

Changes of Foster Care System in Lithuania

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Abstract

This article presents some insights about the changes of the foster care system in one of the post communist countries. The information is based on several studies done in this area from 1995 to 2005. The changes in the foster care system are related to the understanding of the child's needs, the role of the family in human development and the state responsibility for the child and family welfare during the last 20 years. Private initiatives, international relations and the influence of international organizations are all important for the creation of a more open, more representative of human dignity and better foster care system for children and families.

Nineteen years went by since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and there were uncountable changes in this area during this period of time. Lithuania, one of the Baltic States, reestablished its independence in 1990. The Catholic religion dominates this country, although it coexists with other different religions. The children who were born before this collapse and lived all their childhood after it made the basis for a whole new generation and even maybe for the subsequent generation. What did the post communist countries inherit from the 80-50 years of proletariat dictatorship in the substitute child care system? What changes were planned, why, and what happened to the lives of the children and of the families who were fostering them? These could be interesting questions for many social workers and researchers. Issues concerning substitute care of children in the majority of the cases are not on the political agenda or on the pages of newspapers and even when they become important to this area, it is only for a very short period of time and due to some crucial happening.

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Each social system has its own history, values and sorrows. Family, as the most stable and at the same time the most changing social system adjusting to all environments of human life, should be based (as accepted in the Western culture) on elective affinities. Is this true for the children, for the families? The foster family, as a form of substitute care of children is very influenced by many other social systems, ideologies, policies and structures.

The goal of this article is to present the main features of the development of the foster family system in Lithuania.

The aims of this paper are:

- a) to describe the heritage of substitute care and foster family system in the Soviet Union;
- b) to describe the welfare of foster families in the first decade after the establishment of political independency;
- c) to describe changes in the foster family system after joining the EU.

Conceptualization of the theory beyond the analysis of the development of foster care system

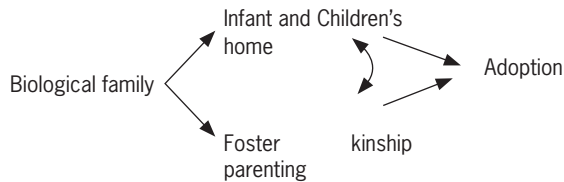
In order to shortly present the substitute child care system in the Soviet Union we need the theoretical structure of development. Since the foster family system has as its main task the welfare or well-being of the child in the relation to the welfare or well-being of the family, I choose to analyze development processes through the welfare perspective. Theorizing about welfare I choose the G. Drover and P. Kerans (1993) description of welfare. They argue „that welfare or well- being entails three stakes: identity, resources and relationships, especially caring relationships” (from Baines 1991; Kymlicka 1990; Allen 1987; Tronto 1987) in (Drover and Kerans 1993, p. 5). This description of welfare is based on the development of human capacities, or from compensatory welfare to empowering welfare (Block 1987 pp. 31-2). In this notion society is not divided into givers and takers, but it is assumed that everyone requires help from others in order to develop. In this understanding the process of self-actualization is related to seeking diversity and pluralism of understanding and to relationship and differentiation. The main tension is between the self and the community, hegemonic group with the norms and values or ideologies and dominant discourses of the society. We know that „dominant values and meanings are imposed on everyday experiences of oppressed and constructs identity.” (A. Giddens in Drover and Kerans, 1993).

The development of substitute child care: inherited structures of the soviet system

The development of substitute child care in the territory of Russian Empire, that Lithuania was occupied for more 100 years before 1918 at this time was at the stage of the Poor law and informal community care. The USSR period had its own features. As some contradiction to Marx economical theory, the Leninist theory based on socialist revolution and communist ideology was introduced in the less industrially developed country in Europe – Russia. This social experiment cut down many social developments in this region. According to soviet social Darwinism old capitalist social systems (family, marriage, church) had to be destroyed. The functions of these institutions had to be changed through education. Education was seen as the main institution for the human development, and this notion seen as total institution. Social problems, such as conventionally understood in Western capitalist countries could not exist in the Soviet union, and if a „bad“ family could not take care of its children, kindergarten, school, or the State would grow a new soviet man. There was a very well-organized and functioning system of totalitarian institutions. Education was given in large groups in nurseries, kindergartens, then schools, Wards – “internats”, special schools, infant homes, children homes with schools, vocational schools; labor institutions (factories, collective or state farms), public housing. From the first years of childhood we were taught to „love the Communist party as we loved our mother“, and „we are the happiest children in the world“. The enlargement of children's home system was needed for the survivors of World War II on the one hand and on the other hand, to care for children from the weakest families as proper soviet population and labor force. Siblings of the same biological family were not kept in the same institutions. There was a central Children's Admitting and Distribution Center in Kaunas, run by the police, and before they were sent to an institution all children were kept in this place. Infants from this Center, the majority of which came from the hospitals, were distributed to the infants' or children's homes around Lithuania according to their age, special needs or health condition. If they were adopted, their names and surnames were changed. There are still many young people who do not know their siblings or other extended family members.

Following Triseliotis J., Borland M., Hill M. (2000) structure of development of substitute child's care in Western countries, the development of substitute care in communist Russia and Soviet Union was frozen at the 4th stage – substitute parenting.

1st picture: Possibilities of child care in the USSR and in the majority of the post communist countries (till the 1st of July of 1998 in Lithuania)



If the natural family did not properly care for their children, regularly State authorities would take the children from the family and place them in State infants or a children home. The chance for the child to grow up in a substitute family would only come up as a voluntary idea and action of the family. There were not any professionals or organizations working in this field. The majority of substitute families for the children were from the kinship systems, or driven by any other motives to take the child from the children's home to live in their family. The state authorities have never looked to the foster families, nor visited these substitute families to evaluate child rearing conditions. Research done in the beginning of 1998 in Kaunas showed that the number of substitute families that were known to the State authorities was approximately the same as the number of substitute families unknown to these authorities. The primary and secondary schools helped us to find these families. (Snieškienė, Grigonytė, 2001). The adoption of children was carried out only on a strongly secret basis, but nobody analyzed or evaluated the families that wanted to adopt. The only recommendation needed about the family was from the job place. Registered substitute child care families got a very small allowance from the State. Research in this field was never organized during the soviet ruling period. A very structuralized and planned system let the children from State children's home to get professional education, job and housing. During that time the ex-wards of the children's homes got the priority for support from the State. All substitute care in the institutions or families was permanent.

In such structure and dominant values foster families together with other substitute care families were secret for the society. Many resources of the families were used to keep these secrets in the family, because it was based on informal relationships. In old stories, tales and fairy tales in Russian and Lithuanian literature (grand narrative) the foster family is referred to as a fury witch's family. Taking a

child for permanent care in the family, the family had to be brave enough to accept such neighbor's opinion – labeled “knuckleheads”. In some cases friends or extended families that were helping sometimes blamed these children and cut relations with the family. Blaming was based on the behavioral problems of the foster child that echoed in the neighborhood and in school. Sometimes the behavior of the accepted child was so disturbing (aggression, theft), that friends and extended family members cut relations with this family at all. Foster families were left alone, or sometimes excluded from society. There was not any difference between kinship care and foster families looking from the outsider perspective, or State or society.

At the end of the soviet ruling period (1987) the first articles in the newspaper presented some short information about foster families and collective farms, which helped them to fulfill this function. During “Perestroika” time newspapers started writing about isolated infants and children homes and about how these children needed attention from society. Child care in the family was described as a “good activity”. During this time there were not any specialized services for fostered child and foster family, any responsible institution for substitute child care in the family, and any nongovernmental institution in this field.

The period of “Perestroika” was a period of defrost of feelings and memories of the population. This enthusiasm was a base for reestablishment of religions and organizations of civil society. Lithuania, as a Catholic tradition country, has developed underground movements and an underground press during the Soviet period, and people from these underground movements knew and trusted each other. The reestablishment of the former civil and religion organizations was developed on these trust-based networks. In our case, the most important organization to the development of foster family system was Caritas. This organization, former umbrella organization of Catholic civil organizations, was reestablished as a women's organization in 1988. Its leaders were six elderly ladies (nuns or well-educated), who knew the Catholic Church social activities before the soviet occupation very well. During one year these ideas spread around the country, and ladies in all parishes organized Caritas groups. Very soon with international support this organization became the biggest and the best known organization in Lithuania. It played one of the major roles in the development of social services in the beginning of the reestablished Lithuania.

Media information about children in the closed institutions (at this time there were about 15 000 children in 100 institutions in Lithuania, with a 3, 7 ml. of population), and religion and patriotic feelings encouraged many families to come and visit these children. Some families did not only visit, but also took them in their

families for temporal or permanent care. There were organized massive christenings of these children, and it was expected that the adults that agreed to be parents in God would take care of these kids in the future. But this did not happen. In the majority of cases, with few exceptions, these parents in God were parents only for one day, and have never visited these children again. The induced activity of many families at this time was not organized or supported by any State or private institution. Those families, who took children in their home for permanent care, were left alone, just like the families who had done that before.

The first decade of independency: 1991 – 2004

Context

The first years of reestablished independency in Lithuania were related to a very large and deep economical crisis and a very weak social security system for people in such situations. At this time the understanding of freedom and of the role of the State had changed in an opposite way: from totalitarian to extreme neoliberal stance. This period of time was a disruption period for many families: unemployment, suicide and homelessness were problems of everyday life. The number of children in the institutions was increasing every year. The call of this time was „Everyone is responsible for himself or herself“. „State is not going to care about the family“. „Each family is responsible alone for their life“. The State decided to help only people in need: handicapped, the elderly and children without family. The number of children without parental care was increasing since 1992, and from 1995 – in average 3000 every year: 1997 – 3175, 1998 – 3502, 1999 – 3261, 2000 – 2597, 2004 – 3247 and 2007 – 2824 children. The general number of children in Lithuania from 1990 to 2004 decreased in 45 percent (Gyventojai ir socialinė statistika).

Reorganizing the state institutions and structures in 1991 Social Care departments at the municipalities were as well organized as Child Care departments in it. Child Care departments were responsible for finding proper children homes and preparing documentation for families who wanted to adopt a child. At this time the door was open for international adoption of children from Lithuania.

At this period of time nongovernmental organizations and mainly Caritas became the most important resources for help with food, clothes, and medicines. International humanitarian support was coming through these organizations. All these organizational efforts were done on a voluntary basis because none of the professionals in

this area was ever prepared for this kind of work. Social work or social pedagogy was never heard of as a profession in the Soviet Union. The leader of Caritas in Lithuania, sister Albina Pajarskaitė, who knew these professions very well from their experience with women's organizations before World War II, opened courses for social workers in Lithuania in 1939. The biggest Lithuanian emigrant population could be found in the United States and many were coming back to help developing the country. Some professors and professionals returned to their home country and were looking for ways of being as useful as possible, or trying to find the most useful activities for themselves. In 1992 the idea that was brought from Canada and the USA about the preparation of social welfare professionals was accepted in Caritas. Together with professionals and professors from the USA this institution organized social work courses that became a master program at the Center of Social Welfare Professional Education at the reestablished Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas. The program was run by professionals and professors from different European countries and the USA. All students of this program had diplomas of higher education and got some experience and a strong motivation to work in the social field. In 1995 – the first graduates in social work: and the first research about foster families in Lithuania (D. Kabašinskaitė, 1995). This research showed that kinship care families dominate in this field, but there are many foster families as well. They have never been visited by any professionals or State officials, although they need support and some training.

Lithuania as a State again became a member of the UN organization and signed the main documentation of the Human Rights. The convention on the Rights of Child was signed in 1992. After the signature of this convention the Central Child Rights Protection Agency was established in 1993. The agency reorganized the Child Care departments at the municipalities to the Child Rights protection agencies that have had more responsibilities and resources, but were still very much dependent on the municipal authorities. According to Caritas and graduates from the first social work program initiatives together with Child Rights Protection Agency in Kaunas the new social services program project "Temporary child care" was written and presented for PHARE foundation in 1995. The projects together with the Tallin project won the grant. The UK Kent County social services department helped to develop the program „Pastogė“ (Shelter) in 1996. The idea of this social service program was to organize and to train foster families that could foster the child temporally. At the same time social workers were going to work with the biological family, in order to help them change and prepare them to take care of their own children again. The

program was very innovative, because according to the Law, there were not such legal possibilities or a legal form of temporally foster care in the family and services for the biological family. The support for these new foster families was given from Caritas organization and international funds.

The international organization Save the Children played an important role in this field as well. The Lithuanian branch of this organization organized political actions for the ratification of The Convention of the Rights of the Child. The convention was ratified in 1995. Preparation of reports to the Child Rights committee and recommendations of the Committee were important for changing attitudes upon the child situation in Lithuania.

Social workers of „Pastogė“ together with other organizations worked intensively for the changes of Legal Acts on substitute child care. A new Legal Act on Substitute Child Care was published and came into force on the 1st of July in 1998. In this Act for the first time in Lithuania a new understanding of the substitute child care was presented. The goal of the substitute child care was formulated as support to the natural family in crisis and to the child, in order to get the proper circumstances for growth and development. The priority was defined for child care in kinship care, followed by foster care and last, institutional care. A description of permanent and temporary child care was presented in this document.

The State was responsible for the evaluation and preparation of foster families for child care. But this Act was not intended to formulate any special services for foster families or kinship care families. It was believed that a bigger financial support would solve all the problems in this field: many families decide to be foster families, and the only control needed is on how they will spend this money. In the beginning of capitalism politicians and those who were in charge believed in an „invisible hand that would solve all the problems“. Analyzing child care ideologies according to Harding (1997) and Forsberg (1998), (in Rantalaiho U-M., 1998) this period could be understated as the period when ideologies in Lithuania began to change from a State paternalism and a traditional patriarchal ideology model, where the upbringing of a child was absolutely private and/or absolutely controlled by the State to a more family oriented and cooperative model.

In the beginning of 1998 we did some research with the goal of understanding how many children were fostered in how many families or were in kinship care without any registration and what are their needs were. This research, carried out in Kaunas city, showed that there was the same proportion of registered families

and children as unregistered foster families and children, and that they did not have any support from the State, living in very poor conditions and sometimes not having their basic needs fulfilled. The majority of these families planned to register and get a good financial support that would be spend responding to the children's needs during their growth and development. They were not informed about the possible services within the community. The most informing research about foster care in the families was done in 2001, as a doctoral dissertation „Foster care as a social action“(Snieskienė, 2001). During this research 334 kinship care and foster care families in the central Kaunas County were interviewed with a semi structural questionnaire. The interviews were done in the homes of the families. This research contributed to the foster families' motivation to areas such as substitute child care, identity, resources and relations, needs and other topics.

After the implementation of the new Act on Substitute Child Care in Lithuania, the number of registered families increased, but the major upswing was based on the registration of former unregistered families.

Resources that existed or were developed during this time can be separated in two groups:

1. Formal:

Allowances: Before the 1998 Act, that were very small and equal to the allowance given to the poor families with children – 125 Lt, or 36, 4 Euro per month. After the 1st of July 1998, this allowance increased to 500 Lt, which is 3 times more than the allowance given to the children of poor families.

Services: The earlier the substitute parenting families were registered, they used less services for themselves and for the foster child. The range of services can be presented as follows: Child Rights protection agency, psychologist, school, social welfare department at the municipality, physician, social workers from program „Pastogė,“ in Kaunas, priest, some NGOs. Families of kinship care were presented as a resource, as well as policemen.

2. Informal:

Family members and extended family members are the main resource, followed by friends, neighbors and other well-known foster families. These informal resources were the most important for economical and emotional reasons.

Relations could be separated in two groups as well: relations with the community, resources and the general society and relations inside the foster or kinship care family.

Before the new Act, the relations of these families with the community were very individualized and depended on the behavior of the children, on values presented from officials to these families, but they were not very clearly expressed. Prior to the new Act of the year of 1998 and after it, the majority of the society was not indifferent to what was happening with foster or kinship care families. Many newspapers started presenting problems in these families, always blaming them for what had happened inside them or with the fostered children. Many foster families took many children in their homes and wanted to create homes for children without stable resources. Other families started looking to these families as rivals in child's care, especially those who were very poor, because the State support for them was very low. The TV presented the cases of poor families in the neighborhood that wanted to exchange with their children and get a bigger support from the State to ensure a better life for their children. The welfare of the child and the welfare of the family were understood according to the distribution of scarce resources. From the grudge of such allowances to the foster and kinship care families many professionals (teachers, doctors, and others) did not help the foster child for free. Social services as obligatory resources did not exist in any political or media agenda for the children and for the natural and substitute care families.

Analyzing foster families relations with resources it is clear that families registered before 1994 used less formal and informal resources. The most resources were used by the foster families that registered last. (Snieškienė, 2001). According to the new Substitute Child Care Act 1998 families of kinship care are deprived of training and preparation for care, as well as of the continuation of services. Foster families can get some training only in one region of Lithuania – Kaunas County, where the program „Pastogė“ was active. In other counties (there are 10 of them) the evaluation of foster families, as well as support and training were left to a voluntary basis of municipalities. This shows that development of the foster family system was and still is very unequal around Lithuania.

Relations inside the family are very difficult to present shortly because these are created, constructed and deconstructed all the time. In the majority of cases if the evaluated substitute care families were caring about the children, those they found and decided to accept in their family, sometimes the first meeting was very important to see how the other family members accepted it and what role in the

family did parents and children play. From the observation of the communication during interviews, it could be said that in most families „dominator relationships“, or „keeping secrets“ were felt but there were many cases with very supportive, maturing and bonding relations.

The majority of foster families did not keep any relations with the biological parents of the fostered child, but kinship care families were managing these relations as everyday routine, or a very difficult part of the family life. This showed that kinship families need more training and services than foster families.

Identity of substitute child care families

Following the description of identity of Sprey – Wessing (1982), (in Drover & Kerans. 1993), all families were oriented to the role of natural parents. They understood ourselves as real parents of the child or children. As above mentioned the majority of the foster and kinship care **families were secret**, as a continuation of the soviet heritage. At the beginning of the research in 2000 Child Rights protection agencies did not have separate lists of foster families and kinship care families. Only 30 percent of the addresses of substitute parenting families in Kaunas were correct. The research showed that the date of the beginning of substitute care was in discrepancy from a few months to 14, 8 years in more than 20, 8 percent of the respondents. During the application of the interviews we found ourselves as the first visitors who were interested in the life of foster children and their families. The majority of these families were very suspicious about us.

As they evaluated themselves 20,4% of families of kinship care and 9,8% of foster families felt being very poor and poor, more living in the city (20,8%), and 13,0% in villages. There were 2, 7% of kinship care and 5, 4% of foster care families economically well functioning. The ones who felt poorer were the families that started substitute care earlier (27, 6 %). The new registered foster families (84, 2 %) felt mediocre.

As these families had been labeled „**knucklehead**“ in the past because of the blaming or rival debates in the media, the majority of them felt degraded, angry and trying to live with one more label „**caring for money**“. Many families, those living in very poor conditions from the past, lived in fear that their children might be taken out because of the economical situation in the family. Because of these money issues and at the same time because of the increasing prices and

requirements of clothing, health care, living conditions of the substitute child in the family, families felt in danger of impoverishment. The majority (only 5 negative answers in 334 cases) of the interviewed families saw themselves as successful in fostering because they had overcome problems and were able to manage all the destructive conditions from the outside. They found this success in the process of growth of the children and in their own process of growth.

At the end of this period the Seimas (Parliament) of Lithuania approved the State Conception on the Child Welfare for 10 years, where the development of services for children and families are articulated.

After 2004 Joining EU

Political and economical situation

This period is important for the development of the foster care system because it promised big welfare for families with children after joining the EU, many Legal Acts, that pass in the government and the huge emigration of Lithuanians to other European Countries. The economical growth from the year 2000 was very good, but equity and equality were decreasing very fast. Emigration of people to other western countries began in the first years of collapse of the Soviet Union. Before joining the EU the majority of the emigrants were illegal. The biggest wave of emigration was after the enlargement of the EU (2004 – 2005). From 1990 to 2008 the population in Lithuania decreased by 327, 3 thousand (official statistics), but together with unregistered emigration – 0, 5 ml. of people, the majority of them middle aged or young and families with children.

The State reacted to such situation very slowly. A strategic plan for the implementation of the State Conception on Child Welfare in 2005-2012 was accepted and alongside with this The State Child Rights Protection and The Adoption Service were organized in 2005 under the surveillance of the Ministry of Social Security and Labor. There were also new establishments of social workers for foster and kinship families in municipalities, as well as services for families at risk at municipalities from 2006. Strict requirements from the Child Rights Committee to Lithuania encouraged the development of a “Strategic plan of means” for substitute child care system from 2007 to 2012.

According to all these documentation and economical changes additionally to previous **resources**, new ones were developed. The first resource for recruitment

and training of foster parents are social workers or groups of them at the majority of the municipalities. But it is still the dominating opinion that training and services are not needed for kinship careers. The program PRIDE of Child Welfare League of America had a big influence on the development of substitute family systems. This program was adopted in 2007 with some modifications from Poland. First of all foster care trainers were prepared. A very important resource for foster and kinship care families is the Lithuanian Association of Foster Families (LVGA). The idea of having an association was alive since 2002, but it took time until this became a reality. It was established in 2007 and it is a very active organization, having branches in the majority of the municipalities. The organization works as support groups for families and as a tool for the advocacy of the legal system and expressing common needs of foster and kinship care families.

The allowance for the fostered child in the families has not changed since 1998, but this kind of financial support to the biological families has increased and during this period of time many free services (free meal at school, kindergarten, school books etc.) for foster children were refused. The requirements for economical conditions of the foster and kinship care families increased, and inflation minimized the difference between the allowances for the child in natural or foster family. At the same time foster parents have to work to have social insurance, but there is lack of vacancies in kindergartens and many children in substitute care have special needs and can not use regular services.

At the same time the number of children in institutions and in foster and kinship care homes became equal, not because the number of substitute care families has risen, but because the number of children has dramatically decreased. According to statistics (Kabašinskaitė, 2005), the probability of each child in Lithuania to grow up in an institution or without a family increased all the time.

Relations. As it is still the common understanding that raising a child is something done only for pleasure and it is not a job, if the child grows up in a family, professionalized substitute care for children with special needs is not admissible? During the 18 years period, respect from the State institutions towards foster and kinship care families is growing up. Many municipalities are organizing events with the attention focus on foster families; LVGA advocates these families' needs, which are more and more heard by the authorities. But many foster families still fear for security and for the future. There is more and more research about foster care in Lithuania, and society is becoming more informed about this phenomenon. New

topics of research on good experiences, family motivation, empowerment of the child and others, open relations, strengths and problems in these families.

Identity. Together with a huge wave of emigration the new forms of foster and kinship care families became very popular in Lithuania. There are families caring for the children of relatives, friends and neighbors who left the country to earn money. Official statistics show that there are more than 20000 children living without their parents, who are emigrant workers. These foster or kinship care families do not have any support from the State. Research in Kaunas showed that the quality of the relationship of these families with the cared child is related to the economical support given by the child's parents.

The identification of foster families is changing very slowly because of a very big economical stress and lack of good services for these families. The latest research shows that they feel more open, normal and more accepted for a good activity, but on the other hand they feel more controlled and administrated. They officially became responsible for all issues related to the child and have to fight bureaucracy for the foster child's custody, relations with natural family members, and fight for proper education and other rights. In many cases social workers are only controllers and not supporters.

The development of social services depends on the authorities in municipalities, and foster families feel and identify themselves differently as well.

Conclusions

Foster care system during the last 20 years changed from secret to publicly known, from blamed or unimportant to support deserving and as the main resource for the child development.

The changes of the foster family system are strongly related to international, national and municipal policies, private initiative, the development of social professions, changing values, attitudes in the society.

The continuation of an ethics of totalitarian oppression strongly influences the application of values of human rights in the everyday life and services, as well as in family relations.

The identification of foster family is strongly influenced by practices in macro and mezo levels.

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