

# On the verge of a long-term care reform in Italy?

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## Description

*In April 2021, the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan included a goal to invest in long-term care (LTC) provision and to reform the whole LTC system. Less than a year later, in January 2022, the Ministry of Labour Market and Social Affairs presented a Reform proposal which is currently under discussion.*

Italy is among the few countries in the European Union which has not reformed its public long-term care (LTC) system in the last three decades. Over the last decades the country has developed a relatively complex public LTC system, which has several strengths but also weaknesses. The system is organised around two main pillars (cash transfers and services), which have different governance and financial arrangements. As a result, coordinating the whole system is very complicated.

Public LTC spending was equivalent to 1.7% of GDP in 2019, slightly higher than the EU average (1.6%). Importantly, cash transfers absorbed more than half of the public resources invested in LTC (around 52% in 2019). In this respect, Italy is among the very few EU countries where cash transfers make up more than half of LTC public spending (the EU average is around 16%).

While a relatively large share of older people with LTC needs benefit from cash transfers (around 11% of those aged 65+), the coverage rate of services is much lower: around 3% can access residential facilities and around 5% home care. Italy remains largely behind many other EU countries, especially those in Continental-Northern Europe, in terms of both residential and home care provision.

Strengthening home care services, with the goal of covering 10% of older people, and promoting a general reform of the whole LTC system were two explicit goals set in 2021 by the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP).

Both the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour Market and Social Affairs have been working on plans to achieve these goals since the summer of 2021. In particular, the latter Ministry created an ad hoc “LTC Reform Commission”, chaired by L. Turco, a former Social Affairs and Healthcare Minister. The “Turco Commission” produced a Reform Proposal, which was formally presented to the Prime Minister M. Draghi in January 2022.

Meanwhile, some of the policy proposals of the “Turco Commission” were already included and approved in the Budget Bill for 2022 (Legge di Stabilità) in December 2021.

The main proposals of the Reform already introduced in the Budget Bill were:

- Introduction of basic social levels of LTC provision (Livelli essenziali delle prestazioni sociali), which are based on the right to access a set of services.
- Greater integration between social and healthcare services in relation to LTC. This should be helped by the creation of “integrated entry gates” to public social and healthcare LTC services (Punti unici di accesso). Within such “gates”, groups of professionals from the National Healthcare System and municipal social services will provide both a “multidimensional” assessment of the needs of frail elderly people requiring assistance and an “integrated individual assistance plan” (Progetto di assistenza individuale integrata).
- Strengthening of the coordination among municipalities for joint planning and joint commissioning of LTC (the so called “Ambiti Territoriali Sociali”).

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- Strengthening of home care services, also improving the use of digitalisation and e-health.
- Introduction of several different types of assisted living solutions for frail elderly people (co-housing, etc.), which have been tried out over recent decades in many Italian municipalities, but have not received national specific codification and formal recognition.

- Strengthening of both respite care services and support for caregivers.

Other important issues addressed by the “Commission Turco” Reform Proposal include:

- Rebalancing and better integration between LTC cash transfers and services.
- Support for the legalisation of undeclared employment in the LTC sector, professionalisation and training of workers in this policy field.
- Creation of a monitoring and evaluation system of public LTC provision in Italy.

Both the Reform Proposal and the contents related to LTC in the Budget Bill for 2022 state, often in general terms, the goals that have to be achieved, explicitly delegating to the Government (through ad hoc “Delegation Bills”) the specific regulation of these goals.

## Outlook and commentary

Overall, the combined effect of the NRRP investments, the Budget Bill for 2022, and the “Turco Commission” Reform, if approved, could represent a major policy change in how public LTC functions in Italy, improving needs coverage

and the quality of provision. The resources made available by the NRRP could be an effective trigger to strengthen care for frail older people.

However, this potential policy change has to face two challenges.

First, the “Turco Commission” Reform has not yet been discussed either by the Italian Government or by the Parliament. It is possible that minor or major changes will be made to the proposal. The fact that the proposal was formally sent to the Prime Minister M. Draghi in January 2022 and has not yet been discussed might suggest that changes will be made to the text approved by the “Turco Commission”.

Second, the Italian NRRP aims to promote an “ageing in place” strategy by strengthening home care, which is an important goal. In order to implement this strategy, the NRRP also proposes to transform (or to close) some nursing homes. However, this latter choice might prove to be inappropriate. As underlined above, Italy has a relatively low coverage rate of residential care compared with other countries in Europe. A further reduction in residential provision will mean that especially very frail elderly people who cannot count on informal support will have to rely only on home care provision. The Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat, 2021) estimates that around 1.2 million older individuals in Italy (44% of those with severe disabilities) are also very frail and lack enough informal care support. A reduction in (nursing) residential care provision might weaken the overall effectiveness of the Italian LTC system.

## Further reading

Istat, (2021), Gli anziani e la loro domanda sociale e sanitaria. Anno 2019 [The elderly and their social and health demand. Year 2019], Istat, Rome.

Saraceno C., Pavolini E. (2022), 2021. L’anno della svolta per le politiche assistenziali e della cura in Italia? [The year of the turning point for welfare and care policies in Italy?], in Capano, G., Sandri, G. (eds.), *Politica in Italia* [Policy in Italy]. Anno 2021, Il Mulino, Bologna.

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