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German and French childcare policies under the impact of the European Union

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Research Paper

German and French Childcare Policies
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European Social Policies
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1. Introduction

In most European societies, it is women who are considered responsible for raising children and caring for dependent family members, whereas men’s task is to cater for the family financially. On the one hand, this prevents mothers from participating actively in the labour market, while on the other hand, it gives fathers little time to spend with their children. Traditionally, national welfare states have regulated this kind of inequality in accordance with society’s norms and values, by providing a framework of services (e.g. public childcare facilities), monetary transfers (child-rearing benefits), and leave regulations (parental leave), thus creating incentives and disincentives for mothers (and fathers) to work and/or to look after the children at home. National arrangements vary considerably across the different states, whether they be geographically and culturally close or remote, whether they belong to the same or to a different welfare state regime. A good example for such differences are childcare arrangements in Germany and France. Although neighbours and both conservative-corporatist welfare states, they have developed very different approaches in dealing with the problem of labour market participation of women with children.

In the past 20 years, welfare states, and with them family policies, have faced considerable pressures of different types. External as well as internal changes have played a role here. Macroeconomic changes have brought about a need for states to increase their competitiveness in order to combat rising unemployment, cutting down or restructuring social welfare. Moreover, attitudes towards childcare have changed, with women increasingly wanting to take up work. Another type of pressure arose with European integration. With the EU, a new player has emerged to interfere with the design of family policies in the Member States, especially after recognising that competition and market integration alone do not automatically lead to social justice.

The central question of this paper is to what extend one can say that a combination of these pressures, and especially the ones created by EU policies, are likely to cause convergence of German and French childcare policies. The term childcare policies in this paper refers to the provision of services and monetary benefits as well as to parental leave arrangements for children before reaching the compulsory school age. But some references to tax regulations for families and care facilities for school children will be included as well.