

# From austerity-conditionality towards a new investment-led growth strategy: Social Europe after the Recovery and Resilience Facility

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## Abstract

By providing financial resources, conditional to the implementation of the (social) recommendations in the Semester and the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) has opened new political and institutional opportunity windows for the multi-level co-production of social policies. The article first dives into how the RRF has been translated into national social policies choices, by assessing the alignment of reforms and investments with the Semester social recommendations and their capacity to address the social vulnerabilities identified in the Pillar's Social Scoreboard. Second, it sheds light on the interaction between the European Commission, in charge of assessing and monitoring the RRF, and the national governments, the key actors in setting-up and implementing the plans. Comparing six case studies (Italy, Germany, Spain, Croatia, Belgium and Austria), the article shows that the RRF has only partially contributed to reinforcing member states' compliance with social Country Specific Recommendations and the role of the Social Pillar in the drafting of National Recovery and Resilience Plans has been very limited. This notwithstanding, the RRF has contributed to fasten-forward the implementation of welfare reforms and initiatives which would have been remained on the paper, especially for whose countries with

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limited fiscal capacity. Furthermore, it provides empirical evidence of the collaborative approach between the Commission and the national government, substantiating the claim of the emergence of a new mode of coordinative Europeanization.

#### KEYWORDS

European pillar of social rights, European semester, NGEU, recovery and resilience facility, social Europe

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The agreement of the European Council on Next Generation EU (NGEU) of July 2020 has been welcomed by some commentators as a potential path-breaking innovation (de la Porte & Jensen, 2021; Schelke, 2021). After the temporary suspension of the Stability and Growth Pact and the creation of the European instrument for temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) to reinforce national job retention schemes, the European Union (EU) seemed to have broken another taboo by strongly increasing—though temporary—its fiscal capacity supported by the issuance of common European debts and bonds (Buti & Papaconstantinou, 2021). The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), at the hearth of the NGEU package, has been appreciated as a proof of European solidarity and a concrete manifestation of the EU commitment to address the pandemic crisis (Ferrera et al., 2021). Endowed with €672.5 billion to sustain the post-pandemic recovery, mostly of Southern and Centre-Eastern European countries (Alcidi & Corti, 2022), the RRF introduced a new “expansionary-oriented framework” (Armingeon et al., 2022), which marked a clear break with the ‘austerity-oriented’ approach of the Economic Adjustment Programmes’. The key objective of the RRF is indeed not only to mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the Covid-19 crisis but to enhance the Union’s economic, social, and territorial cohesion and convergence. The social dimension of the recovery is given a particular prominence in the RRF, which explicitly aims at ‘contributing to the upward economic and social convergence, restoring and promoting sustainable growth and the integration of the economies of the Union, fostering high quality employment creation and contributing to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights’ (RRF Regulation, Art. 4). From this perspective, therefore, the RRF has been appraised as a new step in the long march of EU multilevel production of social policies. With the RRF, the EU has enhanced its role within the “social citizenship marble cake”—even if through the deployment of a huge amount of “carrots” rather than the traditional sticks (Guillén et al., 2022).

Over the years, the progressive erosion of the paradigm of “austerianism” was layered by an equally important reorientation in the macroeconomics of the Eurozone (Hemerijck & Corti, 2022). This was reflected not only in a more flexible interpretation and implementation of the EU fiscal rules but also in a new understanding of the relationship between the E(M)U and nation-based welfare states, the latter no longer being conceived as an ‘adjustment variable’ to achieve fiscal stability and cost-competitiveness (Costamagna, 2018). Social policies were initially re-appraised as productive factors, contributing to welfare states’ carrying capacity, boosting competitiveness and growth by increasing workers productivity. The launch of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) provided a non-negligible impetus to the EU social agenda by promoting the adoption of new legislative and non-legislative initiatives (Garben, 2019; Vesan & Corti, 2022). Most importantly, the EPSR has opened space for the further production of social rights by the EU, giving rise to new creative and innovative modes of output-oriented enactment and implementation of rights beyond the traditional *social acquis stricto sensu* (Ferrera et al., forthcoming). Translated into a new scoreboard of social indicators, the Social Pillar indeed was included in the European Semester, contributing to further strengthen and consolidate its already ongoing socialisation process (Vesan et al., 2021). Yet, with the

Stability and Growth Pact fully in place and the investment flexibility clauses hardly working (Darvas & Anderson, 2020), the reorientation of the Semester towards a genuine appraisal of inclusive and resilient welfare states, remained on paper as Member States were left the (fiscal) responsibility of implementing the recommendations, with the risk to make social reforms and investments to implement the Social Pillar a privilege for countries with deep fiscal pockets (Hemerijck & Corti, 2022).

Against this background, the purpose of this article is threefold. First, it provides a descriptive analysis of the ‘social dimension’ of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) by looking at the policy content and orientation of the main initiatives included in social and employment domains. Second, it aims to understand the extent to which the RRF contributes to put finally some meat on the bones of the Semester social recommendations and translate the principles of the EPSR from Brussels into national social agendas. Third, this article aims to shed light on the interaction between the Commission and national governments in setting social policy priorities in the NRRPs, in order to understand whether the “expansionary-oriented approach” of the RRF is also accompanied by the emergence of a different mode of interaction between EU and national levels, which could “pave the way for a new mode of EU policy-making” (Schramm et al., 2022, p. 7).

The remaining of the article is organised as follows. Section 1 presents the analytical framework that guides our study. Section 2 presents the original data collection, the case studies, and the methodology. Section 3 reconstructs the social dimension of the recovery plans in the selected member states and the role of the Social Pillar. Section 4 analyses the interaction between national governments and the European Commission in the setting of NRRPs. Section 5 concludes.

## 1.1 | Analysing the impact of the RRF on national social agenda

The link between the European Semester, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Recovery and Resilience Facility is clearly visible in the Regulation of the RRF. This Regulation stipulates in its preamble (recital 4) that at EU level, ‘the European Semester for economic policy coordination, including the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, is the framework to identify national reform priorities and monitor their implementation’. In article 4 of the Regulation on the general and specific objectives of the RRF, the implementation of the principles of the Pillar is repeated. The RRF also explains the alignment with the Semester, which entails contributing to addressing the national reform challenges as stated in the relevant CSRs (Vanhercke & Verdun, 2022). Moreover, the preamble of the Regulation states that, the criteria related to the CSRs and the implementation of the Pillar’s goals, should require ‘the highest score of the assessment’ when the European Commission evaluates the NRRPs.

Given the relevance of the social objectives included in the RRF regulation, two questions follow. The first regards the extent to which the social reforms and investments included in the NRRPs address the recommendations included in the European Semester and reflect the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The second concerns the nature of interaction between the European Commission, as the actor in charge of assessing and monitoring the NRRPs, and the national governments, as the key actors in setting-up and implementing the plans.

To start with the first question, the literature on the political economy of structural reforms has casted more than one doubt about the effectiveness of the European Semester recommendations (Efsthathiou & Wolff, 2018; Guardiancich & Guidi, 2022). Governments indeed seem to respond to higher risk premia charged by international financial actors more than to the Semester’s CSRs, unless the latter are addressed under the corrective arm of the Excessive Deficit Procedure. This speaks notably against the effectiveness of social CSRs, which—except for the cases of pensions and healthcare—are traditionally addressed under no binding procedure and figure as rather soft recommendations (Bekker, 2021). While compliance with the CSRs has been usually modest (Haas et al., 2020; Hagelstam et al., 2019) and with significant variation across countries (Bokhorst, 2022), recent studies find that—with the RRF - the increases in the use of ‘carrots’ and ‘sticks’ might make the Semester more effective, as it becomes a ‘harder mode of soft governance’ (Vanhercke & Verdun, 2022). By introducing a new positive

conditionality, which makes access to financial resources conditional to the compliance with the CSRs, the RRF is expected to increase the effectiveness of CSRs. Since the size of the financial support varies significantly across Member States (Alcidi et al., 2020), one might expect the degree of compliance with the CSRs to increase the larger the RRF envelope, and vice versa.

Moving to the Social Pillar, as observed above, the RRF regulation repeatedly recalls that the national plans should be an instrument to better implement the principles of the EPSR and notably should contribute to improving the levels of the indicators of its Social Scoreboard. The literature on the European Semester has initially been sceptical about the capacity of broader non-binding European social policy framework to be translated into effective policy recommendations, such as the Lisbon Agenda or Europe 2020 (Cantillon, 2011) or the European Employment Strategy (Copeland & Ter Haar, 2013). The socialisation literature has contributed to partially reverse this initial assessment and provide (procedural and substantive) evidence of an effective translation of the Social Investment Package first and then the Social Pillar into the Semester recommendations (Vesan et al., 2021; Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2018). Yet, the socialisation largely remained a unilateral Brussels' bureaucratic endeavour with low ownership at national level (Vanheuverzwijn & Crespy, 2018). With the RRF, however, the condition to explicitly link the reforms and investments to the Social Pillar principles, and notably to the Social Scoreboard challenges can potentially contribute to improve its implementation as a joint commitment among EU institutions and domestic actors.<sup>1</sup> Since countries entered the Covid-pandemic crisis with different levels of social vulnerabilities, we might expect that the translation of the Social Pillar into concrete measures included in NRRPs to be higher in those countries with higher vulnerabilities.

Moving to the second research question that is, the interplay between national and supranational actors in setting the social priorities of the NRRPs, the literature on the political economy of structural reforms within the European Semester offers again useful insights. Such literature has focused on the capacity of the EU institutions (notably the Commission) to induce Member States' reforms. Two main approaches can be identified (see Bokhorst & Corti, 2023).

The first one focuses on the Semester's hierarchical functioning with top-down steering based on rules and numbers, skewing power away from democratic fora towards executive and technocratic power (Crum, 2018; Dawson, 2015; Scharpf, 2013; Schmidt, 2020). A second approach has been the experimentalist governance school, which attributes value to non-hierarchical governance designs. Scholars in this school have provided empirical evidence on the Semester growing emphasis—over the cycles—on joint exploration and mutual learning about how to address common European objectives and challenges in diverse national contexts (Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2018).

Against these different approaches, the introduction of the RRF could be interpreted as a potential reinforcement of the hierarchical nature of EU economic governance. With the RRF, the Commission can reject plans in case member states are insufficiently ambitious in addressing the Country Specific Recommendations. Moreover, a key novelty of the RRF is the introduction of a new performance-based budgeting. This latter departs from the traditional “cost-justification approach” of the EU structural funds and links the disbursement of the financial support to the compliance with an ‘operational agreement’, signed between the Commission and the national government, that defines the specific “milestones” (i.e. qualitative indicators on the implementation of reforms) and “targets” (i.e. quantitative indicators to track investments) to be achieved within a fixed timeframe (semester or year). Also given this relatively new form of conditionality characterised by a quite high degree of obligation (Bekker, 2021), one might expect that the European Commission maintains a strong “top-down” approach in the management of the RRF by using its regulatory powers to drive the agenda setting process in national social policy. According to this perspective, therefore, the RRF could be interpreted as an example of “coercive Europeanization” by other means (Leontitsis & Ladi, 2018), which uses the strictness of the performance monitoring mechanisms associated with the performance-based conditionality to enforced change into member states.

A different reading is provided by other scholars (Bokhorst & Corti, 2023; Ladi & Wolff, 2021; Schramm et al., 2022), according to which hypothesizing a fully hierarchical approach in the implementation of the RRF would be unrealistic. Preliminary evidence by Vanhercke and Verdun (2022) shows that despite the Commission and

notably DG ECFIN being in the driving seat of the RRF, national actors have options too and especially social actors both at national and European level are strategically using the institutional structures of the revised Semester as a vehicle to 'have a say' in the RRF. Similarly, as stated by Schramm et al. (2022, 3), "despite the various European steering mechanisms, the RRF retains a basic bottom-up approach". According to these scholars, the drafting of NRRPs largely depended on national authorities because of two main reasons. The first one is the lack of resources (staff shortage) and time pressure at the EU level, in front of the heterogeneity in scope, ambition and details of the national plans. The second reason is that this bottom-up approach is also the result of a "conscious decision" (Schramm et al., 2022, p. 7), which aimed at securing a greater legitimacy and, in theory, efficiency in the implementation of reforms by increasing their "national ownership". Against this background, one may conclude that, despite the factual empowerment of the Commission, the definition of reforms and investments in the plans ultimately resulted from an iterative process. Therefore, contrary to what hypothesized above, the drafting of NRRPs in the social and employment policy domains rather followed a bottom-up approach, which resulted more in a balancing act between discipline and discretion, than in a direct imposition from the European Commission.

## 2 | CASE SECTION, DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To answer our research questions, we focus on six countries, Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Germany, Italy, and Spain, reflecting the differing scales of RRF receipts (relative to GDP). Spain, Italy, and Croatia indeed receive an envelope equal to respectively 5.8% (EUR 69.5 billion), 4.1% (EUR 68.9 billion) and 12.2% (EUR 6.3 billion) of the national GDP, while Germany, Belgium and Austria receive respectively 0.8% (EUR 25.6 billion), 1.3% (EUR 5.9 billion) and 0.9% (EUR 3.5 billion) of the national GDP. Moreover, the six countries entered the crisis with different degrees of social vulnerabilities and were addressed different social country specific recommendations (see Tables A1–A6). Looking at the Social Scoreboard published in the 2020 Country reports, Austria, Belgium and Germany did not show any "critical situations" in employment and social fields but only a limited set on indicators to watch (three indicators for Belgium and Austria and one for Germany). By contrast, Italy shows a critical situation in eight indicators and two indicators to watch, Spain shows a critical situation for three indicators and a trend to watch for three indicators. Finally, Croatia shows a critical situation in one indicator and four indicators to watch. In terms of recommendations, Italy and Spain received both five social CSRs, Croatia, Belgium, and Austria three social CSRs and Germany only one social CSRs.

To understand to what extent the plans are aligned with the social recommendations and contribute to readdress the social imbalances identified in the Social Scoreboard we rely on an original dataset constructed in the framework of a recently launched CEPS project.<sup>2</sup> Building on this dataset, we then produced a synoptic table for each country (Tables A1–A6) including the following information:

- The performance of the country vis-à-vis the indicators of the Social Scoreboard (using the Country Report 2020 as a reference).
- The social country specific recommendations in 2019 and 2020 Semester.
- The social reforms and investment projects included in the national plan.
- The principles of the EPSR addressed by each intervention included in the national plan.

Such tables allow us to understand, first, the general orientation of the social dimension of the RRF plans that is, which social policies are addressed in the national RRFs. Second, whether there is alignment between the measures, notably the reform, and the social CSRs and between the measures and the social vulnerabilities identified in the Scoreboard. Third, it further allows identifying whether the countries include investments and reforms beyond what strictly recommended in the CSRs and highlighted in the Scoreboard.

Once assessed the orientation and the degree of alignment of the social measures included in the plans with the social CSRs and the Social Scoreboard, we move to the analysis of multi-level interactions in the setting of NRRPs. To unbox the negotiations between the Commission and the Member States in the identification of social reforms and investments, we rely on 20 interviews with national public official in charge of the drafting of the recovery plans at the ministerial level (Ministry of finance and/or social and labour affairs) and EU Commission representatives (DG ECFIN and SECGEN) in charge of the country desk (Table B1). In terms of interview techniques, we use semi-structured interviews to understand if the social measures included in the plan were or not in the coalition government decision-making agenda, if the Commission has exerted any sort of pressure for the inclusion or removal of specific measures, and finally what role has been played by the EPSR in national decision-making process.

### 3 | THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF THE RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE PLANS

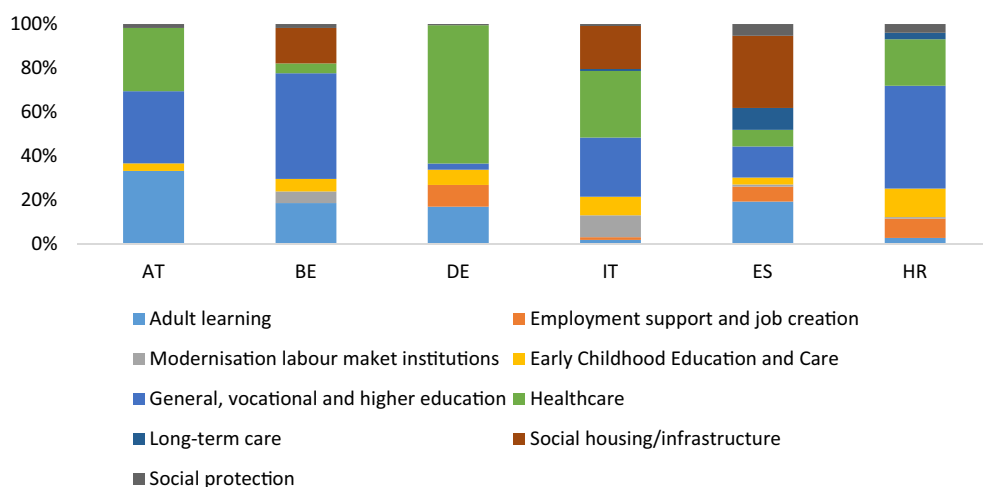
Building on the approach described above, in this section we illustrate the content of the RRF social investments and reforms, with the aim to provide a first account of the plans' orientation. As a second step, we assess the extent to which the measures included in the plans are aligned with the social CSRs and the vulnerabilities highlighted in the Social Scoreboard.

#### 3.1 | The orientation of social investments and reforms in the recovery plans

Preliminary studies on the orientation of social policy intervention in the NRRPs, especially in Southern member states, seem to point towards a social investment orientation of the plans and an overall focus on supply-side labour market interventions (Guillén et al., 2022; Rainone, 2022; Tassinari, 2022; Theodoropoulou, 2022). As we will illustrate below, a closer analysis of the NRRPs portraits a more complex and variegated situation.

To start with the investments, Spain is the country that allocates the largest share of the RRF envelope to social spending (30%), followed by Italy and Belgium (28%), then Germany and Croatia (26%) and finally Austria (24%). In terms of policy areas, the countries show different priorities (Figure 1). The Italian plan largely focuses (35% of the total social spending) on general educational policies. Particularly significant is the investment in healthcare infrastructure (30%) and in urban regeneration and social housing (20%). Spain instead prioritises investments in social infrastructure and housing (33% of the entire social envelope), followed by adult learning (19%) and general educational policies (14%). Belgium and Austria also identify three main areas of social spending in their plans, notably general education (33% in Austria and 48% of the total social spending in Belgium), adult learning (33% and 19%) and healthcare in the case of Austria (29%) and social housing infrastructure in Belgium (16%). Finally, Germany invests the largest share of its social envelope in the digitalization of the healthcare (70%), while Croatia invests the largest share in educational and ECEC policies (60%). If we look at the investments, the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights that are addressed in the NRRPs include: Education, training and life-long learning (1), Gender equality (3), Active support to employment (4), Childcare and support to children (12), Healthcare (16), Inclusion of people with disabilities (17), Long-term care (18), and Housing and assistance for the homeless (19). The focus on social investment policies of the NRRPs financed projects is not a surprise. As argued by Corti et al. (2022), the RRF financial support is mainly for capital investment (i.e. infrastructure) and not for current expenditures. This in large part explains the focus of the RRF spending on social (investment) services, rather than traditional social protection cash transfer-based policies.

Turning to reforms, the number of the interventions change across countries. Spain is the country with by far the highest number of social reforms (33), followed by Italy (17) and Croatia (16). By contrast, the number of interventions decreases significantly in Belgium (11), Austria (9) and Germany (6). Contrary to investments, the scope of



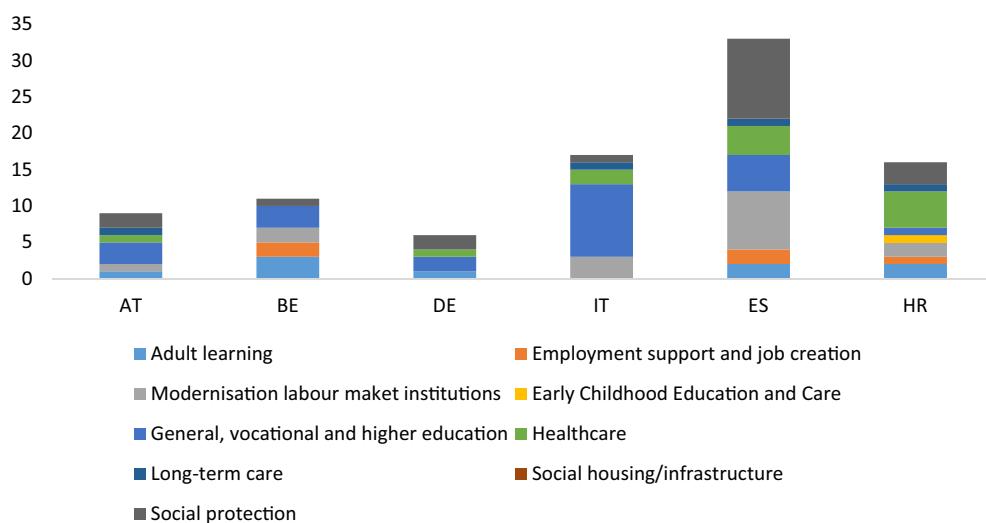
**FIGURE 1** Breakdown of social investments by policy areas (% of total Recovery and Resilience Facility social envelope). Source: Authors' own elaboration, based on Council Implementing Decisions on National Recovery and Resilience Plans and accompanying Commission Staff Working Documents. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/spol.12906)]

the social reforms is broader and includes the modernization of labour market institutions, social protection, vocational and higher education and healthcare.

In the case of Spain, Italy and Croatia the focus is in particular on modernization of labour market institutions and social protection reforms. For instance, the Spanish plan includes five reforms of the pension system, an ambitious reform of the employment legislation to strengthen the protection of workers within the labour market, the rationalisation of the non-contributory benefits of the Minimum Vital Income schemes, and the simplification of the Unemployment Assistance. The Croatian plan intervenes to reinforce the public employment services and creates a new voucher system for adult learning. The plan includes a revision of the guaranteed minimum benefit to improve coverage, adequacy, effectiveness, and efficiency and five reforms of the healthcare system. Two additional relevant interventions regard the adequacy of the pension system and the introduction of a national plan for long-term care. In the Italian plan, a set of reforms is included aimed at reorganising the educational sector with the objective of facilitating the transitions from schools to the labour market. As part of the labour market reforms, the plan includes the creation of a Guarantee of Employability of Workers (GOL) and a National Plan for New Skills. Of relevance is also the reform of the non-self-sufficient elderly persons that reforms social services with the aim to improve the living conditions of non-self-sufficient elderly people.

The reforms included in the German, Austrian and Belgian plans are instead more focused on general education, pensions and healthcare. Belgium and Austria include two important reforms of the pension system aimed at increasing the retirement age and the fiscal sustainability of the system. Germany includes a reform for the digitalization of the pension system. Reforms of the educational system, notably vocational training and lifelong learning are also included in the three plans with the aim to improve access to education, inclusiveness and address the skills mismatch. Finally, Austria and Germany intervene in the healthcare sectors with reforms aimed at enhancing primary health care, further develop care provision and digitalize the system.

To sum, contrary to investments, the reforms included in the plans significantly broaden the number of policy areas addressed. The following principles of the EPSR are additionally addressed: Secure and adaptable employment (5), Social dialogue and involvement of workers (8), Social protection (12), Unemployment benefits (13), Minimum income (14), and Old age income and pensions (15). Interestingly, however, except for the pension reforms (included



**FIGURE 2** Breakdown of social reforms by policy areas (total number). Source: Authors' own elaboration, based on Council Implementing Decisions on National Recovery and Resilience Plans and accompanying Commission Staff Working Documents. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

in all member states except for Italy) the new policy areas addressed by the NRRPs' reforms regard only two countries: Spain and Croatia (Figure 2).

### 3.2 | The alignment with CSRs and the EPSR principles

Against this backdrop, the question is to what extent the above illustrated interventions are in line with the CSRs and the challenges identified in the Social Scoreboard. Based on the synoptic tables in Tables A1–A6, three different approaches emerge.

To start with, Germany and Austria ignore, respectively to a large respect and in part, the CSRs as well as the Social Scoreboard social vulnerabilities. In the case of Germany, nine out of 12 social sub-recommendations are completely ignored and the reforms included in the plan, like the Social Guarantee and the digitalization of the pension system, were even already adopted before 2021. Similarly, 86% of the investments included in the plan were already planned by the German government and would have been nonetheless financed even without the RRF support (Corti et al., 2022). In the case of Austria, the plan introduces measures to facilitate inactive and long-term unemployed access to public employment services and upskilling and reskilling pathways, and it introduces a small revision of the pension system for couples with children. By contrast, Austria does not intervene to address the challenges in the low participation in early childhood education and care, as well as gender employment gap, rising (regional) inequalities and low integration of vulnerable people in the labour market. Austria further ignores the recommendations on ensuring the sustainability of health and long-term care, as well as to shift taxes away from labour to sources less detrimental to inclusive and sustainable growth. Like Germany, 69% of the social investments included in the Austrian plan were already planned and do not represent any additional spending but rather a replacement of national one (Corti et al., 2022). Both countries ignore the challenges raised by the Social Scoreboard with respect to increasing income inequality trends in Germany and low Gross disposable household income growth in the case of Austria.

A different approach emerges in the cases of Spain and Croatia, which not only consider all the Semester recommendations and the challenges identified in the Social Scoreboard, but also include measures in areas not related to



the CSRs or the Scoreboard. As observed above, the Spanish plan includes a broad set of reforms touching upon various policy areas, specifically upon labour market and traditional social protection policies. In addition, the plan introduces a number of measures that are non-directly linked to the social CSRs.<sup>3</sup> As regards the investment, Spain allocates the largest shares of investment (around 60%) to new projects, which would have not been financed without the RRF support (Corti et al., 2022). Like Spain, the Croatian plan addresses all the social CSRs and the challenges identified in the Scoreboard, but also intervenes in three additional policy areas (pension, long-term care and inclusion of people with disability) not mentioned by the social CSRs.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, a third approach is followed by Italy and Belgium, which do not address all social CSRs and the Social Scoreboard critical indicators, but include reforms in areas not included in the social recommendations of the Semester. In the case of Italy, the plan does leave unaddressed some of the challenges identified in the CSRs, notably the reform of the pension system as well as the improvement of the adequacy and inclusiveness of social protection schemes. The plan also does not envisage measures to contrast the critical income inequalities, nor to increase the effectiveness of social transfer. Yet, like Spain and Croatia, Italy also allocates the largest share of its resources to new projects (64%) long in the pipeline but lacking the financial resources to be implemented (Corti et al., 2022). Similarly, the Belgian leaves unaddressed the recommendations on increasing the sustainability of the long-term care, on removing disincentives to work and ignores the Scoreboard critical situation in terms of social transfer effectiveness and disposable household income. At the same time, the plan includes an important reform of the elderly care, a new housing and childcare investment plan, not foreseen in the CSRs nor by the Scoreboard. Finally, like Italy, in the Belgian plan, the large share of investments are new (65% according to Corti et al., 2022), which confirms the key role played by the RRF in supporting social investment that would have otherwise not taken place.

To sum, this section provided a detailed account, first, of the orientation of the NRRPs of six member states, showing the overall alignment of social spending along what we call social investment priorities. Yet, when it comes to reforms, member states seem to follow different trajectories, with Spain and Croatia standing out for a higher focus on traditional social protection policies, while other countries, like Italy, show a supply-side approach mostly centered on the activation paradigm. We further observed that—contrary to what initially hypothesized—there is not full alignment between social CSRs and the measures included in the plans. This is true both for countries that receive a comparatively higher RRF envelope and for those receiving a smaller one. Similarly, the vulnerabilities identified in the Social Pillar Scoreboard do not seem to be necessarily reflected in the initiatives undertaken by the Member States. Countries further adopt social reforms and investments even when these are not included neither in the CSRs nor in the EPSR Scoreboard, thus suggesting that other dynamics might play a role in the set-up of social priorities. In the next section, we zoom in on the interplay between the Commission and the national government in setting such priorities.

## 4 | THE DRAFTING OF THE NATIONAL RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE PLANS

If we look at the influence of the RRF on national social agendas, we must distinguish between two levels: investments and reforms.

Investments were discussed at a technical level and earlier in the drafting process while reforms were object of a more political debate, centred on the alignment with the CSRs that started only in a second moment in all Member states at the beginning of the 2021. As put by the Commission itself, the key object of the discussions on investments was the compliance with the eligibility criteria set up in the RRF regulations more than the CSRs or the EPSR principles. If these conditions were met, the Commission did not interfere with the national priorities that were set by the governments.

As observed above, the investments were rarely a novelty. As stressed by the Italian interviewees, there were not the condition to invest something completely new and accordingly the strategy was to rely on projects already

under development [IT-GOV-1]. A similar perception is confirmed by interviews realised in Croatia: “the national plan was based on different strategic documents [...], which offered a sort of anchor or skeleton around which we built the plan” [HR-GOV-2]. The investments included in the plan did not represent a novelty also in other countries such as Austria, where “the government’s programme was a blueprint for the national recovery plan” [AT-GOV-1], and in Germany, where the plan was designed on the basis of the “corona fiscal package” adopted in June 2020 [DE-GOV-1]. As posit by an EU official, “the spirit of the RRF regulation was to finance projects that were ready or semi-ready to hit the ground in the short term and to be completed by August 2026 [...]. It was logical that were synergies between national RRF and other already planned domestic interventions” [DE-COM-1].

One of the factors explaining this *lack of novelty* is the contextual conditions in which NRRPs were adopted, characterised by a combination of time constraints to present the plans and the limited human resources both at national and European level to prepare them. Yet, where the RRF made the difference, providing the needed financial resources, is in those countries with less fiscal margins to intervene that probably would have not otherwise been able to finance the projects in pipeline. This claim is also confirmed by the empirical evidence—illustrated above—on the additionality of the public investments channelled through the RRF. In countries, such as Germany, Austria, the RRF did not represent a breakthrough for the adoption of social initiatives. As confirmed by a German representative: “the national budget was enough to cover the national social needs, that is why the social initiatives were (*partially*) left aside in the RRP” [DE-GOV-2; DE-COM-2]. Similarly, the Austrian interviewees stressed that: “The RRF is not a social instrument to us. We have the resources to cover both capital and current social expenditure” [AT-GOV-1]. By contrast, in Croatia, Italy and Spain that is, in those countries with less fiscal margins to intervene, the RRF made the difference, providing the financial resources needed to adopt some reforms and initiatives. As acknowledged by our interviews, the RRF was considered an important opportunity, a “trigger” and a tool for the implementation of social reforms that would either not been adopted because of lack of adequate funding or would have been further delayed [HR-GOV-2; IT-GOV-2]. Overall, the RRF gave an incentive to implement reforms or investments that were postponed or delayed in the past and was thus an opportunity used by domestic actors to “accelerate things” [HR-GOV-1; HR-GOV-2; IT-GOV-2; ES-GOV-2].

Moving to reforms, here is where the negotiations between the Commission and the Member states focused. Contrary to what one might have envisaged, there was no hierarchical steering from the Commission asking member states receiving a higher envelope to implement structural reforms. The setting of social priorities within the NRRPs can be described more in terms of cooperation than of mere imposition. One might argue that this was facilitated by the fact that the countries knew in advance the challenges they had to address [ES-COM-2], and the Commission adopted from the beginning a collaborative approach [IT-COM-1, ES-COM-2, DE-COM-1, HR7]. Yet, as observed in the previous section, not all the social CSRs were translated into the content of NRRPs, and some countries included several social reforms and initiatives that were non-related to CSR. Our interviewees in this respect stressed that there was an element of judgement in the application of the RRF conditionality, whereby asking for a full implementation of all CSRs would have been neither realistic nor appropriate [IT-COM-1].

With respect to the role of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Commission did not explicitly assess whether the reforms and investments included in the national RRP were in line with the principles of the Social Pillar but rather if they were aligned with the 2019–2020 social CSRs [BE-GOV-1; IT-COM-2; HR7]. As put by one of our interviewees: “We checked the Social Pillar in a broad way. All Member states had a social CSRs covering some of the elements in the Social Pillar [...] We therefore indirectly checked the Social Pillar principles by assessing the compliance of the plans with the social CSRs” [AT-COM-1]. On the government side, according to our interviews, the Social Pillar seems not have had a direct influence on domestic social policies agenda. Only in the case of Belgium, the Pillar acted as a normative guide that framed the inclusion of measures that were “in the spirit of the Pillar” (Garben, 2019). As put by one of our interviewees, while the focus on the social dimension was a decision of the government, still the Pillar was used to “frame and justify” [BE-GOV-1] the measures included in the plan.

Overall, according to our interviewees, the Commission adopted from the beginning a “collaborative approach” and the negotiations with national governments were mainly focused on the ambition of the interventions.

[IT-COM-1, ES-COM-2, DE-COM-1, HR7]. Such ambition was defined along two lines. First, the Commission focused on guaranteeing that the interventions included in the plans would have been ultimately not only adopted but also implemented. Accordingly, specific attention was paid to the *milestones* and *targets*, their credibility and feasibility. Second, and most important, the ambition of the interventions was assessed based on the *growth strategy* behind them [IT-COM-1; HR-COM-2; BE-COM-1]. As put by a Commission official: “for us, it was important to understand that *national plans* were not simply a list of *milestones and targets*, we needed to know the whole strategy behind the investment choice” [ES-COM-1, *italic added*]. Member states were invited to “think about reforms and investments in parallel and this is a positive element because it forces to have a coherent approach [IT-COM-2]. Indeed, the idea to connect reforms and investments is one of the key elements in the design of the RRF that could foster learning processes at the national level: “reforms were necessary to ensure effectiveness of investments [...]. Yet to have an impact we need investments and reforms together” [HR-COM-1].

As put by one of our interviewees, the RRF with its combination of reforms and investments, together with ex-ante definition of milestones and targets, represents an experimental exercise [IT-GOV-2] for both national governments and the European Commission since it forces policymakers to “go faster” [IT-GOV-2; HR-GOV-1; ES-GOV-2; ES-GOV-1]. At the same time, it “armed” reform proposals with specific financial and political resources to be “used” by domestic political actors to build strategies for modernising national welfare states. While the negotiations between the Commission and national governments was intended to be on long-term growth strategies, various obstacles limited in practice the activation of such iterative processes of mutual learning.

First, as confirmed by several interviews [IT-GOV-1; DE-GOV-1; ES-GOV-2; ES-GOV-1; HR-GOV-2; BE-GOV-1; AT-GOV-1], the decision on reforms and investments were strongly time constrained. Time constraints refer not only the set-up of the plans, as observed above, but also to their implementation. Since all projects need to be completed by 2026, this strongly limits the ambition in the phase of programming. Second, as observed by Corti et al. (2022), many Member States came from a decade of investments in social infrastructure close to zero (Germany, Austria, Belgium) or even underinvestment (Italy and Spain) and found themselves unprepared to suddenly absorb such a significant number of resources. In addition, they had almost no experience in using the new performance-based approach, which limited the swift set up of milestones and targets to monitor the reforms and investments. Related to this, a third problem hampering the possibility to activate learning and long-term strategic planning processes concerns the centralization of the decision-making process at national level, mostly at the ministry of Finance or Prime Ministry Office (Bokhorst & Corti, 2023). While this helped to speed up the definition of reforms and investments and identify milestones and targets, it came with a lack of consultation of the actors involved in the implementation of the plans.

According to some interviews, the sum of these three factors in part jeopardised the activation of future long-term strategic planning processes and may risk in the future to transform the performance-based approach in a “box ticking exercise that forgets what the real goals of the interventions are” [IT-COM-1].

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

The RRF represents an important novelty for the European integration process from both a political, institutional, financial and operational perspective. This is also true with reference to the development of Social Europe since the RRF has opened new political and institutional rooms to the multi-level co-production of social policies. The provision of fresh financial resources, conditional to the implementation of the (social) recommendations in the Semester and the principles of the Social Pillar (based on the social vulnerabilities identified in the Social Scoreboard), indeed represents an important input for the adoption and implementation of welfare reforms and initiatives that would have been probably remained on the paper, especially for whose countries with limited fiscal capacity.

This article provides three main findings. First, although most of the social measures included in the NRRPs are mainly focused on social investment, national plans also embrace traditional core welfare state areas such as pension,

income protection and, indeed, healthcare. Second, our empirical research shows that the RRF has only partially contributed to reinforcing member states' compliance with social CSRs. A significant part of the measures included in the NRRPs are not aligned with social CSRs and some CSRs are not translated into specific investments. Similarly, not all the vulnerabilities identified by the Social Scoreboard are addressed by the NRRPs. Moreover, the role of the Social Pillar per se in the drafting of NRRPs has been very limited and thus we cannot maintain that the RRF has reinforced the sense of EPSR ownership at the national level, as foreseen by the RRF regulation. Third, zooming in on the selection of social priorities, this article provided empirical evidence of the coordinative and collaborative approach between the European Commission and the national government, which characterised the drafting of the recovery and resilience plans. Such dialogue emerged as a common trait in all six countries under study. Even though a generalisation based on a limited—yet heterogeneous—sample would not be possible, our empirical evidence substantiates the claim of the emergence of a new mode of coordinative Europeanization (Ladi and Woolf 2021). Such a form of Europeanization sheds light on an innovative way through which the Union affects a much wider range of welfare policies by means of a new mode of (positive) financial conditionality based on the attainment of policy goals set by national governments in dialogue with EU representatives. Yet, further research is needed on the factors that can affect such coordinative Europeanization, as well as on the politics within the national arenas, not only during the drafting but even more during the implementation of the plans.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> On the link between national ownership and improved implementation of soft laws, see Ma (2022).

<sup>2</sup> For further information, see <https://rrfmonitor-ceps.eu/>

<sup>3</sup> Such measures include initiatives specifically aimed at strengthening the long-term care system, modernise the active labour market policies, introduce a permanent mechanism for flexibility and stability which builds on the positive

experience of the ERTE and reinforce the collective bargaining system. The Accessible Country Plan to include disable people in the labour market, the investment for the reinforcement of the childcare system and the social housing program are also additional initiatives included in the plan without being explicitly demanded in the CSRs.

- <sup>4</sup> The three policy areas include a reform of the pension system, aimed at increasing its adequacy is included, together with investments for the digitalization of the system; an initiative in the domain of long-term care with a reform aimed at developing community-based services to prevent institutionalisation coped with a complementary investment; and finally, additional investments for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the field of mobility.

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## APPENDIX A

## A.1 | Synoptic tables on national Recovery and Resilience plans' alignment with the social CSRs, the Social Scoreboard and the European Pillar of Social Right principles

TABLE A.1 Alignment of National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) reforms and investments with the social CSRs, the Social Scoreboard and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) principles—Austria.

Social scoreboard	Austrian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
-	CSR 2019 (1)(a) Ensure the sustainability of the health	-	-	-
-	CSR 2019 (1)(b) Long-term care	-	-	-
-	CSR 2019 (1)(c) Pension systems, including by adjusting the statutory retirement age in view of expected gains in life expectancy.	4.D.2 Increase in effective retirement age 4.D.3 Pension splitting	-	15. Old age income and pensions
-	CSR 2019 (2)(a) Shift taxes away from labour to sources less detrimental to inclusive and sustainable growth	-	-	-
Gender employment gap— To watch	CSR 2019 (2)(b) Support full-time employment among women	-	4.A.4 National roll-out of 'early aid' for socially disadvantaged pregnant women, their young children and families	3. Gender equality
Children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare—To watch	CSR 2019 (2)(c) including by improving childcare services,	-	3.C.3 Expansion of elementary education	11. Childcare and support to children
-	CSR 2019 (2)(d) and boost labour market outcomes	3.B.1 Education bonus (for long-term unemployed)	3.B.2 Promoting re-skilling and up-skilling	4. Active support to employment

(Continues)

TABLE A 1 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	Austrian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
-	for the low skilled in continued cooperation with the social partners CSR 2019 (2)(e) Raise the levels of basic skills for disadvantaged groups, including people with a migrant background.	-	-	-
-	CSR 2020 (1) Improve the resilience of the health system by strengthening public health and primary care.	4.A.1 Enhancing primary health care 4.B.2 Reform to further develop care provision	4.A.2 Funding of primary health care projects 3.A.3 Austrian Institute of Precision Medicine 4.A.3 Development of the electronic mother child pass platform including the interfaces to the early aid networks 4.B.4 Investment in the implementation of community nurses	16. Health care
-	CSR 2020 (2) Ensure equal access to education and increased digital learning	2.B.1 Fair and equal access of pupils to basic digital competence 3.C.1 Improved access to education	2.B.2 Provision of digital end-user devices to pupils 3.C.2 Remedial education package	1. Education, training and life-long learning
GDHI per capita growth— To Watch	-	-	-	-
-	-	4.D.7 National Financial Education Strategy	-	-
-	-	4.D.10 Labour market: one-stop shop	-	-

Source: Authors' own elaboration.



**TABLE A 2** Alignment of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRP) reforms and investments with the social CSRs, the Social Scoreboard and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) principles—Belgium.

Social scoreboard	Belgian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
-	CSR 2019 (1)(a) Continue reforms to ensure the fiscal sustainability of the long-term care	-	-	-
-	CSR 2019 (1)(b) and pension systems, including by limiting early exit possibilities from the labour market.	R-4.07: 'End of career and pensions' of the Federal State	-	15. Old age income and pensions
Employment rate (% of population aged 20–64)—To watch	CSR 2019 (2)(a) Remove disincentives to work CSR 2019 (2)(b) Strengthen the effectiveness of active labour market policies, in particular for the low-skilled, older workers and people with a migrant background.	- R-4.01: 'Digisprong' of the Flemish Community R-4.06: 'An inclusive labour market' of Flemish Community R-5.01: 'Cumulation regime and mobility to sectors with shortages' of the Federal State R-5.03: 'Learning account' of the Federal State, R-5.05: 'Reform of support to jobseekers in Wallonia' of the Walloon Region''	- 5.03: 'Upgrading of advanced training infrastructure' of the Walloon Region 5.04: 'Learning and career offensive' of the Flemish Region 5.05: 'Strategy for relaunching the labour market' of the Brussels-Capital Region 5.06: 'Digital skills' of Flemish Region''	- 4. Active support to employment
-	CSR 2019 (2)(c) Improve the performance and inclusiveness of the education and training systems and address skills mismatches	R-4.02: Higher education advancement fund' of the Flemish Community R-4.03: 'Global action plan against early school leaving' of the French Community	1.09: 'Renovation of public buildings - schools' of the French Community 1.11: 'Renovation of public buildings - universities' of the French Community	1. Education, training and life-long learning

(Continues)

TABLE A 2 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	Belgian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
-	CSR 2020 (1) Reinforce the overall resilience of the health system and ensure the supply of critical medical products.	R-4.05: 'Re-qualification strategy' of the Brussels-Capital Region, R-5.03: 'Learning account' of the Federal State R-5.04: 'Life-long learning' of the Flemish Community	2.15 Improving the connectivity of schools (internal), but also of the 35 business parks in Wallonia—Walloon Region 4.02: 'Higher education advancement fund' of the Flemish Community 4.03: 'Personalised guidance in compulsory education' of the French Community", 4.04: 'Digital strategy for higher education and adult learning' of the French Community 4.05: 'Digital turnaround for Brussels schools' of the Brussels-Capital Region 4.06: 'Digital transformation of education' of the German-speaking community, 4.07: 'Re-qualification strategy' of the Brussels-Capital Region 4.08: 'E-inclusion for Belgium' of the Federal State", 4.09: 'Digital platforms for prisoners' of the Federal State 4.11: 'Digibanks' of Flemish Region	16. Health care
-	CSR 2020 (2) Mitigate the employment and social	See above CSR 2019(2)	See above CSR 2019(2)	-

TABLE A2 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	Belgian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
	impact of the crisis, notably by promoting effective active labour market measures and fostering skills development			
GDHI per capita growth—To watch	–	–	–	–
Impact of social transfer other than pensions on poverty reduction—To watch	–	–	–	–
–	–	R-4.04: 'Tackling discrimination at the labour market' of the Federal State	4.10: 'Gender and work' of the Federal State	2. Gender equality
–	–	–	1.01/1.02/1.03: 'Renovation of social housing' of the Flemish Region, of the Brussels-Capital Region, of the German-speaking Community 4.12: 'Development of public utility housing and housing for vulnerable persons' of the Walloon Region	19. Housing and assistance for the homeless
–	–	–	2.07: 'Digitalisation of ONE' of the French Community 4.13: 'Creation and renovation of early childcare infrastructure' of the Walloon Region	12. Childcare and support to children

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

**TABLE A3** Alignment of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRP) reforms and investments with the social CSRs, the Social Scoreboard and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) principles—Croatia.

Social scoreboard	Croatian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
Children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare - To watch Youth NEET (% of population aged 15–24) - Weak but improving	CSR 2019 (2)(a) Deliver on the education reform and improve both access to education and training at all levels and their quality and labour market relevance	C3.1 R1: Structural reform of the education system C3.1 R2: Modernisation of higher education	C3.1 R1-I1: Construction, upgrading, reconstruction and equipping of ECEC facilities C3.1 R1-I2: Construction, upgrading, reconstruction and equipping of primary schools for single shift full-day teaching C3.1 R1-I3: Construction, upgrading, refurbishment and equipping of secondary schools C3.2 R1-I1—Development of a system of programme agreements for funding universities and research institutes focused on innovation, research and development C3.1 R2-I1: Digital transformation of higher education C3.2 R1-I1—Development of a system of programme agreements for funding universities and research institutes focused on innovation, research and development C3.2 R1-I2—Strengthening institutional capacity of universities and research institutes for innovation	1. Education, training and life-long learning 12. Childcare and support to children
At risk of poverty or social exclusion (in %)—To watch Impact of social transfer other than pensions on	CSR 2019 (2)(b) Consolidate social benefits and improve their capacity to reduce poverty	C4.3 R1: Transparency and adequacy of social benefits in the social protection system.	C4.3 R1-I1: Improving the digitalisation of the social benefits system between the national and local levels	12. Social protection 13. Unemployment benefits 14. Minimum income

TABLE A 3 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	Croatian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
poverty reduction—To watch		C4.3 R2: Development of social mentoring service	C4.3 R1-I2: Development of a web application on the possibility to receive social benefits at the national level C4.3 R2-I1: Introduction of social mentoring services C4.3 R3-I2 - Improving the digitalisation of social welfare system and connecting social welfare centres with social service providers	
Employment rate (% of population aged 20–64); Critical situation	CSR 2019 (2)(c) Strengthen labour market measures and institutions and their coordination with social services	C4.1 R1—Development and implementation of new targeted active labour market policies for the purposes of green and digital transition of the labour market C4.1 R2—Strengthening of the system of inclusion and monitoring of vulnerable groups in the labour market through improvements of the employment service processes C4.1 R3—Setting up a voucher system for adult education, training and upskilling C4.1 R4—Improvements to the labour legislation	C2.3.R3-I10: Digitalisation and computerisation of the CES (eHZZ)	4. Active support to employment 5. Secure and adaptable employment 9. Work-life balance

(Continues)

TABLE A 3 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	Croatian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
-	<p>CSR 2020 (1) Enhance the resilience of the health system</p> <p>Promote balanced geographical distribution of health workers and facilities, closer cooperation between all levels of administration and investments in e-health</p>	<p>C5.1 R1: Improving the efficiency, quality and accessibility of the health system.</p> <p>C5.1 R2: Introducing a new care model for key health challenges</p> <p>C5.1 R3: Introducing a system of strategic management of human resources in health</p> <p>C5.1 R4: Ensuring the financial sustainability of the health system.</p> <p>C5.1 R5—eHealth</p>	<p>All the investments from C5.1</p> <p>C2.3.R3-14: Consolidation of CEZH health information infrastructure systems”.</p>	<p>16. Health care</p>
Net earnings of a full-time single worker earning average wage: To watch	<p>CSR 2020 (2)(a) Strengthen labour market measures and institutions and improve the adequacy of unemployment benefits and minimum income schemes</p>	<p>See CSR(2019)2</p>	-	<p>12. Social protection</p> <p>13. Unemployment benefits</p> <p>14. Minimum income</p>
-	<p>CSR 2020 (2)(b) Promote the acquisition of skills.</p>	<p>C4.1 R3—Setting up a voucher system for adult education, training and upskilling</p> <p>C6.1.R2—Developing a framework for ensuring adequate skills in the context of green jobs needed for post-earthquake reconstruction</p>	<p>C4.1 R3-11—Implementation of vouchers for adult education, training and upskilling</p>	<p>4. Active support to employment</p>
-	-	-	-	-

TABLE A3 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	Croatian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
-	-	C4.2 R1—Increasing pension adequacy through continued pension reform.	C2.3.R3-I1.1: ICT support modernisation of HZMO (eHZMO) C2.3.R3-I1.2 Digitalisation of the HZMO archives (eArhiva)	15. Old age income and pensions
-	-	C4.3 R3: Developing community-based services to prevent institutionalisation	C4.3 R3-I1: Strengthening the capacity of community service professionals C4.3 R3-I4: Construction and equipping of centres for the elderly care (home and community based services and institutional services)	18. Long-term care
-	-	-	C1.4 R1-I2—Improving the system of exercising the rights of persons with disabilities in the field of mobility	17. Inclusion of people with disabilities

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

**TABLE A 4** Alignment of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRP) reforms and investments with the social CSRs, the Social Scoreboard and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) principles—Germany.

Social scoreboard	German social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
-	CSR 2019 (1)(a) Focus investment-related economic policy on education	-	-	-
-	CSR 2019 (1)(b) Affordable housing, taking into account regional disparities	-	-	-
-	CSR 2019 (1)(c) Shift taxes away from labour to sources less detrimental to inclusive and sustainable growth	-	-	-
-	CSR 2019 (2)(a) Reduce disincentives to work more hours	-	-	-
-	CSR 2019 (2)(b) Including the high tax wedge, in particular for low- wage [learners]	-	-	-
-	CSR 2019 (2)(c) Second earners	-	-	-
-	CSR 2019 (2)(d) Take measures to safeguard the long-term sustainability of the pension system, while preserving adequacy.	-	-	-
-	CSR 2019 (2)(e) Strengthen the conditions that support higher wage growth, while respecting the role of the social partners.	-	-	-
-	CSR 2019 (2)(f) Improve educational outcomes and skills levels of disadvantaged groups.	-	C4.1/2 Apprenticeship support	4. Active support to employment
-	CSR 2020 (1) Mobilise adequate resources and strengthen the resilience of the health system, including by deploying eHealth services.	C5.1.R1 Strengthening of the digital and technical resources of the public health service	C5.1.1/1 Programme to future-proof hospitals	16. Health care
-	CSR 2020 (2)(a) Promote private investment to foster the economic recovery. Focus investment on (...) housing	-	-	-



TABLE A4 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	German social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
-	CSR 2020 (2)(b) Promote private investment to foster the economic recovery. Focus investment on (...) education	C3.1.R1 Education platform C3.1.R2 Educational centres of excellence C4.1.R3 Educational support for students with a learning backlog	C3.1.J1 Investment programme for teacher devices	1. Education, training and life-long learning
Income quintile ratio (S80/S20)—To watch	-	-	-	-
-	-	C4.1.R1 Social guaranteee 2021	-	-
-	-	C4.1.R4 Digital pension overview	-	15. Old age income and pensions
-	-	-	C4.1.J1 Investment programme 'Childcare-financing' 2020/21; special fund 'Child Day-care Expansion'	11. Childcare and support to children

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

**TABLE A5** Alignment of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRP) reforms and investments with the social CSRs, the Social Scoreboard and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) principles—Italy.

Social scoreboard	Italian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
Income quintile ratio (S80/S20): To watch	CSR 2019 (1)(a) Shift taxation away from labour, including by reducing tax expenditure and reforming the outdated cadastral values.	-	-	-
	CSR 2019 (1)(b) Implement fully past pension reforms to reduce the share of old-age pensions in public spending and create space for other social and growth-enhancing spending.	-	-	-
	CSR 2019 (2)(a) Step up efforts to tackle undeclared work	R2 National Plan tackling undeclared work	-	-
Employment rate (% of population aged 20–64): Critical situation	CSR 2019 (2)(b) Ensure that active labour market and social policies are effectively integrated and reach out notably to young people and vulnerable groups	R1 The Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) and Vocational Training R1.9 Public employment reform and simplification reform	I1 Strengthening Public Employment Services (PES) I4 Strengthening of the Universal Civil Service	4. Active support to employment
Unemployment rate (% active population aged 15–74): Critical situation	Youth NEET (% of population aged 15–24): Critical situation			
Gender employment gap—Critical situation	CSR 2019 (2)(c) Support women's participation in the labour market through a comprehensive strategy, including through access	R2 Reform for non-self-sufficient elderly persons	I1.1 Plan for nurseries and preschools and early childhood education and care services I2 Gender Equality Certification System	3. Equal opportunities 12. Childcare and support to children 18. Long-term care

TABLE A5 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	Italian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
Early school leavers from education and training (% population aged 18–24)—Critical situation	<p>to quality childcare and long-term care</p> <p>Italian social CSRs</p> <p>to quality childcare and long-term care</p> <p>CSR 2019 (2)(d) Improve educational outcomes, also through adequate and targeted investment, and foster upskilling, including by strengthening digital skills.</p>	<p>R1.3 Reorganisation of the school system</p> <p>R1.1 Reform of Technical and Professional Institutes</p> <p>R1.2 Reform of the tertiary vocational training (ITS)</p> <p>R1.4 Reform of the “Orientation” system</p> <p>R1.5 University Degree groups reforms</p> <p>R1.6 Enabling University Degree Reform</p> <p>R2.1 Teachers’ recruitment</p> <p>R2.2 Tertiary advanced school and compulsory training for school managers, teachers, administrative and technical staff</p> <p>R4.1 Ph.D. Programmes Reform</p> <p>R1.7 Reform of student housing regulation and investment in student housing</p>	<p>I5 Creation of women’s enterprises</p> <p>I1 Supporting vulnerable people and preventing institutionalisation</p> <p>1.1 Construction of new schools through building replacement</p> <p>I1.2 Plan for the extension of full-time</p> <p>I1.3 School Sports Infrastructure</p> <p>Enhancement Plan</p> <p>I1.4 Extraordinary intervention aimed at the reduction of territorial gaps in I and II cycles of secondary school and at tackling school drop-out</p> <p>I2.1 Integrated digital teaching and training on the digital transformation for school staff; “I3.1 New skills and new languages</p> <p>I3.2 School 4.0: innovative schools, wiring, new classrooms and workshops”, “I3.4 Teaching and advanced university skills</p> <p>I4.1 Extension in number and career opportunities of PhDs (Research-oriented,</p>	<p>1. Education, training and life-long learning</p>

(Continues)

TABLE A5 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	Italian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
	Italian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
	CSR 2020 (1)Strengthen the resilience and capacity of the health system, in the areas of health workers, critical medical products and infrastructure	R1 Definition of a new organisational model for Territorial healthcare assistance network R1 Revise and update the current legal framework of the Scientific Institutes for Hospitalisation and Care (IRCCS)	Public Administration and Cultural Heritage I1.7 Basic digital skills I1.5 Development of the tertiary vocational training system (ITS) I1.6 Active orientation in school-university transition I1.7 Scholarships for University access I3.3 School building security and structural rehabilitation plan I3 Strengthening the dual System I3 Structured socio-educational interventions to combat educational poverty in the South supporting the Third Sector	16. Health care
	CSR 2020 (1)Strengthen the resilience and capacity of the health system, in the areas of health workers, critical medical products and infrastructure	R1 Definition of a new organisational model for Territorial healthcare assistance network R1 Revise and update the current legal framework of the Scientific Institutes for Hospitalisation and Care (IRCCS)	I1 Inner Areas (Enhancement of community social services and infrastructures + Territorial Proximity health facilities) I1.1 Community Health Houses to improve territorial health assistance I1.2 Home as the first place of care and telemedicine	16. Health care

TABLE A5 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	Italian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
-	CSR 2020 (1)(a) Provide adequate income replacement and access to social protection, notably for atypical workers	-	1.3 Strengthening Intermediate Healthcare and its facilities (Community Hospitals) 1.2 Towards a safe and sustainable hospital 1.1 Digital update of hospitals' technological equipment 1.2.1 Strengthening and enhancement of the NHS biomedical research 1.2.2 Development of technical-professional, digital and managerial skills of professionals in the healthcare system	
-	CSR 2020 (1)(b) Mitigate the employment impact of the crisis, including through flexible working arrangements and active support to employment.	-	-	-
-	CSR 2020 (1)(c) Strengthen distance learning and skills, including digital ones	CSR 2019 (2)	See CSR 2019 (2)	1. Education, training and life-long learning

Long-term unemployment (% active population)

(Continues)

TABLE A5 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	Italian social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
aged 15–74): Critical situation				
GDHI per capita growth: Critical situation				
Impact of social transfers other than pensions on poverty reduction: Critical situation				
-	-	R1 Framework Law for Disability	I2 Autonomy patterns for people with disabilities I3 Housing First and Post Stations I4 Investments in projects of urban regeneration, aimed at reducing situations of marginalisation and social degradation I5 Urban Integration Plans (general projects and Overcoming illegal settlements to fight labour exploitation in agriculture) I6 Innovative Plan for Housing Quality	17. Inclusion of people with disabilities 19. Housing and assistance for the homeless
At risk of poverty or social exclusion (in %): To watch	-	-		

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

**TABLE A6** Alignment of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRP) reforms and investments with the social CSRs, the Social Scoreboard and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) principles—Spain.

Social scoreboard	Spanish social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
-	CSR 2019 (1) Preserve the sustainability of the pension system.	C30.R1 Separation of sources of social security funding C30.R2 Maintenance of the purchasing power of pensions, alignment of the effective retirement age with the statutory retirement age, adaptation of the calculation period for the calculation of the retirement pension to new careers and replacement of the sustainability factor by an intergenerational equity mechanism C30.R3 Reform of the Social Security contribution system for the self-employed C30.R4 Streamlining of maternity add-ons C30.R5 Review of the current supplementary pension system C30.R6 Adjustment of maximum contribution base	-	15. Old age income and pensions
Impact of social transfer other than pensions on poverty reduction: Critical situation	CSR 2019 (2)(a) Ensure that employment and social services have the capacity to provide effective support	C22.R2 Modernising public social services and giving them a new regulatory framework C23.R4 Simplification of contracts: generalisation of the open-ended contract, reasons to use temporary contracts and regulation of the training/apprenticeship contract C23.R7 Review of hiring incentives	C22.I2 Plan for the Modernisation of Social Services: Technological transformation, innovation, training and strengthening childcare"	12. Social protection
Net earnings of a full-time single worker earning average wage—To watch	CSR 2019 (2)(b) Foster transitions towards open-ended contracts, including by simplifying the system of hiring incentives			5. Secure and adaptable employment

(Continues)

TABLE A6 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	Spanish social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
At risk of poverty or social exclusion (in %)—To watch	CSR 2019 (2)(c) Improve support for families and address coverage gaps in national unemployment assistance and regional minimum income schemes.	C23.R10 Simplification and improvement of unemployment assistance	—	13. Unemployment benefits
Early school leavers from education and training (% population aged 18–24): Critical situation	CSR 2019 (2)(d) Reduce early school leaving and improve educational outcomes, taking into account regional disparities	C21.R1 New organic law on education C21.R3 Comprehensive reform of the university system	C21.I2 Program for orientation, progress and educational enrichment (“PROA+”) C21.I3 Support to vulnerable students and families C21.I4 Training of teaching and research staff C21.I5 Improving university digital infrastructure, equipment, technologies, teaching and evaluation	1. Education, training and life-long learning
—	CSR 2019 (2)(e) Increase cooperation between education and businesses with a view to improving the provision of labour market relevant skills and qualifications, in particular for information and communication technologies.	C19.R1 National Digital Competences Plan C20.R2 Law regulating the integrated VET system linked to the National Qualifications System C20.R1 Plan for the Modernisation of Vocational Training C21.R2 A new curriculum model for key competences, fundamental learning and inclusive academic planning	C19.I2 Digital transformation of education C19.I4 Digital professionals C20.I2 Digital transformation of vocational training C20.I3 Innovation and internationalisation of vocational training	1. Education, training and life-long learning
—	CSR 2020 (1) Strengthen the health system's resilience and capacity, as regards health workers, critical	C18.R1 Strengthening primary and community care C18.R2 Reform of the public health system	C17.I6 Health C18.I1 Investment plan for high-tech equipment in the National Health System	16. Health care



TABLE A6 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	Spanish social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
Employment rate (% of population aged 20–64)—critical situation	medical products and infrastructure	C18.R5 Reforming the regulation of medicines and improving access to medicines	C18.I2 Actions to strengthen prevention and promotion of health	
Long-term unemployment (% active population aged 15–74)—Weak but improving		C18.R3 Strengthening cohesion, equity and universality	C18.I3 Increased capacities to respond to health crises	
Youth NEET (% of population aged 15–24)—To watch	CSR 2020 (2)(a) Support arrangements to preserve jobs, effective hiring incentives and skills development	C19.R1 National Digital Competences Plan C18.R4 Strengthening professional skills and reducing temporary employment	C18.I5 Plan to rationalise the consumption of pharmaceuticals and promote sustainability C18.I6 Health data lake C19.I3 Digital skills for employment C23.I3 New skills for the green, digital and productive transition C19.I1 Transversal digital skills C20.I1 Reskilling and upskilling of the labour force linked to professional qualifications C18.I4 Training of health professionals and resources to share knowledge C23.I1 Youth Employment C23.I3 New skills for the green, digital and productive transition C23.I4 New territorial projects for rebalancing and equity	1. Active support to employment

(Continues)

TABLE A 6 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	Spanish social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
Unemployment rate (% active population aged 15–74): Weak but improving	CSR 2020 (2)(b) Reinforce unemployment protection, notably for atypical workers	C23.R10 Simplification and improvement of unemployment assistance	C23.I5 Governance and boost of policies to support activation	12. Social Protection 13. Unemployment benefits
GDHI per capita growth: To watch	CSR 2020 (2)(c) Improve coverage and adequacy of minimum income schemes and family support, as well as access to digital learning	-	C23.I7 Promoting inclusive growth by linking social inclusion policies to the national minimum income scheme ("IMV")	14. Minimum income
Income quintile ratio (S80/S20)—Weak but improving	-	-	-	-
			C23.I2 Female employment and gender mainstreaming in active labour market policies C22.I4 Plan Spain protects you from gender violence	2. Gender equality
			C2.I2 Programme for the construction of social rental housing in energy-efficient buildings C2.I5 Public Buildings Rehabilitation Programme	19. Housing and assistance for the homeless
			C22.I3 Spain Accessible Country Plan C21.I1 Promoting early childhood education and care (ECEC)	17. Inclusion of people with disabilities 12. Childcare and support to children

TABLE A6 (Continued)

Social scoreboard	Spanish social CSRs	Reform(s) included in the NRRP	Investment(s) included in the NRRP	Principles of the EPSR addressed in the NRRP
-	-	C22.R1 Strengthening long-term care and promoting a change in the model of support and long-term care	C22.I1 Long-term care and support plan: deinstitutionalisation, equipment and technology	18. Long-term care
-	-	C23.R9 Modernisation of sub-contracting activities		12. Social protection
-	-	C23.R3 Regulation of the work of home distributors by digital platforms (riders)		12. Secure and adaptable employment
-	-	C23.R1 Regulation of teleworking		12. Social protection
-	-	C23.R2 Measures to close the gender gap		2. Gender equality
-	-	C23.R5 Modernisation of active labour market policies (ALMP)		4. Active support to employment
-	-	C23.R11 Digitalisation of the Public Employment Services (PES) for its modernisation and efficiency		4. Active support to employment
-	-	C23.R6 Permanent mechanism for internal flexibility, job stability and reskilling of workers in transition		13. Unemployment benefits
-	-	C23.R8 Modernisation of collective bargaining		8. Social dialogue and involvement of workers

Source: Own elaboration.

## APPENDIX B

TABLE B1 List of interviews.

Interview number	CODE	Institution		Platform	Date
		National Government	Labour Ministry		
1	HR-GOV-1	National Government	Labour Ministry	Microsoft Teams	21 April 2022
2	HR-GOV-2	National Government	Special Advisor to the Prime Minister for Economic Issues	Microsoft Teams	21 April 2022
3	HR-COM-1	EU Commission	DG ECFIN	Microsoft Teams	4 May 2022
4	HR-COM-2	EU Commission	SG RECOVER	Microsoft Teams	2 May 2022
5	IT-GOV-1	National Government	Labour Ministry	Microsoft Teams	29 April 2022
6	IT-GOV-2	National Government	Ministry for Economic Affairs	Microsoft Teams	10 May 2022
7	IT-COM-1	EU Commission	DG ECFIN	Microsoft Teams	6 May 2022
8	IT-COM-2	EU Commission	SG RECOVER	Microsoft Teams	6 May 2022
9	ES-GOV-1	National Government	Director General of Macroeconomic Analysis	Microsoft Teams	24 May 2022
10	ES-GOV-2	National Government	Head of Unit of the ES RRF programming	Microsoft Teams	17 May 2022
11	ES-COM-1	National Government	PermRep Spain	Microsoft Teams	9 May 2022
12	ES-COM-2	European Commission	SG RECOVER	Microsoft Teams	13 May 2022
13	DE-COM-1	EU Commission	SG RECOVER	Microsoft Teams	15 March 2022
14	DE-GOV-1	National Government	Ministry of Finance	Webex	4 March 2022
15	DE-GOV-2	National Government	Ministry of Social Affairs	Microsoft Teams	24 May 2022
16	DE-COM-2	European Commission	DG ECFIN	Microsoft Teams	30 May 2022
17	BE-GOV-1	National Government	Ministry of Finance	Microsoft Teams	24 February 2022
18	BE-COM-1	EU Commission	SG RECOVER	Microsoft Teams	11 March 2022
19	AT-COM-1	EU Commission	SG RECOVER	Microsoft Teams	15 March 2022
20	AT-GOV-1	National Government	Ministry of Finance	Microsoft Teams	1 March 2022