Committee Governance after the Enlargement of the EU: the Institutionalisation of Cooperation within the Social Protection Committee

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Abstract

Specialised committees form an important part of the policy-making process in the European Union. After the 2004 enlargement of the EU, the institutional setup of these committees and the practice of 'committee governance' have been considerably challenged. The Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC) is a mode of governance in which the work of expert committees is essential. Open and consensus-oriented discussions in committee meetings are regarded as a precondition of the success of the OMC and as a basis of its legitimacy. However, with ten new member states joining OMC committees, the institutional conditions of discussions change. This article provides a discursive conceptual framework for analysing the undergoing changes, and applies it to the case of the Social Protection Committee.

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1.   Introduction

Specialised committees form an important part of the policy-making process in the European Union. After the 2004 enlargement of the EU and the inclusion of ten new member states, the institutional setup of these committees and the practice of 'committee governance' have been considerably challenged. The Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC) is a new mode of governance in which expert committees play an essential role. This article focuses on the institutionalisation of the committee phase of the OMC after the enlargement of the EU, examining specifically 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 deliberate 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). 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). In other words, if there are no substantial discussions with the involvement of all participants, the OMC is neither legitimate nor successful. Enlargement can be pictured as a cause of potential problems in this respect for many reasons. For example, one might argue that due to the lack of socialisation of actors from new member states (see Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2002), or because of the increasing diversity of policy positions (Scharpf 2002), it becomes more difficult or impossible to reach a consensus.

Therefore, it is essential to analyse whether enlargement can transform this procedural aspect of the OMC, and if yes, in what ways. Most authors emphasise that successful discussions require certain institutional conditions (Risse 2000, Hemerijck 2004). Consequently, there is a need to study whether and how these conditions changed after the enlargement of the EU. In order to do so, this article develops a discursive conceptual framework for

analysing the potential impacts of enlargement on the committee phase of the OMC. The analysis will focus on the *institutionalisation* of the work of committees through the case study of the SPC.

The structure of the article is the following. First, the institutional setup of the OMC and the role of the SPC are briefly presented. Second, the conceptual framework of the analysis is outlined. The framework centres on the discursive, inter-subjective institutionalisation of new governance arrangements. The article then turns to the empirical analysis, thus to the case study of the SPC. Attention is paid to the organisation of interaction within the SPC after the enlargement and to the role perception, normative commitment and relationships of its members. The analysis has to reveal the potential differences between old and new actors in these respects. The final section presents the conclusions.

2. 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 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'. As Frank Vandenbroucke (2002: 9) noted when he was the Minister for Social Affairs and Pensions of the Belgian Federal Government:

> 'the open method of co-ordination is both a cognitive and a normative tool. It is a 'cognitive' tool, because it allows us to learn from each other. In my opinion, this learning process is not restricted to the practice of other Member States, but also extends to their underlying views and opinions, an area that is no less important. Open co-ordination is a 'normative' tool because, necessarily, common objectives embody substantive views on social justice. Thus open co-ordination gradually creates a European social policy paradigm'.

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).

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[1] In the cases of social inclusion, pensions and health care (streamlined social protection and social inclusion) the main responsible committee is the Social

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 so straightforwardly assumed in the case of new member states.

2.1 The Social Protection Committee

Social protection and social inclusion are among those policy areas where definitions of policy problems and ideas about potential solutions are the most diverse, debated 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.

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).

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 SPC 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).

The main tasks of the SPC – which has an advisory status – are the following (see Council of the European Union 2004):

(1) 'to monitor the social situation and the development of social protection policies in the Member States and the Community';
(2) 'to promote the exchanges of information, experience and good practice between Member States and with the Commission'; and
(3) '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'.

Since the Treaty of Nice, these tasks are also listed in the EC Treaty (Article 144).

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). The committee also established an Indicators' Sub-Group that is responsible for the development of indicators and for providing statistical support.

3. Conceptual framework

The discursive conceptual framework of this article is developed to analyse the institutionalisation process of new governance arrangements such as the OMC. It focuses on the ways in which the actors involved in such governance processes perceive, enact, and make sense of them. As enlargement means that new actors started to be actively involved in co-ordination and policy-making processes in OMC committees, this framework is especially useful to examine the institutionalisation of committee governance in this period.

Within this framework,

> 'discourse serves to explain political events, to legitimate political actions, to develop political identities, to reshape and/or reinterpret political history and, all in all, to frame the … political discussion' (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004: 202-203).

Institutions influence who can be an important actor in these discussions; when, how and where. Furthermore, 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.

Paying attention to how actors enact and interpret institutional norms is especially crucial in the case of 'institutional ambiguity' (Hajer 2006, Hajer and Versteeg 2005). In this context,

> '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' (Hajer 2006: 43).

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). A concept that helps the analysis of this inter-subjective construction of institutions and participants is

'performance' (Hajer 2006, Hajer and Versteeg 2005). If one assumes that discourses are speech *acts*, then the 'contextualised interaction itself is seen as producing social realities' (Hajer and Versteeg 2005: 345).

The case of committees within the OMC represent an interesting case of institutional ambiguity, especially after the enlargement, as new actors have had only vague ideas about how policy coordination was working. As one committee representative from a new member state described:

> 'The problem is that we got on when the committee was running and no-one really explained to us what is the role of the committee and how it functions (…), it was more or less learning by doing' (Interviewee no. 6).

Although there are pre-defined rules that structure action – as it was shown in the discussion of the OMC above – actors are mainly left alone to work out their own rules and sources of authority. Committee discussions can be regarded as performances, during which actors (committee members) enact and communicate the normative basis of their institutional setting (consensus and cooperation). Through discursive practices they construct themselves as participants (Hajer 2006).

Performing policy processes within certain institutional contexts brings about 'living institutions' (Olsen 2000) through the process of institutionalisation (Olsen 1997). When actors start to enact and interpret certain organisational rules and norms and they do so in a more and more regular way, the process of institutionalisation starts. The present analysis focuses on two main dimensions of institutionalisation as defined by Olsen (1997: 213): first, the 'structuralization and routinization of behavior', and second, 'linking resources to values and world-views'.[2]

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[2] There is a third element of institutionalisation in Olsen's framework, 'standardization, homogenization and authorization of codes of meaning and ways of reasoning' (Olsen 1997: 213), which is not discussed here. It is certainly a crucial element from a discursive perspective; however, it can partly be set aside when one aims to analyse changes in the organisation of and commitment to decision-making procedures. Nevertheless, it is in part taken into account under the heading of the other two elements of institutionalisation.

According to Olsen (1997: 213), the first element of institutionalisation is the 'structuralization and routinization of behavior' within governance structures. Within the present framework, this behaviour should be interpreted as the mode of interaction: the way of discussing, communicating and interpreting issues. Modes of interaction or 'requirements of communication' (March and Olsen 1995: 175) become conventionalised, well-established and legitimate while adapting to formal and informal rules which are less and less contested and directly reflected on. All through the institutionalisation process, actors' continually enact and interpret the existing institutional setting itself, but this becomes decreasingly visible and evident. As a result of a series of discussions and interpretative practices, actors begin to perceive their role, the structures they act in and the legitimacy of their decisions more and more similarly.

The other element of institutionalisation in Olsen's framework is 'linking resources to values and world-views', which means that

> 'resource mobilization and principles of resource allocations are routinized' (Olsen 1997: 213).

Within the framework presented here these resources or capabilities are conceptualised to be inter-subjective as well: they are dependent on the perceptions and interpretations of actors that evolve through discursive practices. Individual capabilities and resources are context-dependent, so are power and authority. Modes of interaction also require and facilitate certain distributions of power. For example, in a coordinative setting, power is typically interpreted as being 'dispersed' (Schmidt 2002: 239); thus, participants tend to perceive each other more as equals. The institutionalisation of governance structures strengthens these perceptions and routinises modes of resource mobilisation; but again, this process does not prevent their repeated reinterpretation.

After the 2004 enlargement, one can identify several factors influencing or disrupting the ongoing routinisation of behaviour and the mobilisation of resources within the context of OMC committees. For example, these factors can be: the increasing

number of committee representatives; the professional background and relationship of committee members; or specific organisational practices that can reflect power relations among old and new actors. Certainly, these perceived relations influence the nature of discussions within the SPC: if members do not regard each other as equals, discussions cannot be regarded as honest, and participation is not effective in the case of all representatives.

Furthermore, in order to study the individual commitment of actors to cooperation procedures, it is essential to see how the institutional setting is perceived, communicated and performed, and how modes of interaction and their routinisation shape the role perception and normative standpoints of actors (see also Egeberg 1999). Without the support and commitment of new member states – in other words, without committee representatives being socialised into the OMC – the legitimacy and effectiveness of the OMC can weaken. Thus, committee discussions can only be successful if committee members themselves acknowledge[3] that cooperation and consensus are *the* appropriate and '*the* legitimate ways of reaching decisions' (Egeberg 1999: 460, emphasis original).

As it was introduced in the discussion about the OMC, this article regards cooperation among actors in the form of open, inclusive and consensual discussions as the main (procedural) normative bases of the design of OMC committees, as these are the most prevalent in both academic and European policy discourses. Thus, the analysis has to reveal how actors' interactions and discourses are organised around the theme of consensus and cooperation, and how the setting of OMC committees is performed and become institutionalised as consensual and cooperative. It is important to note here, nevertheless, that the analysis does not seek to provide explanations for why certain actors perform their roles in certain ways; it only discusses how participants construct their own role and the governance arrangements they act in.

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[3] Acknowledgement or acceptance does not necessarily mean internalisation. It only concerns the actors' recognition that OMC committees operate in a certain way, which needs to be communicated.

4. Case study: the Social Protection Committee

This section of the article discusses some impacts of the 2004 enlargement on the institutionalisation of the SPC. The analysis illustrates how the above presented discursive conceptual framework can be used for empirical evaluation, and in particular, how changes in committee governance can be assessed. All empirical material and citations that are referred to in the next section are from semi-structured, anonymous interviews with member state representatives of the SPC.[4] 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 interviews can reveal what values the actors communicate and find important as the bases of their institutional action.

4.1 Performing consensus: role perceptions and the organisation of interaction

The nature of discussions, their interpretation and the commitment to common normative standards are the first important phenomena to study. If discussions are not open and consensual, or committee members do not interpret them this way, the effectiveness and legitimacy of OMC committee decisions can weaken. When asked about organisational practices after the enlargement, member state delegates listed several factors that can disrupt the openness of discussions. Most of them referred to changes in the working methods of the SPC due to the increased number of delegations. Since the SPC has more than fifty members with the inclusion of new member states, it has to rely on written procedures (discussions through emailing) much more often. Furthermore, there is little

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[4] The empirical analysis is based on 13 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with member state representatives of the SPC and 3 with officials of the European Commission who attend SPC meetings regularly. Among the 13 interviewees from member state administrations 5 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.

room for longer discussions in SPC meetings. Therefore, delegates are encouraged to make short interventions that are not longer than three to four minutes, or not to intervene at all if an opinion was already articulated by somebody else. One consequence of this limited possibility to intervene is that those with less experience in attending such meetings are less likely to participate actively. This applies mostly to delegates from new member states. A further problem, as it was pointed out by some of the delegates, is a more extensive reliance on using interpretation services instead of speaking only in English or French, which makes interactions longer and more complicated. Certainly, with these informal rules and language difficulties in place, substantial discussions become more difficult to reach.

Some delegates mentioned another organisational factor that influences discussions. There is a high turnover rate in SPC membership in the case of some member states, especially the new and small ones. There are two main reasons for this phenomenon. First, there are often different experts in the national administrations responsible for the different topics discussed by the SPC. Second, new member states could not always find delegates who could stay in the committee for a longer period of time. As a result of the partly changing membership of the SPC, delegates 'do not know each other that well' (Interviewee no. 2) to discuss issues in an informal manner. Furthermore, new delegates do not always appreciate – or simply know about – previous agreements, which can hinder further discussions.

Nevertheless, interviews show that most member state delegates regard the SPC as a 'valuable forum for exchanging opinions' (Interviewee no. 6), regardless of the scepticism expressed by some of them about the working methods or the difficulties in having in-depth discussions. They emphasised the importance of exchanging information and argued that the SPC allows member states to 'learn from each other' (Interviewee no. 9). Delegates highlighted that the OMC is a 'consensual process' (Interviewee no. 9), a 'dialogue' (Interviewee no. 6) that is built on cooperation among member states, and in which disagreements are resolved by in-depth, 'ongoing discussions' (Interviewee no. 7). In this process, it is perceived to be essential for the SPC to reach a 'consensus' or a

'compromise' at the end of all debates (almost all interviewees mentioned these terms), and to come up with a position that is 'commonly shared' by all the representatives. These 'common opinions' were seen as the main determinants of the success of the SPC (e.g. Interviewee no. 7). Some delegates also emphasised the importance of developing common indicators, as common definitions and understandings were not available before. The general atmosphere of the meetings is described to be 'friendly' (e.g. Interviewee no. 6), where all representatives are equals.

However, there are some observable differences between old and new members of the SPC – whereas the term new delegates here encompasses delegates from both old and new member states. Those who have been representatives for less than two years (i.e. became delegates after the 2004 enlargement) tend to be much more critical about the working of the committee, and they refer to keywords such as consensus, cooperation or common values less often. This is especially true for new delegates from old member states, who tend to talk less about the abstract principles on which the OMC or the SPC rest. They seem to be less attached to the SPC and emphasise instead much more their loyalty to their respective government or ministry.[5] In the answers of new delegates, the European Commission or the European Union in general often appears to be something outside or even against the member states. For example, one delegate descried the Commission as a 'tank' that can even override member states in order to achieve its goals (Interviewee no. 4).

Furthermore, answers of new representatives reflect the socialisation process of the SPC more explicitly, referring to statements of the chair or representatives of the European Commission 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

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[5] About 'representational ambiguity' and its analysis see Trondal and Veggeland (2003). One form of role ambiguity can be well illustrated with one statement of a committee representative: 'It is a little bit difficult for me to get into this mentality, because I am a technocrat, I am not a politician; but gradually, you understand' (Interviewee no. 5).

an authoritative member of the committee. One delegate from a new member state, for example, referred repeatedly to statements of the chair of the SPC and their impact on her thinking:

> 'The Social Protection Committee, as [the chair] said himself, is a political thing, and you are looking for a compromise' (Interviewee no. 5),

or

> '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. 5).

From these quotations it also seems clear that the chair of the SPC plays an important role in making the delegates understand what the main values of the committee are and in formulating their commitment to the SPC and to the OMC as an institution.

4.2 Authority and resource mobilization: equal participation in cooperation?

Relationships between actors and power distributions can influence the effective participation of committee representatives. Therefore, it is essential to study how resources are perceived to be distributed within the SPC. Although all interviewees claimed that everyone has the same right to participate, most of them acknowledged that opportunities and competencies differ. The main individual resource mentioned by delegates is 'expertise' (e.g. Interviewee no. 2) or 'knowledge' (Interviewee no. 6). When asked directly, most of them refused the presumption that new member state delegates do not have as much expertise as those from old member states (there were some exceptions, see in connection with recruitment). However, it was acknowledged by some that those who have been involved in policy issues related to social protection and social inclusion for a longer time are more 'listened to' (Interviewee no. 2). If there is any country grouping mentioned in this regard, then it is the distinction between large and small member states. Here the main argument is that small member states have fewer resources; therefore, they are not able to send their best experts to SPC meetings, or sometimes they are not able to send anybody at all.

This certainly hinders their effective participation in committee meetings.

Besides expertise, three more sources of respect were mentioned in the interviews: size of the country of the delegate, the ability to reach a compromise, and neutrality (opinion independent from the official position of a member state). These latter two are particularly interesting, especially considering the fact that all delegates are claimed to be primarily member state representatives who are bound by the official position of their ministers. Bringing up neutrality, therefore, points to the direction of a normative orientation towards consensus-oriented, substantive discussions about common concerns.

Neutrality can be especially achieved by those who have formal positions within the SPC: the respective chairpersons of the SPC and the Indicators' Sub-Group, and the vice-chairs of the SPC (Interviewee no. 10). The chairs are usually not bound by their national governments, as their main role is to help finding consensual solutions. It is the chairperson who defines the agenda of the SPC meetings consulting the secretary, with the Commission having a right of initiative, which is discussed by the bureau the night before the meeting. Presently, one of the vice-chairs is from a new member state. The chairperson can also make a ruling if member state representatives cannot achieve consensus in certain areas. Furthermore, as it was shown above, the chairperson plays an active role in making delegates learn and understand their role as members of the SPC.

Recruitment is one aspect in which some representatives from new member states observed a difference between old and new members. SPC representatives from the old member states are in general senior public servants, while those who come from new member states are usually younger and less influential. As one delegate from a new member state explained, senior officials tend not to come to meetings because they do not speak the working languages of the SPC (i.e. English or French) and would have problems without interpretation services, which are not always available for every country. This lack of senior representatives is observed to be a problem for two main reasons. First, senior officials are usually

more experienced and have more expertise in a given policy area. Second, without senior representatives, 'there is not enough support from the minister' (Interviewee no. 8). Both because of their expertise and status, senior officials would have the opportunity to 'talk more freely' and they would be 'more flexible in making decisions in the meetings' (Interviewee no. 8). Junior members have to consult their colleagues back in their ministries more often. This happens many times only after the committee meeting itself, which makes it impossible for these members to contribute effectively.

Finally, 'discourse coalitions' (Hajer 2003) are said to be based on similar policy traditions in member states and can vary from issue to issue, as it was perceived by some member state delegates. Others see these alliances as more stable along ideological lines. There seems to be two main groups of countries who differ in the way they define the role of social policy (e.g. the UK and the Netherlands on the one hand, France, Belgium and Luxembourg on the other hand). New member states mostly joined these groupings. However, enlargement altered the balance of power in member state positions; it is especially the United Kingdom that is seen to have gained more allies from among the new member states. Nevertheless, all delegates agreed that there are no discourse coalitions based on an old-new member state distinction. Delegates from new members states feel that they are part of these alliances and are involved in the discussions.

5. Conclusion

This article aimed to provide an assessment of the impacts of the 2004 enlargement on the institutionalisation of committee governance within the OMC based on a discursive conceptual framework. It argued that in a context of institutional ambiguity that increased after the enlargement, it is essential to study how participants perform and commit themselves to coordination procedures. The case study of the SPC showed that enlargement has influenced the institutionalisation of committee discussions as it is perceived to have an impact, first, on the organisation of interactions, second, on the role perceptions and normative

commitments of actors, and finally on the routinisation of resource mobilization and the relationships of participants.

Certainly, this article does not want to suggest anything about how the SPC worked before the enlargement. Though the institutionalisation of the OMC has been going on since its creation, enlargement represents an important moment in this process. Enlargement has challenged several features of the initial institutional setting of OMC committees and changed the experience of cooperation. The changing rules and values that are listed in this article are perceived to be important by the actors themselves. The details of the institutional context discussed here show how participants in the SPC (re)construct their institution vis-à-vis such momentums as the enlargement. Member state delegates perform and transform their role in light of the perceived changes – and communicate it to the outsider.

As the discussion in the previous section showed, enlargement influenced the institutional setup of the SPC as it changed the organisation of meetings, mainly due to the large number and turnover of representatives. SPC meetings are in many respects not regarded as fora for substantial and inclusive discussions. Delegates noted that there is no time to give the floor to everyone to talk, and many opinions are presented only later in writing. Meetings become more and more formal, while written procedures gain importance. These changes also strengthen the increasing inequality of committee members. Representatives are not perceived to be equals in their expertise, seniority and experience. All these factors make it difficult to create commitments towards common goals and the procedures themselves.

Furthermore, after the enlargement, the number of delegates who had not been socialised into the work of the SPC grew considerably. Not only new member states got involved in the process, but also some representatives from the old member states changed. This is partly due to the fact that more and more issues are discussed in SPC meetings, which require the involvement of new experts. These new delegates are still in the process of learning how the SPC works and based on what kind of values; therefore, they act upon and perform these values to a much lesser extent. However,

interviews showed that – contrary to expectations – it is not the representatives from new member states who are the least likely to accept, communicate and commit themselves to procedures of cooperation. New delegates from old member states show less willingness to learn to participate and are much more sceptical about common concerns.

Thus, enlargement seems to have influenced the inter-subjective institutionalisation of committee meetings, which can be seen especially from how representatives described and reconstructed the consensual and equal nature of meetings of the SPC. However, the impacts of enlargement on the self-identification of member state delegates is less clear. On the one hand, old representatives from old member states have not become more sceptical about the success of the OMC and still see consensus and cooperation as an essential part of it. On the other hand, while new delegates do not question the basic normative principles of meetings and the whole coordination process, they tend to be more critical about them and do not participate fully in performing and communicating the OMC as a consensual process. The question that remains is whether these new representatives are going to be socialised into the SPC, or the changing institutional setting will influence their perceptions about the nature of the OMC.

Undoubtedly, these changes have consequences for the practice of committee governance in general. The case of the SPC has been interesting to study because of the particularly ambiguous and contested character of its institutional setup. At the same time, there are several other type of committees that differ in their organisation, tasks and bases of legitimation. Nevertheless, the institutional setting has probably been challenged in the case of all committees, which can result in changing working methods and role perceptions of their actors. Further comparative studies can reveal how these changes influence socialisation processes and the performance of actors within committee governance in the EU.

Acknowledgements

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