The politics of long-term care: the Italian policy-making scenario

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Population aging is one of the main processes transforming contemporary societies. In statistical terms, demographic aging means the proportion of people of working age is shrinking, while the number of older people is expanding. The silent demographic revolution (Rowland 2012) has profound implications, not only for individuals, but also for governments, market and civil society, impacting, among others: health and social care systems, labor markets, public finances and pension entitlements. The age-orientation of social policies varies dramatically across advanced industrialized countries (Lynch 2006): elderly/non-elderly spending ratio transgresses the boundaries set by Esping Andersen's (1990) seminal division of advanced countries into three words of welfare capitalism. In this regard, long term care has often been considered to be an "invisible social welfare policy" across European welfare states. The aim of formal long-term care is to prevent, reduce, or rehabilitate functional decline and it can be provided in different settings, such as home care, community-based care, residential care, or hospital care. However, due to population aging and a lack of sufficient and/or adequate services - including the costs associated with appropriate care - in the last decade long-term care has become an increasingly salient topic in the EU Member States' policy and political agendas. How - and whether - long-term care policies are gradually gaining ground in decision making scenario deserves further scholars' attention.

In fact, policy change does not occur in a vacuum: institutional settings alongside historical, cultural and economic factors matter in evaluating transitioning paths in both policy and politics. The politics of long term care is inspiring for at least two reasons. First, this set of policies reflect the development of new social risks. Old age is not a new social risk per se. However, since the 1970s, the socioeconomic scenario has changed dramatically. This historical turning point marked the development of post-industrial welfare characterized by higher wage inequality, family instability and women's entry into the labor market. This latter factor reduced the dependence of households on the male breadwinner, thus creating new dilemmas in the field of family care and share of care burden responsibilities. While fertility has hit post-war lows almost everywhere, the rise of elderly people has posed new - and demanding - challenges to Western welfare states (e.g., Castles, 2003, 2004; Esping-Andersen 2009). Second, macro-institutions of veto points and stabilization in routinized institutional arrangements of political behavior are still under researched by scholarship of long-term care reforms across Europe.

With reference to long-term care politics, the paper asks "how does government politics affect long-term care reform?". The paper aims at analyzing governmental inter-actors' dynamics and relationships - i.e., exchanges and feedbacks between organizations (e.g. coalition) and formal institutions (government and ministerial committees) - within long-term care policymaking scenario. For these purposes, the Italian case of long-term care reform is considered to be puzzling. While long-term care has struggled to be acknowledged as a relevant issue in the Italian public debate and political agenda (Madama, 2019; Madama et al., 2019), in 2021 the Pact for non-self-sufficiency - an interest group - collected 58 organizations, involving employers and trade unions, professional orders and service managers, research centers and academic experts. In 2021, three Ministerial Committees were appointed to study the policy implications of LTC reform, with the aim of providing technical advice to the government. The Parliament approved the Decree Law in March 2023 whereas implementing decrees will be approved by January 2024. The Italian scenario represents a typical case of government politics, where (i) a government alternation occurred in September 2022; (ii) major policy reform is expected to occur in an integrated legislative vacuum; (iii) the Covid-19 pandemic - as a leading historical momentum - played an abruptive role. The timespan considered goes from 2020 to 2023. The paper relies on qualitative methods: desk analysis and semi-structured interviews. Desk analysis aims to reconstruct the policymaking cycle and inter-actors' (Ministers, Committees and interest group) exchanges and feedback in achieving the reform. Semi-structured interviews with key institutional and non-institutional actors intend to retrace strategic junctures in a multidimensional - and complex - political scenario.