Towards a More Social Europe?
The Role of Welfare State Regimes in the Implementation of the European Semester's Social Policy Recommendations

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Abstract

The European Semester plays a pivotal role in the European Union's social policy coordination and the promotion of social rights. This thesis analyses the effectiveness of the Semester in shaping domestic social policy reform by introducing welfare state regimes as a new, previously overlooked explanatory factor. Using the concepts of willingness, capacity and legitimacy from the compliance literature, the thesis sheds light on how different welfare state regimes respond to the Semester's country-specific recommendations. The study compiles a new dataset with quantitative data from various sources and uses multilevel logistic regression to demonstrate the significant differences across welfare regimes. Social-democratic and liberal welfare states are found to implement the social recommendations of the European Semester to the highest extent, while countries with a conservative, post-communist and Southern European regime lag behind. The findings have important implications for EU policy-makers on how to further tailor country-specific recommendations in order to increase their implementation rates. This, in turn, can contribute to creating a more social Europe and improving welfare reforms that address complex social issues such as poverty and education.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The global financial crisis of 2007-2008 highlighted the weaknesses of governance systems at multiple levels around the world, including the European Union's economic governance. The interconnectedness of member states' economies led to the financial crisis quickly spreading through Europe, resulting in an EU-wide recession and a sovereign debt crisis for multiple countries (Szczepanski, 2019). To address the shortcomings of the EU's governance mechanism and prevent future economic meltdowns, the European Council introduced the European Semester in 2010. The European Semester (also referred to as 'Semester' in short) is a policy tool aimed at improving economic, fiscal and social policy coordination across member states (European Council, 2024). This thesis investigates how welfare state regimes shape EU member states' response to the European Semester's social policy recommendations, thereby offering an insight into the interplay between national and international policy-making.

The European Semester

The European Semester constitutes a significant milestone in the evolution of EU policy coordination and is a prime example of multi-level governance where national and international actors are simultaneously involved (Bekker, 2020). The Semester is an annually repeated cycle through which member states receive recommendations from the European Union on how to improve their national policies in different areas. It starts in November each year when the members of the European Commission agree on policy priorities for the upcoming year and issue the Autumn Package (European Commission, n.d.). Then, the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament review these guidelines and adopt the Commission's recommendations. During spring, member states prepare and submit their National Reform Programme, a detailed plan on how they aim to achieve policy goals and implement recommendations from previous cycles through mobilising and allocating resources. The European Commission then reviews these plans and proposes country-specific recommendations (CSRs) to each member state on how to improve national policies and respond to challenges (European Commission, n.d.). In July, the Council formally adopts the CSRs following the European Council's endorsement. Member states are then expected to incorporate these recommendations into their reform agendas for the upcoming year. The cycle concludes in October when member states submit their finalised budgetary plans, which serve as input for the subsequent Semester cycle starting in November. The implementation of the recommendations is recorded, monitored and evaluated each year to track member states' progress.

Over time, the European Semester has transformed significantly as a result of changes in economic, political and institutional circumstances. One important development is the 'socialisation' of the Semester, which refers to the growing emphasis on social policy and the increasing amount of social recommendations since the first cycle in 2011 (Elomäki & Gaweda, 2022; Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2017). Originally, the Semester's main focus was on fiscal and macroeconomic policy coordination, but over the years, social objectives have been gradually incorporated into its agenda (Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2017). Nowadays, the Semester includes recommendations on a wide variety of social policy fields, including pension, employment, social inclusion, poverty reduction and education. However, scholars argued that this socialisation of the Semester has been limited and imperfect as economic goals continue to overshadow social objectives (Copeland & Daly, 2015).

Research Puzzle

Alongside the gradual socialisation of the Semester, the academic literature has also shown increasing attention to the European Semester and its role in policy coordination within the European Union. Scholars have extensively studied the effectiveness of country-specific recommendations and the determinants of successful policy implementation (Darvas & Leandro, 2015; Efstathiou & Wolff, 2018; Ma, 2021; Mariotto, 2022). Recently, studies also focused specifically on the social policy recommendations of the Semester (Al-Kadi & Clauwaert, 2019; Azzopardi-Muscat et al., 2015; Copeland & Daly, 2018; Hennis, 2021; Rainone, 2022). Nevertheless, the scholarship on assessing the effectiveness of the European Semester remains scarce in three regards. First, studies on the implementation of (social) recommendations have been overwhelmingly descriptive, highlighting general trends but failing to identify explanatory factors that drive implementation (Al-Kadi & Clauwaert, 2019; Bíró-Nagy & Laki, 2022; Darvas & Leandro, 2015; Rainone, 2022). Second, much of the existing literature that aimed to uncover the determinants of implementation relied on single-case or small-n designs, limiting the generalisability of their findings (Bokhorst, 2022; D'Erman et al., 2021; Hennis, 2021). Finally, those studies that both used larger samples and aimed to identify drivers of CSR implementation have predominantly focused on economic and fiscal indicators while overlooking other crucial domestic factors related to institutional structures, such as welfare state regimes (Azzopardi-Muscat et al., 2015; Efstathiou & Wolff, 2018; Ma, 2021; Mariotto, 2022). Thus, a critical gap remains in the literature which this thesis aims to address by exploring the role of welfare state regimes as a determinant shaping social policy outcomes on the domestic level.

Within the European Union, member states have diverse welfare arrangements, ranging from the social-democratic model predominantly found in Scandinavia to the more conservative and liberal types (Kammer et al., 2012). The type of welfare state regime a country adopts influences its policy priorities, welfare provisions and its approach to tackling wicked problems such as poverty (Wickham, 2020). For instance, countries with a universal welfare approach aim to provide social protection to all citizens regardless of their labour market participation, while other welfare arrangements believe in weaker state intervention and more market-driven solutions (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). These ideological differences manifest in the structure of domestic institutions and policies, and impact decisions about policy reforms and resource allocations (Klitgaard, 2005). Consequently, this suggests that the type of welfare state regime a country adopts also shapes the way it responds to the social policy recommendations of the European Union (Scharpf, 2002), including those received during the European Semester.

Despite its relevance for social policy outcomes, so far no research has been conducted on welfare state regimes as a basis for comparing country responses to the Semester's recommendations. While the intersection of welfare states and EU recommendations has been previously explored in relation to other EU policy instruments, such as the Open Method of Coordination (e.g. see De La Porte, 2002), this has not been done within the context of the Semester. Thus, to address this gap, the present study aims to answer the following research question: *How can the variation in welfare state regimes help to explain the differences in the response patterns of European Union member states to the social policy recommendations of the European Semester?*

Theoretical and Practical Relevance

This study advances the existing academic literature by uncovering the role of welfare state regimes in the implementation of the European Semester's recommendations. The theoretical contribution of the present study lies in offering new insights into the determinants of national responses to EU recommendations by exploring the connection between welfare regimes and the compliance literature's three explanatory factors: willingness, capacity and legitimacy (Börzel et al., 2007). This can not only contribute to the compliance literature in general (Börzel et al., 2010; Treib, 2014) but also advance our understanding of the European Semester as a policy coordination tool. In addition, exploring the link between welfare regimes and responses to EU policies can provide a new perspective on welfare arrangements and how these systematic differences in domestic institutions and ideologies shape countries' responses to supranational initiatives. Besides, the present study is the first to provide empirical evidence for the differences across welfare state regimes in their response patterns to the Semester's recommendations, thereby filling a significant gap in the literature. The insights and findings of this study also point towards interesting avenues for future research which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Besides the theoretical and empirical contributions, this study also has some practical implications for policy-makers and wider society. As the EU faces unprecedented challenges related to social policy, such as the ageing population, labour shortages, and the recent pandemic's negative impact on education, social inclusion and healthcare, it is ever more relevant to further investigate this policy area. By shedding light on the effectiveness of the European Semester's social policy recommendations and exploring the differences across welfare state regimes' responses, this study offers actionable insights that can help to improve country-specific recommendations. In particular, the study helps to understand how CSRs can be further tailored to different types of welfare arrangements and thereby increase their implementation and effectiveness. These insights can point towards policies that help to address unemployment, eliminate poverty and reduce social inequalities, thereby benefiting society as a whole. As the European Semester plays a central role in the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, it is essential to study its effectiveness in depth in order to safeguard social rights within the EU (Al-Kadi & Clauwaert, 2019).

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured as follows: first, Chapter 2 reviews the existing academic literature on the European Semester and the determinants of compliance with EU policies, and then shifts the focus to the literature on welfare state regimes. The chapter concludes with synthesising this knowledge and formulating hypotheses. Then, Chapter 3 elaborates on the methodology used to gather data, operationalise concepts and analyse the relationship between welfare states and the implementation of recommendations. Chapter 4 presents the results of the analysis and evaluates the proposed hypotheses. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the results in light of the academic literature and connects the present findings to the findings of previous studies. This chapter also further elaborates on the theoretical and practical implications of the study and suggests various directions for future research. The thesis ends with a summary of key takeaways and concluding remarks.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This thesis aims to shed light on how the European Semester's effectiveness in shaping social policy within the European Union can be explained by the differences in welfare state regimes. By doing so, the study answers the following research question: *How can the variation in welfare state regimes help to explain the differences in the response patterns of European Union member states to the social policy recommendations of the European Semester?*

This chapter begins with reviewing the existing academic literature on the European Semester, followed by an exploration of the determinants of compliance with EU laws and policies. It then shifts the focus to the literature on welfare state regimes, identifying and elaborating on the main regime types within the European Union. In the end, these insights are combined and a set of hypotheses is proposed, which is subsequently tested during the analysis.

The Governance Mechanism of the Semester

In order to understand member states' compliance with the Semester's recommendations, it is important to first explore the governance mechanism of this policy coordination tool. The legal basis of the European Semester is laid down in Articles 121 and 148 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (European Council, 2024). Article 121 states that economic policies shall be a 'common concern' and encourages coordination within the Union, while Article 148 gives authority to the Commission and the Council to annually assess the situation of employment in each member state and provide recommendations (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 2012). This shows that the legal underpinning of the European Semester is rather broad, which creates ambiguities regarding the enforcement of its recommendations, especially considering the EU's simultaneous commitment to respect the sovereignty of its members (Al-Kadi & Clauwaert, 2019).

In the academic literature, the European Semester is often referred to as a soft law mechanism (Eeva, 2024; D'Erman & Verdun, 2021; Papadopoulos & Piattoni, 2019), while others regard it as a combination of soft and hard law instruments (Bekker, 2020; Costamagna, 2013; Vanhercke & Verdun, 2022; Verdun & Zeitlin, 2018). While the country-specific recommendations (CSRs) produced during the Semester are not legally binding, some have more "coercive elements" and stronger legal underpinnings (Bekker, 2021, p.115). For instance, CSRs rooted in the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure (MIP) or the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) are accompanied by deadlines, monitoring mechanisms and sanctions in case of non-compliance (Hagelstam & Hradiský, 2014). However, it is important to note that the EU has so far refrained from sanctioning members for their non-compliance with the MIP or SGP (Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2017), and even suspended the latter in past years due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war (Steinberg & Feás, 2024). In addition, Efstathiou and Wolff (2018) found no evidence that recommendations rooted in the MIP are implemented faster or to a larger extent compared to other CSRs with a weaker legal basis.

Thus, the literature suggests that the soft law mechanism of the Semester is more prevalent and the effectiveness of this approach stems from the informal pressure put on member states and the political costs of inaction (Bokhorst, 2022). Since the CSRs are endorsed by both the European Commission and the Council, they are politically binding, meaning that there is significant political pressure on member states to take into account recommendations when drafting their national plans and policies (Hagelstam & Hradiský, 2014). Indeed, Andone and Coman-Kund (2022) argued that soft law labelled as a ‘recommendation’ is misleading as these recommendations usually imply strict expectations regarding member states’ policy directions and therefore restrict their discretion. In this regard, the Semester resembles an earlier soft law tool of the European Union, namely the Open Method of Coordination (OMC)[1], which relies on benchmarking, sharing best practices and peer pressure (Scharpf, 2002). In fact, the Semester integrates a variety of prior EU policy tools, including the social OMCs, the Lisbon Strategy, the European Employment Strategy, the Youth Guarantee and the Social Investment Package, which are all now implemented in the context of the Semester (De La Porte & Heins, 2014; European Commission, 2024). Similarly to the OMC, the Semester uses periodic monitoring to track compliance, which relies more on reputational incentives rather than strict legal obligations (Eeva, 2024). As progress on the CSRs is reviewed and evaluated annually as part of the Semester cycle, member states are under continuous pressure to align with these guidelines.

The Implementation of Country-Specific Recommendations

Despite the legal and political pressures to follow the Semester’s recommendations, the actual implementation of CSRs remains limited. Studies repeatedly showed that only a fraction of CSRs are implemented by member states each year, and this percentage has been declining over the years (Al-Kadi & Clauwaert, 2019; Darvas & Leandro, 2015; D’Erman &

[1] For more information on the OMC as a predecessor of the European Semester in social policy coordination within the European Union, see De La Porte (2002), Heidenreich and Zeitlin (2009), and Tholoniat (2010)

Verdun, 2021; Efstathiou & Wolff, 2019). Several trends emerge regarding CSR implementation. For instance, Efstathiou and Wolff (2018) demonstrated that CSRs related to finances are implemented to the largest extent, while recommendations on pension, unemployment and taxation show lower implementation rates. Similarly, Al-Kadi and Clauwaert (2019) found that social policy-related CSRs are often not or only partially implemented, especially in politically sensitive policy areas such as wages and pension.

Scholars have extensively studied the determinants of member states' compliance with EU laws and policies. The academic literature identifies three main approaches to explaining compliance, or the lack thereof: enforcement, management, and legitimacy (Börzel et al., 2007; Tallberg, 2002). It is argued that member states' noncompliance with EU policies can be either voluntary or involuntary, and the differences in the underlying causes of noncompliance point towards different remedies (Treib, 2014). Nonetheless, all three perspectives agree that domestic factors are crucial determinants of the extent to which states comply with EU laws and recommendations, as these shape the political and economic context in which policies are implemented. While originally applied to hard law instruments, the insights from the compliance literature are believed to be helpful in explaining the progress of member states in implementing soft law and non-binding recommendations, such as the CSRs of the European Semester. The following sections explore these theoretical approaches and illustrate their relevance to the Semester.

Enforcement

The enforcement logic argues that countries breach EU laws and avoid implementing certain policies on purpose (Treib, 2014). This approach believes that noncompliance is voluntary, stemming from a lack of willingness of member states to pursue a certain policy path. When countries perceive the cost of implementation as higher than its potential benefits, it decreases their willingness and motivation to invest their resources in that policy direction (Börzel et al., 2007). Besides financial considerations, ideology, party politics, public opinion and the congruence between the new policy and domestic legal traditions were all found to be important in shaping countries' willingness to comply (Treib, 2014).

In the context of the European Semester, Coman (2017) argued the lack of willingness of member states is the primary reason for the low implementation rate of country-specific recommendations. If a recommendation is not in line with a country's domestic agenda and policy priorities, it may be reluctant to pursue such policy reform. Closely related to the notion of willingness is the national ownership of CSRs. Ma (2021) argued that when recommendations align with the interests and policy preferences of member states, the perceived benefits of implementation rise, along with the motivation to comply. Consequently, it was found that when national governments have a high level of ownership, they implement the country-specific recommendations of the European Semester to a larger extent (Ma, 2021). In addition, it is important to emphasise that CSRs are not implemented by governments alone on the domestic level. The participation of a variety of stakeholders is often necessary to ensure effective and successful policy reform. Thus, ownership matters not only for national governments but also for other stakeholders such as public institutions and civil society organisations, who are involved in the implementation process. Indeed, D'Erman et al. (2021) found that when domestic stakeholders perceive CSRs as misaligned with or opposing their interests, they are more likely to mobilise their resources against these recommendations, which in turn hampers implementation.

These findings tie into the Europeanisation literature's misfit argument. This approach suggests that the domestic implementation of EU policies is largely determined by the compatibility of the EU's policy recommendations with national institutional traditions (Treib, 2014). When there is a high level of alignment between national and supranational policies, implementing EU recommendations is easy as it does not require substantial shifts at the domestic level. In turn, this fit likely increases countries' willingness to comply, as the perceived financial and political costs are relatively low. In contrast, a high level of misfit arises when domestic policy goals are incompatible with EU initiatives, which puts significant pressure on member states to adapt their approach to bridge this gap (Börzel & Risse, 2000). While this pressure can be conducive to domestic change, having too high pressure may generate resistance and result in institutional inertia. Thus, Börzel and Risse (2000) argued that the optimal environment for domestic change is when the new policy is "compatible with collectively shared understandings and meaning structures" (p. 15). Although the Europeanisation literature most often applies this argument to explain the implementation of EU policies, its core logic can also be used to account for noncompliance or incomplete policy implementation. In the context of the European Semester, it suggests that countries are more likely to follow recommendations when those are in line with their social policy approaches on the domestic level, whereas misalignment can trigger political opposition and slow down reform, resulting in lower compliance with recommendations.

Management

In contrast with the enforcement logic, the management approach believes that countries' noncompliance is involuntary, arising from constraining factors such as limited capacity, unclear policy wording and lack of resources (Treib, 2014). Börzel et al. (2010) argued that the capacity of states in terms of available administrative and financial resources is an essential factor that determines their compliance with EU laws. Indeed, financial investments, effective bureaucratic systems with a skilled workforce, and strong monitoring mechanisms are all crucial for ensuring the success of policy reforms (Tallberg, 2002). Without sufficient capacity, reforms are likely to fail, be contested, or remain only partially implemented (Börzel et al., 2010).

In the context of the European Semester, scholars argued that the low implementation rate of country-specific recommendations can be explained by capacity-related factors such as the number of recommendations received during a cycle. For instance, Ma (2021) reasoned that the more recommendations a country receives in a year, the lower its implementation rates will be considering the limited resources and capacity available for policy reform. Besides, receiving a high number of recommendations may indicate that a country is already underperforming in certain policy areas, which, in turn, limits its ability to implement reform (Ma, 2021). This argument was supported by Efstathiou and Wolff (2019) who found that receiving a lower amount of recommendations significantly increased the likelihood of implementing those.

Legitimacy

The third and most recent perspective in the compliance literature focuses on legitimacy as a determinant of state behaviour. Proponents of this approach argue that countries are more likely to comply with EU laws when those are perceived as appropriate and fair at the domestic level (Börzel et al., 2007). This suggests that when member states view CSRs as constructive and legitimate suggestions, they are more willing to implement them. In this sense, legitimacy perceptions are believed to be tied to willingness and the misfit argument of the Europeanisation literature. If a recommendation aligns with a country's domestic policy orientation, its perceived legitimacy will be higher in the eyes of the national government and stakeholders, which in turn increases the willingness to comply. Both Coman (2017) and Hallerberg et al. (2011) showed that member states repeatedly questioned the legitimacy of the Semester, mainly its process and output in terms of Country Reports and CSRs, which in turn negatively affects implementation. The findings of Bokhorst (2022) support this argument as the author illustrated that the decrease in the Semester's perceived legitimacy over the years was accompanied by growing opposition towards its suggested policy reforms in Italy.

Synthesis

All in all, the enforcement, management and legitimacy perspectives each offer distinct explanations for member states' noncompliance with EU recommendations. The core argument of the compliance literature is that member states' adherence to EU recommendations largely depends on their willingness to pursue the suggested policy path, legitimacy perceptions, and capacity to effectively implement reform (Coman, 2017).

The aim of this thesis is to identify and empirically test a new, previously overlooked factor that determines member states' compliance with the Semester's recommendations, particularly those targeting social policy. When it comes to social policy reform, welfare state regimes offer a systematic framework to explain both the willingness and capacity of member states to follow the Semester's social recommendations. As discussed above, welfare regimes shape domestic priorities, institutions and policies, which in turn influences how countries perceive EU recommendations and respond to them. In the following, the most common types of welfare arrangements are introduced, together with their main characteristics and approaches to social policy. Then, welfare state regimes are linked to the European Semester and the implementation of social policy recommendations using the above insights from the compliance literature.

Welfare State Regimes

The welfare state regime is a central concept in this study as it shapes the social policy priorities and outcomes of states. In this study, the welfare state is defined as "a set of institutions, socioeconomic policies, and cultural attitudes that determine the dimensions and strength of a society's safety net" (Gonzales, 2014, p. 7041). The welfare state is a form of governance and an institutional structure that safeguards citizens' well-being through varying means. Despite the differences across systems, all welfare arrangements generally strive towards three main objectives: ensure social stability to protect against risks, decrease poverty, and give autonomy to citizens (Goodin et al., 1999, as cited in Ferragina et al., 2014).

The academic literature offers a variety of typologies when it comes to categorising welfare states. The first and most influential comprehensive typology was developed by

Esping-Andersen in 1990. In his book *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Esping-Andersen (1990) identified three main types of welfare states: social-democratic, conservative and liberal. As their names suggest, these three categories are rooted in distinct political theories and ideologies, which is the core reason for their institutional differences. Esping-Andersen used the concepts of decommodification and stratification for his demarcation between the three clusters and argued that the main difference between these clusters lies in the extent to which citizens' welfare is dependent on their labour market participation (Arts & Gelissen, 2002).

Later, other authors extended Esping-Andersen's typology by introducing new categories and indicators (Bonoli, 1997; Castles & Mitchell, 1993; Ferrera, 1996; Korpi & Palme, 1998; Leibfried, 1992; Siaroff, 1994). For instance, Ferrera (1996) proposed a fourth cluster for the classification of welfare states, namely the Southern European model, arguing that Mediterranean countries do not fit the original typology of Esping-Andersen. Despite the multitude of existing typologies, however, comparative studies showed that these classifications largely overlap with each other and tend to categorise countries into roughly the same clusters (Arts & Gelissen, 2002; Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011).

Looking at the European Union, the 27 member states have vastly different welfare state regimes, despite their geographical proximity, shared history and economic interconnectedness. This is because of the diverse cultural, political and historical factors that shaped the individual development of member states in the past centuries (Orosz & Szijártó, 2021). In the following, the types of welfare state regimes are explained briefly with their most relevant characteristics and unique approaches to social policy. However, a remark should be made in advance. Even though EU countries can be clustered into the five main categories below, Esping-Andersen (1990) and many other authors argued that cases are hardly ever pure. Social-democratic regimes often contain certain liberal elements and vice versa, while the traditions of conservative welfare regimes are essentially rooted in social-democratic and liberal components, blurring the distinction between clusters (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Thus, while these categories can help to understand the differences across countries, they should be treated with caution and critical awareness. In addition, welfare states are dynamic concepts and thus are susceptible to change over time (Orosz & Szijártó, 2021). As new societal challenges continue to emerge, countries amend their strategies to certain policy problems, which can result in a shift towards a different ideal type. For instance, the Netherlands, Belgium and Austria are examples of such a shift as their traditional classifications have been repeatedly reevaluated, resulting in different typologies or being regarded as hybrids (Arts & Gelissen, 2002; Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011; Ferragina et al., 2014; Kammer et al., 2012).

Social-Democratic Regimes

The social-democratic welfare state regime is generally characterised by universal social protection, providing access to a variety of benefits and services for all citizens, regardless of their labour market participation or family structure (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). Social-democratic regimes guarantee high levels of social security, set high standards for labour markets, and offer universal pension with comprehensive coverage (Kammer et al., 2012; Korpi & Palme, 1998). Generally, social-democratic regimes are viewed as providing the strongest safety net to their citizens and Goodin et al. (1999, as cited in Van Kersbergen, 2002) argued that countries with such a welfare regime outperform other types both with regards to social objectives and economic efficiency. Within the European Union, Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, Finland and Denmark are often categorised as social-democratic welfare states, together with the Netherlands, Austria and Belgium in some cases (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011).

Liberal Regimes

In contrast with the social-democratic type, the liberal welfare state believes in weak state intervention and offers benefits exclusively to those in need. This approach relies on market mechanisms to satisfy citizens' needs and regards the state as a 'last resort', providing a safety net only in case the market fails to protect people's needs (Wickham, 2020). In such systems, there is often no universal healthcare, government benefits are limited and based on needs rather than rights, while pension and housing are largely provided by the private sector (Wickham, 2020). Consequently, government expenditure on social protection is low while inequalities in these societies remain high (Kammer et al., 2012). Classical examples of this welfare arrangement include Anglo-Saxon countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). Within the European Union, Ireland is currently the only country characterised by a primarily liberal welfare regime (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011).

Conservative Regimes

The conservative, also known as Christian-democratic, corporatist, Bismarckian or continental welfare regime, can be considered the middle ground between the social-democratic and liberal types (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). Conservative regimes protect individuals and families against short-term market uncertainties but do not aim to treat citizens equally or provide universal protection (Wickham, 2020). This regime's foundation lies in traditional family structures and employment-based contributions to the welfare system (Kammer et al., 2012). Conservative regimes, in contrast to social-democratic ones, reject the idea of decommodification and often link government benefits to employment history and past earnings. The literature tends to disagree on which European countries constitute examples of a conservative regime. France, Germany and Luxembourg are consistently categorised as members of this cluster, while Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands tend to be considered either conservative or social-democratic (Arts & Gelissen, 2002). Esping-Andersen (1990) and Castles and Mitchell (1993) also regarded Italy as a conservative type, while Ferrera (1996) and Leibfried (1992) clustered it together with other Mediterranean countries.

Southern European Regimes

Some authors regarded Esping-Andersen's original trichotomy of welfare states as overly simplified and argued for a fourth cluster for Southern European countries (Castles & Obinger, 2008; Ferrera, 1996; Leibfried, 1992). The Southern European, or Mediterranean, welfare state model is similar to the conservative type in its approach to social protection and the central role of family (Rhodes, 1996). It is often regarded as an underdeveloped or incomplete form of the conservative model as it has lower government revenue from income taxes but relatively high social insurance contributions (Kammer et al., 2012). Southern European regimes often face social challenges such as high unemployment and poverty rates, social inequalities and tax evasion (Rhodes, 1996). Within the European Union, Southern countries such as Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, Malta and Cyprus constitute Southern European welfare regimes, although the latter two are often overlooked in classifications (Ferragina et al., 2014).

Post-Communist Regimes

Esping-Andersen (1996) and Deacon (1993) proposed an additional welfare state type for Central and Eastern European countries that were under communist rule during the second half of the 20th century. Both authors believed that this is a temporary cluster as once post-communist countries catch up with the West, it will be possible to classify them as one of the Western types. However, Fenger (2007) demonstrated that these countries continue to show distinct features from Western welfare states and thus do not fit the above four categories. Half a century of communist oppression led to significant economic and institutional legacies in these countries, shaping them into a distinct welfare category. For instance, post-communist countries are characterised by lower political trust and worse social outcomes, such as lower life expectancy and gender equality (Fenger, 2007). These challenges are closely connected to lower taxes and government expenditures on social services (Fenger, 2007; Orenstein, 2008). Examples of countries with a post-communist welfare regime in the European Union include those who joined during the 2004 Eastern enlargement (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia) as well as Romania and Bulgaria who joined in 2007 and Croatia since 2013. While Fenger (2007) argued that there are significant differences among post-communist countries and encouraged further division into three subgroups, for the sake of simplicity, this study clusters these together under the umbrella term of post-communist welfare state regimes.

Welfare State Regimes as Determinants of Policy Implementation

The European Semester is a highly cooperative process characterised by the dynamic interaction of national and international actors (Bekker, 2020). Consequently, the Semester does not operate in a supranational vacuum; its effectiveness largely depends on the domestic circumstances of member states. As the implementation of country-specific recommendations remains the responsibility of national governments, it is essential to examine domestic contexts to understand the outcomes of the European Semester (D'Erman & Verdun, 2021). So far, this thesis summarised the most relevant insights from the compliance and welfare state literature. In the following, the threads of these two scholarships are woven together to propose expectations regarding member states' response patterns to the Semester's country-specific recommendations.

The present paper introduces the concept of welfare state regimes as a key domestic factor that helps to explain countries' response to the Semester's social policy recommendations. As outlined above, welfare state regimes are a set of policies, organisational principles and ideologies that shape states' approach to providing social protection. Welfare arrangements impact national attitudes and capacities, which were found to be the main determinants of implementing EU policy recommendations, also in the context of the European Semester (Coman, 2017). On the one hand, the compliance literature argued that capacity is a key factor in the domestic implementation of EU laws, as states require institutional capacity and financial resources for policy reform. On the other hand, capacity is not a sufficient condition as it must be coupled with willingness, a certain level of commitment and motivation, to achieve successful policy implementation (Börzel et al., 2010). Following this logic, the next sections explore the divergent levels of both willingness and capacity of different welfare state regimes and how this can account for the cross-cluster differences in the implementation rates of social CSRs. The next paragraphs apply the concepts of willingness and capacity to each welfare state regime individually to explain how these impact member states' response to social recommendations, and conclude with proposing hypotheses.

Social-Democratic Regimes: Leaders in Implementation

Out of the five ideal types, social-democratic regimes have the strongest focus on the universal welfare of their citizens. This regime offers a wide variety of social services to all its citizens regardless of their labour market participation and thus believes in universal coverage and access to benefits based on rights rather than needs (Wickham, 2020). It is believed that social-democratic regimes are the most willing to implement the Semester's social policy recommendations because of their progressive social goals and strong emphasis on social policy. When it comes to the policy direction of the European Semester, Haas et al. (2020) found that the Semester's recommendations have increasingly promoted state intervention over time, especially in policy areas such as social protection and the labour market. This suggests that the Semester's approach is already well-aligned with the policy directions of social-democratic regimes, and reinforces existing policy objectives without requiring a significant domestic shift (De La Porte & Heins, 2014). This is supported by López-Santana (2006) who argued that social-democratic regimes have the highest level of fit with the EU's labour market policies, which suggests that it is easier for these countries to align their domestic policies with the EU's recommendations. This, in turn, contributes to their willingness to follow the Semester's CSRs as well as their legitimacy perceptions of those.

In addition, social-democratic welfare regimes are characterised by the highest tax rates as a proportion of citizens' disposable income (Kammer et al., 2012), while also having the largest social expenditures proportionate to their national GDP (Orosz & Szijártó, 2021). This redistributive structure gives them a strong financial capacity to advance and implement social policy. Indeed, Orosz and Szijártó (2021) found that social-democratic regimes have the highest spending on areas such as childcare, family policies, and healthcare, proving their commitment and capacity to strengthen citizens' welfare. Thus, these regimes are believed to have both high willingness and capacity, which puts them in an advantageous position to effectively and successfully implement the policy recommendations of the Semester. This argument is supported by the findings of Al-Kadi and Clauwaert (2019) who showed that Sweden and Denmark tend to implement social CSRs much more diligently than recommendations targeting other policy areas. Furthermore, the authors found that Finland has the highest average implementation rate of social CSRs out of all EU countries. The findings of Mariotto (2022) also demonstrated that the three Scandinavian countries have the highest rates of fully implemented CSRs according to the Commission's evaluation. Based on these findings and the insights of the compliance literature, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 1: *Compared to other welfare regime types, member states with a social-democratic welfare state show the highest implementation rate of social policy recommendations received during the European Semester.*

Post-Communist and Southern European Types: Facing Implementation Challenges

In contrast with social-democratic regimes, countries with a post-communist and Southern European welfare arrangement are believed to score low on both willingness and capacity. First of all, post-communist countries are believed to have low willingness as they are generally characterised by lower government expenditure on healthcare, education and social protection (Fenger, 2007). At the same time, Copeland and Daly (2018) found that Eastern European and Baltic countries receive on average more market-correcting social policy recommendations during the Semester, which require greater state intervention and resource investment. Thus, complying with these social recommendations pushes post-communist regimes to increase their spending over time, which not only poses challenges to their capacity but may also go against their political will (Orenstein, 2008). This ties into the legitimacy argument of the compliance literature. When the EU's recommendations clash with the domestic approaches of post-communist countries, national leaders start to question the legitimacy of such recommendations and become more hesitant about implementing them. This is well-illustrated by the reaction of Hungary to the Semester's social recommendations in 2019 that push for more state intervention and wider social protection:

> Since 2011, Hungary has received recommendations every year on the labour market, the adequacy of social benefits and unemployment benefits, and improving the scope of beneficiaries. The widespread provision of social benefits can easily lead to a dependency on benefits and an inactivity trap. That is why the Hungarian government

> continues to insist on the principle of 'work instead of benefits', the success of which is proven by the data of recent years. (The Government of Hungary, 2019, p. 36)

When it comes to the willingness of Southern European types, López-Santana (2006) argued that these regimes have a high level of misfit with the EU's labour market policies, which in turn hinders their willingness to adapt. This misfit stems from Southern European regimes' emphasis on family-based welfare provisions and the prevalence of dual labour markets, which can be difficult to reconcile with the EU's policies promoting more inclusion and protection (Rhodes, 1996).

Besides willingness, post-communist and Southern European regimes also have a lower capacity to implement policy reform compared to other welfare regimes. Post-communist regimes are generally characterised by lower government expenditure on healthcare, education and social protection, as a result of lower individual taxes and government revenue from social contributions (Fenger, 2007). Indeed, Orosz and Szijártó (2021) found that post-communist countries dedicate a significantly lower percentage of their GDP to social expenditures than any other welfare regime type. This signals that they potentially lack the financial reserves necessary for social policy reform. In addition, as these countries transitioned from communist regimes to democracies within the past three decades, their administrative systems are often characterised by structural deficiencies that hinder policy implementation (Fritz, 2003). Southern European regimes were also found to allocate a significantly lower percentage of their GDP to social expenditures compared to conservative and social-democratic countries (Orosz & Szijártó, 2021). In addition, these countries have struggled with high unemployment rates in recent decades which put a significant strain on public finances (Dimian et al., 2018). These financial constraints, coupled with inefficient and fragmented administrations (Rhodes, 1996), limit the capacity of Mediterranean countries to implement the Semester's social recommendations. As these recommendations often push for strengthening social safety nets while reducing government spending (Haas et al., 2020), they are not only misaligned with the capacity of Southern European states but may also challenge their willingness.

The low willingness and capacity of post-communist and Southern European regimes are believed to negatively impact their progress on the implementation of the Semester's social recommendations. This logic is supported by the findings of Bíró-Nagy and Laki (2022) who demonstrated that Visegrád group countries (which all constitute post-communist regimes) lag behind in the implementation of CSRs. In addition, both Al-Kadi and Clauwaert (2019) and Efstathiou and Wolff (2018) found that Eastern European countries (especially

Croatia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland) tend to implement CSRs to the lowest extent, while Mediterranean countries have moderate progress. Toporowski (2014) argued that the economic challenges and high public debt Southern European and Visegrád group countries face can account for their limited progress in implementing the Semester's CSRs. Consequently, the following hypothesis with two sub-parts is proposed:

Hypothesis 2a and 2b: *Compared to other welfare regime types, member states with a post-communist (2a) and Southern European (2b) welfare state regime show the lowest implementation rate of social policy recommendations received during the European Semester.*

Conservative and Liberal Regimes: Balancing Traditions and Reforms

While the literature points towards clear expectations regarding the response patterns of social-democratic, post-communist and Southern European regimes, predicting those of conservative and liberal types proves to be more challenging. This is because these two welfare state regimes have mixed levels of willingness and capacity, creating a more complex and nuanced relationship with the implementation of the Semester's recommendations.

First of all, while conservative regimes protect individuals against the uncertainties of the market, they continue to rely on welfare provisions connected to employment and family structures. This suggests that their willingness to invest in social protection is limited as they do not believe that citizens' welfare is solely the responsibility of the state. Conservative regimes also tend to value institutional traditions and favour the status quo, which increases their resistance to change and slows down policy reforms (Aust & Bönker, 2004). In addition, López-Santana (2006) argued that these regimes have a moderate level of misfit with the EU's labour market approaches. All these factors together support the argument that conservative regimes have a moderate willingness to implement the Semester's social policy recommendations. Liberal regimes, which are exclusively represented by Ireland within the EU, are also believed to have a moderate willingness to implement CSRs. On the one hand, these regimes believe in limited state intervention and market solutions, which suggests that they may be reluctant to implement recommendations promoting universal protection and significant investment. On the other hand, Haas et al. (2020) found that while the EU pushes liberal regimes like Ireland towards more state intervention and social protection in its CSRs, it also encourages lowering government expenditures. Since this is partially in line with the policy preferences of liberal regimes, a moderate willingness is expected.

Regarding capacity, both regimes are in the middle range when it comes to social expenditures as a proportion of their GDP as they tend to spend less than social-democratic regimes, but more than their post-communist and Southern European counterparts (Orosz & Szijártó, 2021). In addition, countries with conservative and liberal regimes tend to have relatively well-established administrative systems and bureaucratic capacity. This combination of financial and administrative resources puts their capacity to implement social policy reform at a moderate level.

As a function of their moderate willingness and capacity, conservative and liberal regimes are expected to be selective with the implementation of the Semester's social policy recommendations. They likely make bigger progress on the recommendations that are aligned with their domestic priorities, while lagging behind on those that oppose their traditions. This is mostly supported by the findings of Al-Kadi and Clauwaert (2019) and Efstathiou and Wolff (2018) as countries such as Ireland, Austria, the Netherlands, France and Belgium were found to have moderate progress on the implementation of CSRs. However, two conservative regimes, Luxembourg and Germany, constitute exceptions as their implementation progress tends to be some of the lowest within the EU (Al-Kadi & Clauwaert, 2019; Efstathiou & Wolff, 2018). Nonetheless, based on the insights and findings of the academic literature, the third hypothesis with two sub-parts is formulated as follows:

Hypothesis 3a and 3b: *Compared to other welfare regimes, member states with a conservative (3a) and liberal (3b) welfare state regime show a moderate implementation rate of social policy recommendations received during the European Semester, lower than social-democratic regimes but higher than post-communist and Southern European types.*

Chapter 3: Methodology

Case Selection and Data Collection

To answer the research question, this study gathered and analysed quantitative data on the implementation of the European Semester's social recommendations in each European Union member state. The scope of the study was limited to the Semester cycles of 2017, 2018 and 2019. These years were chosen for multiple reasons. First, the Covid-19 pandemic, which hit the European Union in early 2020, largely impacted member states' policy priorities for the years that followed. The vast majority of EU countries declared a state of emergency and shifted their focus to crisis management and addressing the immediate needs of their economies and citizens. While social policy during the pandemic constitutes an interesting research topic, the present thesis aimed to identify general trends in terms of social policy reform, and therefore the implementation rates of CSRs after 2020 were deemed to be biased. Second, as a result of the pandemic, member states received significantly lower numbers of social CSRs in the 2020 cycle (Rainone, 2020), and received none in 2021, marking an extraordinary year in the history of the Semester during which only fiscal recommendations were issued related to the Recovery and Resilience Facility (Darvas, 2024). While social CSRs were issued again in 2022, their number has largely decreased compared to pre-Covid times (Rainone, 2022). Therefore, the last three Semester cycles before 2020 were chosen as a sample for the present study in order to eliminate the effect of the pandemic and attain a sufficient sample size.

The European Commission monitors member states' progress in implementing CSRs on an annual basis and reports these implementation rates using a scale ranging from 'no progress' to 'full implementation'. The data on implementation rates is publicly available in the European Semester's Country Reports which are published online each year for each country, as well as the Commission's country-specific recommendations database available through the following link. The present study used this dataset as the input for the analysis.

Since the study focused specifically on the social policy recommendations of the European Semester, CSRs covering other policy areas were excluded from the final dataset. Recommendations were coded as social policy-related based on the guidelines of D'Erman et al. (2019), Crespy and Vanheuverszwijn (2017), and Copeland and Daly (2018). First, the dataset was filtered based on the labels used by the Commission, and the following policy areas were retained: health and long-term care; childcare; poverty reduction and social inclusion; unemployment benefits; education; skills and life-long learning; active labour market policies; employment protection; incentives to work; job creation; labour market participation; pension; wages and wage-setting. Then, recommendations were checked manually to ensure that they covered social policy-related issues based on the frameworks of the literature. CSRs with a primary focus on economic or fiscal policy and without a clear link to social policy were excluded from the final dataset. This resulted in retaining 310 sub-CSRs out of the 809 received in total by the 27 EU member states during the 2017-2019 cycles. Although the Commission also evaluates the implementation of earlier cycles' recommendations in its annual review, each CSR was included in the dataset only once, paired with the progress score received in the subsequent year after its issuance. For example, recommendations received during the 2017 cycle were included together with the Commission's implementation score given in 2018 while evaluations of these 2017 CSRs after 2018 were not taken into account.

Lastly, all countries that were members of the European Union as of December 2024 were included in the final dataset. The United Kingdom was excluded considering its departure from the EU in January 2020. Each country received on average two to five social policy recommendations as part of the Semester process each year. While in some cases certain countries did not receive any social CSRs in one of the three years, these missing values were not considered problematic for the present analysis as the focus was not on within- or between-country effects, but rather on general between-group trends for clusters of countries based on their welfare state regimes.

Operationalisation

This study included a categorical independent variable, the welfare state regime, and an ordinal dependent variable, the implementation score of the Semester's social policy recommendations at the domestic level. In addition, the study also used various control variables to enhance the validity of the findings. The following sections discuss the operationalisation of all variables included in the analysis.

Welfare State Regimes

The welfare state regime was operationalised as categories of social-democratic, liberal, conservative, post-communist and Southern European, combining the traditional typology of Esping-Andersen (1990) with the addition of the latter two categories following Ferrera (1996) and Fenger (2007). Combining different authors' typologies helped to allocate countries into more distinct categories, thereby enhancing the validity of the construct. Each of the 27 EU member states was placed in one of these five groups following the most common categorisation in the academic literature and the examples of prior empirical studies (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011; Kammer et al., 2012; Orosz & Szijártó, 2021; Ronchi, 2018). These welfare regime categories are mutually exclusive, meaning that each country belongs to exactly one cluster. In the case of countries that are often regarded as hybrids, the most commonly used typology was applied based on the academic literature. Table 1 provides an overview of the allocation of countries within the five welfare regime clusters.

Table 1

Allocation of EU Member States in Welfare State Categories

Welfare state regime	Countries
Social-democratic	Sweden, Finland, Denmark
Liberal	Ireland
Conservative	Germany, France, Austria, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg
Post-communist	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania
Southern European	Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Malta, Cyprus

Implementation Rate of Recommendations

When it comes to implementation rates, the European Commission's evaluation was used as a measure of countries' progress on social policy recommendations. While some authors claimed that the Commission's evaluation may be politicised and biased, not reflecting member states' actual progress (Al-Kadi & Clauwaert, 2019), Efstathiou and Wolff (2018) argued that "there is good reason to believe these assessments are accurate" (p. 3). Indeed, the Commission's evaluation was endorsed by the members of the Economic Policy Committee as a reliable measure (European Court of Auditors, 2018). Thus, it is believed to be a useful measure for this study's purpose. Implementation rates are labelled by the Commission as 'no progress', 'limited progress', 'some progress', 'substantial progress' and 'full implementation'. On this scale, no progress indicates that a country made no credible commitments to implement the CSR, while full implementation means that the member state fulfilled all required actions to fully address the recommendation (Efstathiou & Wolff, 2019). The score 'limited progress' is awarded by the Commission when a country announces some measures but these do not fully address the recommendation, some progress occurs when countries adopt measures that partially address the CSR, while substantial progress signals notable improvements and almost fully implemented measures that effectively address the recommendation (Efstathiou & Wolff, 2019). The European Commission evaluates each country's progress on a case-by-case basis for each CSR separately and specifies the progress levels and their meaning in the annually issued Country Reports.

As country-specific recommendations are often formulated as lengthy and complex sentences, covering multiple policy areas at once, this study used sub-CSRs as the unit of observation instead. This is in line with the approach and recommendation of previous studies (Al-Kadi & Clauwaert, 2019; Crespy & Vanheuverzwijn, 2017; Efstathiou & Wolff, 2019; D'Erman et al., 2019; Ma, 2021). Using the subparts of country-specific recommendations helps to enhance the validity and reliability of the analysis and provides a more precise and nuanced snapshot of countries' progress (Al-Kadi & Clauwaert, 2019; Ma, 2021). The implementation rates were coded into a numerical ordinal variable where 0 indicates 'no progress' and 4 stands for 'full implementation', following the examples of earlier studies (Ma, 2021; Mariotto, 2022).

Control Variables

Besides welfare state regimes as an independent variable, this study included a selection of control variables informed by prior research to account for the effect of other domestic factors on the implementation of EU recommendations. First of all, GDP per capita was used as a control variable in the analysis since it impacts member states' capacity and available resources for policy reform (Börzel et al., 2010; Ma, 2021). Eurostat measures were used to gather information on the GDP per capita for each country and each year included in the dataset (Eurostat, 2024). This was measured as a continuous variable. Second, unemployment rate was also added to the model as a control variable considering its economic and political impact (Efstathiou & Wolff, 2019; Mariotto, 2022). Information on unemployment rates within EU countries in the years 2017 to 2019 was also gathered from Eurostat reports (Eurostat, 2017, 2018, 2020). This control variable was also measured as continuous. The third control variable was a categorical one measuring whether countries held national parliamentary elections in the given year. As changes in government were shown to influence member states' willingness to comply with EU policies (Treib, 2014), this variable was added to the model to control for its effect. Data on parliamentary elections was gathered through internet searches and the variable was categorical with two values: 0 for no parliamentary election in the given year, and 1 for elections being held. Fourth, the analysis controlled for the legal basis of recommendations using a categorical variable named MIP. This indicated whether the recommendation is grounded in the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure (MIP), a framework that safeguards member states' economic stability through strict surveillance. Given its stronger legal foundation and coercive potential, the MIP can shape member states' decisions regarding which recommendations to prioritise, thus this variable was included in the analysis (Efstathiou & Wolff, 2019; Ma, 2021). As a binary variable, the value 0 indicated that the recommendation was not rooted in the MIP, while 1 indicated that it was. Finally, the year in which recommendations were issued was also included as a control variable to account for potential year-specific effects and changes in the European Semester that may impact countries' implementation rates (Ma, 2021). Year was also used as a categorical variable with 2017 as the reference category.

Analysis

Considering the ordered nature of the dependent variable, and the repeated measures for each country over the three years, a multilevel ordinal logistic regression was performed using the generalised linear mixed model option in SPSS Statistics 30. This test was deemed appropriate for the structure of the data considering that the dependent variable is ordered and does not follow a normal distribution. In addition, generalised linear mixed models are helpful when analysing panel data as they can deal with correlations amongst observations and do not assume the independence of residuals (Sommet & Morselli, 2017). Treating the outcome variable as ordinal and using ordinal logistic regression analysis is also in line with the approach of previous empirical studies that analysed the implementation rates of the European Semester's recommendations (Efstathiou & Wolff, 2019; Ma, 2021; Mariotto, 2022).

Before conducting the analysis, several assumptions were tested to ensure that the most appropriate model was used. First, the proportional odds assumption was checked using the parallel lines function in SPSS to confirm that the odds ratios are consistent across all levels of the outcome variable. This assumption was met since the test was insignificant and failed to reject the null hypothesis that slope coefficients are the same across the categories of the outcome, χ^2 (20) = 29.91, p = .07. Second, multilevel models are based on the assumption that there is interdependence within clusters, meaning that the residuals are not independent of each other. This assumption was tested by running an intercept-only model and checking the significance of the random intercept's variance based on countries. This test yielded a significant result, z = 2.25, p = .01, proving the presence of clustering in the data (Crowson, 2020). For additional confirmation, the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) was calculated which quantifies the amount of variation between clusters as compared to the total variation in the dataset (Sommet & Morselli, 2017). This coefficient can range from 0 to 1, where 0 indicates the perfect independence of residuals and 1 the perfect interdependence. With a between-cluster variance of 0.73, this ICC value was 0.18, which means that 18% of the total variation in the outcome variable is due to cross-country variations (Sommet & Morselli, 2017). This justifies using a multilevel model and including countries as random effects (Heck et al., 2012). Consequently, in the final regression model, the independent variable welfare state regime together with the control variables GDP per capita, unemployment rate, national elections, MIP, and year were included as fixed effects, while country was used as a random effect. This is also in line with the approach of prior studies using multilevel ordinal logistic regression (Ma, 2021; Mariotto, 2022). The syntax of the analyses can be found in the Appendix.

Strengths and Limitations

While this study aimed to provide a valid and reliable measurement of the implementation rates of social policy recommendations across different welfare state regimes, limitations persist. First of all, the validity of the findings is limited by the manual selection of CSRs to be included in the analysis. As Al-Kadi and Clauwaert (2019) emphasised, the selection of social recommendations and the exclusion of those related to other policy areas are bounded by subjectivity. Although CSRs were selected based on the frameworks of prior studies, their classification was based on subjective interpretation. Also considering the large number of sub-CSRs that were coded, it is possible that some were accidentally overlooked and not all social policy-related sub-CSRs were included in the final dataset. This limits the validity of the findings to some extent.

Second, Sommet and Morselli (2017) highlighted that SPSS faces certain software limitations when conducting multilevel ordinal logistic regression. Despite these shortcomings, SPSS was chosen for this study due to limited familiarity with alternative statistical software and time constraints. This poses a limitation to the validity of the results as other software, such as R or Stata, might have been more suitable for analysing such multilevel data, potentially yielding more accurate results.

Third, some clusters of welfare state regimes included fewer countries than others, as illustrated in Table 1. This limits the robustness of the findings and decreases the statistical power of the analysis. Uneven sample sizes within clusters are not ideal as the variation within larger clusters may be higher while it remains low within clusters with one or a few countries. It is possible that this imbalance skews the results and thereby limits the validity of the findings and the conclusions drawn from them.

On a positive note, the present study has high replicability since the research process is described in detail and the data used for the analysis is publicly available. This transparency allows for replicating the study and confirming the findings, which in turn contributes to its reliability. In case the analysis is repeated under the same scope conditions (i.e. using the same time frame and selection of CSRs), the results are believed to be consistent.

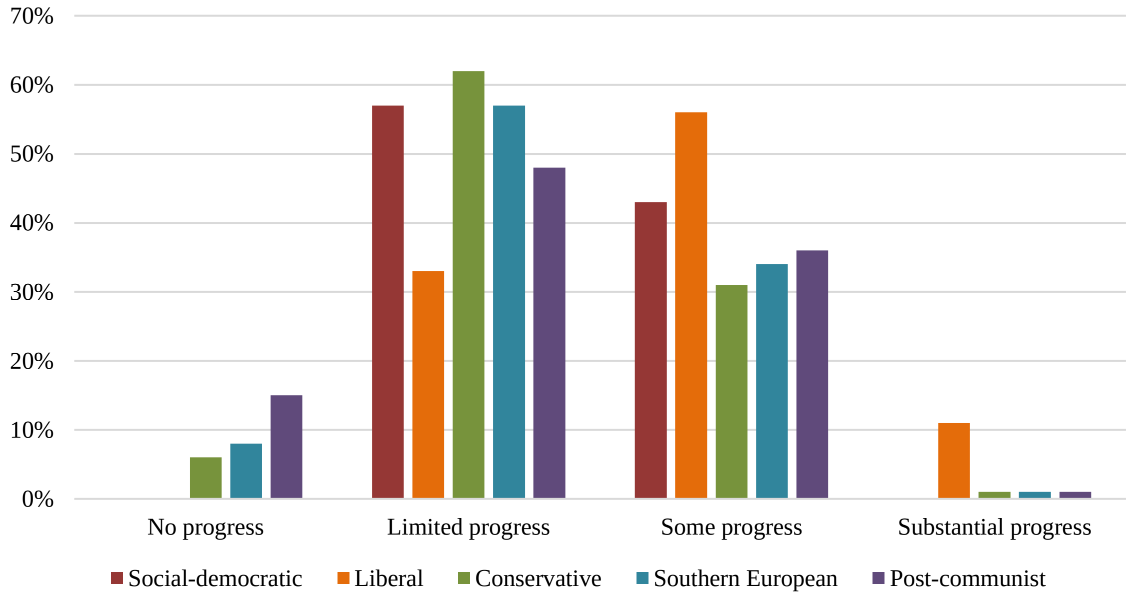
Chapter 4: Results

Descriptive Statistics

This study aimed to uncover the variations in the response patterns of different welfare state regimes to the European Semester's social policy recommendations. First, a distribution of implementation scores for each welfare state regime was created which is illustrated in Figure 1. This diagram shows the percentage of sub-CSRs at each level of implementation and for each cluster of welfare regimes. For the data used in this study, percentages are believed to be a more meaningful metric compared to frequencies, as there are high fluctuations in the number of sub-CSRs received by countries, as well as the number of countries per welfare regime cluster. Nonetheless, these proportions are still somewhat skewed because of these unequal distributions, thus they need to be interpreted with caution.

Figure 1

The Percentage of Recommendations at Each Level of Implementation Across Different Welfare State Regimes



Overall, Figure 1 shows that the vast majority of CSRs between 2017 and 2019 were implemented with limited or some progress. Liberal regimes (in this dataset solely represented by Ireland) had the highest proportion of CSRs that were implemented with substantial progress, while also scoring highest on the 'some progress' level. Conservative regimes demonstrated the highest proportion of CSRs with limited progress while scoring the lowest on 'some progress'. Social-democratic regimes had the second highest proportion of their CSRs implemented at the middle two levels and had no recommendations with no progress nor substantial. In contrast, post-communist regimes exhibited the highest proportion of CSRs with no progress while having moderate levels at the 'limited' and 'some progress' levels. Finally, Southern European types had the second highest proportion of CSRs with no progress and limited progress, while scoring lower on the other two higher categories. During the 2017-2019 cycles, there were no sub-CSRs out of the 310 included in the analysis that were rated with the score 'full implementation' by the European Commission, thus this category was excluded from the histogram.

Hypothesis Testing

A set of ordinal logistic regression analyses were conducted using generalised linear mixed models in SPSS to test the three proposed hypotheses. Overall, the model showed a good fit with the data and was statistically significant ($F_{10,297} = 15.71$, $p < .001$). This suggests that all predictors together explain a significant amount of variance in the outcome variable implementation rate. Out of the six fixed effects included in the analyses, two predictor variables yielded significant results, namely the welfare state regime ($F_{4,297} = 26.66$, $p < .001$) and national elections ($F_{1,297} = 5.27$, $p = .02$). The following sections evaluate the results of the regression analyses in light of each hypothesis separately.

Hypothesis 1

The first regression analysis tested Hypothesis 1 which argued that social-democratic welfare state regimes show the highest implementation rate of the European Semester's social recommendations out of all welfare regimes. Thus, this analysis used social-democratic regimes as the reference category for the dummy variables on welfare state regimes. The results are illustrated in Table 2. Overall, the analysis showed partial support for Hypothesis 1. It was found that conservative, Southern European and post-communist regimes all implemented the social policy recommendations of the European Semester to a significantly lower extent than social-democratic regimes. In particular, the odds of having a higher implementation rate on CSRs were 77% lower for countries with a conservative regime as compared to social-democratic types (*OR* = 0.23, 95% CI [0.06, 0.90]). The same was true for Southern European (*OR* = 0.16, 95% CI [0.04, 0.73]) and post-communist countries (*OR* = 0.14, 95% CI [0.03, 0.62]) with 84% and 86% lower odds of achieving a higher level of implementation respectively. In contrast, the odds of CSR implementation at a higher level for liberal regimes did not differ significantly from that of social-democratic ones (*OR* = 1.29, 95% CI [0.35, 4.76]). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported, as social-democratic welfare state regimes showed significantly higher implementation rates of social CSRs compared to conservative, Southern European and post-communist regimes but not compared to liberal ones.

Table 2

Results of the Regression Analysis With Social-Democratic Regimes as Reference Category

	Coefficient	Standard error	Odds ratio
Welfare state regime			
Liberal	0.25	0.66	1.29
Conservative	-1.46*	0.69	0.23
Southern European	-1.83*	0.77	0.16
Post-communist	-1.95*	0.75	0.14
Unemployment rate	0.01	0.07	1.01
GDP per capita	0.00	0.00	1
MIP	0.35	0.34	1.41
National elections	-0.54*	0.24	0.58
Year			
2018	-0.21	0.29	0.81
2019	-0.09	0.26	0.92

Note. N = 310

*p < .05

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis proposed that post-communist and Southern European welfare state regimes have the lowest implementation rates on the Semester's social recommendations. The same regression analysis was rerun twice as for Hypothesis 1, but this time with post-communist and Southern European regimes as reference categories. The results are displayed in Tables 3 and 4 for each welfare state regime.

Overall, Hypothesis 2a and 2b were also partially supported. First of all, the results showed no significant differences between the odds of implementation of Southern European and post-communist regimes, which was in line with Hypothesis 2. While Southern European regimes had higher odds of implementing the social CSRs with a higher progress level, this coefficient was not statistically significant at a significance level of .05 (*OR* = 1.13, 95% CI [0.32, 3.98]). In addition, in both analyses it was found that social-democratic and liberal regimes were more likely to implement recommendations at a higher level than the two reference categories, which also supported the hypotheses. Social democratic regimes were 7 times more likely to have a higher implementation score on a CSR than post-communist regimes (*OR* = 7.04, 95% CI [1.62, 30.56]), and around 6 times more likely as compared to Southern European types (*OR* = 6.21, 95% CI [1.37, 28.01]). Liberal regimes were 9 times more likely than their post-communist counterparts (*OR* = 9.07, 95% CI [3.48, 23.60]), and 8 times as compared to Southern European types (*OR* = 7.99, 95% CI [2.79, 22.87]).

However, the coefficients also indicated that conservative regimes were not significantly more likely to implement the social CSRs of the European Semester at a higher extent than post-communist and Southern European regimes. While the odds ratios for conservative regimes were higher than post-communist (*OR* = 1.63, 95% CI [0.59, 4.50]) and Southern European welfare regimes' (*OR* = 1.44, 95% CI [0.47, 4.45]), these were not statistically significant at a significance level of .05. This result is not consistent with Hypothesis 2a and 2b as those stated that conservative regimes are significantly more likely to implement social CSRs to a higher extent compared to the other two regimes. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was partially supported.

Table 3

Results of the Regression Analysis With Post-Communist Regimes as Reference Category

	Coefficient	Standard error	Odds ratio
Welfare state regime			
Southern European	0.13	0.64	1.13
Liberal	2.21*	0.49	9.07
Conservative	0.49	0.52	1.63
Social-democratic	1.95*	0.75	7.04
Unemployment rate	0.01	0.07	1.01
GDP per capita	0.00	0.00	1
MIP	0.35	0.34	1.41
National elections	-0.54*	0.24	0.58
Year			
2018	-0.21	0.29	0.81
2019	-0.09	0.26	0.92

Note. N = 310

*p < .05

Table 4

Results of the Regression Analysis With Southern European Regimes as Reference Category

	Coefficient	Standard error	Odds ratio
Welfare state regime			
Liberal	2.08*	0.53	7.99
Social-democratic	1.83*	0.77	6.21
Conservative	0.37	0.57	1.44
Post-communist	-0.13	0.64	0.88
Unemployment rate	0.01	0.07	1.01
GDP per capita	0.00	0.00	1
MIP	0.35	0.34	1.41
National elections	-0.54*	0.24	0.58
Year			
2018	-0.21	0.29	0.81
2019	-0.09	0.26	0.92

Note. N = 310

*p < .05

Hypothesis 3

Finally, Hypothesis 3a and 3b were tested with the results of the above three regression analyses. Hypothesis 3 argued that liberal and conservative regimes have moderate implementation rates of the Semester's social recommendations, higher than post-communist and Southern European regimes but lower compared to social-democratic ones. Conservative regimes' implementation rate was not found to be significantly different from post-communist and Southern European types, while the same was true for liberal regimes compared to social-democratic ones. Thus, both Hypothesis 3a and 3b were rejected, as neither regime showed the expected moderate implementation rates, but instead clustered with either the other higher- or lower-performing regime types.

Control Variables

Regarding the control variables included in the model, only one out of five yielded a significant result. This variable was the one measuring whether national elections were held in a given country and year, which had a negative significant relationship with the implementation rates of social CSRs. In particular, countries where national parliamentary elections were held had 42% lower odds of implementing recommendations at a higher level compared to countries that did not hold national elections (*OR* = 0.58, 95% CI [0.36, 0.93]). This is an interesting new insight as no earlier studies on the European Semester demonstrated this effect before. However, GDP per capita, unemployment rate, MIP and the year in which the recommendation was issued were all found to have no significant impact on member states' implementation rates, which in some cases contradicts the findings of prior empirical studies (Efstathiou & Wolff, 2019; Ma, 2021; Mariotto, 2022).

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

This study introduced a new explanatory variable to examine the effectiveness of the European Semester in shaping social policy within the European Union. By doing so, the thesis sought to answer the following research question: *How can the variation in welfare state regimes help to explain the differences in the response patterns of European Union member states to the social policy recommendations of the European Semester?*

The results of the analysis showed significant differences across welfare state regimes regarding the implementation of the Semester's social CSRs, although these were not always fully in line with the predictions of the hypotheses. Overall, the results provided partial support for Hypothesis 1, 2a and 2b, while rejecting both 3a and 3b. The next sections discuss the findings of the analysis in light of the expectations and the insights from the academic literature.

Discussion of the Results

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis argued that social-democratic regimes have the highest implementation rate of the European Semester's social recommendations. The academic literature pointed towards this expectation as social-democratic regimes have a strong emphasis on social policy and universal protection, a high fit with EU policies, and the highest social contributions and spending on social policy areas out of all welfare regime types (Kammer et al., 2012; López-Santana, 2006; Orosz & Szijártó, 2021). The results of the analysis showed partial support for this hypothesis. On the one hand, the findings confirmed that social-democratic countries outperform conservative, post-communist and Southern European regimes, which is consistent with the hypothesis. This supports the argument that social-democratic regimes have a strong fit with the Semester's recommendations, as this alignment coupled with their financial and administrative capacities enables them to implement CSRs to a higher extent. The results are also in line with the findings of Al-Kadi and Clauwaert (2019) and Mariotto (2022) who both showed that Scandinavian countries are at the forefront of implementation of the Semester's recommendations.

On the other hand, however, the results showed no significant difference between social-democratic and liberal regimes' progress, which contradicts the expectation, as for Hypothesis 1 to be fully supported, liberal regimes would also have had to score significantly lower on implementation rates. There are various possible explanations for this contradictory finding. First of all, this finding can be caused by the sample used in this study. It is important to note that in the present study, and in the European Union as a whole as of 2024, liberal welfare state regimes are represented solely by Ireland according to the most common categorisations in the academic literature (Arts & Gelissen, 2002; Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). Because of this small sample size for liberal regimes, the present study's capacity to make conclusions about this regime type is limited. Another possible explanation is that Ireland may not be a perfect representative of liberal welfare state regimes. Indeed, some authors in the academic literature regarded Ireland as a hybrid regime rather than a pure archetype of liberal welfare states as it borrows certain institutional practices from other regime types (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). This can explain why the results based on Ireland's implementation rates did not support the hypothesis about liberal regimes. Finally, a third potential explanation can be the unique economic and political context of Ireland. During the 2010s, Ireland experienced rapid economic growth as a result of increased foreign direct investments and a business-friendly corporate tax system that attracted multinational companies. This economic growth boosted government revenues and enhanced the state's capacity for policy reform, which can explain Ireland's high level of progress in implementing the Semester's recommendations. As Ireland has the second-highest GDP per capita within the European Union (Eurostat, 2024), the country has a substantial financial capacity to implement social policy reform, even if its willingness to do so is less strong. All in all, this intriguing finding calls for further investigation into liberal welfare regimes and their response to supranational social policy recommendations, as well as Ireland individually as a subject for a single-case study.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis posited that Southern European and post-communist regimes exhibit the lowest implementation rate of the Semester's social CSRs. This hypothesis was proposed based on the high level of misfit between these regimes' domestic institutional traditions and the EU's recommendations, as well as their constrained capacities to implement reform (Fenger, 2007; López-Santana, 2006; Orenstein, 2008; Orosz & Szijártó, 2021; Rhodes, 1996). The results again showed partial support for this hypothesis. As expected, liberal and social-democratic welfare regimes had significantly higher implementation rates than the two reference categories in this case, which supports the argument about the important role willingness and capacity play in shaping policy implementation. It also confirms the challenges Southern European and post-communist countries face in implementing the

Semester's recommendations, which stems from their limited willingness as well as financial and institutional constraints (Toporowski, 2014).

However, conservative regimes did not have significantly higher implementation rates as compared to Southern European and post-communist types. This result challenges the assumption that conservative regimes are a more developed and efficient version of these two regimes (Kammer et al., 2012), but resonates with the findings of Al-Kadi and Clauwaert (2019) to some extent who showed that Central and Eastern European countries lag behind the most on the implementation of social CSRs as these countries fall in the conservative and post-communist categories. The finding that conservative regimes are not significantly better performers than Southern European and post-communist countries in the implementation of EU recommendations can also have multiple plausible explanations. First of all, conservative regimes tend to favour traditions and maintain the status quo, which can reduce their willingness to shift policy paths (Aust & Bönker, 2004). Although these regimes have a moderate fit with the EU's recommendations (López-Santana, 2006), this alignment may not be a sufficient incentive to invest their resources in improving social policy. Second, a core feature of conservative regimes is their reliance on traditional family structures and employment-based social contributions (Kammer et al., 2012) which may be harder to reconcile with the EU's progressive recommendations. Finally, similarly to liberal regimes, the findings about conservative regimes can also be explained by the characteristics of the sample. The cluster of conservative regimes is diverse, comprising member states that vary greatly in terms of size, GDP, population and political systems. For instance, Luxembourg belongs to the category of conservative regimes, but its GDP per capita is twice as high as that of the other conservative countries (Germany, Austria, Belgium, France and the Netherlands) (Eurostat, 2024) while having a significantly smaller population, especially compared to the EU's biggest nations Germany and France. Other additional economic and political dissimilarities can also contribute to this imbalance within the cluster of conservative regimes and may help to explain why their combined implementation rate did not support the proposed hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3

The last hypothesis, with two sub-parts 3a and 3b, argued that liberal and conservative regimes constitute a middle ground between social-democratic regimes on the one hand and Southern European and post-communist on the other, characterised by moderate progress. This hypothesis was not supported by the results of the analysis. As mentioned above, liberal regimes were at the forefront of implementation together with social-democratic types, showing no significant difference between the two regime types. At the same time, conservative regimes did not outperform their post-communist and Southern European counterparts, which indicates that their willingness or capacity is not sufficiently high to differentiate them from the other two regimes. The potential explanations for the lack of support for Hypothesis 3 are outlined above.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

By shedding light on the differences across welfare state regimes in their response patterns to the Semester's social recommendations, this thesis carries numerous theoretical and practical implications. First of all, the study makes a significant theoretical contribution to the academic literature on the European Semester by introducing a new predictor that accounts for cross-country differences in CSR implementation rates. By empirically testing the role of welfare state regimes, this thesis goes beyond prior descriptive studies (Al-Kadi & Clauwaert, 2019; Bíró-Nagy & Laki, 2022; Darvas & Leandro, 2015; Rainone, 2022), and adds to the literature by illustrating the significance of a predictor that so far has been overlooked. Furthermore, the findings of this study also advance the literature on welfare state regimes and compliance by exploring the interplay between domestic institutional structures and the implementation of EU recommendations. Together with D'Erman and Verdun (2021), the present thesis stresses the importance of domestic contexts in assessing the effectiveness and success of the European Semester as the EU's key tool for policy coordination. This advances the general understanding of welfare state regimes and how they react to supranational policies. For instance, the results challenge the assumptions that social-democratic regimes are the most effective in implementing social policy reforms while liberal regimes are reluctant to do so. These findings suggest that the relationship between domestic welfare arrangements and implementing supranational recommendations is more nuanced.

Next to that, this research also contributes to the academic discussion on whether the European Union encourages convergence towards a common social model or preserves national differences through its policy coordination tools such as the European Semester. Orosz and Szijártó (2021) and López-Santana (2006) argued that the Semester does not lead to convergence across welfare state regimes, as institutional legacies continue to persist. Similarly, Copeland and Daly (2018) found that the Semester does not promote a single policy direction, but issues varying recommendations promoting both market-correcting and market-making solutions. However, the results of the present study challenge this assumption as they show that certain welfare state regimes implement recommendations more successfully than others. This suggests that the Semester's CSRs align better with the domestic approaches of some regimes, while others show lower progress potentially due to the misalignment with their national priorities and capacities. While the Semester does not impose a one-size-fits-all solution, the varying levels of implementation rates across welfare regimes imply that the Semester either issues similar recommendations to all welfare regimes, which align with the domestic approaches of some regimes better than others, or it tailors its recommendations to certain regimes more than the rest.

The above theoretical insights point towards important practical implications for policy-makers. This thesis demonstrated that certain welfare state regimes lag behind in the implementation of the Semester's recommendations, which can be a symptom of misalignment with the EU's policy priorities. It is possible that the Semester's CSRs do not sufficiently account for institutional, ideological or cultural differences across member states at the domestic level. The present study helps to highlight countries (i.e. post-communist and Southern European member states) where CSRs must be further tailored to the national political and economic contexts in order to reduce potential misfits, increase their perceived legitimacy, and thereby enhance the implementation of the recommendations. This, in turn, can help to improve the overall effectiveness of the European Semester and strengthen the European Union's role in coordinating social policy effectively across the continent. As D'Erman et al. (2019) demonstrated, the Semester's CSRs are already tailored to different market economies to a certain extent, and it is believed that a similar approach for welfare state regimes could further improve the effectiveness of the Semester. This policy solution is also endorsed by Scharpf (2002) who suggested grouping member states based on their welfare regimes and enabling cooperation within these clusters. Tailoring recommendations to clusters of welfare states could help to balance harmonisation with respect for national traditions and lead to increased regional cohesion while also ensuring continuous policy reform. From a political perspective, this differentiated integration approach is also more feasible as reaching a consensus on a common European social model is neither probable nor desirable (Scharpf, 2002).

Directions for Future Research

As Efstathiou and Wolff (2019) emphasised, identifying the determinants of member states' progress in implementing EU recommendations is a challenging task. The multitude of political, economic and social factors that play a role in countries' progress, as well as the complex interplay between these factors, make it difficult to draw straightforward conclusions about individual determinants. While welfare state regimes proved to be a significant predictor of implementation rates, these categories alone cannot account for all variation across member states in their implementation rates as the relationship is likely more nuanced and complex. This suggests several directions for future research.

First of all, this thesis demonstrated general trends in the implementation of the Semester's social CSRs across different welfare regimes, but it fell beyond the scope of the study to empirically test the explanations of the compliance literature (enforcement, management, legitimacy) that were used to establish the hypotheses regarding response patterns. Thus, more research is needed to delve deeper into the determinants of cross-cluster differences. An important factor to consider in future studies is the content of CSRs as certain recommendations may align with the ideology of one welfare arrangement more than others. For instance, Copeland and Daly (2018) demonstrated that social CSRs often combine market-correcting and market-making approaches. Investigating the type of recommendation different regimes receive during the Semester can help to better understand their response patterns and implementation rates by illustrating the level of (mis)fit between EU recommendations and domestic agendas. Thus, future research should explore the content of CSRs across different regimes and how it impacts their progress.

Another interesting avenue for future research is tracing welfare states' implementation progress over time. As Hennis (2021) stressed, there is a need for a broader interpretation of the Semester's effectiveness to fully capture the progress member states make each year. Since many recommendations require long-term investments and gradual policy reforms, examining the implementation of CSRs over multiple years instead of only looking at the Commission's progress score from the subsequent year can offer deeper insights into the factors that drive or hinder progress. Thus, future studies are advised to adopt a longitudinal design to identify trends over time and examine the pace with which different welfare states implement recommendations. Incorporating this temporal dimension can also uncover conditional effects with variations across regime types in how certain political and economic factors influence policy implementation. In addition, using a broader timeframe also helps to increase the generalisability of the findings, which is a limitation of the present thesis as it focused only on a three-year period.

Third, future studies are also recommended to adopt a single-case or small-n qualitative design to track the process through which domestic welfare arrangements impact national responses to EU policies. This can help to better understand the specific contextual factors that shape national responses to the Semester and can offer insights on how to increase its effectiveness. As mentioned above, countries such as Ireland constitute an interesting subject for such a study, together with other countries that are often regarded as hybrids in the welfare state literature, such as Austria or the Netherlands (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011).

Finally, future research could further explore the role of different domestic actors and institutions in shaping the implementation rates of the Semester's social CSRs. As Treib (2014) argued, political parties and ideologies, changes in government, and public opinion all impact countries' willingness to comply with EU policies. The present study also found that national parliamentary elections being held in a given year had a significant negative effect on the implementation rates of CSRs in that year. Thus, future studies should investigate more in-depth how these political factors affect the response patterns to the Semester's recommendations and how they interact with welfare state regimes. This can offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of domestic factors that collectively shape countries' response to EU social policy coordination.

Conclusion

The European Semester is an important tool for the European Union to coordinate economic and social policy and implement the European Pillar of Social Rights. Through the country-specific recommendations, the Semester incentivises member states to implement social policy reforms on the domestic level and thereby improve a variety of crucial social services such as healthcare, education, and pension. Nonetheless, the implementation of recommendations remains at the discretion of member states, highlighting the tension within the EU to increase integration and raise common standards while also respecting the diversity of existing domestic institutional structures (Scharpf, 2002).

This study investigated the role of welfare state regimes in shaping the implementation of the European Semester's recommendations, contributing to the academic literature by exploring a new, previously overlooked domestic factor. The findings demonstrate that welfare state regimes are a significant predictor of member states' implementation progress on social recommendations. In particular, liberal and social-democratic welfare regimes implement the Semester's recommendations to the highest extent, while conservative, post-communist and Southern European types show significantly lower progress. These results challenge the assumption that liberal welfare states are reluctant to invest in social policy reform, as well as that conservative regimes outperform Southern

European and post-communist countries. At the same time, the findings confirm that social-democratic regimes are at the forefront of implementing social policy reform, while also verifying the difficulties Southern European and post-communist regimes face with regards to improving social services and implementing EU recommendations.

The above findings carry important practical implications. The European Commission is encouraged to further tailor country-specific recommendations to each member state's unique domestic context, taking into account their welfare state regime and its implications for policy priorities and institutional capacities. This way, the EU can improve the perceived legitimacy of its recommendations while increasing countries' willingness to comply, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of the European Semester.

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Appendix

SPSS Syntax of Statistical Analyses

Step 1: Test the parallel lines assumption in SPSS

```
PLUM Implementationrate BY Welfarestateregime MIP Nationalelections Year WITH
GDPpercapita
   Unemploymentrate
  /CRITERIA=CIN(95) DELTA(0) LCONVERGE(0) MXITER(100) MXSTEP(5)
PCONVERGE(1.0E-6) SINGULAR(1.0E-8)
  /LINK=LOGIT
  /PRINT=TPARALLEL.
```

Step 2: Test the clustering in the data by running an intercept-only model

```
*Generalized Linear Mixed Models.
GENLINMIXED
  /DATA_STRUCTURE SUBJECTS=Country
  /FIELDS TARGET=Implementationrate TRIALS=NONE OFFSET=NONE
  /TARGET_OPTIONS DISTRIBUTION=MULTINOMIAL LINK=LOGIT
  /FIXED USE_INTERCEPT=TRUE
  /RANDOM USE_INTERCEPT=TRUE SUBJECTS=Country
COVARIANCE_TYPE=VARIANCE_COMPONENTS SOLUTION=FALSE
  /BUILD_OPTIONS TARGET_CATEGORY_ORDER=ASCENDING
INPUTS_CATEGORY_ORDER=ASCENDING
   HCONVERGE=0.00000001(RELATIVE) MAX_ITERATIONS=100
CONFIDENCE_LEVEL=95 DF_METHOD=RESIDUAL
   COVB=ROBUST SCORING=0 SINGULAR=0.000000000001
  /EMMEANS_OPTIONS SCALE=ORIGINAL PADJUST=LSD.
```

Step 3: Run multilevel ordinal logistic regression with the generalised linear mixed model function of SPSS, use social-democratic regimes as reference category for welfare state regimes, include all fixed and random effects

```
*Generalized Linear Mixed Models.
GENLINMIXED
  /DATA_STRUCTURE SUBJECTS=Country
  /FIELDS TARGET=Implementationrate TRIALS=NONE OFFSET=NONE
  /TARGET_OPTIONS DISTRIBUTION=MULTINOMIAL LINK=LOGIT
  /FIXED  EFFECTS=Welfarestateregime Unemploymentrate GDPpercapita MIP
Nationalelections Year
   USE_INTERCEPT=TRUE
```

```
  /RANDOM EFFECTS=Country USE_INTERCEPT=TRUE SUBJECTS=Country
COVARIANCE_TYPE=VARIANCE_COMPONENTS
    SOLUTION=FALSE
  /BUILD_OPTIONS TARGET_CATEGORY_ORDER=ASCENDING
INPUTS_CATEGORY_ORDER=DESCENDING
    HCONVERGE=0.00000001(RELATIVE) MAX_ITERATIONS=100
CONFIDENCE_LEVEL=95 DF_METHOD=RESIDUAL
    COVB=ROBUST SCORING=0 SINGULAR=0.000000000001
  /EMMEANS TABLES=MIP CONTRAST=NONE
   /EMMEANS TABLES=Nationalelections CONTRAST=NONE
   /EMMEANS TABLES=Year CONTRAST=NONE
  /EMMEANS_OPTIONS SCALE=ORIGINAL PADJUST=LSD.
```

Step 4: Re-run the same multilevel ordinal logistic regression as in Step 3 but with Southern European regimes as the reference category, first recode variable

```
RECODE Welfarestateregime (1=5) (5=1) (ELSE=Copy) INTO WSR_SouthernEuropean.
EXECUTE.

*Generalized Linear Mixed Models.
GENLINMIXED
  /DATA_STRUCTURE SUBJECTS=Country
  /FIELDS TARGET=Implementationrate TRIALS=NONE OFFSET=NONE
  /TARGET_OPTIONS DISTRIBUTION=MULTINOMIAL LINK=LOGIT
  /FIXED  EFFECTS=WSR_SouthernEuropean Unemploymentrate GDPpercapita MIP
Nationalelections Year
    USE_INTERCEPT=TRUE
  /RANDOM EFFECTS=Country USE_INTERCEPT=TRUE SUBJECTS=Country
COVARIANCE_TYPE=VARIANCE_COMPONENTS
    SOLUTION=FALSE
  /BUILD_OPTIONS TARGET_CATEGORY_ORDER=ASCENDING
INPUTS_CATEGORY_ORDER=DESCENDING
    HCONVERGE=0.00000001(RELATIVE) MAX_ITERATIONS=100
CONFIDENCE_LEVEL=95 DF_METHOD=RESIDUAL
    COVB=ROBUST SCORING=0 SINGULAR=0.000000000001
  /EMMEANS TABLES=MIP CONTRAST=NONE
   /EMMEANS TABLES=Nationalelections CONTRAST=NONE
   /EMMEANS TABLES=Year CONTRAST=NONE
  /EMMEANS_OPTIONS SCALE=ORIGINAL PADJUST=LSD.
```

Step 5: Re-run the same multilevel ordinal logistic regression as in Steps 3 and 4 but with post-communist regimes as the reference category, first recode variable

```
RECODE Welfarestateregime (4=1) (1=4) (ELSE=Copy) INTO WSR_PostCommunist.
```

```
EXECUTE.

*Generalized Linear Mixed Models.
GENLINMIXED
  /DATA_STRUCTURE SUBJECTS=Country
  /FIELDS TARGET=Implementationrate TRIALS=NONE OFFSET=NONE
  /TARGET_OPTIONS DISTRIBUTION=MULTINOMIAL LINK=LOGIT
  /FIXED  EFFECTS=WSR_PostCommunist Unemploymentrate GDPpercapita MIP
Nationalelections Year
    USE_INTERCEPT=TRUE
  /RANDOM EFFECTS=Country USE_INTERCEPT=TRUE SUBJECTS=Country
COVARIANCE_TYPE=VARIANCE_COMPONENTS
    SOLUTION=FALSE
  /BUILD_OPTIONS TARGET_CATEGORY_ORDER=ASCENDING
INPUTS_CATEGORY_ORDER=DESCENDING
    HCONVERGE=0.00000001(RELATIVE) MAX_ITERATIONS=100
CONFIDENCE_LEVEL=95 DF_METHOD=RESIDUAL
    COVB=ROBUST SCORING=0 SINGULAR=0.000000000001
  /EMMEANS TABLES=MIP CONTRAST=NONE
   /EMMEANS TABLES=Nationalelections CONTRAST=NONE
   /EMMEANS TABLES=Year CONTRAST=NONE
  /EMMEANS_OPTIONS SCALE=ORIGINAL PADJUST=LSD.
```