

Social Policy During a Decade of Centre-Right Governance in Macedonia



Maja Gerovska Mitev

Introduction

The analysis in this chapter shows that during the 10-year period of the VMRO-DPMNE rule, social protection has been reshaped in order to serve clients that are less vulnerable than in the past. Active labour market policies (ALMPs) have been designed in a way that excludes “hard to serve” clients and have targeted those more easily activated among the unemployed. The introduction of arbitrary increases in welfare entitlements has become a new norm. The creation of social policy throughout the period has slowly dissolved into a monolithic and top-down policy process, excluding any possibility for reflection, for the use of critical approaches or for the utilisation of prior knowledge and experience.

Ideological preferences for, and political influences on, the creation of social policy have been a constant source of interest among researchers and analysts. Theoretical and empirical findings have shown that traditional conservative ideology implemented through decommodification and stratification favours a form of social policy that privileges and preserves the family and is unwilling to alter status and class structures (Esping-Anderson 1990). Assessing the impact of political parties on the dynamics of social expenditure, Kittel and Obinger (2002) found that the share of conservative parties in a government restrains the growth of social expenditure. However, political and partisan forces, ideologies and institutions are only some of the key elements in the social policy process (Schneider and Ingraham 1984). Other important variables that relate to social policy outcomes include the level of economic development, as well as the maturity of the social security system.

M. Gerovska Mitev (✉)

Faculty of Philosophy, Institute of Social Work and Social Policy, University Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje, Macedonia

e-mail: gerovska@zf.ukim.edu.mk

Social policy in Macedonia has always evolved through an indirect process, depending on economic and political conditions and priorities. In addition, the trajectory of social policy during the post-independence phase (1991–2000) followed the reform requirements of the international financial institutions (IFIs), which undermined the legacies of the previous social policy (e.g. generational solidarity in the pension system and universality of the social protection system). The outcome of such a subordinated and detached social policymaking process was a weakened social protection scheme, providing minimal protection to an increasingly narrow group of vulnerable people.

The entry into power in 2006 of VMRO-DPMNE, a centre-right political party with demo-Christian and conservative values, initially made little difference to the existing patterns of social policy. Although the main priorities within their electoral programme (2006–2010) were economic reform and the reduction of unemployment, these were not immediately implemented through specific social policy programmes or reform proposals.¹ In fact, they did not aim to achieve their main priorities through the social protection system. The party lacked a thorough knowledge of the social protection system, and it may have been this factor that led to a fragmentation of the system and a decrease in the use of redistribution as a means of equalising resources and opportunities for more vulnerable people. Prominent among the social policy instruments that have dominated their policy agenda at a later stage were active employment and self-employment programmes and measures. An analysis of their initial social policy programmes and their current approaches to social protection shows a huge discrepancy between them. Differences can be seen in relation to the principles, scope and targeting of social policy, all of which are analysed in more detail in the following sections.

Socio-economic and Political Context of Social Policy Creation in the Last Decade

The economic conditions in Macedonia have never been advantageous for a more comprehensive approach to the design of social policy. However, since 2004 the country has experienced a positive trend in GDP growth, peaking in 2007 when real GDP increased by 6.5%. This rapid growth came to an end in 2009, when real GDP fell by 0.4%, and since then, up to 2016, it never increased by more than 4% per annum. However, even during the 5 years of rapid economic growth at above 4% from 2004 to 2008, living standards did not improve much, and the unemployment rate declined by only 3.4% points. Although the unemployment rate has continued to decline since then, it is still exceptionally high standing at 26.1% in 2015. The Bretton Woods Institutions have acknowledged that economic growth in Macedonia

¹Programme of VMRO-DPMNE for Rebirth 2008–2012, “Rebirth in 100 Steps: Upgraded and Expanded”, Skopje: VMRO-DPMNE.

has not benefitted all segments of society. The VMRO-DPMNE government strictly followed the recommendations of the World Bank and the IMF to accelerate structural reforms by improving the investment climate, decreasing the informal economy through a reduction of social security contribution rates and introducing a flat tax rate on personal income (and abolishing the previously progressive tax system). Unfortunately, this economic determinism was not accompanied by comprehensive social policies. On the contrary, the main motto of the conservative VMRO-DPMNE government, in all their political platforms, emphasised that “the best social policy is a sound economic policy”. Such an approach clearly signalled that social policy was not seen as a productive factor, but rather as an expense that should be limited and only provided to those who had earned the right to benefit from it.

The social outcomes of the economic reforms were slow and often not very successful. Since 2006 the employment rate has been improving, albeit with modest progress, from 35 to 42% over the 10-year period. Unemployment, although significantly reduced, remains among the highest in the region and in Europe with particularly worrisome trends among young people (in 2015 the unemployment rate was 47% among 15–24 years old and 39% among 25–29 years old). Poverty too is very high, at a rate of 22% in 2015, with highest rate among children aged 0–17 (29%) and households with three and more children (52%). The unequal income distribution has only started to improve since 2014, while the Gini index for 2015 at 34% indicates high disparities.

While the initial years of the VMRO-DPMNE-led government (2006–2009) can be associated with more dynamic economic reforms and progress, as well as a more open and transparent policymaking process, this has changed more recently. Since 2009, there have been serious and constant criticisms related to the independence of part of the judiciary (European Commission 2009), the growing dependency of the media on the state (OSCE 2009), the high level of politicisation (Atanasova and Bache 2010) and corruption in the public sector (UNODC 2011). In addition, the process of adopting laws without any public debate or consultation culminated in changes to the Law on Higher Education which introduced a controversial new school-leaving exam and in amendments to a number of laws related to the introduction of social contributions for “honorary workers”. This type of sudden and isolated policymaking led to large demonstrations by students, temporary workers and various civil society organisations.

Other political and societal actors, such as the political parties in the opposition block, civil society organisations and trade unions, were not included in the policy process as constructive partners. Only voices that affirmed the government’s actions were acclaimed and supported. Hence, a monolithic approach to the creation of social policy emerged that led towards policies and measures that were not based on the needs of the population for social protection (as evidenced by the trends of low incomes, high poverty, extremely high unemployment among youth and so on), but were rather either hand-picked from different international policy menus in a process of policy transfer that lacked any strategic coherence with the existing social

protection system and which were instantly adopted to serve the short-term goals of the ruling party.

Family Benefits Through the Conservative Lens

Macedonia's family and child protection system was formed during the socialist period before 1990 and comprised benefits targeted at parents and their children. The main mechanisms of support were contribution-based paid maternity leave and different forms of child benefits such as financial support for the first-born child, a child allowance for school children, a special child allowance for disabled children and cost-sharing assistance for preschool education. The principles of family and child support were less universal than in the past consisting only of financial support for the first-born and were largely based on employment. However, the general characteristic of most tax-financed social benefits, including child benefits, was their low absolute amount. Hence, they could not significantly contribute much to poverty reduction, but nevertheless represented an important monthly supplement for low-income parents.

The introduction of a parental allowance for the third child in 2010 denoted a different pattern of child benefits. Its particularity was in the fact that it was almost four and half times higher than the child benefit, twice as much as the special child allowance, and its explicit target was not low-income households. Rather, it was a universal flat rate transfer with no income threshold or condition. The introduction of universal social transfers could be welcomed in a context in which targeted and means tested benefits have occupied much of the social policy agenda. However, as indicated by Bradshaw and Finch (2002), policies towards families and children are typically much influenced by the particular national labour market and demographic context. In Macedonia, the demographic argument for introducing the parental allowance for a third child can be justified. According to the data from the State Statistical Office and Eurostat, the natural rate of population growth fell from 2.7 per thousand in 2004 to 2.3 in 2009, and the fertility rate fell from 1.80 live birth per thousand women in 2002 to 1.5 throughout 2005–2009.² Yet, other national trends, such as the high poverty rate among households with three and more children, the low labour market participation of women, accompanied by a continual decrease in the number of beneficiaries of social transfers targeted at low-income families (i.e. social financial assistance and child allowance), signify that the introduction of the parental allowance for the third child did not correspond to the socio-economic context and the priorities of the social protection system. Instead, all households with three or more children, not only the poorest, received those benefits. According to an analysis by UNICEF, "it is the costliest scheme within the social protection portfolio and estimates indicate that in less than 10 years' time its annual budget will be close

²State Statistical Office Makstat database (2005–2009) and Eurostat online data.

Table 1 Beneficiaries of parental allowance for the third child, 2010–2015

Year	Parental allowance for third child			
	Number of children	Beneficiaries		
		Mother	Father	Guardian/other
2010	5256	5250	1	–
2011	8249	8236	8	1
2012	11,216	11,196	15	1
2013	13,799	13,773	20	2
2014	17,117	17,078	30	4
2015	20,930	20,877	45	4

Source: SSO (2016)

to 51.7 million Euros, which represents 0.75 per cent of current GDP” (UNICEF 2013: 64).

Apart from the economic argument that this benefit could place a serious financial burden on the budget (see Table 1), the demographic data also show that it has not achieved its primary goal of stimulating population growth. Since its introduction, the fertility rate remained stable at 1.5 throughout 2010–2015. Meanwhile, the natural increase in population fell from 2.5 in 2010 to 1.3 in 2015.

The introduction of these untargeted social transfers by the ruling VMRO-DPMNE party goes hand in hand with the main priorities of their ideology, namely, the preservation of the traditional family. When comparing with other countries, we find similar policy approaches in societies led by conservative parties. For example, in Hungary, family policy is focused on “expansion of the income of better-off families and the shrinking protection of poor families” (Szikra 2014). However, she also confirms that this approach did not lead to higher birth rates (2014). The conservative Law and Justice party in Poland introduced the Family 500+ programme in February 2016, which provides universal child-raising benefit of 500 zloty (€114) per month for a second child under 18. Sowa (2016) worries that the Polish law could decrease the employability of low-qualified women of reproductive age, create overlapping benefits, diminish the administrative capacity to process applications and lead to the abuse of benefits. According to a Polish parent, 500 zlotys per month will not encourage more children; what is needed are “cheaper housing loans, the opportunity to return to work after pregnancy and more well-financed kindergartens” (Berardi 2016). Indeed, Luci and Thevenon (2011) show that while cash benefits can have an effect on the timing of births, their effect on the final fertility choices of individuals is doubtful and that “a coherent mix of family policies, supporting a combination of family and work in a comprehensive way, encourages fertility” (Luci and Thevenon 2011: 11). Hence, in the Macedonian case, due to high unemployment rate as well as absence of steady economic growth that would make households feel more confident about expanding their family size, it may be expected that parental allocation for the third child will not bring about a positive effect on population growth. However, if this benefit were to be reoriented towards low-income households with children, it could have beneficial effects in reducing the high rates of child

poverty and poverty among households with three and more children. A similar policy proposal has already been put forward by UNICEF, which advocates a “merging of Parental and Child Allowances to develop a new model that improves targeting, raises coverage of the poorest families from 18 to 54 per cent, and increases impact and cost-efficiency” (Carraro and Beazley 2013).

Three other new social transfers have been introduced targeted towards (1) single parents with disabled children, (2) children without parents or parental care and (3) mothers who give birth to a fourth child. These measures also demonstrate the lack of a coherent strategy within the social protection system and its atomisation into separate unconnected policy programmes. Although all the targeted groups deserve attention and support from the social protection system, the timing of the introduction of these measures and their anticipated use, their lack of targeting and the absence of any linkage with similar measures brings them all into question. The absence of a coherent approach to targeting social transfers can also be seen through the introduction of financial assistance for single parents with disabled children. This benefit is targeted only towards the registered unemployed and persons not receiving pension after their retirement age (62 for women and 64 for men). Why these groups have been chosen and why other single parents with disabled children are excluded are neither clear nor publicly discussed. The introduction of financial assistance to mothers of a fourth child is even more peculiar. This right is guaranteed to those mothers who have had a fourth child since 2009; it can only be used after they reach pensionable age of 62 and cannot be accessed in the years after giving birth when it is needed most. Finally, the provision of separate rights for children without parents and parental care openly stigmatises them. The timing of advocating and of introducing these new social transfers coincided with pre-election periods, suggesting that they have more of a clientelistic logic than one related to real social need.

As a result, it may be argued that the policy approaches that the ruling party have adopted concerning the social and child protection systems consist of unsystematic and disconnected social programmes, without any coherent priorities or goals. Thus, while population growth is a clear aim, it has not been achieved by social transfers. At the same time, a reduction of poverty either in general or among specific groups, although an important social problem, has not been a priority aim of the government as the budget for social transfers to low-income households is much lower than the budget for other types of social transfers to households irrespective of their income.

Reforms Related to Active Labour Market Programmes

Since the VMRO-DPMNE came to power in 2006, the issue of unemployment has constantly been placed high on the government agenda. Attracting foreign direct investment has been the main policy instrument in the fight against unemployment. This indeed proved to be an important tool, which in the early years of the VMRO-DPMNE government increased due to privatisation, while later on special economic zones and fiscal incentives for investors such as a 10-year profit tax holiday were

Table 2 Numbers of unemployed people registered at the Agency for Employment (2007–2016, December)

	Actively looking for work	Other unemployed	Total
2007	354,661		354,661
2008	342,227		342,227
2009	340,931		340,931
2010	321,341		321,341
2011	281,144		281,144
2012	243,403	419	243,822
2013	96,200	121,658	217,858
2014	123,661	100,147	223,808
2015	114,979	95,758	210,737
2016	104,523	96,251	200,774

Source: Agency for Employment, Skopje

offered to foreign investors.³ Active labour market policies were quite modest in the period from 2008 to 2011. They received only a low level of fiscal support, ranging from 0.07% of GDP in 2008 to 0.11% of GDP in 2011, and covered only 2% of the unemployed during this period (Mojsoska-Blazevski 2011).

Fostering active labour market policy, particularly its effective take-up, is not easy in the Macedonian context, as the profile of the registered unemployed is very unfavourable. Due to some inherited rights from the previous socialist system, many of the unemployed register at the Employment Agency only to gain access to free health insurance granted to all unemployed. Hence, many of them are not interested in finding a job or participating in the labour market. So, in 2010, the government introduced changes within the Employment Agency and transferred those registering only for free health insurance and not actively looking for work to the Health Insurance Fund. This has reduced the numbers of registered unemployed by almost 80,000 people. Despite this, many of the registered unemployed lack primary education and are long-term unemployed. So the law was amended to differentiate between unemployed persons that actively look for job and who must report at the Agency every month, other unemployed persons looking for job who must register every 6 months and persons who have twice rejected an employment offer from the Agency.⁴ This has halved the number of registered unemployed, as those not actively seeking work are not counted in the overall number of registered unemployed (see Table 2). Worryingly, they are excluded from access to measures for labour market activation. Despite the fact that the status of “passive” unemployed can be changed to “active” unemployed at the request of the unemployed person, participation in the active labour market policies (ALMPs) is not automatically granted, as the ALMP measures require claimants to be registered as actively

³This is the “Invest in Macedonia” project. See Agency for Foreign Investments and Export Promotion, <http://www.investinmacedonia.com>

⁴The Law for Employment and Unemployment Insurance Official Gazette of RM, 153/2012.

employed for a minimum of 6 months. This arbitrary modification has been detrimental to many people, particularly to the most disadvantaged communities, such as Roma.

Operational plans for active employment programmes and measures published in 2014, 2015 and 2016 do not envisage any activation measures for those registered as “other unemployed”.⁵ This is especially problematic, as this group is quite large (48% of the registered unemployed) and is composed of the most vulnerable. Hence, they will continue to be counted among the unemployed, unless some long-term measures are introduced to improve their literacy, education and employability.

The most recent ALMP measure was carried out as a separate project outside the formal system for employment protection. The policy approach involves avoiding existing measures and programmes and substituting them with project-type short-term programmes. The project “Employing Macedonia” was solemnly announced and initiated in March 2015 (Gerovska Mitev 2015). Its main goal was to speed up the reduction of unemployment from 27% in the first quarter of 2015. The project targeted five categories of registered unemployed persons, incentivising employers with tax or social contribution exemptions. The project succeeded in reaching its goal, creating 19,000 jobs in 10,140 companies (MLSP 2016), and a second phase “Employing Macedonia 2” has been implemented.

At first glance, the project succeeded in achieving its goals and targets. However, detailed inspection of its elements identifies critical issues. While contrasting with other government strategies and goals, it fails to activate the vulnerable unemployed. In this respect, one could argue that the exclusive focus on tax and social contribution exemptions may jeopardise the solvency of social insurance funds and discriminate against employers who are regular tax and social contribution payers. Moreover, it is inconsistent with other reforms that have been undertaken such as the introduction of mandatory fully funded pension insurance and the reduction of social contribution rates, which are based on regular payments of social contributions. Also, requiring employers to guarantee the created jobs for a period of 5 years (3 years for small- and medium-sized enterprises—SMEs) in a context in which most SMEs face liquidity problems speaks volumes about the short-term goals of this project in which the take-up of the measures is more important than their sustainability. Maybe the most problematic aspect is that most measures fail to focus on the provision of training or the enhancement of skills. Since on-the-job training enhances skills, those that do not benefit from state job subsidies should be provided with other options to improve their employability.

In addition, despite the fact that one of the five targeted categories includes vulnerable unemployed people, in order to be able to benefit from the measure, they must have been registered for at least 3 months before the start of the project. In this way the “other unemployed” are not in a position to benefit from the “Employing Macedonia” project. Finally, anecdotal evidence suggests that many

⁵Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Operational Plans for Active Employment Programmes and Measures.

of the unemployed who were included in the project have been removed from the Agency's unemployment statistics of the Agency, without actually initiating their employment contracts.

The fragmentation of employment policy instruments into short-term projects without incorporating them into the overall employment and social protection schemes does not support the transitions from social protection to the labour market nor the workfare of those who are long-term dependents on the social protection system.

Adequacy of Social Benefits: Social Financial Assistance and Pensions

An additional line of policy undertaken since 2014 by VMRO-DPMNE relates to increases in the amounts of social protection and social insurance. In particular, instead of indexing and adjusting pensions and social assistance according to changes in the cost of living or the average wage, the government began to increase them in nominal terms (e.g. a fixed increase of 5%). As indicated by IEG "the replacement of the indexation mechanism for pensions by ad-hoc increases and discretionary policy decisions has increased the risks to the stability of the pension system, has reduced the predictability of public financial management and has heightened the risks to fiscal sustainability" (IEG 2016: 8).

This discretionary approach is particularly problematic for social financial assistance (SFA), whose amount is extremely low. For example, the SFA is defined in nominal terms, and in 2016 it was 2451 denars (about €40) for a household with one member. For every additional household member, the base increases by a coefficient of 0.37, up to five family members. The amount is paid in full during the first 3 years, but only 50% is paid from year four onwards. For example, for a couple with two children aged 5 and 10 with both parents unemployed, the amount of the monthly SFA would be 5173 denars (about €84) less the total income of the family.

Up until 2014, the amount of SFA was adjusted on an annual basis according to the cost of living for the previous year. However, as mentioned above over the last 3 years it has been increased at a fixed rate of 5%, although if compared with the increase in the cost of living this did not make a huge difference. Nor was the scope of eligible households increased. The World Bank noted: "freeing of resources from improved targeting has not been used to relax eligibility criteria for financial assistance to cover more vulnerable groups marginally above the threshold. This could have been a step forward for the social protection agenda given that one-fourth of the country's population, or around 150,000 households, is below the poverty line" (IEG 2016: 14). Taking into consideration the timing of these increases, it could be argued that they served electoral purposes rather than anything else.

Despite the nominal increases in the SFA, spending on social transfers remains low. The only sources of information are World Bank estimates and government

Table 3 Central government expenditures on social assistance and pensions (% GDP)

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Social assistance (all types)	4.9	5.0	4.7	4.5	4.4	4.4
Pensions	8.5	8.8	9.0	9.2	9.3	9.5

Source: World Bank (2015)

administrative sources. Despite nominal increases of SFA, its share in GDP has actually been declining (see Table 3).

On the other hand, the share of pension expenditure in GDP has increased. This presents a serious challenge. Its growth is not due to the 5% nominal increase in pensions in recent years, but is a combined effect of cuts in social insurance contribution rates and the transition costs for the introduction of a second mandatory private pension pillar based on individual accounts. According to the Public Expenditure Report “the increase of the pensions share in total expenditures has not only elevated the risks to fiscal sustainability, but also negatively affected the effectiveness of public expenditures and the equity of public resource use” (IEG 2016: 11).

The use of discretionary power to set the amount of social welfare benefits represents a new welfare approach introduced by the VMRO-DPMNE government. It is a form of clientelism, similar to that in the Mediterranean welfare states, that has been identified as “patron–client relations that entail the provision of tangible resources in return for political support” (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984). This approach has been expanded by introducing new measures, such as the arbitrary setting of the level of social welfare entitlements.

Discussion

The last 10 years of political leadership under the VMRO-DPMNE government has brought new approaches to the creation and distribution of social welfare rights. The new policies and rights are not path-dependent, i.e. they do not correspond to the legacies of the previous social protection system that existed under the socialist system prior to 1991. Although these new measures are not definitive, they nevertheless signify a change in the scope and principles of the social protection system. Several dimensions of change are noticeable in the policies related to employment, social and child welfare and social insurance.

First, vulnerability is no longer a leading principle in assessing rights in the social protection system. Following the introduction of new social welfare benefits with no upper income threshold, whose total amount is above the “traditional” social rights targeted towards low-income households and disabled people, the bulk of social transfers have shifted towards the “less vulnerable”. In a context of low economic

growth and a high rate of poverty and unemployment, this seems unjust and unsustainable.

Second, the atomisation of separate social rights and the “projectisation” of social programmes have placed additional burdens on the social protection system and employment schemes. The introduction of new rights only demonstrated the lack of a coherent and strategic approach towards the creation of social policy. The introduction of at least eight new rights turned the social assistance scheme into a highly categorical system, with preferential treatment and arbitrary amounts of certain entitlements. The projectisation of the active labour market policies and their targeting towards more active beneficiaries has further distorted the goals and purpose of policies for vulnerable people.

Third, the discretionary setting of the amounts of social transfers has decreased the stability of the social protection and social insurance systems and has eroded the democratic principles on which they are based. The electoral tuning of welfare spending according to political preferences “is ideal for binding poor voters to a long-term relationship based on material dependence” (Diaz-Cayeros et al. 2016: 103).

Consequently, instead of moving the trajectory of the welfare state towards new forms of provision according to demographic, economic and social realities, the new social policy developments in Macedonia have provided strong arguments for going “back to the roots” and re-establishing and renewing the basic elements necessary for the functioning of the welfare state, namely, the democratisation of its processes and procedures, which ought to form the basis of a modern social protection system.

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