Back to the familialist future: the rise of social policy for ruling populist radical right parties in Italy and Poland

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the emerging studies of populist radical right parties' social policies by looking at two cases, Italy and Poland, where such parties have been in office without the constraint of mainstream pro-market coalition partners. The comparison of two cases with different historical/institutional paths and economic conditions shows how important high-visibility, high-expenditure social policies can be for populist radical right parties (PRRPs) once in government. More specifically, the analysis of pension and family policies reveals important parallels in the revamping of familialistic aspects of the welfare state, despite demographic and economic pressures. The find- ings demonstrate that social policy is more important and less focussed on welfare chauvinism than assumed by the literature on PRRPs. This is explained by PRRPs' electoral expansion strategy towards more deprived groups, which in countries with a strong conservative Catholic presence is achieved through ideological repertoire expansion towards familialism, which can address both the material and cultural interests of the new electorate.

KEYWORDS Populism; radical right; social policy; family policy; Italy; Poland

Despite a growing interest in the socio-economic policy stances of populist radical right parties (PRRPs), we still know little on what and why, they would do when given the opportunity to govern alone. The existing literature has focussed on cases where such parties have been in coalitions with mainstream parties that likely have moderated their policy inputs (Afonso 2015; Rathgeb 2021; Röth *et al.* 2018). This article advances the understanding of PRRPs' social policies by looking at Italy and Poland, the two largest EU countries where such parties have recently come to power without the constraint of mainstream allies: the 2018–19 coalition between Lega and the Five Star Movement (M5S), and the 2015–19 majority governments of Law and Justice (PiS). Although Lega was the

junior party in the 2018–19 Conte government, within two months of government, it overtook its coalition partner in the opinion polls, becoming *de facto* the strongest player according to most observers. The party had been in power in governments labelled as populist before, but its senior coalition partner's (Forza Italia) socio-economic policies were broadly mainstream centre-right. PiS was not included in the classic typology of PRRPs (Mudde 2015), but despite its self-representation as a mainstream conservative party, it has over time absorbed far right parties such as the League of Polish Families and adopted radical stances on issues such as sexual minorities' rights and refugees.

Despite their different historical paths (from a Christian democratic origin in Italy, from a communist one in Poland), by the 2010s both countries had a welfare state with strong 'familialistic' characteristics (Estévez-Abe *et al.* 2016; Saraceno and Keck 2011). While mainstream parties were cautiously challenging these core assumptions in the face of emerging new social risks, PRRPs rediscovered the political importance of traditional family models. Our 'most different' case selection allows us to test if programmatic features of PRRPs can be generalised beyond specific national legacies.

The rise of the populist right among working-class voters, which started in the 1980s and accelerated after the financial crisis of 2008, has been accompanied by the increased salience of social policy for these parties (Afonso and Rennwald 2018; Lefkofridi and Michel 2014; Otjes *et al.* 2018). This is interesting because popular accounts of PRRPs' rise have focussed on identity factors, as in the growing 'white working class' literature (Kaufmann 2018; Williams 2019), concluding that social policy was of secondary importance and centred on welfare chauvinism (Ennser-Jedenastik 2016). By concentrating on the apparent dichotomy between identity and interests, less attention has been paid until recently (Enggist and Pinggera 2021) on the specific content of PRRPs' social policies, which has also been difficult to isolate because in most cases PRRPs have ruled as the junior coalition partners of mainstream conservative ones.

Once in office, it can be expected that PRRPs, like all challengers, will listen to electoral demands for social policies. But whether this will result in institutionalisation and de-ideologisation through an 'electoral turn' (Wenzelburger and Zohlnhöfer 2020) is to be seen. In a field with still relatively few cases, Italy and Poland reveal a remarkable social policy activism by both Lega and PiS, all the more that these parties had previously prioritised low-tax populism instead. We try to explain this puzzle by looking at both content and ideology, and to identify a possible emerging social policy approach specific to such parties, something that calls for a historical and interpretative approach. After a review of their policy approach, we analyse policy interventions related to the work/family demarcation (pensions and family benefits) as the most

distinctive ones, arguing that the underlying emerging familialism defines the recent electoral strategies of these parties, despite the very different political and economic contexts.

Right-wing populism and social policy

What we know about PRRPs' social policies is still based largely on their proposals while in opposition (Ennser-Jedenastik 2018; Fenger 2018; Ketola and Nordensvard 2018; Otjes *et al.* 2018) or on cases of government in coalition with market-liberal parties, which have constrained their policy input (Afonso 2015; Rathgeb 2021). As their electoral manifestos have been regularly criticised for being unrealistic, it is important to chronicle their policy output once unconstrained in power.

Social concerns have grown in importance in PRRPs' electoral performance: correlation between the fall of social spending and the rise of populism has been detected across Western Europe (Foster and Frieden 2019), and mainstream parties have increased their social policy offering against the challenge of PRRPs (Krause and Giebler 2020). Some see populist social policies as a form of Polanyian communitarian response to neoliberalism and austerity, as well as being against European integration (Bohle 2021; Fischer 2020; Hopkin 2020; Orenstein and Bugarič 2020). While this approach may explain the timing of populist social counter-movements, it says little about the forms they take. Emerging literature on PRRPs' socio-economic policy has focussed more on the nativist, populist and authoritarian aspects of their core ideology (Otjes *et al.* 2018; Rathgeb 2021). Scholars have discussed the aversion of PRRPs to bureaucratic complexity, which translates into a preference for straightforward systems, such as cash transfer programmes with minimal administrative burden and no intermediaries (Fischer 2020; Ketola and Nordensvard 2018), and for social consumption (especially pensions) over social investment (Enggist and Pinggera 2021).

Ennser-Jedenastik (2018) has shown that social programmes vary in their degree of vulnerability to welfare chauvinistic appeals. PRRPs' welfare chauvinism tends to be lower for insurance-based programmes, which do not contrast with these parties' nativist worldview, and higher for universal healthcare and means-tested social assistance programmes, which encompass also the allegedly undeserving (immigrants, welfare scroungers, etc.). However, if welfare chauvinism might be salient in electoral manifestos, as a government policy it is unlikely to satisfy by itself the working-class electorate, because it generates few savings and creates administration costs. Moreover, PRRPs' biggest electoral successes have been in post-socialist Europe, where immigration is a less central issue.

More broadly, Gingrich and Häusermann (2015) have argued that, in the changing post-industrial social structure, while Left parties have become more middle-class, non-Left parties are attracting more working-class voters and subsequently have moved to more pro-welfarism. Crucially, they add that these new preferences are influenced by the surrounding welfare state institutional configurations: the shifts are more pronounced in social-democratic and Christian democratic regimes than in Southern and liberal ones. In this political realignment, parties adopt different combinations of social protection (decommodifying) and social investment (commodifying) depending on the class composition.

These streams of literature have paid little attention to familialism in PRRPs' ideological baggage, which is akin to perpetuating Esping-Andersen's (1990) original neglect of variation in family and gender patterns in welfare states. Exceptions are Ennser-Jedenastik (2018), who finds that universal family allowances are mostly saved from PRRPs' nativist criticism, and Orenstein and Bugarič (2020), who depict the 'work, family, fatherland' orientation as exquisitely instrumental in the post-socialist PRRPs' quest to find new developmental paths. Still, familialism may provide exactly that combination of value- and instrumental rationality that PRRPs need to keep power without renouncing their roots. The ideological dimension of material incentives through an enlarged discursive and policy repertoire allows new voters to be attracted without demobilising the original core electorate.

This article first argues that the social policy of PRRPs in power is more prominent and substantial (e.g. involving real reallocation of resources, beyond symbolic policies) than generally assumed, which fits with the Polanyian perspective. Second, it adds that, compatibly with the country's welfare regime and political culture, PRRPs espouse familialism as a core feature of their social policy when they want to significantly enlarge their target electorate. The implication of this argument is that we expect that, when in power and unconstrained by mainstream parties, PRRPs promote the grandmotherly and spouse roles of women through natalist benefits and earlier and differential retirement ages; they defend employment protection of insiders (middle-skilled, middle-age males) combined with declaratory concern for youth. By contrast, they will neither invest in public childcare and social services, which promote dual-earner families, nor in social investment. This social policy mix has the potential to meet both material and cultural needs of a broader electorate while remaining compatible with the ideological preferences of PRRPs' core supporters. Such strategic orientation dovetails with the findings of the literature on social blocs, which depicts, for the Italian case, the alliance between Lega and M5S as an attempt to construct an 'anti-bourgeois bloc' (Bulfone and Tassinari 2020).

Case selection and methods

Little research compares the Mediterranean and post-socialist welfare states (Gal 2010; Inglot 2008), in general, and Italy and Poland, in particular. Incomparability is often invoked as a reason. The differences are easily summarised. Historically, Poland ditched communism thirty years ago, and Italy fascism 75 years ago: as a result, their post-authoritarian constitutions are designed to protect markets in Poland and to protect labour in Italy, with differences evident in the level of trade union influence. Economically, Poland is a star performer and the only EU member state not to experience a recession in 2008–09. The country is outside the Eurozone, has a flexible exchange rate and its finances were constantly abiding by the Maastricht requirements. By contrast, Italy's productivity has been stagnating for the last 25 years. Multiple structural deficiencies prevented the adaptation of its growth model to Eurozone membership. The public debt burden, exceeding 100% of GDP since 1992, provides little leeway to modernise the welfare state.

A most-different case selection is adopted to identify similarities within the dissimilar contexts. Here we follow Estévez-Abe *et al.*'s (2016) comparative analysis of familialistic welfare states, where the family represents the primary locus of welfare provision by way of intra- and intergenerational mutual aid, and where the state may or may not lend financial support. Instances of familialism by default and supported (through subsidies) familialism were first identified as a specific characteristic of southern European welfare regimes (Saraceno 2016). These sharply contrast with various efforts, e.g. in the Scandinavian model, at defamilialisation, i.e. the ability of women to support themselves without relying on a male breadwinner either through participation in the labour market or through individual entitlements as mothers.

Estévez-Abe *et al.* (2016) distinguish between the social security (age bias; paid maternity/paternity leave; low social services), labour market (employment gender gap; employment protection for standard contracts; high shares of self-employment and fixed-term employment) and social aspects of familialism, such as the high level of adult children living with families. As shown by OECD data for 2010 on these dimensions (see Table A1, Appendix), Italy and Poland ranked as the most familialistic welfare regimes among advanced economies.

On the eve of Lega and PiS government experiences, the previous liberal/centre-left governments had made timid attempts at modernising them, e.g. by harmonising the retirement age to 67 for both genders in Poland and through labour market and social assistance reforms in Italy. Yet in the early 2010s, the male bread-winner model was visible in both countries in the well-above-EU average gender employment gap and

notably the lowest employment rate for women aged above 50 in the EU, after Malta (Eurostat data). The inflow of in-house care migrants compensated for underdeveloped childcare and social care, giving rise to the so-called 'migrant-in-the-family' model (Bettio *et al.* 2006; Keryk 2010).

In terms of social protection expenditure (see Table A2, Appendix), while by 2010 Italy outspent Poland by 10% points of GDP (largely because higher GDP-per capita countries spend more on it), spending patterns were almost identical in old-age plus survivor pensions (around 56%), sickness/healthcare and disability (circa 30%) and social exclusion (1% or less). Italy spends more on housing (5.0 versus 2.1%) but this is compensated for by spending less on family/children policy (3.9 versus 6.8%).

Confirming the above, Saraceno and Keck (2011: 395) placed Italy and Poland side by side in the 'weak supported familialism, weak defamilialisation' cluster, which consists of 'countries that give a large amount of room to familialism by default, since decommodification, through either supported familialism or defamilialisation, is weak' and 'does not actively support women's financial autonomy, while offering limited protection from the financial costs of the gender division of labour'.

Hence, Italy and Poland have to cope with many of the new social risks stemming from their transitions to a post-industrial society (Taylor-Gooby 2004). Familial welfare states are ill-equipped to respond to the combination between low levels of fertility and workforce feminisation. Among the most apparent difficulties in Italy and Poland are low fertility rates (1.3 in both countries in 2015, against 1.5 EU average – Eurostat) and low economic benefits from women's education compared to men's (OECD 2020). Hence, Italian and Polish policymakers face the problem of reconciling family obligations with an increasing incidence of dual-earner households.

Our cases offer a privileged field to detect the contours of PRRPs' social policy in settings best suited for their emergence through a most-different case design (in terms of historical and economic conditions), which adds to the significance of the findings. We compare the social policies (dependent variables) of PRRPs in government (independent variable), identifying similarities between countries and discontinuities with the past, to elaborate a model of PRRPs' social policy within a familialistic welfare setting. Historical contextualisation involves the study of continuity and rupture with previous and, in the case of Italy, subsequent governments. The qualitative case-study approach complements the mainly quantitative literature in the field by providing a possible interpretation of the nature of and reasons for PRRPs' social policy turn, by linking it to the simultaneous electoral strategy shifts.

Data collection has been based on secondary literature, official legislation and government papers regarding social policies; on documents by parties (especially manifestos), trade unions and employers; on electoral and survey data (e.g. the European Social Survey, ESS); and on interviews with privileged observers from government agencies, trade unions and employer associations (five in each country, carried out in 2016 and 2020 in Poland and 2020 in Italy). We also include social expenditure data (see Table A3, Appendix), mostly for Poland, as the Conte I experience was too recent and short-lived. The different duration is a methodological concern, as a governing party's imprint on social policy spending appears only after a full term in office (Schmitt and Zohlnhöfer 2019). Measuring welfare effort through social spending is notoriously delicate due to path dependence and to spending patterns being partially independent from the adopted policies (e.g. in defined-contribution pension systems, present in both Italy and Poland), especially during crises (Lee *et al.* 2020). Therefore, we study 'reform events', i.e. the legislative output and its potential outcome, as a better indicator of social policy innovation – as the focus is on innovation rather than on lasting deep effects, the fifteen months duration of the Lega's experience are significant at least with regard to the party's priorities.

Italy

The Lega Nord was founded in 1989 as a regionalist, often secessionist party and was a junior coalition partner in 1994–96, 2001–06 and 2008–11. Under the new leadership of Matteo Salvini, from 2013, it turned into a national radical right party, jumping from 4.1% of the vote in the 2013 parliamentary elections to 17.4% in 2018 (see Albertazzi *et al.* 2018). It formed the first Giuseppe Conte government (June 2018–September 2019) with the not easily classifiable Five Star Movement (M5S), which had emerged as the largest party with 32.7% of the vote. Although technically the government's junior party, Lega almost immediately, and consistently from September 2018 on, exceeded the M5S in voting intentions, becoming, in the opinion of all observers, the strongest partner in the coalition.

Lega's quick electoral rise was numerically only possible by expanding the electorate from the northern regions to the poorer central and southern ones. The southern electorate differs sharply from the northern one, particularly in its higher unemployment rate (19 against 6% in 2018) and stronger traditional religiosity (35 against 21% weekly mass attendance in 2014 – Istat data). In the 2008 national elections, Lega Nord had not filed any candidates in southern regions, and in 2013 did so but obtained only 0.2% of the vote. By 2018, Salvini's renamed Lega

made inroads in the south and the islands (5.3%) and in the subsequent 2019 EP elections it reached 23% in those regions, making it for the first time a strong *national* party dominating the centre-right field.

Afonso and Bulfone (2019) and Ipsos (2019) show that the profile of Lega voters became increasingly comparable to the classic electorate of Berlusconi's center-right: self-employed workers and small entrepreneurs, housewives, but also blue-collar workers. Their educational attainment is medium to low, they reside in small and medium-sized municipalities and are informed exclusively or mainly through TV.

The quadrupling of Lega votes between 2013 and 2018 owes much to traditional right-wing concerns. The 2015–16 migration emergency was a particularly salient issue. Yet, there was much more than just security and immigration to Lega's electoral strategy. With M5S, whose brand of populism is more 'inclusionary', it shared an aversion to the austerity measures that followed the sovereign debt crisis (Caiani 2019). The 2011 Fornero pension reform, enacted under the technocratic leadership of Mario Monti and which increased the retirement age, was deeply resented, as were the labour market liberalisation reforms by the following centre-left coalitions.

At the same time, under Salvini Lega, which had had, until 2013, openly secular leaders frequently using anticlerical tones, explicitly embraced traditional Catholic messages and iconography, especially against Islam and LGBT and in defence of the traditional family (Ozzano 2019). Salvini's Catholic turn paid off handsomely. Among regular church-goers it outperformed both rivals and its own average results. According to Ipsos (2019) data, Lega's gains between 2018 and 2019 were largest among monthly and occasional church goers. Among monthly mass attendees, Lega significantly exceeded its national average share of the vote in 2019 (38.4%). ESS data also show a higher-than-average religiosity of 2018 Lega voters, but do not allow a comparison with earlier elections, as the subsample of Lega voters was then insignificantly small. The contextual fact that church attendance is significantly higher in the South indicates a link between target electorate and party repositioning.

Additionally, Lega's manifesto offered selective material rewards for previously despised southern constituencies, besides the low and flat taxes traditionally promised to the core electorate of employers and self-employed in the northern strongholds. Salvini pledged significantly to expand early retirement options, which was complementary to the 'citizenship income' (*reddito di cittadinanza*, RdC), the Basic Minimum Income policy proposal of the Five Star Movement, which Lega accepted in the coalition programme after adding activation conditionalities and strict ten-year residency requirements to it. As detailed below, again Lega hit the right chords with parts of the electorate in the Italian *Mezzogiorno*.

Yet, the Lega government experience was short-lived. Salvini, wanting to capitalise on the result at the 2019 EP elections, withdrew its support of the Conte I executive in August 2019 to force snap elections. The manoeuvre failed as Conte formed a coalition between M5S and the Democratic Party, starting in September 2019.

Despite limited overall legislative production, the social policy reforms of the Conte I executive emerge as remarkable considering the short period in charge, the continuous intra-coalition disagreements, the difficult economic conditions and the fact that they happened against EU and other international organisations' recommendations. While with more time Lega might have implemented other parts of its programme (e.g. the flat tax), it can be said that for fifteen months it shared the government's preference for expensive new social policies over tax cuts. Conte I's social policy included the Basic Minimum Income and the 'Dignity Decree' to increase employment protection, but these were based on proposals from the M5S. The Lega input was visible instead in specific areas of pensions and family, which reveal the ideological and electoral nature of this social policy turn.

Pensions

Partly cancelling the begrudged 2011 Fornero pension reform, which eliminated several early exit options, the Conte I government introduced Lega's flagship 'quota 100' in January 2019, on an experimental basis until 2021. The policy was designed by Lega deputy labour minister Durigon, previously deputy general secretary of the right-wing trade union UGL. The union had entered a close alliance with Lega in 2018, thus providing some labour support to a party often siding with business organisations. Quota 100 consisted of an early retirement scheme for people aged at least 62 and having contributed for at least 38 years (quota refers to the sum of the two minimum thresholds). Quota 100 does not involve a reduction in benefits or require occupational hardship criteria to be met. The only disincentive is that before reaching the statutory pensionable age the pension benefit cannot be combined with extra earnings exceeding 5,000 €/month. It is especially targeted at men with long contribution records and is particularly favourable to public sector employees as severance payments continue to accrue as if the retiree were still employed, and this to the detriment of workers – most frequently female – with discontinuous careers (Stamati 2020).

The scheme's cost was foreseen as in excess of 5bn€/year, but the take-up in 2019 was lower than expected: 151 thousand exits against the 314 thousand predicted by the Parliamentary budgetary office. Unsurprisingly, demands by males were 2.5 times higher than by women,

and for every benefit disbursed to women 3.08 were paid out to men (Brambilla and Gazzoli 2020). A largely unexpected outcome of quota 100 is its popularity among southern workers. Potential claimants were described as 'male workers from Northern regions like Lombardy, Veneto, Piedmont and Emilia-Romagna who started working early with a stable contract' (Afonso and Bulfone 2019: 248), a widely shared interpretation. Instead, quota 100's actual beneficiaries, due to the measure's bias in favour of public sector employees, i.e. predominantly white-collar workers, turned out to be more concentrated in the south (Brambilla and Gazzoli 2020). Tellingly, in 2019 Lega's rise in popularity was primarily in the south and among public employees (Ipsos 2019). It is worth noting that Lega's 2018 manifesto, where pensions were the second point, just behind tax and before immigration, had proposed two additional measures (seniority pensions and 'quota 41') better suited for early-career workers typical of northern industries. Neither was implemented: in the coalition government, Lega prioritised, of the three proposals, the one relatively more favourable to southern voters.

A lower retirement age, in the Italian context, directly supports familialism, because it anticipates important inter-generational transfers through generous severance payments (Floridi 2020). But even more explicitly, the M5S-Lega government decided to prolong the '*opzione donna*' (female option) early pension, whose first incarnation was introduced by the Northern League through the Maroni reform in 2004. *Opzione donna* allows women to retire at 58 with 35 years of contributions against a less favourable (entirely defined contribution) formula resulting in a 20–30% reduction in future benefits. Such differential retirement age policy is consistent with a familialistic view of women as caregivers for children and grandchildren, and as second-earners dependent on men for income support.

Family policy

In terms of family policy, the M5S-Lega government displayed ambivalent positions. After its conversion into a national party, the Lega started espousing greater appreciation for pro-family policies, thus for the first time promoting two key goals in its electoral manifesto: reaffirming the traditional family as central to everyday life and countervailing low fertility (Pavolini *et al.* 2019). While in power, the familialistic and chauvinistic aspects of Lega's connections with extremist catholic fringes came to the fore (Donà 2020). The anti-abortionist stances of the Minister for the family, Lorenzo Fontana, as well as the proposed changes to the legislation on the custody of children in cases of divorce (Pillon decree, soon withdrawn) were labelled as male chauvinist, attracting, together with the anti-gay rhetoric, the label of 'Polish drift of Italy' (Betti Dakli 2018).

In the short time in office, changes were made also to existing pro-natalist measures: means-tested 'natality benefits' for new-borns (till the age of 1) were increased by 20% starting from the second child, and nursery subsidies were increased from 1,000 to 1,500 €/year. Compulsory paternity leave went from four to five days, while maternity leave could be postponed until the day of birth. In May 2019, Fontana presented a bill (*Pacchetto Famiglia*) to introduce child benefits of 200–300 €/month per child, but the bill was opposed by the M5S and was not even discussed due to the change in government. Resources were earmarked for the development of occupational welfare (in large enterprises) but not for public facilities. In connection with pensions, Lega ministers proposed to count every child as an additional contribution year for women, but the costly measure was deferred. Finally, the unambiguously familialistic imprint was strengthened through the abolishment of a 600 €/month subsidy for baby-sitting or crèches for mothers opting out of parental leave due to work obligations that had been introduced by the centre-left government in 2013.

Poland

Law and Justice (PiS) was created in 2001 as a right-wing split of the conservative Solidarity Electoral Alliance, and in its first years it focussed on law and order, especially the death penalty and decommunisation. Its 2001 manifesto contained very little on social policy, but this started to change in the 2005 one, which included progressive taxation, housing and employment policies, but still within a 'cheap state' (*tanie państwo*) low-tax discourse (Klepka 2008). PiS entered power, first, in 2005–07 in coalition with two other populist parties and then again, alone with an absolute parliamentary majority, in 2015, to be confirmed in office in 2019.

In between 2005 and 2015, substantial shifts occurred. In 2005, PiS had still considered a coalition with the liberals, and gave the crucial finance minister position to the impeccably neoliberal economist Zyta Gilowska. From 2007, it moved to the right, absorbing far right parties such as the (fundamental Catholic) League of Polish Families, establishing strong collaboration with the influential traditionalist Catholic Radio Maryja broadcaster (Burdziej 2008) and adopting an uncompromising nationalist stance after the Smolensk disaster of 2010 that killed President Lech Kaczyński, leaving as sole party leader his more hard-line twin, Jarosław. But also, it moved to labour-friendly social policies and a close alliance with the trade union Solidarity. The 2019 manifesto, titled 'A Polish welfare state model' (PiS 2019) had replaced the fiscal populism of the early 2000s with social transfers and family. After losing the 2007, 2010 and 2011 elections, it had to significantly enlarge its otherwise

demographically shrinking ex-Solidarity conservative electorate. In a country with one of the lowest electoral turnouts in Europe, this was achieved by mobilising the large pool of disaffected voters, concentrated in deprived areas of the country. In 2005, PiS had obtained 3.1 m votes (27% on a 40.6% turnout). In the 2019 parliamentary elections, it gained 8.1 m (44% on a 62% turnout). The largest inflow, in 2015, was from people who had never voted before, with some gains also from the peasant party PSL and the left-wing SLD, but very little from the direct opponent, the moderate liberal Civic Platform (CBOS 2015). This newly mobilised electorate was at the same time more rural and less educated (CBOS 2017), more female (until 2011, turnout was higher among men, but this reversed in 2015 and by 2020 it was 7% points higher among women) and more religious: from the ESS question on religiousness and mass attendance, in 2006 PiS had only the third most religious voters among large parties, but by 2018 it had by far the most religious ones.

The PiS majority governments, led by Beata Szydło in 2015–17 and by Mateusz Morawiecki from 2017, have combined nationalist stances towards the EU and refugees and reactionary policies on LGBT, education and women's reproductive rights with major social policy activism. Ost (2018) suggested for PiS the definition 'national socialist' (lowercase). It is worth noticing that its main ideological leaders (Jaroslaw Kaczyński, Antoni Macierewicz, Jan Olszewski) in the 1970s were linked to the left-wing opposition group KOR.

If the 2005–07 PiS-led government had overseen a reduction of social expenditure from 20.8 to 19.4% of GDP, the more recent one expanded it from 20.2% of GDP in 2015 to 21.3 in 2019 (OECD data). It also introduced labour-friendly policies (a higher monthly minimum wage and a new hourly rate to protect part-time workers; restriction of precarious work contracts; some support to unionisation), although in a unilateral way with only nominal regard for tripartite social dialogue, relying on the support from the Solidarity union. A Solidarity officer expressed something unusual for European unions: 'how can we oppose a government that meets all of trade unions' requests?' [Solidarity officer, 2016]. To understand the puzzle of this right-left concoction (Orenstein and Bugarič 2020; Shields 2019), it is necessary to look at the detail of these policies. While some labour policies (especially the Sunday trading ban) had an explicit cultural dimension, the distinguishing features of PiS policies are, like for Lega, about demography and family.

Pensions

The liberal governments of 2007–15 had raised the retirement age to 67 for both men and women, from the earlier 65 and 60 thresholds. After

the Solidarity trade union had unsuccessfully mobilised against that reform, PiS fully reversed it in 2017, at a planned cost of €2bn/year. PiS combined labour-friendly arguments with familialistic ones to justify the lower retirement age of women on the grounds of their grandmotherly role. However, in defined-contribution systems, lower retirement ages result in much lower benefits. Low earners were compensated through a 30% increase of the minimum state pension between 2015 and 2019. Following the change in the statutory retirement age, the future replacement rates in Poland are projected to be the lowest in the EU after Lithuania (OECD 2019). In the OECD, only Hungary, Poland, Israel, Switzerland and Turkey are not planning to eliminate the gender gap in statutory retirement age. Ahead of the 2019 and 2020 elections PiS campaigned for more generous pensions, including a 13th and 14th monthly payment.

Family policy

PiS's flagship social policy has been the '500+' child benefit programme. Introduced in 2016, it stood for a significant shift in public support for families with children in Poland. The programme guaranteed 500 PLN/month (approx. 120€) for the second and subsequent children and the same amount for the first child in families with incomes below a specified threshold. In July 2019, ahead of new elections, the benefit was made universal for all children aged 0–17, an extension which nearly doubled its total cost and benefitted primarily middle- and higher-income households.

The 500+ programme was presented as a solution to both child poverty, which had shown remarkable tenacity despite fast economic growth, and to the low birth rate. Within a year, it reduced absolute child poverty by half and extreme child poverty by 94% (data: Polish Statistical Office) but failed to have a lasting impact on birth rates. The liberal opposition objected to the measure, partly on merit (e.g. arguing that childcare provision should have been prioritised) but mostly on economic grounds, against its cost and the disincentives for female employment. Such criticism proved misplaced: despite the expense (1.1% of GDP) public deficits remained under control, and female employment was only marginally affected (Myck and Trzciński 2019). The programme proved popular with the public: by 2019, according to CBOS opinion polls, 62% of adult Poles had a positive opinion of government family policy and only 7% held negative views (in 1996–2015, positive responses never exceeded 16%). Ahead of the 2019 elections, such popularity forced the liberals to promise that they would not cancel the 500+ programme but only correct it. Voters opted for the original though, granting PiS a second term.

Another noticeable measure was raising compulsory school age from six to seven in 2016 (reversing the opposite move by the preceding liberal government), which, combined with the under-provision of pre-school childcare, results in the additional promotion of the family as main care provider.

Comparative analysis

In January 2019, Salvini met Kaczyński to propose an alliance ahead of the European elections, but the two parties remained in separate groups in the European Parliament and there is no evidence of direct imitation or influence between the two. Yet, when in government, Lega and PiS displayed a striking resemblance given that they emerged from completely different social and labour policy contexts, and had never explicitly seen each other as policy models.

Two similarities are worth emphasising (see Table 1): noticeable social expenditure increases; a degree of convergence towards supported familialism that openly promotes women's caring roles through earlier retirement and family benefits. These similarities are evident also in the eyes of interview respondents from local business associations and trade unions, all confirming this social turn regardless of their political sympathies and evaluation of specific policies. Social policies were also unilateral government initiatives, not concessions in bipartite or tripartite negotiations: in the words of an Italian employer association officer, Conte I was a 'Jacobin government' [Confindustria officer, 2020].

Table 1. comparison of italian and polish social policies.

policy area	policy measure	M5s-**l**ega (2018-19)	pis (2015-19)
pensions	reduction of retirement age	early exit at 62 with 38 years of contributions ('quota 100')	reduction of statutory retirement age from 67 to 65 for men and 60 for women
	Different treatment men/women	renewal of 'opzione donna': women retire early, but must accept lower benefits (proposed contribution credits for every child, not introduced)	statutory retirement age at 60 for women and 65 for men
Family policy	child benefits	'natality benefits' increased by 20% from the second child nursery subsidies increased by 50% (proposed child benefits of €100-300, 'pacchetto famiglia', not introduced)	'500+': 500pln/month child benefit for every child from the second (2016); for every child from 2019
	incentives for working mothers	abolished subsidy for baby-sitting or crèches for mothers opting out of parental leave	500+ means-tested for first child in 2016; universal from 2019

Social expenditure measures have been among the most visible policies of these governments. Total social expenditure increased from 27.6% of GDP in 2017 to 28.2 in 2019 in Italy, and in Poland from 20.2 in 2015 to 21.3 in 2019, in a reverse of the decline in the three years before the change of government (OECD data projections). Change in the composition of expenditure is even more marked. The planned yearly costs of pension reforms (€5bn in Italy and €2bn in Poland), child benefits in Poland (€10bn), and citizenship income in Italy (€7bn) represented the main additional budget expenditures of those countries. These policies are thus much more than symbolic, indicating that, when in power, PRRPs do overturn earlier austerity measures. Given that the fiscal situation of the two countries was vastly different, the social policies of Lega are even more remarkable, as they were introduced against the open criticism of the markets and EU institutions, and ahead of the main promised tax cuts (the never introduced flat tax). At the same time, both countries reduced expenditure on social services such as healthcare and childcare. In Poland, OECD data for 2016 and 2017 show that expenditure in health services increased more slowly than in previous years, in Active Labour Market Policies stagnated, and in early childhood education and care it was reduced by over 10% in 2015.

Parallel moves away from defamilialisation and towards supported familialism that upholds the traditional gender division of labour can be detected in pension and family policies. For both Lega and PiS the reversal of the retirement age increases introduced by earlier governments was a major campaigning issue and policy priority once in power. It was a case of policy reversal rather than innovation, and therefore counted as regime restoration rather than as an element for a new kind of welfare. The collateral effect was to strengthen the differential treatment of men and women in pensions, thus emphasising the traditional role of wives (retiring at the same time as their spouses) and grandmothers (retiring early to care for grandchildren), while benefiting workers with long, continuous employment (mostly men). In Poland, this was achieved by abruptly reinstating a retirement age differential between men and women. In Italy, 'quota 100', overwhelmingly benefitting men, dovetails with 'opzione donna', thereby using incentives to achieve the same differential, instead of mandating it. Moreover, being both systems based on defined contributions, they increase the risk of poverty in old age for early leavers, thereby making many women dependent on other sources of income support.

In family policy, whereas Lega only proposed some controversial measures and espoused an almost fanatical pro-family ideology, it was PiS that managed to introduce the 500+ flagship measure, besides many other initiatives on civil rights and culture, including calling on the

Constitutional Court to restrict abortion rights. In its first rendition, the child benefit programme was unequivocally familialistic as it created disincentives for women to enter the labour market. Lega did not achieve as much, yet it abolished a subsidy for baby-sitting or crèches for mothers opting out of parental leave.

A familialistic social model includes, besides social policy, bread-winner oriented labour markets. On this dimension the comparison is more complex given the institutional differences, e.g. on wage setting. Both PiS and M5S-Lega reversed some previous employment liberalisation, but in Italy this was on the initiative of coalition partner M5S. Both Lega and PiS relied on close ties with selected trade unions (UGL and Solidarity) for support, but Solidarity's role is more important than UGL's. The Italian and Polish labour markets remain deeply segmented and the complex changes at work would require separate research.

The reasons behind these converging moves also appear to be comparable. While welfare chauvinism is visible (but not the defining aspect of social policies) in Italy but hardly relevant in Poland, in both countries there was a strategic reorientation towards new voters. Lega and PiS massively expanded their target electorates, towards the south and towards rural non-voters respectively. These electorates are, as shown by ESS data, both more religious and less socially privileged. The Lega and PiS leaderships turned to the traditionalist Catholic discourse, itself in the meanwhile largely abandoned by other parties and by the mainstream Catholic Church itself. Salvini started waving the rosary at rallies and Kaczyński mobilising the conservative Catholic Radio Maryja and TV Trwam broadcasters. Familialistic social policies became part of their discourse rather than a separate policy offer.

The comparison has some limitations, starting from the different contexts. Lega was in power for one year and PiS for five, meaning much more time for the elaboration and adaptation of more complex policies. The evolution of Lega after the collapse of the Conte I government suggests that expansive social policies are there to stay: Lega stepped up its calls for social transfers during the Covid crisis, as well as for natalist family policies.

Conclusion

The Italian-Polish comparison highlights parallels set against the background of distinct historical paths and economic conditions. The prominence given to pensions and family benefits, and to some extent to labour market re-regulation and cash transfers by the PRRPs in government is interestingly similar even if implementation differed, above all

because of the much shorter Italian experience. Both Lega and PiS departed from the modernising liberal policies of their predecessors, as well as from their own periods in office in the 2000s. This suggests two considerations with respect to the relationship between PRRPs and social policy worth looking at in future research.

First, PRRPs' increasing success should not be explained away by cultural factors alone, as suggested by the 'white working class' literature. The dichotomy between 'economic insecurity' and 'culture' that characterises much literature on populism may miss the fact that populist success in government is a blend of the two. PRRPs may emerge on cultural issues, *in primis* immigration, but their institutionalisation as government parties comes with greater attention to social policies as a key electoral arena. These policies are neither of secondary importance nor can they be reduced to welfare chauvinism. While being a strong campaigning tool in opposition, welfare chauvinism is a symbolic policy of limited use once in government. Other recent studies suggest that PRRPs engage in different specific social policy areas in strategic and not simply reactive ways (Afonso 2015; Rathgeb 2021).

For Lega in Italy, pension reform was a crucial political goal above and beyond tax cuts. In Poland, where immigration is not as salient, the social policy dimension of PiS was even more visible. Social protection plays an increasing role in right-wing populism, as indicated by the evolution of Lega from an inconsistent socio-economic orientation in the 1990s to systematic attention to social measures in the 2010s, and of PiS from a broad respect for neoliberal constraints in 2005–07 to a stronger social profile after 2015. It is too early to affirm that such parties produce lasting changes in welfare policy: most measures passed by Italian and Polish PRRPs consist of policy reversals and therefore are more about restoration than innovation. The intensity of social reorientation is still to be assessed, but the direction of change is clear.

Second, beyond being nativist, authoritarian and populist (Otjes *et al.* 2018), PRRPs in government resort to traditional conservatism, through the familialistic orientation of their social policies, at least where family solidarity networks are still a credible option. PRRPs in Italy and Poland held a strong natalist preference, favoured differential retirement for men and women, paid little attention to social services, rejected (if not for electoral purposes) universalism, and neglected the disincentives to female employment. These PRRPs have skilfully used family policy to respond to social demands while restoring a traditionalist national-Christian culture.

As for the generalisability of our findings, not all PRRPs display such familialistic orientation: Pavolini *et al.* (2019) detect them in France and Italy but not in the UK, USA and Germany. The welfare state and

religious-cultural context seem rather decisive: in countries that are manifestly traditionalist and experience unconstrained PRRP rule, such as Serbia under Aleksandar Vučič and, partly so, Viktor Orbán's Hungary, eagerly follow the Polish familialistic path (Orenstein and Bugarič 2020), while Spain's Vox shows similar tendencies in opposition.

So, at a time when familialistic welfare states face problems such as demographic decline, valorisation of women's work, and weakening of extended family solidarity, PRRPs find a political place in partly recasting the old model. This resonates well with part of the population. In the Italian and Polish cases, a Polanyian illiberal countermovement against the market reforms of the last two-three decades, through an appeal to restoring traditional family solidarity as a form of (partial) decommodification appears as a strong unifying element behind the two cases. At the same time, the actual policies present differences, and more research is needed to identify the core elements of nationally-embedded (also implicit) social and gender contracts, to explain intriguing differences such as the fact that Lega has a predominantly male electorate but PiS is an outlier among PRRPs for its equal, and occasionally higher, support among women.

The puzzle of PiS and Lega's social policy turn relative to the past finds its explanation in the specific nature of these social policies in concomitance to the expansion of the target electorate in the mid-2010s to step up from minority coalition parties to dominant majority parties. The new targets in this expansion were groups both more religiously conservative and socially underprivileged (southern voters for Lega, rural previously non-voters in Poland). Lega and PiS did not react to social policy demands in clientelistic ways (something typical, in Italy, of the Christian Democracy governments of 1948–93), but with a few flagship general policies with a clear ideological orientation. Familialistic social protection managed to respond to both the material and cultural interests of the target electorate, allowing PRRPs to expand and become dominant parties. In Poland and Italy, countries with deep social divisions and a strong Catholic church, the ideological glue of these social policies was provided by traditionalist (rather than mainstream) Catholicism.[1]

The implications for the study of radical right populism is that while, once in government, PRRPs cannot remain single-issue parties and must pay more attention to interests, they can do so by expanding, rather than abandoning, their ideological nature, avoiding institutionalisation traps and any dichotomous choice between 'interests' and 'ideas'. In our cases, familialism is an expansion and not a denial of the ideological repertoire: it complements anti-immigration and economic nationalism through nativist and social order arguments. In other countries, the ideological glue may be different (e.g. nationalism, race, order).

Familialistic welfare restoration is unlikely to work: neither in Italy nor Poland have birth rates bounced back, while increased gender inequality can create new poverties and further waste women's skills in the economy. In the meantime, though, the underlying message 'Make the Traditional Family Great Again' seems to be working for the electoral successes of parties in both new and old EU member states.

Notes

1. An intriguing parallel inspiration for these PRRPs' social turn may also be in the fact that in both countries the authoritarian interwar leaders, Benito Mussolini and Józef Piłsudski, stemmed from the socialist movement but moved closer to the Catholic Church once in power and had a strong social rhetoric.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Marius Busemeyer, Manuela Caiani, Manuela Naldini and Philip Rathgeb for their intellectual input. Additionally, we would like to thank the participants to the workshop *Populism in power and its socioeconomic policies in Europe* that took place at the Scuola Normale Superiore in March 2021 for their feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix

Table A1. country rankings on key dimensions circa 2010.

	state (social security)			MarKet (labour market)				FaMilY	reDistriBution (poverty rate)		
	age-bias	paid maternity and parental leave	social services	employment gender gap	epl	self-employment	Fixed-term employment	children living in family	children	Working age	pensioners
1	Japan	czechia	sweden	italy	portugal	Korea	poland	italy	usa	usa	Korea
2	italy	Hungary	Denmark	Korea	czechia	italy	spain	spain	spain	Japan	australia
3	portugal	Finland	Finland	Japan	netherlands	portugal	Germany	portugal	italy	canada	usa
4	poland	sweden	uK	czechia	italy	poland	sweden	poland	Korea	italy	Japan
5	usa	Denmark	France	poland	Germany	czechia	portugal	czechia	canada	spain	spain
6	ermany	poland	Hungary	australia	sweden	spain	France	Hungary	Japan	Korea	uK
7	czechia	France	netherlands	spain	France	new Zealand	netherlands	usa	portugal	australia	new Zealand
8	Korea	portugal	Germany	new Zealand	Korea	netherlands	italy	austria	new Zealand	uK	portugal
9	France	canada	Japan	netherlands	austria	uK	Finland	uK	poland	poland	italy
10	spain	Germany	new Zealand	austria	spain	austria	austria	Germany	australia	portugal	austria
11	Hungary	italy	australia	uK	poland	Finland	Korea	australia	Hungary	sweden	poland
12	canada	Japan	spain	Germany	Finland	Hungary	canada	netherlands	France	new Zealand	Germany
13	austria	uK	austria	Hungary	Denmark	Japan	Japan	France	czechia	Germany	canada
14	australia	austria	usa	portugal	Hungary	Germany	Hungary	Finland	uK	austria	Finland
15	uK	australia	Korea	France	australia	France	czechia	sweden	austria	Finland	sweden
16	sweden	new Zealand	italy	usa	new Zealand	australia	Denmark	Denmark	sweden	France	Denmark
17	new Zealand	Korea	canada	canada	Japan	sweden	uK	canada	netherlands	Hungary	France
18	Finland	spain	czechia	sweden	uK	canada	usa	–	Germany	netherlands	czechia
19	Denmark	netherlands	poland	Denmark	canada	Denmark	australia	–	Finland	Denmark	Hungary
20	netherlands	–	portugal	Finland	usa	usa	–	–	Denmark	czechia	netherlands

Table A2. Detailed data circa 2010.

	ita	pol	esp	prt	Hun	cZe	Jpn	Kor	sWe	DnK	Fin	Deu	Fra	nlD	aut	GBr	usa	can	aus	nZl
state																				
age-bias	0.83	0.76	0.67	0.77	0.66	0.71	0.86	0.71	0.60	0.56	0.59	0.72	0.71	0.51	0.62	0.61	0.76	0.66	0.62	0.60
paid maternity and parental leaves	0.19	0.34	0.02	0.28	0.78	0.93	0.18	0.03	0.71	0.56	0.72	0.23	0.30	0.02	0.15	0.17	–	0.28	0.13	0.08
social services	1.07	0.97	2.01	0.63	2.59	1.02	2.37	1.16	6.93	6.85	4.55	2.38	2.73	2.54	1.83	4.08	1.58	1.03	2.21	2.37
Market																				
employment gender gap	21.4	12.7	12.2	8.8	9.6	17.3	19.9	21.3	4.9	4.7	2.8	10.0	8.7	11.2	10.3	10.2	8.6	5.3	12.4	11.7
employment protection	2.76	2.23	2.36	4.13	2.00	3.05	1.37	2.37	2.61	2.13	2.17	2.68	2.38	2.82	2.37	1.26	0.26	0.92	1.67	1.56
self-employment	25.28	22.98	16.68	23.12	12.32	17.72	12.19	28.80	10.95	9.15	13.40	11.57	11.49	15.09	13.81	13.98	7.05	9.28	11.25	16.23
Fixed-term employment	46.79	64.53	58.43	56.43	24.98	22.52	26.64	30.20	56.79	21.14	43.06	57.22	55.10	48.30	36.96	13.81	8.07	29.81	5,42	–
Family																				
children living in family redistribution	75.0	69.4	72.8	72.4	64.6	68.3	–	–	36.0	32.9	37.1	53.6	41.0	50.2	61.7	58.5	62.8	27.1	53.0	–
poverty rate (children)	18.0	13.3	20.3	15.5	12.1	10.6	15.7	16.0	9.0	3.5	3.9	8.0	12.0	8.7	10.0	10.5	20.5	15.7	12.9	14.0
poverty rate (working age)	12.7	10.2	12.7	10.1	7.3	6.0	14.4	11.3	9.2	6.3	7.7	8.2	7.4	6.9	7.9	10.3	17.9	13.0	10.4	8.3
poverty rate (pensioners)	11.7	10.6	16.7	12.5	2.1	3.4	19.4	47.0	8.5	8.0	9.8	10.5	5.4	1.5	11.3	14.4	19.4	10.0	35.5	13.5

sources: all data are for 2010 or closes available year, retrieved from the oecD database, http://stats.oecd.org.

notes: 1) age-bias = (social expenditure on old age pensions, survivor pensions and healthcare)/social expenditure; 2) paid maternity and parental leave as % of GDp; 3) social services = in-kind spending without healthcare as % of GDp; 4) employment gender gap = 15-64 male - female employment rates; 5) employment protection legislation: Version 1, regular contract; 6) self-employment as % of total employment; 7) Fixed-term employment = 15-24 temporary employment on total employment; 8) children living with family = 15-29 year olds living with parents; 9-11) poverty rates after tax and transfer, below 50% of median income for people aged 0-17 (children); 18-65 (working age); >65 (pensioners).

Table A3. social protection expenditure by function, 2000–18.

	2000		2005		2010		2015		2018	
	% of GDp	% of total	% of GDp	% of total	% of GDp	% of total	% of GDp	% of total	% of GDp	% of total
total expenditure										
eu-27	–	–	–	–	28.6	100.00	28.6	100.00	27.9	100.00
italy	23.7	100.00	25.2	100.00	28.7	100.00	29.7	100.00	28.8	100.00
poland	19.6	100.00	20.0	100.00	19.7	100.00	19.4	100.00	19.7	100.00
social protection benefits										
eu-27	–	–	–	–	27.4	95.55	27.4	95.75	26.7	95.75
italy	22.9	96.34	24.3	96.38	27.5	95.80	28.6	96.35	27.9	96.60
poland	19.0	97.31	19.4	96.94	19.2	97.56	19.0	97.83	19.2	97.24
sickness/Health care										
eu-27	–	–	–	–	8.0	27.78	7.9	27.61	7.8	28.01
italy	5.6	23.57	6.5	25.77	7.0	24.28	6.6	22.22	6.4	22.24
poland	3.7	19.11	3.8	18.88	4.4	22.44	4.5	23.11	4.2	21.42
Disability										
eu-27	–	–	–	–	2.1	7.24	2.1	7.27	2.0	7.32
italy	1.2	5.02	1.4	5.39	1.6	5.45	1.6	5.51	1.6	5.46
poland	2.7	13.63	2.2	11.12	1.7	8.44	1.5	7.60	1.3	6.63
old age										
eu-27	–	–	–	–	10.6	36.94	11.0	38.34	10.7	38.55
italy	12.3	51.60	12.5	49.41	13.7	47.58	14.0	47.25	13.7	47.34
poland	8.5	43.27	9.2	46.18	9.1	46.41	9.2	47.62	9.1	46.11
survivors										
eu-27	–	–	–	–	1.8	6.37	1.8	6.16	1.6	5.91
italy	2.4	10.13	2.4	9.52	2.5	8.74	2.8	9.33	2.6	9.13
poland	2.1	10.54	2.1	10.60	2.0	10.07	1.9	9.69	1.7	8.53
Family/children										
eu-27	–	–	–	–	2.2	7.80	2.2	7.66	2.2	7.97
italy	0.9	3.76	1.0	3.79	1.1	3.92	1.1	3.73	1.1	3.98
poland	0.9	4.85	0.9	4.62	1.3	6.78	1.5	7.81	2.5	12.68
Housing										
eu-27	–	–	–	–	1.8	6.33	1.5	5.22	1.2	4.46
italy	0.4	1.66	0.5	1.86	1.4	5.04	1.7	5.70	1.5	5.34
poland	0.9	4.47	0.6	3.13	0.4	2.08	0.2	1.06	0.2	1.18
social exclusion n.e.c.										
eu-27	–	–	–	–	0.5	1.61	0.6	2.07	0.6	2.17
italy	0.1	0.58	0.2	0.60	0.2	0.69	0.7	2.47	0.9	3.01
poland	0.1	0.58	0.4	1.79	0.2	1.03	0.1	0.67	0.1	0.52

source: eurostat (2020).