



Inside the Social Open Method of Coordination. The Hard Politics of 'Soft'
Governance

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Abstract (EN)

Inside the Social Open Method of Coordination: the Hard Politics of 'Soft' Governance

The process of European integration has irreversibly altered the configuration of national welfare states. In spite of formidable institutional and political hurdles, incremental European social regulation led to the development of a genuine EU social policy. This PhD is mainly concerned with one particular 'soft' EU social policy instrument: the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion ('Social OMC'). The ambition is to understand *whether and how the Social OMC has become a significant element in the shaping of national and EU policies*, alongside and in interaction with other policy instruments.

The main thesis put forward is that the Social OMC – in spite of skeptical academic accounts and repeated attempts to weaken the process – 15 years after its formal launch continues to appeal to EU and domestic actors because it is seen as a tool with an added value in at least two respects. First, the OMC's 'soft' tools *are being used by policymakers and stakeholders alike* to shape key phases of the 'hard' policy development process. Second, under certain conditions, the OMC *operates as a catalyst or selective amplifier* for reform strategies, and as a consequence has both substantive and procedural effects on domestic and EU policymaking.

This PhD thus shows that OMC in different policy areas is felt and perceived as being much 'harder' than could be expected. Non-binding measures are far from being perceived as irrelevant by the Member States and the decision-making process leading to their adoption involves *hard politics of 'soft' governance*.