

**THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL SERVICES IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE:  
TRENDS AND REFORM STRATEGIES IN THE FACE OF NEW SOCIAL RISKS****LA TRANSFORMACIÓN DE LOS SERVICIOS SOCIALES EN PERSPECTIVA  
COMPARADA: TENDENCIAS Y ESTRATEGIAS DE REFORMA FRENTE A LOS  
NUEVOS RIESGOS SOCIALES**MICHELE DI SALVO\*<sup>1</sup>CROSSMEDIA LABS – IT – UK  
ENIA – ENTE NAZIONALE PER L'INTELLIGENZA ARTIFICIALE – IT**ABSTRACT**

Welfare state systems are facing unprecedented pressure, simultaneously challenged by budget constraints, demographic changes, labour market shifts and the emergence of new social risks (NSRs). This essay analyses the trends and reform strategies undertaken by social services to respond to these challenges. Through a desk-based analysis and a review of the international literature, the contribution focuses on territorial asymmetries in service delivery and quality, the complexities of multi-level and multi-sectoral governance, and strategies for innovation and adaptation. The results highlight a marked divergence between Nordic models, and Mediterranean and Eastern European models. The most effective reform strategies appear to be those that combine operational decentralisation with strong national coordination, integration of services (health, social, employment), activation of public-private-third sector partnerships, and massive investment in human capital and digital technologies. The discussion concludes that the future sustainability of social services will depend largely on their ability to transition from a remedial and passive model to a preventive, active and personalised model.

**Keywords:** new social risks, social services, comparative welfare state,

**RESUMEN**

Los sistemas de bienestar social se enfrentan a una presión sin precedentes, al verse desafiados simultáneamente por restricciones presupuestarias, cambios demográficos, transformaciones en el mercado laboral y la aparición de nuevos riesgos sociales (NSR). Este ensayo analiza las tendencias y estrategias de reforma emprendidas por los servicios sociales para responder a estos desafíos. A través de un análisis documental y una revisión de la literatura internacional, la contribución se centra en las asimetrías territoriales en la prestación y la calidad de los servicios, las complejidades de la gobernanza multinivel y multisectorial, y las estrategias de innovación y adaptación. Los resultados ponen de relieve una marcada divergencia entre los modelos nórdicos y los modelos mediterráneos y de Europa del Este. Las estrategias de reforma más eficaces parecen ser aquellas que combinan la descentralización operativa con una fuerte coordinación nacional, la integración de los servicios (sanitarios, sociales, de empleo), la activación de asociaciones entre el sector público, el privado y el terciario, y una inversión masiva en capital humano y tecnologías digitales. El debate concluye que la sostenibilidad futura de los servicios sociales dependerá en gran medida su capacidad para pasar de un modelo correctivo y pasivo a un modelo preventivo, activo y personalizado.

**Palabras clave:** nuevos riesgos sociales, servicios sociales, estado del bienestar comparativo.

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: Michele Di Salvo. CrossMedia Labs-IT-UK. ENIA- Ente Nazionale per l'Intelligenza Artificiale.  
Email: [mik.disalvo@gmail.com](mailto:mik.disalvo@gmail.com) ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9531-0591>

## 1. Introduction

The landscape of the Western welfare state has been profoundly redrawn over the last three decades. Post-industrial transformations – globalisation, demographic transition towards increasingly ageing societies, the digital revolution and changes in family structures – have eroded the effectiveness of traditional social protection schemes, which were designed in an era of full male employment and stable family structures (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Taylor-Gooby, 2004). In this context, the so-called New Social Risks (NSRs) have emerged, i.e. vulnerabilities affecting particular segments of the population at specific stages of the life cycle, which are not adequately covered by traditional social security systems (Bonoli, 2005; Hemerijck, 2013).

Among the most relevant NSRs are: the risk of exclusion for young people and women entering the labour market (precarious jobs, youth unemployment); the difficulties of reconciling work and family life (care for children and the elderly); the risk of poverty for single-parent families; insecurity linked to low wages and atypical work (in-work poverty); and insufficient pension coverage (Bonoli, 2005; Taylor-Gooby, 2004). These risks pose particular challenges for social services, requiring interventions that are no longer merely monetary or welfare-based, but increasingly based on personalised, integrated and activating services (Hemerijck, 2013; Morel et al., 2012).

- Social services, traditionally the "poor relation" of the welfare state compared to monetary transfers, are therefore becoming the cornerstone of the response to NSRs. However, this centrality clashes with three fundamental problems, which are at the heart of this analysis:
- Territorial asymmetries: The geographical distribution of the capacity to provide and the quality of social services is deeply uneven within national states themselves. These disparities create real "geographies of welfare" (Kazepov, 2010) that exacerbate, rather than mitigate, socio-economic inequalities.
- Multi-level and multi-sectoral governance: Responding to NSRs requires the coordination of a plethora of actors: from the European Union to national governments, from regions to municipalities, to the third sector and the private for-profit sector. This decision-making "labyrinth" often generates inefficiencies, duplication and opaque accountability (Bifulco & Centemeri, 2008; Kazepov, 2010).
- Reform and innovation strategies: Policy makers are called upon to innovate in a context of public spending constraints, experimenting with new delivery models (welfare mix, co-production), new technologies (e-government, artificial intelligence) and new paradigms (active welfare, social investment) (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Pavolini & Vitale, 2016).

This essay aims to analyse these three dimensions from a comparative perspective, examining how different European welfare models are responding to the pressure of NSRs, with what strategies and with what results.

## 2. Objective and Hypotheses

The primary objective of this essay is to analyse, from a comparative perspective, how different European welfare models are transforming their social service structures to address the pressure of New Social Risks (NSRs). The research aims to critically examine the adopted reform strategies, focusing specifically on three interdependent dimensions: the management of territorial asymmetries in service provision, the challenges posed by multi-level and multi-sectoral governance, and the adoption of innovation strategies in the design and delivery of interventions (Kazepov, 2010; Heidenreich & Rice, 2016; Pavolini & Vitale, 2016).

The overarching hypothesis guiding the analysis is that the effectiveness of social service reforms is strictly conditioned by the welfare systems' ability to manage the tensions between three pairs of often conflicting objectives: administrative decentralization vs. territorial equity; multi-

sectoral integration vs. clarity of accountability; technological innovation and personalization vs. universality of rights (Ferrera, 2005; Bifulco & Centemeri, 2008; Bova, 2020). It is hypothesized, in particular, that the Nordic social-democratic models, thanks to an institutional context characterized by high administrative capacity, widespread social trust, and a universalistic tradition (Esping-Andersen, 1990), are better equipped to navigate these trade-offs more successfully, implementing complex reforms (such as service integration or co-production) relatively effectively. In contrast, it is presumed that the Mediterranean and Eastern European models, marked by familial or transitional welfare systems, local administrative frailties, and strong territorial disparities (Ferrera, 1996; Rymcza, 2015), face a "double challenge": modernizing services to respond to NSRs while attempting to bridge historical deficits in capacity and territorial cohesion. The integrated analysis of secondary quantitative data and qualitative case studies will serve to test this hypothesis, verifying in which contexts and under what conditions the different reform strategies produce the expected outcomes or, conversely, generate unintended consequences that may exacerbate inequalities or reduce service accessibility.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a comparative qualitative-descriptive approach, integrated with the analysis of secondary quantitative data. The research is based on an extensive review of international scientific literature in political science, sociology of public policy, and social work, selecting theoretical and empirical contributions relevant to the theme of new social risks, governance, and social service reforms. The period of empirical analysis primarily covers the decade of 2010-2020, a crucial period that includes the years following the 2008 financial crisis and the consolidation of the "social investment" paradigm on the European agenda, as reflected in the data series examined.

The comparative dimension is implemented through the analysis of emblematic case studies, representative of the different European welfare models (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Ferrera, 1996). Methodological integration occurs systematically: the qualitative analysis of reform trajectories and governance frameworks in these cases provides depth and contextual understanding, while quantitative analysis offers an objective empirical basis for comparing performances, expenditures, and disparities at the macro level. For example, the qualitative review of strategies such as service integration or co-production is complemented and validated by quantitative data on coverage, labor inclusion outcomes, or levels of social service spending.

The empirical analysis uses quantitative data from official international databases, processed to produce comparative tables and graphs that visualize territorial disparities and differences between welfare models:

- OECD Social Expenditure Database (SOCX) for total social expenditure and expenditure by function (OECD, 2021).
- Eurostat and EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) for data on poverty, social exclusion, and service provision (Eurostat, 2022).
- European Quality of Government Index (EQI) to measure institutional quality at the regional level (Charron et al., 2014).

The analysis is conducted mainly at the macro and meso levels, examining institutional reform trajectories and system performance. The triangulation between qualitative evidence (literature and cases) and quantitative data is fundamental for testing hypotheses, understanding the causes behind numerical trends, and avoiding conclusions based on a single type of evidence.

#### **4. New Social Risks and the Centrality of Services: Deepening the Theoretical and Empirical Nexus**

The emergence of New Social Risks is not merely an additive phenomenon but represents a qualitative shift in the nature of vulnerability in post-industrial societies. Traditional welfare systems, built on the male-breadwinner model and the assumption of stable, lifelong employment, are structurally ill-equipped to handle risks that are often intermittent, transitional, and linked to life-course transitions rather than permanent statuses (Bonoli, 2005). For instance, the risk of in-work poverty or inadequate social protection for atypical workers stems directly from the decoupling of social rights from standard employment contracts. This mismatch necessitates a fundamental recalibration of social protection, shifting the focus from passive compensation to active enablement and prevention. The Social Investment paradigm, while dominant, is not without its critics. Some scholars argue that it may privilege economically productive activities (e.g., childcare to free parents for work) over care for the elderly or disabled, and that its focus on future returns can justify the neglect of immediate poverty relief for those deemed "uninvestable" (Cantillon & Van den Bosch, 2015; Saraceno, 2015). This tension underscores the political and ethical dilemmas at the heart of modern welfare reform.

Spending on social services (excluding health) is a crucial indicator of this orientation. As Figure 1 shows, the Nordic countries allocate a significantly higher percentage of GDP to this item than Mediterranean and Eastern European countries (OECD, 2021).

These figures highlight the structural gap between models: Nordic countries invest more in NSRs-related services, while Mediterranean countries maintain a focus on pensions and transfers (Ferrera, 1996; Leibetseder, 2018).

**Figure 1**

*Expenditure on social services (% of GDP, 2019) – Source: Own elaboration Based on Eurostat data*

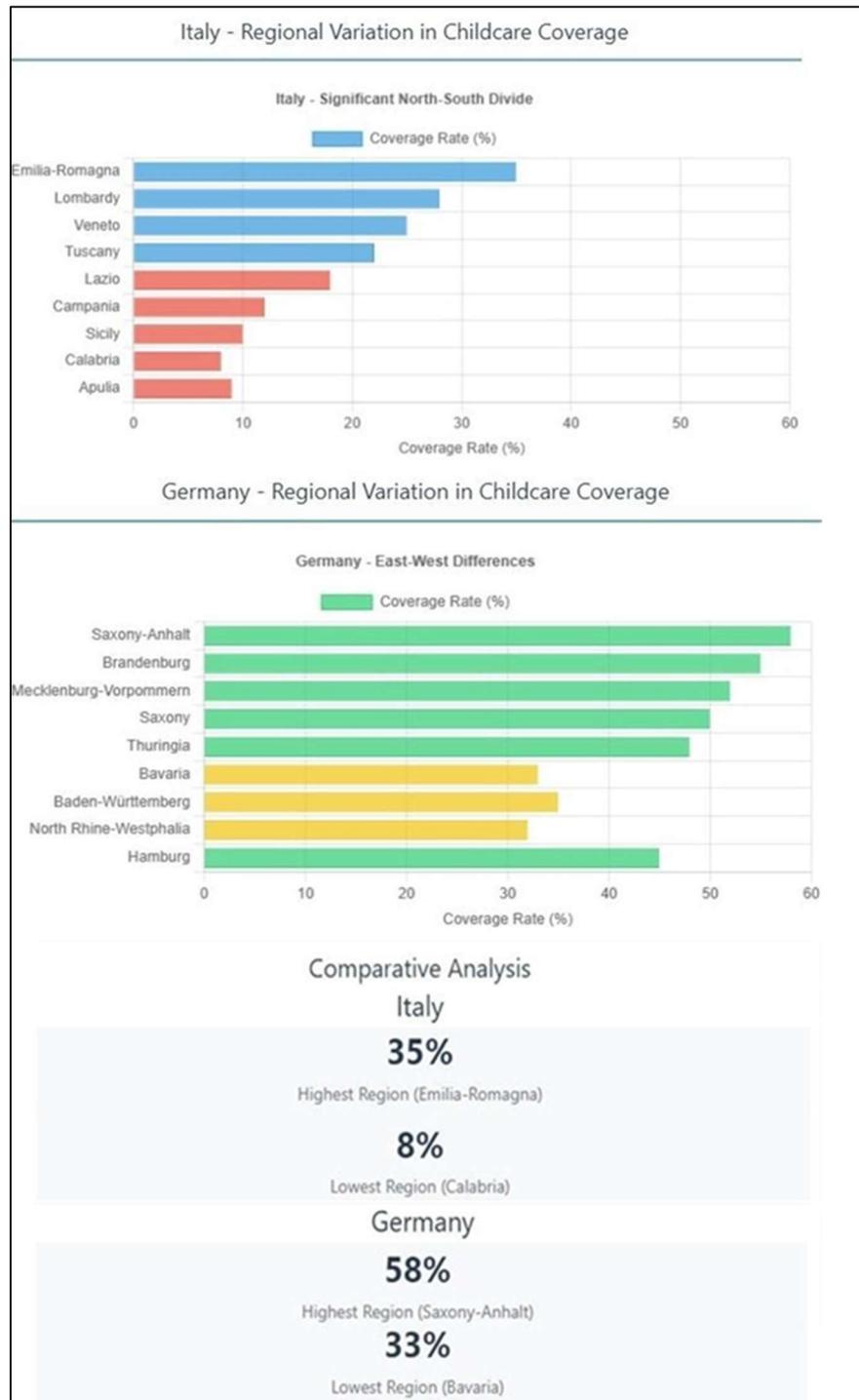


## 5. Territorial Asymmetries in Social Services

Administrative decentralisation has been a dominant trend in Europe since the 1990s. However, the transfer of powers to sub-national governments (regions, municipalities) has not always been accompanied by an adequate rebalancing of financial resources and administrative capacities. This has led to significant territorial asymmetries (Kazepov & Barberis, 2017; Ferrera, 2005).

**Figure 2**

*Coverage rate of childcare services (0-3 years) by NUTS2 region in Italy and Germany (2020) – Source: Own elaboration Based on Eurostat data*



### Figure 3

#### *Coverage rate of childcare services*

**Key Observations**

Italy shows enormous regional variation in childcare coverage rates, with a difference of 27 percentage points between the highest (Emilia-Romagna at 35%) and lowest (Calabria at 8%) regions. This reflects the significant North-South divide in service provision.

Germany also shows considerable regional variation (25 percentage points), though less extreme than Italy. The Eastern regions (like Saxony-Anhalt at 58%) generally have higher coverage rates than Western regions (like Bavaria at 33%), reflecting the legacy of different social policies.

The causes of these disparities are multifactorial:

- Fiscal capacity gaps: Wealthier municipalities can invest more in services than those in depressed areas (Kazepov, 2010).
- Administrative capacity gaps: The presence of qualified personnel, management know-how and innovation is unevenly distributed (Charron et al., 2014).
- Different political cultures: Priorities in social spending vary according to local political majorities (Kazepov & Barberis, 2017).
- The "Matthew" (or winner's) effect: Better services attract citizens with greater social and economic capital, further increasing the resources of the area at the expense of weaker ones (Ferrera, 2005).

These asymmetries transform the right to social citizenship into a "territorial lottery" (Ferrera, 2005), where access to an essential service depends on one's postcode of residence, violating the principle of equity.

The consequences of these asymmetries are profound and multi-layered. They do not only create inequality of access but also generate vicious cycles of territorial disadvantage. Regions with weak services often have higher rates of poverty and social exclusion, which in turn increases demand and complexity, further straining inadequate local systems. This dynamic is evident in the distribution of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, a cornerstone of social investment. As Chart 2 illustrates, coverage rates vary dramatically not only between countries like Italy and Germany but within their own regions, often mirroring core-periphery and North-South divides. Furthermore, the quality of services, an aspect often harder to measure than mere coverage, is even more susceptible to territorial disparities. A place in a nursery school is not equivalent if the staff-to-child ratio, staff training, and pedagogical approach differ drastically. These qualitative gaps perpetuate intergenerational inequalities from the very start of the life course, undermining the very goal of social investment (Kazepov & Barberis, 2017; Naldini & Saraceno, 2016).

## 6. The Challenges of Multilevel and Multisectoral Governance

The response to NSRs requires horizontal (between sectors) and vertical (between levels of government) integration. This gives rise to complex multilevel governance systems:

- European Level: Defines the political agenda (Europe 2020, European Pillar of Social Rights) and provides funding (ESF+) (European Commission, 2017; Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2018).

- National Level: Defines the LEPs (Essential Levels of Performance), the framework legislation and the funding system (Ferrera, 2017).
- Regional Level: Often planning and coordination (Kazepov, 2010).
- Local Level (Municipalities): Provision of services (Bifulco, 2016).

These levels often operate with different logics and timelines, creating inefficiencies. Multisectoral (or integrated) governance is even more complex. To manage a case of social hardship (e.g., a young NEET), it is necessary to integrate municipal social services, regional employment centres, schools (ministerial) and, possibly, third sector actors. Failures in this integration are frequent and costly (Bifulco & Centemeri, 2008; Heidenreich & Rice, 2016).

Strategies to improve governance include:

- Governance networks: Permanent consultation tables between public and private actors (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012).
- Case management and single point of contact: To guide the user through the service network (Hartlapp & Schmid, 2018).
- Territorial pacts: Formal agreements to achieve specific objectives (Bifulco, 2016).
- Integrated budgets: Pooling of financial resources from different entities for common objectives (Costa-Font & Greer, 2013).

However, the effectiveness of these tools is strongly influenced by the quality of local institutions and the trust between actors (Charron et al., 2014).

## 7. Reform, Innovation and Adaption Strategies

Reform strategies are varied and reflect the path dependence of each national system. However, some common trends can be identified: Personalisation and co-production: Transition from standardised services to personalised plans, co-designed with the user (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Ostrom, 1996). The personal budget is an example of this. Digitalisation and e-government: From online helpdesks to the use of AI for predictive analysis of the risk of hardship. This reduces costs but raises ethical questions about the digital divide (Bova, 2020). Circular subsidiarity and welfare communities: Enhancing the role of the third sector and voluntary organisations as service providers in partnership with the public sector (Pavolini & Vitale, 2016; Pestoff, 2014). Evaluation and evidence-based policy: Greater focus on measuring outcomes (social impact) rather than outputs (number of interventions), through tools such as Social Impact Assessment (Le Galès, 2016). Institutional consolidation reforms: In some contexts (e.g. Scandinavia), municipalities are merging to create "scale economies" and improve efficiency (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019).

The abstract discussion of strategies is best understood through concrete, documented cases. The following eight examples illustrate the diverse applications and challenges of reforming social services across Europe:

1. *Personal Budgets in England and the Netherlands (Personalisation)*: The implementation of personal budgets for long-term care, allowing users to purchase their own care, aimed to increase choice and autonomy. Research, however, documented mixed outcomes. While some users benefited, others, particularly the elderly and those with lower socio-economic capital, found the system complex and burdensome, leading to anxiety and reduced access (Glendinning et al., 2008; Da Roit & Le Bihan, 2010). This case highlights the risk of personalisation exacerbating inequalities without adequate support structures.
2. *The "Tilburg Model" in the Netherlands (Integrated Governance)*: The city of Tilburg became a European benchmark for integrated social services in the 2000s. It reorganized

its administration into a matrix structure based on life events (e.g., "having a child," "losing a job") rather than departmental silos. This required profound cultural and operational change, supported by shared IT systems and joint budgeting, leading to improved user journeys and efficiency (Hendriks & Tops, 2005). It demonstrates that successful integration is a deep organizational reform, not just a procedural tweak.

3. *The "Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza" (PNRR) in Italy (Addressing Territorial Asymmetries)*: Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan, funded by the EU Next Generation, allocates over €20 billion to strengthen social infrastructure, including early childhood services and home care for the elderly. A key innovation is the attempt to tie funding to the reduction of territorial gaps, requiring regions to allocate resources preferentially to underserved areas (Governo Italiano, 2021). This represents a massive, centrally steered attempt to use European funds to correct long-standing territorial inequalities in service provision.
4. *Predictive Analytics in Poland (Digitalisation)*: Several Polish municipalities have experimented with algorithms to analyse municipal data (e.g., utility payment arrears, school absences) to predict which families are at highest risk of needing social worker intervention. While intended to optimize resources, such systems have raised significant ethical concerns about profiling, data privacy, and the potential for reinforcing bias (Minku & Stefanuk, 2020). This case underscores the tension between efficiency gains and the risks of algorithmic governance in sensitive social domains.
5. *The "Municipal Amalgamation Reform" in Denmark (Institutional Consolidation)*: Between 2007 and 2014, Denmark reduced its municipalities from 271 to 98 to achieve economies of scale and strengthen administrative capacity. Evaluations show that while economic efficiency improved in some areas, the physical distance between citizens and service centres increased, potentially weakening local democracy and accessibility for vulnerable groups (Blom-Hansen et al., 2016). This illustrates the trade-off between efficiency and proximity in service delivery.
6. *Co-production of Homelessness Services in Sweden (Welfare Mix)*: In Stockholm, the "Housing First" program for the homeless is delivered through partnerships between the municipality, non-profit housing associations, and healthcare providers. The model gives users a stable tenancy first, then wraps support services around them. Research indicates higher success rates in sustaining housing compared to traditional staircase models, crediting the flexibility and user-centeredness enabled by the multi-actor partnership (Busch-Geertsema, 2013). It showcases effective co-production for a hard-to-serve population.
7. *The "Kela" Agency in Finland (Digitalisation and Personalisation)*: The Finnish Social Insurance Institution (Kela) has developed a highly digitalised service platform where citizens can manage most social security benefits (parental allowances, housing support, etc.) via a single online portal. This is coupled with strong customer service support. The system is praised for its simplicity and transparency, though challenges remain for digitally excluded groups (Hiilamo, 2018). It represents a successful, large-scale integration of digital tools to simplify access to monetary and service benefits.
8. *Social Impact Bonds (SIBs) in the UK and Germany (Innovative Finance and Evaluation)*: SIBs involve private investors funding preventive social programs (e.g., for at-risk youth), with the public sector repaying the investment only if predefined social outcomes are achieved. A SIB in Berlin aimed at integrating young refugees into the labour market showed promising initial results but also highlighted the complexity of setting appropriate metrics and the high transaction costs of such models (Fraser et al., 2018; Warner, 2013).

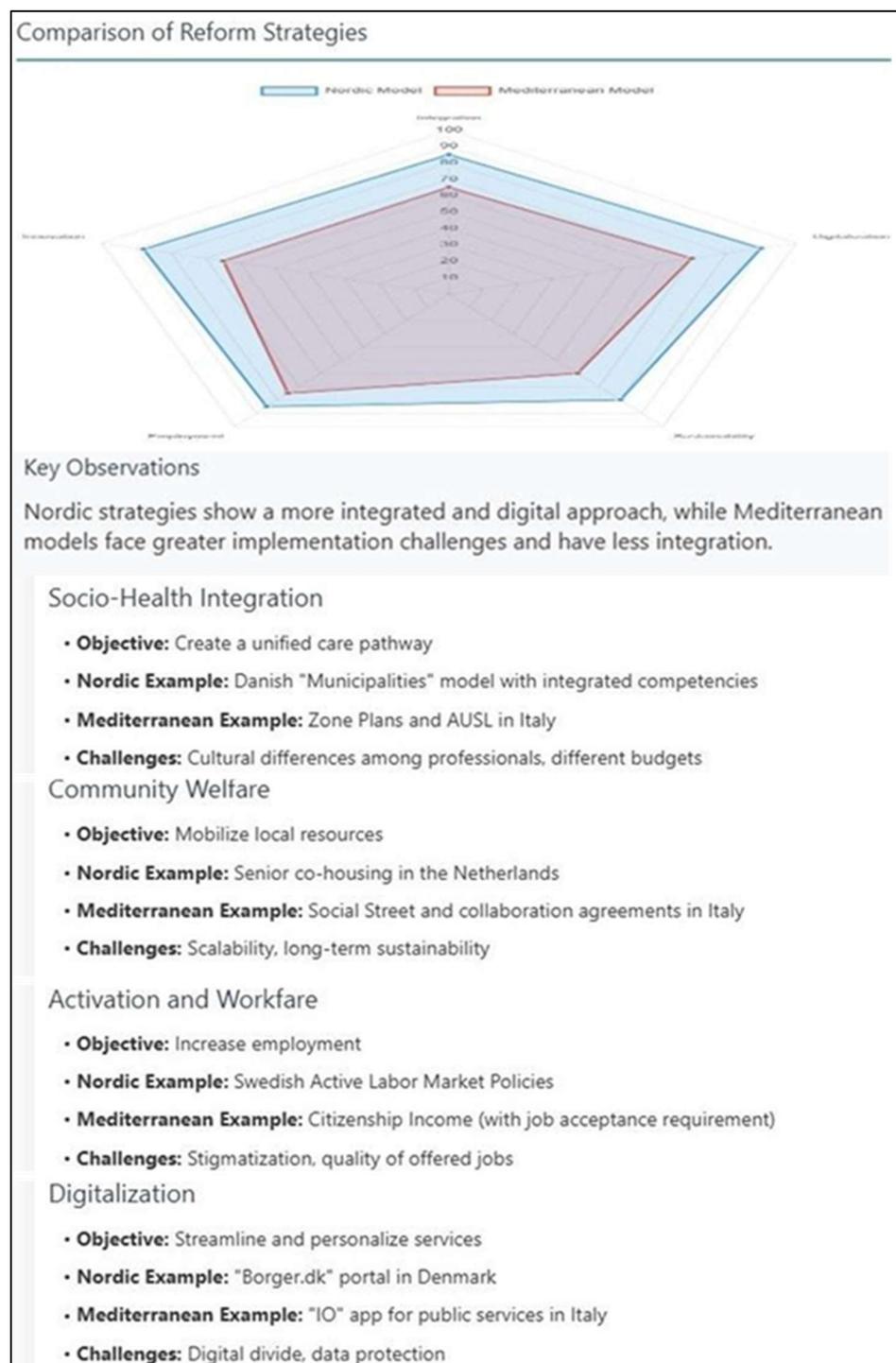
This case exemplifies the push for outcome-based funding and the entry of private finance into social service provision.

9. *Integrated Family Centres ("Familienzentren") in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany (Integrated Governance & Prevention)*: Since the mid-2000s, the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia has transformed numerous kindergartens into "Familienzentren" (Family Centres). These centres act as local one-stop-shops, providing not only childcare but also parenting support, early intervention services, family counselling, and links to job centres and health services. Funded through a mix of state subsidies and childcare fees, they aim to reach families early, prevent escalation of problems, and improve coordination between sectors. An evaluation found they improved service access for disadvantaged families and strengthened community networks (Betz et al., 2016). This case exemplifies a preventative, place-based approach to integrating services for families with young children.
10. *The "Youth Guarantee" in Finland (Activation & EU Policy Coordination)*: Finland's implementation of the EU Youth Guarantee (YG) is considered a benchmark. Launched in 2013, it guarantees all under-25s a job, apprenticeship, traineeship, or continued education within three months of becoming unemployed. Success is attributed to deep cooperation between the national employment service (TE Offices), municipal authorities, and educational institutions, supported by substantial investment. Case managers develop personalised plans. By 2017, over 83% of participants were in employment, education, or a traineeship within three months of registering (European Commission, 2017). This demonstrates how a robust, well-funded administrative framework is critical for turning a rights-based policy pledge into an effective activation service.
11. *The "Chèque Emploi Service Universel" (CESU) in France (Formalising the Care Market & Welfare Mix)*: Introduced in 2006, the CESU is a simplified payment mechanism for employing someone for home-based services (childcare, elderly care, housekeeping). It reduces administrative burdens for employers (households) and ensures social security coverage for employees, formalising a previously large informal sector. The CESU can be funded privately or, for eligible low-income households, through public allowances. It significantly boosted the growth of the personal services sector and increased female employment, though critiques note it may subsidise low-waged, precarious jobs more than creating a high-quality care system (Morel, 2015). This case highlights an innovative tool for managing the care economy through regulated marketisation and voucher systems.
12. *The "Local Area Coordination" (LAC) Model in Scotland, UK (Asset-Based Community Development & Personalisation)*: Inspired by an Australian model, LAC is being implemented across several Scottish local authorities. It deploys Local Area Coordinators who are not traditional social workers but community connectors. Their role is to build long-term relationships with citizens with disabilities or long-term conditions, helping them identify personal goals, strengths, and community resources, rather than just allocating predefined services. The approach reduces dependence on formal services, fosters community inclusion, and is reported to improve well-being while generating long-term cost savings for local authorities (Duffy, 2017). This represents a radical shift towards an asset-based, community-focused model that challenges conventional service-led approaches.
13. *The "Social Welfare Act 2011" Reform in Slovenia (Recentralisation & Standardisation)*: In contrast to the decentralisation trend, Slovenia's 2011 reform recentralised key social services (e.g., social assistance, child protection) from municipalities to the state. The goal was to ensure uniform service standards, professionalise the workforce, and guarantee equal rights across the territory. While it improved consistency and reduced territorial disparities in service quality, it also increased bureaucratic centralism and reduced local

flexibility and innovation. The reform illustrates a political choice to prioritise equity and national standards over local autonomy (Kopač & Pevcin, 2017). This is a key case of a post-communist country using recentralisation as a strategy to overcome weak local governance and build a coherent national system.

**Figure 4**

*Types of social services reform strategies in comparative perspective. Author Elaboration*



14. *Digital Social Work ("DigiSos") in Norway (Technology-Enabled Professional Practice)*: Norway's "DigiSos" initiative is not just about citizen-facing portals but about transforming back-office professional practice. It provides social workers with a national, digital platform for case management, featuring decision-support tools, knowledge databases, and secure communication channels with clients (e.g., via video). Crucially, it is designed to save time on administration, allowing more time for direct client interaction, and to support evidence-based practice. Evaluations point to improved information sharing between agencies and more consistent service quality, though challenges in system usability and changing work routines persist (Mikalsen et al., 2018). This case focuses on technology as a tool to empower, rather than replace, professional social work judgement and interaction.

## 8. Discussion

The comparative analysis shows that there is no single winning reform model. The effectiveness of strategies is deeply context-dependent. Thanks to a long tradition of universalism, high administrative capacity and widespread social trust, Nordic countries can implement complex reforms (e.g. service integration) with relative effectiveness (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Johansson & Hvinden, 2007). In contrast, Mediterranean and Eastern European countries face a "double challenge": modernising services to meet NSRs while attempting to bridge historical territorial gaps and strengthen often fragile administrative capacities (Ferrera, 1996; Rymysza, 2015).

The tension between decentralisation (to bring services closer to citizens) and the need to ensure equity (through strong central coordination and national standards) remains unresolved. The definition and financing of LEPs is crucial: without them, decentralisation risks becoming a multiplier of inequalities (Kazepov, 2010; Ferrera, 2005).

Furthermore, the emphasis on social investment, while commendable, must not lead to neglecting the protective function of the welfare state. Cash transfers remain essential for alleviating immediate poverty, especially in contexts of high unemployment. The challenge is to find the right balance between "buffering" and "bridging" policies (activation and investment) policies (Hemerijck, 2017; Cantillon & Vandenbroucke, 2014).

Finally, technological innovation is a powerful tool, but not an end in itself. The digitisation of services must be inclusive and accompanied by an enhancement of the human capital of social workers, who are key figures in the personalisation of interventions and the building of a relationship of trust with the most vulnerable users (Bova, 2020; Saruis, 2017).

The documented cases enrich this discussion with concrete lessons. First, they show that institutional preconditions are critical: the success of complex tools like integrated governance (Tilburg) or digital platforms (Kela) rests on a foundation of reliable bureaucracy and digital infrastructure often absent in weaker contexts. Second, they reveal unintended consequences: personal budgets can confuse, amalgamations can alienate, and predictive algorithms can discriminate. This calls for robust, independent evaluation and ethical oversight in all reforms. Third, they demonstrate the growing role of the EU as a financier and agenda-setter, as seen in the Italian PNRR, potentially offering leverage to overcome national path dependencies. Ultimately, the cases confirm that the transformation of social services is a contested political arena where choices about personalisation, marketisation, digitalisation, and centralisation shape the very nature of social citizenship.

## 9. Conclusions

The transformation of social services in the face of new social risks is a complex, non-linear process marked by significant trade-offs. Comparative evidence suggests that the most promising reform strategies are hybrid and pragmatic ones that: combine local autonomy and national

standards, clearly defining essential levels of service and funding them adequately to reduce territorial asymmetries (Kazepov, 2010; Ferrera, 2005). Invest in the administrative capacity of sub-national governments, especially in the weakest areas, to break the vicious circle between low capacity and low service quality (Charron et al., 2014). Promote integrated governance not only on paper, but through operational tools such as case management, pooled budgets and interoperable information systems (Bifulco & Centemeri, 2008; Heidenreich & Rice, 2016). Experiment with innovative models of co-production and community welfare, without, however, shifting responsibilities that belong to the public sector onto informal networks (families, third sector) (Pavolini & Vitale, 2016; Pestoff, 2014). Use technology as an enabler of more efficient and personalised services, while taking care not to leave behind the most vulnerable sections of the population (Bova, 2020).

The future of social protection in Europe will depend on the ability of its Member States to navigate these complexities, finding a new balance between efficiency, equity and sustainability, and recognising that strong and universal social services are not a cost, but a fundamental precondition for a cohesive and resilient society (Hemerijck, 2017; Vandenbroucke et al., 2011).

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