Socialised into consensus-seeking? Normative commitments to the OMC after the enlargement of the EU

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Introduction

Specialised committees form an important part of the policy-making process in the European Union and are key sites for socialising national bureaucrats to accept certain rules and norms that institutions of the European Union represent or propagate. Paying attention to the socialising potential of such expert committees is especially interesting in the case of new modes of governance like the Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC), the acceptance and legitimacy of which is largely contested and debated. This paper focuses on the normative socialisation of committee representatives in one OMC committee, the Social Protection Committee (SPC).

The institutional framework of the OMC has been designed so that committees become 'discursive communities' (Schmidt 2002, 247), in which member state representatives discuss and debate about common normative frameworks, guidelines and opinions in specific policy areas. Thus, committees are the main fora for policy co-ordination among member state representatives. This process is said to be the basis of both the effectiveness and the legitimacy of the OMC (Mosher and Trubek 2003, Zeitlin 2005). On the one hand, as the strategy relies on the self-commitment of member states, it is usually argued that if discussions of member state representatives are not consensus-oriented, policy learning is less likely to occur (Puetter 2006). On the other hand, as committee members represent the link between national and European administrations, they play a crucial role in legitimating the OMC in the eyes of national bureaucrats who are in charge of policy-making. However, these representatives can only do so if they themselves embrace some legitimating principles of the OMC.

Doubts about the effectiveness of the OMC arose especially after the 2004 enlargement of the EU, when ten new member states joined the OMC committees. Since 2007, the number of member state delegates in the SPC is 54. Enlargement can be pictured as a cause of potential problems for many reasons, one of them being that due to the lack of socialisation of actors from new member states it can become more difficult to reach a real consensus in committees (about socialisation and enlargement, see Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2002). Therefore, it is essential to examine whether new committee members became socialised into the consensus-oriented nature of committees, or whether there are differences between the normative commitments of old and new committee members.

The structure of the paper is the following. First, the institutional setup of the OMC and the specific case of the social protection and social inclusion policy field are briefly

presented in order to show why it is important to pay attention to normative socialisation in OMC committees and particularly in the SPC. Second, the analytical framework on socialisation is outlined. The paper then turns to the empirical analysis, thus to the case study of the SPC, where the normative commitments of committee participants (commitments to the principles of communication, consensus and learning) are analysed. The final section presents the conclusions.

The Open Method of Co-ordination

The OMC was officially launched in 2000 at the Lisbon European Council (European Council 2000a) in order to define the new mode of governance that emerged with the already existing Broad Economic Policy Guidelines and the European Employment Strategy. Later on, the OMC was also introduced in other areas, most importantly in connection with social inclusion, pensions, and access to health care. These issues make up the so-called streamlined social protection and social inclusion agenda. This new method is said to help reaching the overarching goal of the Lisbon strategy: 'to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (European Council 2000a).

In addition, the OMC also forms part of the project of democratising EU decision-making through participatory governance (de la Porte and Nanz 2004). The involvement of 'social partners and civil society' in the coordination process 'using variable forms of partnership' is one of the main promises of the method (European Council 2000a). Furthermore, the normative anchoring of the OMC is also in its 'openness' and 'flexibility', its focus on 'cooperation', and its ability to promote 'learning' and 'greater convergence towards the main EU goals' (European Commission 2003, 8-10). At the same time, the OMC allows the EU and its member states to respect 'diversity' and the principle of 'subsidiarity' (European Commission 2003, 10). The European Commission's White Paper on European Governance describes the OMC the following way:

> 'The open method of co-ordination … is a way of *encouraging co-operation*, the exchange of best practice and agreeing common targets and guidelines for Member States, sometimes backed up by national action plans as in the case of employment and social exclusion. It relies on regular monitoring of progress to meet those targets, allowing Member States to compare their efforts and *learn from the experience of others*' (European Commission 2001, 21, emphasis added).

The institutional setup of the OMC has been designed to help reaching these goals of 'learning' and 'convergence'.

The co-ordination process within the OMC relies on 'administrative networks' which consist of various experts and public officials who continuously and repeatedly co-ordinate their actions, 'interact and exchange ideas and experiences' in several fora, and 'exert peer pressure on one another' (Borrás and Jacobsson 2004, 196). The establishment of fora for discussion, the most important of which are expert committees[1] that meet regularly, serves to enhance a '(self-)reflective debate' (Cohen and Sabel 2003, 346). The goal of committee discussions is to reach consensual decisions in areas where policy positions differ considerably, without any voting procedure, with every participant (representatives of every member state of the EU) ready for compromises and to accept the position of others.

However, these consensual decisions are not binding for member states in any formal sense. Therefore, as Jacobsson (2004, 359) put it: 'a key issue is how formally non-binding agreements can gradually become politically, socially and morally binding for the actors involved'. Jacobsson (2004, 356) conceptualises the mechanisms through which this becomes possible as being 'discursive regulatory mechanisms'. She argues that these mechanisms can only work if member states are 'committed to the cooperation procedures' (Jacobsson 2004, 366). This commitment was taken for granted before the enlargement. However, this cannot be as straightforwardly assumed in the case of new member states. Therefore, it is essential to pay attention to socialisation mechanisms and the normative commitments of committee members.

Social protection and social inclusion are among those policy areas where definitions of policy problems and ideas about potential solutions are the most diverse and contested. There is no clear 'vision' about how policies combating social exclusion should look like that is shared among the member states (de la Porte and Pochet 2002). Furthermore, social protection and social inclusion are 'politically highly sensitive' policy areas where the competence of the EU has always been questioned (Kröger 2006, 1). Therefore, it is particularly important to study the SPC that is responsible for the streamlined social protection and social inclusion process. While this committee faces many difficulties in agreeing on problem definitions and policy solutions, it is also under pressure to reach consensual decisions in order to give visibility to social issues and to justify its existence.

[1] In the cases of social inclusion, pensions and health care (streamlined social protection and social inclusion) the main responsible committee is the Social Protection Committee (SPC), for the European Employment Strategy, it is the Employment Committee (EMCO), and for economic policy co-ordination, it is the Economic Policy Committee (EPC).

Socialisation in committees: the framework for analysis

The assumption that institutions are sites for socialising actors is certainly not new. There are even studies that show that committee members who meet on the European level can change their loyalties, role perceptions and identities as a result of their participation in committee meetings (Egeberg 1999, Egeberg et al. 2003, Trondal 2001, Trondal and Veggeland 2003). When studying socialisation, several authors try to distinguish whether actors really internalise given norms or simply act according to them (see the distinction between Type I and Type II socialisation in Checkel 2005). This paper does not attempt to make this distinction, and would even argue that the examination of 'real' motivations of actors is not relevant in order to reveal how their actions and normative commitments can influence and legitimise the work of OMC committees.

Thus, instead of focusing on motivations, this paper centres on discursive actions of committee participants in order to study their normative commitments to the institution of the SPC. Furthermore, though it discusses socialisation, it does not treat institutions as static entities, but as 'living institutions' (Olsen 2000). This means that through their cooperation, actors continuously reinterpret and reconstruct their own institution. Thus, discourse also legitimates and interprets institutional arrangements. This interpretation process concerns the normative basis of institutional design and the different roles played by relevant actors within specific governance structures. This assumption is especially important in the case of such ambiguous processes as the OMC. Hajer (2006, 43) defines 'institutional ambiguity' the following way: 'there is no single "constitution" that pre-determines where and how a legitimate decision is to be taken. Actors bring their own assumptions about rules and authority. Consequently, the policy process itself becomes the site at which rules need to be negotiated'. This implies that this negotiation process itself is crucial in bringing about shared notions of rules, authority, and legitimacy. The participation of actors within an institutional context shape and construct that context but at the same time, the experience of cooperation transforms the actors themselves (Hajer and Versteeg 2005, Olsen 2000).

As it was mentioned above, this paper aims to study the individual commitments of actors to cooperation procedures. Thus, the concept of 'socialisation' here refers to a process of interaction through which actors embrace similar normative principles as bases of their actions in a given institutional setting. In order to judge these commitments, it is essential to see how this institutional setting is perceived and communicated and how modes of interaction shape the role perception and normative standpoints of actors. As the arguments

goes, without the support and commitment of new member states – thus without committee representatives being socialised into the OMC – the legitimacy and effectiveness of the OMC can weaken.

Due to the assumption of institutional ambiguity, the paper does not deal with pre-given principles of legitimacy or institutional norms that should be followed by old and new participants, though, as it will be shown, the principles described by interviewees partly reflect the 'official' definition of the OMC. In the absence of presumptions about the work of OMC committees, the first task is to identify the most important normative commitments based on interviews with committee delegates. Nevertheless, as many studies argue for the need for an existing commitment to consensus-seeking in committee meetings (see above) and interviews indeed show that this principle is important for committee members, consensus-seeking attitudes are given special attention in the analysis.

The next section compares some normative statements of different groups of committee representatives to see whether old and new actors perceive the SPC in similar or diverse ways. There are three main groups of participants that are distinguished: representatives from old member states who participate in SPC meetings from the beginning, delegates from old member states who became members after the enlargement (they can also be regarded as 'new' members of the SPC), and finally, new member state representatives. Based on this comparison through discourse analysis, conclusions can be drawn about the socialisation of different members of the committee.

Normative commitments or how the Social Protection Committee should work

After presenting some basic information on the SPC, this section analyses the main arguments of selected members of the SPC about values based on which the committee does or should work. All empirical material and citations that are referred to in this section are from semi-structured, anonymous interviews[2] with member state representatives of the SPC. The interviews are assumed to be discursive actions themselves, as interviewees can use them 'as a political instrument to further their views and goals' (Barbier 2004, 19). This means that the

[2] This preliminary empirical analysis is based on 12 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with member state representatives of the SPC. Among the 12 interviewees from member state administrations 4 is from new member countries, 5 has been a member of the SPC since its creation, and 3 is from old member states who became representatives after the enlargement. The interviews were conducted in the first half of 2006. Interview transcripts were numbered randomly, and the interviewees are quoted according to these numbers.

interviews can reveal what values the actors communicate and find important as the bases of their institutional action.

The Social Protection Committee

The SPC was established in 2000 (Council of the European Union 2000; re-established by Council of the European Union 2004), after the Nice European Council launched the Social Inclusion Process (European Council 2000b). The committee has four broad objectives: 'to make work pay and provide secure income, to make pensions safe and pension systems sustainable, to promote social inclusion and to ensure high quality and sustainable health care' (Council of the European Union 2004). One of the main tasks of the SPC is 'to prepare reports, formulate opinions or undertake other work within its fields of competence, at the request of either the Council or the Commission or on its own initiative' (Council of the European Union 2004).

Members of the SPC are representatives from the member states – in principle, two delegates from national ministries with two alternates if the member state is able to send this many people – and two representatives of the European Commission. The committee elects its chairperson from among the representatives for two years, which term is non-renewable. The chair is responsible for setting the agenda for SPC meetings. This person is assisted by a 'bureau' that consists of Commission representatives and four vice-chairpersons, two of whom are elected for two years, one is from the country holding the Presidency of the Council, and one is from the country of the following Presidency. The European Commission appoints a so-called secretary of the committee and provides organisational support for the SPC (Council of the European Union 2004).

In the following paragraphs, normative commitments of some delegates of the SPC are discussed. However, before the analysis, it has to be noted that only those principles are examined here that are, first, related to the effective work of the committee, and second, relevant in understanding the differences in emphases and approaches between old and new members of the SPC. These main principles that were chosen based on the interviews are the following. First, the SPC should work like a forum for discussion where the exchange of opinions is possible (commitment to communication). Second, a tradition of consensus-seeking should be maintained (commitment to consensus). Finally, the policy coordination process should result in some kind of learning (commitment to learning). This certainly means that the list of legitimating features of the OMC presented here is exclusive – even such

important principles as participation and subsidiarity (as it was described by the delegates) are left out. Furthermore, it is important to mention here that the differences between certain groups of interviewees are rarely sharp and there are exceptions in most cases. Thus, the findings can only be very cautiously generalised (if at all), especially based on the limited available information.

Commitment to communication: the SPC as a forum

The most widely accepted advantage of the OMC and the SPC in particular is that it is a 'valuable place of exchanging opinions' (Interviewee no. 6). Thus, the SPC is said to provide a 'forum for discussion' on a European level about social issues (Interviewee no. 9, 11). This forum is the main meeting point for representatives coming from certain national ministries. It is a place for 'networking' (Interviewee no. 6), to 'make contacts' (Interviewee no. 11), and to get to 'know the other stakeholders in Europe and to get used to them' (Interviewee no. 9). To quote one of the delegates:

> 'The SPC is a concrete way to legitimately have common discussions; which is not completely evident from a national point of view; the fact that the German can discuss with the French or the French with the Polish and so on, with the Greek and so on, on what could be considered as very national topics' (Interviewee no. 1).

Having meetings once a month allows delegates to have 'quite in-depth discussions' and to hear 'the position of different member states' (Interviewee no. 2). An essential feature of these discussions is that 'everybody has an opportunity to be involved'; as without such a 'formalised' coordination process only bilateral discussions would be possible and potentially not at the time when a country needs it (Interviewee no. 11).

The goal of committee discussions is 'sharing information' and 'sharing experiences with other member states' (Interviewee no. 7). This is especially interesting as the position of member states differs in many policy issues: 'we may not always agree, but we'd still talk to each other to try and find out what our position is about and try and understand what is there to say' (Interviewee no. 7). Sharing information and best practices can lead to the recognition that 'we're not the only one with problems in this matter' (Interviewee no. 9). Moreover, as one of the delegates put it:

> 'it's important to bring us together once a month for the SPC meeting, because then you see other member states' positions, sometimes you may discuss them more in detail, and then you may sometimes also adjust your positions and get other views' (Interviewee no. 2).

Thus, this 'circulation of ideas' (Interviewee no. 1) can also bring about changes in the way of thinking about particular problems in particular countries and ultimately, can lead to the 'sharing of goals' (Interviewee no. 1) and even to 'solving problems together' (Interviewee

no. 12). Reaching these common goals is possible because during the ‘dialogue’ between member states, delegates present ‘reasonable’ arguments (Interviewee no. 6): ‘everyone is in the business of convincing others’ (Interviewee no. 3). As one of the interviewees explained: ‘It’s not as if people are reading set pieces, they’re listening to what other people are saying, it’s a real debate, and it’s very important that it’d be that way’ (Interviewee no. 3).

The description of the SPC’s ideal way of working as a forum for discussion was there in all interviews and was valued positively in all cases. Nevertheless, there is certainly a difference between those who communicate that the SPC works like such a forum and those who think that the SPC should work according to this principle, but at present does not fulfil the requirements. The answers of delegates vary from the most positive through ambiguous to the most critical with the oldest members being on the positive side. New members of the SPC, no matter what country they come from, tend to be more critical about the actual work of the committee. However, the most critical attitude was that of a relatively old member of the SPC, but her answers should be treated cautiously as she was not coming from a national ministry but was an external expert. In her formulation: ‘the delegates of the committee appear to be less involved in real exchange and decision-making; this seems to be more in the hands of the functionaries of the permanent representations in Brussels (Interviewee no. 10). In other words, member states just talk, while the Commission, ‘like a tank’, pushes through documents (Interviewee no. 10).

There is also another difference between representatives, in this case between the ones coming from old and others from new member states. All interviewees somehow regarded the SPC as a link between national administrations, the Council of Ministers, and the European Commission. However, the perspectives differ. Some delegates coming from new member states mentioned an additional feature of the SPC as a forum that links different levels of policy-making. For them, the SPC is not only helpful because people who represent ministers can come together and discuss common problems – and those problems can become ‘European’ – but also because it is a forum that can ‘communicate easily with the ministers’ and can send ‘messages back’ to national ministries about what is going on at the European level (Interviewee no. 5). The best illustration for this attitude is the following quote: ‘you have to know what’s happening, because you have to know if you’re working like I am working on the European Union matters, you have to know what’s happening at the European level’ (Interviewee no. 8). This top-down perspective of talking about ‘Europe’ as something that should be accepted or known but not necessarily constituted will be discussed in relation to the principle consensus-seeking as well.

Commitment to consensus-seeking: maintaining the tradition

Most delegates emphasised that the SPC is not only a forum, but a forum with a special aim of reaching consensual decisions and common opinions. The OMC is regarded as a 'consensual process' in which all 'views are taken into account' (Interviewee no. 3). Such consensus should be 'recognised' by all the delegates and the Commission without any voting procedure.[3] Within the committee, 'everybody accepts the need to compromise' (Interviewee no. 7) and everybody should accept that the objective is to 'get a consensus, achieve and maintain the kind of *tradition of consensus* on issues, [and] listen to the range of views' (Interviewee no. 3, emphasis added).

As most representatives agree, reaching such consensus – or compromise – is certainly not easy, as the starting points of member states are different: 'there are some fairly different viewpoints within the committee, but we still nevertheless enter our consensus' (Interviewee no. 7). Or in a different formulation:

> 'normally we try and thresh it out till we get something which sometimes a compromise, where, you know, the opposing sides can live with it, sometimes we can change some procedural things so that's right, sometimes we come back and gain an agreement later' (Interviewee no. 4)

The consensus or agreement that is reached in the end allows member states 'to identify common objectives' (Interviewee no. 3), as the ultimate goal is 'to have a common view' (Interviewee no. 2) on certain important issues and 'a mutually acceptable outcome' (Interviewee no. 3).

Again, the consensual nature of the OMC and the need to find a compromise between member states was accepted by all interviewees. Certainly, differences in accents occur, especially in two respects: first, in giving reasons why such consensus is necessary (including the reference to the visibility of social issues), and second, in evaluating the role of the Commission and the chair of the SPC. These differences are discussed in turn.

For most delegates, having a common view as a result of a consensual process is important, 'because the SPC also communicates', so achieving a 'common SPC document' is vital in order to make the voices of member state representatives heard in the Council and in different fora (Interviewee no. 2). Here lies the 'political' nature of the committee: in order to influence the Council, a consensus or a compromise should be presented that reflects the opinion of all member states (Interviewee no. 8). In general, nevertheless, old members of the

[3] Quoting Interviewee no. 3: 'We've never had a vote at SPC; never ever had to have a vote. People just recognise a consensus (…). We've never failed in the 6 years to agree on a document'.

SPC talk about this feature of the SPC with more certainty. New delegates mention the need for a compromise or consensus (mostly compromise in their formulation) less frequently and often without giving any reasons why it is so important. Furthermore, new members of the committee, especially coming from old member states appear to be more critical about this consensus-seeking tradition: 'as long as competences are mainly based in member states, it's necessary to find a compromise; otherwise the reaction would be very negative (...) if a big member state (…) felt neglected or just overruled' (Interviewee no. 9). They seem to be less attached to the SPC and emphasise instead much more their loyalty to their respective government or ministry.

The visibility of social issues on the European level is a specific reason linked to the need for consensus. Interviews suggest that an important feature that can legitimate the OMC in social policy-related fields is that through this process, 'social policy and social questions [are put] more highly on the agenda' (Interviewee no 11). Several delegates argued that 'it's necessary to give social policy some place to discuss in Europe' (Interviewee no. 9) in order to counterbalance economic policy harmonisation and coordination. For some – mostly for old members of the committee – the visibility of the 'social dimension' is important on its own (Interviewee no 2). Others took a more pragmatic approach and argued that 'for Europe it is important not to neglect the social policy, because it's closely related with reputation and its legitimacy (…); if it's only about market and competition, then (…) people [might] say that "we don't like this kind of Europe"' (Interviewee no. 9). In other words, the social dimension should be taken up at European level, as 'Europe needs it and people want to hear it' (Interviewee no 3). Interestingly, using the visibility of social issues as a potential argument for legitimating the OMC is completely missing from the interviews of delegates coming from new member states. This can be due to their lack of 'historical' perspective on the SPC and the OMC[4].

A further difference that can be observed is that the top-down perspective discussed above appears again in the case of some delegates coming from new member states. As one of them said, 'it's important to get to the ministers a clear message understood by the whole committee' (Interviewee no. 5). Or else: 'it's very interesting how it is possible to find a compromise for all countries; it's very difficult from the Commission's side I think (…) the Commission has to find the best solution for all the member states' (Interviewee no. 12). These quotes show that the interviewee her- or himself, as a supposed-to-be voice of minister assumes to play a less active role in finding a consensus or a compromise.

[4] As a delegate from a new member state put it: 'we got on when the committee was running and no-one really explained to us what was the role of the committee and how it functions' (Interviewee no. 6).

The latter quote also draws the attention to differences between delegates in describing the role of the Commission and the chair of the SPC. In the case of old members, the Commission and the chair appear to be neutral facilitators of getting a consensual view: a consensus is reached 'with the help of the Commission, with the help of the secretariat and the chair' (Interviewee no. 7). The role of the chair is especially vital; as one of the interviewees put it: 'one of the reasons why we have the current chair is because if he as an ordinary member (…) practices as a voice of compromise suggesting ways to go about, that's one of the reasons why he was elected as chairman' (Interviewee no. 7). The role of the chair in maintaining the tradition of consensus is acknowledged even more explicitly by a delegate from a new member state: 'the Social Protection Committee, as [the chair] said himself, it's a political thing, and you are looking for a compromise' and 'when there was a conflict [the chair] explained to us that this is different from other meetings, this is a political meeting as well' (Interviewee no. 8). These quotes also reflect the socialisation process of the SPC, as the interviewee referred to statements of the chair about the importance and the consensual nature of discussions. Thus, in these cases, normative principles appear as phrases mentioned by someone else – even if this someone else is an authoritative member of the committee.

The role of the Commission is judged in a more controversial manner. As it was mentioned in the previous paragraph, in the interviews with old members of the SPC, the Commission, along with the chair, is a relatively passive facilitator of consensual decisions[5]. In contrast, in the case of new members of the committee, the Commission is said to play a much more active role, which is judged either negatively (in the case of most delegates from old member states) or neutrally or positively (in the case of new member state representatives). New member state representatives refer to the Commission as having a role in finding the 'best solution for all the member states' (Interviewee no. 12), or find it important that in the SPC they can find out 'how the Commission would like to do' things (Interviewee no. 5), or even describe the coordination process as a useful tool for the Commission 'to look how the member states are performing and how the member states are reforming their policies' (Interviewee no. 5).

Commitment to learning: widening horizons

As 'learning' is often mentioned as a desired end-state of policy coordination, it also has to be discussed here. Attitudes of delegates towards learning influence their normative positions

[5] With the exception of the external expert member of the SPC, who described the Commission as a 'tank' that gets its views across.

about the whole cooperation process and necessarily play a role in shaping the perception of the OMC in national ministries.

The most widespread understanding of 'learning' is basically sharing information, widening horizons and learning about how other countries solve certain problems without actually mentioning potential policy results: 'the goal is making this (…) not in order to negotiate or influence more, but in order to learn more. Because here we have, it's a European network, so we could be more aware of what is at stake and how it works in the other countries' (Interviewee no. 1). Or, as another delegate put it: 'one of their clear benefits would be if member states were looking for comparisons to see how other countries were doing and therefore learning lessons from them' (Interviewee no. 4). A specific perspective of new member states can be seen from the following quote: 'definitely we understand more different countries, especially I think the old member states understand more about the new member states right now than they used to a year ago or a year and a half ago' (Interviewee no. 6). This type of understanding of learning can be found in most interviews that discuss learning as an important feature of the OMC in any way, no matter from which country the interviewee came from. Nevertheless, it has to be noted here that most delegates coming from old member states did not even mention learning throughout the interviews, and one new member from an old member state even talked about it with a negative tone.

Knowing this absence of commitment to learning in the case of old member state delegates, it is not surprising that the most important difference between representatives is that all interviewees who talked about effective outcomes as results of a learning process were from new member states (with the exception of the chair of the SPC[6], but that is a somewhat specific case). New member state delegates emphasised that it is important 'to get the experience from the other countries, and maybe to take in our legislation some ideas' (Interviewee no. 12). Or else, a representative from a new member state claimed that: 'for us it's interesting how Ireland is working with child poverty, or for example Netherlands is trying to liberalise the services especially in the area of employment services; and trying to sort of look at it and think about it how to incorporate it into [our] systems' (Interviewee no. 5).

There exists a third formulation of learning, but it can solely be found in answers of the chair of the SPC. This understanding of learning refers to the 'moral influence' of Europe, thus the ability of Europe to influence the 'priorities' of member states 'without (…) being

[6] As he put it: 'at the end of the day, that's the only point of doing it, to have an effective outcome for people at national level'.

able to direct them'. Interestingly, this partly coincides with the Commission's understanding of the OMC.

Conclusion

The above analysis studied the main normative commitments of old and new committee members to cooperation procedures. It distinguished three main principles expressed by interviewees based on which the SPC should work – the principle of communication, the principle of consensus and the principle of learning – and examined the different understandings of and commitments to these principles. The role of this final section is to draw some conclusions about the normative socialisation of committee members based on the above findings. Again, the present study is not interested in the specific motivations of different actors. Instead, it analysed whether delegates acknowledge that discussions and consensus-seeking are *the* appropriate and '*the* legitimate ways of reaching decisions' (Egeberg 1999, 460, emphasis original) and that learning is among the legitimate goals of the OMC. This acknowledgement or acceptance does not necessarily mean internalisation; it only concerns the actors' recognition that the SPC operates in certain ways, which needs to be communicated.

The analysis does not support initial expectations about the lack of socialisation of new member state representatives. Though to different degrees, but all interviewees accepted that the SPC works on the basis of ongoing discussions and consensus-seeking. Furthermore, it was not delegates from new member states that were the most critical about these principles of cooperation and their realisation in the SPC, but those coming from old member states who became committee members after the enlargement. Certainly, representatives with different backgrounds had different perspectives on communication and consensus and about their own role in achieving these. In general, delegates from new member states showed a more passive attitude towards consensus-seeking, relying on the active participation of the Commission much more. This can also be seen from a more top-down perspective on communication and the emphasis on getting information coming from the European level.

Thus, the analysis suggests that the effectiveness and the legitimacy of the OMC are not undermined because of the lack of consensus-orientation of new committee members. Nevertheless, one has to be aware that without being able to give reasons why such a consensus is important, this principle can be only an empty phrase instead of a clear value to follow. In this context, it seems to be a rather crucial difference that the socialisation process

of delegates from old member states started when debates on the OMC were more heightened, whereas representatives from new member states simply had to accept the existence of such a coordination process.

Another important finding of the present paper is about commitments to learning as a desired end-state of the policy process. Undoubtedly, it makes a difference if a member state representative attends committee meetings to gain more information or with a more or less clear reform-agenda in mind. From the interviews it seems that the OMC is much more about learning in the sense of changing policies for new member state delegates than for old ones, which is interesting considering the fact that learning became a keyword in describing the OMC in many studies and official documents. This eagerness to learn from the side of new member states representatives can be attributed to a greater influence of the Commission within the socialisation process, but the present analysis certainly cannot confirm this presumption. What appears from the interviews, nevertheless – as it was already mentioned above – is that delegates from new member states indeed regard the Commission as playing an active and significant role within the SPC.

A next step in future research can be to look at how these different understandings, commitments and role perceptions – thus the process of socialisation – influence the outcomes of the policy process. Additionally, more interviews should be conducted, which can make it possible to generalise the findings to a greater extent, and to answer new questions about the differences between perceptions that arose during this study.

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