

Three dimensions of welfare transformation.

Welfare reforms and poverty in post-socialist Hungary, Poland and Estonia

Serena Romano, PhD*

Abstract

Comparative social policy studies have at length focused on the trends towards an alleged regional convergence of welfare regimes clusters. Even though post-socialist European countries share a number of common traits which are generally recognized as major elements of a Central Eastern variant of the welfare state, a broader understanding of both past and recent social policy transformation is needed in order to comprehend the nature of the different paths of post-transition welfare change. This work aims at going beyond the mainstream welfare regime theory approach, by focusing on the *direction* of change observed in antipoverty policy after twenty years of transition. The paper investigates whether, in the absence of a comprehensive re-construction of this sector, minor processes of change have so far re-shaped the institutional mechanisms of social redistribution and, accordingly, how this has affected the emergence of new poverty profiles. In order to provide a different perspective on the post-socialist model of welfare, in this paper we seek to identify different processes of welfare 'recalibration', described as “an act of institutional reconfiguration and re-balancing” (Ferrera et al. 2000). We analyze reforms from 1989 to date in antipoverty programmes (unemployment, social assistance and family benefits) of Poland, Hungary and Estonia according to normative, functional and distributive dimensions of welfare change. Afterward, we observe current poverty profiles provided by Eurostat data. Our findings suggest that social inequalities and the impoverishment of specific social groups are shaped differently in each of the countries examined according to the specific role exerted by the domestic legitimization of social justice values, the distributive mechanisms of redistribution among social and economic categories, and the overall ideas concerning the 'function' of the welfare state.

*Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II - Department of Sociology
Via Orsi 2/E, 80129 Napoli
romano.se@gmail.com
+39 3397157646