Europeanisation through the Back Door: EU Social Policy and the Member States

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Summary

The article aims at broadly delineating the division of labour in social policy between the EU and the member states; in other words, at showing to what extent the social policy of the member states has been Europeanised. Our understanding of Europeanisation is broad. Europeanisation can be a rather subtle and invisible process rather than an abrupt modification of the national institutional architecture. The Union's legal and juridical competences in the social area have been restricted to issues related to the single market, such as labour law, the free movement of workers, health and safety at the working place, and non-discrimination. In addition, the social OMC is a case of subtle and indirect Europeanisation influencing above all values, norms and ways of thinking about social policy. Moreover, national social systems are also influenced by other EU processes, such as the European macro-economic policy, the single market, the common currency, and the European Employment Strategy.

Keywords: European Union, Europeanisation, social policy, Open Method of Coordination

1. Introduction

Membership in the European Union implies changes in the national system of a member state. The EU is both a political and an economic actor and affects a wide range of spheres of activities. The delegation of competences in environmental protection, gender equality in the workplace, occupational health and safety, etc. has moved the EU towards a system in which many of the negative consequences of market activity are addressed in Brussels rather than in national capitals (Sbragia

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and Stolfi, 2008: 116). Social policy has not traditionally had a high European profile, but in recent years the social dimension of the EU has been strengthening. The concept of a European social model, which is often referred to in this context, indicates that there exists a common model for the member states' social policy. To investigate whether this is an accurate description of the situation is the main task of this article. As Annesley (2007) puts it, the Lisbon vision for a social Europe is clearly a blueprint rather than a model. The article at hand aims at broadly delineating the division of labour in social policy between the EU and the member states; in other words, it seeks to show to what extent has the social policy of the member states been Europeanised.

By Europeanisation we understand the influence of the EU on the member states. Europeanisation can be defined as a process through which domestic institutions and politics are changed as a consequence of European-level institutions and politics (Featherstone and Radaelli, 2003). Our understanding of Europeanisation is broad. Social policy deals with values, institutions and policies, and all these can potentially change. The EU social policy is mostly mediated in the form of soft law rather than binding directives. Hence, the best way to observe potential changes is to open up the political and administrative argumentation and trace the emergence and sources of particular concepts and ideas. Europeanisation can thus be a rather subtle and invisible process rather than an abrupt modification of the national institutional architecture.

Europeanisation is not a one-way process in which the national systems remain static. Rather, it is strongly modified by the national political process (Kettunen and Kungla, 2005). A sample of recent studies verifies this. Mailand (2008) studied to what extent the European Employment Strategy has been implemented in the member states, and concluded that this depends on the gap between the EU-level aims and the national policy. In the studied case, Denmark received hardly any recommendations to alter its employment policy, Spain a few, but Poland much more. Mailand also wanted to see to what extent the EU discourse was captured by the national actors and used in political debate. Although we could assume that such a transfer indicates a deeper Europeanisation, this depends on the national political situation. If everyone agrees on the national policy, no such transfer is necessary (*ibid*.). The concept of Europeanisation does not bind itself to a particular source of initiative. Europeanisation can also be initiated and advocated by member states rather than the EU institutions. Örnberg (2008) delineates an effort by the Nordic governments, Sweden in particular, to bring more health-related issues on the European alcohol agenda. Her conclusions, based on key-actor interviews, underline that research-based argumentation, even if backed by several member states, is not a sufficient condition for changes on the European agenda. In her case, the Swedish Social Ministry had expected that the presented material would speak for itself, but

this technical approach did not prompt the other member states and the Commission to follow up the initiative (Örnberg, 2008: 388). Thus, Europeanisation does not take place mechanically, but is also a matter of changing ways of thinking and, hence, persuasion. This indicates that in addition to policy goals and the comparison national policies, Europeanisation also has to be looked at as a cognitive process of soft influence. Besides the formal division of competences, mechanisms of collective action must be taken into account when analysing how the national and the European levels interact.

In this article, we analyse the roles of the EU and the member states in the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in social policy. In order to first have a better idea of what is being coordinated, we begin by having a look at the national social systems. By making a difference between the value basis and institutional structure, we can better understand the similarities and differences between the member states. Thereafter, the discussion moves on to the European level. In the third section, we delineate the basic features of the EU social dimension and after that, in the fourth section, we discuss in detail its mechanisms of Europeanisation. Finally, in the fifth section, we sum up the results and present our conclusions about the division of labour between the EU and its member states.

2. Social Policy and the Member States

Social policy or social protection refers to various income transfers and services, which aim to provide support for those citizens who are not able to support themselves. Typical social services cover, for example, income support, housing and support for disabled persons, and child day-care. The basis of social policy are human rights protected by the UN and the court system. Beyond this, national social problems largely overlap. Poverty, for example, prevails in all member states, in varying degrees, and so do the needs in connection to old age, disability and alcohol.

This universal background (basic human needs) is different from the institutional framework of the social policy systems in Europe. In other words, while all member states invest in social policy, the level and form of these investments and commitments vary. Comparative analyses of national welfare policies have produced a number of typologies describing this variety (Esping-Andersen, 1990), but depending on the focus, the placing of the member states in the categories vary. For example, the Scandinavian countries usually come forward as representatives of high-quality, universal social services. However, Anttonen and Sipilä (1996) argue that when focusing on social care services, differences between the European states are not so clear. Social services as such are a heterogenic group of public policies focused on larger (children, old people) or more limited (disabled, alcoholics) groups of citizens. Thus, member states may commit to one type of service but not to another. Competing classifications are therefore possible. For instance, if both social care services

for the elderly and social care services for children are dichotomised on the basis of mean values into groups of abundant and scarce services, we get four groups:

1) countries with abundant social care services: Denmark, Sweden and Finland;

2) countries with scarce social care services: Portugal, Greece, Spain, Ireland and Germany;

3) countries with abundant services for the elderly but scarce services for children: the Netherlands, Norway and the UK;

4) countries with abundant services for children but scarce services for the elderly: Belgium, France and Italy.

In another example (Kari et al., 2008: 128), the member states are categorised according to their commitment to combating child poverty. Again, the Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Finland and Sweden, together with Austria, the Netherlands, Cyprus and Slovenia show the largest commitment, while at the other extreme of the continuum we find countries such as Latvia, Poland, Bulgaria and Rumania.

To what extent the member states invest in social policy depends on a myriad of factors. The economic basis is a paramount factor behind both the capability to act and the prevalence of economy-related social problems (Laffan and Stubb, 2008). Secondly, the political commitment to tackle social problems may also vary. This may reflect the political composition of the government, but also the history and current strength of professions, NGOs and so forth. Thirdly, the institutional composition of the social policy system may to a large extent guide the implementation of social policy. In some member states, the dividing line between public and private actors is a strict one, in others private actors contribute to the production of social services as well.

Finally, the social policy systems of the member states are not stable, but in constant transition. The Scandinavian welfare model has its strengths, but it has been criticised as well. Rothstein (1995) points to high public costs of universal services, the firm, paternalistic grip of the citizens which the comprehensive services imply (from the cradle to the grave), and the difficulty of combining universal, standardised services with the heterogenic and individual-based needs. This critique indicates how social policies are part of the member states' public administration systems, which are themselves subject to various pressures of change. These pressures also come from outside the immediate context, for instance through trends like New Public Management (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004).

In short, while we have a common value basis in the European social policy, the nation-level institutional service systems vary. This means that although there are challenges common to all European social systems, the specific ways of dealing with them may differ. This makes the coordination of social policy an interesting issue.

Is it possible to copy ways of doing things from other member states? The question is complex, because social institutions are also deeply embedded in each country's larger societal framework and history, and therefore cannot easily be transferred as such. Although the above examples suggest that the Scandinavian countries, mainly Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, are in many ways an ideal model of social policy, it does not mean that the model could be transferred without problems to another context, where the societal division of labour may be quite different. Comparisons of social systems are usually based on government activities. However, seen from a more comprehensive viewpoint, we find social political actors such as NGOs, voluntary associations, and religious organisations, which in many ways accomplish public activities and contribute to social policy. In addition, the role of the family varies a great deal between southern and northern Europe. In the latter, the high number of women in working life explains the extensive child day-care services. On the other hand, in Scandinavia a debate on the goals of child day-care prevails and it is being asked whether the service is meant for women being able to work or for the needs of the children. To sum up, the basic values underlying the different national social policy systems are similar, while, at the same time, the institutional ways of organising this assistance differ with respect to which groups of recipients are prioritised and which actors provide services (public or private). However, all systems face common challenges, such as demographic ageing and poverty. This mutuality is the starting point for the EU-level processes, to which we turn next.

3. The Social Dimension of the European Union

The Europeanisation of social policy has not taken the traditional path of integration, i.e. the gradual shifting of legal competences to the EU level. By contrast to economic policies, the formal authority in most social issues has remained with the national governments, and Europeanisation has occurred in the form of coordination of national policies. On this note, the EU's social dimension is today an example of policy fields where some need for European solutions is perceived, but the member states do not wish to delegate control and thus prefer a scheme of "soft" and flexible cooperation to "hard" legislation.

The Union's legal and juridical competences in the social area have been restricted to issues related to the single market, such as labour law, the free movement of workers, health and safety at the working place, and non-discrimination. In these areas, European legislation is part of the *acquis communautaire* and thus equally effective in all member states. At the same time, these regulations do not touch on the national welfare systems as such. However, vague aspirations to build a more far--reaching social dimension have been referred to as early as in the Treaty of Rome (1957). In Article 117, the member states "agree upon the necessity to promote improvement of the living and working conditions of labour so as to permit the equali-

sation of such conditions in an upward direction. They consider that such a development will result not only from the functioning of the Common Market which will favour the harmonisation of social systems, but also from the procedures provided for under this Treaty and from the approximation of legislative and administrative provisions." Furthermore, "it shall be the aim of the Commission to promote close collaboration between Member States in the social field" by acting "in close contact with Member States by means of studies, the issuing of opinions, and the organising of consultations both on problems arising at the national level and on those of concern to international organisations" (Article 118). On the basis of these provisions, the Commission attempted to claim responsibility for social matters in the early 1960s, but the member states were unwilling to give authority to the EU in this area (Cram, 1997: 31-33). They thus blocked the traditional way of integration, i.e. the formal shifting of legal competences on a Treaty basis.

Instead, the Europeanisation of social policy took a different path that allowed coordination while taking account of the issue's political sensitivity. During the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, the Commission built up cooperation schemes that gradually institutionalised the collection and exchange of information, policy research and analysis, as well as the networking of different actors in the field. Yet, it was only in the 1990s that two changes in the policy environment brought social policy higher on the European agenda, and at the same time reoriented its focus more towards economic policies. Firstly, the completion of the single market, the European Monetary Union (EMU), and the continuing integration of further policy areas had impacts on the functioning of the welfare state and national social policies. In particular the Stability and Growth Pact, with its restrictions on national budgets, led to reform pressures on the welfare systems. In this situation, European coordination was perceived necessary to balance macro-economic policies with national welfare regimes (Palier, 2008; Borrás and Jacobsson, 2004: 186). Secondly, the reactions to the Maastricht Treaty (1992) and the crisis of the Santer Commission (1998/1999) led to a more general legitimacy crisis of the Union. This also created pressures for the EU to address the social consequences of its economic policies. At the same time, however, it also made it difficult to transfer substantial competences in sensitive areas to the European level. Despite recognition by the predominantly Social Democratic national governments that common responses were necessary to preserve their social models in the new economic environment, they were thus reluctant to shift authority on these issues to the EU. In addition to that, the prospect of the upcoming eastern enlargements and thereby growing intra-EU diversity also led to a search for new balances between community and flexibility (Borrás and Jacobsson, 2004: 186-187).

The juridical fundaments for the new institutions were laid in the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), which created the possibility for the Council to "adopt measures designed to encourage cooperation between Member States through initiatives aimed

at improving knowledge, developing exchanges of information and best practices, promoting innovative approaches and evaluating experiences in order to combat social exclusion" (Article 137). Additionally, the old Article 118 was strengthened and now requested the Commission to "encourage cooperation between the Member States and facilitate the coordination of their action in all social policy fields under this chapter", including social security (Article 140). Three years later, in 2000, the Lisbon European Council gave form to these provisions by creating the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in social inclusion.[1] Later, the OMC has also been applied to pensions (2002) and health and long-term care (2006), and in 2006 these three policy areas were integrated into what is today known as the "social OMC", i.e. the OMC in social protection and social inclusion. Since 2010, the social OMC has to a great extent been realised as a part of the EU2020 strategy's European platform against poverty and social exclusion. It is yet too early to evaluate the changes that this new framework may bring; however, the basic mechanisms of cooperation have largely stayed the same.

While all OMCs share some key elements, they are not completely similar to one another. The main institutional features of the social OMC are as follows. There are common objectives establishing broad policy goals, such as to "ensure the active social inclusion of all by promoting participation in the labour market and by fighting poverty and exclusion among the most marginalised people and groups". These objectives are drafted by DG Employment, accepted by the Employment and Social Policy Council and adopted by the European Council. Member states submit annual "National Strategic Reports" in which they lay out their strategies and policies to attain these objectives. On the basis of these strategic reports, DG Employment drafts an annual Joint Report which is adopted by the Council of Ministers. The Commission assesses the progress made, identifies good practice and names priorities and issues to work on; within the EU2020 strategy, it can also issue policy recommendations or policy warnings to member states. Candidate countries participate in the process by signing a Joint Inclusion Memorandum (JIM) together with the Commission, which forms the basis of a process preparing the country for accession to the EU as concerns social policy. At the moment, however, Croatia is the only candidate country with a JIM. One hub of the OMC process is the Social Protection Committee (SPC), a Treaty-based body consisting of two representatives of each member state and two Commission representatives. The SPC's tasks

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[1] The Lisbon Council also introduced OMCs in various other policy areas, *viz.* better regulation, training and education, enterprise policy, information society, research and development. After Lisbon, OMCs have been launched in pensions, health and long-term care, sustainable development (environmental policy), youth, and tourism. For an overview of all OMCs and comparable processes, see Laffan and Shaw, 2005.

are to strengthen cooperation between the member states, monitor developments in social policy in the member states and the Community, promote the exchange of information, experience and good practice, and prepare the annual Joint Report (drafted by DG Employment). It also has contacts with the respective committees in the European coordination processes in employment and economic policy. The SPC has set up an Indicators Sub-Group to develop the qualitative and quantitative common indicators used to measure the member states' progress. Another mechanism of exchange in the social OMC are peer reviews, which are organised seven to ten times per year in one of the member states, with the idea to learn from each other. In facilitated discussions, member states present policies with perceived potential for dissemination, or alternatively plans for policy reforms under preparation, to typically five to ten interested member states. Finally, a distinct characteristic of the social inclusion strand of the social OMC in particular is the aim to involve a wide range of governmental and non-governmental actors on all levels. On the European level, especially European networks of social NGOs play a remarkable role. On the one hand, they are meant to represent the citizens who are affected by social inclusion policies, i.e. people living in or at risk of poverty. On the other hand, these organisations are also expected to communicate in the opposite direction and raise the citizens' awareness of the European policy process.

Obviously, this structure differs greatly from conventional government and governance. The OMC transcends the dichotomies of national *vs*. European (Palier, 2008: 54) and formal *vs*. informal policy-making. Formally, social policy remains within the competence of the member states, and the OMC does not include any mechanism by which policy solutions could be imposed on national governments. At the same time, however, the very rationale of the process is to bring about coordinated action in spite of this. Coordination implies that the OMC potentially has some influence on national policies, which in return would mean that these become Europeanised to some extent. The following section discusses the mechanisms in which the OMC can influence national social policies, and what this means for the distinction national *vs*. European in this area.

4. Discussion: European *vs.* National Policies

The influence of the social OMC on national social policies has mainly been studied in case studies about single member states.[2] The results indicate that the impact differs significantly from one country and one policy area to another. This is perhaps to be expected, bearing in mind that the OMC does not contain any compulsory

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[2] For an overview, see the contributions in Zeitlin et al., 2005, and the OMC forum of the European Union Center of Excellence at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (http://eucenter.wisc.edu/OMC/).

measures. However, the effects of European processes on national policies vary not only because governments can choose which elements to adopt, but also because social policies are deeply rooted in different national traditions and institutions, as shown in section 2. These structural conditions determine considerably what specific forms European influences take at the national level. In this sense, the Europeanisation of social policies is a process of path-dependent adjustment. Moreover, the transformation of European developments into national policies is also contingent on the more immediate political context, such as the government's position. At all events, causalities are difficult to establish since there are no formal enactments, and also because the member states influence the OMC for their part. The OMC has in fact strengthened the European Council, which has the role of guiding and coordinating the three processes of social, economic and employment policies (Borrás and Jacobsson, 2004: 198). Moreover, the key position of the SPC means that all member states have the possibility to influence the decisions taken within the frame of the OMC. Therefore, measuring the OMC influence by looking for concrete pieces of social policy originating from a European blueprint does not tell the whole story. Instead, we are here focussing on the *mechanisms* of Europeanisation at work in the OMC.

The social OMC is a case of subtle and indirect Europeanisation influencing above all values, norms and ways of thinking about social policy. This effect can be seen in the fact that although the national welfare systems of the EU member states have remained very different, recent welfare reforms have been strikingly similar in their general orientation (Palier, 2008: 44, 55-56). In other words, the OMC can induce cognitive transformation by developing and disseminating common discourses, problem definitions and norms about what is "good policy". On the one hand, this is a process of group dynamics among all involved actors, but on the other hand, discursive mechanisms are also skilfully used by the European Commission to steer developments into certain directions.

For the member states, the OMC provides first of all a policy forum where civil servants meet regularly, ideas spread and participants may be socialised into epistemic communities (cf. Radaelli, 2000a: 19). In such forums, certain ways of thinking can become dominant and are subsequently established as the obvious point of view on the matter. Once a critical number of countries has adopted a particular perspective, this can create adaptational pressure for the others to join in, although there is no formal coercion involved (Radaelli, 2000a: 17; Usui, 2007: 626). The result is a hegemonic discourse that gives meaning to realities by conceptualising, categorising and narrating things in a certain way, which implies particular problem definitions and ideas about what are good solutions for them. The actors who share such a discourse share a certain view of the world. In the social OMC, dominant notions about poverty include the definition of the problem as "social exclusion",

which can be measured with certain statistical indicators; the notion that strategies to "combat poverty and social exclusions" should include fighting child poverty, discrimination and overindebtedness, and promoting "active inclusion" and decent housing; as well as the notion that good social policy-making implies learning from and competing with each other and involving "a wide range of stakeholders", such as local authorities and NGOs.

It is fair to suggest that most of these conceptualisations did not come up in the discussions of national executives, but have been successfully promoted by the European Commission. To understand the influence mechanisms of processes like the OMC, one has to take account of the Commission's role as a "policy entrepreneur", i.e. an actor continually striving to extend the scope of its competences (e.g. Cram, 1997). Although the Commission cannot prescribe social policy orientations to the member states, it exerts a subtle, but considerable influence by leveraging a range of discursive instruments. These are generally based on exploiting the Commission's mediator position and thereby avoiding the impression that "Brussels" would impose policies. Mediating a coordination process means having a privileged position to shape the agenda by highlighting certain issues and leaving others with less attention. The Commission has used this position above all to frame the discourses about social policies, i.e. to present them in certain ways and contexts. Since the Commission drafts all important OMC documents, on the basis of which discussions takes place, its conceptualisations easily condition the terms of the conversation. Of course, this presupposes that the interpretations offered are accepted by the member states, which restricts the choice of possible alternatives. One strategy to increase chances that member states adopt an idea is to stress mutual learning and the role of "best practice". As Radaelli (2000b) has shown, promoting particular types of policy instruments on a European level is more likely to succeed if one can refer to an existing model of one or more member states. Governments acting under the condition of uncertainty are more ready to adopt solutions which have proven successful elsewhere. As it is the Commission that structures the exchange process within the OMC (e.g. by preselecting potential policies for peer reviews), it controls which policy instruments are presented to member states as models worth copying. Furthermore, the mutual learning process in the OMC is underpinned by extensive data collection and policy analysis undertaken by and on behalf of the Commission. Policy analysis carried out by an involved actor can be regarded as persuasion rather than a scientific enquiry to find optimal solutions (Cram, 1997: 38). They are one instrument to steer discussions in certain directions. Indeed, the analyses and assessments presented by the Commission identify policy priorities, supported by extensive data which demonstrate the need for action and mutual learning. Another tool to steer discussions is the organisation of European Conferences, which provide the opportunity to talk about pre-defined issues with those actors one wishes

to invite. Conferences thus influence not only the content of policy discourses, but also who gets involved in them. In the social OMC, the Commission has widened the circle of actors to include a variety of public and private organisations, notably NGOs. It funds a range of European networks of social NGOs, many of which it has also helped to set up. In the case of the social OMC, the relations between the Commission and NGOs are thus more complex than the usual assumption, according to which NGOs form spontaneously in order to influence EU policies (Cram, 1997: 125-139). While European NGOs certainly do have influence, the Commission in turn uses its relationships strategically to further their own interests. For one thing, pointing to consultations with NGOs is an argument legitimating the Commission's propositions *vis-à-vis* the member states. For another thing, funding organisations advocating policies to reduce poverty also means strengthening the lobby for these issues in the EU and the member states (Bauer, 2002: 388-390). Even if NGOs do not always promote the same solutions as the Commission, they keep the topic on the agenda, and thus, for example, work as a balance to economic policies. Finally, the Commission also seeks to use NGOs as a channel to reach out to the citizens with the aim of raising awareness of and support to the social OMC and the EU in general. However, in this latter respect they have so far had little success. O'Connor (2005: 358) argues that while the OMC mechanisms reflect an opportunity for information sharing and policy learning, its realisation is not assured. The impact of the OMC on the fight against poverty and social exclusion is dependent on the governments' commitment and pressure by social forces within the member states. The latter is dependent on their involvement in the process of formulating and evaluating National Strategic Reports. There is little evidence of substantive influence of such involvement (de la Porte and Pochet, 2005).

To sum up, we can say that the European Commission's influence on national social policies within the OMC aims at cognitive transformation and works in discursive and indirect ways. While direct influence is minimal, Europeanisation arrives in subtle ways through the back door without any specific decision being taken in the national government or parliament. On this note, it can be compared to a fashion: without a clearly visible process, things come to be thought of and done in particular ways. How much impact this form of Europeanisation has and what ultimate form it takes varies from case to case and from country to country. Influence can also be twisted and turned, so that the initial European stimulus is not visible in the eventual outcome. This means that instead of looking for a formal borderline between European and national policies and competences, we should rather study either individual policies (and what influences them) or the mechanisms by which a given set of actors influences others.

An important open question for research is also what this kind of elusive influence means for democratic legitimacy. Up to this point, it is difficult to conceive

how democracy might be realised in a setting without clearly responsible agents. A key requirement in this respect would be to discuss publicly the alternative courses of political action, and open the debate also for views deviating from the dominant discourse (Usui, 2007: 629-631).

5. Conclusions

At the beginning of this article, we asked in how far social policy is an EU or a member state responsibility. The above delineation suggests that both actors are involved. The direct influence of the EU focuses mainly on the rules of working life and social security in connection to the free movement of labour. The embryonic steps towards the free movement of services, which potentially would put pressure on the institutional structures of the member-state social systems, are still in an early phase. The main emphasis in this article has been on the OMC and its influence on national social policy. Our analysis shows that for welfare policy there is no clear-cut division of labour, but the borderline between the national and the European levels is blurred. Although social policy is formally a national responsibility, in the frame of the OMC there is plenty of indirect and subtle impact which is not well known. Seen from a wider angle, this also means that the whole question of policy areas remaining purely national is absurd because as soon as countries start to cooperate, influences are impossible to block, although it may be that formally some policies are more federal than others. In the case of subtle and indirect Europeanisation, it would thus be of particular importance to discuss the values and goals of the activities openly.

Social policy deals with the value basis of individual countries, deep norms and traditional ways of behaviour. Compared to markets, these value bases can be more difficult to coordinate and integrate. Although there is widespread agreement that there is no such thing as one European social model, but rather a variety of models with some common features, the OMC can highlight particular characteristics of some of these models. The idea is that if some social systems are evidently doing better than others in dealing with unemployment, poverty and the financing of healthcare, lessons could be learnt from those more successful models. The Nordic countries, for example, are proud of their welfare state, although occasional criticisms occur. Do the Nordic nations represent a goal for the others, or rather a historical result which is difficult to imitate? O'Connor (2008: 356) raises the question whether this kind of policy-learning is possible in the EU25 (now 27), which is characterised by greater variability than before in the member states' resources for redistribution and in historical social-policy patterns. As highlighted in the second section of this article, the long history of national development of social policy systems embedded in specific societal context may act as a resistant to European mutual priorities and institutional integration. The same applies to values, which con-

tain both universal and national elements. The latter is indicated, for example, in the differing ways poverty is seen as a political problem demanding measures.

On the other hand, despite the differences, there are common problems, and it is easy to see that the way the member states deal with social problems may affect the other member states. The Roma people are an excellent example of such an issue in which the negative effects of member-state-level lack of commitment impact on other member states. This is thus a typical issue for EU-level activity. In fact, the Roma problem has risen on the OMC agenda since the 2007 enlargement, but whether the stronger EU engagement leads to policy changes remains to be seen.

Irrespective of the formal division of labour, social policy has to be analysed in a European framework. O'Connor (2005: 359) argues that the European dimension needs to be taken into account, to a varying extent depending on policy area, in analysing change over time and cross-national variation within the European Union, and in situating EU countries within a broader comparative policy framework. National policy-makers need to acknowledge and benefit this dimension, but should also pay more attention to the influence of ideas originating in EU processes and their implementation in the different national contexts. Processes impacting on the orientation of welfare policies should be explicitly included in public discussion.

The social OMC is not the only process that influences national welfare policies. Hence, for a researcher the task is to trace the appearance of ideas, in different combinations. For example, Örnberg (2008) refers to difficulties in pinpointing exactly where specific ideas come from. Sometimes concepts are first developed in academic research, and then picked up by some political actor. In addition to the EU, organisations such as the OECD, the UN, the European Council and the IMF can be promoting new ideas. Out of these, especially the OECD has generated influential concepts concerning social policies. What makes the OMC stand out in terms of such processes is the fact that here the policy goals are defined commonly on the European level (Borrás and Jacobsson, 2004: 197). This means that the general policy orientations might merge over time. Moreover, national social systems are also influenced by other EU processes, such as the European macro-economic policy, the single market, the common currency, and the European Employment Strategy. National social policies are thus influenced by many factors in different ways. Hence, although social policies are determined nationally, the European Union impacts on them in a multitude of different ways, and is therefore the most important external source of influence. At the same time, the member states can affect the European Union and try to convince both the EU and the other member states that a particular way of dealing with social problems would be better. An active discussion about different ways of doing things would also democratise the process by making it possible to learn from good practices in all corners of Europe.

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