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*Transformation of the Contemporary Czech Family
in the Context of Societal Change*

Transformacja współczesnej rodziny czeskiej w kontekście zmian społecznych

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the issue of the transformation of the contemporary Czech family within the context of broader social changes. It characterizes selected specific features of family life, delineates internal and external transformations of the family, and emphasizes the critical role of the state and public institutions in enhancing the quality of life for certain families in the Czech Republic. For the optimal development of children and youth, a functional and cooperative triad comprising family, school, and society is essential. The presented article identifies new trends characterizing the family not only in the Czech Republic but also in many other Western countries. For illustration, we mention a few: reduced family stability, declining number of children per family, involuntary intergenerational cohabitation increased emotionality of family life, isolation of the family from its surroundings, longer lifespan, declining mortality rates, and economic and social uncertainty. The aim of the study is to demonstrate that the commitments of the state and public authorities extend even into such an intimate institution as the family, particularly during uncertain and turbulent periods such as those the contemporary world – including Europe – is currently experiencing.

Keywords: family; school; society; public administration; social care; marriage; partnership; living conditions; economic hardship; state institutions; non-profit organizations; single parents; lifestyle; value orientation; family stability

THE FAMILY – A PUBLIC MATTER?

Many people spontaneously and suggestively respond to this question: Certainly not – it is an entirely private matter. After all, by consenting to such a claim, we would be putting our intimate world at risk! They are right... Yet the family also represents a fundamental unit of society, a network of social relationships that often reflects broader societal dynamics (such as obligations regarding the observance of rights, duties, and laws within the family). The second aspect of this truth also relates to the need for effectively addressing emerging and existing conflicts within the private lives of families, as well as the moral duty, at the very least, to care for those who are socially and health-wise disadvantaged. Thus, we simultaneously affirm: yes, the family is indeed a public matter. This ambivalence may partly explain why the family's current status is so difficult to assess. We answer affirmatively to both conflicting claims and choose whichever is most convenient. This applies to us as individuals and as representatives of public institutions alike (Šípek, 2025).

Recently, we seem to witness increasingly frequent attempts by state authorities and institutions to shirk responsibility for the state of the family. There are certainly many understandable reasons: family autonomy, the right to privacy, economic demands, uncertain effectiveness of protective programs, a leaky social safety net, low awareness of available solutions, problematic immediate economic returns, ambiguous life and value orientation among parts of the population, or insufficient preparedness for family life. Thus, a wide range of reasons contribute to the current stagnation in public institutions' approach and state administration to the difficult situations modern families face. Given the current state of affairs, it is realistic to assume that responsibilities toward the family will only increase. We must ask ourselves realistically: What are the specific features and traditions of today's Czech family? What are its prospects? Do we take into account the preparation needed for individuals to fulfill family roles? Do we sufficiently address the prevention of partnership-based families?

NO UNIVERSAL FORM OF COHABITATION HAS EMERGED

The main characteristics of the contemporary Central European family are rooted in Christian morality and a Christian worldview, although these elements have been significantly modified over time and by social conditions. One may still identify persistent traces of patriarchal coexistence – though many men might not perceive it as such, whereas many members of the feminist movement find it deeply troubling. With societal development and the modernization of human life, the family has been increasingly separated from the public sphere. Many functions that were once performed by the extended family have shifted

to formal organizations. The division of roles and labor gradually detaches both adult members from the family; schools and various health and social institutions increasingly assume educational roles, and mass media organize and fill leisure time. Nevertheless, the Christian foundation of the family remains visible – not necessarily in daily life, but rather in what we value as essential and desirable in family life. These original values – which emerged in response to ancient, outdated traditions – included sexual restraint, chastity, and the cult of widowhood. Marriage was established as an indissoluble bond that guaranteed the family's stability. The core purpose of marriage and family was procreation, while incest, extramarital relations (fornication), homosexuality, and contraception were strictly forbidden. These structural and value changes in family life are well documented in recent sociological syntheses, which emphasize the diversity and dynamism of family forms in contemporary societies.

As is often the case in history, the question arises as to how consistently this value system was observed and practiced in everyday family life, or how faithfully it was honored by its proponents. The nuclear family thus became the cornerstone of the social structure, and this state – since it seems that, so far, no one has come up with a more universal form of cohabitation – has endured to the present day, albeit in a considerably modified form. The duration of cohabitation has changed, as have social roles within the family and the status of its individual members. A comparison between the modern family and its counterpart a hundred years ago reveals significant shifts in lifestyle (e.g. in 1890, the average life expectancy in Europe was 47 years; by 1950, it had risen to 66 years, with marked local differences). This trend continues gradually, accompanied by a substantial decline in birth rates throughout Europe, including the Czech Republic. The demographic structure is therefore changing markedly – Europe is aging, and for the first time there is a notable increase in male mortality in young and middle adulthood compared to women. Women's life expectancy is now significantly higher, which, among other effects, strongly influences family dynamics. The conditions under which families are formed have also changed dramatically. The requirements that prospective spouses must meet today bear little resemblance to those of the past.

CURRENT SITUATION AND PERSPECTIVES – NEW PHENOMENA CHARACTERIZING THE CZECH FAMILY

The current family is not typically described in positive terms. This is often linked to the notion of a “crisis” of the family, or doubts about its survival as a social institution. However, we are not witnessing the demise of the family, but rather significant formal changes – the strength and permanence of relationships are evolving, as are the types of partnerships (heterosexual and homosexual), and the substance of the family's influence. A key question is what form the family

will take in the further course of the 21st century (Vávrová, Vávra, 2024). The answer will depend both on global development trends and the conditions we can establish within our context (Kovaříková, 2020). Similar trends and challenges in family life, partnership forms, and parenting are observed globally, as analyzed in detail by Abela and Walker (2014), who provide a comprehensive overview of contemporary family issues in various cultural contexts. Below, we characterize several key attributes of the contemporary family in greater detail.

Decreased family stability

This phenomenon stems from both external and internal factors. External factors include social, economic, and legal pressures that may place families in difficult and stressful situations. Internal factors are primarily human: reduced stress tolerance, partners' willpower, character stability, and the social and emotional maturity of individuals entering marriage. Cohesion is an "internal" matter; "external" influences play only a minor role in preserving family stability. Perhaps public opinion (e.g. "What would the neighbors say?"), especially in small towns and villages), the economic difficulty of divorce, ties to a shared business, and respect for religious norms may have some influence.

Research on young marriages and potential partners reveals a stark reality: many young people do not approach family formation with a sense of permanence and responsibility. Instead, they view it as something that can be dissolved if it fails or becomes boring. Parental attitudes during divorce proceedings often appear unconcerned regarding their children's experiences. They are used to it – why make a fuss? After all, joint custody exists! So, they believe they will not lose their children – but what about the children's inner emotional world? The real question is what could change this situation. Possibly systematic support, positive role models, and well-informed behavior in a comprehensive form could make a difference. The current state of family life does not suggest that families can cope on their own – now or in the near future. Someone will have to deal with these issues in a tangible way. Family dysfunctions very quickly become public concerns, and their consequences are felt immediately – and even more profoundly over time – by society as a whole (for details, see Vališová, Kovaříková, 2021, pp. 253–271).

Insufficient preparedness for family and partnership life

This aspect arises from the generally low level of education in this area, combined with the psychological and social immaturity of those starting a new family. In earlier times, families were often started by people who were too young. Were they unrealistic, romantic, demanding, emotionally unstable, ignorant, or

irresponsible? Yes, perhaps. But could they have been any different? Once again, we must ask: what shaped these individuals? What influenced them? What models did they imitate? Where did they learn what family means, how to overcome difficulties, how a partner thinks and feels?

In recent years, demographers have observed a positive shift. But the question is: What conclusions we should draw from this, and how will we as individuals and institutions interpret it? These changes could easily be attributed to macroeconomic factors or to a growing sense of personal and interpersonal responsibility. However, demographers (and physicians) also point out a different trend slowly emerging in our country: a reluctance to live in formal families, a desire to limit the number of children, to delay parenthood, to minimize interruptions to professional careers due to pregnancy and childcare and avoid repeating the perceived “mistake” of entering marriage.

It remains debatable who benefits from this shift and what role should society and state institutions play in influencing these “private” matters? Support can be found primarily in institutions that aim to develop people in this area – and often sincerely try to help. Most importantly, the school – provided it has qualified staff who are able to address these issues. Schools need general support in their efforts to prepare individuals for partnership, sexual, and family life. They also need material support to handle this “extra service”, without which it is nearly impossible to succeed. With backing from administrators and those who make funding decisions, schools currently appear to be one of the few institutions capable of breaking the longstanding tradition of entering partnerships and parenthood without any preparation, a situation that would be unimaginable in other areas of life.

Yet schools are not a universal remedy. Mentions should also be made of non-profit organizations – counseling centers, various foundations, and initiatives – that operate with minimal resources and great enthusiasm but can only manage for a limited time without more support.

Changed position of women linked to high employment rates

This factor is also highly significant in the context of family and society. It has led to changes in family functions and disruption of conventional gender roles. Families strive to adapt to the new role of women, but the ultimate effect may be a serious conflict between maternal, partnership, and economic functions. The consequences are no less severe than those described in earlier sections. We frequently hear complaints about women being overburdened, about neurotic mothers unsettling both children and spouses. We may wish it were easier to change – but here comes another “but”. Today’s woman is not willing to give up her opportunities, her emancipation, or her rights. She is not inclined to abandon

her capabilities or education for the sake of the family. We consciously set aside the fact that an educated woman with broad knowledge significantly contributes to both the upbringing of children and the overall well-being of the family (Gaigg, Syllaba, 2023). Once again, the key responsibilities lie outside the family: namely in high-quality and accessible services and social support systems and in available options for relaxation and recovery.

Democratization of relationships within the family

This phenomenon is closely tied to the transformation of the man–woman relationship into a broadly accepted partnership model. It is also rooted in the loosening of the parent–child relationship (Vališová, 2008). A legitimate question arises: how far can this process go? To what extent is its development shaped by specific European traditions, what are its undeniable benefits and what are its potential limitations? Concepts such as freedom, responsibility, rights and duties, discipline, and internal self-regulation (for children, youth, and adults alike) are coming to the forefront. This context also brings into focus the topic of parental authority: What it is based on (if anything), and how it works – as well as the nature and distinctiveness of childhood, a life stage that is gaining a new dimension in the rapidly changing world.

Extended period of children’s residence in the parental home

Today, this trend is influenced by several factors: the limited ability of “human offspring” to care for themselves, the family’s increasing protective attitude toward children, and above all, the prolonged period of professional and social maturation. A major contributing factor is also an economic necessity that forces many people into involuntary multi-generational cohabitation such as rising rent prices, lack of affordable housing, or the need to care for aging parents.

It is unlikely that the family will return to the structure of the traditional extended family. The notion that everyone should simply take care of themselves according to their own abilities also no longer holds. In this area, the state and its institutions will undoubtedly face serious challenges. Immediate solutions might involve postponement, yet the long-term implications could escalate unexpectedly.

Declining number of families relative to the population

We now arrive at an indicator that calls into question common beliefs about modern families. The notion that society is primarily made up of complete families is somewhat inaccurate. There is little evidence to suggest that the atomization of family relationships will slow down anytime soon. In fact, due to changing forms

of social pressure and legal norms, the number of incomplete families may even increase. On a broader scale, public perception will need to adjust to encountering more and more single-parent households headed by fathers who hold equal rights as mothers.

Another significant trend is the rapid decline in societal pressure for children to be born within marriage. The number of unmarried couples with one or more children is rising sharply. While one may personally approve or disapprove, objectively, society has little power to alter this trend. The key question remains: Why is this happening, who benefits from it, and how are children's rights protected? – since this is what matters most.

Contributing factors include socioeconomic measures and, not least, tax benefits and state support (e.g. housing benefits for single parents, tuition assistance, etc.). For many unmarried couples, those living “out of wedlock” with their own children, this arrangement is often economically advantageous.

What does this imply for society, state, and public administration? At the very least, it underscores the necessity of acknowledging that incomplete families (divorced, unmarried, widowed) are inherently more vulnerable and more dependent on social, economic, and moral support from the state. The rise in single-person households will undoubtedly create new obligations in the future social policy.

The family's inability to fully uphold children's rights

This characteristic appears somewhat paradoxical relative to the previously described democratization of family relationships. However, it may be precisely for this reason that such issues have become more visible and easier to identify. The living conditions of a significant portion of the child population (even in the Czech Republic) are in stark contrast to the international treaties and conventions ratified and adopted in this area. Abused, neglected, and exploited children are phenomena increasingly normalized in media and public discourse – fortunately, not yet normalized in law.

In this context, the duties of the state and its institutions are unequivocal: from social supervision and guardianship in crisis situations, to effective intervention in identifying offenses and crimes against humanity, to prevention. The question is: who, when, where, and under what circumstances? The matter is further complicated by the fact that it involves both a moral-human and a legal dimension.

The family faces actual or perceived economic hardship

This statement does not apply to all families, but it highlights a serious and substantial trend. Its impact, resulting from the changing social and economic situation of families, is closely linked to both family income and value orientation.

In many cases, the pursuit of material goods threatens to disrupt, transform, or dominate all other family functions. The effect on family stability, emotional dynamics, and child-rearing is evident (Banderas, 2024).

Growing opportunities for self-realization within the family

Among the listed characteristics – some pessimistic, others optimistic – it is important to highlight one essential quality of the family: Families are learning to navigate and decide upon their intimate affairs autonomously, according to their capabilities and resources. It is becoming accustomed to taking responsibility for itself. This, once again, underscores the need to prepare individuals for life within a family – ideally in a natural, functional family setting, but realistically also through non-family institutions whose functionality and purpose we, as a society and as a state, are responsible for (Kovaříková, 2024).

CONCLUSION

One might wonder precisely how and where to conclude this enumeration of contemporary family characteristics. Perhaps here is an appropriate juncture. The nine characteristics discussed above neither exhaustively list all possible factors nor reveal unforeseen insights. The primary intention is rather to emphasize that societal, state, public, and social institutional obligations do not end even when dealing with a profoundly intimate institution such as the family. This applies to the present and will be even more relevant in the future – unless we want, figuratively speaking, to cut off the very branch we are sitting on. Thus, yes: the family is also a public matter – whether we like it or not.

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ABSTRAKT

Niniejsze opracowanie podejmuje temat transformacji współczesnej rodziny czeskiej w kontekście szerszych zmian społecznych. Scharakteryzowano w nim wybrane specyficzne cechy życia rodzinnego, opisano wewnętrzne i zewnętrzne przemiany rodziny oraz podkreślono istotną rolę państwa i instytucji publicznych w podnoszeniu jakości życia niektórych rodzin w Republice Czeskiej. Dla optymalnego rozwoju dzieci i młodzieży niezbędna jest funkcjonalna i współpracująca triada: rodzina, szkoła i społeczeństwo. Artykuł wskazuje na nowe trendy charakteryzujące rodzinę nie tylko w Republice Czeskiej, ale również w wielu innych krajach zachodnich. Dla zobrazowania wspomniano o kilku z nich: obniżona stabilność rodziny, spadająca liczba dzieci w rodzinie, przymusowe współzamieszkiwanie pokoleń, wzrost emocjonalności życia rodzinnego, izolacja rodziny od otoczenia, wydłużenie średniej długości życia, spadek śmiertelności oraz niepewność ekonomiczna i społeczna. Celem badania jest ukazanie, że zobowiązania państwa i władz publicznych sięgają również tak intymnej instytucji jak rodzina, zwłaszcza w niepewnych i burzliwych czasach, jakich obecnie doświadcza współczesny świat – w tym Europa.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina; szkoła; społeczeństwo; administracja publiczna; opieka społeczna; małżeństwo; partnerstwo; warunki życia; trudności ekonomiczne; instytucje państwowe; organizacje non-profit; samotni rodzice; styl życia; orientacja wartości; stabilność rodziny