UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN STUDIES (CES)

ADAPTING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN THE WELFARE STATE LANDSCAPE

Early childhood and care policies in the broader context of the European Child Guarantee: a comparative study on Italy and Sweden

Camilla Michelotto

Master's thesis:	30 credits
Programme:	Master's Programme in European Studies
Level:	Second Cycle
Semester year:	Spring 2025
Supervisor:	Björn Halleröd

UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN STUDIES (CES)

Abstract

This thesis aims to investigate the adaptation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in Italy and Sweden in response to the European Child Guarantee (ECG), illustrating how EU social policies are interpreted within contrasting welfare state regimes. By conducting a comparative case study analysis of the Italian and Swedish family policies, educational frameworks, and National Action Plans (NAPs) for the ECG, within the context of differing welfare state regimes, the study reflects the phenomena of EU policy harmonization and the influence of path dependency. Employing theoretical frameworks from Esping-Andersen (1990), Ferrera (1996), and Leitner (2003), the study addresses the research question: How are Italy and Sweden adapting early childhood education and care services following the European Child Guarantee establishment? The findings suggests that ECEC serve as a perfect example of social policy where the EU's intention for harmonization of social policies is evident, with Italy displaying signs of convergence toward EU objectives, modifying some of its familialistic attitudes, and Sweden already aligns with the EU's policy framework.

Master's thesis:	30 credits
Programme:	Master's Programme in European Studies
Level:	Second Cycle
Semester year:	Spring 2025
Supervisor:	Björn Halleröd
Keyword:	Early childhood education and care; European Child Guarantee; European Pillar of Social Rights; policy implementation; European Union; Italy; Sweden; harmonization; path-dependency; welfare state regimes; familialism / de-familialization
Word count:	18052

List of figures and tables

List of abbreviations

EU European Union

EPSR European Pillar of Social Rights

ECG European Child Guarantee

ECEC Early Childhood Education and Care

NAP National Action Plan

PR Progress Report

PNRR National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza)

ISEE Equivalent Economic Situation Indicator (Indicatore della Situazione Economica Equivalente)

AUU Assegno Unico Universale (Universal Child Allowance)

ADI Assegno di Inclusione (Inclusion Allowance)

WS Welfare system

Content

1. Introduction

This thesis is about how two European welfare states, Italy and Sweden, reacts and possibly amend their welfare states regimes to meet EU policy making using the example of ECEC.

1.1 Introduction

Children's rights are human rights (European Commission, 2021a, p. 1)

This fundamental idea recognizes that every child, defined as every person under 18 years old (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 5), is entitled of rights and the protection of these rights. This principle lies at the core of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) of 1989, and it is ratified by the European Union, that has tried to strengthen this commitment through strategies and policies to promote children's right in the European Union and its Member States. The most recent initiative, which aligns with the European Pillar of Social Rights, is the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and it aims to put children in the centre of the European plans, by acting for children and with children (European Commission, 2021a, p. 3). Within this strategy, the EU aims to promote a child-friendly society and fight child poverty. To accomplish it, the EU has established the European Child Guaranatee (ECG), which intends to guarantee access to basic key services to children that are considered at risk of poverty and social exclusion, often referred to as children in need. Member States are recommended to guarantee "effective and free access to high quality early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal each school day and healthcare; effective access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing" to children in need (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 6). After the ECG recommendation, the Member States were expected to submit their national plans outlining how they would implement the Child Guarantee. It is important to bear in mind that the EU does not have the authority to implement policies directly, hence it is the Member States responsability to implement the policy. However, these plans are developed within the states' existing welfare system (ws), which shape their social policies. For this reason, it is important to have a clear understanding of the welfare state theories and the models developed over the years. These models contribute to national differences and differences in the implementation of EU policies. The relationship between each state, the market, and the family, as pointed out in Esping-

Andersen's (1990) study on welfare state regimes, differs across countries and it is influenced by long-term institutional development and their political and economical capabilities. This also applies to the care functions, child-care and services, and family support. Moreover, these policies exist within a path-dependency logic, where pre-existing institutional structures and policy influence future reforms. This means that when Member States try to pursue EU objectives, the approaches adopted will differ between countries, based on their welfare traditions and institutional structures.

1.2 The importance of access to ECEC

"Ensuring access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a primary concern of national and EU decision-makers when developing policies related to young children and their parents." (Eurydice, 2025a)

In all the EU strategies and policies that are directed to children and their parents, important attention is paid to the access that they have to childhood education and care (ECEC) services. The body of research on the benefits of both education and ECEC is well-established. There are plenty of reasons why ECEC services should be implemented by Member States. Increased participation in ECEC yields multiple benefits for both individuals and society, including improved educational attainment, lifelong learning success, reduced school dropout rates, greater social cohesion, improved family support networks, enhanced language development, increased empathy, and the promotion of equality, tolerance, and diversity (Council of the European Union, 2019).

Early intervention and investments in high-quality ECEC can benefit individuals and generate economic returns by reducing welfare dependency and enhancing workforce productivity (Guio, Frazer, & Marlier, 2021, p. 65). The benefits can both be more for the well-being of the child as well as for the well-being of society, as a tool to combat inequality and educational poverty from an early age, making it particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Council of the European Union, 2011; Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014).

ECEC generates social benefits that supports children, their parents, and their communities by influencing their development, parental employment, income levels, parental behaviours, and community cohesion and inclusion (Baptista, Guio, Marlier, & Perista, 2023,

p. 13). However, these benefits are only possible when ECEC services are of high quality and widely available (Baptista, Guio, Marlier, & Perista, 2023, p. 13). The economic consequences of child poverty are equally significant. Research shows that child poverty reduces productivity, decreases the likelihood of securing stable employment, increases welfare costs, raises unemployment rates, and leads to higher social protection and justice costs, ultimately threatening social cohesion (Bastos, 2016, p. 41; Papanastasiou, Papatheodorou, & Petmesidou, 2016, p. 67). The "costs of child poverty" encompasses health, education, employment, behavior, financial consequences, family and personal relationships, and overall well-being (Griggs & Walker, 2008).

More in depth, benefits can be both monetary and none, from monetary benefits in returns of investing in ECEC, to child development, inequality, social cohesion and integration (Lenaerts, Vandenbroeck, & Beblavý, 2018, p. 22-23). There is strong and consistent evidence demonstrating the positive impact of ECEC on children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as on their long-term educational trajectories (Lenaerts, Vandenbroeck, & Beblavý, 2018, p. 33). As the authors emphasize: "Children who attend ECEC are found to have higher educational attainment than those who did not. Children who participate in early childhood education and care generally perform better in school […] and have higher rates of school completion" (Lenaerts, Vandenbroeck, & Beblavý, 2018, p. 34). From a societal perspective, the economic returns of ECEC can also be observed through decreased public expenditure and increased revenue in areas such as social security and taxation (Lenaerts, Vandenbroeck, & Beblavý, 2018, p. 35). Adittionally they wrote: "because individuals who attended ECEC generally have higher educational attainment than those who did not, they also have better chances in the labour market" (Lenaerts, Vandenbroeck, & Beblavý, 2018, p. 36). There are also important benefits for parents. They point out that: "In many European countries, both parents are active in the labour market nowadays. As a result, the demand for childcare has increased tremendously. This, however, also implies that a lack of accessible, affordable and high-quality ECEC may impose barriers to labour market participation. Moreover, it could also affect parents' work-life balance." (Lenaerts, Vandenbroeck, & Beblavý, 2018, p. 36). These dynamics are especially significant for women, who continue to bear the primary responsibility for caregiving in many families (Kimmel, 1998 as cited in Lenaerts, Vandenbroeck, & Beblavý, 2018, p. 36).

Higher parental labour market participation and improved economic stability subsequently leads to reduced reliance on welfare and other public assistance schemes (Lenaerts, Vandenbroeck, & Beblavý, 2018, p. 37). Ultimately, ECEC benefits children directly and indirectly, by improving their parents' economic conditions (Lenaerts, Vandenbroeck, & Beblavý, 2018, p. 38).

Accessibility remains a critical issue. Children from ethnic minority and low-income backgrounds face more barriers to accessing high-quality ECEC and are often placed in lower-quality environments (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014, p. 328). Participating in ECEC can help combat inequality and educational poverty from an early age, making it particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, migrant or Roma communities, and those with special needs (Council of the European Union, 2011). ECEC services are considered a child's right, a cornerstone for lifelong learning for lifelong learning, a tool to female labor market participation, and reduced inequalities.

Addressing issues like child-poverty is of extreme relevance in the EU nowadays. Growing up in poverty has lifelong consequences, making it harder for individuals to escape the cycle of poverty (Papanastasiou, Papatheodorou, & Petmesidou, 2016, p. 67). Early intervention is crucial: studies indicate that childhood poverty has more detrimental effects than poverty experienced during adolescence (Hackman & Kraemer, 2020, p. 90).

The effects of child poverty are well-documented. The socio-economic status (SES) of a child often extends into adulthood. Early low SES is linked to lower school performance and educational attainment, reduced employment opportunities, and poorer health outcomes later in life (Bastos, 2016, p. 41). Studies indicate that SES influences children's cognitive capabilities, with low SES negatively affecting neurocognitive development (Hackman & Kraemer, 2020). SES is a multidimensional construct that reflects various aspects of a child's environment (Hackman & Kraemer, 2020, p. 89). Since children's SES is associated with that of their parents and family, it is influenced not only by family income but also by parental education levels, the community they live in, and the quality of their school environment (Hackman & Kraemer, 2020, p. 89). SES is a strong predictor of developmental outcomes, including childhood and adulthood health, mental well-being, and academic success (Hackman & Kraemer, 2020, p. 89). In other words, lower SES leads to fewer life opportunities (Hackman & Kraemer, 2020, p. 90).

Disadvantage and exclusion at an early life stage can hinder children's future success: they are more likely to drop out of school and have fewer chances to find decent employment opportunities later. This often creates a cycle of disadvantage across generations called "intergenerational poverty" (European Commission, n.d. a).

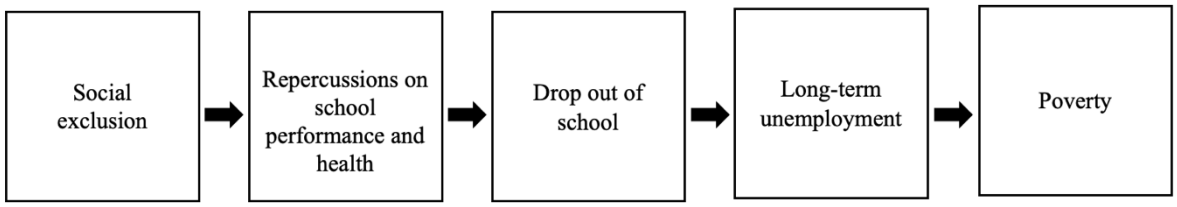

Figure 1: Cycle of poverty and social exclusion across generations. Source: European Commission, n.d. a

In conclusion, ECEC is a fundamental part of the ws, and a strategic tool to mitigate socio-economic inequalities and prevent poverty both during childhood and adulthood.

1.3 Research aim and research question

With a focus on Italy and Sweden, this thesis aims to investigate the actions taken by the two regarding ECEC systems, which defines ECEC for children below the age of six (or the age of compulsory schooling) after the Council of the European Union established the ECG. EU countries are required to implement the ECG in their systems, but this, as for any of the EU recommendations, has come into terms with the existing welfare systems and institutional bodies present in the states. This results in different tools putted in actions from the states to reach their goal, even if they originate from the same EU objective.

Understanding that children's educational policies are not developed alone in isolation, is fundamental. ECEC is a multidimensional policy that intersect education with gender policies, anti-poverty strategies, labour market participation and social exclusion. Most child-related social policies target the household and family by supporting them, working indirectly on the children. Significant is that education is one of the few domains where children are targeted directly by the state, bypassing the family. Additionally, ECEC is connected to family policy which in turn is connected to the broader welfare state. This interconnectedness is driven by a form of path-dependency. Various aspects of the welfare state interact and impact each other.

Starting from the broader understanding of welfare states using Esping-Andersen (1990) and Ferrera (1996), and the concept of (de-)famililization (Leitner, 2003), this thesis aims to

unravel how ECEC services are structured and implemented in Italy and Sweden, in response to the European Child Guarantee, to respond to the following research question:

How are Italy and Sweden adapting early childhood education and care services following the European Child Guarantee establishment?

By comparing Italy and Sweden and their implementation plans their ECEC after the ECG, this thesis aims to understand how policies at the EU level are adapted within contrasting welfare regimes. This could also allow the understanding of the EU's capabilities and limitations in shaping European policies on national level and, more broadly, influencing European integration.

While education and ECEC has been widely studied in Europe and beyond, the ECG is still relatively new, making it not possible to study the full impact. For this reason, the following thesis focuses on how different welfare state regimes interpret and implement the ECG within their ECEC. Since research on the topic is still limited, this thesis allows to investigate the state of implementation as much as possible with the available material, without accessing the effectiveness of the policy.

1.4 Thesis outline

The present study is structured in the following way. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical frameworks that define the study, focusing on welfare state regimes, with particular attention to theories incorporating the notion of care responsibilities.

The research follows, as much as possible, a funnel-like structure, particularly visible in Chapter 3 and 4, starting from the overarching EU policies and targets, and then narrowing down the focus to family policies and the ECEC systems and the policies at the national levels.

Chapter 3 examines policies and targets that the EU wants to implement in the Member States to guarantee better life chances for children and the respect of their rights. These traits in the EU different strategies will then be analyse in the lens of the welfare state regimes and the concept of familialization. It will be acknowledged that the European Union does not function like a single Member State, lacking a unified ws, but this chapter proceeds with the analytical assumption that the EU acts as if it did.

Chapter 4 is divided into two sections, the first outlines relevant family policy measures and the second describes the ECEC services. This approach should allow the reader to acquire a broader understanding of how the plans on how to implement the ECG collocates within the broader family policy and welfare state context. This chapter is directly connected to Chapter 5, where the National Action Plans and the progress reports of the countries are described. Chapter 4 and 5 will be discussed in Chapter 6.

2. Theories on welfare state regimes and typologies

In the following section different theories on welfare state will be illustrated, allowing the later understanding of the differences between the Italian and the Swedish ECEC policies within the broader framework of welfare state typologies. This chapter also aims at showing how Italy and Sweden always end up in different categories when their welfare states are studied, also motivating and emphasizing the case selection.

The structure of this chapter follows a funnel-like approach, consistent with the overall structure of the thesis. It will begin with the overall perspective of the welfare state classifications and gradually will narrows the focus to more specific classifications that consider gender equality, family policies and care responsibilities as specific aspects of the welfare state.

At later stages, the thesis refers to the concept of path dependency, which highlights how historical developments continue to shape present and future policy options. Once a country follows a certain trajectory, such as a specific welfare state model or familialistic orientation, shifting direction becomes increasingly difficult. As Mahoney and Schensul (2006, p. 454) argue, present and future possibilities are constrained by historical contexts and institutional legacies. Early policy choices give rise to self-reinforcing institutions and norms, meaning that when change does occur, they happen gradually rather than through sudden shifts.

2.1 Mainstream welfare state typology

Esping-Andersen's (1990) book "The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism", introduces a classification of welfare regimes that provides a foundational basis for this analysis. A welfare state should be considered in terms of rights that it guarantees, as well as in terms of the state activities and how they are intertwined with the social role and provision of the market and the family (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 40). His work, which can be considered as one of the most relevant in mainstream welfare state theories (Bussemaker & Van Kersbergen, 1994, p. 11), emphasizes two fundamental concepts: decommodification and stratification.

For decommodification, Esping-Andersen means "when a service is rendered as a matter of right, and when a person can maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market" (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 41). This concept helps understanding how welfare states provide social protection and reduce the dependence on the market. Additionally, the minimal definition, as Esping-Andersen puts it, ensures that citizens, without the risk of losing their jobs, their income, or their welfare, can decide when they consider it necessary to leave their work (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 43). The author continues by writing that Scandinavian countries have the highest levels of decommodification, contrary to Anglo-

Saxon and continental European countries. Continental European countries, with their conservative and catholic tradition, are considered more likely, compared to the Anglo-Saxon nations, to have higher scores of decommodification, meaning that their welfare states "maintain social control mechanisms that limit market liberalization, such as strong employment attachment or familial obligations" (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 92-94).

For stratification, it is possible to talk about ways welfare state's structure social relations. Esping-Andersen identifies three stratification models: the poor-relief model, the social-insurance, and the universalist model (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 44). The former consists of "means-tested social-assistance" (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 44), meaning that citizens must demonstrate their need of support. It can be perceived as "punishing and stigmatizing" for the recipients (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 44). The second has two different effects: "The first was to consolidate divisions among wage-earners by legislating distinct programs for different classes and status groups, each with its own conspicuously unique set of rights and privileges which was designed to accentuate the individual's appropriate stage in life. The second objective was to tie the loyalties of the individual directly to the monarchy or the central state authority" (Esping-Andersen, 1990, pp. 44-45). This type can be called a corporatist social insurance, which finds its historical roots in imperial Germany, and it is often referred to the "Bismarckian" model. The other, the universalistic system, can be defined as an alternative to the first two forms of stratifications. It promotes equality among the recipients, providing similar rights with no distinction between class and position, culminating in a "cross-class solidarity" (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 46). However, as Esping-Andersen points out, this also creates a dualism: economically disadvantage rely on the state whereas the others rely on the market (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 47).

Esping-Andersen (1990) identifies three welfare state regimes based on the interaction between the state, market, and family. These regimes are named: Social-Democratic Regime, Conservative-Corporatist Regime, and Liberal Regime. The regimes correspond to the different stratification models cited above.

Social-Democratic Regime

The social democratic regime consists of the smaller group of countries studied by Esping-Andersen, and they are characterized by universalism, high decommodification (reducing dependence on the family and market), and extensive state intervention in welfare provision (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 50). It is a form of welfare state that aims at promoting high level equality ensuring that "manual workers come to enjoy rights identical to those of salaried white-collar employees or civil servants" (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 51).

"The social democratic regime's policy of emancipation addresses both the market and the traditional family. […] The ideal is not to maximize dependence on the family, but capacities for individual independence. In this sense, the model is a peculiar fusion of liberalism and socialism. The result is a welfare state that grants transfers directly to children, and takes direct responsibility of caring for children, the aged, and the helpless. It is, accordingly, committed to a heavy social-service burden, not only to service family needs but also to allow women to choose work rather than the household" (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 51).

"Perhaps the most salient characteristic of the social democratic regime is its fusion of welfare and work. It is at once genuinely committed to a full-employment guarantee, and entirely dependent on its attainment. On the one side, the right to work has equal status to the right of income protection. On the other side, the enormous costs of maintaining a solidaristic, universalistic, and de-commodifying ws means that it must minimize social problems and maximize revenue income. This is obviously best done with most people working, and the fewest possible living of social transfers. Neither of the two-alternative regime-types espouse full employment as an integral part of their welfare-state commitment. In the conservative tradition, of course, women are discouraged from working; in the liberal ideal, concerns of gender matter less than the sanctity of the market" (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 51-52). Scandinavian countries are the ones that adopted this form of regime.

Conservative/corporatist regime

The second regime includes Italy, Austria, France, and Germany, which are part of the conservative/corporatist regime cluster. Welfare provision and benefits are tied to employment status. Often, the corporatist regimes are also connected to the Church, reinforcing the traditional family structures and values, with an emphasis on motherhood (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 50). The limited development of family services like day care reflects a form of welfare state that acts only when "the family's capacity to service its members is exhausted." (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 50). The family is part of the social policy, with public and social services provided by the state as a result of the failure from the family to fulfil these services (Bussemaker & Van Kersbergen, 1994).

Liberal regime

The third cluster is the liberal regime, which relies deeply on the market, as a provider of welfare to the citizens. It is "means-tested assistance, modest universal transfers, or modest social-insurance plans predominate." (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 48). As with the poor relief stratification model, recipients have a low income that they need to demonstrate to have to receive benefits. The welfare is structured in a way that does not incentivise people to take advantage of it instead of working, to avoid discouraging working (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 49). Benefits are accessible only under certain

eligibility criteria, which are more often associated with stigma, and are limited in scope, and consequently, “the state encourages the market, either passively – by guaranteeing only a minimum – or actively – by subsidizing private welfare schemes.” (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 49). As a result, “this type of regime minimizes de-commodification-effects, effectively contains the realm of social rights, and erects an order of stratification that is a blend of a relative equality of poverty among state-welfare recipients, market-differentiated welfare among the majorities, and a class-political dualism between the two” (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 49). Unlike the first ws mentioned, the liberal regime restricts social rights to a certain class (the working class and 'the poor') and generally supports the mercantile character of the workforce (Bussemaker & Van Kersbergen, 1994, p. 12). This cluster includes the United States, Canada, Australia and Britain (Bussemaker & Van Kersbergen, 1994, p. 12).

More recent studies, as summarized in the most recent De Gruyter Contemporary Social Sciences Handbooks (2022) classify Sweden as a Nordic welfare state characterized by the provision of universal welfare state, public services extensively generous, high labour market participation, and great gender equality to limit inequalities (Gerven, 2022). Consequently, Italy is usually clustered with other Southern European countries in what is usually called the Southern European model of welfare, which is explained in the following chapter 2.2.1.

2.2 Critics to mainstream welfare typology

Esping-Andersen's book was published in the early 1990s and is based on data from the 1980s. The analysis remains valid, and these three welfare regimes remain a dominant analytical framework, due to the heavy path-dependencies of welfare states, which means that historical institutional arrangements continue to shape contemporary welfare policies and outcomes. However, it is important to remember when this work was published and the material data was collected because, with time, many scholars have identified limitation.

In this chapter, firstly, an identification of a welfare state cluster helping classifying Italy is illustrated. Following a funnel structure, more suitable classifications and typologies related to care and family responsibilities in the welfare systems are portraited. These typologies are born from the limitations and critics to Esping-Andersen, especially in addressing new social risks, which are risks concerning women, families, and young peoples, and usually are about the inability to reconcile work and family life, single parenthood, and the risk of child poverty (Ferragina, Seeleib-Kaiser, & Spreckelsen, 2015, p. 289).

Countries that effectively address these new social risks tend to have higher female labor force participation and lower child poverty rates (Esping-Andersen, 2009, as cited in Ferragina et al., 2015, p. 289). Additionally, Esping-Andersen's framework has been criticized for neglecting the role of family and gender in welfare state analysis (Sainsbury, 1994). Scholars argue that welfare states shape gender roles through policies on work-family reconciliation, parental leave, and childcare provision (Bettio & Plantenga, 2004). Daly (2020) highlights that welfare states differ in their approach to gender equality, with Nordic countries promoting gender sameness, while continental European countries and other welfare states reinforce traditional gender roles (Daly, 2020, pp. 40-41).

2.2.1 The "southern model" of welfare state regimes

Massimo Ferrera (1996) identified a "southern model" of welfare state regime. It includes Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece. Ferrera finds this cluster by noticing four traits shared by the countries. These countries are characterized by "peak of generosity" related mostly to pensions, and "accompanied by vast gaps of protection" (Ferrera, 1996, p. 29); the universalistic principles characterize national health services; government do not have a strong presence in all areas of welfare, and that private companies and non-governmental organizations are also heavily involved, meaning a "low degree of state penetration of the welfare sphere" (Ferrera, 1996, p. 30); strong presence of clientelism (Ferrera, 1996). These southern European countries were previously studied as Bismarkian /conservatives in their welfare state regimes. However, what differs between the Bismarkian and the Mediterranean when looking at the family is that the former explicitly supports the role of the family as a provider of unpaid care and welfare through policies, whereas in the Mediterranean countries the lack of state intervention forces the family to become the provider of care and welfare (León & Migliavacca, 2013, p. 26).

The Southern European cluster is highly recognised in contemporary research and it is diffuse knowledge that it is a model in constant transformation but that has also major weakness when it comes to welfare services for childcare, labour market policies, long-term care (Natili & Jessoula, 2022). Traditionally, as Saraceno (1994) called this situation, Souther European countries, Italy included, are "familialistic by default" (as cited in Natili & Jessoula, 2022), creating a strong gender biased labour market and society, and where women are penalised, not able to partecipate to the labour market.

2.2.2 Caring function and familialism

Building on these discussions, Leitner (2003) developed the concept of defamiliarization, which describes the extent to which welfare policies relieve families, particularly women, from caregiving responsibilities (Daly, 2020, p. 42). Leitner's comparative study on the function of the family in terms of care suggests the existence of four ideal types of familialism. Care policies in the EU should manifest according to them. Her study starts by the statement that family's caring responsibilities, like childcare,

have been under pressure with the increase entrance in the labour market of wives and mothers. Child-care and families need institutional supports to help families, especially mothers, to take care of them without compromising their labour market positions (Leitner, 2003, p. 355). Before explaining the four ideal types, Leitner distinguishes between the notion of familialization and de-familialization for Esping-Andersen (1999, as cited in Leitner, 2003, p. 356), writing that the familialistic welfare state, is characterized by public policies that assumes that the households should carry the care responsibilities, and it is possible to find this type of welfare state in the "conservative" welfare state regime. The de-familializing welfare state, on the other hand, seems to unburden the household from this responsibility, either by providing public social services, as happens in the Scandinavian countries, or through market driven service provision, as the liberal countries (pp. 356-357). Leitner then continues with the analysis and develop a matrix with four ideal types:

Table 1: Leitner (2003) ideal types' matrix (Leitner, 2003, p. 358)

		De-familialization	
		Strong	**Weak**
Familialization	**Strong**	Optional Familialism	Explicit Familialism
	Weak	De-familialism	Implicit Familialism

Leitner (2003, p. 360), when looking at different forms of familialism in childcare defines:

- optional familialism, when a country presents a both extensive use of cash benefits and the presence of formal childcare, services and supportive care policies are provided, and there is a partial relieved from caregiving responsibilities, leading towords shared responsibility in care between the state, the market, and the family;
- explicit familialism, when the cash benefits are still extensively used but the service provided is not that widespread as in the case of the "optional familialism" neither from the market nor the state;
- implicit familialism sees a combination of the lack of both the cash benefits (lack of active support to families) and formal care;
- de-familialism, when there is a lack of cash benefits for childcare, but the provision of formal childcare is widespread and provided by both the market and/or the state.

Leitner classified fifteen countries using these ideal types in the field of child-care. The two variable Leitner uses to group the countries are the provision of cash benefits to families during parental leave and the availability of formal childcare services for children under 3 years old (2003, p. 360).

Table 2: See Leitner, 2003, p. 361

	Formal childcare	
	Widespread	**Poor**
Payment for Child-Care	Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Sweden	Austria, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands
No Payment for Child-Care	Ireland, United Kingdom	Greece, Portugal, Spain

Leitner's classification clusters the Scandinavian/Nordic countries together as Esping-Andersen's but distinguishes the conservative from the southern welfare regimes. While looking at care policies, Italy differs from the other Southern European countries, proving cash benefits as forms of child-care policies, but lacking formal child-care services, resembling continental Europe countries. Interesting, even if not relevant for the thesis is that Leitner's study shows that for elderly care, Italy can be then again grouped with Southern European welfares, in the implicit familialism ideal type.

Leitner's typology allows a better understanding of childcare and educational policies in the broader concept of welfare states. Many references will be done to Esping-Andersen's and Ferrera terminology, as well as to de-familistic and familialistic. Leitner's ideal types are more specific to understand the topic and reach the research aim. As such, they will be used as main lens to analyze Italian and Swedish policies, with a specific focus on childcare services for children below the age of compulsory schooling.

2.3 Welfare state regimes and familialism

To summarize, the objective of Chapter 2 is to provide a broad understanding of the welfare state classifications. For this reason, the chapter began with the description of Esping-Andersen (1990) regimes: Liberal (even if is not particularly relevant for the scope of this thesis), Conservative/Corporatist, and Social-democratic. To Esping-Andersen's typology, Ferrera's (1996) framework is added to provide a cleared distinction between Italy and other states.

To broad these definitions of welfare states, the focus shifted to the role of family and caregiving responsibilities, culminating in Leitner's (2003) conclusions on familialism and de-familialism.

This chapter has served multiple purposes. Firstly, it has emphasized that parts of the ws cannot be thoroughly understood without considering the totality. ECEC policies cannot be fully understood unless they are contextualized within the broader welfare characteristics of a country. Secondly, Italy and Sweden, regardless of the typology used in the study, have always emerged as two distinct, contrasting cases, from Sweden's Social-Democratic model to Italy's Southern welfare state, and from explicit to optional familialism traits. Italy and Sweden diverge in welfare state classification, familialistic tendencies, and approaches to gender equality.

These differences are rooted in path-dependency and characterize how the countries respond to the different EU initiatives. Since the thesis uses ECEC as focus, chapter 3 will outline the EU's strategies and policies. It will provide a detailed examination of how the EU is aiming at harmonizing social policies across different welfare regimes.

3. The European Union

Social policies and educations are responsibilities of the Member States, with the EU having a supporting role. Nevertheless, in recent years the EU has acted to promote social policies that could have EU-wide applications. Some aim at strengthening social rights of children, considered as a vulnerable group in society, and to address the most vulnerable within them.

This chapter will provide an overview of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European strategy on the Right of the Child, the European Child Guarantee and the Barcelona Target; later the principles within the Pillars of Social Rights will be analyzed in the lens of the welfare state regime traits and the varieties of familialism.

The chapter is important for the overall understanding of the thesis because by providing information about policies in action, it explores how these policies influence national policies without direct coercion.

3.1 Different European strategies and targets

By 2030, the EU has set some targets that reflect the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), probably the most important social policy tool at the EU level. The target areas are employment, adult education and training, and poverty: by 2030 at least 78% of the population should be employed, 60% of adults should be given the chance to participate every year to a training, and 15 million people should be lifted out of poverty, 5 million of which should be children (European Commission, n.d. b). These targets reflect the twenty principles that constitute the EPSR that should guide the EU towards a stronger social Europe (European Commission, 2023). The 20 principles can be categorized in 3 chapters: “equal opportunities and access to labor market”, “fair working conditions” and “social protection and inclusion” (European Commission, 2023). The principles are meant to create an equitable society.

Providing an overview of the 20 principles helps clarifying the main aspects within the European social policies. Since not all the pillars are of fundamental significance for this thesis, only a short description of all the principle will be provided here. A more detailed analysis of the most relevant pillars will follow.

Table 3: The 20 Principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). Source: European Commission, 2023.

	EPSR **Principles**	Description

Equal opportunities and access to labor market	1	Right to quality education, training, and lifelong learning.
	2	Gender equality in labor market participation.
	3	Right of equal treatment and opportunities for everyone.
	4	Assistance to improve employment or self-employment prospects.
Fair working conditions	5	Right of fair and equal working condition, social protection, and training for workers.
	6	Right to fair wages to workers.
	7	Workers have the right for clear terms of employment and fair dismissal process.
	8	Rights to dialogue, consultation and collective action for workers.
	9	Work-life balance, including equal access to parental leave and care services.
	10	Workers have the right to healthy, safe and well adapted work conditions and environment, and data protection.
Social protection and inclusion	11	Rights of children (affordable, good-quality ECEC, protection from poverty, and support for disadvantaged children).
	12	Adequate social protection for both workers and the self-employed.
	13	Unemployment benefits that incentivize a quick return to work.
	14	Right to adequate minimum income.
	15	Right to pensions for workers.
	16	Right to timely, affordable, and good-quality healthcare.

	17	Right to income support for the inclusion of people with disabilities.
	18	Right of affordable and effective long-term care services.
	19	Access to adequate housing and shelters.
	20	Right to access essential services, with support available for those in need.

Principle 11 is central to this thesis: "Children have the right to affordable ECEC of good quality. Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities." (European Commission, 2023)

Within this principle, it is possible to find the Strategy of the Right of the Child and the ECG, two policy frameworks that aim at targeting the protection of children's rights and guarantee the access to key services to the most vulnerable children. The Strategy's objective is to empower children to participate in the democratic life of the EU and their countries, to create a justice system that can support them, to create a child-safe society and environment free from any sort of violence (both physically and on the internet), with a good health and educational system, and lastly, to fight child poverty (European Commission, n.d. a). Children have the right of good living standards, meaning that they should have equal opportunities, help and support. However, when children struggle and live at risk of poverty and social exclusion, attending schools or having access to medical services is more complicated. To aim at dealing with this problem the European Commission has established the ECG. By guaranteeing access to key services, the EU tries to combat social exclusion (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 5). The key services that the EU wants to guarantee are the following:

- free ECEC;
- free education;
- free healthcare;
- heathy nutrition;
- adequate housing (European Commission, n.d. c).

For this thesis, a closer look will be given to ECEC. In the Recommendation establishing the ECG (2021), it is established that Member States must guarantee to children in need "effective and free access to high quality early childhood education and care" (p. 6). By "effective and free" the EU means "a situation in which services are readily available, accessible, of good quality, provided in a timely

manner and where the potential users are aware of their existence, as well as of entitlements to use them, and provided free of charge, either by organising and providing such services or by adequate benefits to cover the costs or the charges of the services, or in such a way that financial circumstances will not pose an obstacle to equal access" (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 6). To enable this policy framework, also in the domain of ECEC, the state should have focused on social exclusion, breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty, as well as reducing the impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

To effectively implement the ECG, Member States need to identify children in need, paying particular attention to the diversity of needs among the different groups of children at risk of poverty and exclusion. In particular, attention should be given to homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation, children with disabilities and mental health issues; children with a migrant background, children with minority ethnic origin (particularly Roma) children in alternative care, and children family situations that can be described as precarious (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 6).

Lastly, in 2021 and 2022, the EU announced two initiatives related to care strategies: the revision of the Barcelona targets on ECEC, and a strategy on long-term care. The original Barcelona targets, set ten years earlier, aimed to boost the participation of women, particularly mothers, in the labour market by promoting the availability of ECEC services in Member States. These services are crucial not only for child development but also for enabling women's employment and closing the gender pay, care, and pension gaps (European Commission, 2022, p. 11).

The revised targets reflect this dual objective. They now call for a participation rate of 50% for children under 3 and 96% for children between the age of 3 and compulsory schooling, up from the original 33% and 90% respectively (European Commission, 2022, p. 22). The Council recommendation also emphasizes the importance of adequate time intensity in ECEC attendance. The Members are advised and recommended a minimum of 25 hours per week for children under 3 years old, and at least 35 hours per week for children aged 3 and above to facilitate the labour market participation of their parents (Council of the European Union, 2022, p. 22). A clear link emerges between these updated targets and broader EU strategies aimed at addressing disadvantage. Member States are expected to increase the participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds—including those at risk of poverty or social exclusion—and to "close the participation gap in ECEC between children at risk of poverty or social exclusion and the overall population of children" (European Commission, 2022, p. 22). As often recommended by the EU in this area of social policy, states should ensure accessibility by removing barriers to ECEC services. This includes aligning service hours with parents' working hours, guaranteeing access regardless of parents' employment status, ensuring physical accessibility,

providing clear information about services, and supporting families with the enrolment of their children (European Commission, 2022, p. 22).

In addition, Member States are encouraged to promote gender equality in care responsibilities, with the aim of closing the gender care gap by fostering a more equal sharing of caregiving between parents (European Commission, 2022, p. 24).

3.2 Which welfare state regime would the EU adopt if it were a country?

Keeping in mind that the EU as a whole does not have a particular ws that can be categorized as the single Member States, but is rather a "material supporter" of their welfare systems and policies (Hermans, Greiss, Delanghe, & Cantillon, 2022, p. 465), the following section aims to analyze the EPSR to determine, if possible, which type of welfare state the European Union would belongs to or align the most with. For this exercise, both Esping-Andersen's (1990) and Ferrera's (1996) typologies will be considered, as well as Leitner's concept of familialism (2003) for better understanding the EU defining traits of the EPSR. This discussion is necessary to align EU soft policy making to the broader understanding of welfare regimes and, hence, path dependency.

From the beginning, it is possible to see a certain emphasis on universalism: universal access to education and training, childcare, and universal health care and essential services (Principles 1, 11, 16, and 20). Inclusive education, training and life-long learning of quality are everyone's rights (Principle 1). Principle 2 promotes gender equality, especially in labor market and pay, and regardless of gender or ethnicity everyone should have the right of equal treatment and opportunities (Principle 3). However, since education is seen as a right also in other welfare it is more correct to say that Principle 1 is shared across welfare regimes. The same goes for Principle 3: equal opportunities should be a common trait in democracies and therefore could be categories with the label "All Models".

Furthermore, the EU aims for a full employment by guaranteeing active support to employment (Principle 4), including the reintegration of mothers into the labor market and the integration of women (also part of Principle 2). From Principle 5 to 8 and 10, there is a focus on secure working conditions, with an adequate wage, transparency in the work conditions, active involvement of workers and workplace safety and digital rights. These are traits that can easily apply to all welfare states and are not related to care responsibilities but rather aim to ensure fair living and working conditions for every worker. For this reason, these principles will be classified with the term "All Models" too.

Work-life balance is supported by the pillars (Principle 9), especially for parents and carers. Work-life balance promotes gender equality as well as participation in the labor market, particularly of women, who are also helped at re-entering the labor market by funded early child-care projects. The focus on gender equality fosters equality of treatment and opportunities for both men and women in all aspects of life, but with a particular focus on labor market participation, employment conditions, career opportunities (again Principle 2), and care responsibilities. This principle is easily tracible again in the Social-democratic welfare model. Additionally, from Leitner's (2003) prospective, work-life balance gives families choice and support, exemplifying more the optional familialism typology rather than an explicit familialistic one, where the care responsibility is mostly provided by the family.

In relation to EPSR Principle 11, the EU wants to guarantee the highest standard of care and education to every child, regardless of their background or area of residence. The right to ECEC of good quality reflects both the Social-democratic regime and the de-familialization and optional familialism. Care responsibilities can include also people with disabilities, and Principle 17 also reflects a de-familialist policy orientation by promoting income support, labor market and society integration, so to alleviate dependence from the family, more typical of the social-democratic welfare state. Guaranteeing a good provision of care services, both in childcare and in long term care (Principle 18), reinforces a form of de-familialization, in the sense of provision of services that allows people usually responsible for care in the family to rely on services that alleviate the caregiving responsibilities. Mediterranean welfare states are known to lack these services, and it is usually a characteristic of the Social-democratic, that mostly fit in the optional familialism typology, in which caring responsibilities are partially taken away from the family, and the care giving responsibility can be considered not as a duty but more of a right (Leitner, 2003, p. 359).

As briefly mentioned above, the EU aims for a full employment, but it is also seeking to guarantee unemployed benefits (Principle 4 and Principle 13) and a minimum income to ensure an adequate standard of living (Principle 14), while promoting a quick reintegration in the market (both Principle 13 and 14). Principles 12 to 15 focus on rights related to work and income, and are strongly tied to the employment status, key feature of the Corporatist/Conservative/Southern welfare states. They also reflect similarities with the Social Democratic model, particularly the commitment to inclusion and labor market participation. Access to healthcare (Principle 16) is universal, as in the Social-democratic and the Southern welfare models.

Lastly, access to adequate housing and essential services (Principle 19 and Principle 20), both reflect the intention of the EU to achieve social inclusion. They both emphasize universal rights with additional support for those in need. This represents a mixed approach, common across different welfare

regimes. It ensures access to basic services for all, while also applying means-testing to identify and assess the level of individual need

Table 4: Alignment between EPSR, welfare state regimens and Leitner (2003)

EPSR Principle	Welfare State Model(s)	Leitner's Familialism Typology[1]
1	All Models	-
2	Social Democratic	OP
3	Social Democratic / All Models	-
4	Social Democratic / All Models	-
5-8 + 10	All Models	-
9	Social Democratic	OP
11	Social Democratic	OP/DF
12 -15	All Models	-
16	Social Democratic / Southern	-
17	Social Democratic	OP/DF
18	Social Democratic	OF/DF
19	All Models	-
20	All Models	-

[1] OF: Optional familialism
DF: De-familialism

Concluding, when looking at pillars linked to the care responsibilities, the EU has taken an orientation more toward de-familialization, focusing on work-life balance, gender equality, and alleviation of responsibilities, taking traits primarily of the Social-democratic ws, sometimes also present in the Southern model. This is particularly visible with Principle 11.

The EU finds itself working with 27 different social protection schemes, rooted in different welfare models and traditions. However, without considering the Eastern Member States and their welfare state systems, it is possible to say that the EU leans mostly toward a more social-democratic model. In a way this can be interpreted as an encouragement for homogeneity and harmonization within social policies, put in action from the EU. EPSR can be interpreted as a tool for harmonization since it is set of principles that are implemented parallel to States' practices (Montanari, 1995, p. 22). Consequently, ECG can be also considered as a tool to reach the same outcome. Certain countries find themselves reacting to this harmonization differently depending on the ws they have. This is even more true for ECEC. Countries' ECEC polices reflect the countries' welfare, but the ECG policy reflects the EU bias leaning toward specific traits of universalism and de-familililialization. This can create a scenario where Member States national policies try to alight with the EU.

4. The Member States

This chapter follows, once again, a funnel-like structure, for both cases studied in the thesis. The chapter begins by providing the main characteristics of the family policies relative for the study and then moves to the ECEC and other care services, with the purpose of providing country backgrounds and general policy overviews that lay at the basis of the interpretation and discussion.

4.1 Family policies

Family policies play a crucial role in shaping and managing caregiving responsibilities, and are an important tool to understand educational policies. Here, some of the most relevant policies related to family will be illustrated.

4.1.1 Italian family policy

In Italy, several policies aiming at supporting families with children are in place, aiming at addressing poverty as well as work-life balance. It is possible to identify four main tools: the Assegno Unico e Universale per i figli a carico (AUU), the Assegno di Inclusione (ADI), the Bonus Asilo Nido and the different forms of leaves. Other tools are available, but for the purpose of this thesis they will only be mentioned and not explain in depth.

The Italian policies highly rely on the ISEE (Indicatore della Situazione Economica Equivalente, in English the Equivalent Economic Situation Indicator), a mean-tested method, that by assessing the economic situation of the households helps determine the eligibility and the level of eligibility of families and people entitled of benefits in Italy.

The AUU, Single and Universal Child Allowance, has come into force in 2021, and it is a financial benefit for all families with dependent children (Repubblica Italiana, 2024, p. 6; INPS, 2025a). AUU is not tied to ECEC attendance, but complements it by improving family income security, which can facilitate participation. It is given to everyone with at least a child, but it does differ depending on the ISEE. There are additional requirements that can influence the amount of money that the family receive, including if the mother is less than 21 years old or if the children have disabilities. The AUU is found to have an effect on poverty and income equality since it is registered that the Gini index dropped from 30.4% to 29.6%, the poverty risk fell from 18.6% to 16.6%, and the poverty gap decreased from 5.2 to 4.4 (Repubblica Italiana, 2024, p. 6). Additionally, with the Budget Law of 2024, working mothers, from their second child, have experienced a contribution relief by the government, on nursery services, on a further increase in parental leave, and on facilitating access to mortgage guarantees for the purchase of a first home for large families (Repubblica Italiana, 2024, p. 7). Additionally, with the same Budget

Law 2024, a de-contribution for female workers has been introduced for the period 2024-2026, for "a 100 percent exemption from the share of social security contributions for disability, old age and survivors dependent on working mothers of three or more children, with a permanent employment contract, up to the month in which the youngest child turns eighteen" (Department for Family Policies, 2024).

With the objective of reducing child poverty and better access to services, that has been clarified several times that it is the main objective of the ECG, it is relevant to also mention the Reddito di Cittadinanza (RdC), that since 2023 has been substituted by ADI. It is not part of the ECEC system itself, but it presents an income support also for families with children, and then, it can also act to contribute to reducing child poverty and, therefore, facilitating thee access to ECEC services. It is also a mean-testing tool, but it can be provided by the State for a maximum of 18 months (INPS, 2025b).

The Bonus Asili Nido is also one of the many allowances that required the evaluation of the applicants ISEE. To help pay nurseries, the State provides the Bonus Asili Nido, which is a mean-tested, income-based bonus, to help cover the childcare fees for children in the 0-3 age range. With the new Budget law of 2024, the bonus has seen an increase in the amount of money that is provided to families (INPS, 2025a). The bonus is also given to families requiring it for home-based care for children with severe chronic illnesses. This shows a certain attention that the Italian state is trying to give to children with disabilities as children in need.

Other family policy instruments also exist, such as paternity and maternity leaves and parental leaves. The aim of parental leaves is to guarantee a reconciliation of work and family life. Parental leave is guarantee to both male and female workers, public and private employees, who want to be absence from work to take care of their children and the family, so it is not mandatory (Department for Family Policies, n.d. a). Workers who do take a parental leave receive an economic allowance that allows them to survive. The parents can take this type of leave within the first twelve years of the child's life, for a total of eleven months, and can be shared between the parents. Both parents are entitled to six months of leave, three of which are none transferrable, but the father may receive an additional month if he takes a leave of absence from work lasting at least three months (INPS, 2025c). A single parent is entitled of the whole period of 11 months. The allowance has seen some changes with the Budget Law 2024 and 2025. Both parents are compensated with 30% of their daily salary. With the Budget law of 2024 the allowance has increased for one month up to 80% if the leave is taken in the first six years of the child life, and an additional month is compensated at 60%, which can become 80% if used in 2024, again in the first six months of life. The remaining two months are unpaid (INPS, 2024a). With the budget law of 2025, two months can be paid at 80% of the wage (INPS, 2025c).

The parental leave is different from the maternity or paternity leave. The first is a mandatory period for the mother to be absent from work (Department for Family Policies, n.d. b). Also, paternity leave is mandatory but, differently form the maternal leave that guarantees from two to five months, only guarantee ten days that can be used within the same timeframe of the maternity leave (INPS, 2024b). The aim of such form of leave is to guarantee a more equal distribution of the care responsibilities within a family, as well as guarantee a stronger bond with the newborn (Department for Family Policies, n.d. c).

During the writing of this thesis, a new bonus has been presented by the government and INPS, the Bonus nuovi nati, Newborn Bonus, in favour of parents who became such from January 2025 (INPS, 2025d). The aim of such contribution is to encourage births and to help families with the expenses of a new child (INPS, 2025d).

Table 5: Italian family policy and Measures

Policy Instrument	**Target Group**	**Benefit Type**	**Notable Features**
AUU	All families with dependent children	Monthly cash benefit (means-tested) from € 54,04 to € 189,20 (under 18y.o.) + 18-21y.o., from €27 to €91.90	Reduces child poverty, complements ECEC access
Bonus Asilo Nido	Families with children aged 0–3	Annual cash support for childcare (means-tested): - €3,600 per year for ISEE up to €40,000; - €1,500 per year for ISEE over €40,000	For kindergarten and home-based care
ADI	Low-income households, including families with children	Income support (means-tested)	Income support
Parental Leave	Working parents (public/private sector)	Paid time off (partially compensated)	11 months total; improved compensation in 2024–2025
Maternity Leave	Working mothers (mandatory)	Paid leave (80%–100% salary)	2 months pre-birth, 3 months post-birth; extendable max 5 months

Paternity Leave	Working fathers (mandatory)	Paid leave (100% salary)	10 days
Decontribution for Female Workers	Working mothers with ≥ 3 children	Exemption from social security contributions	Valid 2024–2026; until youngest child turns 18
(Newborn Bonus)	Parents with children born/adopted from Jan 2025 (ISEE < €40,000)	One-time payment (€1,000)	Promotes births and help with expanses

4.1.2 Swedish family policy

The Swedish economic and financial family policy aims at helping households with children to reduce the risk of poverty and reducing this risk in comparison to households without children. Not only it allows families with children to have fewer financial differences compared to families without children, it also allows a more gender equal society and parenthood. This is particularly relevant as it minimizes financial barriers to accessing education and care services and serves as a practical example of the Nordic social-democratic welfare model in action.

In Sweden there are different financial contributions to families and family policies to help parenthood and work-life balance. Starting from parental leaves, they can be up to 480 days for every child, and it can be shared between the parents. For the first 390 days the allowance that the parents are entitled to depending on their income, whereas the remaining 90 days the amount is equivalent to 180SEK per day (Försäkringskassan, n.d. a). The allowance is based on the sickness benefits of the worker. As a parental leave, this allowance aims to compensate the lack of work due to care responsibilities. A parent can get parental leave even when they are unemployed, looking for a job or studying, even if they are retired (Försäkringskassan, n.d. a).

The parent who did not give birth is allowed to receive a compensation for being absent from work for ten days after the birth of the child and it called “10-day or temporary parental benefit in connection with the birth of a child” (Försäkringskassan, n.d. b). The compensation is equivalent to a little less that 80% of the income and it cannot exceed a certain amount of money (Försäkringskassan, n.d. b).

On the other hand, as a policy for childhood and adolescents, as well as a policy for the family, parents who have and live with their children in Sweden receive a child benefit-allowance. The child allowance is given to families with children under 16, and it can be added to it a multiple child allowance in case the family has two or more children (Försäkringskassan, n.d. c). Every family with child is entitled of

SEK 1,250 per month per child, and in the case of two children, the family is allowed of an extra SEK 150 to the two child allowances, this amount that increases with the more children the family has (Försäkringskassan, n.d. c). The contribution is paid to both parents, unless in the case of single parents, where it is fully paid to them.

Other forms of measures established in the Swedish family policy are the housing allowance for families with children, and in case of children with disabilities.

Table 6: Swedish family policy and measures

Policy Instrument /Benefit	Target group	Benefit type	Notable features
Parental Leave	All parents	480 days shared per child; 390 days income-based, 90 days at flat rate (income base)	390 days based on sickness benefit income; 90 days at 180 SEK/day.
10-day Parental Benefit	Non-birthing parent	For parent who did not give birth; compensation after birth (paid leave)	~80% of income (up to a capped amount) for 10 days.
Child Allowance	All families residing in Sweden with children under 16.	Monthly financial support for each child under 16 (universal)	1,250 SEK/month per child.
Multiple Child Allowance	Families with ≥2 children	Extra allowance for families with 2+ children (universal)	150 SEK/month for 2 children; more for additional children.

Sweden's family policy system is highly institutionalized, and in this section only fundamental aspects of the family that are enough to evaluate the ECG implementation.

4.2 Educational systems

The description of the educational systems in the EU Member States is provided by the Commission's network Eurydice. In the following section the educational systems of ECEC services for children aged 0-6 will be described, to provide a general information of the services provided in the two countries. All data are sourced by Eurydice. ECEC will naturally align with the rest of the family policy and welfare state at large.

4.2.1 The Italian ECEC educational system

The Italian educational system includes ECEC that can be divided into two main age groups: 0-3 (ECEC 0-3) and 3-6 (ECEC 3-6). Compulsory education begins at the age of six and ECEC services are not compulsory for children to attend. Services can be provided both publicly and privately but for the purpose of this thesis, solely publicly funded ECEC services will be discussed.

For ECEC 0-3 families are required to pay fees for the services. In ECEC 3-6, children attend childhood schools (scuole dell'infanzia), and contrary to ECEC 0-3 they are free of charge. Municipalities are responsible for providing the service on the territory, but it is centrally regulated by the Ministry of Education and Merit (Eurydice, 2024a).

Since participation is not compulsory, there is no legal entitlement and guarantee of a place in these services (Eurydice, 2023a). However, for ECEC 3-6, the state has managed to generalize the service, ensuring actual access to most of the children in the country (Baptista, Guio, Marlier, & Perista, 2023).

Since ECEC 0-3 can be costly for the families, municipalities can provide exemptions or reduced fee depending on the family ISEE (Eurydice, 2023a), the indicator that is used to evaluate households' economic situations. ECEC 3-6, even if free of charge, there are services that require a contribution, such as transportation, canteen services or out of hours provisions, as activities before and after the schools' timetable, and the contribution is also again regulated depending on the family's income (Eurydice, 2023a). In public ECEC 3-6 children are entitled of 40 hours per week, from 8 to 16 (Eurydice, 2023a).

The participation of children in ECEC services is reported by Eurostat, and at the time of writing this, new updated data on "children in formal childcare or education by age group and duration" has been realised. Based on the data of 2024, the dataset can be customized by looking at the age of the children, distinguishing between ECEC 0-3 and ECEC 3-6, and the duration of hours attending the service, which can be zero, less than 30 hours or more than 30 hours. For children 0-3, 60% of children do not attend ECEC, 12.3% attends between one at 29 hours, and 27.1% more than 30 hours. On the other hand, children 3-6 not attending are 7.6%, 19% attend less than 30 hours, and 73.4% more than 30 (Eurostat, 2025a). In other words, for the ECEC 0-3 the percentage of children participating to any form of service is equivalent to 39.4% and for ECEC 3-6 it is 92.4%.

Table 7: Summary of the Italian ECEC system

Italy	Compulsory	Legal entitlement	Fee
ECEC 0-3:	No	No	Yes, depends on ISEE

- Nurseries - Spring sections - other integrated systems			
ECEC 3-6	No	No	Free of charge

4.2.2 The Swedish ECEC educational system

The Swedish public school system for children includes preschool (förskola) and preschool class (förskoleklass). Basic principles for these types of schools are outlined in the Swedish Education Act (Skollagen) of 2011. Förskola is not compulsory for children of age 1-5, contrary to förskoleklass for children aged 6 until the beginning of compulsory school that is mandatory (Eurydice, 2023b). Municipalities, that are responsible for organising the educational services, are required to ensure the service of the preschool classes (Eurydice, 2024b). The educational level is decentralised at the municipality level (Eurydice, 2024b).

Children from the age of one to three are entitled to publicly funded ECEC services, and starting at the age of 3 till compulsory schooling, children are guaranteed free of charge ECEC for at least 15 hours per week, for a total of 525 hours annually (Eurydice, 2023c). Attendance at preschools is not compulsory, but children should always be offered a place if the family requires it. However, the preschool class for 6-years-olds is compulsory, all six-year-olds are entitled to a place free of charge for a minimum of 525 hours yearly (Eurydice, 2023c). 525 hours per year are publicly founded and the remaining hours outside of them must be paid by the guardians, depending on the guardians' income level. The cost is decided by the municipality where the preschool is located, but the fee cannot exceed a certain maximum rate (Skolverket, n.d.).

Other alternative ECEC services in Sweden include leisure-time centres (fritidshem), and care at uncomfortable times services.

Like Italy, Eurostat reports the same information on children in formal childcare or education for Sweden too. Children aged 0 to 3 that do not participate in ECEC is equal to 42.3%, attending less than 30 hours is the 14.3%, and more than 30 hours is 43.4%. Correspondingly, 1.1% of children from 3 to compulsory schooling do not attend ECEC, little above 26% attend less than 30 hours and, finally, 72.7% attend more that 30 hours (Eurostat, 2025a).

Table 8: Summary of the Swedish ECEC system

Sweden	Compulsory	Legal entitlement	Fee
ECEC 1-5	No	Yes	Yes, depends on income (free 525hs/yearly)
ECEC 6	Yes	Yes	Yes, depends on income (free 525hs/yearly)

5. National Action Plans and progress reports

This chapter aims at explaining the reasoning why a case study has been use, justifying its relevance to the following case. Then, the rationale for document analysis is outlined. After, the main features of reports submitted by Italy and by Sweden are described, and discussed in more detail in chapter 6.

5.1 Case study methodology and method

The thesis employs a multiple case study approach comparing Italy and Sweden as representatives of the two distinct welfare state regimes and different familialistic approaches. The decision to do a case study lies on the nature of the studied topic, which involves studying real-world cases that benefits from well-established theoretical frameworks, allowing the real world to be studied under the chosen lens (Yin, 2014, p. 16-17). The study aims at providing a comprehensive in-depth understanding of Italy's and Sweden's welfare provision of ECEC, in line with "The goal of a case study [which] is to produce a comprehensive in-depth account of the case" (Ylikoski & Zahle, 2019, p. 1).

The selection of the two cases in a controlled manner is justified because, dealing with a small number of cases, it should be done intentionally rather than randomly in order to avoid the "insufficiency of randomization" (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 295). Following the techniques of Seawright and Gerring (2008), the choice of Italy and Sweden is based on the cross-case method of diversity. Diverse cases are selected to represent at least two distinct traits or to examine the relationship between these traits (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 300). Italy and Sweden are always categorized in different welfare state models, with different traits and characteristics, making it a valid comparison. Comparing ECEC services offers a better understanding of how different national approaches are impacted within the European framework and the role of the welfare state.

The aim of this document analysis is to examine how the EU recommendation affects the two countries, revealing how national welfare state traditions shape both policy design and execution. The expected outcome can be summarized as follows: same directive, different pathways.

A document analysis is a technique involving reviewing different types of documents. The techniques of document analysis use is the "Bowen 3-step process" (Sankofa, 2023, p. 746), which consists of skimming, reading, and interpretation (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). The researcher does an examination of the documents in a more superficial way by skimming, then later examines more carefully through reading, and lastly, the researcher interprets what is written in the documents. Simultaneously, to analyse documents the researcher should combine both a content analysis and thematic analysis (Bowen, 2009, p. 32).

It is a cost- and time-efficient method since relevant materials, as in this case, are often publicly available online, making it a practical approach for policy research (Bowen, 2009, p. 31). The analysis can be conducted using a wide range of materials, from reports and other forms of official publications to more informal material depending on the scope (Bowen, 2009, pp. 27-28). This validates the choice of including information about the ECEC services in place in the countries gathered in the Eurydice's webpage and reports, as well as contextual information for general family policies, the official websites of INPS and Försäkringkassan, institutions for social insurance. The material used is also "stable" and "non-reactive" (Bowen, 2009, p.31), by nature, to the research process, as well as being "precise" (Yin, 1994 as cited in Bowen, 2009, p. 31). Even if sometimes the documents chosen may be insufficient for the research purpose since not all documents are created with the same intent (Bowen, 2009, pp. 31-32), in this research all documents are produced for the same purpuse, so this limitation does not occur.

However, one limitation for this method is the biased selectivity of the documents chosen (Yin, 1994 as cited in Bowen, 2009, p. 32). Especially when working with national documents, they can present a bias because national governments may try to frame their efforts in a likable and positive light to meet the EU ambitions and people's opinion (Bowen, 2009, p. 32).

The advantages outweigh the limitations which motivates the use of this method for the following study. The material use is stable, precise, easy and free to access, available in different languages, and it did not change during the process of interpretation. It felt appropriate for answering the research question, allowing a neutral but reliable response. The comparative analysis of the Italian and Swedish National Action Plans and their respective 2024 progress reports reveals two distinct approaches to implementing the ECG in the field of ECEC, reflecting their broader characteristics of their ws.

During the analysis, the Bowen 3-step process has been followed. Initially the documents have been skimmed in their whole entirety. During the reading process, parts regarding ECEC 0 to compulsory schooling were identified. Finally, the interpretation of the study was possible using the following codes and themes:

Table 9: Codes

ECEC access	Anything related to presence of the service, participation, free entitlement, time (it includes both ECEC 0-3+ECEC 3-compulsory schooling)
Universalism	Universal provision to children
Targeting	Mean-testing measurements
Financial supports	Cash transfers, subsidies, benefits

Care responsibility	Policies for parental leave, days, money, work-life balance
Barriers	Challenges for children to access ECEC
Progresses	What are the tools to achieve goals

The codes are grouped in two different themes:

Table 10: Themes

- ECEC access - Barriers - Progress	Implementation and commitment
• Universalism • Targeting • Financial support • ECEC access • Care responsibility	Welfare and familialistic logics

5.2 Material

Member States were required to submit a national action plan as written in the Counsil Recommendation that would illustrate the implementation of the ECG in their ws, as well as the existing policies. Additionally, every two years till 2030, the Member States are required to submit progress reports regarding the implementation of the policy (European Commission, n.d. c).

The NAPs and the 2024 PRs are the key materials used. The NAPs are valuable documents that highlight national intentions for implementing the ECG in their welfare system, whereas the PRs provide the implementation progress every two years. During the timeframe in which the Child Guarantee is intended to operate, four progress monitoring reports should be published by the states. Since the ECG is a recent policy from 2022, the PRs are only from 2024. This limits these documents to four. The NAPs embrace the ECG core objective of delivering high quality ECEC for children in need. The results reported in the 2024 documents will be compared with the national goals reported in 2022, even if the purpose of this study is not to evaluate the achievements of the two countries.

The NAPs length changes. For instance, the Italian NAP is 37 pages plus a separated annex (of a total page number of 77), whereas the Swedish one is of 87, which includes two annexes. The NAPs structure is not the same, including also the formatting. The Swedish document has wide margins, making the

whole document longer that the Italian one. For the 2024 documents, the countries followed a content-templet, making the documents similar is length: the Italian 60 pages long, the Swedish 50. The documents were both in English and the countries' national languages, allowing the material to be read and understood by most people. Including two documents per each country provides symmetry in the number of sources used and ensure balance.

The EU created three preparatory phases to analyse the feasibility of the ECG project and the different national plans through the years. The explanation of the preparatory phases can be found on the European Commission ECG official website page[2]. For the third phases, the EU worked in collaboration with UNICEF to properly test how the ECG would work in seven EU countries, including Italy, where they carried out what they called "policy deep dive" (European Commission, n.d. c). It was essential for the creation of the national plans. These "pilot studies" enhance the credibility of the documents and strengthening them as good empirical material. At the national level, a national Child Guarantee Coordinator was requested to be nominated, helped by a technical support committee in charge of the monitoring. For Italy the coordinator is Anna Maria Serafini whereas Håkan Nyman is the Swedish coordinator, as reported in the 2022 NAPs.

5.2.1 Italian NAP and progress report

The Italian NAP mentions how educational poverty is a current phenomenon and in order to to combat it, Italy wants to invest in ECEC 0-6 (Repubblica Italiana, 2022, pp. 1-2). The ECEC is part of the ACTION 1 of the first working area "high quality early childhood education and care, learning and school activities, canteens", one of the four individuated in 2022 by the state.

The most salient critical areas reported is the low coverage of, and access to, ECEC 0-3, which is caused by the presence of inadequate infrastructures, often excluding children for the lack of actual spaces. It is written in the NAP: "The general aim is to extend the supply of full-time places in early childhood education services to over 33% and towards the target of 50% for new nurseries and early childhood sections, developing fair and sustainable accessibility in the 0-3 age group and gradually abolishing nursery fees" (Repubblica Italiana, 2022, p. 5). Expanding full-time places in pre-schools to reach the universal coverage (100%) is also in the Italian agenda.

The differences in regional distribution of accessibility are a critical area. It is reported in the PR that, on average, the North (especially North-East) and Central Italy, when looking at the percentage of the

[2] Available at the page: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/social-protection-social-inclusion/addressing-poverty-and-supporting-social-inclusion/investing-children/european-child-guarantee_en

coverage for ECEC 0-3 services, exceed the 33% threshold, respectively 36.2% and 36.7%. Northwest is close to the target, with a percentage of 31.5%. However, the South and the Islands are way far from the coverage threshold, reaching not even 20% coverage, but only 16.0% and 16.6%, respectively (Repubblica Italiana, 2024, p. 32). The age group 0-3 is therefore affected by a coverage gap within the country, making children and families having different possibilities depending on the area where they live. Additionally, even if the ECEC participation rates have been increased, children from low-income households have less access to services.

The vulnerable group that is identified in this ACTION 1, and who would benefit the most of free and universal provision of ECEC services are "migrant children, Roma, disabled children in situations of severe housing deprivation, children with mental health problems, children in alternative care facilities, especially institutional care, children in precarious family situations" (Repubblica Italiana, 2022, p. 5). These different groups are defined as the most vulnerable ones, living in areas with absolute poverty and high educational poverty.

The suggested actions in the documents to overcome the deficit see the establishment of regional standards as tool to reach a national level 50% of full-time childcare places, with a particular focus on the differences between northern and southern regions. reach the 100% coverage for pre-schools (ECEC 3-6), create initiatives to inform, engage and support families and their access to childcare services (particularly families from the most vulnerable groups), and launching a training course on the quality of education for ECEC staff, fee reduction for nurseries. For families with ISEE up to €9,500 it was planned to provide a fee reduction by 2023- 24, and by 2030 for families with an ISEE up to €26,000. Expanding the income range up to €26,000 is strategic to "bring closer to the educational service both the families of the neediest categories and those with lower-middle income, which are currently considered at risk of exclusion" (Repubblica Italiana, 2022, p. 26).

Different investments are mentioned such as the investments coming from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP, or PNRR in Italian), the national program for inclusion and fight against poverty 2021-2027 (PN Inclusion 21–27), and the national educational program 2021-2027 (PN School and Skills 2021–2027). The National Fund for the Integrated 0–6 System has the purpose of constructing and renovating public buildings that will be used for ECEC services, guarantee financial support for families to reduce the costs that they would have, guarantee a training to ECEC staff (Repubblica Italiana, 2024, p. 33). This fund for 2021-2025 allocates a total of approximately €1.51 billion for these purposes, which operates in parallel with other funds, including the PNRR funds which allocates €3 billion divided in investments for infrastructures. The plan includes over 1,800 construction projects and aims to create 150,480 new publicly funded places (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito,

n.d.). The target of the creation of 150,480 new publicly funded places is actually a revision of the original plan that envisioned the creation of 228,000 new nurseries sports (Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze, 2021). The change in the target was a consequence of the increase of the cost of material prices. These measures are aligned with Action 1 of the Italian NAP, dedicated to early childhood education, care, and school services (Repubblica Italiana, 2024, p. 34).

To summarize, the points selected in the documents refer to the codes:

- ECEC access, since the access to ECEC0-3 has a low coverage;
- Barriers, caused by the low coverage and presence of infrastructure on regional level, and for the cost of ECEC0-3;
- Progress, thanks to different targeted funds;
- Targeting, that is at the core of ECG identifying children in need, as well as children in families with a low ISEE (as a mean tested tool) that should receive exemptions for ECEC0-3 fees (categories that could overlap).

5.2.2 Swedish Nap and progress report

The Swedish NAP reflects the long-standing commitment of the welfare system in the country, especially when focusing on the universal access to ECEC for every child. The action plan's aim is to ensure effective access to crucial services to every child in need such as ECEC (Regeringskansliet, 2022, p. 7). In Sweden, existing legislation provides effective access to key services of childcare, which are also mostly provided for free (Regeringskansliet, 2022, p. 7). Indeed, legal entitlement is a cornerstone of the Swedish educational welfare policy. The NAP aims at closing the gap between children by trying to guarantee their full participation in ECEC services though legislative mandates.

Measures regarding ECEC are part of the working area 7 "Early childhood education and care, education and school- based activities, one healthy meal each school day", which is then divided into different subcategories depending on the topic.

This document is situated in a strong institutionalized welfare system, which, as already mentioned, provides yearly 525 hours of ECEC of free of charge preschool to every child.

The main deficit reported by the Swedish NAP is a 4% of children that, by 2020, between 3 and 5 were not participating to ECEC services. It is established that it is more likely that children living in socially vulnerable areas engage less and have less access to these services. In other words, the Swedish state recognised that the main challenge faced in the provision of universal childcare was to address the 4% of the children population that did not access these services. It is mentioned in the action A "Identify

and address financial and non-financial barriers to participation in early childhood education and care, education, and school-based activities" (Regeringskansliet, 2022, p. 8).

The vulnerable group here identified consists of children who are financially and socioeconomically disadvantaged or live in socioeconomical vulnerable areas, children in foster care or other forms of care outside of their home, children with disabilities (highly visible in working area 7d), children with migrant background, who recently arrived in Sweden, most likely in need of language support of the Swedish language.

Not a real deficit but still an area of interest is the working area 7c "Provide learning support to children with learning difficulties to compensate for their linguistic, cognitive and educational gaps" (Regeringskansliet, 2022, p. 14). If children are identified as in need of support, especially to develop the Swedish language better, they are entitled of accessing ECEC services as a way to improve their language skills. This also works in parallel to working area 7e "Put in place measures to support inclusive education and avoid segregated classes in ECEC establishments and in educational establishments; this may also include giving priority to, or, when needed, early access for, children in need" (Regeringskansliet, 2022, p. 21). These are working ares that aim at cover possible deficits.

Since the participation to ECEC is high in Sweden the main goal is concerning the ECEC3-5 that is not participating in ECEC. As the main measure taken the state has adopted the Förskola för fler barn (Preschool for more children) (Govt Bill 2021/22:132), a proposal that aimed at increasing the participation of children in ECEC services by emphasizing attention on outreaching parents and guardians about the services, as well as mandatorily offering a place to children in need for their better development of their language skills. The Progress report of 2024 addresses the Govt Bill 2021/22:132, Förskola för fler barn policy, as the main inclusion measure to address the percentage of children not attending ECEC.

To cover the possible deficits children are given the possibility to start preschool from the age of one (instead of 3), when necessary, taking into account the employment status of the parents and/or their studies, or other specific needs due to the family's situation (Skollag, 2010), in case of physical, mental or other needs (Regeringskansliet, 2022, p. 23). This is intended to adress inequality and provide an equal start in the education for every child.

Additionally, The second main point of the bill is that it should be mandatory for municipalities to offer preschool places to children in need of language development support (Sveriges Riksdag, 2021), "by reserving a place at a preschool unit even without any request for preschool having been notified by the child's guardian if: 1. the child was born abroad and has resided in Sweden for no more than five years,

or 2. the child's guardians who are residents of Sweden were born abroad and have resided in Sweden for a maximum of five years. The municipality shall strive to offer a place in preschool in the same way to other children who should be offered public preschool if they need preschool for better language development in Swedish." (Sveriges Riksdag, 2021). It is important to remember that in Sweden all children can benefit from the education and preschools, but not every child can benefit from the early and priority access to preschools for a better language development in the Swedish language. The target group is children that have lived in Sweden for a shorter amount of time than their peers. This again should be a tool to increase integration, allowing children to participate in school and avoid discrimination and segregation in society.

The codes identified ar ethe following:

- ECEC access, that is guaranteed with legal entitlement;
- Universalism, again linked with legal entitlement;
- Targeting, for identifying children in need, and addressing 4% of children between 3 and 5 not attending ECEC;
- Care resposability, as a consequence of legal entitlement, also for children from the age of one depending on the family situation or need for language development;
- Progress, with the establishment of the Förskola för fler barn.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Considering the two countries main goals (Italy to address ECEC 0-3, extending the coverage, and reducing fees, and Sweden addressing the 4% of children not going to ECEC) in the broader context of the ECG and national policies, it is possible to discuss what these actions would mean in relation to welfare regimes and EU soft policies, as well as observing obstacles and opportunities caused of path dependency. This will link to the themes and help conduct the analysis, allowing also space for further considerations.

The same funnel-like structure will be followed, starting from the EU and continuing with the Member States, referring to the theoretical framework utilized throughout the thesis.

6.1 Discussion

6.1.1 EU's strategic interventions: harmonization and path-dependency

As previously stated, "same directives, different pathways", the ECG is grounded in the ESPR principles, which are shared across Members, but its practical realization is shaped by the NAPs, which reflect the country's regime and already in place policies.

The general EU objective closely resembles with the Social-democratic welfare regime and the de-familialistic, or optional familialistic, logic, as discussed in Chapter 3.2. Although, the EU cannot impose binding reforms in such areas. Indeed, it works with soft laws, and acts as a policy maker, but its capacity to act at the national level remains limited. However, these forms of soft power represent the EU's effort to have more proactive influence, promoting a form of harmonization and encouraging convergence in the social policies across the EU, behaving more like a policy-doer.

However, due to path-dependency, this process of harmonization encounters obstacles, and Member States progresses are far from linear and follow different paces. The degree to which Member States can respond and implement EU recommendations is deeply influenced by these historical and cultural established structures. Therefore, it is possible that the alignment with EU goals could be achieved more quickly and more effectively in some countries more than others, leading to a differentiated advancement in social policies across Members. For countries like Sweden, with optional familialistic traits, the needed adjustment is more limited compared to Italy, where more tools and recourses to fully achieve ECG objectives are required. Nevertheless, a change at national level is not impossible, they just require more time since they can reflect deeply rooted institutional and cultural trajectories. Examining Italy and Sweden reveals both policy convergence and challenges in practical

implementation. In the long term, could EU integration and "soft" policymaking direct member states toward a more unified European welfare state regime?

6.1.2 Welfare and familialistic logics

The ECG interact with the single forms of welfare. It is noticeable that Sweden's policy trajectory remains mostly unchanged within the NAP and progress report, as "Most of the key services covered by the European Child Guarantee are already free of charge or heavily subsidised in Sweden" (Regeringskansliet, 2024, p.48), with a big emphasis on the Förskola för fler barn that aims to "increase the proportion of children in early childhood education" (Regeringskansliet, 2022, p. 22). Preschools become a place where children are legally entitled to participate, "all children are entitled to free preschool of at least 525 hours per year […] termed 'universal early childhood education'" (Regeringskansliet, 2022, p. 9). Education is important for children and society because "Education is the highest priority contribution for minors since its aim is to combat isolation" (Regeringskansliet, 2022, p. 10) and "participation in early childhood education, which has positive effects on the child's development and learning as well as the community" (Regeringskansliet, 2022, p. 11).

Every child is entitled of ECEC as is entitled to receive child allowance. Cash benefits are also present in Italy, where the AUU has become an established policy. The AUU and the child allowance reflect the idea that raising children is also a state responsibility. The state acts and help supporting costs related to the upbringing of the children. This fit in the broader context of the paternalistic role of the state, which is embedded in the socio-democratic ws. At the same time, the logic aligns with the idea that children should start their life on an equal footing with their peers, which is at the core of the ECG, as well of the Swedish model. Even if the AUU, and other cash benefits, are now in place in Italy, trying to close the gap with Sweden, the Italian policies are still characterized by targeting and mean testing, whereas Sweden still benefits of universalism, as "Children aged 3–5 years are covered by universal early childhood" (Regeringskansliet, 2022, p. 10).

As anticipated in chapter 4.3, Sweden can still be easily categorized as an optional familialistic country, where the state helps families with children and equalises their economic situations compared to families without children. At the same time, Italy has many traits that still make it belonging to the explicit familialistic model. However, the overall picture can reflect a shift in the ws toward more optional familialistic traits based on the expansion of the ECEC.

Through Leitner's typology, the shift can be explained as an outcome of the harmonization process put in place by the EU to create a more homogeneous set of social policies by "imposing" a certain way of being. As said, harmonization is closely connected to path-dependency, meaning that the shift might be

blocked or happening slowly because of path-dependency. For this reason, it is important not to think that a slow adaptation is not a sign of the failure of national plans, but rather because of path-dependency, and to remember that these regimes and traits are not static but rather dynamic and can be subjected to changes. The Italian NAP can be interpreted as the testament to the Italian convergence toward de-familialistic intentions of the EU. Consequently, when some systems are more aligned with EU recommendations, requiring only minor adjustments, harmonization appears more as a process of consolidation than transformational. However, it is worth considering if the change in the familialistic traits is solely a consequence of harmonization, or is also influenced by societal needs and changes, leaving to further research the possibility to investigate the origins and drivers of these shifts. Additionally, rather than a shift from one regime to the other, it is possible to discuss if there is a change within regimes. This reflects an observation doable on the EPSR 11 (childcare and support to children), the ECG and the NAPs, and it leads to idea that there is a process of "hybridization" of the regimes and systems (Bertin, Carrino, & Pantalone, 2021).

The EPSR and the ECG, on the EU level, promote universal support with targeted support for more vulnerable groups, which reflects and is reflected also in the Swedish case: it is possible to talk about "targeting within universalism", a characteristic of the Nordic system (Jacques & Noël, 2020). Most importantly, this targeting does not imply means-testing. On the other hand, Italy's intention can be also framed in the same way, with universal right for all children combined with targeted elements for the most vulnerable, as also stated in the NAP (2022, p. III). However, in this case, the targeting is implemented using mean-testing method, ISEE, and it is more of a challenge that the state wants to overcome rather than a process already in place.

This also suggests aspects that has not been addressed in the study. There has been no consideration of whether the paternalistic role of the State is perceived and/or welcomed by the population. It has been previously mentioned that one particularity of ECEC as a social policy is that it bypasses the family, allowing the state to assume a prominent role in the family and care responsibilities. Public opinion regarding this increased state intervention is crucial, as it could potentially influence, drive or hinder the observed shifts in familialistic traits. For example, in Italy, public resistance to increased state intervention in family matters could slow down this shift, reinforcing path-dependency, and reinforcing traditional familialism. In Sweden, since the state intervention is more normalised, the implementation of ECEC could be seen just as an extension of existing policies.

At the same time, by addressing certain children in need, it may imply a lack of trust in their families as sole caregivers by a state. For instance, in the Swedish case, the emphasis is on ensuring ECEC for children in need of language development, that mostly overlap with children from migration

backgrounds, it could suggest that the state does not fully trust certain families in providing adequate upbringing. Thus, the state intervenes to ensure that children are raised in what it perceives as the "right way".

As seen, the countries have their own objectives and their implementation of the ECEC reflects their welfare state structure, affecting their starting points, their needs, objectives and tools. The change in the Italian famililization model does not only consider what is stated in the NAP, but also a series of considerations regarding the broader systems related to child education system, which includes moving away from the traditional welfare state path. Concurrently, changes happen over time. In Italy a gradual shift toward a different form of familialism can be observed through the fact that "Italy is investing many billions of euros to strengthen the enforceability of the fundamental rights of its children and their parents" (Repubblica Italiana, 2022, p. V). The change will not happen overnight, but rather slowly and gradually. Indeed, "Combating social exclusion requires substantial, long-term work, which must also be adapted to the national context" (Regeringsansliet, 2024, p. 50).

Ultimately, while the shift in familialism may align with the broader EU harmonization of social policies, in this case symbolized by children and family welfare, it remains important to consider the extent to which

the state's responsibility for care provision is expanding. In contrast, the Swedish case, as the type of familialization seems to remain unchanged, it is suggesting that the responsibility for upbringing and care continues to be part of the state's role. In the Italian case, the change in familialism could symbolize the intention to expand this function of the state. Raising children to become "good citizens" by participating in their upbringing from the first years should therefore become (and in some cases already is) a state responsibility.

6.1.3 Implementation and commitment

Firstly, to what extent have Italy and Sweden fulfilled the objectives they have set out? On one hand, in the Italian NAP there is reported the intention to reform the ws, "We need to change our welfare system" (Repubblica Italiana, 2022, p. V), a process already initiated in previous years through various measures such as tax deductions and direct funding schemes (Repubblica Italiana, 2022, p. V). The NAP highlighted the limited number of services for families and minors at the beginning of the current decade, emphasizing the intention to strengthen rights for these groups:

At the beginning of the current decade, Italy seemed to be lagging behind many other central and northern European countries in terms of the wide range of initiatives in favour of minors and their

parents (from income support for families with children to specific educational, social and health services). (Repubblica Italiana, 2022, p. V).

The key initiatives are mentioned in Chapter 4.2.1 alongside major investments through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). Italy's specific target regarding ECEC 0-3 is to achieve a 50% coverage rate and gradually eliminate fees for families with an ISEE up to €26,000, with a short-term goal of reaching zero costs for families with an ISEE below €9,500 by 2023-24. However, the 2024 progress report does not provide clear evidence of whether this short-term goal has been achieved. Instead, regional initiatives, such as Tuscany's "Free Nursery Measure" for families with an ISEE below €35,000 (Regione Toscana, 2025) and Lombardy's "Nidi Gratis Plus" for families with an ISEE below €25,000 (Regione Lombardia, 2024), suggest a fragmented approach.

Without national-level evidence, it is difficult to assess the full success of the Italian government's intentions, raising concerns about whether future monitoring will adequately track such targets. In contrast, participation in ECEC 0-3 in Italy has increased significantly: the 2024 Eurostat data show that 39.4% of children attended ECEC 0-3 services, marking the highest rate since the COVID-19 pandemic and the adoption of the European Child Guarantee Recommendation (Eurostat, 2025b). On the other hand, Sweden's NAP focused on reducing the 4% of children not participating in ECEC and according to recent data, Sweden successfully reduced this percentage to 1.1% by 2024 (Eurostat, 2025a). Although the aim is not to evaluate the efficiency of the two plans, Italy is achieving only part of its objectives, whereas Sweden appears to be more effectively addressing and fulfilling its goals. This also supports the claim that Sweden upholds the principle of "universal early childhood", committing to childcare inclusion and education, especially under the EPSR 11. In other words, while neither have achieved their goals fully yet, Sweden has nearly met its target whereas Italy so far shows fragmented implementation and lacks national-level evidence of goal achievement.

When comparing some of the data collected by Eurostat with data from the NAPs, it is important to keep in mind that measurement criteria can differ, leading to possible divergences. This happens because the criteria used in the NAP differ from Eurostat regarding the definition. "Children registered in ECEC" does not necessarily reflect the percentage of those actually attending on a daily or weekly basis. This is visible when looking at Sweden's data. There is a discrepancy between the data from Eurostat and the NAP when looking at ECEC 1-3, because according to Eurostat, 57.7% of children in this age group attend formal childcare services, but the NAP reported in 2020 a registration rate a lot higher, 79.1% (Skolverket, 2020). An explanation arises from the fact that the NAP does not measure the effective participation but rather only the formal enrolment. Children might then be enrolled but not attending regularly, due to illness or even because of parental leave. This also illustrates the difficulty in comparing ECEC data across member states. For Italy, the NAP and progress reports focus on the

coverage rate rather than the enrolment. The coverage rate differs between regions and cannot be directly compared to the Eurostat attendance data.

Policy ambitions meet the actual ability of people to benefit from the services. For certain categories of people, fees can be a financial barrier to accessing services. Both countries have different actions in progress that ideally can contrast these financial barriers. In Italy, the Bonus asilo nido and the AUU could help families cover the costs of ECEC 0-3 service, and in Sweden the child allowance for the use of the service that exceed 525 hours yearly. However, when it comes to the most present barriers, which are also non-financial (Baptista, Guio, Marlier, & Perista, 2023, pp. 19–20), other factors need to be taken into consideration. The areas that need more attention are the ones just mentioned for the two countries, and the relations between different forms of barriers can intertwine.

In Italy, a key non-financial barrier is the lack of available places and the existence of waiting lists, which are a problem considered in the reports as well. Waiting lists are based on the "priority rule", which tends to favour children from dual-earner households. While this promotes employment and work-family balance, it tends to disadvantage all the other categories. ISTAT's data indicate that children with a migration background, single-earner families, and refugees are among the categories least prioritized for access to ECEC services (ISTAT, 2023, p. 5). The emphasis on supporting dual-earner households suggests that the reconciliation of work and family life is central to ECEC access policies in Italy. However, the right to work-life balance is more effectively guaranteed for certain categories of families than for others, leaving families from disadvantaged backgrounds often deprioritized and without realistic access. Alternatively, as previously mentioned, geographical disparities remain significant in the country. Even though Baptista et al. (2023) do not consider it, it can still be regarded as such since the provision of services differs across areas of residence. An additional issue arises when combined the financial support system with the lack of service offer. The bonuses' ability to stimulate demand effectively becomes limited: although many families receive financial support, the absence of available places prevents the actual realization of service demand (ISTAT, 2023, p. 6). Consequently, financial incentives alone are insufficient without parallel investments in expanding the supply of services.

These problems are related to the fact that Italy lacks legal entitlement to ECEC. However, legal entitlement does not guarantee a perfect system that satisfies all children and families either, neither in Sweden. Families do face a cost for ECEC, especially because the average weekly attendance of ECEC services exceeds the 15 hours weekly: children aged 1-3 attend ECEC services for 18.6 hours and 32.2 hours for children aged 3-5 (Eurostat, 2025b), making the free of charge an insufficient full time employment support. Child allowance and parental leaves and benefits can be an effective tool to cover the costs of ECEC, allowing the inclusion of children in these services when are not free of charge. If a

Swedish family chooses to not exceed the 15 hours, it could rely on the parental leaves more than in Italy, where these benefits are less generous and accessible. And child allowance can act as an incentive to the enrolment of children in schools because the costs would then be covered.

Swedish families face similar challenges to Italian families when deciding whether to prioritize family care without additional costs or to work. However, it appears that enrolling children in ECEC is comparatively easier for Swedish families than for Italian families, making the choice less difficult. Unlike Italy, Sweden's priority access model prioritizes children who need to develop proficiency in the Swedish language, reinforcing the role of ECEC in promoting social inclusion. While the limited number of free hours might not fully support maternal labour market re-entry, it provides an important opportunity for mothers (or fathers) who do not wish to work full-time, offering a structured and inclusive environment for children at least part of the week.

The barriers not only restrict the labour market participation, or increase the chances of inclusion for families, but also have important implication on social inclusion and integration of the children themselves. Effective access can guarantee children a chance to interact and learn alongside peers, increasing their wellbeing especially when living in disadvantaged circumstances. It is the responsibility of both the EU and national governments to acknowledge and address the importance of policies concerning children, and to ensure that these policies receive adequate attention, since they are essential not only for social inclusion and child well-being, but also for the long-term sustainability of welfare systems across Europe.

6.2 Limitations

Some limitations need to be addressed. The data come from institutional documents missing a certain perspective. By focusing only on ECEC, the study overlooks intersectional aspects that do play a role in children well-being, the protection of their right and the breaking of the circle of poverty. Nevertheless, this focus can be viewed also as a strength, as it enables a deeper exploration of ECEC services.

Since the EU recommendation is of 2021, the NAPs of 2022 and the progress reports of 2024, the material used is limited, making it difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate the long-term impacts or policy sustainability of the ECG and the single national objectives. This could perhaps have been avoided by using more than two countries for the comparative study, allowing also a better understanding of the different welfare state regimes present in Europe, considering then the Liberal cluster and the Eastern European one. This would have allowed the research to use a greater amount of material. An in-depth analysis of the Eastern European welfare model would have been needed to support and understand the decision of taking one of the belonging countries from this cluster. However, it is plausible that the results would have been the same since the research would have been structured with the same funnel-like structure, starting from the overarching strategies and targets established at the EU level. Since the study reveals that the EU action tends to lean toward the Social-democratic/Nordic model, making it easier for certain countries to align with the EU recommendations, the study's findings feel generalizable.

This thesis does not address the demographic challenges that many European countries, especially Italy, are currently facing. Demographic decline is, in fact, one of the factors contributing to the gradual narrowing of the gap between the number of children and available nursery places in Italy, as noted in the Italian progress report and widely acknowledged in the public debate. Even if the number of available places increase, this phenomenon does not contribute to reduction of structural disparities and inequalities. Additionally, in the broader discussion on the demographic decrease, it makes it even harder for society to support the welfare and pension scheme.

The thesis focuses on access to ECEC services rather than on their quality of them. The initial plan included the pedagogical documents of both Italy and Sweden in the document analysis. However, they were not relevant for a study centred on welfare state typologies.

Finally, a potential bias could arise in the analysis and interpretation of the NAPs due to my personal familiarity with the Italian context. This might have in certain ways led to the possibility of favouring phrasing toward Sweden, resulting to a reader an argumentation "too kind" when explaining the

Swedish case. Nonetheless, efforts have been made to maintain impartiality and provide equal attention to both countries throughout the analysis.

6.3 Concluding remarks

This thesis examined how Italy and Sweden have responded to the establishment of the European ECG, looking at early childhood education and care, as part of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The main objective of the thesis was to see how the two states have planned to adapt their ECEC system in response to the ECG, situating the developments within the broader welfare state theory frameworks. Special attention was given to the different theoretical approaches that critique a mainstream welfare model for neglecting the role of the family. Throughout the thesis, the research engaged with the variety of familialism typology that was developed by Sigrid Leitner and focuses on the care responsibilities of childcare. Both this typology and Esping-Andersen's and Ferrera's frameworks are of fundamental importance for this thesis. Firstly, they helped explaining the characteristics of the Italian and Swedish welfare state and attitudes. Secondly, they place the two countries in two distinct welfare regime clusters, which makes them well-suited for a comparative case study. Welfare orientations shape the respective implementation paths under the ECG.

By considering path-dependency as a key aspect shaping policies and decisions and their trajectory, it becomes evident that EU recommendations need to be responsive to and be adapted to the specific national characteristics. It is impossible to have a one-size-fit-all approach, so several pathways will be taken starting one directive. Member States will react differently to EU recommendations depending on the welfare state they "belong" to. This is what is now happening with the ECG. Even if the EU does not have a per se ws to belong to, it has been possible to use the frameworks to identify its tendency. It has been clear that it has a propensity toward de-familialization and Social-democratic values. This means that when the EU formulates recommendations and other legislative measures, countries with welfare systems more aligned with the EU are likely to find it easier to develop effective implementation processes. The thesis points out how the implementation of tools such as the ECG and principle outlined in the EPSR, even without direct empirical support, reflects a specific welfare orientation that also demonstrates the EU's intention to foster a harmonization of social policies across Members, slowly transforming the countries systems into a more coherent and European welfare landscape. There is no doubt that Italy and Sweden keep belonging to two different welfare and familialistic categories, but it might seem that the typologies are changing, indicating a convergence toward more hybrid regimes. It seems like the Italian intention is to move toward more an optional familialism from the original explicit familialism. Swedish universalism is simultaneously evolving, with a growing emphasis on targeted measures.

When examining child-related policies, it is possible to identify traits that point toward both harmonization and path dependency. It raises, the questions whether in the future this harmonization will lead to a more unified European welfare state model, promoting convergence, and hybridization of the national welfares. This makes this specific thesis on the ECG a case example showing the complexity of the creation of the EU policies within the context of the different welfare regimes.

Reference list

Baptista, I., Guio, A., Marlier, E., & Perista, P. (2023). *Access for children in need to the key services covered by the European Child Guarantee: An analysis of policies in the 27 EU Member States.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union .

Bastos, A. (2016). A REVIEW OF CHILD POVERTY APPROACHES: The European Union Experience. In M. Petmesidou, E. Delamónica, C. Papatheodorou, & A. Henry-Lee , *Child Poverty, Youth (Un)Employment, and Social Inclusion* (p. 41-66). Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag.

Begg, I., Mushövel, F., & Niblett, R. (2015). *The Welfare State in Europe Visions for Reform.* Chatham House Europe Programme.

Bertin, G., Carrino, L., & Pantalone, M. (2021). Do standard classifications still represent European welfare typologies? Novel evidence from studies on health and social care. *Social Science & Medicine (1982), 281*, 114086–114086.

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method. *Qualitative Research Journal, 9*(2), 27–40.

Council of the European Union. (2011, June 15). Council conclusions on early childhood education and care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow. Official Journal of the European Union.

Council of the European Union. (2019, May 22). Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. Official Journal of the European Union.

Council of the European Union. (2021, June 21). COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee. Official Journal of the European Union.

Daly, M. (2020). *Gender Inequality and Welfare States in Europe.* Edward Elgar Publishing.

Department for Family Policies. (2024). *Decontribution for female workers*. Retrieved April 2025 from Italian Government – famiglia.governo.it: https://www.famiglia.governo.it/it/politiche-e-attivita/contributi-economici/decontribuzione-per-le-lavoratrici/

Department for Family Policies. (n.d. a). *Parental leave*. Retrieved April 2025 from Italian Government – famiglia.governo.it: https://www.famiglia.governo.it/it/politiche-e-attivita/famiglia/conciliazione-famiglia-lavoro/congedo-parentale/il-congedo-parentale/

Department for Family Policies. (n.d. b). *Il congedo di maternità*. Retrieved April 2025 from Governo Italiano – famiglia.governo.it: https://www.famiglia.governo.it/it/politiche-e-attivita/famiglia/conciliazione-famiglia-lavoro/il-congedo-di-maternita-1/

Department for Family Policies. (n.d. c). *Paternity leave*. Retrieved April 2025 from Italian Government – famiglia.governo.it: https://www.famiglia.governo.it/it/politiche-e-attivita/famiglia/conciliazione-famiglia-lavoro/il-congedo-di-paternita-1/

European Commission. (2021a). *EU strategy on the rights of the child (COM(2021) 142 final).* Brussels: European Commission.

European Commission. (2021b). *Toolkit for inclusive early childhood education and care: providing high-quality education and care to all young children.* Brussels: Publications Office.

European Commission. (2022). *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care (COM(2022) 442 final).* Brussels.

European Commission. (2023, October 24). *European Pillar of Social Rights – 20 Principles*. Retrieved April 2025 from Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en

European Commission. (n.d. a). *The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee*. Retrieved April 2025 from European Commission: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee_en

European Commission. (n.d. b). *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan*. Retrieved April 2025 from Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en

European Commission. (n.d. c). *European Child Guarantee*. Retrieved April 2025 from European Commission: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/social-protection-social-inclusion/addressing-poverty-and-supporting-social-inclusion/investing-children/european-child-guarantee_en

Eurostat. (2025a, April 15). *Children in formal childcare or education by age group and duration – % over the population of each age group*. Retrieved April 2025 from Eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_caindformal/default/table?lang=en&category=es.tesip.tesic.tesicq.tesicqprim

Eurostat. (2025b, April 15). *Average number of weekly hours of formal care by age group - children with or without formal care*. Retrieved April 2025 from Eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_camnforall/default/table?lang=en&category=livcon.ilc.ilc_lv.ilc_ca

Eurydice. (2023a, November 27). *Italy – Access*. Retrieved from Eurydice – European Commission: https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/italy/access

Eurydice. (2023b, November 25). *Fundamental principles and national policies*. Retrieved April 2025 from Eurydice – European Commission: https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/sweden/fundamental-principles-and-national-policies

Eurydice. (2023c, November 27). *Early childhood education and care*. Retrieved April 2025 from Eurydice – European Commission: https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/sweden/early-childhood-education-and-care

Eurydice. (2023d, Noveember 27). *Organisational variations and alternative structures in ECEC – Sweden*. Retrieved April 2025 from Eurydice - European Commission: https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/sweden/organisational-variations-and-alternative-structures-ecec

Eurydice. (2024a, May 22). *Early childhood education and care*. Retrieved April 2025 from Eurydice - European Commission: https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/italy/early-childhood-education-and-care

Eurydice. (2024b, January 30). *Administration and governance at central and/or regional level*. Retrieved April 2025 from Eurydice – European Commission: https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/sweden/administration-and-governance-central-andor-regional-level

Eurydice. (2025a). *Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe 2025: Eurydice report.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Eurydice. (2025b, February 25). *Educational guidelines*. Retrieved April 2025 from Eurydice – European Commission: https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/italy/educational-guidelines

Försäkringskassan. (n.d. b). *10-dagar vid barns födelse - 10 days after birth*. Retrieved April 2025 from Försäkringskassan: https://www.forsakringskassan.se/privatperson/foralder/10-dagar-vid-barns-fodelse

Försäkringskassan. (n.d. a). *Föräldrapenning - Parental allowance*. Retrieved April 2025 from Försäkringskassan: https://www.forsakringskassan.se/privatperson/foralder/foraldrapenning

Försäkringskassan. (n.d. c). *Barnbidrag och flerbarnstillägg - Child allowance and multiple child allowance*. Retrieved April 2025 from Försäkringskassan: https://www.forsakringskassan.se/privatperson/foralder/barnbidrag-och-flerbarnstillagg

Ferrera, M. (1996). The "Southern Model" of Welfare in Social Europe. *Journal of European Social Policy, 6(1)*, 17-37.

Gerven, M. v. (2022). 4 Nordic welfare states: up to the challenge? In B. Greve, *De Gruyter Handbook of Contemporary Welfare States* (p. 47-64). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter.

Griggs, J., & Walker, R. (2008). *The costs of child poverty for individuals and society: a literature review.* Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Guio, A.-C., Frazer, H., & Marlier, E. (2021). *Study on the economic implementing framework of a possible EU child guarantee scheme including its financial foundation.* Luxemburg: Publications Office.

Hackman, D., & Kraemer, D. (2020). Socioeconomical Disparities in Achievement: insignt on neurocognitive development and educational intervention. In M. Thomas, D. Mareschal, & I. Dumontheil, *Educational neuroscience: : development across the life span* (p. 88-119). Routledge.

Hermans, K., Greiss, J., Delanghe, H., & Cantillon, B. (2022). Delivering on the European Pillar of Social Rights: Towards a needs-based distribution of the European social funds? *Social Policy & Administration, 57(4)*, 464–480.

INPS. (2024a, April 18). *Circolare numero 57 del 18-04-2024*. Retrieved April 2025 from Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale - INPS: https://www.inps.it/it/it/inps-comunica/atti/circolari-messaggi-e-normativa/dettaglio.circolari-e-messaggi.2024.04.circolare-numero-57-del-18-04-2024_14551.html

INPS. (2024b, June 26). *Congedo di paternità obbligatorio*. Retrieved April 2025 from INPS: https://www.inps.it/it/it/dettaglio-scheda.it.schede-servizio-strumento.schede-servizi.congedo-di-paternit-obbligatorio-58988.congedo-di-paternit-obbligatorio.html

INPS. (2025, February). *Assegno unico e universale per i figli a carico*. Retrieved April 2025 from Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale INPS: https://www.inps.it/it/it/dettaglio-scheda.it.schede-servizio-strumento.schede-servizi.assegno-unico-e-universale-per-i-figli-a-carico-55984.assegno-unico-e-universale-per-i-figli-a-carico.html

INPS. (2025a, March 25). *Bonus asilo nido: novità 2025, attivo il servizio per la domanda*. Retrieved from INPS: https://www.inps.it/it/it/inps-comunica/notizie/dettaglio-news-page.news.2025.03.bonus-asilo-nido--novit--2025-attivo-il-servizio-per-la-domanda.html

INPS. (2025b, January). *Assegno di Inclusione (ADI)*. Retrieved April 2025 from Istituto nazionale della previdenza sociale INPS: https://www.inps.it/it/it/dettaglio-scheda.it.schede-servizio-strumento.schede-servizi.assegno-di-inclusione-adi.html

INPS. (2025c, February 20). *Parental leave allowance for employed workers*. Retrieved April 2025 from Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale - INPS: https://www.inps.it/it/it/dettaglio-scheda.it.schede-servizio-strumento.schede-servizi.50583.indennit-di-congedo-parentale-per-lavoratrici-e-lavoratori-dipendenti.html

INPS. (2025d, April 17). *Bonus nuovi nati*. Retrieved April 2025 from Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale - INPS: https://www.inps.it/it/it/dettaglio-scheda.it.schede-servizio-strumento.schede-servizi.bonus-nuovi-nati.html

ISTAT. (2023). *Nidi e Servizi Integrativi Per La Prima Infanzia. Anno Educativo o2021/2023.*

Jacques, O., & Noël, A. (2020, Febraury). Targeting within universalism. *Journal of European social policy, 31* (1), 15-29.

Leitner, S. (2003). Varieties of familialism: The caring function of the family in comparative perspective. *European Societies, 5*, 353-375.

Lenaerts, K., Vandenbroeck, M., & Beblavý, M. (2018). *Benefits of early childhood education and care and the conditions for obtaining them.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

León, M., & Migliavacca, M. (2013). Italy and Spain: Still the Case of Familistic Welfare Models? *Population review Vol.52 (1)*, 25-42.

Mahoney, J., & Schensul, D. (2006). Historical Context and Path Dependence. In J. Mahoney, D. G. Schensul, & C. Tilly, *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis* (p. 454–471). Oxford University Press.

Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze. (2021, May 26). *The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP)*. Retrieved from Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze: https://www.mef.gov.it/en/focus/The-National-Recovery-and-Resilience-Plan-NRRP/

Montanari, I. J. (1995). Harmonization of social policies and social regulation in the European Community. *European Journal of Political Research, 27*, 21–45.

Natili, M., & Jessoula, M. (2022). The Southern European welfare model. In B. Greve, *De Gruyter Handbook of Contemporary Welfare States* (p. 101-118). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter.

Papanastasiou, S., Papatheodorou, C., & Petmesidou, M. (2016). CHILD POVERTY AND INTERGENERATIONAL POVERTY TRANSMISSION IN THE EU: What is the impact of social protection policies and institutions?

Regeringskansliet . (2022, March 8). *Förskola för fler barn Prop. 2021/22:132*. Tratto da Regeringskanliet : https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/proposition/2022/03/prop.-202122132

Regeringskansliet. (2022, March 8). *Förskola för fler barn Prop. 2021/22:132*. Tratto il giorno April "025 da Regeringskanliet: https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/proposition/2022/03/prop.-202122132

Regeringskansliet. (2022). *National Action Plan to implement the European Child Guarantee.*

Regeringskansliet. (2024). *Progress Report on Sweden's National Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee.* Stockholm.

Regione Lombardia. (2024). *DGR n. 2744 del 15 luglio 2024 – Approvazione misura "Nidi Gratis Plus 2024/2025".* Milan.

Regione Toscana. (2025). *Decreto n. 4591 del 05-03-2025: FSE+ 2021/2027 – Avviso pubblico per il sostegno della frequenza dei servizi educativi per la prima infanzia per l'anno educativo 2025/2026 – Misura NIDI GRATIS.* Florence: Direzione Istruzione, Formazione, Ricerca e Lavoro.

Repubblica Italiana . (2024). *Rapporto sull'attuazione della Garanzia europea per l'Infanzia ai sensi del § 11, lettera f) della Raccomandazione (UE) 2021/1004 del Consiglio.*

Repubblica Italiana. (2022). *National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Child Guarantee (NAP)* . Roma.

Repubblica Italiana. (2022). *National Action Plan to implement the European Child Guarantee Annexes.* Roma.

Repubblica Italiana. (2024). *Rapporto sull'attuazione della Garanzia europea per l'Infanzia ai sensi del § 11, lettera f) della Raccomandazione (UE) 2021/1004 del Consiglio.*

Sankofa, N. (2023). Critical method of document analysis. International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 26(6), 745–757. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2022.2113664

Seawright, J., & Gerring, J. (2008). Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options. *Political Research Quarterly, 61*(2), 294-308.

Skolverket. (n.d.). *About preschool*. Retrieved April 2025 from Utbildningsguiden: https://utbildningsguiden.skolverket.se/forskolan/om-forskolan/about-preschool-om-forskolan-pa-engelska

Skolverket. (2024). *Förskola – Barn och grupper – Riksnivå (Tabell 2B)* [Excel file]. Swedish National Agency for Education.

Sveriges Riksdag. (2021). *Preschool for more children*. Retrieved from Sveriges Riksdag: https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/proposition/forskola-for-fler-barn_h903132/html/#page_20

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods.* SAGE.

Ylikoski, P., & Zahle, J. (2019). Case study research in the social sciences. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A, 78*, 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2019.10.003