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Emergency welfare states in action: Social policy adaptations to COVID-19 in the Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia

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Abstract

This article analyses the developments of the welfare state's reaction to the pandemic in Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia during 2020–2022, asking whether the changes in social policy represent only temporary responses to the challenges of the pandemic, or if the changes will likely lead to long-run transformative changes in social policies. All three countries applied emergency adaptive changes to some extent except for job protection, as the short-time work schemes represent a permanent change in Czechia and Slovakia. Furthermore, the absorption capacity of the welfare state was relatively good, which enabled the countries to avoid the negative social impacts of the crisis in terms of increased unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion. We argue the governments did not introduce permanent third-order change because they already introduced such changes during the transition to the market economy in which they introduced a low-expenditure welfare state trajectory. During the pandemic, this trajectory limited their fiscal space for introducing reforms that could radically expand the welfare state. Policy learning and political constellations also had some influence.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, social policy changes

1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID pandemic has presented a challenge for the European welfare states as GDP fell by an average of 5.9% among the EU-27 during 2020. Government restrictions on economic activities contributed to this decline. At the individual level, threats of unemployment increased and some groups, such as self-employed and non-standard workers, were left unprotected. Risks of becoming ill and having to stay in quarantine increased as well, as did the risk that one must stay at home to take care of one's children when schools and pre-school facilities closed.

Thus, the pandemic has presented new challenges for welfare states. Although many governments tried to implement austerity policies to deal with the increase in debts incurred in the aftermath of the financial crisis, the COVID pandemic reached such a magnitude that all the governments in the area felt forced to follow expansionary policies and have continued these policies for over t2 years (Béland, Cantillon, et al., 2021; Béland, Dinan, et al., 2021). This might give greater legitimacy to the welfare state and the state as an actor that has the capacity to improve the living standards of the population and lead to calls for increased expansion of the welfare state to meet new social risks (e.g., Aidukaite et al., 2021; Ennggist et al., 2021). On the other hand, it is also possible that governments will return to neo-liberal orthodoxy, abandon temporary measures implemented during the pandemic and introduce austerity measures to decrease the budget deficits once the pandemic recedes.

We analyse the developments of the welfare state's reaction to the pandemic in Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia during 2020–2022. Post-communist welfare states deviate from the other European welfare states in having a *hybrid model*, so they do not fit so well into the traditional welfare typologies. Second, since the collapse of communist rule, their systems have been in flux, and have been highly adaptive to the economic and political turn-outs (Inglot, 2008). The question then emerges how the new policy challenge coming from the pandemic affects their trajectory. These three countries are particularly interesting to compare, as they have had much different political constellations: the rightwing, illiberal democrat Orban has dominated Hungarian politics for over a decade, while the leftwing populist Smer had dominated Slovak politics, but was replaced by a centre-right coalition of various types of populist parties shortly after the pandemic began. Meanwhile, the centrist, entrepreneurial populist ANO party was in power in Czechia during the first years of the pandemic, but a centre-right coalition replaced it in 2021. This allows us to also see whether path dependency or differences in political constellations were more important in determining social policies during the pandemic.

We analyse whether the changes in social policy represent only temporary responses to the new challenges of the pandemic, or if the changes are permanent, and, as such in some respect also responses to the more general long-run societal challenges. We also assess whether the changes represent what Hall (1993) calls first-order changes (adaptation of the existing instruments), second-order changes (implementation of the new policy instruments) or third-order changes (a shift in policy goals).

In the next section, we discuss our theoretical assumptions, then we provide an analysis of the welfare state developments in Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia. In the fourth section, we discuss our findings in a broader perspective of welfare state developments. In the final section, we give our concluding remarks.

2 | THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

2.1 | The welfare state and pandemic

Béland, Cantillon, et al. (2021) argue that policies are path dependent during times of political and economic stability. Path-departing changes are relatively rare even at ‘critical junctures’, that occur because of exogenous shocks like financial crises or pandemics. Moreira and Hick (2021: 262) claim that policies remain path dependent during times of uncertainty, because people stick to what they know best so governments avoid unknown policy alternatives. Previous studies bring evidence about the role of policy legacies in terms of their adaptive capacity of the welfare state faced with new emergent risks. Thus, during the pandemic the Nordic countries mostly only extended their existing universalist and generous welfare state measures rather than introducing new ones (Greve et al., 2021), while liberal countries had to adopt new measures besides increasing the generosity of the existing ones (Béland, Dinan, et al., 2021; Hick & Murphy, 2021). Meanwhile, continental and South European welfare states adopted new protection mechanisms for non-standard workers (Cantillon et al., 2021; Moreira et al., 2021). Thus, the absorptive capacity of the welfare state coincides with the strong path dependency trajectory: lower absorptive capacity induces additional measures.

However, even under the circumstances of exogenous shocks, in the long run, public policy is rooted in economic preconditions. Therefore, institutions and policies work within a framework in which the economy places certain limits (Noh et al., 2022). In particular, fiscal space in government spending matters, so lower government debts enable governments to allocate more funding to social expenditure to compensate for the social impacts of the pandemic.

Demand and political factors are also influential. According to the compensation hypothesis, when social risks are increasing, public demand for welfare programmes increases. Crises make partisan and electoral politics more attentive to public demands (Noh et al., 2022).

2.2 | The welfare state in Central-East Europe during pandemic: Tentative hypotheses

Scholars have classified the post-communist welfare states as being a hybrid of Bismarckian, neoliberal and social democratic elements (Aidukaite et al., 2021; Cerami, 2006, 2010; Inglot, 2008; Kuitto, 2016; Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2019; Vanhuysse, 2009). Even though these countries generally have a Bismarckian core dating back to pre-communist times, during the transition to market economies, the countries transformed their welfare states promptly by adopting additional emergency measures, although most of the social policy areas have shown high degrees of path dependency. Bismarck-inspired social insurance schemes continue to provide universal coverage to the benefits, but at low replacement rates, and family policies have continued down a relatively conservative path based on the norm of threeness, which encourages mothers to stay at home until the child reaches the age of three. Meanwhile, a neoliberal approach dominates labour market policies, which emphasise a work-first approach rather than human capital development. Even this is somewhat path dependent in that the communist regimes required everyone to work. Similarly, their neoliberal approach implies a relatively inaccessible and ungenerous minimum income scheme (Saxonberg et al., 2013; Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2019). Despite important differences between post-communist countries, their differences are less pronounced than the differences between the post-communist countries and the other welfare models (Aidukaite, 2011; Bohle & Greskovits, 2007; Fenger, 2007).

According to the *path dependency hypothesis* (*H1*), the CEE countries will only implement temporary first and second-order changes in most social policy areas. First, the post-communist welfare states have been in 'constant flux' for decades, and continued to behave as 'emergency welfare states' (Inglot, 2008). They are highly adaptive to the economic fluctuations and political turns, which emerged in the communist and post-communist periods. Although the pandemic presents a challenge, it is hardly comparable with the challenge of the transition to a market economy during the 1990s. Despite the relatively low levels of spending on social programs in the region, the welfare states have been generous enough to effectively alleviate poverty risks—thanks to their universalist and redistributive principles combined with ad hoc, continuous emergency measures that governments have adopted during crises. In this context, policymakers might deem temporary first and second-order changes to be a sufficient response to the crisis (e.g., Inglot, 2008; Kuitto, 2016; Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2019).

On the other hand, there are reasons to expect more significant, possibly even third order permanent changes in the specific policy areas (*H2 path departure hypothesis in specific sectors*). Previous studies show that policies in different areas in one country may follow different paths because of different policy legacies (Weir & Skocpol, 1985). In particular, new measures to protect existing jobs during lockdowns and when there are restrictions of economic activities might be expected. Policy learning plays a role here: the CEE countries learned in the 1990s that the core workforce should be protected, otherwise, the increasing risks of poverty and social unrest may represent a significant political challenge. In the early 1990s, Czechia succeeded in keeping unemployment levels low because the government protected jobs in privatised companies when state-owned banks tolerated their indebtedness, protecting them against bankruptcy. This contrasts with the shock therapy in Hungary, which led to much higher unemployment levels (e.g., Bruszt & Stark, 1997; Kornai, 1993; Vanhuysse, 2006). Slovakia attempted to prevent job losses by adopting a similar strategy as Czechia. In 1997, parliament passed a law on the Revitalisation of Enterprises that introduced tax deferrals and debt forgiveness to companies to deal with the fact that during the previous year the total amount of bad company debt had reached 18% of GDP (EBRD, 1997). Policy learning comes also from international experiences: all three countries in focus were inspired by the *Kurzarbeit* (short time working) policy which Germany implemented during the years following the financial crisis and which many countries implemented during the pandemic (OECD, 2010). Saxonberg et al. (2013) showed in the Czech case how employment policies diverged from family policy and healthcare in implementing third order changes in the period 1990s–2000s.

Finally, *H3 compensation/government protection hypothesis* predicts that experiencing economic hardship during crises increases support for welfare policies (e.g., Vis et al., 2011). Previous studies confirm strong public support for welfare state intervention and redistribution policies in the post-communist countries because of deeply rooted egalitarian values among the population stemming from the *communist legacy* (Dallinger, 2010; Lipsmeyer & Nordstrom, 2003). Aidukaite et al. (2021) expected these countries to strengthen their welfare state when observing a series of new solidaristic measures adopted during the first pandemic year. Such an assumption obviously relies on the responsiveness of the governments to demands of social protection by the public in order to maintain power.

Thus, when pandemic restrictions are no longer in place, it is interesting to examine how the post-communist welfare states deal with the COVID pandemic. Will they continue the tradition of only engaging in short-term emergency solutions, or will they make more significant long-term reforms?

Here, we discuss the most important policy measures that the three countries implemented in response to COVID-19. We are neither concerned here with the measures dealing with epidemiologic aspects (such as mask-wearing rules), nor with the measures to support the economic sustainability of businesses in the affected sectors. Our concern is the social policy measures which may show a shift in the welfare state trajectory.

3 | METHOD AND DATA

In our analysis, we built on the historical-institutional tradition by analysing the policies implemented in Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia in several social policy fields during the pandemic and classifying them according to Peter Hall's typology. First-order changes occur when the levels (or settings) are altered while the overall goals and instruments remain the same. Second-order changes take place when the hierarchy of goals remains the same but the basic techniques, instruments as well as their settings are altered. Third-order change comes about when all three components of a policy are altered—the instrument settings, the instruments themselves, and the hierarchy of goals behind the policy (Hall, 1993: 278–289).

In order to identify the types of policy changes we conduct an institutional analysis documenting if and how policy settings, instruments and goals changed compared to pre-pandemic times. Following Hall (1993), we operationalise the above changes as follows. (1) First-order changes implies changes in eligibility conditions, target groups, levels and duration of benefits. (2) Second-order change implies that new types of benefits, and services are implemented representing a change in the policy instruments. (3) Third-order change requires a shift in policy priorities; and the new priorities behind the instruments in effect represent a change in policy goals; such a change may be either explicitly stated by the policy actors or it may be an implicit change, such as an obvious outcome of new policy instruments. In this article we focus on the implicit changes of goals, since it is difficult to investigate what goals policymakers might have actually held.

The second criterion of our analysis is the timing of policies: We distinguish temporary changes (in effect only during state of emergency) and permanent, long-run changes (in effect after state of emergency was terminated, without a given time limit).

We focus on the main social policy fields which were highly relevant during pandemic: employment policies, sickness policies, minimum income schemes and unemployment protection, housing support, leave for parents caring about children and some other like support for pensioners. We use data from Eurofound (2022), European Commission (2022), IMF (2021) and data available in other published comparative and national studies.

4 | SOCIAL POLICY MEASURES RESPONDING TO COVID-19

4.1 | Short-time work (STW): Protection of existing jobs

For all three countries employment protection became the first social policy priority. The Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, expressed this well on 6 April 2020: 'The government's economic protection action plan aims to create as many jobs as the coronavirus is destroying' (M1 channel).[1] The Central East European (CEE) governments implemented several measures at the beginning of the pandemic to protect jobs. The most significant were short-time work (STW) and job subsidy schemes (JSS) inspired by the German *Kurzarbeit* scheme. The measure was not completely new. Previously, all three countries had gained financing from ESF projects to employ similar but less large-scale measures during the first years following the 2008 financial crisis (OECD, 2010). At the beginning of the pandemic, STW, by contrast, was implemented as a large-scale systemic measure under clear eligibility conditions enabling equal access.

Czechia applied the most generous and most encompassing employment protection scheme among the three countries. It covered employees in firms closed by government order (Antivirus A), as well as employees in firms which reduced their production or services (Antivirus B). The Antivirus A scheme provided full compensation for one's previous wage with a relatively high ceiling (Sirovátka et al., 2021), see Table 1. It applies to employees being quarantined or isolated from COVID-19 and in closed companies. The measure remained in force until the end of February 2022 while in 2021 the government proposed this measure as a standard policy instrument to be used in times of economic slowdowns: At the beginning of May 2021, parliament approved a proposal to set the wage

TABLE 1 Short time work schemes.

Scheme (April 2020)	Eligibility	Wage to employee	Paid by state	Type of change
CZ Antivirus A	Quarantine, company closed by government order	60%, 100% (October 2020)	100%	Permanent change 2nd order
Antivirus B	Quarantine, care of child 30% employees	60%–100%	70%	
HU Kurzarbeit	Cut of working time 30%–50%	70% (and loan for wages possible)	70%	Temporary 2nd order
	Organise training for 30% cut working hours			
SK Wage subsidy (Kurzarbeit)	Closed by order	80%, 100% (October 2020)	80%; 100% since October 2020	Permanent 2nd order
	Drop in revenue ≥20% (10%)	20%–80%	See above or fixed sum €180	

Source: The authors, based on Sirovátka et al. (2021) and Eurofound (2022).

subsidy paid by employers to employees at 80% of salaries for the reduced working time, with a ceiling of 1.5 times the average wage. Employers received 80% of the wage costs reimbursed by the state (MLSA, 2021a; Sirovátka et al., 2021). In June 2021, this measure became a permanent measure when the senate approved an amendment to the Employment Act, which allows the government to decide by itself to implement the STW-scheme during a crisis (MLSA, 2021b).

Hungary adopted a more selective scheme aimed only at firms which did not close but reduced production by less than 75%, compensating 70% of lost salary with a low ceiling HUF of 214,300/€584 (see Table 1). Hungary also implemented a targeted measure of income support for employees engaged in R&D activities in April 2020: a 3 month's wage subsidy of 40% of gross income with a ceiling of HUF 318,920/€874; the measure ended in February 2021 (Albert, 2021; Eurofound, 2022). Nevertheless, job retention policies were less important than measures to support industry and infrastructures (Medve-Bálint & Bohle, 2022).

Next, the widely used activation measure, public works scheme was re-extended compared to the previous period since March 2020: compulsory participation in the programme was introduced for those who cannot find a job in the labour market within 3 months and also restrictions of compulsory participation on skilled workers were lifted in state of emergency (Albert, 2021).

In April 2020, Slovakia introduced a scheme supporting 80% of wages when companies had to shut down because of the pandemic (option 1) and between 20% and 80% when the companies reduced their activities because of the pandemic (option 2, see Table 1). The subsidy of 80% of wages was also provided to employers who maintained a job within the active labour market policy (ALMP) projects. From October 2020, it covered up to 100% of the total labour cost of employees, including compulsory payments to insurance funds; however, it had a €1100 ceiling. Under option 2 (a fixed subsidy), the government replaced a drop in revenues. Previously, it paid the subsidy when the decline of revenues was at least 20% the decline, but then changed it to 10%, see Table 1.

In April 2022, the Slovak government prolonged the availability of the measure for January and February 2022. Thus, eligible employers could ask for support until the end of April 2022. Since 1 May 2022, a new universal, not COVID-19 related measure *Kurzarbeit* is available for employers.

In the three countries, STW and job subsidy schemes represented the most important additional measures implemented during the pandemic. They represent a shift from market-conforming employment policies used during pre-pandemic times towards *emergency Keynesianism*. They were implemented fast, developed during the pandemic and included steps towards full coverage and greater generosity. Furthermore, they were adopted as a permanent measure. Czechia provided the most generous schemes and Hungary least generous in terms of replacement rates of income support to employees and employers and the ceilings. Hungary combined the STW scheme with market-conforming principles to some extent, by requiring companies that receive support to maintain their economic activities at a certain level and to provide vocational training programmes to employees. We classify this measure as a second-order reform as the goal of protecting the existing jobs was previously put on the front during economic slowdowns: in the Czechia during 1990s, in all three countries after financial crisis of 2008. The instrument is new, however, in the sense that the eligibility conditions and substance have greatly changed, leading to large-scale usage, a big increase in the generosity of support and change of status from being a temporary to being a permanent program in Czechia and Slovakia.

4.2 | Other measures protecting employment

STW and job subsidy schemes were accompanied by other measures protecting employment, but they have not become permanent. They fall under the category of second-order change, where the instruments temporarily changed but not the goals.

In Czechia, the government provided a waiver of social insurance payments employers with less than 50 employees for up to 3 months starting in June 2020. It also allowed employers to defer their social insurance payments from May until October 2020 for all employers in the private sector.

Hungary provided tax relief on labour for certain target sectors hit hard by COVID-19 in the months of March–June 2020 and extended it until 2021 in the periods when there was a state of emergency. The tax relief was for both employers and employees, who only had to pay health insurance. Next, for those in the hard-hit sectors, the government also provided relief from social insurance payments and the flat rate tax for self-employed and micro-companies.

In May 2020, Hungary also added a wage subsidy (covering 100% of labour costs with a ceiling of HUF 100,000/€225 monthly for 6 months) to create jobs for registered jobseekers. In October 2020, the ceiling was increased to HUF 200,000/€550 for 6 months, which corresponds to 150% of the minimum wage but the rate of subsidy dropped to 50% of labour costs. Since June 2020, the target group has been those who have been registered over 6 months as jobseekers, as well as youth between 15 and 25. In October 2020, the government also included low-skilled labourers (Albert, 2021; Eurofound, 2022).

Next, between October 2021 and January 2022, the Hungarian government provided a subsidy to businesses to cover the costs of training their employees and the cost of wages for downtime because of this training. The subsidy ranged from 50% to 70% of wages according to company size. The subsidy had a ceiling of HUF 200,000 (about €555), or HUF 300,000 per month for targeted vulnerable groups, with the condition that their employment must continue at least 12 months after the training ends (Eurofound, 2022). In January 2021, parliament passed a permanent measure to support the employment of disabled people, abolishing the income limit for people with disabilities which represents a first order change.[2] Thus, the disabled are entitled to rehabilitation and disability benefits at any level of earnings.

Hungary also made working time regulations more flexible as deviations from the labour code were allowed, such as changing the working hours and allowing employers to order employees to work remotely (home office) and increasing the period in which employers can ask employees to work irregular hours. These rules were extended until June 2022 (Albert, 2021; Eurofound, 2022) and represent first-order changes as the government simply adapted existing measures.

In Slovakia from March 2020 to December 2020, employers and the self-employed could defer their social insurance payments if the public health protection authority forced them to shut down for over 15 days or if they faced a fall in revenue of over 40%. This provision was later extended until June 2021 (Gerbery & Bednárik, 2021). During the autumn of 2021, the pandemic worsened, so the government prolonged the measure until the end of 2021. In January 2022, the government decided to further postpone the compulsory payments that employers and self-employed must pay to the Social Insurance Agency until 31 March 2025 (Eurofound, 2022).

Similar to Hungary, in March 2021 Slovakia also passed laws to make work more flexible. The law defines more clearly conditions for working from home and on-line with the aim to prevent, for example, work performed on the premises of the employer's customers. Furthermore, the employer must reimburse the employees for their increased expenses associated with withholding home office and teleworking.

In summary, waivers and deferrals on social insurance payments and tax reliefs were temporary, adaptive, second-order measures, in which the governments changed the instruments but not the goals. Czechia provided the most comprehensive and generous measures to support survival of the existing jobs with such instruments, while Hungary was rather selective and Slovakia modest. Hungary also provided active labour market policy temporary adaptive measures for the unemployed (job subsidies) and employees (support to employers for vocational training programmes). Making work schedules more flexible was another temporary adaptive measure in Hungary, while in Slovakia some permanent adaptations were made in the Labour Code related to home office and telework.

4.3 | Sickness benefits and sick pay

When coping with COVID-19, European countries adopted different measures for dealing with the existing sickness scheme in terms of the requirements to receive sickness benefits, the level of benefits, the period of receiving the benefits and the manner of their funding (Baptista et al., 2021).

Interestingly, in Czechia, part of the sick pay employers paid was reimbursed through the STW scheme (see above). Because of the risk that people would avoid taking COVID-19 tests so that they would not have to go into quarantine if the results are positive, in March 2021, the government announced a new extraordinary benefit for employees in mandatory quarantine. This benefit supplements the standard sickness benefit by providing an additional CKZ 370 (14 Euros) per day for 14 days. The total sickness benefits were so high that they often exceeded the net wage for those in quarantine who earned less than the average wage (Sirovátka et al., 2021).

Hungary was the only of the three countries which recognised COVID-19 infections gained while performing employment-related duties as an occupational injury. This entitled employees to a benefit equal to 100% of their salary (Albert, 2021).

Slovakia introduced a pandemic sickness benefit which pays 55% of gross wages (about 70% of net wage) from the first day of quarantine or work incapacity due to COVID-19, while in other cases it only pays 25%. The government also abolished the employers' obligation to pay sick leave benefits for COVID-19 related cases; instead, the Social Insurance Agency took over the responsibility (Gerbery & Bednárik, 2021). The pandemic sickness benefit ceased on 1 December 2021. Subsequently, employers resumed the payment of compensatory income during the first 10 calendar days of the employee's illness (Eurofound, 2022).

In principle, the three countries used their existing schemes to cover the periods of sickness and quarantine during the pandemic, but added some temporary (in one case permanent) adaptive adjustments of replacement rates which represented first order changes. Czechia had the most generous replacement rates while the Hungarian policy was to consider COVID-19 infection in the workplace as an occupational disease (see Table 2). The three countries also extended their coverage of the statutory healthcare system in order to cover COVID-19 related treatments, including coverage for testing and vaccinating. For reasons of space we will not go into details here about this.

4.4 | Minimum income schemes and unemployment protection

Similar to many EU countries, Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia implemented income protection measures for vulnerable groups, but in contrast to most of these countries, Czechia and Hungary did not improve unemployment benefit schemes. In 2020, however, Slovakia extended the period in which one could receive unemployment benefits, so the total benefit period increased from 6 to 10 months. In March 2021, the government reactivated the measure with an extension by 2 months (from 6 to 8 months) which expired on 31 May 2021 (Gerbery & Bednárik, 2021).

In their minimum income schemes (MIS), the governments of this study did not raise the levels of key benefits, rather they aimed to improve the coverage of some vulnerable groups. In Czechia, the Ministry of Industry and Transport provided a new type of benefit outside of the MIS: a lump sum compensation for the self-employed in the amount of CZK 25,000 (€562) for the period between 12 March and 30 April 2020, which amounted to CZK 500 (€19) per day (see Table 3). No income threshold was set. In February 2021, the government increased the compensation to CZK 1000 (€38) per day, for those claimants whose income had dropped by at least 50%. In December

TABLE 2 Sickness benefit and sick pay (due to COVID).

Country	Replacement rate (standard)	Improvements during pandemic for COVID related cases	Type of change
Czechia	60% (66% after 30 days, 72% after 60 days)	Extra benefit CZK 370/E14 per day for 14 days	Temporary 1st order
Hungary	60%	100% if infection acquired when performing employment related duties	Permanent 1st order
Slovakia	55%	55% paid from the first day (instead of 25%)	Temporary 1st order

Source: The authors.

TABLE 3 Minimum income schemes.

Country	Improvements during pandemic for COVID related cases	Type of change
CZ	Bonus for self-employed €19/day	Temporary 2nd order
	From February 2021 €38/day if income decreases by at least 30%	
	Extraordinary immediate social assistance made temporarily more accessible October 2020	Temporary 1st order
HU	One off grant for solo self-employed €608 in 2021	Temporary 2nd order
	Extended entitlements for child-related flat rate benefits (March 2020–December 2021)	Temporary 1st order
SK	March 2020–July 2021: €210/month, €300 since October 2020 for self-employed, those without any other entitlements	Temporary 2nd order
	In June 2021, one-time allowance €333 to the most vulnerable families. October 2021, €100 per dependent children under 18	Temporary 2nd order

Source: The authors.

2021, the government prolonged the compensation bonus until 2022. The self-employed—except for seasonal entrepreneurs—became eligible for the bonus if they suffered from a decrease in sales caused by COVID-19 of at least 30% during the period from 1 June to 30 October 2021 (Eurofound, 2022). This new instrument represents a second-order change, as it is a new type of benefit, but does not represent a change in the basic goals.

The Czech minimum income scheme includes two means-tested regular benefits: an allowance for living and a supplement for housing costs. The third benefit is a discretionary lump-sum payment, called 'the extraordinary immediate social assistance'. This benefit had been made temporarily more accessible since October 2020. Since February 2022 this one-off benefit has helped residents who do not have sufficient funds to cover their necessary expenses. Here, the benefit may also be provided to pay for the one-off costs associated with energy bills, which arose because of the war in Ukraine and the green transition (Eurofound, 2022).

In contrast to Czechia and Slovakia, Hungary did not adjust the minimum income scheme, but instead improved the child-benefit-package (see Table 3). In March 2020, Hungary extended the entitlements for child-care-related flat-rate benefits of HUF 28,500 (€78) monthly, paid to persons on maternity leave that would have expired during the state of emergency until the the of state emergency ended. The government also provided a new type of compensation for solo self-employed from June 2021–December 2021. These beneficiaries received a one-off grant equal to the monthly minimum wage for skilled workers amounting to HUF 219,000 or €608 monthly. Only entrepreneurs were eligible, who had no employees and, therefore, were not eligible for economic subsidies provided to these sectors (Eurofound, 2022).

In contrast to Hungary, which did not adjust its minimum income scheme, Slovakia combined adjustments in its minimum income scheme with universal pandemic allowance for families with children. In April 2020, Slovakia improved its existing extraordinary support of humanitarian aid by granting a new type of benefit (thus, a second-order change). This regular SOS subsidy lasted until July 2021 (see Table 3). The monthly subsidy amounted to €210, and which in October 2020 increased to €300. This benefit went to those who stopped working—including non-standard workers, or to those who ran a business and found themselves with no income from any other benefits during the pandemic (Eurofound, 2022; Gerbery & Bednárik, 2021). Next, in June 2021, the government paid a one-time pandemic allowance of €333 to the most vulnerable families.[3] In October 2021, the Ministry also approved a 'pandemic benefit' of €100 per dependent children under 18-years-old.[4]

Czechia and Slovakia only made only partial and temporary adjustments in their minimum income schemes. The first-order changes (the use of existing instruments) included: (a) easier access to extraordinary immediate need benefit in Czechia and lump sum per child paid in Slovakia; (b) an extended child-care related benefit in Hungary. Meanwhile second-order (using new instruments) adaptive changes included: (a) special income support for self-employed in Czechia and Hungary; (b) new regular benefits to those ineligible for other social benefits in Slovakia. These measures were mainly concerned with covering self-employed and non-standard workers and those belonging to other previously ineligible categories; however, the benefit levels were not very generous except for Czechia, where a compensation bonus for the self-employed increased to a level close to the country's average wage.

4.5 | Housing support

Housing support was rather modest in the three countries of this study. Both the Czech and Slovak governments introduced measures protecting the rights of both homeowners and tenants, while the Hungarian government only added measures to protect homeowners. None of the three countries provided rent subsidies on loans.

In March 2020, Czechia adopted a moratorium, allowing for the deferral of loan repayments and rent for those who had experienced a temporary loss of income because of a COVID-19 infection or related preventative measures. The measure was valid from April 2020 to September 2020; 80% of deferred loans were related to housing. However, one had to pay the rent by 31 December 2020. In addition, the price moratorium on housing rent was in effect from 24 April 2020 during the state of emergency in 2020 (Sirovátka et al., 2021).

Similar to Czechia, Hungary suspended the requirement to repay loans for private individuals on 18 March 2020. Every commercial loan, mortgage or other loan contract signed before then received a freeze on loan repayments, capital repayment and any related fees until 31 December 2020. In September 2021, the government approved an extension of the suspension of loan repayments until 31 October 2021. In addition, vulnerable groups (pensioners, parents and expectant parents, those enrolled in public works programmes, individuals who lost income in 2020) could request an extension until 30 June 2022 (Albert, 2021; Eurofound, 2022). In October 2020, the government decided that in order to protect families, starting from 1 January 2021, those buying new homes now only have to pay 5% VAT instead of the previous 27%.[5]

Slovakia introduced a deferral on mortgage payments from April 2020, valid until the end of 2021. Slovakia also introduced a ban on terminating tenancy agreements. However, this did not suspend the tenants' duty to pay their financial obligations (Gerbery & Bednárik, 2021).

In summary, deferrals on loan and mortgage payments and bans on terminating a tenancy agreement were temporary adaptive second-order measures. Only Hungary introduced a permanent, more significant adaptive measure: a lower VAT rate on new homes for families (second-order change).

4.6 | Leave for parents whose children could not attend school or a pre-school service because of COVID-19

The pandemic caused significant problems for parents when their children had to stay at home because their schools or pre-schools closed down. Czechia built on the existing caregiver's allowance, increasing it from 60% to 80% of the ‘daily calculation base’, so for most families, the level increased from 70% to about 90% of net wage (since benefits are not taxed). In October 2020, this caregiver's allowance was 70% of the daily calculation base with a minimum CZK 400 (€15.40) per day for taking care of children up to 10 years old. The benefit was available for the entire period of the (pre-)school closure until June 2021, see Table 4. In November 2021, the government restored the measure, because although there were no longer country-wide school closures, many parents had to stay at home with their children because of local school closures or because they were in quarantine due to contact with an infected person (Eurofound, 2022).

The Czech government also introduced a new, temporary caregiver's allowance for self-employed persons who were not previously eligible (since participation in the sickness insurance scheme is optional for them). The benefit level was CZK 424 (€16.30) per day. In October 2020, it decreased to CZK 400 (€15.40) (Sirovátka et al., 2021).

TABLE 4 Leave for parents in case of childcare (due to COVID).

Country	Improvements during pandemic for COVID related cases	Type of change
Czechia	Care allowance increased from 60% to 80% of daily calculation base, from March 2020, 70% from October 2020 until June 2021 (for children up to 10 years old) during time when (pre)school facility was closed	Temporary 1st order
Hungary	Covered by *Kurzarbeit* (70% of previous salary)	Permanent 2nd order, but a different policy
Slovakia	55% of gross monthly earnings (children up to 12 years) during time when (pre)school facility was closed	Temporary 1st order

Source: The authors.

Hungary did not implement a similar scheme since it relied on the STW scheme to solve the problem. Under this programme, the state paid parents a reimbursement amounting to 70% of their wage if they could not work because they were taking care of children due to (pre-)school closure.

In Slovakia, parents taking care of a sick relative (usually their children) were eligible for a benefit amounting to 55% of their gross daily earnings. One could receive this support for children under 12-years old who stayed at home because of school closures, children under 16 because of illness and for taking care of relatives because of the closure of their social service facility. The measure was adopted in March 2020 and in force during 2020 and 2021 (Gerbery & Bednárik, 2021).

In summary, while Hungary relied on its STW scheme to support families whose children had to stay at home, Czechia and Slovakia used existing sickness insurance paid leaves and temporarily extended periods of benefit provision. In contrast to Slovakia, Czechia also increased its replacement rates. This all were temporary, first order changes (see Table 4).

In addition to the above measures, Czechia and Slovakia introduced temporary modest lump-sum additional payments provided to pensioners (first order changes). In Slovakia this measure was selective, in contrast to Czechia, when the benefit to pensioners depended on being vaccinated (temporary second order measure). Hungary applied a more generous measure by reintroducing the 13th month pension, which it had abolished in 2009 (a permanent first-order measure).

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The welfare state in the Central-East European Countries has exhibited a strong path dependency during pandemic in 2020–2021. Even though some permanent changes have taken place, most changes have been temporary, of the first or second-order. The most important second-order change was the STW and job subsidy schemes that all three countries adopted. This represents a departure from their previous market conforming principles in employment regulations and policies. In other areas, the three states restricted their changes to temporary adaptive first- and second-order changes by enhancing the key features of their welfare model, which underpins their absorption capacity. This model includes a combination of universalism and redistribution towards threatened groups. On the other hand, we observe a lack of more significant adaptive and transformative changes in some welfare state areas where the other European countries adopted some. In particular, there was no improvement in unemployment benefits in Czechia and Hungary, and only a marginal improvement in Slovakia. Similarly, only partial changes were adopted in minimum income schemes, in supporting housing and policies to prevent homelessness.

When turning to our hypotheses, the *path dependency hypothesis* holds for most areas. The CEE post-communist welfare states build on the legacy of their good capacity to adapt to crises. Apparently, all three countries in our study strived to adapt to the crises by enhancing key qualities of their welfare state by expanding coverage to threatened groups like the self-employed and non-standard workers or, sometimes, slightly improving replacement rates and the accessibility of benefits (temporary, first-order and second-order measures).

Building on their good absorption capacity and adopted measures, the post-communist welfare states in Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia have done comparatively well during the pandemic despite their low levels of social expenditure. Although they have experienced a slightly lower decline in GDP growth in 2020 compared to the EU-27 average, in 2021 unemployment rates were significantly lower in Czechia and Hungary (2.8% and 4.1%) and slightly lower in Slovakia (6.8%) than the EU-27 average (7.0%) (European Commission, 2022). In 2021, government debt was lower in Czechia (41%) and Slovakia (63%), with only Hungary (76%) being close to the EU-27 average of 88%. Meanwhile, poverty rates remained significantly below the EU-27 average (16.8% in 2021) and decreased in Czechia to 8% and remained between 12% and 13% in Hungary and Slovakia (European Commission, 2022). The effectiveness of social transfers in alleviating poverty remains much better than the EU-27 average (50%) and even improved during the pandemic year of 2020 in all three countries (to 77% in Czechia, 72% in Hungary and Slovakia) (European Commission, 2022; own computations). This success may be explained by the almost full coverage of all groups of population by social security benefits in post-communist welfare states, combined with their emphasis on redistribution towards those belonging to risk groups, which lead to relatively positive outcomes despite the modest replacement rates.

The other influential legacy is that, despite the COVID-19 crisis and the pressing need for emergency measures, the countries in focus did not abandon the trajectory of the low expenditure welfare state. Concretely, social protection expenditure remains significantly below the EU-27 average and this did not change during pandemic (in Czechia 14.4%, Hungary 13.6% and Slovakia 16.6% GDP compared to the EU average of 21.9%). While in the EU-27 social protection expenditure increased by an average of 2.6 percentage points in 2020, it only increased by 2 percentage points in Slovakia, 1.9 percentage points in Czechia and 0.9 percentage points in Hungary (European Commission, 2022).

The three countries were also able to implement some transformative second-order, permanent changes, however, such as the introduction of STW schemes. Consequently, the *path departure hypothesis in specific sectors* partly holds in the sense that permanent changes were introduced in Czechia and Slovakia which deviate from the neo-liberal approach that has dominated labour-market policies in these countries. The main reason that no clear third-order changes have been adopted during the pandemic is that COVID represents a weaker challenge than the transition from a command to a market economy in the 1990s, which in turn created the need to establish completely new social programs, such as establishing a system of social safety nets, unemployment insurances and introducing active labour market policies. Back then, the goals and instruments had clearly shifted, making them third-order changes.

During the pandemic, by contrast, the governments introduced STW schemes partially because of policy learning based on their experiences from the transition to market economies, as well as lessons from Germany's experience with *Kurzarbeit*, as well as from their previous experience with STW schemes which they had introduced as temporary measures in connection with the financial crisis of 2008. During the pandemic, STW schemes were implemented, but this time as a systemic, large-scale measure, which became permanent in Czechia and Slovakia. Thus, it represents a more significant explicit shift in goal priorities than observed before: from market-conforming principles in employment policies to emergency Keynesianism. This happened during the pandemic because of the exceptionality of the situation when many businesses had to close because of government orders or they had decrease their activities for pandemic-related reasons. Thus, expectations towards government protection increased significantly. This was a situation of 'accumulation of anomalies, experimentation of new forms of policies' Hall (1993: 280) when 'an emerging consensus that the status quo is unacceptable' plays a key role for new emerging policy paradigms (Baumgartner, 2013: 252). Yet, it is not clear that the government's actual goals had changed, since they had already introduced STW schemes on a temporary basis after the financial crisis and because, despite the fact that their labour policies had a neo-liberal emphasis, the policy legacies of these countries had more of a Bismarckian tradition (Cerami, 2010; Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2019) and STW schemes follow the Bismarckian tradition of favouring insiders (i.e., those with jobs) over outsiders (i.e., those without jobs). In Hungary, the reasons why the SWT scheme was not turned to permanent measure are probably twofold: most significant support for businesses was provided during pandemic through direct selective subsidies rather than through SWT (see above theory section); second, in contrast to Czechia and Slovakia, Hungary employs neoliberal labour market and social policies (Medve-Bálint & Bohle, 2022).

Finally, the *compensation hypothesis* holds to various degrees. All three countries promptly introduced measures to alleviate people's suffering due to the pandemic. These were rather modest first and second order changes, underpinned by a good absorptive capacity of the welfare state, with differences among countries regarding generosity and coverage. Czechia adopted the most generous and universal measures. Hungary was the least generous, and often selective while targeting the traditional family and emphasising the activation of the unemployed. Slovakia applied modestly generous measures by combining universal and selective measures and targeting vulnerable families.

These differences correspond with the different political constellations among the countries. During the main part of the pandemic in Czechia, the centre-populist entrepreneurial ANO was in power in a coalition with the Social Democrats, who strongly supported encompassing, generous measures. ANO went in the same direction because it saw a political opening in the centre-left, seen by the fact that in the 2017 elections it greatly increased its votes by appealing to previous social democratic voters when Social Democratic party imploded (Saxonberg & Heinisch, 2022).

In contrast, the rightwing, authoritarian FIDESZ was in power in Hungary in a coalition with Christian Democrats. As an authoritarian, rightwing party, FIDESZ emphasised support for the ‘traditional family’ and its unemployment policies that were based on placing obligations on those receiving benefits. In contrast to ANO in Czechia, it tried to gain votes from the radical right. Thus, in 2022 was able to get an absolute majority of votes, while the radical right JOBBIK fell by 13pp.[6] These differences are fully compatible with the conservative right-wing strategy of ‘work society’ in Hungary.

In Slovakia, a centre-right populist party, OĽaNO, had replaced the leftwing populist *Smer* as the leading coalition partner in government shortly after the pandemic began and formed a coalition with right-wing populist *Sme rodina* and two other small junior partners. It did not see political openings in the left, where a strong leftwing, populist opposition party *Smer* dominated, so it moved to the right and pushed through modestly generous and pro-family-oriented social policies.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data derived from public domain resources.

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ENDNOTES

1 See: https://koronavirus.gov.hu/cikkek/annyi-munkahelyet-kell-letrehozni-amennyit-virus-tonkretesz.

2 See: https://koronavirus.gov.hu/cikkek/itm-mar-90-ezer-munkavallalo-utan-igenyeltek-agazati-bertamogatast.

3 See: https://www.employment.gov.sk/sk/uvodna-stranka/informacie-media/aktuality/rodiny-dostanu-jednorazovy-pandemicky-prispevok.html.

[4] See: https://www.employment.gov.sk/sk/uvodna-stranka/informacie-media/aktuality/rodinam-detmi-do-18-rokov-zaciname-vyplacat-jednorazovu-financnu-pomoc.html.

[5] See: https://koronavirus.gov.hu/cikkek/novak-2021-elejetol-kevesebbet-kell-fizetni-az-uj-otthonokert.

[6] See: https://www.statista.com/statistics/895670/hungary-election-share/, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Hungarian_parliamentary_election.

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