

**Original research paper**

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## **“Family 500+” programme as a social investment aimed at increasing the number of births in Poland – an analysis of Internet forums discourse**

**Abstract**

The aim of the paper is to identify discourses related to the pro-natalist goal of the “Family 500 plus” programme, which is the largest family cash benefit scheme ever introduced in Poland. The paper presents an analysis of the conventional discourse based on Internet forums devoted to this programme. The analysis of 47 forums and over 3,000 posts shared between November 2015 and June 2019 allowed the author to distinguish fourteen dominant conventional discourses which were classified into three groups labelled as follows: (1) discourses of the state’s/individuals’ responsibility (2) discourses concerning policy making (3) discourses of (in)efficiency and (in)effectiveness. The research also indicates the leading role of the social perception of parents-beneficiaries in the debate on the “Family 500+” programme. The key to gaining social support, and, more broadly, for the legitimation of the welfare state in Poland, seems to care for a positive image of parents eligible for the benefit. The paper reveals complexity and interdependence of arguments concerning chances of the programme

in terms of supporting increases in fertility in Poland. To the best of the author's knowledge, this paper is the first attempt to analyse online forums in terms of social policy instruments.

**Keywords:** Family 500+, conventional discourse, pro-natalist policy, Internet forums, family policy, Poland

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## Introduction: the “Family 500+” programme and its pro-natalist goal

The “Family 500+”<sup>1</sup> programme (in Polish: Program Rodzina 500+), started in April 2016, is the most expensive of all family benefit schemes ever implemented in Poland. A cash benefit in the amount of PLN 500 per child under 18 years of age per month is the basic instrument of the programme. At the beginning of the programme, families were eligible to receive the benefit for the second and any consecutive child. If the family income was under PLN 800 per family member, and under PLN 1,200 per family member in the case of families with disabled children, they also received it for the first child. The programme was revised in 2019: since July 2019 the cash benefit has been now paid for any child under 18 years of age, irrespectively of the family income.

According to Statistics Poland (2020), the average monthly number of children for whom families received a child benefit in the second half of 2019 was 6.07 million children. Mainly as a consequence of this programme implementation, budget expenditure directly dedicated for families with children increased substantially. The data of the end of November 2019 show that nearly PLN 92 billion was paid to families during the period of three and a half years.

Increasing the number of births as well as reducing poverty and improving the quality of children's human capital is one of the main objectives of the programme (Szarfenberg, 2017, 2018). This message dominated in media statements of politicians of the ruling party and legislative documents accompanying introduction of “500+” (Gromada, 2018). The pro-natalist goal results directly from the population projections indicating a systematic decrease in the size of Poland's population, a decrease in the number of births with a simultaneous increase in the number of deaths, and the progressive population ageing due to strong changes in the population age structure. Boosting fertility is also a goal that society puts before the Polish government. In 2016, almost four out of five respondents (77%) indicated that the state should encourage people to have more children through social policy (CBOS, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> In the paper the terms of “Family 500+” and “500+” are used as synonyms of the programme's name.

The governments of highly developed countries had been addressing the issue of unfavourable demographic trends in their political agendas before the paradigm of social investments became more widespread (Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012). However, as Rymysza (2018) points out, in addition to other goals, in its pro-natalist dimension the "Family 500+" programme is a form of an investment. Its purpose is not to compensate parents for the losses they suffer on the labour market but to create incentives for having children and develop their human capital.

According to Statistics Poland (2020), 382 thousand children were born in 2016 i.e., 12.9 thousand more than in 2015, 402 thousand in 2017, and 388.2 thousand in 2018. The number of births declined to 374.9 thousand in 2019. The first estimates for 2020 give the figure of 355 thousand of births. Doubts about the impact of the "500+" programme on fertility in Poland are reflected in the scientific literature and in experts' opinions. Among others, the following is indicated: maladjustment of the instrument, which is a cash benefit, to the socio-economic situation in Poland, the lack of coherence with other social programmes or the lack of reference to available research results on fertility effects of different policy measures (Gajewicz, 2018; Gromada, 2018; Kotowska, 2019; Puślecki, 2016; Ruzik-Sierdzińska, 2018). In addition, the researchers point out that the governmental communication contains elements of propaganda of success related to the programme, including the area of increasing fertility (Olechowski, 2016; Piotrowski, 2018).

In surveys carried out by CBOS in 2017, a vast majority of respondents (69%) declared that they had not heard about anyone making or making earlier the decision on having the first or the next child as a result of the programme's functioning. Only 9% of the respondents answered that they encountered such cases in families they knew (Roguska, 2018). During the introduction of the "500+" programme, a majority of Poles believed that it would contribute to the rise in the number of new-born children (CBOS, 2017a). On the other hand, studies on reproduction plans indicate that between 2013 (i.e., well before the "Family 500+" programme was introduced) and 2017 (one year after its introduction), "the percentage of women planning offspring has not changed substantially" (40% women in 2013, and 41% in 2017) (CBOS, 2017b).

An analysis of conventional discourse was applied in this study. It is a qualitative and interpretative method of analysing a text. Here, texts posted on Internet forums have been analysed. Possibilities of an extensive analysis of these posts result from the common knowledge of the "Family 500+" programme, as since the announcement of its first draft the programme has been widely discussed. Even before its starting date on April 1, 2016, four out of five Poles were familiar with its content (79%), while the others heard about it, although they had no knowledge on its details (CBOS, 2016).

Discourse analysis is the study of how language functions and how meanings are created in diverse social contexts. The aim of this paper is to present conventional discourses on “Family 500+” as a form of social investment to boost the number of births in Poland. How do people perceive and evaluate the role of the “Family 500+” programme in terms of boosting fertility in Poland?

Description is the purpose of the analysis of conventional discourse. The aim is to show what people think and how they perceive the reality that surrounds them. The analysis is not critical and statements are not analysed in terms of their substantive value. In this paper, I follow this analytical approach and I do not judge the statements and opinions shared nor try to verify whether they are right or wrong. I consider them in order to distinguish common cognitive schemas related to the topic of interest. Hence, the analysis is important for policy implementation, i.e., allows for understanding how the policy is perceived. It is expected that the results of the analysis will not only serve as a diagnosis of attitudes towards the programme, but also provide information on how people perceive and evaluate the programme and, in general, the policy that is oriented to support fertility. From this point of view, the results of the research can be used to inform the public better about the objectives of the programme, but also they allow scientists to take a closer look at the assumption (theory) and discourses that we use ourselves. It must be stressed that the analysis of conventional discourse is descriptive in nature. It is a form of a content analysis, which provides the first step for further studies. The research results may draw attention to problematic aspects of the policy or challenges it brings to the society. Consequently, it may be a starting point for changes in the policy itself, in methods of its implementation and ways of communicating it as well as inspiration for further research.

## Method

“Family 500+” online forums offer opportunities for numerous studies. In this paper, my attention is on the perceived impact of “Family 500+” on decisions about having a child. It is worth emphasising that in the paradigm of social investments, the issues of quality and size of new generations are closely related (Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012) This is reflected in the objectives of the programme as formulated by the government i.e., an increase in the number of births as well as improving the quality of children’s lives by rising their human capital. However, due to the broad scope of these two issues, it is not possible to analyse them simultaneously and this paper focuses on the former goal.

The analysis of online forums, which is used in the study, is not a completely new research method, although due to objective reasons (the use of the Internet was not very common in the past), researchers have started using it relatively recently. Until now, online forums have been mainly used in marketing research (Bickart & Schindler, 2001, Pitta & Fowler, 2005), addictions (Barratt, 2011; Soussan & Kjellgren, 2015), suicides (McSwain, Lester, & Gunn, 2012), financial investments (Tumarkin & Whitelaw, 2001), weight loss (Hwang et al., 2007) and studies on chronic diseases (Seale et al., 2010). Researchers are reaching for Internet forums to find real information, especially when the respondents, for some reasons, do not want to share it. To the best of the author's knowledge, there are no web-based analyses concerning the national social policy in Poland.

The study has covered Internet forums devoted directly to the programme. The search for online forums relevant for the analysis took place between January 10 and February 15, 2019, with the use of the google.pl Internet browser. In order to identify the forums, various combinations of the following words have been applied:

- the programme's names used in the media and everyday language: "500+", "Family 500+", "Programme 500+", "500 plus";
- definitions related to the demographic purpose of the project: 'number of children', 'demography', 'population', 'number of births', 'demographic growth', 'fertility rate', 'more children', 'newborn children'.

In addition, words such as: 'impact', 'effect', 'forum', 'discussion' and 'encouragement' were used. Examples of combinations used during the search for the forums are: "500+ and the number of children", "Family 500+ and demography", "500+ and fertility rate". During the search, both affirmative sentences and questions were used (e.g., "Does the "500+" programme encourage to have more children?").

The forums that did not contain any reference to the relationship between "Family 500+" and investments in the number of children were eliminated from the list of the analysed forums. They mainly included 'information forums' which are dedicated to providing information and advice on how to apply for the benefit.

The first step in the analysis of conventional discourse is to read enough comments on a given topic to see the discourses shared in them (Strauss, 2012). Internet forums related to the topic of "Family 500+" were collected and read. Finally, after eliminating some of the statements (e.g., those aimed at insulting another person rather than presenting opinions), nearly 3,000 posts from 47 web forums were analysed, which translates into over 600 pages of the normalised text.

The text, i.e., statements on Internet forums, was the subject of the analysis. An inductive approach is used in the paper (data driven coding). In the first cycle of coding, the collected statements were reviewed to start identifying the coding

categories (pre-coding). The first cycle of coding led to creating a codebook. Then the coding categories were revised. The coding was oriented on demographic aims of the programme; barriers, reasons, benefits, and (possible) effects of supporting pro-natalist behaviour. After the first cycle of coding, the coding process (categorisation and re-categorisation) was repeated. As the effect of this process, the identified discourses were combined in three main categories: (1) discourses of the state's/individuals' responsibility, (2) discourses concerning policy making, (3) discourses of (in)efficiency and (in)effectiveness.

The study is a typical example of Internet research (as opposed to online research, that includes techniques of e-mailing, web surveys or online focus group interviews). In the Internet research, the respondents are not aware of their participation in the research. This type of research provides numerous benefits: geographical independence (the respondents do not have to be in one place), avoiding dominance of one of the study participants (each of the surveyed persons has the same speaking options), and anonymity of the respondents. Internet research naturally eliminates the effect of the researcher's presence. There is also no need to stimulate interaction as the participation is completely voluntary. What is important from the researchers' point of view is that Internet forums provide natural data. *Naturalness* ensures that neither a question formulated by a researcher in itself nor its form determine a reaction of a subject (Kalton & Schuman, 1982). As a result, what we observe in the forums largely corresponds to 'social needs' (*I am writing because I feel such a need*) and not academic needs. The Internet forums are also characterised by anonymity, de-individuation, which certainly is a significant disadvantage (inclination to extreme and hostile behaviours), as is the lack of representativeness.

## Conventional discourses: the possible impact of the “500+” programme on childbearing decisions

The analysis of statements about the pro-natalist nature of the “500+” programme indicates that some of the authors of the posts shared on Internet forums strongly emphasise the need to support fertility among Poles (the discourse of *children as a public good*). This discourse is very broad. Primarily, the forum users highlight the need for reciprocity. As parents, they<sup>2</sup> bear the cost of raising a child, but the society (including childless people) are also likely to benefit in the future:

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<sup>2</sup> The form of the statement in Polish indicates that the forum participants who write about children as a public good are parents.

- *bring up children yourself, you will know how much it costs, my children will work for your pension. (B.)*<sup>3</sup>
- *...our children will work for your pensions. (guest)*
- *What is the intended 500+ effect? When you retire, someone will have to pay for your pension! (dariusc)*

In this context, there are statements that indicate that people who have no children take advantage of other members of the society.

- *Parasites without families, living at the expense of families with children; they are upset that some of their taxes are allocated to pay for child maintenance. They would like to spend their money on alcohol and trips to Egypt and expect that families with children will maintain the country on their own as well as ensure that pensioners have enough to eat for the next 20 years. (GS)*

In the statements about reciprocity, there is an element that shows that the authors refer to newborns. The situation is different when they consider the need to support families in order to ensure the continuity of the Polish society. In this case, a clearer message dominates: having children is important for Poland.

- *It is better to give Polish women money for having children than to grant benefits to Arab asylum seekers. We can see what's happening in Sweden, France... etc. These countries are finished. And it's very good if Polish women want to have children, give them 1,000 zlotys or even more. (Koni32)*
- *Children are our future. When they grow up, they will support the state through paying taxes, contributions for healthcare and pensions, not only for their parents, but also for those "smart ones?", who do not have their own children. I am grateful to our state for the help.... But not only the financial aspect is important. Finally, someone has appreciated our efforts, because we are raising the next generation for our Homeland, for You Poland. (Matka500+)*

In contrast to the message that children are a public good, the *children as a private good* discourse is quite commonly observed. Children are perceived as a good for parents who have decided to have them. Therefore, these are the parents, not the society, and not childless individuals in particular, who should bear the cost associated with having a child.

- *...your child, your business. You have given birth to a child, support it! (b.b.)*

The authors of the posts included in the discourse of *a public good* appear to be only indirectly speaking about the role of the programme to increase the number of children. It is more often pointed out that families should be supported because by

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<sup>3</sup> Nicknames of the forum users are unchanged. The user "guest" means that the user does not use a nickname.

raising children they contribute to the good of the whole society. This observation leads to another discourse labelled *children who are already born*. There are opinions that the programme does not encourage to have children, but rather supports families who have already had children. Therefore, in the case of these families the financial status was not an argument against having a child.

- *The goal, which was proposed by the originators, in theory is to help people in making the decision on having children. I will tell you that 90% or maybe even more of those beneficiaries will not have more children because they already have them. Unless they have an “unwanted pregnancy”. (Marcin)*
- *This programme could help to increase the number of births if the money is paid only to families with newborn babies... (~niki)*

The aspect of the age of some parents is also emphasised: the older the parents, the smaller the chances of deciding on the next child. Therefore, from the perspective of boosting the birth rate it is unjustified to support families with relatively older parents:

- *Parents who are already 40 years old and have one child or even two, will definitely not decide to have more children (except in the case of an unplanned pregnancy) because of 500+. (ja)*

There are also statements that demonstrate that the programme was important for the decision to have a child:

- *Together with my wife we earn PLN 10,000, we have three children, every month we receive PLN 1,000 for their future, the third child was born after the 500+ reform. MANY of our friends also have decided to have another child. (cool)*
- *... my friends are having children, one after another... (Natalia)*
- *You can see so many pregnant women in companies and in the streets. (Polka)*

However, it is quite common that the Internet users are much more likely to think that we should not expect the programme to encourage young people to have (more) children. For instance, it is noted that many children were born regardless of the programme introduction:

- *I had my third child in 2017 but it had nothing to do with 500 plus. We would have this child anyway, we just wanted to have another baby. And probably most of the new parents had this motivation. (Michał)*

According to the forums' participants, the rules for granting the benefit represent one of the obstacles to achieving the pro-natalist goals of the programme. They stress that a majority of young and professionally active people (potential parents) are likely to exceed the income threshold, which makes them eligible to receive the benefit for their first child. Moreover, the cost of raising a child (the first one in particular) is very high. These opinions illustrate the discourse of *the first step* and the discourse of *a drop in the sea*:



- ... They should give PLN 250–300 for each child, not just for the second one... Maybe it would not be a significant help (although there are some allowances), but at least everyone would have enough money to buy diapers. For sure it would be a lot easier for young parents, as the first child involves most spending; next children can reuse things after their elder siblings, so it's easier. (Obserwator)
- It is a pity that the government discriminates families with one child. In this way, it encourages to have many children, but does not facilitate the decision of young people on having their first baby, and thus does not help young families at the start. (Frezja\_1)
- The programme will not help 30-year-olds that I know; they postpone the decision on having a child due to the lack of money, they simply will not get any financial support. (Jamaika88)

In addition, it is emphasised that people who have one child but are not entitled to receiving "500+" benefits often are in a difficult financial situation, and it prevents them from deciding about the second child:

- I have one child and the fact that I will get PLN 500 for having another does not encourage me to have more children. (Iwona)
- ... I spend my salary on medicines, fees, housing... I cannot afford a holiday, I have to tighten the belt to buy clothes. Will PLN 500 encourage me? Ultimately, I will have to divide this amount between my 2 children (I will not get anything for the first child); and I don't know whether I should laugh or cry!!!! (Ada)

The forums' participants often emphasise that while the cash benefit offered under the "Family 500+" programme is not low, it should be treated only as a supplement to earnings:

- A child is not a toy, and raising it costs much more than 500+; besides, 500+ is available today, but might disappear in half a year. You need money to raise the child, feed it, etc. 500+ is a good addition for someone who can afford having a child. (unregistered user)
- I have friends who are normal people, not patole.<sup>4</sup> They work honestly, take every possible overtime at work, and the 500+ really gives them a break. (Maciell)

In this context it is noteworthy that childless individuals and parents of one child are commonly perceived as young people who are just entering the labour market and have to pay high costs to become independent (flat rental, loans, mortgages, etc.). They are portrayed as facing employment instability and low wages and often experience financial problems.

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<sup>4</sup> Polish term; pejoratively about people from pathological families.

Apart from noticing the need to support families with one child, there are also other views which undermine usefulness of this solution in pursuit of the goal of boosting fertility. On the one hand, there are posts which imply that even obtaining the right to the benefit will not have any impact on the decision on having the first child:

- ... *That would be my first child, thus, I would not get anything, and I cannot afford it now. Anyway, even the damn 500 zlotys would not convince me to bring a new human being to the world. (Ewa)*
- *From the very beginning I knew that PLN 500 would not encourage me to have a child. (Kasia)*
- *I work full-time, my husband too, and we do not earn much (just above the minimum wage). We have one child. We do not get anything, there is no 500 zlotys for us because we have only one child, whose maintenance, according to the state, costs nothing. We are too "rich" to get a social flat (we rent a flat) but we are too poor for banks to get a loan to buy an apartment. We pay taxes, we will not decide to have another child for PLN 500 because it will prevent us from buying a flat. (Kfiatuszek1987)*
- *Now everyone can afford to have the second child. Everybody knows that 500 zlotys is enough to raise a child. Yes, sure, maybe in a poor neighbourhood, eating cheap soup and liver sausage. And there is still some money left to buy cigarettes. (gość, gość)*

On the other hand, the study results indicate that by paying this benefit for the second child in the family the scheme includes a mechanism to encourage families to have more children. Some respondents are of the opinion that providing the benefit to all families, including the ones with one child only, would affect the incentive to have more children (the discourse of *not the first child*):

- ... *, the government has to give money to every child, right? Suppose it does, people will not decide to have more children. (Magda)*
- *I do not understand what the problem is, the programme is to encourage you to have a second child. This is the main assumption of this programme... A mother of one child has to pay for one school trip while I have to pay for two. I have to pay twice for everything. So those who have only one child or no children should not have a say. (Rodzic)*

The proponents of the programme perceive the opportunity to deliver its pro-natalist goals through its "rewarding" nature, which is addressed to parents who decide to have more children:

- *500 plus is not a welfare benefit. It is to encourage (people to have – PM) more children. (Lol)*

The rationale for the support for the second child is, in the opinion of the Internet users, the cost borne by the parents. It is often mentioned that having more than one child puts a financial burden on parents:

- ... *the programme is dedicated to parents burdened with the considerable expenses of children to support them to have more children. And that is why it is not for everyone, but for those who bear higher costs. (Jan)*

It is often emphasised that the demographic situation in Poland will improve when families have more than one child:

- *Large families make efforts to raise future taxpayers. Having one child is simply an effect of instinct. Also, such a child will be able to secure pension for only one parent. (iza)*

As the aim of the programme is to encourage Poles to have more children, some respondents indicate that older or single parents should not be eligible:

- ... *That is why it makes no sense to subsidise, for example, single mothers with one child – this will not ensure the exchange of generations. However, the benefit should be paid to every woman with two children, regardless of her financial status. In general, only these women that have at least two children will contribute to the survival of our society. (lol)*
- ...*sure, the money would be useful for a single mother too, probably it would be better for her to get 500 rather than 300 zlotys she gets as a single mother raising a child, but the programme is intended to encourage people to have more children, not just to support or maintain each child. (zbanowana)*

Making a decision on having a child has long-term consequences, first and foremost, to parents. If the "500+" programme is to contribute to higher fertility rates, it is necessary to keep it for the coming years. Uncertainty means that some people refrain from having children. In the opinion of some Internet users, deciding to have (another) child on the grounds of the benefits is simply irresponsible (the discourse of *uncertainty*):

- *Only an idiot would have the second child because of 500+! Only someone from a dysfunctional family... not a responsible person!! They (the government – PM) can take it back any time. Who will then support this child? (ona)*
- ...*no one will have a child just to get 500+ as no one knows how long this programme will last. (nika)*

The future of this programme is questioned due to its cost, consequently, the government might find it difficult to secure adequate funding to pay for this benefit in the future. Moreover, the lack of support from the opposition parties contributes to this uncertain future as the change of the government may result in suspension/restriction of the programme.

Due to these uncertainties, individuals who have decided to have children as a result of the "500+" programme have been referred to as naïve, irresponsible, greedy, etc., by the Internet forums participants:

- *...in fact, it was the naive people who were misled and decided for reproduction. Becikowe<sup>5</sup> and 500+ have nothing to do with the cost associated with children. (Lilith1)*
- *...giving away money to people who do not work supports and encourages reproduction mostly in dysfunctional families. (gość)*

Although in this paper I do not consider the quality of young generations in terms of human capital, the analysis of conventional discourse requires that this aspect should be addressed. According to numerous statements, “500+” provides motivation to have (more) children, but mainly in these social groups that find the benefit amount attractive when taking into account the cost associated with children. In this case, it is also widely accepted that if the increase in the number of children is to be beneficial for the state, economy, social security system, etc., children born today will need to work and pay taxes in the future. Meanwhile, in the analysed Internet forum posts, it is often emphasised that people who already benefit from the welfare system (i.e., they generate costs and do not contribute to the social good) will have children only to receive additional cash benefits (the discourse of *inappropriate parents*):

- *...the effect: the number of dysfunctional families grows, during their childhood these lazy bones learn how to avoid work, and expect others to give them things. (laleczka)*
- *Normal families know that no children should be born just to get 500+. Just look around in the street and see in which families more children are born. Pathologies and dodgers. ... Yes, this government is now financing dodgers and layabouts who need to do nothing else but have children. These children are to work for our pensions, but the example they see at home is very bad. Farce. (Zoya)*
- *...the number of births grows in the families whose members are unemployed. Moreover, 500+ additionally encourages them not to take up a job. So the number of the so-called cargo people who believe that they should get things for free is growing. The children will not know how to work and will be unemployable (since their parents do not work, either). (jk)*
- *Of course, 500+ has brought some changes. We have a lot of girls named Dzesika<sup>6</sup> and boys named Brajanek in slums. (rodzic)*
- *The unemployed have more children. (ja)*

It is not uncommon to find posts showing that the Internet users acknowledge the fact that people who do not contribute to the good of the society benefit from the programme. However, it does not represent a reason to cancel or reduce the programme:

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<sup>5</sup> A colloquial term used for a newborn allowance paid out in Poland.

<sup>6</sup> Polish spelling of English names: Jessica and Brian. It is stereotypically believed that such names are given to children by uneducated parents from the lower social strata.

- *I am not worried about the increase in the number of children in dysfunctional families. Such families don't care, so if they want to have a child, they will have one. (Monster66)*
- *Hardly anyone will decide to have another child because of the benefit. People from dysfunctional families (Patole) reproduce carelessly so their number will not be affected; a new child in a family means extra cash. (Kontousunięte)*

Moreover, some Internet users think that the increased fertility is not an end in itself, but only a means to achieving other goals. They indicate that the size of the future generations is important for the national economy and social security system. In this case, the already mentioned expectation of reciprocity is clearly expressed. Children whose families receive "500+" benefits are expected to "pay their liabilities back" in the future. However, according to the respondents, there is no guarantee that children born as the result of the programme will continue to live in Poland (the discourse of *emigration*).

- *... don't be surprised if the children born now will not work hard for your pension... when they reach the age of 18, half of them will emigrate to work in the West, as it is today. (Prawda)*

Among the discourses devoted to the role of "Family 500+" in terms of boosting birth numbers, there is also a discourse related to the political goal, which is unrelated to the pro-natalist goal of the programme (the discourse of a *political goal*). Some authors accuse the government of manipulations to hide the real reasons for introduction of the programme and attempts to influence behaviours of the present and future voters:

- *This programme, regardless of the propaganda, was not about having more children. It was about buying votes. (Grzegorz)*
- *Demographic growth occurred at the beginning. Then the distribution was justified differently but summa summarum it is about buying voters. Now you can hear in the post-PGR<sup>7</sup> villages that 500+ is not enough! (15151515)*
- *500+ is nothing else but buying votes from the masses. Karina and Sebi<sup>8</sup> will get 1,000 zlotys and they will vote [for the Law and Justice party]. (dr marco)*

When making decisions about social benefits, politicians face alternative and not always compatible goals. They also always have to consider social, economic, environmental, and political costs/benefits. Sometimes, as some authors think, the real goals of politicians are hidden behind the veil of lofty and socially acceptable slogans:

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<sup>7</sup> PGR – Państwowe Gospodarstwo Rolne – a state-owned farm.

<sup>8</sup> It is stereotypically believed that such names are given to children in the lower social classes by uneducated parents.

- *500 plus is propaganda, buying votes, wasting money. (znachor)*
- *500+ is a tool to make people not to look at PiS.<sup>9</sup> (niezarejestrowany).*

Some of the comments reveal the belief that the ruling party deliberately makes people dependent on the state's support:

- *...buying votes, it is to make dysfunctional people who like to drink alcohol go and vote for 500+ in order to get money for alcohol. (zartowniś).*

In the opinions shared on the Internet forums, the negative attitude towards those who are caught by politicians in the trap is also often expressed. They are commonly called lazy bones, socially dysfunctional people, idiots, fools, etc., whose votes are bought.

Opponents of the thesis on politicisation and the people directly supporting the programme indicate that cash benefits in the amount similar to the amounts proposed under "Family 500+" or higher are commonly used in other countries (*the European standards discourse*):

- *...all western Europe has such allowances for children. (wrocławianin)*
- *In general, social support in many countries is at a much higher level – it is common among the top economies in the world. The birth and education of a child is a big effort, if the state wants to have citizens – it must encourage to have and raise them. (Maria)*
- *It is not money to buy votes but a STANDARD in the entire civilised part of the EU. We had to wait 28 years for this standard, and on the way, we had governments composed of thieves, who sponsored criminals with tens of billions of unpaid taxes and deprived children of the money. (andrzej)*

In this context Poland is presented as an aspiring country which aims to achieve the level of social support that is offered in Western Europe. In addition to the point that supporting families in their decisions about children is common in other countries, there are opinions that the programme contributes to the increased number of children by persuading people who hesitated whether to have or not have a (next) child (the discourse of *persuading the undecided individuals*). In this case, the forum members believe that many people would like to have (more) offspring but the (financial) situation does not support such a decision. In the other version of this discourse, the programme has facilitated the decision on having a child. It is argued that some families, which had considered having another child, decided not to postpone the decision any longer and go ahead with pregnancy:

- *Previous research showed that women, despite their birth plans, did not implement them. Now they can finally do it. (Irn)*

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<sup>9</sup> Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) – the Law and Justice Party.

- *Nobody is having children for 500+, but this money helps to make the decision for those who postponed having a child for financial reasons. (tępa Zośka)*

In numerous forum posts, there are suggestions that receiving cash benefits will not convince Poles to have more children (the discourse *it is not about money*). Some of the respondents believe that introducing the programme is of no importance to (future) parents' decisions. The desire to have a child is stronger than any external stimuli:

- *500+ will not encourage people to have children. Those who want to have them (children – PM) will have them without 500+. 500+ is based on false assumptions. (???)*
- *I had my first child when I was 34 years old, but my decision was unrelated to 500+, it's just how life went and this is my child I was longing for; I did not receive 500+. (Beata1982)*

The authors of other posts share similar views, however, they point out other possible reasons for low fertility in Poland like cultural, social, and economic changes.

The discourse *it is not about money* presents a relatively broad semantic discourse with the prevailing view that cash benefits do not boost births. Some authors refer to the past, indicating that people used to have children although they did not receive cash benefits, and the conditions for childrearing were relatively worse than nowadays. Therefore, it demonstrates that cash benefits improve the situation of families but will not contribute to boosting fertility:

- *It is a miracle that any children are born at all! If we consider it from the historical perspective, we would realise that the best conditions for families to have children were in the period immediately after the war and during the martial law.<sup>10</sup> (Marius)*
- *The majority of children were born when poverty was widespread, which means that the 500+ assumption is wrong and does not translate into reality. (drenz).*
- *This is not the way to boost fertility rate in Poland – such “extras” were practised by communists in the 1980s, when they raised children allowances. (~ racjonalnie)*

Although there are some Internet forum posts suggesting that due to overpopulation, boosting fertility should not be a goal of modern societies, the dominant approach is that state aid is required for this purpose. In addition to the *it is not about money* discourse, which undermines the possibility of affecting reproductive decisions through cash benefits, the discourse of *the different way* is also common. It indicates that in order to achieve the demographic goals, funds allocated for the “500+” programme should be used to finance other social policy instruments, like nurseries, kindergartens, housing subsidies, measures aimed to combine work with raising

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<sup>10</sup> The martial law was imposed in Poland in December 1981.

a child, etc. These posts perceive mentioned solutions as stimulating the increase in the number of children:

- *In my opinion, these billions could have been spent much more reasonably. First of all, it would be useful to develop the network of nurseries and kindergartens so that every Pole could easily get a place for their child in such institutions. Thus, an employed or a job searching parent would not have to worry about this. It would also be useful to invest appropriate resources in obstetrics and paediatric care... (mich).*
- *I would like to have another child in the future... Currently I have a 9-month-old toddler who will not get to the nursery due to the lack of places. This means that I will not be able to go back to work because I have no one to leave my child with, private nurseries cost more than half of my salary. So I am asking: what is the benefit of 500+? It is practically nothing. If I want to have a pro-family policy, I would have to ensure that women have opportunities to earn a living for their children as one salary is not enough. (Kamila).*
- *I believe that the only good solution is to provide both parents with stable employment and reasonable wages. People who are planning to have children think long-term; raising and maintaining children is a long-term effort, and financial status is part of this process. (ASA)*

The online forums participants also indicate other policy programmes, without cash benefits, which would influence the child-related decisions. They also stress that the allocation of funds for “500+” has stopped development of these programmes.

- *I have a friend whose daughter did not get into kindergarten. As a result, my friend had to return to work (they pay back a housing loan and it is very difficult to live on one salary). They sent the daughter to a private kindergarten, which costs PLN 800 a month. Do you think that she will have another child to get 500 zlotys? (Jenna)*
- *I had my first child at the age of 37 and I am taking 500+, however, my decision was not only based on the financial aspect but also on the fact that they (the government – PM) stopped supporting in vitro programme. (Carla)*

Among the posts concerning the discourse of *the different way*, it is quite common that their authors do not believe that other ways of sharing money would change the reproductive behaviours of Poles. They simply indicate that in their opinion the “500+” funding could be spent more efficiently, for instance, by investing in children (e.g., extra-curricular activities), avoiding situations when funds go to ‘inappropriate’ families, helping parents to combine their work responsibilities and raising children. However, it is worth emphasising that these statements are partly interlinked with the discourse of *a public good*. Parents bear the cost of raising children, while the society benefits from it. In this context the respondents believe that the state should support parents. However, there is one reservation: this should not be accomplished through



cash benefits but by raising wages, providing institutional childcare, and healthcare. The *different way* discourse also refers to the *it is not about money* discourse. Both undermine the possibility of influencing reproductive behaviours through cash benefits as well as indicate similar reasons for low fertility in Poland.

## Classification of conventional discourses

The analysis of opinions expressed in the posts has allowed the author to distinguish three basic groups of discourses (see Table 1).

Table 1. Classification of discourses

Discourses of the state's/ individuals' responsibility	Discourses of policy making	Discourses of (in)efficiency and (in)effectiveness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- children as a public good</li> <li>- children as a private good</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- political goals</li> <li>- European standards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>inefficiency and ineffectiveness</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the first step</li> <li>- children who are already born</li> <li>- a drop in the sea</li> <li>- uncertainty</li> <li>- the different way</li> <li>- it is not about money</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>effectiveness and inefficiency</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- emigration</li> <li>- inappropriate parents</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>effectiveness and efficiency</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- not the first child</li> <li>- undecided individuals</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Source: own elaboration.

The first group includes the two fundamental discourses that provide the starting point for the other types. They refer to the distribution of responsibility for bearing the cost of children between the state and the parents. These discourses have a common part: both are based on the assumption that raising a child implies the cost for parents. They differ with respect to allocation of that cost. As a result, the discourses defined refer to two different values: a specific view of justice (social solidarity) as well as freedom of child-related decisions and responsibility for their effects. The *children as a public good* discourse emphasises that the cost is borne by parents, while the benefits are for the entire society. People who choose to have children hold responsibility to cover the related cost, but this is society, a nation, a social security system and state economy that gain from successive generations. In this context the Internet forum participants expect that the state shares the cost, i.e., it should support families with children.

In contrast, the essence of the *children as a private good* discourse is the recognition that everyone should be responsible for their decisions. The decision about children is made exclusively by the parents, therefore, they should primarily bear the cost of children without expectation of any involvement of the state or society. It should be noted, however, that treating a child as a private good does not exclude views that children contribute positively to the society.

The second group of discourses refers to policy making goals. They either doubt whether boosting fertility was the actual goal of the “500+ programme” (the discourse of a *political goal*) or claim for similar policy measures like in wealthy European countries (the discourse of *European standards*). The former discourse includes suggestions that the government created the benefit to make families dependent on the state support and to help the ruling party in winning next elections.

The latter discourse covers opinions that the “Family 500+” represents a state policy solution that has been used for a long time in Western European countries. It is indirectly assumed that these policies have led to higher fertility than observed in Poland. Therefore, this policy measure is not extraordinary in its nature and its sole purpose is to match the European standards.

A vast majority of the analysed discourses address the effectiveness/efficiency of the “Family 500+” programme in terms of achieving the goal of boosting birth numbers. Most of them are based on the two assumptions: people want to have children and a lack of adequate financial resources is an obstacle to realise this will.

These discourses can be divided into three groups: those that indicate that the programme is effective, those that deny it, and those that indicate that the programme is effective, i.e., leads to achieving the goal defined in terms of the increased number of children, but inefficient. The subgroup of inefficiency and ineffectiveness discourses includes six types which refer to different aspects of childbearing decisions and the policy measure used.

The discourse of *children who are already born* emphasises ineffectiveness of the “Family 500+” programme directed to families who already have children. It is suggested that even keeping the status quo with respect to the number of children, people are still eligible to receive this benefit. Spending money on such families is inefficient and ineffective when it comes to increasing the number of newborn babies. The “Family 500+” does not promote having children but simply supports families with children. In other words, the programme does not provide incentives to have (more) children but improves the financial status of families with children.

The discourses *a drop in the sea* and the *uncertainty* suggest that the programme will not achieve its goals since the amount of this benefit is insufficient or its availability is uncertain in the future, respectively. Difficulties with covering the financial costs of

children, especially in the case of the first child, are also strongly emphasised in the discourse of *the first step*. It is often stated that responsible people are not encouraged to have more children because the future of this programme is uncertain. The issue of ineffectiveness has been treated differently in the discourse of *the different way*. This is one of the few discourses in which the supposition that direct cash benefits influence procreative behaviours is rejected. When it comes to the reasons behind low fertility, it does not point to material poverty, but to the shortage of goods, and all services facilitating raising a child in particular.

The *not about money* discourse, unlike most discourses of (in)efficiency and (in)effectiveness, does not address the reasons for low fertility which could be addressed through government policy. In this case, the lower number of children born is considered as a result of broad social, cultural, and economic changes, therefore, programmes such as "Family 500+" are likely to fail.

The discourses included to the *effectiveness but inefficiency* group imply that the "500+" programme is effective as it will lead to the increased number of children, however, at the same time it is also inefficient as even this increased number will not improve the situation in the future. In the discourse of *emigration*, contrary to the discourses mentioned earlier, it is not assumed that the number of newborn children is unlikely to increase. But it is supposed that in the future, due to emigration, these children will not provide benefits to Poland. In the discourse of *inappropriate parents*, it is declared that the number of children may increase, which is similar to the supposition under the emigration discourse. In this context, the programme is viewed as potentially effective. However, to make the programme efficient, the children born today must contribute to a given society in the future, and this will not happen if they grow up in 'inappropriate' families. That term refers to families where decisions to have another child results directly from a possibility of receiving the benefit.

Both the *emigration* discourse and the *inappropriate parents* discourse indicate beliefs that due to "Family 500+" the number of children will increase, proving the effectiveness of the programme. However, they also stress that the increased number of children should not be the only goal of the programme. They emphasise that the growing size of the new generations is only a means to achieving other goals, such as economic development, an efficient pension system, etc. In this sense, "500+" is ineffective – more children will be born, but when they become adults, they will not take up jobs (*inappropriate parents*) or will emigrate from Poland (*emigration*).

The discourses of effectiveness and efficiency include the opinions labelled as the discourse of *not the first child*, which completely contradicts the discourse of *the first step* included in the subgroup of *inefficiency and ineffectiveness* discourses. The

demographic aim assumes that most couples will decide to have their first child, regardless of the fact whether they receive the cash benefit from the state or not. However, this is not enough to solve the problem of low fertility in Poland. To achieve this, the incentives must go to those who are already parents and decide on having more children. The discourse of *undecided individuals* is based on two assumptions. Firstly, people want to have (more) children. Secondly, some of them may hesitate due to insufficient income, and therefore, the cash allowance will help them to decide. In this context, the cash benefit will act as a trigger, as increasingly more people will decide to have (another) child.

## Conclusion

The paper presents the first attempt to analyse the social policy from the perspective of Internet forums. The analysis is focused on the “Family 500+” programme, the largest financial transfer within the family policy programme in Poland. One of the main declared goals of the “Family 500+” programme is to boost the birth rate in Poland. Available options to achieve the intended goal are widely discussed on Internet forums. The aim of the paper is to identify the dominating discourses in online discussions on the effects of the “500+” programme in terms of boosting birth numbers in Poland. The analysis of conventional discourse is descriptive, and it is used to present the discourses without evaluation of their validity.

A vast majority of discourse analysis so far has focused on the debates led by most actors of social life: policymakers, politicians, trade unions, media, etc. To the best of the author’s knowledge, the analysis presented in the paper is the first study in which Internet forums were analysed in the context of the social policy in Poland.

The analysis of the posts shared on online forums between November 2015 and June 2019 revealed that the aimed increase in the number of births was discussed in relation to numerous other topics, such as social justice and solidarity, citizens’ rights and duties, performance of professional work, individuals deserving for the state’s support, differences between social groups, individual responsibility, social and economic consequences, etc. Most of these issues are of utmost importance to legitimise the state policy, and they are strongly interrelated.

The results of this study how the selected family policy measure is perceived and assessed by citizens may provide a starting point for considering the threats to the legitimacy of the implemented social policy measures and the ways of influencing public opinion by specific groups (the government, opposition parties, the media, etc.). Although identifying the discourses was the main goal of the research, the results

of the analysis not only show the multiplicity and variety of the discourses, but also their interconnections. These interconnections can be all considered in relation to the perceptions of parents in families receiving the cash benefit, pointing to a special position of the *inappropriate parents* discourse.

The discourse of *inappropriate parents* is based on the assumption that boosting births is only a means to achieving other goals related to functioning of the state, the society and the economy in the future. In this context, it is not enough to increase the number of newborn babies, but also to provide them with adequate conditions for development, which will support them and help them become useful citizens in the future. Internet users often prescribe parents a vital role in shaping children's attitudes, behaviours, and achievements. The analysis of the relations among the identified discourses shows that it is frequently assumed that people who decide to have children because of "500+" are mainly those who will not take care of them properly.

The *inappropriate parents* discourse addresses the perception of parents – beneficiaries of the "500+" programme – most explicitly. However, other discourses identified in the study relate to this perception directly or indirectly. The discourse of *a public good* is based on the claim that investments in children will contribute to the public good in the future. The discussion on inappropriate parents determines the success of this investment based on the characteristics of parents; inappropriate parents make the investment unsuccessful. Many of the identified discourses include the assumption that children will be born in inappropriate, bad families, i.e., the ones that will not secure any return on the investment. According to a *private good* discourse, only people who can afford a child should go ahead with the decision on having children. This means that if this decision is made as a result of "500+", it is unreasonable and so are the people who make it. Similar conclusions can be drawn from other discourses. Only unreasonable people decide to have a child because of the "Family 500+" programme as the cost of child maintenance is much greater than the benefit (*a drop in the sea*). Another problem is that no one knows how long this programme will last (*uncertainty*). The group of people who will decide to have children will include individuals who will choose to have children for their own reasons, regardless of social aspects and the benefit (*undecided*). It is also assumed that good parents, i.e., the only group that will raise children properly, support the existence of the family and are employed (Michoń, 2021). They have been excluded from the programme as they do not meet the means-tested criterion, and meanwhile, the benefit is granted to non-earners (*the first step*). At the same time, people who decide to have a child as a result of "500+" are more likely to become dependent on state aid and more prone to present demanding attitudes. Children brought up in such families will also depend on the state's support (*political goals*).

The acceptance of the programme, and more broadly legitimacy of the welfare state, will largely depend on the perception of the beneficiaries of the “Family 500+” programme. The discourse of inappropriate parents has the central place in the analysed debates and indicates that in order to shape the social perception of the programme, special attention should be paid to the image of parents who are the programme beneficiaries. It is the parents, not the children, that are considered to be beneficiaries. Many of the arguments presented would not be justified if the parents’ image was positive.

Social support for the “Family 500+” programme depends to some extent on the perception of the possibility of achieving its goals. Discussions taking place on the Internet focus on the possibility of achieving the intended goal, but also its essence. In both cases, parents are put at the centre of the discussion. The stereotypical image of parents as people oriented towards their own, individual goals and using the child as a source of cash benefits might influence negatively the evaluation of the entire “Family 500+” programme and lower the legitimisation of the welfare state in Poland.

Citizens’ attitudes, concerns, and expectations play a significant role in shaping social policy. Recent years have brought numerous studies on this subject. However, quantitative studies usually encounter a significant limitation as they are based on assumptions made by researchers at the level of formulating survey questions. This approach is likely to limit the researchers when looking for new explanations.

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