

CHILD AND SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Svetlana TRBOJEVIK

Prof. Dr., University "Ss Cyril and Methodius" in Skopje, Faculty of Philosophy - Skopje, Institute Social Work and Social Policy, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia.

Elena RIZOVA

*Assoc. Prof. Dr., University "Ss Cyril and Methodius" in Skopje, Faculty of Philosophy - Skopje, Institute of pedagogy, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia.
ORCID NO: 0000-0003-3390-1879*

Sofija GEORGIEVSKA

University "Ss Cyril and Methodius" in Skopje, Faculty of Philosophy - Skopje, Institute Social Work and Social Policy, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia.

Natasha Stanojkovska TRAJKOVSKA

University "Ss Cyril and Methodius" in Skopje, Faculty of Philosophy - Skopje, Institute of special education and rehabilitation, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia.

ABSTRACT

This article presents an overview of the political, legislative and practical efforts aimed to improve social and child protection systems in the Republic of North Macedonia, with a primary focus on measures targeting families and children. The Republic of North Macedonia has experienced a tough transition as a result of internal political and ethnic turmoil as well as unfavourable external environment. In the last 15 years, the child and social protection system of the Republic of North Macedonia had undergone several strategic reforms aiming to decentralise, deinstitutionalise and pluralise the social welfare. When it comes to children and families, the reforms were primarily focused on the reduction of child poverty through the improvement of benefits and social services for children. The main reason behind the reforms was a critique related to inappropriate targeting of children, undeveloped and expensive services for children of a low quality. The legal changes followed the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international standards and principles, while the primary goal of the ongoing reforms is the harmonisation with the European Union's legislation (but also other international documents). This article aims to discuss these reforms and their implications for children and families. It will expose the obstacles, omissions, and inconsistencies of the child and social protection system. Within the child and social protection system, numerous administrative and other barriers are imposed that hinder the access to the rights and thus also the ability to realise the rights. The paper will thus also shed light on some of the obstacles imposed by the administration that discriminate against the poorest and most socially excluded.

INTRODUCTION

Social security system in the Republic of North Macedonia consists of pension insurance, unemployment insurance, child benefits and social security regulated by number of laws and bylaws such as the Law on Social Protection, the Law on Child Protection, the Law on Family, the Law on Labour Relationships, the Law on Employment and Insurance in Case of Unemployment, and the Law on Social Security for Elderly. For the most part, social protection is based on insurance contributions with the exception of family benefits (child benefit) and social protection programs which are based on solidarity and material census. Primarily, social security is provided by exercising the rights to financial assistance from social and child protection and provision of social and child services and other measures designed to protect citizens from social risks and to prevent social problems that adversely affect citizens well-being and their social inclusion in society. Social security of citizens, according to the Article 34 of the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, observes the principles of social justice, humanity, and solidarity.

1. Trends and challenges of social protection in historical perspective

The social security system in the Republic of North Macedonia was established within the former Yugoslav federation in the early 1960s. After independence, in the early nineties of the last century, social security in Republic of North Macedonia was established centrally and was at large accomplished through cash transfers and benefits to citizens at social risk. Social services were underdeveloped and reduced primarily to institutional forms of care (Bogoevska Trbojevik, 2015). Since the early nineties, social security system has undergone number of changes. First and foremost, changes were directed at overcoming weaknesses that emerged from the inherited centralized social security system, unable to respond to problems caused by the transition process. Long and poorly managed transition process caused low economic growth, high unemployment rate, poverty as well as an increased demand for social protection of citizens. Therefore, changes in the social protection were designed to provide the minimum protection of the “new poor” that arose from the redundant workers, later identified as victims of transition. Additional, changes were made with the aim of creating modern and efficient social protection system that will protect individual freedoms as well as social and human rights. The changes assumed introduction of systematic measures for creating a new legal and institutional system of social and child protection which would ensure social security of citizens despite life insecurities.

Number of changes were adopted in the legislation as well as in the ways of financing, administering and offering child and social protection services. Mainly, the reforms were made under the auspices of the international organizations and aimed at providing the required safety net for citizens as well as at harmonizing Macedonian social legislation with the EU.

Chronologically, the first reform commenced in 1992 with the adoption of the Family Law¹ and the Program for socially endangered population. The Program intended to protect the basic needs of an average four-member family through individual cash allowances for family members. The reform was not thoughtfully designed and faced weaknesses in the practical implementation. This scheme had de-stimulating effects on employment and unjustified redistribution of value per family (Bogoevska, Bornarova, Trbojevik, 2013).

The first Law on Social Protection was adopted in 1997, the first Law on Child Protection was adopted in 2000, whereas the first Law on Labor Relations was adopted in 2005. Social protection measures were expanded with the adoption of the Law on child protection, establishing the system of benefits for child allowance and services of protection and recreation. (Bogoevska & Dimitrijoska, 2019). The reform process from the 2003 was considered as the most significant in the area of social protection at the time. In this period there was a broader orientation towards social inclusion and services based on individual needs for care. The effects of the reform on child protection are connected to promotion of the deinstitutionalisation children with disabilities. As a result of the decentralization process local government gain competences in managing nursing homes and kindergartens.

The National program for development of social protection 2011-2021 and the Strategy for reduction of poverty and social exclusion 2010-2020 adopted in 2010, became key strategic documents that will determine the future development of social and child protection. Both documents provided directions for further realization of the key principles of the reform: decentralization, deinstitutionalization and pluralisation. Whereas, the Strategy for Gender Equality (2013-2020) envisages the introduction of parental leave as part of measures to improve and enhance the economic status of women in the country.

Redefinition of social rights that sought to provide standardization of conditions and procedures in obtaining social benefits as well as to improve targeting of the most endangered beneficiaries of social rights were achieved with the adoption of the new Law on social protection in 2009. Projected changes intended to improve targeting of social protection of vulnerable categories of citizens. The new Law supported the process of deinstitutionalization and development of community-based services by introduction of new types of social services such as independent living support and small group homes. Nevertheless, the decentralization was and still is not developing with the desired dynamics. Social work centres are yet not

¹ In Macedonian Family Law, the most significant reform was made in 1992, when was enacted the Family Law Act. Since then, the Macedonian family law was amended several times, but without any significant changes (Mickovik, D, Ristov A (2016) Family Law in the Civil Code of the Republic of Macedonia. J Civil Legal Sci 5: 166).

delegate under the responsibility of local self-government and therefore remain units under the central authority. The amendments on this Law were numerous. The Law on social protection specifically regulated the rights related to protection of single mothers during pregnancy until the child turns 3 years of age and as well as protection of financially insecure persons older than 65.

In an attempt to reduce the risk of poverty, the Government adopted programs for conditional cash transfers for secondary education for children from families, beneficiaries of social financial assistance, subsidizing the energy consumption of families, beneficiaries of social financial assistance and permanent financial assistance.

An in-depth reform of the system of social protection system was made with the adoption of the New Law on Social Protection, New Law on Social Security for Elderly and the amendments to the Law on Child Protection in May, 2019. Conducted analysis by the MLSP in 2017 showed that the social and child protection system needed considerable reforms in order to improve the effectiveness of cash benefits and the efficiency of social services delivered to beneficiaries. Social transfers were considered uneven and inadequate and social and child protection services were not compatible with the beneficiaries needs, requiring diligent implementation of the process of deinstitutionalization, decentralization and pluralism (Gerovska-Mitev, 2019).

Most profound changes were made in regards to social financial assistance, considering that the benefit had limited effect on poverty reduction prior to the major 2019 reforms. Mainly, due to very small amounts of social benefits and inadequate targeting of beneficiaries. In 2018, social assistance's contribution to poverty reduction was only 3.8 percentage points, which is particularly low when compared to the effect of pensions. Namely, in the same year, pensions contributed 15.1 percentage points to poverty reduction (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2020). Social financial assistance has been transformed to Guaranteed Minimal Assistance (GMA). The right to GMA is designated for materially unsecured household whose total average amount of income on all grounds in the last three months before submitting the request for exercising the right is lower than the amount of the GMA, determined by this Law. Each eligible household receives assistance, according to the risk. In practice, this means that with the reform, a family of five, with two children in primary and one in secondary education, will receive 11,300 MKD. A typical family of four with two children, one in primary and the other in secondary education, will receive 10,600 MKD GMA. The same family within previous legal provisions received 50% reduced assistance that amounted not more than 3,029 MKD. This amount was received by as much as 70% of the beneficiaries. The reform tripled the amount of financial benefits of families in risk of poverty. With the adoption of a bylaw, activation of GMA beneficiaries has been stimulated for the purpose of training for work and employment. GMA beneficiaries are to be more proactive in participating in the active employment measures in order to overcome the material insecurity of the household.

Another novelty in provision of social security is the adoption of a New Law on Social Security for Elderly. This separate law, introduced for the first time in 2019, aims to regulate the right to social pension for persons who are over 65 years old, have less than 15 years of work experience, are citizens of North Macedonia, and have no property. In fact, social pension, is designed to guarantee financial security to more than 4.000 citizens, who have contributed in the society, but have not exercised their right to a pension and have no other source of income to support themselves.

2. Provision of parental care

The legacy of parental care regarding the use and length of maternity leave has been inherited from the previous system. The first Law on Labor Relations was adopted in 2005 and was amended numerous times. The current model of parental care in the Republic of Northern Macedonia is outdated and treats parenting as an issue related predominantly to a mother. The Law on Labor Relations (2005) stipulates a nine months maternity leave or 15 months in case of birth gives birth to several children at once (twins, triplets and more) (Article 165, paragraphs 1, 6 and 7) and a maximum seven days of leave for fathers (this provision varies depending on the collective agreement and is covered by the employer as paid leave due to family circumstances). The funds for the maternity leave allowance are provided from the Budget of the Republic of North Macedonia. According to the Law on Health Insurance, the basis for calculating the salary

compensation is the average monthly amount of the paid salary to which the contribution for the compulsory health insurance was paid in the last twelve months before the occurrence of the case due to which the right to compensation is acquired. The amount of the salary compensation during the leave due to pregnancy, childbirth and maternity is 100% of the base of the salary compensation.

Although the maternity leave cannot be divided between parents, the leave can be transferred to the father. This means that in order for fathers to take the leave, the mother must give it up completely. Namely, according to the Law, the father has the same right to use maternity leave as the mother, he can exercise that right only in case the mother refuses to use the maternity leave. More precisely, the Article 167 from the Law on Labor Relations stipulates that "if the maternity leave from Article 165 of this Law is not used by the female employee, the right to parental leave is used by the father or the adoptive parent of the child". However, the practice of use of this provision is rare in the Republic of North Macedonia. According to the data of the Health Insurance Fund, annually 10-20 men use maternity leave in the Republic of Macedonia.

The Law provides protection at all stages of pregnancy, obliging the employer to introduce multiple risk assessments that may affect a pregnant woman, her unborn or newborn child. Additional risk assessment is also applied in case of changing working conditions, equipment or machinery (Radulovic M, 2017). The Law on Labor Relations stipulates protection against discrimination of an employee on the grounds of pregnancy, childbirth and parenthood by guaranteeing the security of employment. The employer must not cancel the employment contract of the employee during pregnancy, birth and parenthood as well as in case of placement of a child with an adoptive parent, absence from parental work by the father or adoptive parent of the child, etc. (Article 9-b). The termination of the employment contract is considered not valid, if on the day of contract termination, the employer was informed of the circumstances of pregnancy, or if the employee within 15 days of the dismissal notifies the employer of the circumstances of pregnancy by submitting an appropriate confirmation from authorized doctor or competent body (Article 101). Pursuant to the provisions in the part of the Law where special protection is prescribed, it is determined that the employer may not request any data on the pregnancy of the worker, unless she submits it herself for the purpose of exercising her rights during pregnancy (Article 163 paragraph 1). If the employee performs work that during her pregnancy may adversely affect her health or the health of the child, the employer is obliged to provide her with alternative appropriate work and salary, equivalent to her previous position, if it is more favorable for employee (Article 163 paragraph 2). Also, during pregnancy, the employee must not work overtime (Article 120 paragraph 2 and Article 164), or work in night shift (Article 164). . Also, a employee who adopts a child has the right to leave until the child reaches the age of nine months, and if she has adopted more children (two or more) she has the right to leave for up to 15 months. The period when the employee can start the leave for pregnancy, childbirth and parenthood based on the findings of the competent health authority, is 45 days before the birth, but compulsory 28 days before the birth (Article 165, paragraph 2). If for health reasons the child is provided with a treatment in a health institution and in the meantime the mother or the father returns to work, the leave due to birth and parenthood is temporary terminated and a parent that is on parental leave has the right to use it additionally (Article 165, paragraph 4). The employee is obliged to announce to the employer the time of the beginning of the use and the time of the end of the parental leave, 30 days before the beginning, i.e. before the end of the use of the right of a parental leave (Article 165, paragraph 5). An employee who uses leave due to pregnancy, birth and parenthood, has the right to return to work prior to the end of the leave, but not before 45 days from the day of birth of the child (Article 166, paragraph 1). The employee, in addition to the right to a salary, is also entitled to compensation of salary for leave due to pregnancy and parenthood, in the amount of 50% of the determined amount of compensation for leave according to health care regulations (Article 166, paragraph 2). At the end of the parental leave, the employee has the right to return to the same job or, if that is not possible, to a suitable job in accordance to the conditions of the employment contract (Article 166, paragraph 3). In certain cases, the maternity leave in the Republic of Northern Macedonia can last longer than nine months such as in the case of giving birth to a stillborn child or if the child died before the end of the parental leave due to pregnancy, childbirth and parenthood. In this case, the leave is extended for as long as the doctor finds it necessary to recover from the birth and from the mental condition caused by the loss of the child, and at least 45 days. (Article 168, paragraph 1).

Additionally, the Law on Labor Relations stipulates the right of a mother to a breastfeeding. This entitlement was provided with the first Law adopted in 2005. The mother can use this right upon expiration of maternity leave. The right consists of a paid break during working hours in length of one and a half hours daily, which includes the daily lunch break of the employee. The right can be used by the breastfeeding mother until a child is one year old.

The right of unpaid three months parental leave is a novelty in parental care introduced with the enactment of amendments to the Law on Labor Relations in 2013. The right can be used after the end of the absence from work due to pregnancy, birth and parenthood for care of the child, until the age of three and can be divided into a maximum of three parts. Introduction of the right to unpaid leave did not strengthened either workers' or parents' rights. The use of the right was reduced only to female workers - the mother. This unequal position of the woman-mother and man-father only emphasizes the traditional role of the woman as a mother and caregiver.

The Law on Labor Relations, also, stipulates part-time work. This right can be exercised if both parents are employed, and one of the parents of a child with developmental problems and special educational needs has the right to work part-time (the same right belongs to a single parent) based on finding by a competent medical commission, if the child is not placed in a social health care institution. The right to compensation of part-time salary due to care of a child with disability and the most severe forms of chronic diseases is exercised by the parent in the centre for social protection, regardless of the age of the child. The amount of the compensation is 50% of the average net salary of the parent for the previous year, but not more than 50% of the average net salary in the Republic of Northern Macedonia for the previous year. The amount of the salary compensation is 4,800 denars, adjusted with the increase in the cost of living for the previous year, published by the State Statistical Office in January for the current year.

3. Reforms in child protection

Child protection is a complex area regulated by a number of laws and bylaws as well as strategic documents adopted in various domains: social security, child protection, education, healthcare, employment, housing, local administration, equal opportunity etc. (Trbojevik et al., 2018). Hence, most relevant laws regulating child protection are Law on social protection, Law on family, Law on child protection, Law on child justice, Law on elementary education, Law on secondary education, Law on health protection, Law on prevention and protection against discrimination, Law on local self-government, Law on facilities, Law on civil associations and foundations, Law on general administrative procedure, Law on public officials, Law on the Ombudsman, the Law on health insurance and the Labour Relations Law.

Law on Child Protection regulates the system and organization of child protection as an activity based on children rights. The implementation of the law is guided by the principles of the protection of the right to life and development of the child, protecting the best interests of the child, providing a minimum standard for every child under equal conditions, excluding any form of discrimination, respecting the child's right to freedom and personal security, the personal opinion and freedom of expression, associating and education, conditions for a healthy life and achieving other social rights and freedoms of the child.

Prior to the last reform of social and child protection in 2019, the Law on child protection defined a series of child rights such as child allowance, special allowance, parental allowance, right to participation, and one-time financial assistance for new-born. With exception of the child allowance, all the benefits are non-means tested. Child protection rights, according to provisions in the law, are entitled to a child, who is a Macedonian citizen. These rights can be exercised by one of the parents, a guardian or a person who has been entrusted with the child and lives with the child in a family, with a decision of the competent Social work centre. The reform in the area of child protection enabled easier access to child allowance, so that low-income families with children do not need to have an employed family member to enjoy the right, a condition that has been key in achieving the child allowance right. All bylaws related to the new regulation have been published and the first payment has been made in June 2019. (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2020)

3.1. Child allowance

Prior to the changes in the Law on Child Protection in 2018, the child allowance right was obtained depending on the child's age and financial status of the family. The child allowance represented the right of the child and is provided as a financial allowance for covering part of the expenses for raising and development of a child. A child, citizen of RNM who is on regular education in the Republic of Macedonia can acquire the right to child allowance. The right to child allowance is provided to a child until reaching the age of 18 years, that is, until the end of the school year in which a child has reached the age of 18 years and if the school-age child is in regular schooling. The right was exercised by a child who fully and permanently or for a period of one year remained incapable of work before the age of 15 years or during regular schooling for the time of the duration of the incapacity, no longer then reaching the age of 18 years or until the end of the school year in which a child reached the age of 18 years. The financial situation of the family is determined on the basis of incomes obtained by all family members divided by 12 months. A child was entitled to a child allowance only if the family incomes per family member was lower than 18% of the average national income paid for the first half of the previous year, whereas for single parents this percentage equals 32%. The right to a child allowance applied to a child from a family with income of up to 2,580 MKD household member, and 4980 MKD for single parents. Due to the low-income census, single breadwinner households on the minimum wage could not qualify for the right. Numbers of beneficiaries of child protection rights, prior to new amendments in the Law in 2018, were in continuous decline over the past years. That contributed to significant reduction in the number of child allowance beneficiaries have gone above the income threshold to qualify for the allowance. This trend was most evident regarding the child allowance right. Namely, in the period from 2011 to 2018 the total number of beneficiaries of child allowance right decreased from 11,450 beneficiaries (families) with 22,206 children in 2011 to only 4,245 beneficiaries (families) with 9,155 children in 2018, a fall of 62,92% in the number of beneficiary families and a fall of 58,77% in the number of beneficiary children.

The decrease in the number of beneficiaries was related to complicated procedures that required extensive documentation, discrimination with regard to the most underprivileged and socially excluded groups of people, as well as the symbolic amount of the child allowance. Namely, in 2016, the monthly allowance was 740 MKD for a child up to the age of 15 and 1175 MKD for a child aged 15 to 18, with maximum amount per family of 2,415 MKD regardless on the number of children in the family. The law, regulating child allowance, excluded children of unemployed parents and beneficiaries of social financial assistance. This was absurd, having in mind that children living with unemployed parents for the most part live below poverty line. According to a UNICEF Child Poverty Study 2007, identified that 25% of child population in the country were not entitled to a child allowance allocation. Another obstacle to child allowance right was related to introduction of minimal income, which due to the low census per household member lead to exclusion of four member households. One has to note that loss of right to a child allowance on the grounds of income determination methodology by the Public revenue office was also the case, where the income of the past year affected the current exercise of the right.

The fundamental changes with regard to this right were introduced with the Amendments to the Law on Child protection adopted in 2018. The changes are considered to be the most important family policy measure allowing access to the right for relatively broad segment of population. One novelty is the right to a benefit being extended to all children regardless of the status of the parent (employed or unemployed). Nevertheless, financial census remained as one of the most important criteria in acquiring this right. Besides Macedonian citizens with permanent residence, the right can be obtained by foreign citizens with regulated residence in the country. The new law was a significant step ahead, eliminating discrimination among children related to in-work poor parents, while at the same time acting as a measure against poverty especially for families with multiple children. The proposed amendments and reforms to the social and child protection system proved beneficial for people at risk by enabling them to apply for social (guaranteed minimum assistance, GMA) and child assistance (child allowance and educational allowance). In addition, the threshold for child allowance and the newly introduced education allowance was set much much higher. For example, for a three-member household the total average monthly income realized in the last three months before submitting the application and during the exercise of the right on all grounds of all household members must not exceed the amount of 11,400 MKD, for a four-member household 13,800 MKD, for a five-member household 15,000 MKD, 15,600 MKD for a six-member household, 16,200 MKD for a seven-member household, and 16,800.00 MKD for an eight-member household. In a three-member household with

one single parent the access threshold is 18,600 MKD, in a five-member household with one single parent the access threshold is 22,200 MKD.

The amount of the child allowance depends on the number and age of the children in the family, as follows: if there is a school-age child in the family according to law, the amount of the child allowance for one child is 1,000 MKD per month, and for two or more children in the family is 1,600 MKD per month for all children, if there is a child in the family who is not of school age according to law, the amount of child allowance for one child is 1,200 MKD per month, and for two or more children is 1,900 MKD per month for all children, if the family has two or more children, who are not all of school age, the amount of the child allowance for all children is 1,600 MKD per month. The amount of the child allowance is in line with the increase in the cost of living for the previous year published by the State Statistical Office in January for the current year. In case there is no increase in the cost of living for the previous year, the amount of the child allowance is not adjusted.

The new provisions significantly increased the scope of child allowance beneficiaries on up to 18.126 beneficiaries 2019.

3.2. Special allowance

The special allowance is awarded to children with special needs up to the age of 26. This right is exercised without a financial census. For a child with special needs with bodily or mental impairment or a combined developmental impairment up to the age of 26 a special allowance as cash compensation is provided. One of the parents of a child up to the age of 26 is entitled to a special allowance if the child was not in fulltime placement in an institution at the expense of the state. The amount of the special benefit equalled 4,346 mkd. This amount is increased by 50% for single parents and 25% for financially insecure parents, beneficiaries of rights to social protection with children younger than 26 with special needs and physical or mental impairment or combined development impairments. These amounts are compared and harmonized with the increase of living costs for the previous year published by the State Statistics Office in the month of January for the current year. Unlike the situation with the child allowance, the data concerning the right to a special allowance had a trend of increase in the number of beneficiaries. The data showed that there were 6.504 children from 6.286 families, beneficiary of a special allowance in 2011, while in 2018 this number increased to 7.235 children from 7.079 families. Compared to 2011, the increase in the number of families, beneficiary of this right in 2018 equals 10.10%, while the number of children beneficiaries equals 11.20%. The law regulating the social protection for children envisages special allowance for children with special needs to the amount of 3.592,06 MKD a month.

One of the obstacles for access to the right to a special allowance for a physically disabled child whose status as a citizen of the Republic of North Macedonia has not been regulated and who has no permanent place of residence and is not a refugee nor is it under subsidiary protection. Nevertheless, no changes were made regarding this right with the amendment of the law.

3.3. Parental allowance

The parental allowance was introduced in January 2009, it applies to mothers who gave birth to a third child. Compared to other benefits, parental allowance is generous, with monthly amount of 8.362 MKD. The exercised right can be used until the child reaches the age of 10 years. The parental allowance contributed to excessive budgetary burdens as a result of accumulation of beneficiaries over time and a slow rate of exiting from the system. The data show that there were 8,249 beneficiary families exercising this right in 2011, while in 2018 this number increased to 29,472 beneficiary families. The data shows an increase of nearly 3.6 times.

Several categories of potential beneficiaries were excluded from using this right. Namely, beneficiaries of the right to social cash benefits were excluded from parental allowance or were put in position to choose between the two, most often resulting in renouncing the right to social cash benefit. The beneficiaries of social cash benefits were put in an unfair position compared to parental allowance beneficiaries whose right did not dependant on a financial census. It was absurd that wealthy family could obtain the benefit but not a family that is on social financial assistance. Mothers without citizens status, as well as mothers who have obtained citizenship in a period shorter than 3 years were excluded from using the right. Mothers who have not had nor have a proof of a mandatory gynaecologist exams during pregnancy were also excluded from

acquiring this right. Women may have experienced this exclusion due to an insufficient number of gynaecologists in the country, especially in smaller towns and rural areas as well as due to overbooked gynaecologists who are not taking in new patients. Such cases were more prevalent among socially vulnerable groups of women. Some parents have experienced loss of right to parental benefit due to irregular fulfillment of the obligation for submitting confirmations for regular school attendance. The problem stems from the obligation to submit three confirmations for regular school attendance of children in the course of one school year.

Despite high fiscal implications parental allowance was not abolished, but changed and turned it into a real social measure. In a ten years period, since the implementation, this measure did not give the expected results to increase the birth rate. On the contrary, there was a decline in the birth rate from 13.3% in 2011 to 11.1% in 2018 although over €200 million have been spent for its implementation. In fact, it was not a social capital measure at all, but a failed demographic measure, which clearly needed and still needs to be transformed. The most significant changes with the amendments to the Law on child protection in 2019 (Official Gazette of the RNM No. 104/19) regarding parental allowance were made in regards of introduction of census for this right and opening of the right for beneficiaries of GMA. According to the Law, the right to parental allowance for a child (a third child) is exercised if the total average income of the mother's family on all grounds in the last three months before submitting the application for exercising the right and during the exercise of the right is lower than the amount of the minimum net salary determined for the previous year.

3.4. One-off cash assistance for a newborn

Prior the amendments in the Law on child protection one-off cash assistance was paid to a family for a first new-born, multiple children (twins, or triplets) or a first adopted child. Condition for acquiring the right is that a child is born on the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia. The amount equalled 4,829 MKD and a benefit solely for a first new-born. There were 7413 newborn children that used this right in 2018.

This benefit excluded children who were not born on the territory of the country regardless of the citizenship of their parents, giving birth to a child in a foreign country during tourist visit, or possible to exercise of this right in the country where the child was born. A child of a mother without regulated citizenship and a child with an undetermined fatherhood were excluded from this right. Such cases were noted among vulnerable children. Apart from the above-mentioned reasons of exclusion from exercising child rights, potential beneficiaries might have been excluded due to: illiteracy, lack of information and knowledge of one's rights, incomplete documentation, obtained other social benefit or social service, change in material status, irregular child vaccination and change in categorization according to the degree and type of disability.

The amendments regarding the one-off cash assistance for a newborn provides for the right to be used for the first and second child or adoption. Also, there is a significant change regarding the condition related to citizenship. The new provision in the law is depending on mother's citizenship only. Instead, it provides that case the mother is not a citizen of the Republic of North Macedonia, and is married to a citizen of the Republic of Northern Macedonia and has an ID card issued by the Ministry of Interior, the request for exercising the right to one-time financial assistance for a newborn is submitted by the father in his permanent place of residence. The condition is that the applicant (mother or father²) to have a minimum of 12 months of continuous living on the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia prior to the date of a birth of the child. With the amendments, the amount of one-off financial assistance for the first newborn increased to 5000 MKD and a new amount of one-off financial assistance for a second newborn of 20000 MKD was introduced. The amounts of one-off financial assistance for a newborn are aligned with the increase in the cost of living for the previous year, published by the State Statistical Office in January for the current year.

3.5. Educational allowance

A significant improvement in child protection was made with the transformation of conditional cash benefit for a child attending secondary education into educational allowance, expanding the availability of the right to child attending primary education. The educational allowance targeted children from low-income families and children of beneficiaries of guaranteed minimum assistance. Implemented changes contributed to the reduction of child poverty in the country. Based on the provisions in the Law, an educational allowance is

² Regardless if the cohabitation is marital or nonmarital with a cohabitation partner.

provided to cover part of the household expenses related to the regular attendance of the compulsory education of the children. Obtaining the right is regulated with the material census that is considered of single parents. The payment of the education allowance is made to the mother, for whose child/children the education allowance is paid for the current school year. The amount of the educational allowance is 700 MKD per month for a child in primary education and 1,000 MKD per month for a child in secondary education during the school year. The annual amount of the education supplement for primary education in a school year per child is 8,400 MKD, and for secondary education in a school year per child is 12,000 MKD. The payment of the right to educational allowance is conditioned with the regular school attendance of 85% of the realized teaching hours for each of the measurement periods provided by the law, and for the beneficiaries of guaranteed minimum assistance and while the household uses this right.

CONCLUSIONS

Ineffective social protection system led to substantial changes incorporated in the New Law on Social Protection, the New Law on Social Security for Elderly, and in the amendments on Law on Child Protection. The main objective of the reform of social protection system was to improve the volume, scope and targeting of social assistance, as well as to provide fair distribution of protection allocations. Consequently, it was expected that the changes will have a higher impact on poverty reduction. In fact, economic growth, noted prior to COVID 19 crisis, followed by favorable labor market trends (growth in employment and wages), growth in pensions and GMA have contributed to reduction of the poverty rate in the past two years. According to State Statistical Office data, the poverty rate in 2018 was 21.9% compared to the EU28 poverty rate is 16.9% (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2019). Unfortunately, due to the effect of COVID 19 crisis on unemployment and poverty, these goals trend might not be maintained. Regardless, the amended Law on Child Protection contributed to improvement in the quality of services to citizens through the following indicators: improved financial situation of the beneficiaries of child protection rights; increased number of children who exercise their child protection rights; improved school attendance; stimulation of persons with the status of children without parents for lifelong education; improved material status of the employees in the institutions for children; and greater effectiveness and efficiency of service providers.

In the following period the focus and priority objectives are to expand social services network in local communities, which are envisaged with the new Law on Social Protection; to conduct trainings for the employees in the social protection system for delivery of services in the local community; to improve, the cooperation between the employment and social protection services to support and activate the employable GMA beneficiaries, to monitor targeting of beneficiaries for guaranteed minimum assistance right and to introduce new supporting services for labor market entry; and to establish of control mechanisms for functioning of the system. Additionally, the Republic of North Macedonia has to improve its labor legislation in order to fulfil the goals of the Strategy for gender equality (2013-2020). The Government should accelerate the amendment of the legislation related to paternity leave in order to stipulate mandatory paternity leave which will promote the role of man in parental care and will enable harmonization of professional and family responsibilities of both parents.

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