

# Parents on the verge of pro-natalist state policies

- a case study of Hungarian single-parent  
households

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To Mom and Grandma

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# 1. Introduction

The research explores the daily struggles of single-parent families in Hungary. Especially focusing on how single-parent household heads perceive the state vision of the ideal and what kind of alternative narratives they construct. It is particularly interesting to study this phenomenon among single-parent households in Hungary since their family structure deviates from the government-promoted “2 married parents with minimum 3 children” family model. Thus, the analysis of current Hungarian natalist policy provides a unique case to investigate how state ideology influences citizens’ self-constructing. Additionally, the research investigates if single-parent families are fully neglected by the exclusionary state policies and are denied by the dominant family and demographic visions and measures. If so, are they treated differently or stigmatized by the larger population?

The case shows a clear distinction when the individual micro circumstances diverge from the higher macro intentions. Although the Hungarian state propagates a certain type of family model and neglects any other, the latter types are common and not disapproved of by fellow citizens, the unrelated population rather treats these families with empathy. Thus, the governing party FIDESZ of recent years fights against publicly legitimized single-parent households and it rejects to recognize any nonconformist family model. Moreover, it stigmatizes, marginalizes, and by its policies discriminates against non-traditional or alternative family forms. My research can represent a worthy illustration of the constant antagonism between the perspectives of the state and its citizens. Nonetheless, this case holds significance for scholars of sociology, legal and political science, as it addresses essential questions like the ethos of good citizenship and the public interest, the consequences of Hungarian state intervention in families, and reproduction rights.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. In the first chapter, I present the political and sociological contextualization, how the family has become such a central issue in Hungary, and

what measures have been taken to address it. In Chapter 2 I introduce my conceptual elaboration based on Althusser's concept of interpellation and Ingram & Schneider's deservingness, then I provide further insights through Jean Beaman's analytical framework of cultural citizenship. Chapter 3 is about the main changes in the public attitude towards single-parent upbringing in Hungary via quantitative analysis of ISSP data. In Chapter 4, I present a qualitative analysis of the perceived governmental measures and perception of the larger society by single parents in Hungary. For instance, what type of struggles characterise their lives, how the Family Protection Scheme affect them, and what social attitudes they perceive. Finally, I end Chapter 4 with my added discovery, the theoretical construct of Single Parent Perception Ladder, where single-parent families are positioned according to the attitudes towards them. Then, in the Conclusion, I summarize the main arguments of my thesis.

## 2. Political and sociological contextualisation

The Orban regime has been analysed in many different ways, some named it authoritarian neoliberalism (Stubby - Lendvai-Bainton; 2020), radical right-wing populist or authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff 2014), others as elected autocracy or populist democracy. In Ivan Szelényi's (2015) term, it is a "controlled illiberal democratic capitalism with post-communist traditionalism". There is much fruitful debate about the exact term, but János Kornai (2015) was certainly right when he called the change a U-turn that Hungary is the first of the post-socialist democracies to join the autocracies. As Juhász (2012) argues, the new regime has caused a backward step on the issue of gender equality, with gender mainstreaming replaced by family mainstreaming underpinned by a Christian ideology focused on demographic growth. Throughout the transformation and multiple wars (against migrants, NGO-s, CEU, and the European Union), the government addressed the forthcoming actual problem, depopulation. The mortality rate has exceeded the birth rate since the 90s in Hungary (Kapitány–Spéder, 2018), thus anxiety from demographic catastrophe is a common talk for a long time. If the tendency continues and the decline can not be stopped, it will cause labour shortages and troubles in the sustainability of the welfare state.

The government's approach to stop population decrease is multidimensional, but the purpose is unquestionable; encouraging childbirth to avoid the death of the nation. Fidesz, the governing right-wing populist party, fabricated a patchwork-like ideology based on values connecting all Hungarians, thus the policies are positioned in the pentagon of: work, home, family, health, and order (Party Manifesto, Nemzeti ügyek politikája, 2010). Most of the ideological elements and new social policy regulations are subservient to the goal; to rebuild the nation and restore its pride in the middle of the dangerous, multicultural, globalist epoch. Attila Melegh (2016) argues that demographic nationalism in the semi-periphery is resting on a demographic and/or biopolitical hysteria, which claims to provide a defense for the true Hungarians against inner and external enemies. The national government uses populist, nationalist, étatist, neoconservative, and

neoliberal motives in its policies, to construct a “favorable order” for the national rise after the chaos of socialism and liberal democratic regimes (Lugosi, 2018). Noemi Lendvai-Bainton (2017) pointed out Hungary is a unique case, where due to the construction of illiberal neoliberalism and a nationalist competition state, nationalism and neoliberal approach intersect. At the centre of the whole concept is the family, which will protect not only Hungarian but European identity and primacy (Prime Minister’s speech, miniszterelnok.hu, 2019).

According to the accepted Fundamental Law, which substitutes the constitution, Act CCXI of 2011 on the Protection of Families, "As the basic unit of society, the family is the guarantee of the survival of the nation. [...] Without children being born and families thriving, there can be no sustainable development and economic growth. Moreover, “Hungary shall protect the institution of marriage as the union of a man and a woman established by voluntary decision, and the family as the basis of the nation's survival” (Article L). It continues as “Hungary shall encourage the commitment to have children” and "the protection of families shall be regulated by a cardinal Act” (Fundamental Law, Article L). The article does not leave much space for the proliferation of different interpretations or reasoning, as it states the family is based on the marriage of a man and a woman. Fidesz’s ideology fits into the illiberal biopolitical project of familism, which depicts the traditional family as a foundation of the nation (Grzebalska – Pető, 2018). Some “Pro-family” discourses of the new right are less explicitly antifeminist, some of them incorporate in a depoliticized form feminist-inspired motifs implying women's right to sexual pleasure and emotional support from their husbands and a good housewife (Fraser, 1989). On the contrary, the Hungarian Government is completely outspoken on this issue.

Familism as an ideology emphasises the importance of family and family life, both for the individual and for society. It is also characterised by a traditional value system, where the father is the head of the family and the breadwinner, and the mother is the head of the household. In Hungary, familism or 're-familiarisation' not only represents an increase in the importance of the



family but is also seen as a major factor in social welfare. Carefare, as Éva Fodor (2022) calls it, serves political goals well beyond demographic intentions. Since rewarding women's reproductive work has become the basis of a broad nationalist and xenophobic, exclusion-based political ideology that stresses the importance of national belonging. The Law according to the state claims was constructed in line with the teaching of Christianity. The religious tone is emphasized in nation-building, and forming traditional families, which helps to promote conservative and patriarchal family values, parallel with a pushback on gender equality, LGBTQ rights, and freedom of individual choice. The aforementioned quote demonstrates an apparent example how the current government discriminates against non-married heterosexual cohabiting couples and their children as well as homosexuals (Szikra, 2014).

In consonance with the former, the party ideology redefined the role of women and conceptualized women as mothers, the backbone of Hungarian families, and not as citizens (Pivarnyik, 2018), thus they should not enter the labour force in large numbers, rather stay at home, maintain the household, raise children in traditional families and contribute to nation-strengthening accordingly. Women are predominantly the ones held responsible for care work in their families, they often face reconciliation issues with work in the labour market. As a consequence of their limited access to labour market income, women are often economically dependent on a male earner (Lohmann – Zagel; 2016). Simply put, for this perspective the woman and the mother not only overlap but also coincide. In the Hungarian welfare discourse demographic reasoning and familism have been institutionalized as a major vocabulary of the conservative political rhetoric of the governing FIDESZ party. In 2019, PM Orban established a plan to “reach a comprehensive agreement with Hungarian women” (kormany.hu, 2018) to avoid the demographic crisis, meaning the government will create better circumstances to encourage women to raise the reproduction rate, but the offer is not available for everybody.

All policy reforms are influenced by the main notion of family mainstreaming, which aims to strengthen the functions of the family as a part of an alternative policy model in illiberal welfare systems (see family-friendly reforming of the labour market) (Grzebalska – Pető, 2018). In the party's concept, working families are the "good citizens" as they contribute to national prosperity, thus policy proposals must target them by any means (Lugosi, 2018). Among the regulation changes were the replacement of the progressive tax system with the flat-rate 16% income tax, the rise of VAT to 27%, the conversion of financial transfers into tax relief along with the discount in household energy prices (aka rezsicsökkentés). The results of the new initiatives convincingly show how the government arranges policies to unequally support middle- and upper-class families. For instance, the VAT disproportionately affects households with lower income and the utility price reduction was available to every household, but de facto benefitted those more, who had larger accommodations (Enyedi, 2016; Juhász, 2015). Subsequently, the government executes the notion of "socialism for the rich" (Chomsky, 1996). As its plan privileges a certain family type with "the systematic redistribution of resources from the lower to the upper classes" (Enyedi, 2016, pp. 15.), aims to boost fertility rates among the higher income families by providing increased support. Parallel with the termination of the compensation for low-income households and cutbacks of universal family support and unemployment assistance, these actions cause increased social polarisation and poverty levels. (Szikra, 2018; Szivós and Tóth, 2017). Therefore, Esping-Andersen's thesis (1990: 23), which says "the welfare state is not just a mechanism that intervenes in, and possibly corrects, the structure of inequality; it is, in its own right, a system of stratification", is applicable for the Orbán regime.

Besides actively shaping social relations, policies have a secondary, more political purpose, which can be understood through Forrat's (2012) conceptualization. The author claims, that "authoritarian states need legitimacy and legitimation of social policy help maintain the legitimacy of the particular government". Here, I accept V-Dem's (2020) conclusion, that Hungary is an electoral authoritarian regime, which - I add- is characterized by paternalism (the facade of the ruler

is taking care of the „whole” population) and policies, which are means of political control, economic development. On the one hand, the government through its large subsidies intends to recapitalise certain groups to create a stronger middle class (traits not determined), which will catalyse economic growth; on the other, this is more visible, the ruling party heavily relies on the support (and vote) of those, who are the beneficiaries of the policies. They serve as the base, from which its legitimacy originates. These features are entirely complying with Forrat’s theory.

Besides family mainstreaming, specific family policies were announced in the last 9 years. For instance, the new scheme of family tax allowance, which gives deduction after every child for the employed parent without any differentiation between lower and higher-income families. Further, there are some child benefits, which are only accessible to families with three or more children, for instance, free meals and books in public education. (465/2017. (XII. 28.) Korm. rendelet). As a declaration of the state’s family centrism PM Orban announced; “2018 will be the year of families” at the Budapest Family Summit in 2017 (miniszterelnok.hu, 2017). The notion was to consolidate every policy, which has some relation to family matters. Therefore “Family Protection Action Plan” was initiated, which encompasses 7 previously accepted and new policies; such as child expecting and home creating support (simply CSOK, családi otthonteremtési kedvezmény) (16/2016. (II. 10.) Korm. rendelet), subsidized mortgage (337/2017. (XI. 14.) Korm. rendelet) and vehicle purchase options (45/2019. (III. 12.) Korm. rendelet), kindergarten development programs to exemption from the personal income taxes for woman after 4 descendants (2019. évi XXXII. tv). These supports are mostly available for families with minimum of three children, where one parent had permanent employment in the previous year. Additionally, parents who are expecting or promise to have offspring in the next few years can also apply for a smaller loan. However, the reforms helped only those who conform to Fidesz’s narrow definition of the family and it misses to support households most in need, families with one- child or parent (Szikra. 2018, Pivarnyik, 2018). Although, according to Eurostat (2016) single parents are at the highest risk of poverty and social exclusion. Hungary’s recent “family protection” policies aim to

increase the number of newborns. While most demographers agree that they are unlikely to affect the total fertility rate accordingly and push it above the point of replacement (Spéder; 2018). Though, technically, policies could increase the birth rate in at least some segments of society for a shorter period.

Noticeably, the transformation of the Hungarian welfare system to a workfare model with the intentions to contribute to a national revival by cutting state spending and forcing the internalization of the discipline of labour (Hann, 2016), had its own restrictive aspect. For instance, the requirements of the application for state support are constructed in a way that poor families are unable to meet one or two criteria, thereupon they are excluded from the whole process. As an expected result, the lack of earnings will discourage them to have more children, as they do not possess the resources to raise them. For clarity, it is important to mention that these missing elements reflect the long-lasting needs of deprived families. Previous governments were using the universal approach to social assistance (Szikra, 2014), but as Raţ and Szikra (2018) claim new regulations “often exclude the most vulnerable children from eligibility” as „low-income families with irregular or no employment remained adversely included or straightforwardly excluded from some of the mainstream family policy programmes” (ibid, pp. 233.). Although one-parent families are among those, who face higher risks of poverty, the policy concepts evidently miss targeting their issues. Accordingly, state policies have a latent, exclusion-assisting tendency, meaning the government combines neoliberal and pro-welfare ideology with nationalism in its natalist policies, restricting the benefits to those they assign as the member of the Hungarian nation. In the public political discourse, the need interpretation and the comparison of merits have replaced the proportional, equalising, and catching-up distribution.

Besides the veiled structural violence, there is pure discrimination and hate speech as well. The government’s masculine rhetoric includes shaming and ignoring other renitent models. The current debate has its own nationalist / chauvinist vibe, as it excludes citizens who can not achieve

the state directive, like raising good Christian offspring. In the government's narrative, all other family models and their achievements are degraded, not acknowledged, and treated identically apart from their personal stories. Meanwhile, these incitements to despise accomplishments and to marginalize these households are ignored by the general population. The governmental campaign further exacerbates single-parent families' situation, because they not only have to ensure their regular lives, but they are permanently provoked by the state.

However, the government cherishes larger middle class families, where parents are employed and married, the ratio of single-parent families is increasing since the end of socialism (Harcza – Monostori; 2014, Haney, 2002). According to the Microcensus (2017), more than 500 thousand households have only one parent, the majority of them are women (87%), who are raising almost 800 thousand children, which means that currently 1.3 million people are related to the phenomenon in Hungary. This is c. 10% of the total population, but approximately a quarter of all families and a third of the new generation (Microcensus, 2017). The householders are mostly divorced (44%), a third are widowed, 14% are single, and the rest are technically separated. As previous studies show these households are more vulnerable to poverty, the parent is often overwhelmed by the tasks and responsibility, the collective parent-infant time is way lower and the possibility of alcohol, drug use, delinquency, problematic behaviour and forming of their own single-parent families are higher among these children (Barber – Eccles, 1992; Gyarmati – Vályi, 2015).

Although in comparison with others, single-parents are negatively affected in income, education, health prospects, and career opportunities, as they are not directly targeted by social policies across Europe (Monostori, 2019). Judit Monostori (2019) identifies three possible reasons for the phenomenon. Firstly, politicians want to avoid the appearance of supporting single-parent families, as families with three or more children potentially provide more people for the labour market. Secondly, by restrictions they avert abuse of the welfare system, as they filter out all those,

who would divorce on paper for the benefits. Thirdly, conservative governments do not tend to support single-parent families as it does not comply with the traditional family model. Nonetheless, single-parents are constructed through policies, which often highlight the „disadvantageous aspects of their position: as dependent, undeserving, work-avoiding or a threat to social order” (Nieuwenhuis – Maldonado, 2018, 421. pp).

To conclude, after 2010 there were grandiose changes in Hungary, one of them was, when the unit of the political focus altered from the individual perspective to the family. Consequently, the government conceptualized the desired Hungarian family model. The ideal family is preferably minimum middle-class, Christian, in which employed, heterosexual parents are married, and cohabitating with at least two children, which is considerably a narrow category. (Not to mention, apparently non-Roma.) All other types are neglected in the government’s rhetoric and not considered as a family, or “good citizens”. The state transfers favour larger, mostly middle-class or higher-income families (Szikra, 2014) to maintain stagnancy or to decelerate the downtrend in demography, but the effect on increasing fertility is negligible (Kapitány– Spéder, 2018). Additionally, a self-interest following, mainly patriotic middle-class clientele stratum has evolved around the government, as a secondary result of the policies (Enyedi, 2016). They serve as the dependent political base, which can be turned against the needies. This is how dualism develops, who is considered part of the nation, who gets benefits, and who doesn't. The divide is between the privileged families and the groups of more precarious status. Although single-parent families represent the highest risk of poverty and social exclusion in Europe (Lugosi, 2018), Hungarian policies miss to address their issues. In the next segment, I introduce the theoretical framework, which embraces several approaches, while focusing on boundaries and exclusion.

### 3. Conceptual elaboration

While single-parent households are often associated with poverty, welfare dependency, deprivation and the potential academic underperformance of the descendants (Amato–Patterson–Beattie, 2015), most researchers examine well-being among children with single parents, the role of universal and targeted family benefits in reducing poverty in single-parent families, child development, inequality among families and schools (Nieuwenhuis – Maldonado, 2018). Besides the exploration of the socioeconomic circumstances of single-parent households, there are some which investigated their media representation (Ridgway, 2014), occasional stigmatization (Carroll, 2017) and the social constructions of single motherhood through the perspective of the politicians (Monostori, 2019) and the state (Phoenix, 1996), but there is little research on their daily struggles, attitudes and relations to them within the nation.

The vast majority of previous studies on the welfare merit of single mothers have examined the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1990s in relation to the use of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) programs. The persistently negative social construction of African-American women as Jezebels and welfare queens is very strong and has, arguably, been reinforced by policy and social science analysis (Ajandi; 2011), thus politicians could gain public support by portraying them as undeserving, to cut welfare benefits for single mothers (Monnat 2010). Findings suggest that individuals internalize perceptions of others, meaning, in the USA case, the greater public and single mothers may have internalized these negative perceptions received in institutions and publicly (Uzdansky; 2009). This suggests that perceptions of the deservingness of single mothers may also explain the characteristics of the public assistance provided to single parents in general. The Hungarian context alters, Herke (2022) found that single mothers are not stigmatised by the government but are implicitly framed as less deserving because the government propagates the importance of 'traditional' family values. Herke (2022), who investigated the perceived welfare deservingness of single mothers in Hungary based on the

institutional system, government discourse and social attitudes, argues that reduced state support makes single parents, and single mothers in particular, more vulnerable to poverty and reduces the ability of single mothers to set up and maintain an independent household. Her results show that, on the one hand, public opinion agrees with the government's conservative family policy discourse that the two-parent family is the preferred family form, on the other hand, public opinion also considers single mothers to be worthy of state support.

The government and state apparatus need some sort of ideology to justify their actions for instance, for the reorganization of the welfare system. In the meantime, they construct subjects for their initiatives. As Bartha and fellow scholars argue, welfare state reforms, like taxation and family policies, are under the influence of government ideas, thus reflecting their notion of belonging and boundaries by the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion (Bartha et al., 2020). In the Hungarian case, the government uses a mixture of several ideologies (nationalism, familism, etc.) to motivate individuals to act against depopulation and for that, they constructed a new type of the ideal family and the good citizen, as it can be detected from the previous contextualization segment. To analyse the boundaries generated by the government in the context of the new family scheme I use Althusser's concept of interpellation. Similarly, Anna C. Korteweg (2003) applied this theory, when she examined the transformation of the US. welfare system in the 90s, which tried to reshape the relationship women have with the state. The concept allowed her to investigate the processes by which representatives of the welfare state construct welfare-reliant women's subjectivity, along with the attempt at women's making sense of self.

Louis Althusser (2001) claims that ideology has a material existence since it prevails in an apparatus and practices, thus it manifests itself through actions. Moreover, he introduces that ideology hails / interpellates individuals as concrete subjects. Meaning, ideology constitutes subjects, while subjects reproduce the ideology that constitutes them. "Interpellation" helps to explore the process by which individuals become subjects and how they accept, internalize social



categories in which they were addressed. He argues that by transforming individuals into subjects, ideology fulfils its function to recognize or misrepresent individuals. Therefore, Althusser's theory permits us to understand how the state and citizens interpellate single parents for my research.

Ingram & Schneider (1993) in their well-known and appreciated piece argues, that „for critical policy studies no lines are more important than those drawn between people who are deserving and people who are undeserving of the benefits and burdens”. This distribution influences welfare, social status and it even affects identity and how certain groups are perceived. They point out, that political decisions reflect distinctions according to the policy makers' political agenda, which then results in favoured target groups and neglected deserving groups, whose claims are not considered. Therefore, to analyse the social construction of target populations they have created the social construction typology, based on the group's power and deservedness. Ingram & Schneider (1993) determined four categories: the advantaged, the dependents, the contender and the deviants. Here, I have only space to paint with a broad brush, thus I must simplify their concept. The advantaged are labelled as those, who have high levels of political power and they are constructed positively, thus often chosen as beneficiaries of support, while extra burdens are put on others. Incidentally, groups perceived by the public as deserving are more likely to receive generous, universal benefits than groups perceived as undeserving, because their support enjoys a higher degree of social legitimacy. In the Hungarian case, affluent larger families are favoured by the Government, while its public support is unknown. In their typology, dependents are considered as deserving, since they did not cause their issues, but are still unable to solve them on their own, however, they lack political power, as they have no resources or visible contribution to economic prosperity. Dependents are targeted by policies, although these rather serve as sticking plaster than actual remedies. Single mothers should be labelled as such in the Hungarian case. Since distinct target groups receive very different messages from public policy that impact their view of themselves as citizens, their orientation toward government and their propensity to participate can

vary. Schneider and Ingram (1993) claim that public policy-based boundaries between citizens not only affect material welfare and social status but also identity, self-respect and citizenship.

Since the Hungarian case is not solely about the mismatch between the ideology-driven apparatus and individuals but the notion of the ideal family vs the daily struggle of single parents, I must include Jean Beaman's (2016) analytical framework of cultural citizenship, which helps to make sense of the realities of being on the verge of the society and how citizenship operates in everyday life. Beyond the material distinction, the symbolic boundary creation, conceptualized by Lamont and Molnár (2002) is a potential tool to identify, how objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources. On the basis of this concept, Jean Beaman (2015) uses cultural citizenship framework to examine symbolic exclusion among second-generation Maghrébin French middle-class. The framework enables to study of Hungarian single-parent families, as in both cases individuals are positioned on the margins of mainstream society despite their nationality. Cultural citizenship considers citizenship beyond its legislative status and acknowledges the relationship between culture and citizenship. By the application of cultural citizenship researchers gain a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural realities of being a minority and reveal how citizenship operates in daily situations (Beaman, 2015). Jean Beaman (2015) explores "cultural citizenship" based on cultural markers, which allow citizens to create a set of cultural-symbolic boundaries around accepted patterns of behaviour. In my case, boundaries are created by the government through its policies, which propagates a conservative family type and neglects single-parent families.

Moreover, cultural citizenship allows me to study how citizenship operates as a marker of difference, how denied individuals perceive state ideology, construct boundaries around the "ideal family", along with how they locate themselves vis-à-vis these boundaries and how families are marginalised. Translating it to the Althusserian theory individuals are not simply interpellated by the State as citizens, which constructs them as subjects and assigns them status, but it involves

making a claim for recognition by the State and a sort of nexus with fellow citizens. Therefore, Beaman adds to T. H. Marshall's theory of “civil, political and social” citizenship, as cultural citizenship shows why legal citizenship does not mean belonging and provides a theoretical kit to further elaborate on single parents’ situation.

Hungary has stepped on the autocratizing path and the system of checks and balances suffered severe damage, hence various groups have a different amount of agency or influence. The greatest entity, with an almost disproportionately large power, is the circle of the ruling party, which controls the central government and determines debated topics and distributes resources in line with its agenda. The disclaimer shows, that Ingram & Schneider’s (1993) concept and typology might not fit entirely to the Hungarian case as to other classical, competitive democracies. In spite of that, for family policy the typology is apt at large, a well-defined group emerged as beneficiary and dependents, deviants can be outlined. The government arranges policies to unequally support larger, white middle- and upper-class families to boost fertility rates among them by providing increased support. They are the advantaged. While other families, like single-parent households, large but less affluent families, who do not fit into the former category are often neglected, which makes them “dependents”. Henceforth, potential migrant families, those whose acceptance is guaranteed by international agreements are presented as deviants, who can not accommodate Hungarian customs, thus should not be entitled to any state transfer. Similarly, single-parent households with one or two kids are not on the radar, they possess slight advocacy potential. What single parents are struggling with is not on the political agenda, e.g. the family allowance increase. They lack validation of their struggles or a legitimate political concern, which is against the Government's policy and redistributive intentions. They do not have concrete political power, so they are leaning towards dependents, but their deservingness is often criticized as they are depicted as lazy or irresponsible, who have children only for family allowance and are blamed for their situation.

Although the family support emphasises inclusivity and all Hungarian families are favoured in theory, due to the tax exemption schemes the wealthier strata gain larger, out of proportion support. Social constructions embedded in policy become the foundation of orientation to members of society, who are welcomed and appreciated as citizens. In the next segment, I present how the public attitude towards single-parent upbringing changed in ten years' time. Then on the basis of the literature review, I will examine that by degrading their social citizenship, would questioning their belonging to the nation arose. Secondly, do they perceive a second-class citizenship from the members of the society? The single mothers and how they negotiate in the welfare state has generally received scant conceptual attention, it is to fill this gap that this thesis seeks to begin to put them on the academic agenda and address their case.

## 4. Quantitative analysis of the public attitude towards single-parent upbringing in Hungary

Over the past decade, the perception of the family image in Hungary has undergone significant change. Namely, the views outspoken in public on single parenting and same-sex couples have shifted to a more sceptical, disapprobative, less tolerant point of view during the course of the past 10 years. This analysis focuses on examining the relationship between certain demographic variables and attitudes toward single parenting to uncover the societal factors that might influence these changes. Little research has been done focusing on attitudes towards single parenting before, thus this segment aims to provide further information to a blank spot in the literature. One notable study on the subject is a multilevel analysis conducted by Mia Hakovirta, Johanna Kallio, and Milla Salin (2021), titled “Is it Possible for Single Parents to Successfully Raise Children?” which examines the attitudes towards single parenting in 22 European countries. This study did not include Hungary and only focused on 2012, thus this study aims to fill this gap, with the addition of a comparison of the result of the two ISSP waves of “Family and Changing Gender Roles” from 2013 and 2023. The data used in the study is publicly available for 2013 and published by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). 2023 data is forthcoming.

Hungary has undergone thorough change, thus comparing the ISSP survey data from 2013 and 2023 provides valuable insights into the changing social landscape of Hungary through the lens of several questions that measure attitudes towards non-traditional two-parent families. The six outcome variables used in the analysis measure the attitudes of the respondents on a Likert scale by asking them to what extent they agree with a statement, to which they can indicate their opinion on a scale of five options ranging from “completely agree” to “completely disagree”. The items that were asked were the following: “Only married couples should have children.” (marriage\_child), “A single mother can raise her children just as well as two parents.” (single\_mother), “A single father can raise his children just as well as two parents.” (single\_father), “There is no issue with a

couple living together unmarried.” (unmarried), “A couple consisting of two women can raise their children just as well as a couple consisting of a woman and a man.” (two\_women) and “A couple consisting of two men can raise their children just as well as a couple consisting of a woman and a man.” (two\_men), which are items that examine respondents' concepts of family and their perceptions of it. The issues grasped by these items have been on the political agenda for varying amounts of time but they have in common that the Government, an opposing party or an NGO brought up the subject and have been much discussed in the public discourse. Hence they are briefly introduced to see the broader context, though later in the analysis I will focus in more detail on the perception of single parenthood, which is the main theme of this paper. Note that the outcome variables for the regression analysis were recoded so that they took the value 1 if the respondent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, and 0 otherwise. Meaning, 0 groups together non-supporters, not unsupporters.

Since there is narrow literature to draw on, I expect attitudes in Hungarian society to be similar to Hakovirta et. al's (2021) findings, as their sample included countries from the CEE region. They found that exactly this region has the most negative attitudes, while Nordic countries are more accepting and members of those countries which have high proportion of single-parent families. When looking at individual demographic variables as explanatory, they found that women and young people are more accepting, with likely exposure or being able to relate to the situation of single parents, as well as those who vote for left-wing parties and have lower religious beliefs. Couples with children and couples without children tend to be less supportive, as are the religious, the childless, and the unmarried are less approving. Interestingly, those with higher education are also less approving, as if they are not able to empathise despite being educated.

Similar to the research of Hakovirta et. Al (2021), in this analysis demographic explanatory variables were gender, age, education (low, medium and high), religiosity (measured by how often the respondent goes to masses and what religion they identify with), political views - namely what

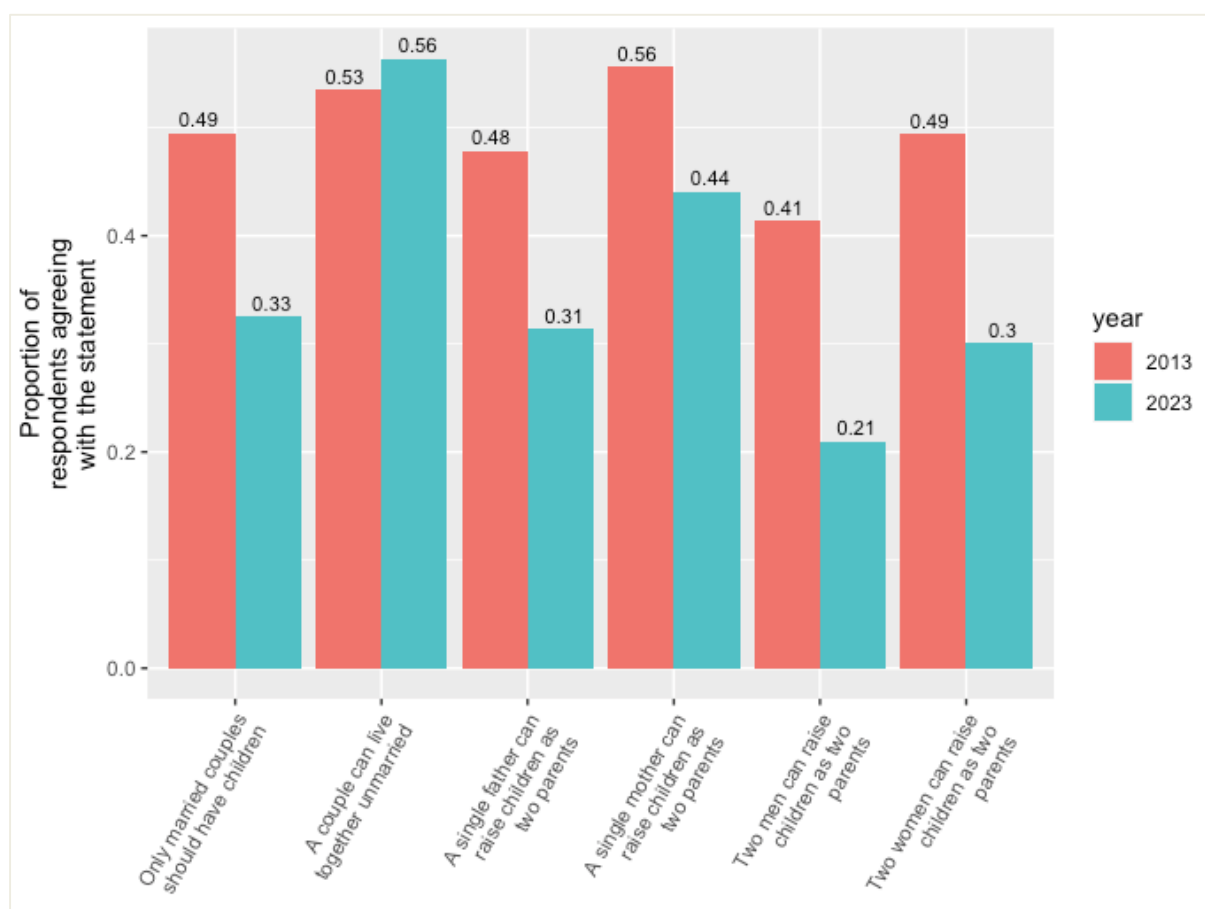
party they would vote for if the elections were tomorrow, income, self-reported life satisfaction, and if they are parents (family status). Descriptive statistics for these variables are available in the appendix (see Table 1-2.). Amongst the outcome variables, there are approximately 1000 observations, and 95% of them are non-missing.

## Descriptive insights

The data from the ISSP suggests a decreasing trend in the acceptance of the parenting of couples of the same gender and single parenting, while unmarried couples gained support. As shown in the graph, in 2013, almost 49% of the respondents agreed on that single fathers are as capable of raising a child as a couple consisting of a man and a woman. For single mothers, the value was above 54%, meaning the majority of the Hungarian society was supporting this type of parenting. Interestingly, between 40-50% agreed with the statement that couples of the same gender are capable of raising children. Not surprisingly, women's acceptance is higher in both cases, which can be attributed to the classical values and gender role perceptions in Hungarian society.

However, what is really striking is that the data revealed in 2023, the decrease of support for single parents was more than 10 percentage points in both cases during the course of 10 years. It fell from 0.56 to 0.44 for women and from 0.48 to 0.31 for men, a drop of 12 and 15 percentage points respectively, but still not as much as for same-sex couples. The drop is also observed for same-sex couples, which is even larger in their case. In 2013, 41.3% of the respondents agreed that two men are perfectly capable of raising children, however, this proportion was 21% in 2023. The quantity of people who agreed that two women are as capable of raising children as traditional couples also decreased by 19.3 percentage points from 49% to 30%. In the case of two men the support almost halved.

Graph 1: Proportion of respondents agreeing with the following statements



Data: ISSP 2013 - 2023, self-designed figure

Moreover, there seems to be a shift in the attitudes toward marriage in general. The proportion of respondents who believe that only married couples can have children reduced by 16.9 percentage points, and in 2023, slightly more people believe that it is not an issue if a couple lives together unmarried than 10 years ago, which might stem from a global change of trend in attitudes. This shift in public opinion could be attributed to various political and social influences, including the stronger political focus on family policies and more frequent depiction of the ideal Hungarian family from the government's side, which endorses the upbringing of children in a marriage-based household. In vain, government intentions and subsidies for married couples, which led to a rise in the marriage rate, the acceptance of cohabitation and having children proliferated.



For further analysis explanatory variables such as gender, age, family status, religion and affiliation, level of education, and self-reported life satisfaction were included. The explanatory variables were recoded in order to prevent overspecification to larger categories. In terms of gender, there was a decrease in the proportion of men from 47.7% in 2013 to 40.3% in 2023, while the proportion of women increased from 52.3% to 59.7% during the same period. In terms of age distribution, the number of individuals surveyed increased from 985 in 2013 to 1,027 in 2023, with a slight increase in the mean age, reflecting the demographic change of population aging. In both years, more than 50% of the respondents were of low education, around 30% were medium education (up to high school diploma), and around 15% were of high education, having a degree from a tertiary-level institution. The educational distribution showed a decline in the proportion of individuals with low education levels, from 50.3% in 2013 to 41.3% in 2023, and an increase in individuals with medium and high education levels. There was a significant expansion in terms of the perceived material situation of the society. For the 10 years' period a significant portion of the Hungarian society felt that it could step forward. In terms of income, there was a decline in the proportion of individuals with low income, from 19.7% in 2013 to 9.6% in 2023, while the proportion of individuals with high income increased from 37% to 51.7%. The majority of the respondents belonged to the middle-income category, who said that they have to plan well in order to get by. Family status saw an increase in the proportion of individuals who were married or in a relationship, from 44% in 2013 to 54.4% in 2023, while the proportion of single individuals decreased from 27.1% to 16.2%. The distribution of religion remained relatively stable, with Christianity being the dominant religion in both years.

The political scene has also undergone substantial changes in recent years, with parties forming and disappearing, and existing parties undergoing ideological shifts. The only constant between 2013 and 2023 is that the Fidesz-KDNP coalition remained in government. Therefore, in the present case, in a dynamically changing political space, it would be difficult to determine the

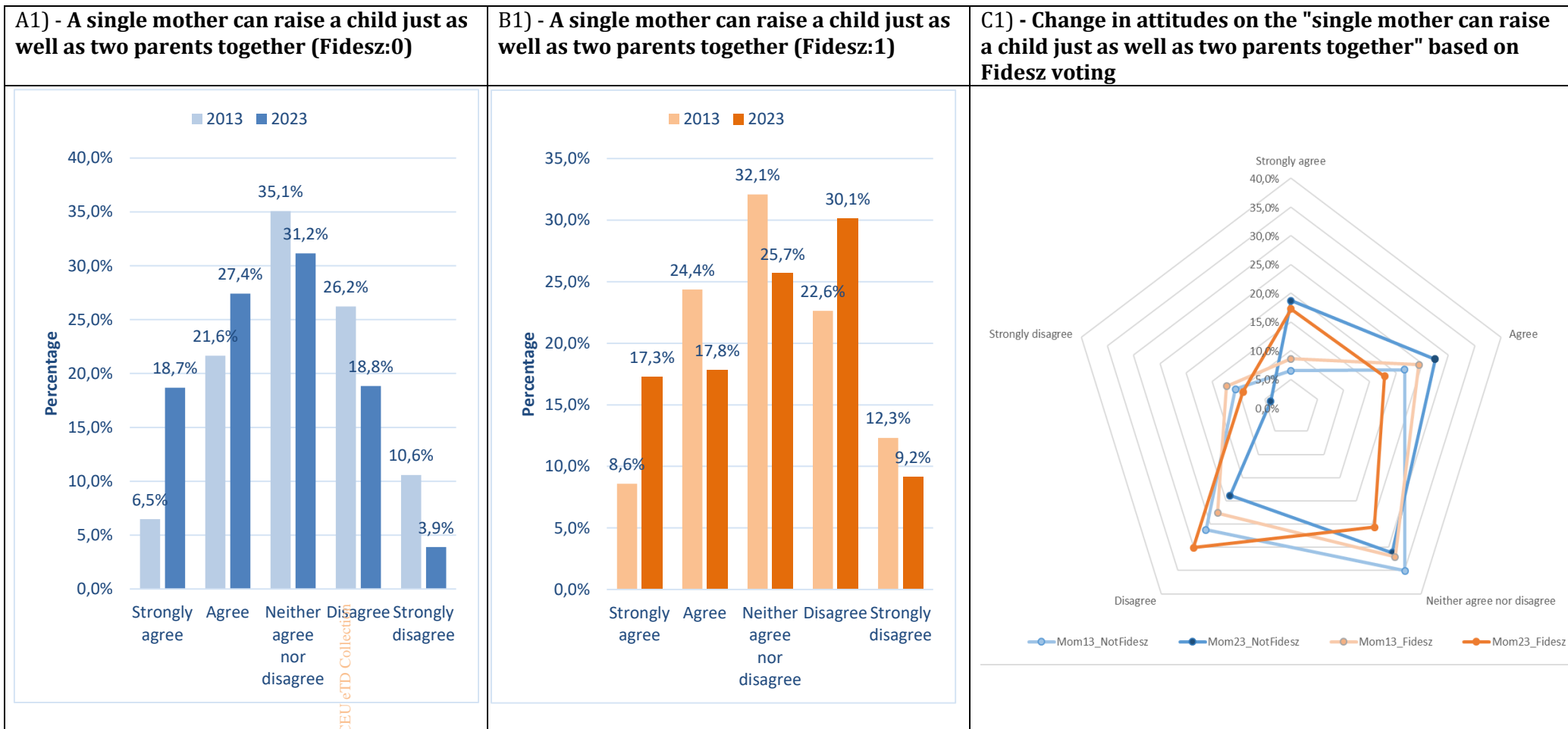
position of each party on the left-right scale, as the previous sample study did for state governments, moreover, the number of respondents for each formation is minimal. To examine the political aspect, I generated a Fidesz-KDNP dummy variable using the item "Which party list did you vote for in the parliamentary elections?", where 1 was those said that they did indeed vote for Fidesz, and all others were assigned to the category "Not a Fidesz voter". Since for both periods the „don't know”, „did not ask because they did not go to vote” and „did not want to answer” are above 37% in total, I will not use the party explanatory variable in further analyses. Simply put, the small number of respondents and the quest to understand the underlying mechanism do not allow us to know what caused what and for whom. In the 2013 sample, 352 respondents said they voted for Fidesz, 34.8% of the total sample. Alike in 2023 382 respondents, 37.4% of the sample.

Table 3 shows how the perception of single mothers and single fathers has changed among Fidesz voters and non-Fidesz voters in two surveys. It can be seen that the perception of single mothers' support increased among non-Fidesz voters from 6.5% to 18.7% and from 21.6 to 27.4 percentage ( see A1), while those who disagree and strongly disagree decreased by 6.7 and 7.4 percentage points, respectively. A similar trend can be observed for single fathers, where the share of strongly agree (+14.4%p) and slightly agree (+1.8%p) grew, while neither and disagree decreased by 5-6%p each among non-Fidesz voters (A2). The radar chart or spider web graph (C column) also shows that for single mothers the octagon became smaller and shifted right upwards, meaning a convergence of views (C1). Likewise for single fathers, where previously there was little substantive difference between Fidesz voters and non-Fidesz voters in 2013, as the light orange and light blue pentagons are in almost similar positions and sizes, and even slightly higher in support than non-Fidesz voters. The Pearson Chi-Square test also confirms the above-summarised results, with no significant association found for either single mothers or fathers in 2013 (M - value: 4.483, 0.345p; F - value: 7.331, 0.119p). The result is not significant, thus the data suggests that the

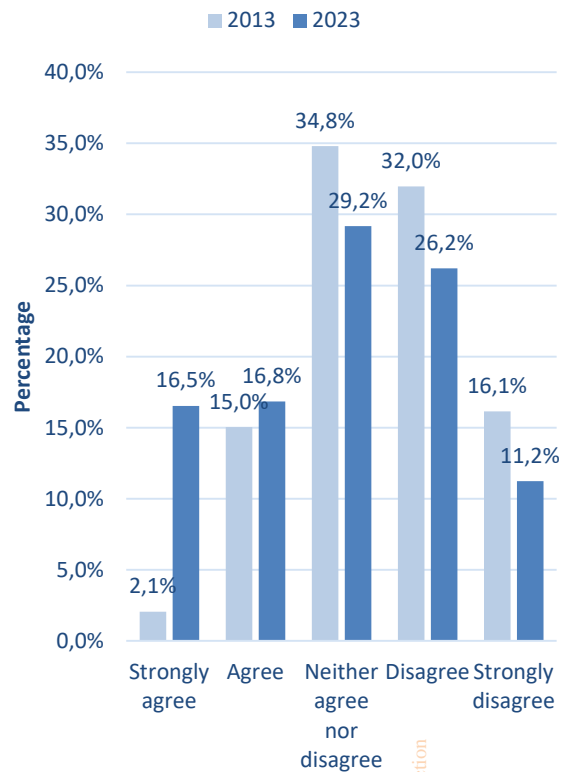
two variables: attitudes towards single mothers and fathers and Fidesz voting are not associated with each other.

The same cannot be said for 2023 data, where both mothers and fathers show a significant result in the Pearson Chi-Square test (M - value: 36.554, 0.000p; F - value: 19.911, 0.001p). In other words, there was an association detected here. As can be observed in the spider chart, in the single mother question the Fidesz voter and non-Fidesz voter pentagon diverged, with the non-Fidesz voter shifted upwards to the right and more to the left, together with an internal polarization (see C1). While the strongly agree share increased (+8.7%p), the disagree share continued to increase from 22.6% to 30.1%, with a decrease in the other answer categories, especially in neither case. For single fathers the strongly agree gained support by 12.8%p, with a slight, but mutual increase in agree and disagree, while strongly disagree grew by 3.3%p (B2). Polarisation can also be identified in the spider chart by the "increase" in the area of pentagon, with more extreme opinions among those who voted for the party. Recognizable on the C2 graph, those who voted for Fidesz shifted upwards to the left due to the double phenomenon, while those who did not vote for Fidesz shifted upwards to the right, as they are more accepting.

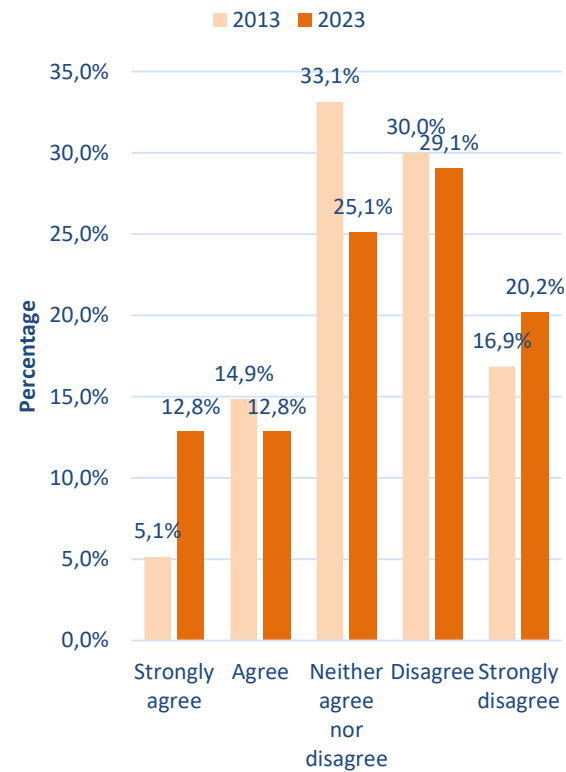
Table 3: Change in attitudes towards single parents in 2013 and 2023 by electoral behaviour



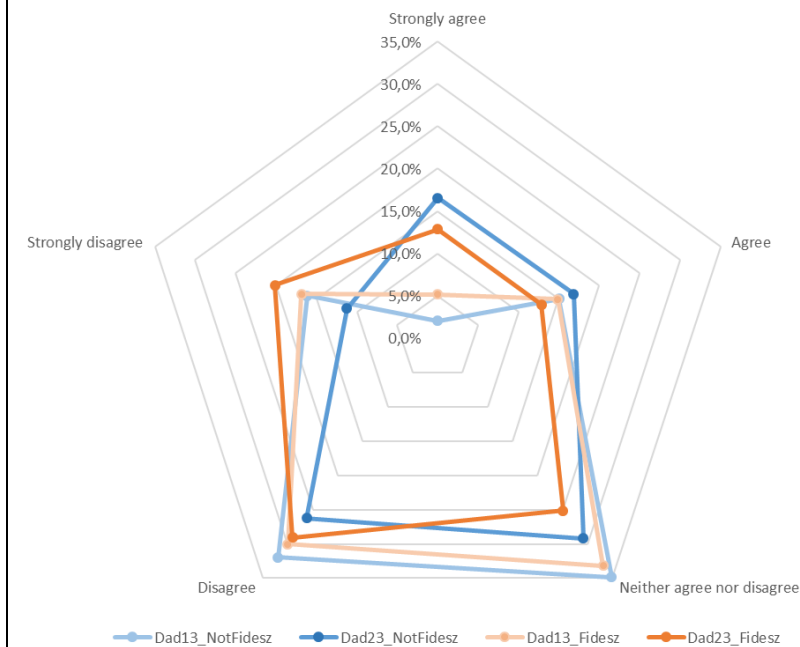
**A2) - A single father can raise a child just as well as two parents together (Fidesz:0**



**B1) - A single father can raise a child just as well as two parents together (Fidesz:1)**



**C1) - Change in attitudes on the "single father can raise a child just as well as two parents together" item based on voting**



Data: ISSP 2013 - 2023, self-designed figures

In following studies, it would be worthwhile to look in more detail at the reasons for this and how this type of change can be explained. My hypothesis is that in 10 years there has been a significant change in the internal support camp that brought the party coalition to power, who are no longer united in their perception of single-parent families. With the above in mind, party decision is no longer included in the regression analysis.

## Results of logistic multilevel regression on attitudes toward single parents

Beyond the political vote, several variables may explain the change in the attitudes towards single parenthood, as Hakovirta et al. Al (2021) explained. In what follows, I examine gender, age, education, marital status, number of children, income, religiosity, and its practice effects using logistic regression. Table4 presents the results of a logit regression analysis examining the factors associated with the acceptance of single parenthood, specifically focusing on the perspectives of mothers and fathers. The dependent variable is the acceptance of single parenthood, and the table includes coefficients, standard errors in parentheses, and significance levels denoted by asterisks (\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ). The first and second models include estimates for 2013, and models (3) and (4) are estimated based on the 2023 data. The last two models include all of the observations, both from 2013 and 2023, including a dummy indicating the year. Note that due to the large extent of missingness on party preference, that explanatory variable was removed from the analysis. The observations were weighted with the four-dimensional weights provided by the ISSP. Generally, due to the high number of categorical explanatory variables, overspecification is a danger when estimating the models, as it can lead to overfitting, possibly leading to misleading conclusions. I left age, gender and education in each model even though they were not significant in many cases, because they contain substantive information.

Table 4 Results of logistic multilevel regression

Dependent variable: Acceptance of single...						
	Motherhood (1)	Fatherhood (2)	Motherhood (3)	Fatherhood (4)	Motherhood (5)	Fatherhood (6)
<b>Gender (ref = male)</b>						
Female	0.314** (0.133)	0.293* (0.152)	0.079 (0.137)	0.288* (0.156)	0.301*** (0.105)	0.137 (0.107)
<b>Age</b>						
	0.003 (0.004)	0.004 (0.006)	-0.010* (0.005)	0.003 (0.005)	0.0004 (0.004)	-0.006 (0.004)
<b>Education (ref = low)</b>						
High	-0.458** (0.198)	-0.204 (0.221)	-0.302 (0.211)	-0.354 (0.235)	-0.373** (0.155)	-0.373** (0.161)
Medium	0.018 (0.154)	-0.014 (0.175)	-0.114 (0.157)	0.024 (0.180)	-0.032 (0.120)	-0.081 (0.123)
<b>Family status (ref = married)</b>						
Divorced		0.669*** (0.232)	0.042 (0.197)		0.341** (0.155)	0.098 (0.158)
Single		0.139 (0.201)	-0.280 (0.226)		-0.176 (0.162)	0.038 (0.164)
Widowed		0.281 (0.273)	0.526** (0.239)		0.026 (0.183)	0.460** (0.188)
<b>Children</b>						
	-0.411** (0.173)		-0.541** (0.213)		-0.211 (0.151)	-0.235 (0.152)

**Income (ref = high)**

Low	-1.220***	0.215	-1.292***	-0.229	-0.324**
	(0.281)	(0.191)	(0.311)	(0.158)	(0.163)
Medium	-0.269	0.397***	-0.644***	-0.070	-0.050
	(0.166)	(0.153)	(0.175)	(0.114)	(0.117)

**Religion (ref = non-religious)**

Catholic	-1.747***		-0.898**	-0.490***	-0.359**
	(0.466)		(0.439)	(0.154)	(0.153)
Other	-0.555***		-0.404**	-0.453***	-0.364**
	(0.176)		(0.179)	(0.144)	(0.148)
Protestant	-1.245**		-1.173**	-0.871***	-0.433
	(0.493)		(0.560)	(0.324)	(0.328)

**Mass attendance (ref = never)**

	-1.106***	-0.945***	-1.019***	-0.850***	-0.539***	-0.438***
	(0.316)	(0.168)	(0.336)	(0.180)	(0.139)	(0.146)

**2023  
dummy**

					-0.629**	-0.793***
					(0.147)*	(0.148)

Constant	0.366	0.246	0.706**	-0.124	0.771***	0.742***
	(0.224)	(0.333)	(0.357)	(0.296)	(0.268)	(0.273)

Observations	982	865	979	865	1,698	1,698
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Log Likelihood	-644.612	-590.406	-643.181	-550.120	-1,171.833	-1,128.553
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*Note:* \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001



These findings reveal several significant predictors of the log-likelihood of the acceptance of single parenthood. The final models were calculated using backward elimination of the insignificant and unnecessary variables. In model (1), gender was significant and positive, indicating that compared to men, women are associated with a higher acceptance of single motherhood. Similarly, the relationship between women and single parenthood is positive in all cases, although the significance value falls below the threshold in some cases (see 1&6), the direction of the relationship is still unchanged. Family status also seems to play a significant role in determining the attitudes toward single mothers. Both in 2013 and 2023, married people viewed single parenting the most negatively compared to other family status categories. The divorced and widowed tend to agree, while the direction of the relationship is unclear for singles. In 2013, being widowed was the most positively associated with being accepting of single fathers. Having children is negatively associated with acceptance for mothers  $-0.411^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.01$  in 2013 and  $0.541^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.01$  in 2023, suggesting that individuals without children tend to have higher approval.

Age has lost its explanatory power, there is no difference in this respect. More so by educational level. Compared to the low educated, the highly educated are generally less supportive. In model (1) about single motherhood in 2013, an odds ratio of  $-0.458$  suggests that individuals with high education levels are approximately 0.5 times less likely to accept single parenthood compared to those with low education levels, holding other variables constant. This negative relationship holds in all cases and is even significant for the panel test at  $-0.373^{**}$ . In models (3) and (4) about the attitudes toward single fatherhood, it seems like education is a less significant predictor. In terms of income, those with higher incomes agree, while those with lower incomes are less likely to support a single parenthood statement.

Religion, measured with two variables, was a significant and negative predictor of acceptance towards single parenting. Mass attendance clearly shows the difference between the never-goers and respondents, who at least occasionally attend. The latter are less likely to agree that

single parenting is good. Protestants, Catholics, and people belonging to religious minorities were in general less supportive of single mothers and fathers. The order partially changed from the original study, with religious minorities in Hungary being the most non-agreeing, while those who declared themselves Catholic were also non-agreeing but to a lesser extent.

Models (5) and (6) describe the attitudes towards single parents in both 2013 and 2023 in a panel dataset, and therefore include a dummy variable for indicating the year. Altogether, women tend to view single parents more positively than men, *ceteris paribus*, and respondents of a lower education view single parenthood more positively than those of high education level. The overall relationship between the explanatory variables and the outcomes is in the same direction as in the previous models. The coefficient of 2023 was negative and significant on all common significance levels in both cases, which implies that it is very unlikely that the observed association occurred by chance alone. Being in the year 2023 is associated with a decrease in the log-odds of the dependent variable compared to the reference year of 2013 in both models, not yet explained by the other variables. Meaning that there was a general unobservable negative shift in society in the direction of being less supportive of single parenthood in general.

This broader negative trend could be attributed to several factors. Over the last decade, societal attitudes might have changed. By emphasizing the family and its importance through the redistributive state system and the multiple public campaigns, there may have been a shift towards more traditional family structures or a conservative view on parenting roles, which could lead to a decrease in support for single parents. Another aspect could be economic conditions, if there is decreased welfare support and financial resources available for single parents, that also could have resulted in decreased support, as if single parents were not as able to financially support their children, that could have led to the shift in public opinion about the capabilities of single parents to successfully execute the upbringing of their children. Likewise, changes in cultural and social dynamics could downsize attitudes toward supporting single parents. Actors, like churches,

(go)NGOs and the entire rhetoric of the government, stronger manifestation of religious or conservative beliefs emphasizing traditional family norms may discourage people whether a single parent can raise a child as well as a straight married couple. Changes in government policies and priorities can also play a role, for instance, policy reforms that were more in favour of marriage and financially aided married couples more than single parents. All these together could trickle down to the respondents.

Overall, this analysis focused on the changing perception of the family image in Hungary in the last 10 years, namely the changes in the attitudes towards single parenting. It utilized publicly available data from the International Social Survey Programme's (ISSP) „Family and changing gender roles” module and attempted to detect trends outlined in a previous study by Hakovirta et al. (2021) – conducted for 22 European countries, which did not include Hungary. Principally, our results are similar. I compared the 2013 and 2023 data of the survey and included several demographic variables to determine what could be connected to the decrease in the support of single parenthood. It seems like women support single parents more than men. Religious respondents viewed single parenthood more negatively than non-religious respondents on average. As well as those with higher education. Respondents with children are less supportive than those without, here the Hungarian case deviates from other findings. Divorced people tend to be the most supportive out of all family status categories. A general negative trend was identified in the overall public opinion, which has significantly shifted against single parenthood. This could be the result of the aforementioned multiple economic, social, and policy factors. These results are not suitable for causal inference, just for determining statistical relationships between variables. However, further analysis could be useful to give insights with a larger sample and repeated over the course of multiple years, to further understand the relationship between attitudes towards single parenthood and the examined explanatory variables.

After diagnosing, the extent of the support towards single parenting in the Hungarian society and how this has changed over the years, in the next chapter of the thesis I summarise the findings of the qualitative part of the research. The investigation included interviews with single parents and care workers, to channel the experiences of people who would otherwise not be reached. I present my findings of the exploratory research, describe difficulties and struggles, how they relate to the government's notion of the 'Hungarian family', their perception of boundaries and policy exclusion, and introduce my own concept of the 'Single Parent Ladder'.

## 5. Qualitative analysis of the perceived governmental measures and perception of the larger society by single parents in Hungary

As has already been shown in the previous chapters, the Government considers it important to help families from a demographic and electoral point of view, and the Hungarian social attitude is quite divided on the issue of single-parent families and child-rearing. Therefore, in the following, I will present the difficulties faced by single-parent families, the extent to which support is available to them and how they feel the majority of society relates to them, through the results of my own interview research.

Without exact predecessors my research can not rely on existing methodology, thus I follow Paige L. Sweet's methods (2019), who recognized and reframed a formally known phenomenon (gaslighting) in the sociological framework. Similarly, I examine one under-studied aspect of a previously known phenomenon. Since the construction and perception of boundaries are not tangible phenomena, to get familiar with the contemporary situation of single-parent families, as preliminary research, I conducted interviews with professionals, who work in Family Support Centres in districts of Budapest ( $N = 9$ ). In the first phase of my investigation I focus on the mapping of single mother struggles through the perspective of state-financed assistance services. I marshalled interviews to uncover the mechanisms and trace the processes. For broader access, I decided to get in contact with the Single-Parent Families Centre in Budapest, which gives targeted support to families in need. Based on their knowledge I could get familiar with single mothers' situations to conceptualize my interview guide (see in the Appendix). As a second phase, I conducted semi-structured interviews with single-parent household heads. During the investigation, I focus on single mother cases as they are the overwhelming majority of household heads. I conducted interviews with mothers ( $N = 32$ ) and two fathers to uncover the process of self-portray, the coping mechanisms and the effects of state influence.

Interviews allow for experiences to emerge on interviewees' own terms. My aim was to gain knowledge about how they describe the situation. Research questions included items about their personal past, present and future, family history and parental background. Interview questions addressed a variety of topics, but the research focus was on national and cultural identity, experiences of its perception and construction. Both national belonging and exclusion are quite invisible and it would be pointless to ask directly, thus I focused on more identifiable phenomena during the interviews. Interview questions targeted how they sense the state relation, how they position themselves in the system, how it affects their lives, did they suffer from discrimination or stigmatization, and how their socialization and state ideology affect their family planning. My thesis seeks to shed light on these questions and to add new perspectives to the existing literature.

In total, I conducted 45 interviewees with parents, social workers, helpers, bank officers, for this study over a 3-month period. Due to the lockdown situation all interviews were conducted online, via Zoom during the 2nd and 3rd wave of the pandemic, between March 21st and May 15th in 2021. I avoided to interview parents in my acquaintance, thus I joined Facebook groups of various districts of Budapest, where I posted the call. A snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants. For ethical reasons, I have not used any NGOs or support groups for recruitment. Professional interviews with employees of the child protection services could counterbalance the possible flaws of the snowball sampling. Since, by this method I was not able to reach citizens of the less affluent classes, but it gives me a rough idea of their situation. Nonetheless, it meant hardship. After reaching out to these single mothers, they rejected the possibility as they could not manage to fit hour-long interview into their extremely burdensome daily schedule.

Interviewees chose the time and location of their interviews, which typically lasted between half and 2 hours. The expert interviews were more focused and therefore shorter. To relieve the tension of having to talk to a strange guy about their most personal private lives, the interviews

always started with a description of their Covid-19 situation to ease the tension. It was particularly useful for me, as it set the mood and I was able to get to know the situations and relations in their narration and later on during the interview I could already refer to how many children she had, how they lived, so I made them feel that I was listening and know a bit about their case. The difficulty all along was that during the interview I would touch on a topic that might open a wound that had not been dealt with and it would turn into psychologising session or the interview might be interrupted by an emotional outburst, thus where I felt the answer was getting too intimate or distant from the question, I tried to change the subject.

All of the respondents gave their informed consent to participate and make a record of the conversation, which was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were stripped of names and all identifying information, while the reason and time of being a single parent, and the number of children remained. Pseudonyms were given randomly from the list of Britain's most popular baby names of 2023. Participating parents received 3000 HUF bookshop vouchers.

All 34 parents lived in Budapest. Their age was in the range of 23-52 years. Number of children was between 1-4. The majority became single parents through relocation, divorce, separation, but the sample included widows, abandoned mothers, mothers left alone during the pregnancy, singles by choice, blended family founders and adoptive parents.

## The struggles of single-parent households

*"He didn't participate before, he didn't take them to school, he didn't dress them, he didn't cook, I did everything with 3 children, so what has changed? Nothing! We didn't share the burden before. I did everything with 3 children. I even earned most of the money."*

*(Sophia; 55; divorced; 3 Children; Single for 13 years)*

*"The whole logistics is in the hands of one person, but if you have a husband, it's about the same. Being a single-parent or having a not-very-useful husband is about the*

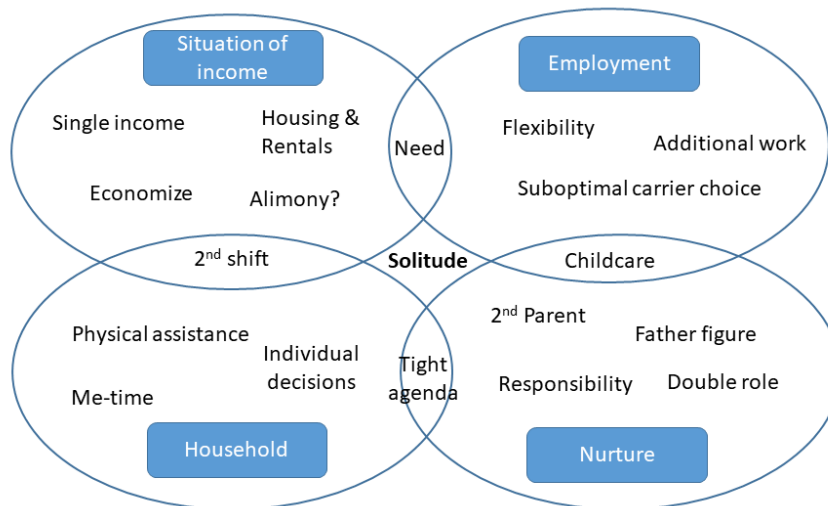
*same. So it's easier in that at least I don't have to explain the organisational stuff, but the responsibility is entirely mine."*

*(Sofia; 45; widowed; 1 Children; Single for 2 years)*

When I first heard the two above quotations, I was shocked to see that in the family image promoted by the Government, which, with the trend towards re-familisation, also defines the place of women in the family, in society and in life, as Eva Fodor's studies prove, it is not that far from the situation and everyday life of single-parent families. Although in many cases fathers have not taken on their share of the household tasks, having a second person is a great help with logistics and the financial situation improves considerably when there is a second salary. However, the two quotes also illustrate the reason for the divorce itself, which was a dysfunctional family by default.

Single parents, in terms of their lifestyle and child-rearing, cannot be very different from two-parent households, as they go through the same cycles, like nursery, doctors, tales and cartoons, bathing, child development, no difference, they are just like being someone else's mum or dad, but they are alone. Thus it is harder to understand the disapproval of the majority society. However, when looking at the struggles, the overwhelming majority of the interviews showed financial and logistical difficulties of single-earner status as the main issues, but also lack of time, stress, exhaustion, parenting hardships, psychological and relationship problems and social stigma. Overall, single parenthood is having an impact everywhere.





### Difficulties faced by single-parent families

Self-designed figure from interview data (2023)

Difficulties stem from the lack of support to a family, which was previously a two-parent household, thus serious deterioration in the quality of life is a real threat. Poverty resulting from single parenthood is common, and the risk is increased. Extra costs appear after divorce, for example, now having to pay rent after moving out. Significant efforts are used to maintain their livelihoods, without any prospect for resolution, as Charlotte has told:

*"I feel that because we have to live on one salary, and alimony wouldn't help much, I'm never going to step ahead, from one to two, so I'm not going to move into a larger apartment than a one-bedroom flat, I'm not going to buy a car younger than 15 years old, because I just won't."*

*(Charlotte; 50; partnership ended; 1 Children; Single for 9 years)*

Subsistence becomes precarious without a supportive family background. If there is none, then they are left to live from day to day. Their situation is characterised by very rigid budgeting and having to create savings from nothing. This is further complicated by the fact that the wages of women, who remain with children, are lower, but the pay burden increases as the children grow up.

In single-earner households, there is a sense of existential anxiety anyway, because they can not afford unemployment. Losing a job is fatal, as if they lose their jobs they are left with no income. Impoverishment in the most severe case could mean the child being taken out of care, as the social workers said. On the other hand, there is a risk that if the parent works an awfully lot to support their family, spends little time with their children, neglects them and without supervision they bear the risk to become involved in bad company, which causes further problems.

Parents with a good financial background, who have a good salary and the ex-partner even pays the alimony or the grandparents help, there is a different difficulty with work:

*“Career-wise, no one cares, you're competing with the men, who are taken care of by their wives, who do everything for them.”*

*(Sofia; 45; widowed; 1 Children; Single for 2 years)*

In other words, not counting that in order to keep up with competitors, they have many more unrecognised obstacles to overcome. Single parenthood is not taken into account by the employer either. While it is extremely difficult to find a job that accepts and understands the responsibility of raising children. Single parents cannot manage to be at work and at home with their children at the same time. Therefore, many parents work part-time, which provides less income, which they can not afford. Most of them work 6 hours a day to balance work and private life since they have to pick up child at nursery / school and manage the afternoon logistics of life, at the cost of lower pay. A best practice is they work through their lunch breaks to get an earlier leave in return, because closing institutions are a particular source of conflict, but more on that later.

At the same time, it was a recurring claim from mothers, that they did everything during marriage, and he did not participate in the family's life before, he just chipped in with its salary. Which on one hand, is a relief financially, but the logistical difficulty remains and time becomes a bottleneck. Mothers bring children home and start their second shifts. The constant rush is

stressful, they can not work simultaneously, but the number of tasks does not decrease, thus they have to deal with the feeling that nothing is ever done and there is a constant backlog, which makes them feel constantly guilty.

*"I have a lot more responsibilities than a mum in a two-parent family. Not necessarily more, just the husband doesn't help out there either, but in our house I'm the only one who can do the housework and administrative work, for the time being, which is obviously shared in a two-parent household. And here I do the cheque payments and the groceries, it's just not shared!"*

*(Amelia; 35; divorced; 2 Children; Single for 3,5 years)*

Parents have also mentioned that quality time with the child is missed because of the daily logistics, and individual free time is almost impossible or has to be planned very well in advance. As it starts with a favour, while if they want to have a recreational activity, or an evening program, or just sit down to read they have to organise it for your child. Planning can create an overwhelming sense of limitation and helplessness. For example, if they get sick they still have to do it or if one child is sick they have to leave one alone while they take the other to school. The issue of supervision is also difficult because legally children cannot be left alone on the street, which the ex-partner uses as an argument in court, but it is impossible to comply with the rules. Mothers said the difference is that even in male-headed single-parent families, a grandmother or a later couple takes over a significant part of the care, hence the burden is shared.

That means that everything falls on that one parent, and there is no sharing of children and the housework. It is a constant state of readiness. There is no one to relieve them, and even if they are tired, they are practically forced to carry on, as children are not to blame. By which comes more responsibility. The positive reading of this is that they can make decisions on their own and there is no dysfunctional setup based on bickering, but they argue it would be better to discuss some issues with someone. One co-parenting mother summarised the difference between the two conditions:

*"I have to do a week all by myself, it's so exhausting, I really feel like a lemon squeezed, I'm not very productive at work because I always have to do something for the kids. And then at the next week you've got so much time, but then it's emotionally hard, not having the kids there and I'm worried for them. It's just a constant limbo."*

*(Mia; 47; divorced but co-parenting; 2 Children; Single for 4 years)*

In addition to the physical strain and time constraints, they also reported the psychological burden of having to process the reasons for being alone, how they got there and how it affects their children. Because by breaking off the partnership, they feel responsible for doing something wrong, they are full of guilt and feel that they are not good parents and trying to fulfil the place of 2 parents.

*"In my mind I said, I don't want to do it alone, my mum went through it and I didn't want to do it as I've seen what happened to my mum, who raised us all on her own and it was stressful for her and she was mental about it."*

*(Aria; 36; abandoned by the father during pregnancy; 1 Children; Single for 5 years)*

*"For me, it was a huge trauma not to be able to have what I grew up in. Her dad's dad died early in an accident and so he didn't have a cohesive pattern in front of him, his mum had several partners that he didn't get along with and maybe that's why he walked out of the relationship more easily because he didn't want to fight for it, but he didn't see what he was losing because he didn't grow up in it."*

*(Violet; 40; partnership ended; 1 Children; Single for 4,5 years)*

It is clear that the institution of the family is important to respondents and most were planning a "classic" model, which did not work out. Now, they must work through it on their own and mourn the divorce. However, this can go on for a very long time if the ex-partner makes things difficult.

In some cases, they keep in touch, but with a lot of conflict or the ex-partner did not understand that there is no return. In other cases, the father would not acknowledge the child and let it take his name, which is another difficulty. The issue of alimony causes a lot of controversy,

often it is seen as a punitive measure along with visitation, even though it is taken from the child and not the other parent. The majority reported that the father either did not pay at all or occasionally, or the court determined an amount so small that it was enough for nothing, which again does not alleviate the financial difficulties mentioned above. By concealing assets, it is still easy to avoid having to contribute to the financial burden if they do not want to, or to just "dribble" part of the fee, in order to avoid new proceedings due to unwillingness. In many cases parents do not want extra conflict from the alimony not coming on time or even less. In families where divorce has been problematic, full of quarrels, or mothers have reported domestic violence, mothers try to minimize contact with fathers. Interestingly, the lockdown due to the pandemic had a positive effect on them. Yet if it is a burden to communicate with the other parent, they feel that they can not prohibit access, no matter how difficult the situation is. Therefore, they do not talk much, only effectively about the child's affairs, but there are perceived efforts to start over the relationship or manipulative acts arise. Prolonged court cases are a source of serious tension, mostly objections to how many rights the second parent has.

The next impact to consider is how the child will be affected by being a single parent, and whether they will have the same chance in life. The literature on this is extensive, so I will just briefly summarise what was repeated in the interviews.

Parents were worried that the child would be mentally affected by the change, that they would not be able to give them the supportive environment they needed to develop, that they would be teased at school. And as I mentioned in the financial situation section for overburdened mothers, not being able to fulfil her role as a mother because she works from dawn till dusk to maintain her family's financial situation, vagrancy is a serious threat for less affluent families.

Additionally, as a single parent, it is difficult to be strict, direct but gentle and permissive at the same time. As Hazel said:

*“As a single parent, it's schizophrenic to raise a child, to be both the father and the mother, it's an ambivalent feeling that I've failed but the child is still in the right place.”*

*(Hazel; 46; divorced; 1 Children; Single for 12 years)*

In almost all interviews, the difficulty of dual roles was raised, as parents felt that children need both mum and dad, from which they receive different parenting. A single-parent can not provide that.

*“When you're alone you have to be dual-sexual, you have to be both male and female, but I don't want to be a man, but I have to be to some extent.”*

*(Aurora; 35; divorced; 2 Children; Single for 8 years)*

And the children miss the other parent:

*“The difficult thing about being a single parent is that everything has to be done by the same person and you have to provide motherhood and fatherhood in the same way, which is impossible on principle because you can't pass on patterns as a woman that a man should do, I can only tell you about it.”*

*(Nova; 52; widowed; 3 Children; Single for 9,5 years)*

Another issue is isolation from the world. Exclusion begins, they are reluctant to go socialize with two-parent families, thus they become peripheral. During divorce and the former circle of friends disappears, as they do not know where should stand and prefers to withdraw, from which the loneliness sets in.

Although they talked a lot about their pandemic situation during the interviews, it would be beyond the scope of this paper to go into detail, now I will just briefly summarise. The previous difficulties can be exacerbated by the situation of a parent or child falling ill, the full individual responsibility of having to manage everything at home, the use up of savings, the loss of a once-a-day hot meal at school, the loss of a job, the issue of a commuting job or just childcare for shopping,

children becoming more attached to one parent, tiring of the closeness, the challenges of the school teaching role, increased housework, the overlap of roles. Perhaps, in single parent households, even more impactful on children is the lack of peer community. Overall, it did not affect single parents any differently, just the same burdens affect them even more. On a positive note, they highlighted that the pandemic encouraged them to organise their lives with fellow mums and neighbours on a small scale collectively.

*"But my priority is not "oh someone else will do it", no, I have to do it, it's just not simple and it's not easy, but it has to be done."*

*(Ava; 41; divorced; 4 Children; Single for 6 years)*

In case of need, they typically turn to parents who are still alive to help execute the agenda, take the child from school, bring them to special classes, but several also reported that when they were left alone, their parents also helped them financially. Their presence may be missed when having children in a later phase in parents' lives. In addition, friends or parents of school classmates can be important support sources. However, they noted that they try to keep track of whom they are asking for help, to avoid overburdening one person, as shown by Nelson (2000) on single mothers' assistance in daily living, while they are keeping track of favours. Parents try to do it on their own in the first place and only then ask for help, since the favour itself has to be organised, which is always a bit more complicated than doing it on their own.

Fathers are rarely asked, most of the problems are solved without them, because it is not their problem anymore and they don't have to get involved. Conversely, if the father takes the child away, he immediately calls the mother with the slightest thing, cutting off her self-time and relaxation.

Single parents do not use external assistance, because they "did not go after the information" or "did not think of it", they were not interested in what kind of NGOs are working in their neighbourhoods or the local family service is only providing emergency grants, which is a

case-by-case solution. The municipality provides emergency assistance, child meals, regular child protection benefits and housing assistance, set out in state law. But if single families are not registered, as they moved to a rented place because of subletting, they lose potential support.

Victim blaming at the child welfare office or welfare department, they felt that they were the cause of their fate, as “they chose the partner”. After such a bad experience, they are reluctant to turn to any kind of public assistance.

The Single Parent Families Centre, set up with substantial government support, is dedicated to their difficulties with sessions, childcare, legal advice and material donations, but interviewees had not yet taken advantage of it. Organisations, like Home Helpers Foundation, Pattent and NANE also came up during the interviews.

Almost all interviewees mentioned some help, support, or initiation they receive from the workplace, but these are usually within the individual authority of the boss. Covid-19 has helped a lot in accepting working from home, so it's easier to coordinate logistics. The most basic support is more flexible or reduced working hours so that the child can be taken to and from school, and some workplaces provide dedicated support for children (school start support in September, camp support for the summertime) that are casual and all children can request, not single parent specific.

Regarding the babysitter, it was noted that it is not an option for them while they are working, as taking care of the child would cost a significant part of the money earned. Rather, they call babysitter, when they cannot solve it otherwise or in affluent families a housemaid comes to assist in the housework, when mothers would like to spend time with their kids.

Overall, they tend to always try to solve everything themselves, while when asked what advice they would give to other single parents, most of them said that they should not be ashamed to ask for help, but somehow their daily routine becomes forgotten. They also mentioned trusting



themselves, not worrying about other people's opinions, taking time to recharge and enjoy life, maintaining a social network, building community, finding a mate.

Finding a new spouse was a common idea, especially in a context as they have not lost their individual needs by becoming a mother, they need emotional support and they consider humans as social beings. They do not feel affected by the fact that how the previous relationship has ended. It was also mentioned that the presence of a man can help the child's development and take away burdens from the mothers. Although this is contradicted by the fact that mothers who became single parents after a long marriage did not say there was any change in family life organization, because the father did not help so far, the maximum was in physical form and apart from sending his salary home. The bigger problem is more about the loss of dad's salary. Finding a partner was never framed as a solution to single parenthood, but to address the psychological reasons for having someone to rely on, for companionship, to avoid isolation, not to find a father figure. New partners would not be involved in parenting, because "that is simply not their job".

As it seems, single-parent families have a very diverse set of problems. I have already outlined the government family support measures available to families, and it is quite clear from comparing them with their issues that single parents are in a very different situation from the families that the Government wishes to support. In the next section I will explain how and for what reasons they are excluded from the family protection scheme.

## Single parents in the Family Protection Scheme

Family support options have been significantly expanded under the Family Protection Action Plan, which aims to ensure that having children is not a burden for parents, but it affects single parents to a small extent. All moms have been able to recall an event or happening that supports the growing focus on family policy in recent years. Typically, subsidized home loans, discounted car purchases, and tax breaks with some memorable speeches from state officials were

mentioned from the Government's side and the "family is family" campaign from the opposition. At the same time, they could not recall any support that would specifically support single-parent families.

*"Which helps single-parent families? (Laughs) They don't help single-parent families in any way, at least they say a lot of things about the family, but they only talk about larger families, they never talk about families with one child, and they overlook single-parent families. Altho there's a difference between single parent and single parent, my situation is very different where the parents are divorced, but both are present."*

*(Aria; 36; abandoned by the father during pregnancy; 1 Children; Single for 5 years)*

Measures that apply to families are also available to single parents and those who can afford them, they tend to do so.

*"There was the CSOK or whatever, there is the family tax allowance, which I was able to take advantage of as a single parent... and I heard so many, here is our family friendly government, and they initiated a lot of measures, but I could make little use of it relatively because I was only a single parent family"*

*(Olivia; 40; divorced, currently in partnership; 3 Children; Single for 7 years)*

However, this was not because she was bringing up the children alone, but because of the number of children. The only single-parent financial support is the "increased family allowance", which was ironically mentioned, but always with the proviso that the extra 1,500 forints (/child) mean nothing and the increase should be arranged. Here the difference between single-parent families emerged very sharply, because those with at least three children receive support through the extended family, while those with one and two children do not. The latter cannot benefit from them.

The government stressed the fact that it was "extended it to single parents", which made several respondents outrageous and find it offensive:

*“When they tell you how much support single parents get, while they only list what two-parent families get, that is nothing, except the extra 1.200-forint family allowance.”*

*(Charlotte; 50; partnership ended; 1 Child; Single for 9 years)*

Rather, they feel that the family support measures do not affect single parents in any way. Single parent households are left out, as they can not put aside the initial capital for the investment for later reimbursement. Moreover, it is almost impossible for them to get a loan on their own. Single parenthood is a slippery slope economically for many families.

*“I’ve heard them all, but I’m out of chances. They are all designed to last until the parent turns 40-42 years old, plus you need to have your own capital.”*

*(Liam; 52; separated; 2 Children; Single for 4 years)*

Less affluent families are excluded from support, since in many cases they lack an accepted registered job, or have a previous loan, which excludes the option for a new one or have accumulated utility debt. Where hardships are prevalent to make a living on a daily basis, they will not dream about a car, as a social worker summed it up. Meaning, those who are in need, can not afford it. Better-off single parents can not take advantage of the opportunity if their needs diverge. As if they do not want to renovate their homes, they do not want to move, they do not want to buy a car. For them, it remains an unused opportunity.

The bank experts clarified, that single parents are not entitled to the baby expecting credit, however, csok is open to them after the existing children. As property prices have risen substantially in recent years, the subsidy and the subsidised loan together are not enough to buy a property within the parameters. Obtaining a market loan is harder for a single person with a low income and no prior equity capital. It is interesting to see how the state and the market have become intertwined in the current subsidy system, as the banks have become the final driving force behind the Family Action Plan.

The tax credit also remains a similar unused option for many families, as the 10 - 33,000 HUF credit per child is useless if the claim is unachieved. By its very nature, the tax credit helps those with registered employment and higher earnings. Low-paid public employees such as teachers or nurses, which are classic female professions, may not necessarily qualify for the support, as Nova said:

*"I understand that they want to support those who work, but now I've almost got to the point where I could use them. I'm a decent person with 3 degrees and not a slacker, because we shouldn't support those, but this is the first time this year that I was able to use the full amount of the tax allowance for my three children. Now I have a salary that I can use the allowance for the 3 children. What kind of allowance is it that a person with 3 children and several degrees cannot claim in a public company? I guess it's not so family friendly. Obviously, where there are two parents, they can make better use of it, because they have more income. Then figure out something for single parents, my income is not enough to claim the allowance."*

*(Nova; 52; widowed; 3 Children; Single for 9,5 years)*

All in all, there is a mismatch between the family support system and the situation of single parents, as if there is no correlation between the problems they face and what they need. Single parents experience lost support and limitedness as they could not make use of the subsidies. Therefore, I believe it was important to investigate whether they could determine quite specifically who the beneficiaries of the measures could be. In other words, do they perceive, in Schneider & Ingram's sense, who are socially constructed as deserving.

*"I think that today's measures, today's family policy is really about families, so I'm not a family as a single-parent family, and that's what's being conveyed in many places."*

*(Olivia; 40; divorced, currently in partnership; 3 Children; Single for 7 years)*

Respondents have a clear definition of what the Government means by families and at the same time they feel an ignorance towards single parents, that there is no public will to support

them. Mothers are unanimous in considering beneficiaries of the present measures to be better-off families where the parents live together and already have or are planning to have more children. This was justified by the fact that the level of benefits is increasing depending on the number of children, and poorer families who do not have access to the deductible needed for the loan are unable to use it.

Looking at it from several angles, it has been defined as, on the one hand, "classic full families", including large families where two parents raise 3-4 children together or young married couples who are eager to achieve this. The family is based on a man-woman relationship, as the Fundamental Law puts it. In terms of financial situation, those with an above-average registered income, middle and upper-class families, who can afford and commit to raising 3 children and start building or renovating. In other words, there is a base to incorporate these family support measures. Simply put, the more money they earn, the more children they have, the better off they are. The less affluent families are undeserving, opening the wealth gap even wider.

*"Of course it's a big blah, I don't believe in that, you've touched on a sensitive issue, I felt that the system doesn't support me, and I felt that it's okay that it's not up to the government or its policies, but I clearly felt that these single-parent families are such undesirable formations. Families with three or more children are praised, it doesn't matter that he beats the child, it doesn't matter that he's an alcoholic, but they are the superstars and they get a lot of support, but say a single parent, of which there are more and more unfortunately, I didn't feel that they were very supportive, just the 1300 forints more, but I didn't feel the supportive atmosphere either."*

*(Layla; 45; partnership ended; 1 Children; Single for 5,5 years)*

In other words, they understand that what the Government calls a family is not them, since they are not beneficiaries of measures. Single parents label themselves families "in a different way". In the Althusserian sense, single parent households would not turn around at the exclamation of "Family!". After all, the message of the measures is that a family in Hungary consists of a mother,

a father and children, preferably as many as possible. While completely ignoring the fact that the majority of them had planned a very similar construct, only life overruled them. Now they have to deal with disappointment and the system punishes them for not succeeding.

*"I still believe in it, regardless of whether it didn't work out for me or it didn't turn out that way, that's why I still believe that it is. Unfortunately, we give up very easily and prefer to divorce or it will be better and easier with someone else. But you shouldn't get stuck in it, we also only live once."*

*(Lily; 38; divorced, currently in a patchwork family; 3 Children; Single for 7 years)*

The interviews showed that respondents attach importance to the institution of the family. There's no correlation between family background and the present condition. The majority had planned a large and cohesive family, which is similar to the picture suggested by the Government, where in all cases they added that no one starts out by getting divorced, life will make it happen. Some parents also mentioned that there is a potential danger for the children experiencing lone parenthood, as it would discourage them to get married.

In the Government's communication, when a measure is introduced, the extent of the support is usually indicated by the phrase "a great help for Hungarian families", thus during my interviews I asked the respondents to try to formulate a lexicon article on the "Hungarian family". I was interested in how much congruence there was between the government family and the Hungarian family.

*"I don't think there is such a thing as a Hungarian family. So in the political discourse there is such a thing as the Hungarian family, which is the theoretical construct of a two-parent male-female marriage with many children, and then there is everything else in reality. There are all kinds of families, like two-parent, single, abusive and happy, gay couples, adopted. I do not know what is Hungarian!? But my concept of a family is people living together, loving each other and taking care of each other and*

*taking responsibility for each other. Whether it is in what number, form or legal status or composition is completely irrelevant."*

*(Luna; 41; partnership ended; 1 Children; Single for 3 years)*

*"I don't have a problem with the concept of Catholic mom, Catholic dad with four cute kids, I just think it's one of the possible narratives. In a sense I've learned to distance myself from the issues of the central narrative, because if I really thought about it and allowed it to be the last issue I wanted to deal with, it would make me so damn angry, because where is the pluralism, the tolerance, the non-judgmentalism, because that could bring about the kind of society I want to live in. In fact, I would point out that I didn't want it, life brought it, and even if I wanted it I couldn't live up to it, so I don't give a..."*

*(Sofia; 45; widowed; 1 Children; Single for 2 years)*

Two types of responses could be distinguished, on the one hand, one similar to the one above, which used a very broad definition of family, which could include single parents, multigenerational, adoptive, LGBTQ and childless couples. The other presented a picture similar to the classic family model, in some cases supplemented by some aspects, such as being married, having many children, white, Christian, secure financial background or settled life. The majority found it difficult to describe what could be called a Hungarian family, but they felt that it was certainly not the same as the governmentally indicated family. They argued for a more broadly defined one. Interestingly, in governmental communication, an existing statement is that 2 children are not enough, as it does not increase the population, only keeps it at the same level, therefore the image of 2 children in the government family is underemphasized, even though it is quite close to the "classic" and "a Hungarian" family. Furthermore, mosaic families are not very advertised either, as there was preceding divorce, which is barely accepted.

Based on the finding so far, the state support system does not respond at any level to the problems of single-parent families. Moreover, the institutionalised family image does not correspond to the existing family composition and diversity.

The government does not support single-parent families, as this is not the state's model, and thus demonstrates that they are not supported. In the majority of cases, it is not the woman who chooses to be alone, but rather the father abandons her or the relationship is abusive, and the woman is least to blame, yet she is left alone with all the burden, leaving single parents vulnerable. Nevertheless, according to the interviewees, the type of family supported by the government operates with a narrower definition than even the classically accepted family type, thus reducing the scope for interpretation. In the following, I will present how the interviewees perceive this change, whether they feel boundaries and contempt, excluded from the majority society, because they live in an alternative composition.

## Perceived attitudes by single parents

*"I don't care how well I meet the government's and society's expectations, because I'm still happy and so is my child, and I won't allow that to be taken away by any measure. "*

*(Elizabeth; 39; divorced; 1 Children; Single for 1 years )*

*"I'm not offended because I feel that it's about gay couples, they were meant to be condemned. I don't feel that I'm not a family in the eyes of the state because I'm a single mother. I didn't find it offensive because I didn't feel it applied to me."*

*(Maya; 29; separated; 1 Children; Single for 4,5 years)*

The responding single parents consciously distance themselves from the government and state narrative. They feel no compulsion to conform to it, as they cannot adapt their lives to that expectation. However, Government signals have a much larger base of receivers than them, Hungarian society itself. Alike, the Government's attitude can trickle down through state institutions into everyday situations such as kindergartens, schools, welfare departments courts, and hospitals. In interactions with single parents, officials can make them realize that they are not living in the right family situation, thus they may be at a disadvantage beyond lost subsidies. Now I will present some public settings and situations that were described in the interviews. After



childbirth, the primary social environment for many single parents, beyond the family, is the crèche and nursery, where they meet their fellow citizens and the state in one place.

Poor or downright negative communication from nursery teachers was reported by several parents. Kindergarten teachers express that the expectation is that the child's parents should be together. Mothers rushing from work are told to take their children earlier than closing time. It is not clear from the interviews whether this treatment is given to all 'late' parents, but regardless, it is not more tolerant towards single parents. Teachers do not always handle the situation well, not necessarily out of ill will, rather ignorance or saying without thinking is the case. For example, do not recite Mother's Day poems with an orphaned child or tell a fatherless child that your mother should bring the neighbour over for Father's Day. What emerges from these situations is that the nursery environment is still quite conservative, which can be further strengthened by the "official" image of the family. There were also good examples of children in divorce situations being given special attention, support or the kindergarten teacher in a similar situation is hence more understanding.

In addition to the institutional relationship, the single parent is drawn into a community of peer parents who may have different experiences of judgement and social expectations. Single parents may not always be welcomed or even looked upon badly, especially where there are couples. The reason for this may be the assumption that it is personally at fault, which is why the cohabitation ended. It also bothers mothers that they talk to their husbands, which stems from personal jealousy. These are all interactions at the individual level, which cannot be linked to the theme of family image. In contrast, mothers of preschoolers asking "what about your husband?" is more a sign of the expectation that a single mother has a husband or a father or a partner in the household. Also, not inviting to joint activities, as they do not want single mothers to talk to their husbands, and the assumption, that it is better for couples if mothers and fathers can talk separately, boost the feeling of exclusion. The family image is passed on through socialization. Several

interviewees reported that single parenthood is definitely a topic among children. The reason for this is rather the children's curiosity to always see one parent, so they notice the anomaly.

*“The next major environment where single parents encountered the state family image was the official and healthcare system. It affected me badly when they included in the Fundamental Law what a family is and made adoption for singles harder. So I can no longer adopt and for them we are obviously not a family, which is obviously not the case. These two things have particularly affected me.”*

*(Gianna; 41; mother by choice; 1 Children; Single for 4 years)*

The Fundamental Law, which sets out the government's vision, defines a family image. What affects further laws and through the state structure, expectations trickle down. Thus it defines who the family is and excludes others, not only from subsidies, but also from other legal options. Since it is included in Fundamental Law, it affects everything else, the laws, rules, and institutions. Therefore, it can have a spill-over effect and determine perceptions and practical attitudes. An example of this is what happened in the United States and the United Kingdom, where the image of single parenthood has been reframed, racialized as welfare dependency with the active involvement of leading politicians.

During the interviews, a gender difference came out very sharply, which the 2 interviewed fathers told about their bad experiences. As authorities did not believe them, since in most cases the man is the abuser, but there are exceptions.

*“As long as there's no paper, they think I'm the one who beats them, they think I'm the bad parent, after the moment when the court said that I have full custody, from then on it was a 180 degree turn and everyone became very helpful.”*

*(Liam; 52; separated; 2 Children; Single for 4 years)*

*“I was never at a disadvantage, only at the beginning when I had to prove that I was fit to be a parent as a man, but then they changed there too. As soon as I proved I wasn't the bogeyman, from then on it was as if I had been cut off and everyone had a*

*completely different attitude. It is still not accepted for a man to raise 1, 2 or 3 children."*

*(Noah; 40; divorced; 3 Children; Single for 17 years)*

The above cases are examples of how the state system still treats child-rearing as a women's issue, where men's role is to provide the material conditions but not to engage in basic care work. The classical family model still prevails.

As I already presented during the struggles section, COVID did not necessarily affect single-parent households differently, but in one case, if the parent has work to do, a very unpleasant situation can arise.

*"Not specifically, just inner feelings, like "why did you bring the kid for a lung screening"? Well as I'm raising him alone and I can't leave him to anyone! They changed immediately and became super nice."*

*(Aria; 36; abandoned by the father during pregnancy; 1 Children; Single for 5 years)*

The above examples illustrate that there is disapproval and negative perception until the specific situation is known. After clarifying the situation, it is usually replaced by understanding and care. This may be because the state system is also run by people who are adaptive to circumstances and humane. Thus, I was interested in how the majority of society, the common people, relate to single parents, whether they have experienced anything negative. At the same time, members of Hungarian society tend to avoid such situations, and it is not common for them to engage in open conflict. None of the interviewees reported any issues. As one of the mothers described it:

*"No, no, obviously it's not written on my forehead that I'm a single mother, that I have to fight for the parking space while the child sits in the back, and fight with the mechanic not to get screwed over, these are the everyday battles in which I have to succeed, but that's a problem just for me, not because they know I'm a single mum. It's harder alone."*

*(Ava; 41; divorced; 4 Children; Single for 6 years)*

This may be the reason, why the degradation of cultural citizenship analysed by Beaman can not occur in their case. There is no external feature that makes them recognisable and therefore distinct from the rest. Just because a mother walks down the street with her child, you can not tell whether the father is not 5 metres behind them, whether he is not working abroad, but they are still married.

In the case of single parents, there is no character trait that could be the basis of the divide that society has. Only the Government and the State have access to legal documents to get information on marital status and custody, on the basis of which information on the family status can be obtained. The division is created through the welfare system. The members of the majority society need some kind of interaction, a short conversation, in order to find out the status of the parent, in which the misunderstanding can be clarified immediately. An example of this is the case of one widow interviewee:

*“Some people said what kind of father is he who leaves children like that, and I said he was dead, and then they treated me differently when they found out that it wasn't a divorce, but there they condemned the divorce, which wasn't the case at all.”*

*(Nova; 52; widowed; 3 Children; Single for 9,5 years)*

In the other interviews, if the respondent was negatively affected, it was also typically aimed at the divorce, as soon as it was clarified that it did not happen as the detractor thinks, then the perception turned positive. As a rule, single parents reported regret from others for being divorced or becoming single parents. Since they sense the magnitude of the tasks to be performed alone, the burden weighs on the single parents' shoulders. Some reported more positive experiences than expected or others no longer pay attention to it, it is so prevalent. People become much friendlier and more supportive after getting familiar with the situation. Despite being a single parent, achievement was seen as a reason for recognition. The generalisability of the event is limited by the

fact that the sample included only parents from Budapest, who live in the more accepting neighbourhoods of the metropolis.

Overall, it can be concluded that, although not socially, at the individual level, single parents are already experiencing acceptance if they provide more information. Society does not exclude or deprive of citizenship status from those who become single parents. During the interviews, it did not appear that they would be made to feel that they are not members of the Hungarian society or nation, or that they questioned this status per se because they are single parents. No stigmatization was reported either. They did not complain about the difficulties of connection, as Beaman found in the French case. They clearly separate the political sphere from their real life, in which experiences in everyday interactions are tended to be positive.

During my fieldwork, I discovered a perceptual difference in the reason why the single person became single, a research innovation I call the "Single Parent Perception Ladder", which I will present in the next section.

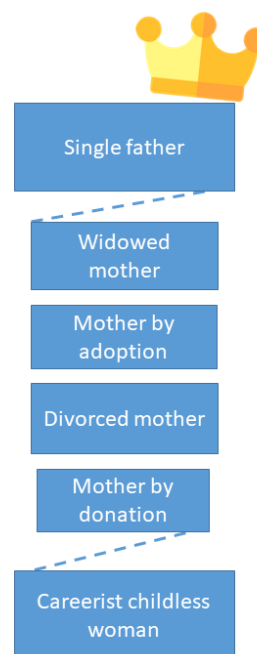
## Single Parent Perception Ladder

The primary and common perception is regret or even commiseration towards the single parent. Typically, others assume the difficulties and burdens of being a single parent. An unforeseen aspect emerged during the interviews, according to which there is a possible difference in the social perception depending on the reason for the parent being single. Meaning, members of society associate a widow with distinct images than a divorcee, which affects their perception. The result of this empirical discovery is illustrated in Graph 2. The phenomenon was titled, Single Parent Perception Ladder. However, for single parents, the distinction was quite obvious:

*"Obviously it's different, if you had to do a ranking now, the top number 1 is single fathers, they're the heroes of the world, and the widowed, then the abandoned women and then they're at the bottom of the ranking, I'm the one who chose this life path for myself"*

*(Ellie; 1; divorced, currently in a patchwork family; 1 Children; Single for 5 years)*

Among single mothers, widows are perceived to have the most unambiguously positive social perceptions. For them, compassion is based on the fact that they did not become single by their own choice and are therefore not responsible for their situation. Others assume that a functioning harmonious marriage was interrupted. An unexpected event makes society more accepting and supportive of her being alone.



**Graph 2: The Single Parent Perception Ladder**

Self-designed figure from interview data (2023)

*"In widowhood, you don't decide to separate and then there's a grieving process. For the rest of your life there's no father to play a role in the child's life, it's a much harder situation than co-parenting."*

*(Violet; 40; partnership ended; 1 Children; Single for 4,5 years)*

The stigma does not even appear. They are literally the actual single parents and have the highest support, which seems a bit contradicting, though until others are aware of the root cause, they also receive disapproval:

*"That's how it comes down from the outside world when we talk about how I'm raising children on my own, this is always the case, they stigmatize me or say that it is because I gave up early selfishly and when they find out, they almost bow to the ground, that it is all different, it's a totally different judgement."*

*(Nova; 52; widowed; 3 Children; Single for 9,5 years)*

The perception of the divorced is already severely negative. They are judged based on their own decision; they go against society's idealized image of the family. Judgment and blame appear more strongly. The parent is held responsible for its previous decision of choosing its partner or it is assumed its personality provided the reason for the divorce. By divorcing, they have undertaken single parenthood and are therefore liable.

*"It's been my experience for many years that there's no point talking to him, he's not cooperative and there are some people who don't see that and still assume that you're somehow separated and it's partly your fault. On the contrary, the spouse's death is a boost to your personality, as if it makes you a better person."*

*(Luna; 41; partnership ended; 1 Children; Single for 3 years)*

The perceived lower social assessment of the divorced can also stem from the fact that married people who live together look down on the "losers who gave up", while they gain self-affirmation, since they are still together. Similarly, the perceived social perception of the childless single woman is clearly and significantly negative. In the Hungarian environment, the careerist

woman has become a curse word, where the stigma is already visible. People are absolutely disapproving. "You're not a woman if you don't have children, you're not a person if you don't have a partner," argued one mother. Socially, silencing and stigmatizing it is used as a tool for limitation before it can appear as a real alternative. Exclusion from the nation does not appear here either.

Compared to the previous two categories, the perception of adopters is less clear. On the one hand, the perception is positive, as it gives someone a chance to have a better life and a family. The act is worthy of respect and recognition; therefore it is supported. Also, they assume that the parent failed due to an unfortunate illness, which explanation serves as a reason to show it is beyond its responsibility. On the other hand, the negative reading is that they are deliberately going against the principle that a child needs two parents. The single adoptive parent may be seen as irresponsible, who is going against destiny and has not bothered to accept that it did not work out for it, this takes the child on alone. Occasionally their parental status is questioned, there is no automatic acceptance of parenthood with adoption. In many cases, the adoption remains hidden from the public. Mothers by choice through donation are an even more clandestine. Hence no social image has been formed of them. The most frequently voiced claim is that they could not accept that it did not work out and took on such a huge task alone. While it is acknowledged that they have fulfilled their desire to become a parent.

There was a clear gender difference in the perceived social connotation of mothers and fathers. This is based on the fact that what is considered natural for mothers is special for fathers.

*"Because such is the attitude of society, which is natural for women to endure it alone, heroic for fathers, as in the case of housework. Society is so conservative in general, and as soon as men pick up a broom it's a heroic gesture."*

*(Ellie; 1; divorced, currently in a patchwork family; 1 Children; Single for 5 year)*



Single fathers were most often described as heroes, making sacrifices to perform tasks considered feminine, then becoming “demigods”. Probably, society does not think of them as being at home with children, rather as working, gaining income for the family in the labour division of the household. Furthermore, the institutional tendency arose that the court generally gives custody to the mother, which implies she had to commit a huge offense to become ineligible. It clearly indicates that raising children is considered a woman's task in the mindset of the office, which is in accordance with the Government's notion. Mothers noted that even in single-parent families headed by men, a significant part of the care work is taken over by a grandmother or a later couple. Women's tasks are still performed by women, just not by the mother. When a father is left alone, he gets an ample amount of help, while a mother always does care work and the compliments remain withheld. Interestingly, the single father becomes attractive, who has a good chance of entering the market. In case of losing a partner, there are some who would be gladly willing to take on surrogate motherhood. For them it is quite easy to find a partner, easier than for a woman. This is also a gender-based distinction. Particularly fascinating was to observe, the gender role differences for mental pictures. Dads were associated with basically positive adjectives such as wonderful and impressive. While mothers were associated with sadness, an image of a weary, tired mother in a tough situation. This confirms that society still imagines a single mother when it comes to single parenthood, since they are the vast majority.

## 6. Conclusion

After the Hungarian welfare system was transformed during the last decade, demographic policies, like the low number of children, gained special attention from the government's side. The Orbán regime's reform was designed in accordance with conservative – neoliberal notions on family, importance of employment and work-life balance. Here I scrutinized, welfare areas such as natalist and family policies, with a special focus on state transfers, allowances and targeting. Especially, the “grandiose” Family Protection Action Plan (Családvédelmi Akcióterv).

Sadly, but unsurprisingly the restructuration of the family policies was executed in line with the Matthew principle, as the rich got richer and the poor must pay the expenses (again!). My critical analysis demonstrated, that besides the “Family action plan”, the family tax exemption scheme helps the affluent classes and further deepens inequalities in the Hungarian society. The new welfare system privileges a certain family type with “the systematic redistribution of resources from the lower to the upper classes” (Enyedi, 2016, pp. 15.). In Schneider & Ingram's terminology middle- and upper-class families are the advantaged group, as the results of the new initiatives convincingly demonstrate how the government arranges policies to unequally support them, in order to boost the fertility rates in these strata. While single parents are treated as dependents. Single-parent families can not be unified into one category, though a clear cut can be observed between families with fewer offspring and larger families.

The exploratory research's base was the potential tension of the welfare scheme and the daily struggles of single-parent families in Hungary. Especially focusing on how single-parent household-heads perceive the state vision of the ideal family how they deal with exclusion and what kind of attitudes they perceive from the broader public. It was particularly interesting to study this phenomenon among single-parent households in Hungary, since their family structure deviates from the government-promoted “2 married parents with minimum 3 children” family model. Thus, the analysis of current Hungarian pro-natalist policy provided a unique case to investigate how state

ideology influences citizens' perceptions. However, the examination pointed out that they understand how they are treated differently, but they are still not considered as second class citizens in public view. As shown in the 10-year periodic review, although support at the societal level is declining, after learning about individual cases, they are generally viewed positively by members of society. Althusser's notion of interpellation and division is tangible on the state level, but it does not stream down to the larger population. Similarly, distinction through cultural citizenship is applicable, since there are no visible signs of single parenthood members of society have no means to exclude them. The state has a family status data registry and it executes a differentiation through the welfare system.

The primary and common perception is regret or even commiseration towards the single parent. Typically, others assume the difficulties and burdens of being a single parent. An unforeseen aspect emerged during the interviews, according to which there is a possible difference in the social perception depending on the reason for the parent being single. Based on the results of this empirical discovery I arranged the Single Parent Perception Ladder, which shows how single parents think society treats them based on the reasons for being single. Beyond the substantive gender difference, it is worth looking at the extent to which perceived individual responsibility determines one's place on the ladder, possibly as a result of the tendency towards excessive neoliberal individualisation. To examine the existence of the Ladder, I propose further focus groups and a large sample survey study, which could clarify the degree. In addition, I encourage all fellow researchers to explore the single-parent issue, as there is ample scope for further research in areas of the literature that have not yet been explored.

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## 8. Appendix

Table 1: Descriptives

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Year
marriage_child	1005	0.495	0.5	2013
single_mother	989	0.556	0.497	2013
single_father	990	0.479	0.5	2013
no_marriage	1002	0.535	0.499	2013
two_women	962	0.494	0.5	2013
two_men	953	0.413	0.493	2013
marriage_child	1021	0.325	0.469	2023
single_mom	1026	0.441	0.497	2023
single_dad	1024	0.313	0.464	2023
no_marriage	1023	0.564	0.496	2023
two_women	997	0.301	0.459	2023
two_men	990	0.21	0.408	2023

Table 2: Descriptives II.

Variable	N	Prop.	Year	N	Prop.	Year
age	985	48	2013	1027	53	2023
gender (man)	483	47.7%	2013	414	40.3%	2023
gender (woman)	529	52.3%	2013	613	59.7%	2023
education (low)	509	50.3%	2013	424	41.3%	2023
education (medium)	336	33.2%	2013	407	39.6%	2023

education (high)	166	16.4%	2013	196	19.1%	2023
family_status (single)	274	27.1%	2023	166	16.2%	2023
family_status (married, in a relationship)	445	44%	2013	558	54.4%	2023
family_status (divorced)	165	16.3%	2013	157	15.3%	2023
family_status (widowed)	128	12.6%	2013	145	14.1%	2023
happiness (happy)	689	68.2%	2013	767	74.7%	2023
happiness (unhappy)	83	8.2%	2013	260	25.4 %	2023
religion (Christian)	593	69%	2013	593	69%	2023
religion (Protestant)	20	0.325	2023	20	0.325	2023
religion (other)	953	0.413	2013	953	0.413	2023
mass_att (monthly)	76	19.8%	2023	686	68.2%	2023
mass_att (yearly)	174	45.3%	2013	281	27.93%	2023
mass_att (never)	134	34.9%	2013	39	3.9%	2023
family_satisf (low)	90	10.5%	2013			
family_satisf (medium)	148	17.2%	2013			
family_satisf (high)	622	72.3%	2013			
income (low)	199	19.7%	2013	98	9.6%	2023
income (medium)	463	43.3%	2013	395	38.7%	2023
income (high)	373	37%	2013	527	51.7%	2023

## Interviewees

<u><i>Name</i></u>	<u><i>Age</i></u>	<u><i>Status</i></u>	<u><i>Children</i></u>	<u><i>Single for</i></u>
Olivia	40	Divorced, currently in partnership	3	7
Emma	46	Divorced	1	15
Amelia	35	Divorced	2	3,5
Ava	41	Divorced	4	6
Charlotte	50	Partnership ended	1	9
Isabella	40	mother by choice	1	3
Sophia	55	Divorced	3	13
Liam	52	separated	2	4
Noah	40	Divorced	3	17
Mia	47	Divorced but co-parenting	2	4
Luna	41	Partnership ended	1	3
Lily	38	Divorced, currently in a patchwork family	3	7
Aurora	35	Divorced	2	8
Harper	30	Divorced	1	1
Gianna	41	Mother by choice	1	4
Evelyn	28	Partnership ended	1	5
Violet	40	Partnership ended	1	4,5
Ellie	1	Divorced, currently in a patchwork family	1	5
Sofia	45	Widowed	1	2
Aria	36	Abandoned by the father during pregnancy	1	5
Willow	45	Divorced	2	4,5
Layla	45	Partnership ended	1	5,5
Nova	52	Widowed	3	9,5
Maya	29	Separated	1	4,5
Ella	32	Abandoned by the father during pregnancy	1	5
Hazel	46	Divorced	1	12
Grace	23	Divorced, currently in a patchwork family	2	2
Emily	48	Divorced	2	11
Elizabeth	39	Divorced	1	1
Camila	37	Divorced but co-parenting	2	2
Chloe	35	Divorced	1	5
Ivy	42	Divorced	1	2

Isla	33	Abandoned by the father during pregnancy	1	3
Athena	38	Partnership ended	1	3,5
<b><u>Additional interviews with social workers from local family care centres and bank loan officers</u></b>				
Inner-Pest	5			
Outer-Pest	2			
Buda	2			
Bank	3			

## Interview guide

Disclaimer: not coming from child protection services, anonymity, no obligation to respond would you accept a record for scientific use?

### 1) Actuality, Covid-19

How did the pandemic influence your everyday life? What has changed? How do you deal with the challenges?

Does to pandemic affect single parent household differently?

### 2) In general

Can you tell me how did you spend your days prior Covid-19?

Clarification: how many people live in the household? What do they do?

Can you describe how were you raised? What kind of family did you plan as a kid?

How did you become single parent? Do you maintain connection with your previous partner? Do you receive alimony?

Does your way of life differ from two parent households? How?

In case of need, help, emergency who do you contact? Have you ever contacted the local family support centre or other NGOs?

Have you tried dating later? (was a new mosaic family formed?)

### 3) Family policy & self-perception

Have you heard about any change in the family policies?

Do you sense any change? And for single parent families?

According to your detection which households are favoured? Can you describe those?

Would you change the current regulations in any way?

What difficulties do Hungarian single-parent families face?

Based on your impressions, what do you think “the Hungarian family” is like?

Could the imagined “normal” family differ for various social groups? How? Examples!

(If differs: how does it affect your case?) - self-defining / expectations

Do you feel to be a useful member of society? Why / not?

How do you perceive? According to your detection are you considered as one?

Have you experienced any discrimination? Have you had any negative experiences?

Did your child have any negative remarks in kindergarten / school?

How do people relate to your circumstances typically when they find out that you are raising your child alone?

What advice would you give to other single parents to make their daily lives easier?