

# **Strategic recalibration: European level politics of welfare reforms through the OMC**

Abstract

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The paper aims to link institutional changes within the framework of the Open Method of Coordination (institutional recalibration) with new European-level priorities given to the social situation of different social groups (functional or distributive recalibration).

The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) is a European level coordination mechanism among EU member states. It is applied primarily in connection with the Lisbon Strategy in policy areas such as employment, social protection and social inclusion. The paper focuses on the OMC in social protection and social inclusion, which has undergone significant institutional changes since its introduction in 2000. These changes are mainly linked to three events: the 2004 enlargement of the European Union, the relaunching of the Lisbon Strategy in 2005, and the streamlining of social protection and social inclusion from 2006. The paper argues that these events have triggered institutional adjustments of the coordination mechanism – adjustments in the Social Protection Committee (SPC), in the role of the European Commission and in NGO involvement – and created a new political situation for the actors involved.

In addition, the paper examines how this new institutional-political situation can be linked to the newly developed practice of policy priorities. From 2007, member states and the European Commission decided to focus on specific problems and the situation of specific groups for an entire year in the years when member states do not have to submit comprehensive national strategic reports. This idea of policy priorities is new within the OMC which was originally designed to be inclusive and all-encompassing. The paper argues that not only this institutional recalibration has been strategic, but also the choice of the actual policy priorities itself. In 2007, this priority was given to child poverty, which is followed by a focus on migrants in 2008. As member states have to prepare reports and strategies in connection with these priorities, the choice of these focuses can have distributive consequences on the national level. Therefore, it is important to analyse why and how certain issues come to the fore.