational, etc.), an increase in poverty (including due to the loss of a breadwinner), and the problems of accelerated forced displacement, are particularly acute for families with children, making them especially vulnerable to the consequences of military aggression.

At the same time, wartime conditions force states to reassess their priorities concerning family and social policy in general, shifting the focus from social programs to defence and recovery. In any case, there arises a need to adapt state strategies in the realm of social and demographic policy to the conditions of war.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, which have destabilized the security and economic situation in Europe as a whole, have significantly heightened the relevance of research into the impact of wars on the situation of families and children, as well as on social and demographic policy. It is related not only to the necessity of understanding the historical and contemporary context of these processes but also to the practical tasks of developing effective national and international strategies in this area. This is crucial both for ensuring the protection of vulnerable groups in wartime conditions and for preventing or at least mitigating the effects of war on the civilian population.

Literature review. Each comprehensive socio-demographic study on fertility and family in Ukraine has included questions about the effectiveness of implemented family policy measures, analysis of issues related to their implementation, the search for solutions to current issues, the prevention of potential threats, and the improvement of family policy overall (Family 2009, Населення України, 2008). The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine prompts a thorough analysis of the experiences of other countries where hostilities have taken place, to identify connections between the development of family policy and fertility dynamics in those countries, and to determine the possibilities of applying their experiences and responses to wartime challenges in our country (Krimer, 2023).

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, a number of reports by international organizations highlighted the impact of the war

on children and families, including security, legal, social and economic aspects (A Heavy Toll, 2023, Ukraine, 2023). Among the comprehensive researches is the scientific project by the Ptoukha Institute for Demography and Social Studies of the NAS of Ukraine, titled “Evaluation of National Social Policy in the Context of Global Challenges”. The largest group of these challenges includes those with a significant impact on national social policy and that are expected to remain relevant over the next three years: “High Level of Armed Violence”, “Employment Crisis”, “Deterioration of Population Mental Health”, “Breakdown of Social Security Systems”, “Increasing Social Inequality” among others (Makarova et al., 2024).

The most pressing topic of public discourse in wartime in Ukraine is the prevention or at least the mitigation of the negative consequences of poverty, as its increase is inevitable during wartime. During the full-scale invasion, a study is conducted on the impact of the war on the poverty levels of households with children. The results of the study revealed that the war has caused a sharp decline in income and a significant increase in child poverty, sudden poverty, and multidimensional poverty (Child Poverty, 2023). The study of specific aspects of deprivation poverty among families with children, particularly regarding housing conditions, was conducted by A. Reut and Y. Kogatko (Reut & Kogatko, 2022).

There is also a special survey (April 2024) with a corresponding report, which focuses on the most urgent water supply needs of Ukrainian households with children, including findings related to water access, quality, some risks, and assistance (Life for Children, 2024). At the end of last and the beginning of this year, a nationwide sample survey on the socio-economic status of households was conducted in Ukraine with the support of UNICEF and BMZ. The results of this survey are currently being analyzed.

Ukrainian researcher O. Strelnyk emphasizes the deterioration of women's economic status during the full-scale invasion, the lack of childcare services, and the reduction in social spending for women and vulnerable groups of the population (Strelnyk, 2023). These statements are also supported by other studies (Жінки в Україні, 2023).

The full-scale invasion has activated the request for research in the field of social protection of internally displaced families. T. Perehudova identified several “weaknesses” in the regulatory providing of material assistance to able-bodied internally displaced persons, including “the arbitrary determination of monetary assistance amount; the lack of connection between monetary assistance and social standards; and the inconsistency among the size of the single social contribution paid by internally displaced employees, their wages, and the amount of financial benefit” (Perehudova, 2022).

At the same time, the researchers note that in Ukraine, within a relatively short period, a new space of humanitarian activity has begun to take shape, thanks to the efforts of international and national organizations. It demonstrates consolidated subjectivity and enhances adaptability to a large-scale humanitarian crisis in wartime (Khmelevska, 2023).

The **purpose** of our paper is to analyze child and family support policy measures in Ukraine to determine the main problems and challenges in the way of implementation of this policy during the full-scale war against Ukraine.

Data and methods. In our research, we have used data from the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, the Ministry of Finance of Ukraine, the outcomes of social surveys conducted during full-scale war, media publications, and foreign research on related topics. The methods of comparison, elementary theoretical analysis and statistical methods were used in the study.

Main results. Throughout the period of Ukraine's independence, the support of families with children was mostly focused on the first years of a child's life. The development of family policy in Ukraine had certain positive trends only in 2005–2013. In April 2005, the childbirth grant was increased several times. In the following years, there was a further increase in financial support for families with children, an extension of the terms of the grant's provision and the linking of payments to the amount of the subsistence minimum. In particular, in 2008, both the childbirth grant amount was increased and the differentiation of payments according to the birth order was introduced (Resolution, 2008). Another positive development was the facilitation of bureaucratic procedures.

At the beginning of 2014, a childbirth grant for the first child amounted to 30 subsistence minimums (30,960 UAH or 3,870 USD at the National Bank of Ukraine (NBU) exchange rate as of January 4, 2014) and was paid over 24 months. The grant for the second child amounted to 60 subsistence minimums over 48 months (61,920 UAH or 7,740 USD), and for the third and subsequent children, it was 120 subsistence minimums over 72 months (123,840 UAH or 15,480 USD). The childbirth grant consisted of a lump sum (10 subsistence minimums) paid at the birth of a child, with the remainder distributed in equal monthly installments. Until July 1, 2014, there was also a separate childcare allowance provided to one parent during parental leave until the child reached the age of three. This allowance was granted for each child regardless of birth order.

After the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in the spring of 2014, the government decided to change financial assistance to families with children. According to the «Law on Preventing a Financial Disaster and Creating Prerequisites for Economic Growth in Ukraine» (2014), the childbirth grant in Ukraine was fixed at 41,280 UAH (or 3,498 USD at the NBU exchange rate as of July 1, 2014) for each child born, regardless of birth order. According to the law, this benefit is paid in installments: UAH 10,320 as a lump sum immediately after childbirth and UAH 860 monthly for the next 36 months.

Since 2014, the amount of the childbirth grant has not changed. However, due to inflation and the devaluation of the national currency, the grant's purchasing power has significantly decreased, thus diminishing its importance as a crucial form of support for the family in this stage of its life cycle. This change also altered the perception of the grant as a substantial tool influencing the decision to have a child. *Figure 1* illustrates the ratio of the childbirth grant to amount of subsistence minimum in Ukraine for the period from 2015 to 2024: while at the beginning of

2015, the grant amounted to 40 subsistence minimums, by early 2024, it decreased to only 16 subsistence minimums (in 2.5 times). The lump sum part of the grant, paid immediately after birth, was 10,320 UAH, equivalent to 10 subsistence minimums in 2014, whereas by 2024, it equaled only 4 subsistence minimums. In terms of the U.S. dollar exchange rate at the beginning of 2015, the childbirth grant reached 2,580 USD, but by early 2024, it had dropped to 1,086 USD (a decrease of 2.4 times).

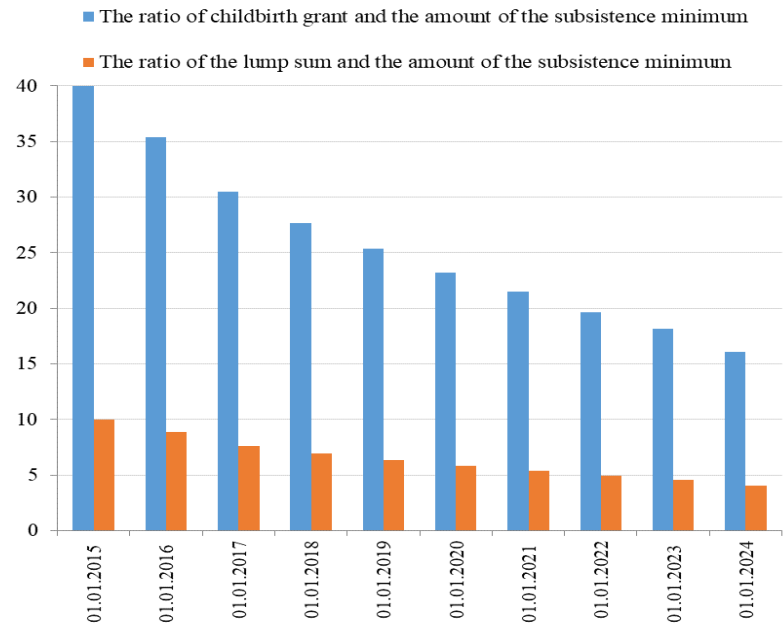


Figure 1. **The ratio of childbirth grant and the amount of subsistence minimum in Ukraine, 2015 - 2024**

Source: compiled by the authors based on data from the Ministry of Finance of Ukraine

In addition, since July 1, 2014, the above-mentioned childcare allowance for children under the age of three, which was provided alongside the childbirth grant to one of the parents who is on parental leave, has been abolished.

The research conducted in 2008–2009 (i.e., before the onset of the war) demonstrated the relationship between changes in the sums of childbirth grants and dynamics of fertility by birth order, with the ties strengthening as the birth order increased (Family, 2009).

The financial constraints, associated with the full-scale war, along with other factors, have significantly increased the risk of poverty and vulnerability for families with children (Черенько, 2023). To mitigate the impact of the war on poverty, it is advisable to index social payments and/or adjust them in accordance with the subsistence minimum. However, this is extremely difficult to achieve in the context of limited finances and dependence on international aid. A “closed circle” emerges, the way out of which is a challenge for social policy, the priority goal of which is preventing further growth in the poverty level of families with children.

However, the situation is complicated by the fact that financial difficulties are combined with other problems. In particular, the significant increase in the number of internally displaced persons (IDP) led not only to the rise in the assistance required for IDP, but also made it difficult to provide the previously assigned cash payments. In addition, many service centers and infrastructure objects have been destroyed, the number of employees has decreased, and their work is interrupted by the lack of electricity and frequent air attacks. Further development of the digitalization of child and family support services, which contributes to greater flexibility of the system is one of the solutions in these circumstances.

Shortly before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, several new institutional tools appeared in Ukraine and were aimed both at financial support for parents with children and maintaining a balance between parenthood and professional employment. One of them was the "*Baby Box*", which is a one-time in-kind assistance from the state to families with a newborn. Baby Box includes a set of the most necessary things for a newborn. In 2020, against the background of the epidemiological crisis, the Baby Box was replaced by an equivalent monetary compensation. In 2021, the option of choosing between the box and monetary compensation was introduced.

In 2019, the *Municipal Nanny program* was introduced. This program provided financial compensation for the use of childcare services (in the amount of subsistence minimum with the possibility of receiving it for all children under the age of three). During 2020-2024, the Municipal Nanny program lost its potential to support parents with children: from 2020, the service was limited to two or more children and children in need of additional care, as well as in the case of parents with disabilities, and from 2022 only for parents with disabilities and children in need of additional care. At the same time, the size of financial compensation increased to one minimum wage.

The extending categories of families with children to be covered by the municipal nanny service Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine was a new step in the development of this program (Постанова, 2024). One of the reasons for such step is that internally displaced people need more time to become employed and integrate into new communities. Another important reason was the closing of a large number of preschools.

Families with many children are a vulnerable category. Since 2019, such families (with three or more children) have been receiving additional fixed monthly allowance for the third and subsequent children (for the period until the child reaches the age of six). The continuation of government support in the difficult conditions of martial law in Ukraine is positive. However, any fixed amount of allowance loses over time its significance through inflation and fluctuations in the exchange rate (especially the variable after the beginning of a full-scale invasion).

In Ukraine, there is a separate financial assistance for single parents (in fact the vast majority of single parents are mothers), which is provided in an amount equal to the difference between 100% of the subsistence minimum for a child of the appropriate age and the average monthly total family income per person per previous six months.

Caring for a child requires not only financial investment but also time. In Ukraine, parental leave is quite long but poorly paid. Maternity leave (126 days) is paid at the level of 100% of previous earnings, while the three-year parental leave is unpaid, but the place of work is preserved, where the parents can return after the leave. The introduction in Ukraine in 2021 of paid leave for the father (or mother, in the case when the main parental leave is issued for the father of the child) lasting up to 14 days was quite progressive (primarily in terms of achieving gender equality in the family sphere) and a long-awaited step. Unfortunately, the short period of such leave is not able to change the situation and stereotypes about the division of responsibilities of a woman and a man in reproductive work (related to the care and upbringing of a child/children).

Despite the war, the housing program for providing preferential loans to young families continued (Посранова, 2012). In Ukraine, young families (spouses are under the age of 35) with children and, in some cases, when one of the parents is under the age of 40 (single-parent families and families of scientists) are eligible for such loans. Alongside, there are loan programs for IDPs and combatants (Куць, 2024).

In April 2024, the Ukrainian government announced the introduction of a new financial support program for children who have lost parental care: “A Child is Not Alone”. Children who have lost their parents but do not have the status of orphans or children without parental care will receive financial assistance (New financial, 2024). As expected, financial support will be provided to persons who have temporarily taken such children into care, including relatives, friends, and families or family-type orphanages.

The Government of Ukraine also makes efforts to achieve gender equality. During the full-scale war, Ukraine ratified “The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence” (Istanbul Convention) (Про ратифікацію, 2022). The Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine has adopted “Strategy for Implementation of Gender Equality in Education until 2030”, “The Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men until 2030” and approved an operational plan for its realization for 2022–2024 (Government portal, 2022). These actions show that Ukraine shares European values and is ready for changes in accordance with them.

In Ukraine, nongovernment organizations are increasing their role and contribution to the development of territorial communities. Many of them focus their activities on the problems of families with children, provide support to vulnerable families, seriously ill children and persons with disabilities, internally displaced persons and their families, as well as families with many children, single parents, guardians (Пепелік, 2022).

The advantage of these organizations' activities is that they can quickly respond to the emergency needs of territorial communities. This is based on understanding the essence of problems and, therefore, a quick search for ways to solve them. Locality, targeting of assistance, and lack of need to coordinate activities with government structures also have a positive effect. However, there are a number of disadvantages, including the lack of action coordination among organizations, so

some groups of the population or communities can receive more attention and assistance than others (sometimes not covered by assistance at all), irregularity of aid, partial territorial coverage when remote settlements are left alone with their problems.

Conclusion. The continuation of the provision of most state payments, benefits, and services to families with children in Ukraine, in the conditions of war, is undoubtedly a positive fact. This is made possible largely thanks to international assistance. The most essential tools of family policy in our country remain the childbirth grant, the “Baby Box” and “Municipal Nanny” programs, payments to large families, single parents, and families caring for a child with a disability, among others. However, the stagnation of payment amounts over a long period (resulting in a decrease in their real value due to inflation), the reduction in the number of family categories eligible for payments, and the cancellation of certain important benefits for families with children (due to wartime financial constraints) diminish the effectiveness of family policy.

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