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Chapter 1

Comments of Anatoly Vishnevsky on the chapter «Fertility and Family» by Louis Roussel

Among the many challenges facing European societies and the governments that represent them at the close of the twentieth century, some of the most important are those that stem from one of the most intimate parts of human life — family relations and the continuation of the species — where enormous changes are taking place.

Not much can be added to the detailed picture of the latest trends in family and fertility painted by L. Roussel in his chapter — a picture showing how little the modern European family resembles any of the classical types of peasant family that served as models for families everywhere for thousands of years. Changes have affected every link in the chain of family formation, and every aspect of the way families operate. All European countries are undergoing these changes, which together are sometimes referred to in the literature as the «second demographic transition».

Changes in family relationships and demographic behaviour take place as a result of the spontaneous actions of hundreds of millions of individuals and families, and ultimately make it necessary to overhaul the entire system of social institutions operating in this area. This in turn requires governments to react. Such reactions take the form of demographic or family policy, and confront politicians and scholars with two age-old questions: what means should be used, and to what ends. L. Roussel's chapter invites consideration of this subject and provides food for thought. More food for thought comes from the government declarations prepared for this Conference. By the beginning of the Conference, I had at my disposal 25 such declarations, which I shall briefly try to summarize.

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What should one make of the changes occurring within families? I wholly concur in the basic approach taken by L. Roussel, who tends not to present them in an adverse light and rules out any return to previous family models and earlier modes of family and demographic behaviour. One cannot, of course, deny the existence of well-known problems arising in connection with falling fertility, an ageing population, unstable marriages and the growing number of free unions and extramarital births, the high number of induced abortions, etc. But on the other side of the scale, we have twentieth century advances which also must not be forgotten: expanded freedom of choice for men and women in family and social affairs, equality of the partners, greater opportunities for contact between the generations, the satisfaction of personal needs, and personal fulfilment.

The position taken by L. Roussel on the future of family and demographic institutions may be described as cautious optimism, and I am in basic agreement. I also believe that if the family is going through a crisis, it is a crisis not of the institution of the family as such but of its old forms, a sign of transition to new forms which may not yet be completely established. And I can only repeat after L. Roussel: the family may even become more important than it was half a century ago, but it will never again be what it was.

At the same time one cannot but see that opinions differ on the changes families are undergoing, and the differences are reflected in government positions. The main axis around which the various points of view are grouped is the relationship between individual and collective interests. Do changes in the mass behaviour of people as individuals correspond to their own collective interests and the need for solidarity within the family or society at large, as represented and personified by the government of any given country? In fact, replies to this question are of a piece with the policy goals set — positive, negative or neutral *vis-à-vis* the changes taking place.

Four main topics predominate in L. Roussel's arguments and the government replies.

A. Changes in family models, family behaviour and the future of the family

Virtually all governments emphasize in one way or another their commitment to the family as one of the most important social institutions, and they are more or less unanimous in maintaining that they must foster improvements in the social situation of families and family members. Most, nevertheless, decline to give a straight answer to the question of how they view the prospects for the growth of their family in their countries. In some cases an answer does emerge obliquely out of their descriptions and evaluations of currently observable trends. Government positions appear to be very closely linked to variations in opinions between geographical areas, as indicated by L. Roussel.

The governments of Western and, in particular, Northern Europe, which encountered these changes earlier than others, tend to view them without alarm. The Finnish declaration states that the Government takes a neutral stance on family types selected by citizens, and the Danish declaration reports a rise in cohabitation and extramarital births but states that this does not necessarily give rise to social problems. The Governments of Germany and Sweden comment that despite all the changes, marriage and the family retain their high prestige, and the German declaration emphasizes that the State has to respect different notions of family life; the Swedish declaration states, on the other hand, that the Government is not worried about the future of the Swedish family. Government's family policy goals in these regions likewise reflect a desire for maximum social incorporation of new family models and relations into the set of those that are socially accepted and protected by the State (for example, the equal treatment of legal and de facto marriages for family allowance entitlement purposes in Belgium).

In Southern and Eastern Europe these changes are greeted more cautiously, sometimes even with outright disapproval (obliquely expressed, for example, in the declaration by the Polish Government which states that «despite unfavourable external conditions the Polish family shows a considerable resistance to diffusion which is so typical of contemporary Europe». This position is also reflected in approaches to the setting of family policy goals. In the view of the Holy See, for example, the situation of non-married couples should not be placed on the same level as marriage duly contracted. The Swiss State, according to the Government declaration, is loath to legitimize concubinage and place it in legislative terms on the same footing as marriage.

B. The combination of family and career obligations and roles, particularly by women

Changes within the family are very closely bound up with the increasing tendency of women to take professional, paid work, which is at one and the same time a prerequisite for and the result of them. Career and career-related interests and values now compete seriously with family interests and values not only for men, as has always been taken for granted, but also for women. L. Roussel ranks economic and social satisfaction among the most important goals which couples building a life together seek to attain, alongside emotional and recreational goals. I am not convinced that this orientation can, as by L. Roussel, be termed «syncretistic hedonism». It seems to me that a multiplicity of orientations attract people, principally by offering a wider freedom of choice and, hence, wider adaptational opportunities at various stages of each individual life.

The declaration by the Holy See contains a reference to a re-evaluation of maternity as an important dimension of women's identity which has been in evidence in recent years. Changes in Eastern Europe and particularly the former USSR, where it is gradually being realized that women were employed to excess in paid jobs, may be what is intended here. But the growing attraction of women into professional, paid jobs is a feature of the European region as a whole, and is becoming a value which competes with traditional family values, including unpaid labour in the home. Society is confronted by the need to establish an institutional framework suited to this new situation. Most governments acknowledge this need, avowing their commitment to policies affording equal opportunities for men and women in all areas of social life, and their determination to create the necessary conditions. There is more unanimity among them on this question than on any other, and not one government expresses disapproval of a woman's combining paid work with family obligations; even those that refrain from giving a direct answer to the question tend in their specific descriptions of family policy to mention various measures to facilitate the combination.

C. Declining fertility and its consequences

One and two-child families and fertility too low for simple population replacement are by now virtually Europe-wide phenomena, admitting of very few exceptions from the Atlantic to the Urals. A very few governments (Sweden and to some extent the United Kingdom) say they are satisfied with current fertility levels. The overwhelming majority express dissatisfaction with the two main consequences of low fertility: the decline in, even reversal of, natural population growth and, particularly, demographic ageing.

Although assessments of the situation are broadly similar, governments' positions on policy for changing it differ substantially. These may be classified into three groups, two of them almost diametrically opposed. The Governments of a number of countries (Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Lithuania, Norway, the Netherlands, Russia, Switzerland, Sweden, Ukraine, United Kingdom and United States) state categorically that they do not set numerical goals for changes in fertility levels or population growth.

At the other extreme are governments which consider it their responsibility to promote among parents a desire to have children, and to take steps towards this end (Greece, Hungary, Israel, Cyprus and to some extent Romania and Latvia).

Lastly, there is an intermediate group of countries: they either do not reply or give an evasive answer, suggesting that the main aims of their family policy are social and qualitative, but that some numerical effect — i.e., some increase in fertility — is also expected. In this they are joined by the governments which openly proclaim their rejection of any specifically demographic policy. The declaration by the Government of Norway is typical: the Government has no clearly formulated policy of controlling or stimulating population growth, and acknowledges individuals' and families' freedom of choice in this matter, believing that the outcome does not present the Government with any serious problems. At the same time, there is general agreement in Norway that the way to increase or stabilize fertility is to provide both parents with the best possible opportunities for combining paid work with household chores. Another example is the German declaration, which says that family policy in general and political measures concerning families have a significance of their own independent of demographic considerations; nevertheless, demographic side effects deemed desirable may occur. This group also include the Netherlands, the only country which considers it desirable to reduce population size. Even the Netherlands believes, however, that its social policy needs to expand opportunities for combining parenthood with other aspects of people's lives, and neutralize the undesirable affects of socio-economic conditions on the values of parenthood.

Hence the government declarations clearly reveal a syncretic view of the goals of family policy, which is intended to strengthen family values, to improve the economic circumstances of needy families, to facilitate women's combination of career and family obligations, and to stabilize or increase fertility.

In keeping with this syncretism of goals, the sections of the government declarations dealing with the problems of fertility and family are largely devoted to lists of measures which, in the governments' view, may be expected to yield the requisite syncretic effect. These measures are virtually identical in structure everywhere. They include a variety of family allowances and financial benefits, various day-care options for children, time off for parents to look after young or sick children and other family members needing care, greater adaptation of working hours to suit family needs and a number of other measures that vary from one country to the next (for example, counting time spent looking after children towards pensionable service). There are a number of references to links between the size of allowances and benefits or the length of leave allowed and the number of children, which may be regarded as an indication of the demographic thrust of these measures, although the links may also be for purely social reasons. As a rule, governments say they intend to develop and expand assistance to families; some of them (Israel, Romania, Russia and Ukraine) emphasize that at present they are constrained by limited material resources.

At the same time, not one government answers the question of how it rates the effect of the steps it takes on the growth of the family. Some measures may not always attain their planned goals but are known to produce side effects. For example, steps taken to increase fertility may instead just make it harder for women to get into the jobs market. Overall, reasons for hoping that the steps taken will have a demographic effect are unclear. The Norwegian declaration states that in 1984 a government commission recommended measures to stabilize fertility while pointing out that no European country had reliable evidence that the measures it proposed, or any others, were effective. The Belgian declaration indicates that radical changes in fertility trends cannot be brought about with the help of an ad hoc policy. Nevertheless, many governments, as we have seen, link the steps they take to an expectation of a demographic effect; even the draft recommendations for this Conference assert that economic assistance to families «may promote an increase in fertility indicators».

D. Family planning

Being more specific, this topic occupies a rather special place in the overall question of family policy. Family planning has become common practice in the overwhelming majority of families in European countries, and the main direct reason for the convergence of fertility levels among them. Nevertheless, the material, legal and psychological conditions affecting the regulation of childbirth are far from identical.

There is significant agreement over the definition of the broadest goals of policy relating to family planning. One common position predominates, as well expressed in the declaration by the Holy See: «The Holy See advocates responsible parenthood, which emphasises the responsible planning of family size. Decisions concerning the spacing of births and the number of children to be born belong to the spouses and not to any other authority. The spouses are called upon to make free and responsible decisions which take into full consideration their duties to themselves, their children already born, the family and society, in accordance with objective moral norms as well as their own cultural and religious condition.»

The fundamental right of couples to decide how many children to have, and when, is not contested in any government declaration. The availability and use of contraceptives, terminations of pregnancy and other such questions are doubtless regulated to some extent in all countries, yet many governments passed over this question in silence. The replies that were received to the question about the current legal status of the practices of preventing pregnancy, abortion and sterilization, and any changes in that status, indicate that different governments treat this right in different ways and the range of differences between them is greatest on this point.

The Holy See states that it supports the use of natural methods for the regulation of fertility, and is opposed to all forms of voluntary abortions. Although none of the governments that address these matters puts its point of view so categorically, the position of several, particularly on abortion, is in fact close to that of the Vatican. They restrict the grounds considered sufficient to warrant abortion, and these restrictions are sometimes even being tightened. In Israel, for example, a possible decline in a family's standard of living is no longer considered sufficient grounds, as it was before 1980; abortion is permitted only if the woman is under 17 or over 40, in the event of extramarital pregnancy, incest or rape, if there is a risk that the child will be born with a genetic defect, or if there is threat to the life or health of the mother. Legal abortion is limited to these latter three cases in Spain, Portugal and, since March 1993, in Poland. Restrictions on abortion have been imposed by the Act on the Protection of Foetal Life passed in 1992 in Hungary. New legislation emphasizing the need to respect human life from the moment of conception is in preparation in the Czech Republic.

At the same time, the positions of a number of other governments indicate rapid liberalization of legislation on means of regulating the number and spacing of children born. Many have no or virtually no restrictions in this area. For example, the

declaration by the Government of Canada states that the ban on the use of contraceptives was abolished in 1969, restrictions on abortion were repealed in 1988, and the law also upholds the right to voluntary sterilization. The declarations from Latvia, the United Kingdom (with, it is true, a reservation relating to Northern Ireland), Ukraine and Sweden state that there is no prohibition on voluntary sterilization. The absence of any ban on abortion (usually subject to conditions governing the stage of pregnancy, the doctor's qualifications, etc.) is reported in the declarations of Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Norway, Romania, Russia, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States. Abortions are officially not allowed in the Netherlands, but the wide exceptions admitted by law make them virtually freely available. The declarations by some governments (Italy and Norway) emphasize that legalizing abortion has not led to any increase in numbers of abortions. An even larger number of governments confirm freedom of contraception, some of them (for example, those of Austria, the Netherlands and Romania) emphasizing their determination to promote public information on the various kinds of contraception available and to make them more widely accessible.

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Overall, and despite some small divergence of positions on a number of matters, the views of most European Governments regarding new trends in family development and the tasks of family policy tend to converge more than they diverge. This is not surprising. One of the main conclusions in L. Roussel's chapter is that basic trends in the evolution of the family extend across the whole of Europe at least. On the main points, all countries are moving in the same direction. I would be inclined to go further. It seems to me that the author of the report sometimes displays excessive caution in assessing the convergence of trends in family evolution throughout the European region, underestimating, in particular, the significance of trends in the eastern part of Europe, whether in extramarital unions, divorces, or intra- or extramarital fertility.

This similarity of trends in the development of the family and the evolution of family and demographic behaviour makes the collective experience (including the undesirable experience of political regimes now passed) that European countries have accumulated as various societies have tried to meet the challenges of the age and adapt their social institutions to new demographic and family realities, especially valuable. Making sense of this collective experience and drawing from it lessons for the future is one of the main tasks of our Conference.