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**The Open Method of Coordination,  
a Cross-Border Mechanism for Social Practice**

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**Abstract:** In the light of the debate on the future of the European Union a new topic has started. This topic is represented by Europeanization process and its profound impact upon the public policy of the member states. In order to understand it, since 1990s, the EU has included “new modes of governance” in its arsenal of policy-making instruments, among others the open method of coordination. The open method of coordination is one of the instruments that attract a particular attention of scholars, being described as “*primus inter pares*”. The open method of coordination is a cross-border mechanism that aims to create a coherent social practice between the European Union member states. In this paper the author addresses the following query: in what extent uses Romania this mechanism for increasing coherence between its social practice and European ones? For answering have been drawn the subsequent objectives: (1) describing the instrument and the operational process of the open method of coordination, stressing the comparative perspective between community method and open method of coordination; (2) researching on historical development and main features of this tool; (3) exploring Romania’s efforts for using the open method of coordination in social policies. From a methodological standpoint, the paper relies on comprehensive and systematic search of the literature and document analysis (among others Annual Reports, authorities’ data, resume, obtained by using free accession to information) and strategic documents.

**Keywords:** mechanisms of Europeanization; open method of coordination; social practice; cross-border mechanism

## **1. Introduction**

The concern of governments for governing from the assessment of public interest perspective, from realistic public need sizing (Matei, 2006, p. 27) has been a constant challenge for policy-making in the context of European integration and Europeanization. Under the requirements of Europeanization, the national institutional framework and policy-making process has been the subject of change (Matei, Dogaru, 2011, p. 3). The Europeanization, understood, on the one hand, as „a process of (1) construction, (2) diffusion and (3) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, „the ways of doing things”, beliefs and values, which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy-making process and then incorporated in the logic of discourse, identities, political structures and public policies of national” (Radaelli, 2003) ensures the understanding of new policy instruments, including the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). On the other hand, if we accept the Europeanization as a globalization process expressed in the European continent, then this is present as a process with a strong impact on the public sector, public administration, as a process of convergence of public policies (Matei, 2007).

Therefore, the Open Method of Coordination is a mechanism that helps states in order to create some similar practices. The beginnings of OMC can be found before its „baptism”, in 2000 period.

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According to some scholars (Dehousse, 2004a; Dehousse, 2004b, pp. 331-332) its development was supported by the experience of the European Employment Strategy, whose origins can be placed in the early 1990s, by the Cardiff and Cologne processes. Its embrace was not immediate, reason for which European Commission concerned about the role of this method, as well as by the Community method brings some clarifications and defines the Community method and the open method of coordination of public policies in the White Paper on Governance (2001). According to White Paper on Governance (2001), the open method of coordination is described as an “experimental form of government”, an instrument of policy coordination. The OMC is a method designed to help Member States progress jointly in the reforms for achieving the objectives of Lisbon strategy, and now for achieving the goals of Europe 2020 strategy.

In the first years of practice, the European Commission has used this technique for developing certain forms of cooperation and coordination in areas close to the basic economic competences of European Union, in order to build some arguments for obtaining direct powers. Initially, the policy coordination was considered as a transition mechanism from national policies to a collective European system.

Today, it is considered that this approach enhanced by the benchmarking technique and systematic comparisons between policies is developed not as a transitional mechanism, but as a way with “full rights” to elaborate EU policy. The aim is to move towards common European goals and at the same time, leaving each state free to define its policies in order to optimal implementation. In the OMC, Member States draw up national plans of action that outlines priorities and actions planned with the support and under the supervision of the European Commission.

## **2. The Open Method of Coordination, a Cross-Border Mechanism**

The realm of possible definitions for OMC is impressive. In this context, the literature emphasizes its specific features. According to a first source of research (Schäfer, 2006, p.15) the open method of coordination is “a special form of multilateral research”. According to other scholars, the OMC was defined as: “the systematic attempt to establish a voluntary process of policy coordination” (Caporaso, 2006, pp. 471-480), “a mutual process of planning, examination, comparison and modification of policies of the Member States” (Vandenbroucke, 2002, p.31).

On the other hand, the papers devoted to this topic (Wallace, Pollack, Young, 2010, p.82) emphasize the presence of three factors that led to increased policy coordination as technique: (a) the transition to Economic Monetary Union with a single monetary policy, but only with the coordination of macroeconomic policies, (b) adoption of the Lisbon Strategy, which raised the open method of coordination to the rank of distinct techniques, (c) recognizing the variations between countries in terms of economic performance and policies. They also, list the following distinctive elements of this method: (a) The Commission is endowed with the quality of a creator of networks comprised experts, stakeholders, civil society, (b) involvement of the Council as a structure for developing activities including brainstorming and deliberation, (c) the involvement of independent experts to promote ideas and techniques, (d) involvement of specialized committees from European Parliament for depth analysis of policy issues, (e) low to moderate degree of centralization.

There is no consensus on the defining elements of this method, however the most of the works recorded following distinctive features (Scott, Trubek, 2002, pp. 1-18): (a) more limited role of Community law, there is a clear separation between the development and implementation of the law and the courts are no longer the main mechanism accountability, (b) a new approach to solving problems in this new format, the method works by repetition, cooperation between different levels of

government, between public and private, (c) participation and power sharing between the community, government (national) and civil society, the division of powers is much stronger, both levels of government and civil society are involved in this process. Furthermore, participation is required due to two reasons: legitimacy and effectiveness, (d) diversity and subsidiarity are inseparable, open method recognizes diversity, (e) new ways to produce useful knowledge, is assumed that the OMC operates as a network, looking for useful information at each level, the specific instruments are consistent with the goal of learning (benchmarking, peer review, research and other multi-lateral mechanisms to spread trans-national policies), (f) public policy learning.

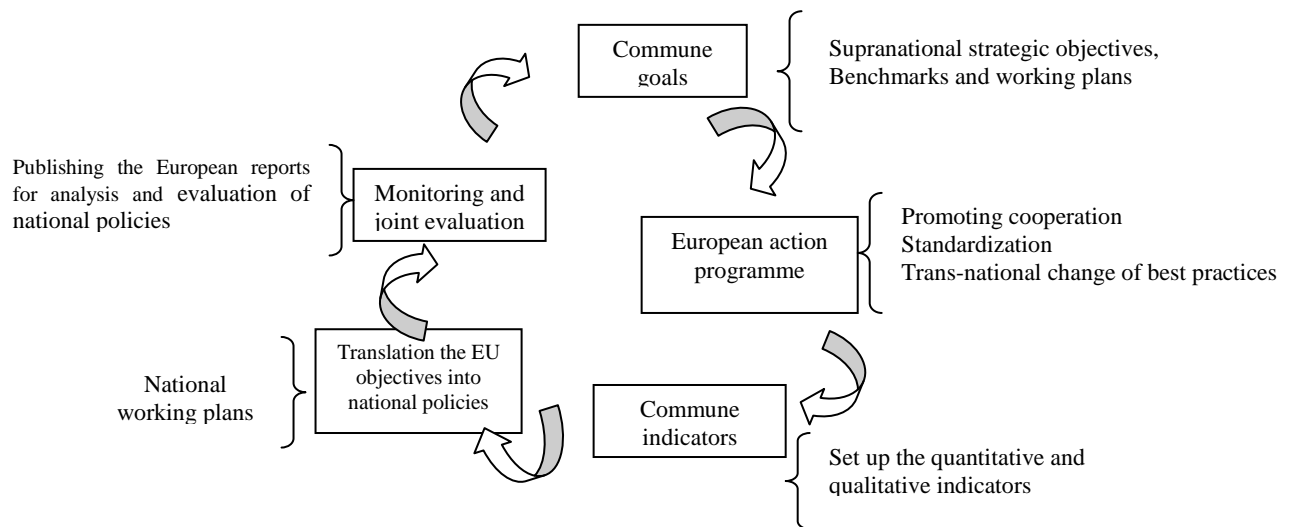
Summarizing the characteristics of OMC, Trubek, (Trubek, 2005, p. 15) have identified six general principles: (1) participation and the sharing of skills, (2) multi-level integration, (3) diversity and decentralization, (4) deliberation, (5) flexibility and (6) creation of knowledge.

### **2.1. The Process of the Open Method of Coordination**

OMC involves several steps. The OMC application starts with defining common objectives that guide the national policies and the development of indicators, on which the policies will be monitoring and evaluation. According to the rules set out in Essen, the conceptualization of these principles takes place at the supranational level and reinforces the coordination, as a principle (Sciarra, 2000, pp. 209-229). Having defined the objectives, it takes place the elaboration of the European Union guidelines and their transposition into national action plans. The main purpose of this action is to make the objectives of EU effective leaving to Member States the free to choose the most appropriate measures for implementation. The whole process ends with monitoring and evaluating the implementation of public policies.

The multi-level dialogue is positioned in the centre of the open method of coordination, the Council from Lisbon emphasizing the importance of including the regional dimensions in this dialogue (Régent, 2002). Once established the objectives and completed the Community action program is held to establish the quantitative and qualitative indicators and translating European guidelines into national and regional policies by setting specific targets. The last step, that European Council from Lisbon drawn on OMC materialization is the monitoring and periodic evaluation, organized as a mutual learning process (2000, Schäfer, 2004, p.11; Tholoniati, 2010, pp. 93-117).

A representation of the steps is shown in the figure below.



**Figure 1. The Process of Open Method of Coordination**

*Source: Adapted from President Conclusions, European Council (Lisbon, 2002)*

There is important variation between OMC's, however. Differences relate in particular to the legal basis and political mandate, the degree of commitment implied by the EU objectives, the status and composition of the committee representing the member states, and the role played by other stakeholders, especially the European Parliament, social partners and NGOs (Tholoniati, 2010, p. 96).

### 3. The Open Method of Coordination in Romania

The open method of coordination in its standard format described in the conclusions of the European Council holds in Lisbon or in its derivative forms finds its application in many areas of public policy, literature structuring these areas into three categories (Radaelli, 2003, pp.31-32):

- policy areas where there is a deliberate attempt to use the open method of coordination, as working method: (a) guidelines on macroeconomic policy, (b) European strategy on employment (labor), (c) social inclusion, (d) pensions;
- policy areas in which the intention was to use the OMC, but so far only limited tools methods were applied: (a) policies on innovation, research and development, (b) education, (c) the Information Society (d) environmental policy (e) health;
- policy areas where coordination method is “disguised”: (a) direct taxation.

Romania adopted and used the tools and principles promoted by OMC even before becoming a member state of the European Union. The main areas in which it reflects are: (1) employment, (2) retirement, (3) social protection and social inclusion, (4) health/ long-term care, (5) environment (6) education and research.

Member States are the main actors in the process of social inclusion being understood as the main structure to achieve the objectives set out in this field.

### **3.1. The Using of OMC in Social Protection and Social Inclusion Field**

In this work, the author attention focuses on the use of the open method of coordination in national social policies, specifically on public policies dedicated to social protection and social inclusion. The selection was influenced by the historical perspective of the open method of coordination, which showed that its origins are found in the European Employment Strategy and the fact that open method of coordination is directly involved in areas of public policy in the social sphere.

The proposal of OMC in social field occurred in the context of concerns for identifying strategies to achieve the objectives set out in the Social Paper of the European Union. Open Method of Coordination on social is a mix between OMC from social inclusion, pensions and health and long-term care fields.

Romania's participation in the OMC began in 2002, by allowing it as an observer to the Community Action Programme on Social Exclusion, and since 2005 has held its consolidation by signing the Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion, programmatic document for policy social.

For coordination the strategic process on social inclusion have been adopted the GD. no. 1217/2006 on the establishment of a national mechanism to promote social inclusion (Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and Elderly – MLFSPE, 2006, p.24). For its implementation, the line ministry has initiated a twinning project which has been implemented together with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in Finland, draft Twinning Light RO 04/01 SO 02/TL "Support for monitoring and implementing the Joint Inclusion Memorandum by the Ministry of Labour, Social Solidarity and Family", the current Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and Elderly.

Although the effective implementation of the new cycle regarding the Open Method of Coordination on social protection and social inclusion began in 2007, preparing for this moment was started the year before, through development by Member States, including Romania the first National Strategic Report Social Protection and Social Inclusion for 2006 – 2008 period. In 2007 is established the National Commission for Social Inclusion and elaborated the National Plan of Development for 2007-2013 period, which inserts among its objectives the cutting down the socio-economic disparities between Romania and the other Member States of European Union, taking into account the promotion of social inclusion.

The results of the implementation of this document were reflected and summarized in the monitoring report on the progress made by Romania in the field of social inclusion, made in early 2008.

In 2008-2010 period was elaborated the second National Strategic Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion, the objectives of which include: continuing efforts to develop an inclusive society based on social inclusion providing integrated services through evaluating the real needs of the individual, through developing the tertiary sector and ensuring equal opportunities for all, with special emphasis on vulnerable people.

Also, Romania's participation in the open method of coordination was achieved through involvement in two projects, one project leader, in the second as partner, funded under the EU PROGRESS, programme, namely: (1) "SYNTHESIS - integrated social services for groups most vulnerable" [Ro - leader], (2) "Life after institutionalization. Equal opportunities and social inclusion of young people: identification and promotion of best practices"[Ro - partner] (MLFSPE, 2008, pp. 31-32).

These actions were complemented by measures such as: (1) 2008 - launching Phare 2006/018-147.04.02.03.02 "Technical assistance for national awareness campaign to promote social inclusion", (2) structural funds - POS - Development of Administrative Capacity: good governance in social

inclusion and increased law enforcement in social services at the local level in the context of decentralization.

#### **4. Short Conclusions**

The special advantages of the open method of coordination are reflected in flexibility, dynamism and its ability to shape public policy.

According to the community method, Member States promote their interests through European Union Council and are involved in the implementation of European policies with the European Commission, assisted by committees of civil servants from the Member States.

In the OMC framework, the Member States draw up national plans of action that outlines priorities and actions planned with the support and under the supervision of the European Commission. Through open method of coordination, the Member States coordinate their policies to combat poverty and social exclusion on the basis of a political exchange (interests, needs) and joint learning

Romania has made its participation in the OMC since 2005, with the signing of the Joint Inclusion Memorandum. Romania has made legislative and institutional progress, developed strategies, action plans and programs of national interest.

Every two years, Romania has to prepare a memorandum on social inclusion, which will be the development of a common EU Memorandum.

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