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# The Europeanisation of Homelessness Policy: Myth or Reality?

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› **Abstract** *This article explores the use of soft governance mechanisms in EU policy-making, with a specific focus on mechanisms used in EU social policy (i.e. the Social Open Method of Coordination or “Social OMC”), and their impact on homelessness policy development. The extent of Europeanisation of homeless policy is assessed, looking at Europeanisation processes on three levels: top-down influencing of national and sub-national processes, bottom-up dynamics influencing EU policy, and cross-national horizontal developments. While tangible Europeanisation is emerging in the field of homelessness through increasing interplay between local, national and EU level governance on homelessness, the Social OMC model is currently failing to produce substantive policy coordination and benchmarking. However, a cluster of countries willingly strengthening transnational cooperation on homelessness could benefit from EU support for the necessary reforms to end homelessness.*

› **Key Words** *Social Open Method of Co-ordination, Europeanisation, governance of homelessness*

## Introduction

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Times have changed since 2001 when the Social Open Method of Coordination (Social OMC) was launched, a Europe-driven coordination of social policies through voluntary cooperation of EU Member States benchmarking their social inclusion/pension/healthcare policies and sharing innovative practices.<sup>1</sup> Social OMC in this article focuses on the social inclusion stream of the process (as opposed to the pensions and healthcare streams), which is the main framework in which policies to tackle poverty and social exclusion evolved at EU level until 2010. The expertise developed and progress made in the Social OMC led to consensus on key EU policy priorities such as homelessness, child poverty, active inclusion (Frazer *et al*, 2010; Vanhercke and Lelie, 2012; Daly, 2013; Barcevičius *et al*, forthcoming). These priorities were re-iterated in the European Commission's Social Investment Package, which includes guidelines for Member States to integrate action in all these fields in their annual National Reform Programmes (European Commission, 2013b).

Over the last ten years, homelessness policy in Europe has undergone significant changes (Busch-Geertsema *et al*, 2010). The drivers of these changes have varied across countries from the economic context, elected officials, the scientific community, activists, markets, lobbyists, and many others. This article looks specifically at the role of Europe as a driver of homelessness policy changes, namely through the Social OMC. Empirical evidence gathered over the last ten years from direct participation in the Social OMC, from various documents and from talking to different "stakeholders", shows that tackling homelessness has gone from being a marginal issue on the EU social inclusion agenda to being a key area of EU social policy. The Europeanising impact of the Social OMC on homelessness policy-making across EU countries is examined, and conclusions are drawn on the results and consequences for the Social OMC and homeless policy formulation.

## Three-tier Europeanisation through the Social OMC

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In the field of social policy, the EU and Member States have a shared competence through the Open Method of Coordination where the EU coordinates policies, which are developed at national (and sub-national) level in accordance with local needs (Kvist and Saari, 2007). This means the goal is not to harmonise social policies across Europe. Rather, national policies are developed according to local social inclusion needs, while the Social OMC framework exists to coordinate and support (sub-) national policies using a number of tools. Whereas Frazer *et al* (2010)

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<sup>1</sup> The Open Method of Coordination was first used in 1999 with the launch of the European Employment Strategy, and then codified as a mode of European governance by the Portuguese Presidency in March 2000 (Council of the EU, 2000a).

refer to the policy coordination *process* when defining the Social OMC, Vanhercke and Lelie (2012) refer more specifically to the Social OMC policy *toolkit* for benchmarking policies as including the following: common objectives, key priorities, indicators, expert and EU stakeholder networks, different types of peer reviews (including through OMC 'projects'), and finally the joint reports which evaluated national policies and include 'recommendations' to Member States. In their paper, they argue that these OMC tools are not only more dynamic than usually acknowledged, but also more diversified.

In their 2011 position on the future of the OMC, the Social Protection Committee (intergovernmental committee of social affairs representatives working in the framework of the OMC) acknowledged the impact of the OMC on policy thinking, discourse and agendas was "varied, but overall indisputable. There are many instances in literally all Member States when the OMC has triggered, or at least contributed, to policy reassessments, public discourses, and actors' agendas. Prominent examples include (child) poverty, homelessness, long-term care and pension reform" (Social Protection Committee, 2011, p.2). Europeanisation is the conceptual approach used in this article to interpret this impact, and namely the interplay between EU and national policy-making through an interactive and multi-directional Social OMC.

Europeanisation can happen in different "domains" such as domestic structures, identities, party politics, intergovernmental relations, and more (Radaelli, 2002; Borzel and Risse, 2003). This article will look at the Europeanising effects of the Social OMC on the domain of public policy. Several definitions of Europeanisation have been used to explore relations between Member States and the EU, with no common definition found to date (Institute for European Studies, 2012). These include: a top-down process whereby the EU induces domestic change; the horizontal transfer of policies across countries; a stage in European integration creating new powers at EU level; a dense two-way interaction between national and EU levels; a multi-directional and interactive process; the transfer of EU values and policies beyond the boundaries of its membership. Generally speaking, Europeanisation is a process whereby national and EU policy-making become more interwoven. Building on these various definitions, Europeanisation in this article is understood as a three-tier process including top-down influencing of (sub-) national processes, bottom-up dynamics influencing EU policy, and horizontal cross-national developments – three processes which are treated separately in this article, but which are empirically linked in practice.

The interactive and multi-directional nature of Europeanisation as defined here is merely a reflection of the increasing interconnectedness of EU Member States (inter-linked economies, transnational networks, high speed communication and transportation) where policy choices in one country are influenced by choices in another (Schmitt, 2010). This holds true for homelessness policy, as demonstrated below.

## **Top-down Impact on National and Sub-national Processes**

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### ***Common EU social objectives as a first trigger for national strategies***

EU social objectives were agreed in 2000 to promote EU cooperation. The common objectives in the Social OMC have never been quantitative targets as such, but rather policy priorities that provide a framework for Member States to address the multiple aspects of poverty in an integrated way. The first set of common objectives agreed in 2000 included a reference to preventing life crises which can lead to homelessness, as well as the need to provide access for all to decent and sanitary housing (Council of the European Union, 2000b). This consequently gave homelessness practitioners a first sign that Europe was willing to support transnational cooperation in the field of homelessness.

The main top-down effect of this was to see homelessness gradually emerge as a key issue in the national reports<sup>2</sup> on social inclusion policies submitted every two years to the European Commission, from homelessness as an urgent priority in some Member States to homelessness gradually becoming a key policy priority in many EU countries (FEANTSA, 2005; Spinnewijn, 2009). The common objectives on homelessness have been vehicles for national agenda-setting through the Social OMC national reporting mechanism, including in EU Candidate Countries (Croatia, 2007). Frazer *et al* (2010, p.130) summarise the impact of the common objectives as having “raised the awareness in many Member States (particularly through the NAPs/inclusion<sup>3</sup>) of the need for a more strategic approach based on more comprehensive and integrated policies; it has helped highlight the need to focus on prevention as well as on alleviation of problems.” Hence the OMC common objectives can be seen as factors inducing policy practitioners to reflect on the place and nature of homelessness policy in wider government (social) policies, in cooperation with their European counterparts. As well as examples and acknowledgement of

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<sup>2</sup> Until 2011, Member States regularly submitted national progress reports on social inclusion to the Commission. But these updates are now provided through the annual National Reform Programmes of the Europe2020 strategy.

<sup>3</sup> NAPs/inclusion stands for National Action Plans on Social Inclusion, submitted to the European Commission every two years from 2001 to 2005 to report on social inclusion measures (and replaced by National Strategic Reports from 2006 to 2010).

discourse penetration in national homelessness policy-making (De La Porte and Al Gailany, 2011; Public Policy and Management Institute, 2011; Social Protection Committee, 2011; Stamatis, 2012) a good indication of this trend is the multiplication of homelessness strategies and programmes over the last ten years (Busch-Geertsema *et al*, 2010).

Only a few EU countries had a formal homelessness policy before the launch of the Social OMC – most policies aimed simply at containing homelessness by funding a wide range of social services without any clear underlying policy objectives. Today, many countries are increasingly trying to significantly reduce homelessness, by funding services within clear policy frameworks underpinned by strategic objectives such as phasing out shelter accommodation and replacing it with long-term housing solutions, in the case of Finland; providing suitable support interventions for homeless people, in the Netherlands; providing a legal right to settled accommodation for all unintentionally homeless households in Scotland, and reducing length of stay in emergency accommodation for more than 6 months, in the case of Ireland (FEANTSA, 2012b).

There are now strategic approaches to homelessness in more than 10 countries (The Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden and the UK (all four regions) and some countries are making serious steps towards a strategy (Belgium-Flanders and Bulgaria). In other countries, reducing homelessness is a priority but is being addressed through decentralised anti-poverty strategies which include objectives such as access to services and housing for vulnerable groups (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy and Spain) or the reorganisation of services towards individualised support systems (Croatia, Malta and Poland) (FEANTSA, 2013).

The heightened presence of homelessness as a priority on national social inclusion agendas is linked to a variety of factors. But the initial placing of homelessness on the Social OMC agenda through the common objectives has been an important first trigger for mobilisation of state and non-state actors like FEANTSA, to support transnational exchange and national policy transfer in a field like homelessness. Importantly, the recently published Social Investment Package which aims to link the EU social agenda to the Europe2020 strategy, has taken this dynamic a step further by adopting an entire European Commission staff working document with detailed policy guidelines to address homelessness at national level, which should enhance further the top-down Europeanisation dynamics in homelessness policy (European Commission, 2013a).

### *European stakeholder dialogue reaching out to the local level*

Over the years, consensus has been reached on homelessness/housing exclusion as a key priority in the Social OMC (Joint Report, 2010; Social Protection Committee, 2012). This consensus has not yet led to benchmarking of policies and measurement of progress due to various reasons – not least because no common homelessness indicators have yet been agreed. However, setting these key priorities has been effective in communicating what Europe is trying to achieve with the Social OMC: European coordination, monitoring and development of effective strategies to tackle different dimensions of poverty, including homelessness. This has consequently made Europe's role clearer to local stakeholders and practitioners tackling homelessness on a daily basis. According to a study carried out in 2010 of stakeholder involvement in the Social OMC, participation is strongest where the EU has key priorities and thematic European networks (Inbas, 2010).

European stakeholder dialogue in the Social OMC has been a channel for raising awareness and shaping policy, and continues today through the European Platform against Poverty (European Commission, 2010), which organises meetings with all relevant EU stakeholders 3-4 times a year in Brussels. With regard to homelessness policy, European networks of practitioners working exclusively or partly on homelessness (such as FEANTSA, Eurocities, Eurodiaconia, SMES-Europa, Mental Health Europe) have been invited to various consultations of the European Commission over the years, especially in preparation of two key annual EU Presidency policy events: the annual meeting of people experiencing poverty and the Annual Convention (formerly known as Annual Round Table). These two annual events have been criticised by many in the past for their lack of impact on poverty. However, their impact on policy formulation is not to be underestimated. Stakeholder dialogue in preparation for EU events through consultations have less influence at local level than stakeholder dialogue taking place *within* EU events. Nearly every year of the last decade, the Round Tables put the theme of homelessness on the programmes, bringing together practitioners from ministries, NGOs, local authorities, academia, other EU bodies (Parliament, Committee of the Regions, Economic and Social Committee) and, increasingly, people experiencing homelessness. This culminated in a European Consensus Conference on Homelessness in 2010 which brought together key experts to address six key questions on homelessness policy at EU level (EU definition, key policy approaches, the role of the EU, etc.) (European Consensus Conference, 2010). The same can be said for the annual meeting of people experiencing poverty – even though participation of people experiencing homelessness has been understandably more challenging, the Danish Presidency of the EU made addressing homelessness a priority theme for the 2012 meeting.

These events frame policy discussions between practitioners in the context of EU social policy developments, and consequently increase the likelihood of EU discourse and concept penetration in local homeless policies and service models. This is all the more true for practitioners involved in key FEANTSA events that focus specifically on homelessness. This direct link created between local practitioners and the realities of the EU political arena has raised awareness of the relevance of the EU policy framework despite homelessness being a phenomenon which is tackled mostly at a local level. Stakeholder dialogue organised through these European events has therefore also developed bottom-up dynamics over the years whereby individuals can push their homelessness policy approaches onto the EU agenda, which is the subject of the next section.

## **Bottom-up Dynamics Influencing EU Policy**

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### ***Pushing national priorities on the EU agenda***

The Europeanisation effect of Social OMC problem definition can also be considered a bottom-up process whereby countries seek to keep their priorities high on the EU agenda. Key priorities were highlighted with the publication of each Joint Report (adopted by both the Commission and the Council based on assessment of national social inclusion reports), and have varied over the years, which reflects the flexibility of the OMC tool to adapt to emerging social challenges.

As the Social OMC progressively became known among national social inclusion policy-makers, governments started to recognise the added value of EU intervention – mainly political and financial support for expertise and knowledge building to effectively address social challenges – in certain areas of social inclusion policies. It became apparent that an increasing number of Member States were keen to keep homelessness on the EU agenda as a key priority. Moreover, the key EU policy priorities were gaining in importance as a social inclusion OMC tool given that the common objectives were considerably watered down when the social inclusion process was streamlined with pensions and health in 2006 – in fact the reference to homelessness was dropped in the new common objectives (European Commission, 2005). Some argue the key policy priorities were developed in order to address the “implementation gap” in the Social OMC (Vanhercke and Lelie, 2012, p.156), to combine both universalistic and targeted approaches in EU social policy (Calandrino, 2009), and to keep up momentum and interest in the EU social inclusion agenda. The national reporting clearly became a channel for such EU agenda-setting, with national authorities and NGOs using the national reports to request EU support and transnational cooperation in specific fields like homelessness (Spinnewijn, 2009).

The integration of national priorities in the European Social OMC process has also been ensured through the 6-month rotating EU presidency agendas: the Finnish EU presidency organised a housing rights conference in 2006, the French EU presidency focused on homelessness in the informal EU Housing Ministers meeting in 2008, the Belgian EU presidency organised a European Consensus Conference on Homelessness in 2010 which provided the starting point for an EU homelessness policy (European Consensus Conference, 2010), the Danish EU presidency chose to focus on homelessness and housing rights at the annual meeting of people experiencing poverty 2012. The French government organised a European workshop on homelessness (although not within its EU Presidency) in 2012 where it called for a EU homelessness strategy with a strong focus on housing-led approaches (France, 2012). Finally, the most recent indication of bottom-up pressure on the EU agenda is the Irish Presidency European round table of ministers responsible for homelessness in March 2013, which agreed 6 key principles to inform EU homelessness policy (see Culhane and Randall, 2013).

The EU Presidency agendas have arguably become increasingly important for channelling national social priorities, since the national reporting on social inclusion has now been mainstreamed to a great extent in the Europe2020 national reporting mechanism. This new reporting provides some scope for countries to demonstrate their social policy priorities in relation to meeting the 2020 poverty target. However, the merging of social policy with economic and employment policy within one strategy (Europe2020) has considerably reduced the space for countries to influence the EU social policy agenda. Moreover, the bottom-up dynamics of the voluntary cooperation and benchmarking of the Social OMC are far less influential in a process like Europe2020, where the European Commission can explicitly steer national priority-setting through annual country-specific recommendations.

### ***European definitions and methodologies developed from local realities***

Transnational exchanges between practitioners in European networks like FEANTSA, which focuses exclusively on homelessness and housing exclusion, quickly required a common policy language, which saw the increasing use of the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) (European Commission, 2006) which is based on four conceptual categories of homelessness which can be operationalised differently according to the national context. This can be considered an example of Europeanisation of homelessness policy through bottom-up processes – a real need from the ground for a sound starting point for effective European policy cooperation in the Social OMC was the key driver for developing this typology, which has now become a reference for homelessness policy-making helping practitioners in different EU countries understand the dynamics of homelessness (Edgar *et al*, 2007; European Consensus Conference,

2010). The ETHOS typology was formally recognised in the Social Investment Package, which is a successful example of local dynamics reaching the EU political arena (European Commission, 2013b). This process of evidence-based European definition-building from the bottom up, has also happened through FEANTSA in a number of other areas, including defining elements of integrated homelessness strategies, defining participatory methods for involving homeless people, defining housing-led policy approaches to homelessness, and recommendations for measurement of homelessness at EU level (see various FEANTSA toolkits).

The commonly agreed indicators for benchmarking policies and practices in the Social OMC are developed by a sub-group of the Social Protection Committee, which build European definitions of indicators based on approaches across EU countries. The indicators are currently available in the Eurostat database. The list covers different dimensions of poverty, including dimensions of housing linked to homelessness (severe housing deprivation, overcrowding, housing affordability), but they do not directly cover homelessness (Atkinson and Marlier, 2010; Rybkowska and Schneider, 2011; European Commission, 2011) mainly due to methodological reasons. Since collecting data on homelessness cannot easily go through traditional EU-SILC household surveys (the main source of data for the common indicators), a different methodology is required, namely going through services, which are in contact with homeless households. This was confirmed by a comparative European study financed by the European Commission (Edgar *et al*, 2007), which built on national methodologies to formulate recommendations for an EU methodology (Frazer *et al*, 2010; Vanhercke and Lelie 2012; De la Porte, 2010). This methodology triggered reflection on homelessness monitoring systems (see MPHASIS project below), but common EU indicators on homelessness have still not been agreed at the time of writing. The Europeanisation of homeless policy therefore currently has its limits in terms of building common indicators, but this is a methodological issue specific to hard-to-reach households in general – an issue which may be addressed in the future with a strengthened EU framework to monitor progress on homelessness.

## **Horizontal Cross-national Policy Developments**

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### ***Influence of European peers in national homeless policy-making***

Peer reviews are a classic mutual learning instrument of any OMC used in EU policy (Laffan and Shaw, 2005; Lange and Alexiadou, 2010; Tholoniati, 2010; Sabato, 2012) – an instrument that takes a policy as a starting point for European peer exchanges. The motivations for hosting a peer review may vary but, based on FEANTSA experience of Social OMC peer reviews, a country generally decides to host a peer review

to illustrate to other countries how it implements a policy, showing the policy in practice through site visits, and to potentially integrate the experiences of participating peer countries in their work. Peer reviews are also used by host countries as a form of policy evaluation by their European peers, to benchmark their policy against other country policies. This brings a cross-national dimension to their policy arena and allows them to benefit from the policy expertise of other countries. The potential transfer of ideas from peers to the host is therefore quite evident.

Homelessness has been the subject of a number of peer reviews since the start of the EU peer review programme in 2004 (Curry, 2012). In 2004, England hosted a peer review on their Rough Sleepers strategy, showing that targeting a specific part of the homeless population is a useful starting point for developing a homelessness policy. Denmark hosted a peer review in 2005 on its 'Freak' Housing policy, showing it was possible to provide alternative housing forms for people with alternative lifestyles. In 2006, Norway hosted a peer review on the Norwegian homelessness strategy, while France hosted a peer review on the wider issue of substandard housing in 2007, framing homelessness policy action in wider housing policy. Austria hosted a peer review in 2009 on methodologies to measure homelessness, as a first step to developing evidence-based policies. Despite investments in social housing and eviction prevention, homelessness was on the rise in Vienna and they were keen to explore with other countries the reason for this evolution. Finally Portugal and Finland each hosted a peer review in 2010 on their national homelessness strategy, with both countries presenting innovations in their respective contexts: in Finland, the strategy represented a paradigm shift away from the use of temporary accommodation outside the housing market to reducing long-term homelessness through mainstream housing; and in Portugal, the strategy represented the first national-level action in Southern Europe.

In all peer review meetings, there were at least 7 peer countries around the table, two European networks and local stakeholders (FEANTSA took part in all the peer reviews mentioned above as one of the two invited European networks) – a mix of stakeholders, which strengthened the variety of critical perspectives in the review. The views of European peers are important for host countries, but peers are also involved in creating another Europeanising dynamic; that of policy learning and possible transfer of ideas into their national context. However these dynamics are more subtle and harder to demonstrate, and according to a recent evaluation of the EU social inclusion peer review programme, there is a general lack of proper follow-up after peer reviews, which makes it problematic to assess policy transfer (Observatoire Social Européen and Public Policy and Management Institute, 2012). National homelessness strategies developed over the last ten years are generally based on national research and surveys on the causes of homelessness, and are therefore very specific to the individual countries. However, there are increasing

similarities in the general policy objectives of strategies, which are beginning to show some signs of convergence. Policy objectives and targets include the following: eliminating the need to sleep rough (Denmark, Ireland, Portugal and the UK), reducing length of stay in temporary accommodation (Denmark, Ireland and Sweden), improving the quality of services (Czech Republic, France, Ireland, Malta and Poland), prevention of homelessness (Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the UK), provide access to housing (Finland, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK), testing or implementing Housing First (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands and Sweden) (FEANTSA 2012b and FEANTSA 2013). The causality between this convergence and EU processes should be explored further.

The Europeanisation of homelessness policy at work here is therefore especially cross-national as homelessness practitioners learn to use OMC tools to get access to expertise on homelessness in other countries. In some countries, official Social OMC peer reviews have been integrated within national homelessness policy processes as highlighted above, hence showing the willingness of policy-makers not to limit themselves to their national policy context but also to use instruments which bring a cross-national dimension to their work.

### ***Transnational exchange between sub-national level practitioners***

Cross-national Europeanising dynamics have increased in quality and depth over the years through the use of EU funding for transnational projects, which involve not only national governments, but all relevant stakeholders including local authorities, NGOs, universities, private companies. These projects are generally linked to EU social policy objectives, including homelessness reduction. A description of some of these projects and cross-national dynamics is now provided.

FEANTSA, the European federation of national organisations working with homeless people, is a network funded to promote European policy and research exchanges in the field of homelessness, mainly through national and regional platforms of services working with homeless people. Through its structure a number of satellite networks have formed, including a network of academics driving the EU homelessness research agenda through the European Observatory on Homelessness. Similarly, a network of local policy-makers responsible for homelessness (HABITACT) is coordinated by FEANTSA, meeting on a regular basis. They have various methods of pooling expertise across local authorities, which includes annual peer reviews taking a local homeless strategy as a starting point for European discussions (e.g. Hermans, 2010; Benjaminssen, 2011; Daavelaar, 2012;

Baptista, 2013). In addition, there have been numerous *ad-hoc* transnational projects on homelessness or partially covering homelessness, which have had Europeanisation effects in local policy and service delivery.

The MPHASIS project – Mutual Progress on Homelessness through Advancing and Strengthening Information Systems – which operated from 2008 to 2009, aimed to improve the capacity for monitoring homelessness and housing exclusion in 20 European countries, hence was directly linked to the Social OMC aims to improve monitoring of poverty across the EU. The project was carried out through transnational exchanges and action-oriented research which directly fed into national discussions on monitoring homelessness within MPHASIS. A national meeting was organised in each of the 20 participating countries with the presence of all relevant practitioners for monitoring homelessness and European experts, which fed in other country examples into the discussions. In some countries, practitioners participating in the national meetings had already met in other local circumstances, with MPHASIS becoming a European branch of their policy work. In other countries, MPHASIS was bringing people together for the very first time, hence injecting some Europeanising influence into local dynamics within the framework of a transnational project. While the EU provided financial support for this, the main driver for this Europeanisation was the desire of a cluster of countries to cooperate on a dimension of homelessness policy: data collection and evidence-building for policy purposes.

Hope in Stations (HOmeless People in European train stations) brought together from 2010 to 2011 the stakeholders of the train stations of Paris Nord and Paris Est, Brussels Central, Roma Termini, Berlin Zoo, Madrid Antocha, Warsaw Central and Luxembourg Central (Carminucci, 2011). The project, in each country, gathered local authorities, social services which support homeless people, and railway companies into a reinforced cooperation. The aim was to experiment with the setting up of a social reference person, in Paris, Brussels and Rome, who would be in charge of the coordination of all the interventions of the different stakeholders in and around the stations. By promoting experimentation and exchanges between non-traditional stakeholders in the field of homelessness policy, this project went further than policy-making.

The Housing First Europe (HFE) partnership was set up as an EU social policy experimentation in order to test the Housing First approach to homelessness in five sites from 2011 to 2013: Amsterdam, Budapest, Copenhagen, Glasgow, and Lisbon. Five peer sites were also selected in Dublin, Ghent, Gothenburg, Helsinki, and Vienna (Busch-Geertsema, 2013). The aim of Housing First policies is to shift from using shelters as the predominant solution to homelessness towards housing-led approaches which aim to provide housing with support as required for people living on the streets. Homelessness policy is in a period of experimentation and reform,

with practitioners across Europe testing new ways of tackling homelessness rather than relying solely on traditional shelter-based methods, and the Social OMC provides a framework for them to cooperate in finding new policy concepts and solutions which work in different countries. HFE has enabled front-line workers to test and compare service delivery models with their counterparts in other EU countries, hence enabling them to introduce a European dimension to their local social policy experimentation in order to fully benefit from the expertise available in the rest of Europe. The launch of Housing First Belgium in 2013 (experimentation testing HF approaches in five Belgian cities) is arguably a direct consequence of Ghent's participation in Housing First Europe, and is but one example of the multiplier effects of such cross-national dynamics.

These different transnational projects indicate that local practitioners are increasingly looking for new and diversified service delivery models to address homelessness. The Europeanisation dynamics here are evident, and they are predominantly cross-national.

### **Conclusion: Social OMC Myth Versus the Homelessness Policy Reality**

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The evidence gathered in this article illustrates some of the Europeanisation dynamics in homelessness policy-making, mainly through a combination of vertical and horizontal dynamics linked to the Social OMC process, which provided the main framework for policy progress on homelessness at EU level over the last decade. The increasing interplay between local, national and European policy-making on homelessness is clear. Tackling homelessness is now an integrated part of social inclusion agendas at both EU level with the key policy priorities of the Social Investment Package, and at national level with homelessness increasingly being the subject of specific national/regional/local strategies on homelessness. This cluster of countries is actively seeking support from the EU and is keen to harness the expertise available in Europe to find solutions to homelessness. Stakeholders are no longer only trying to influence national agendas but also the EU social inclusion policy agenda through various channels, not only promoting certain homelessness policy concepts cross-nationally and at EU level, but also choosing to give a European dimension to their daily work. The frequent use of peer reviews and transnational projects by national and local homelessness practitioners indicates that they are increasingly turning to Europe for policy instruments and resources. Consensus is increasing on defining homelessness, and on key policy objectives in addressing homelessness, but the benchmarking of homelessness policies against common EU indicators for cross-country comparisons is not yet possible. Countries developing voluntary European cooperation in the field of

homelessness do not need motivation and pressure from the EU at this stage, but rather support for the necessary reforms to end homelessness. This type of support is summarised well in the Irish presidency key principles to inform EU homelessness policy (knowledge sharing, a common reference framework, funding, research and innovation, advice). Thus, it can be argued that the Europeanisation of homelessness policy is real and key elements are in place for developing a EU homelessness policy, which can support countries in line with the principle of subsidiarity.

Meanwhile, the benchmarking of policies through the Social OMC process is losing momentum. The Social OMC is a process which dominated most of EU social policy during the last decade, through strong cooperation between the European Commission and Member States through the Social Protection Committee. The Social OMC however is gradually fading away as a process which is now only driven by the Social Protection Committee and which has to a certain extent been replaced by the Europe2020 strategy, which is an economic and employment strategy for Europe, not a social policy strategy. This is now the main governance framework for benchmarking of social policies, through the annual National Reform Programmes (NRP), with a strengthened role for the European Commission which can now give country-specific recommendations in the social policy field (this was not the case with the Social OMC national reporting).

The Europeanisation dynamics referred to in this article are not likely to stop. The top-down dynamics have already been strengthened with the Social Investment Package publishing clear homelessness policy guidelines, and with increasing interconnectedness between the EU and local realities through new media tools. In turn, an awareness of EU opportunities to support local work means that local practitioners will invest more time in influencing EU developments, and ensure that the EU takes into account local realities. The heightened connection between local, national and EU governance in homeless policy will inevitably continue in the future. Intergovernmental peer reviews are still on the agenda the EU agenda – the most recent one was held in Denmark in November 2013, with a focus on the Housing First strategy. Transnational exchanges are increasing as networks thrive with the support of new social media, making it easier to build transnational partnerships for EU projects and meaning that transnational cooperation on homelessness is no longer only the preserve of national governments, but also reaches the level of local policy-makers and services.

The voluntary cooperation of the Social OMC through the Social Protection Committee could therefore benefit from the emergence of Europeanised policy clusters (as is the case in the field homelessness) to keep up momentum in EU social inclusion policy cooperation. The fields of child poverty and active inclusion are also arguably Europeanising given the key documents on these issues in the

Social Investment Package (European Commission, 2013b). In the absence of a clear framework for EU social policy in this new decade, policy clusters of countries seem to be forming which, far from complaining of EU interference in social policy matters, are calling on the EU to support national governments in their efforts to address social issues. This is a testimony to the positive impact of the Social OMC, which over the last ten years has managed to build sufficient expertise and new EU communities in the field of social inclusion willing to work together at EU level on very local phenomena like homelessness.

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