Which Countries Learn from Which?

A Comparative Analysis of the Direction of Mutual Learning Processes within the Open Method of Coordination Committees of the European Union and among the Nordic Countries

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ABSTRACT

Which countries learn from which other countries in the course of cooperation in the Nordic and European open method of coordination (OMC) committees? That is the key question this article addresses. The goal is to contribute to the body of research on Europeanization by exploring its ‘horizontal’ thrust. The object of the study is the direction of learning as perceived by participants in European OMC committees and Nordic committees with similar functions. The approach implies cross-testing of two key hypotheses: (1) the direction of learning in international committees is dependent on which countries can show ‘best practice’, and (2) learning in international committees is dependent on the degree to which countries share a similar economic–political background (the ‘most similar’ hypothesis). The cross test affirms the ‘best practice’ hypothesis, whereas the ‘most similar’ hypothesis is shown to be significant only to the extent that it concurs with the ‘best practice’ hypothesis.

Keywords: EU; mutual learning; Nordic cooperation; OMC; open method of coordination; policy learning

Introduction: What is the OMC?

Which countries learn from which other countries in cooperation committees in the open method of coordination (OMC) of the European Union (EU) and in committees meeting under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers? The article addresses this question based on a survey of all participants in the joint Nordic and joint European cooperation committees that function according to OMC principles. Through a comparative analysis of mutual learning processes in the Nordic and European cooperation committees, the article therefore aims to contribute partly to the body
of research on mutual learning processes in the so-called soft governance instruments and partly to the exploration of horizontal processes of Europeanization.

The article is therefore a contribution to the new start in researching the area of comparative study of new regional integration phenomena that has been under way for some years, even though Nordic cooperation seldom receives mention in the literature on regional integration (see Laursen, 2003). The basis for comparing the cooperation in OMC committees in the EU and committees in the Nordic Council of Ministers is that it is similar in many respects. Hence, it is possible to apply a survey design relying on similar background variables, which strengthens the prospects for solid conclusions on cause–effect relationships. Moreover, it is possible to cross-test the hypotheses in regard to the direction of learning processes, as explained below. However, there are differences as well as similarities between cooperation in the Nordic Council of Ministers, and the extent to which the cooperation in each area operates in accordance with OMC principles is outlined below.

The Nordic countries (Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the three semi-autonomous areas of Greenland, the Faroe Islands and the Aaland Islands) have been cooperating since the early 1950s when the Nordic Council was established. From its very inception, the cooperation has had a ‘hard law’ framework in the form of a common Nordic labour market and the Nordic passport union. Additionally, it acquired a ‘soft law’ structure institutionalized in the Nordic Council of Ministers in 1971. The latter led to the gradual establishment of a wide range of cooperation committees in almost every policy area. The cooperation committees created a space where officials and experts from the Nordic countries could meet for the purpose of exchanging experiences and knowledge on ‘best practice’. The modality of cooperation in the Nordic Council of Ministers’ committees greatly resembles the role the committees in the OMC framework in the EU would play decades later. However, the Nordic cooperation would never come to include the attainment of the overall political and strategic goals that are often attached to the work of the committees in the EU. But, conversely, it is difficult to argue that the mutual learning processes in the Nordic committees are not an early form of ‘soft Europeanization’ among the Nordic countries.

The concept of the OMC was coined and introduced in 2000 as a new form of EU cooperation at the European Council’s summit in Lisbon. The aim of the EU using the OMC is aptly defined in the oft-quoted sentence: ‘... 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.’

Even though the concept of the OMC only came into being in 2000, the method’s genealogy can be traced back to the so-called Luxembourg process, which was initiated at the 1997 summit of the European Council and aimed at ensuring implementation of the European Employment Strategy (EES) that stemmed from the Treaty of Amsterdam. The 1997 European Council’s conclusions stated that the European Employment Committee
(EMCO), later to become one of the cornerstones in the OMC cooperation, was to be established to handle the EES. However, the employment policy coordination procedure, for its part, was also inspired by the Maastricht Treaty’s idea of macro-economic coordination pursued in the Economic Policy Committee (EPC) (Nedergaard, 2005a). Two new committees were established in 2000 with a focus on vocational training (ACVT = Advisory Committee on Vocational Training) and social protection (SPC = Social Protection Committee), respectively. The OMC thereby acquired a broader focus and a stronger organizational base.

The Portuguese presidency defined the OMC in the conclusions of the European Council’s 2000 summit. The definition described the purpose of the method as ‘mutual learning’ with instruments that measured developments using standardized indicators, benchmarking, comparison of ‘best practices’, progress monitoring and so-called peer reviews (European Council, 2000: Section 37). Based on this definition, I regard committees in the Nordic, as well as the European, cooperation that are involved in the above-mentioned elements, and have been established with a view to mutual learning, as OMC committees. However, it has to be noted that neither the Nordic nor the European OMC committees include all mentioned elements.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, the literature on Europeanization and policy diffusion and two hypotheses on the thrust of the mutual learning processes are presented. The data basis for the article is then discussed. The subsequent analysis investigates the direction of mutual learning processes in the OMC committees of the EU as well as in the OMC committees within the framework of the Nordic Council of Ministers based on data from a major survey. I conclude by discussing the validity of the two hypotheses and outline the potential contribution of the article to the literature on policy diffusion and Europeanization.

**Horizontal Europeanization and the Policy Learning Literature**

The literature on Europeanization often falls within three overall perspectives or explanatory types, which I name the ‘compliance approach’, the ‘opportunity structure approach’ and the ‘belief approach’, respectively (see also Knill and Lehmkuhl, 2002). I do not discuss each perspective in depth in this article, but instead briefly present them to the extent relevant for the topic.

The ‘compliance approach’ focuses on the factors that specifically influence how countries comply with EU directives to varying degrees (Börzel, 2000). The approach usually entails a distinction between enforcement and management (Tallberg, 2000). The distinguishing feature of the enforcement approach is the ‘goodness of fit’ hypothesis, which has been the dominant explanatory model for much of the brief history of Europeanization research and has since become the favourite punching ball (Kallestrup, 2006). The ‘goodness of fit’ hypothesis is based on the assumption that
member states’ costs and benefits of compliance are determined by the degree of fit between the national and the EU processes, policies and institutions (Börzel and Risse, 2003).

The ‘opportunity structure approach’ takes the rational choice institutionalist stance that the EU influences policies in member states by destabilizing equilibria in the strategic interaction of national actors, as actors are allocated or deprived of opportunities or resources due to processes of Europeanization. This effect may be caused either by changes in the internal interaction structures between actors or by the EU’s direct interaction with national actors (Knill and Lehmkuhl, 2002; Kallestrup, 2006).

The ‘belief approach’ is a catch-all phrase for approaches that focus on the beliefs and expectations of actors and that emphasize the role of ideas or discourses in the creation of actor preferences (Schmidt, 2002; Radaelli, 2004). Europeanization is therefore conceived as a result of the establishment of horizontal and vertical networks, such as on an informal basis in the comitology system or through the OMC. The EU affects national actors either directly, by contributing to the diffusion of a policy initiative, or indirectly, by establishing networks or even merely cognitive organization with the purpose of increasing the interaction between member states so that state-level actors may to a greater extent than otherwise inspire each other.

In this context, it is worth emphasizing that the compliance approach and the opportunity structure approach usually conceive of Europeanization as a vertical process in which changes in national policies stem from a directive or decision that has been made at the EU level and that is subsequently implemented within member states. Conversely, the belief approach utilizes a broader definition of Europeanization and asserts that it may also occur through horizontal processes, such as the OMC. As the aim of this article is to analyse horizontal processes of Europeanization stemming from cooperation in the OMC, it is firmly situated within this latter approach.4

How the concept of Europeanization can be defined adequately and expeditiously has already been the contentious subject of several debates in the history of the literature on Europeanization research (see Risse et al., 2001: 13; Radaelli, 2003a: 4; Falkner et al., 2005: 11). However, I chose Radaelli’s rather broad definition as a starting point, which implies that Europeanization is conceived as follows:

Europeanization consists of processes of a) construction, b) diffusion, and c) institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public policies. (Radaelli, 2004: 3)

There are several advantages in using Radaelli’s broad definition of Europeanization. However, most significantly, Europeanization proper is conceptually separated from its domain, direction and depth (Radaelli, 2003b; Holzinger and Knill, 2005); these are instead rendered as central
objects of inquiry (i.e. Dyson and Goetz, 2003). This definition is appropriate here, because the object of inquiry is the direction of Europeanization when operating through horizontal processes in committees within the OMC framework.

Moreover, I draw on the seminal literature on policy diffusion that first originated in the 1960s, with the aim of theorizing how Europeanization operates in horizontal processes (Bennett, 1997). The policy diffusion literature may be divided analytically into one strand concerning policy transfer and another concerning policy learning, even though in practice it has proved difficult to distinguish rigorously between instances of policy transfer and instances of policy learning (Stone, 1999). In principle, policy transfer denotes a process by which a policy from one polity is explicitly used as a blueprint for drawing-up a policy in another polity (Travits, 2003). Conversely, policy learning implies gradual processes of realization, where cognitive categories are redefined on the basis of new knowledge. This affects the fundamental ideas that are the basis of different policies (Stone, 1999). Additionally, policy transfers are often analysed at the systemic level, with no actors in the analytical purview, whereas policy learning often implies that the actors involved are assumed to be learning something.

Furthermore, it is possible to distinguish between policy learning taking place in bureaucratic committees and policy learning taking place in expertise-oriented professional committees (i.e. Haas, 1992). It is also possible to distinguish between learning in different international organizations, as illustrated in Figure 1.

For the purposes of this article, the European learning committees are primarily bureaucratic, whereas the Nordic learning committees are to

![Policy Diffusion Literature Diagram]

Source: Author's own compilation

FIGURE 1
The Policy Diffusion Literature: An Overview
some extent also made up of expertise-oriented professional committees. As many scholars have noted (Bennett, 1997; Stone, 1999), the policy diffusion literature is rife with concepts, hypotheses and theories that are elaborated from a wide range of different theoretical perspectives based on a more or less solid empirical basis. However, this plethora necessitates a more rigorous empirical testing of these concepts, hypotheses and theories if their validity is to be established. This is the only way to establish a basis for policy recommendations on how to organize cooperation so that the learning potential is maximized. Furthermore, the salience of policy recommendations aimed at maximizing learning is increasing as mutual learning is increasingly cited as the main purpose of the cooperation in international organizations (Jacobsson, 2003; Zeitlin, 2005b; Nedergaard, 2005a).

In my view, the Advocacy Coalition Framework is a useful starting point for generating testable hypotheses regarding policy learning in committees (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999), because this framework puts particular emphasis on strengthening its own theoretical basis through the generation and testing of hypotheses.

Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith’s framework has developed two distinct — but not necessarily mutually exclusive — hypotheses regarding policy learning between officials from different countries. Their framework includes a hypothesis that posits policy changes as the result of external shocks that lead to policy failures. In this article, I interpret this hypothesis as positing that policy learning can be expected to be more likely if actors come from countries that experience policy failure within the domain of a particular committee. Policy failure may arise as a result of the objective non-performance of policies in a country or if the policies of other countries are perceived to be (far) more successful. The backdrop to this is that the perceived success of some countries puts pressure on less successful countries to learn the perceived best practice.

This hypothesis can be interpreted as being based on organizational–institutional assumptions asserting that the direction of policy learning is not determined by individual incentives but rather by the pressures for copying successful solutions, which arise when an actor is exposed to uncertainty, such as a result of policy failure (i.e. DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). I refer to this as the ‘best practice’ hypothesis.

The Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith framework also includes a hypothesis asserting that the degree of mutual policy learning is directly proportional to the degree of similarity between the belief systems of actors. In my interpretation of the Advocacy Coalition Framework, this implies that two countries can be expected to be more open towards policy learning if they share the same economic–political institutions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999).

This hypothesis may also be interpreted as based on organizational–institutionalist assumptions. Hence, it is similarities in normatively and cognitively constituted traits between officials and others originating in countries with the same economic–political background that are the drivers of mutual learning processes. I refer to this as the ‘most similar’ hypothesis.

In comments on the survey, respondents from both the Nordic and the
European OMC committees were generally divided between the two overall hypotheses regarding which countries they had learned most from. The officials offered comments that essentially supported both hypotheses, even though there was a particular logic in which officials supported the ‘most similar’ or the ‘best practice’ hypothesis. The sections below contain a more detailed analysis of the respective European and Nordic data material, but the collected data material is presented first.

Data Collection

As already alluded to, this article analyses the direction of mutual learning in the Nordic and European OMC committees. The starting point is responses from the officials and experts who participate in the respective Nordic and European OMC committees. The data basis for the analysis is a questionnaire distributed to all of the EU’s OMC committees and the almost 100 Nordic committees that share the same basic characteristics.

Respondents were asked in the survey to indicate which countries they had learned most from and to explain why these particular countries.

The questionnaire was distributed by email in November and December 2005 and the overall response rate for all committees was approximately 55%. Some respondents provided only partial answers. Committee members were primarily officials, even though experts also participate in some committees. Officials from the Commission and the Secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers were not included in the survey. In asking committee members directly, the goal was to generate knowledge about who learned from whom when learning is seen from the perspective of participating officials and experts.

Although the advantages and drawbacks of using questionnaires for collecting data are well established, it is still difficult to determine the seriousness of respondents’ answers and to recognize strategic answers. In my view, these problems have not been particularly grave for the survey in this article. All the respondents were anonymous, so this removed the incentive for ‘miss-stating’ which countries one had learned from.

Furthermore, particular challenges present themselves in connection with the use of questionnaires examining learning processes. This is because actors are themselves frequently unaware or unable to remember what they specifically learned, which makes it inherently difficult to measure the degree of learning. To some extent, this article evades these problems because it examines neither the content of the learning processes nor the degree of learning but instead focuses exclusively on the direction of the learning processes, such as who member states’ committee members claim to learn the most from. In this context it is a reasonable assumption that OMC committee members are more aware of which countries they usually learn from rather than the specific contents of what they learn.

I refer to countries as ‘learners’ if their officials state that they have learned from others. In addition, countries are denoted as ‘tutors’ if officials state exactly that they have learned from these countries.
Analysis of the European Data

The European data were collected from four committees with functions in relation to the OMC. Initially, I sought to contact all 402 members and alternates in the four committees. Contact was made by email and telephone. I first distributed an informational email attached to the questionnaire. Subsequently, several reminders were sent and non-responding members were contacted by telephone.

The outcome was that 234 of the 402 members and alternates answered the questionnaire, resulting in an aggregate response rate of 58.2%. All countries were represented in responses with a minor over-representation of North European countries. I received 95 valid responses to the question about which particular countries committee members had learned from; there was one response from a respondent who had learned from every country, and five respondents replied that who they learned from depended on the policy area. Finally, five answers were invalid. Consequently, the sum of valid responses was 101, which is an overall response rate for this question of 25.1% or of 43.1% of the respondents who had answered the questionnaire.

Even though some respondents noted that they had learned from multiple countries, all responses were weighted equally by each country being assigned one point every time it was mentioned as a tutor; 286 points were awarded in total on the basis of the European data material.

In support of the hypothesis that countries learn from other countries that are perceived as more successful in a particular area (the ‘best practice’ hypothesis), officials in the four committees mention tutors as countries that ‘have good results’ or ‘good economic performance, appropriate economic reforms and policy measures taken’; countries with ‘innovative policies and actions’ where you are struck ‘by some ideas you would never have thought of’; from countries that are ‘the most advanced in my area’; when they have ‘effective policies in crucial areas’ or are ‘ahead of my member state in implementing specific policies’; ‘when they have solutions to problems we need to solve’; when they have ‘succeeded in building stable policy measures’; have ‘more sophisticated administrations’; or simply have the ‘best practices’. The OMC committee members also state that they learn from countries that have ‘proved themselves to be very efficient’; that ‘are imaginative and successful’; where ‘the labour market policy was/is quite good in these member states’; or when ‘they have very innovative and/or successful social policies’.

Moreover, a significant proportion of comments supported the hypothesis that officials and others from countries with a similar economic–political background learned from each other in particular (the ‘most similar’ hypothesis). Officials noted that they learned most from countries where they ‘admire their systems and values’; where the ‘principles and systems are in many respects similar to ours’; where representatives have a ‘similar approach as we have’; where they have ‘different approaches to similar problems’; ‘because these member states are similar to Lithuania’; where countries have ‘common objectives’, ‘similar characteristics’, ‘comparable
systems’; or ‘the same culture of problem solving’; because their policy is ‘close to Slovakia’s governmental policy’; where there is a ‘similarity of education systems, common political and economic background’; when ‘they have tackled similar problems’ or when ‘they have similar problems to my member state’; where they ‘have a system which is adaptable to the Hungarian system’; or have ‘similar systems with comparable solutions’.

Figure 2 illustrates the aggregate number of times a particular country has been mentioned as a tutor by members of the EU’s OMC committees. The most often mentioned tutors are Denmark (47 points), the United Kingdom (44 points), Sweden (42 points), Finland (33 points) and The Netherlands (32 points). These five countries are in a league of their own. They received 198 points out of the total 286 and hence an overwhelming proportion of 69.2% of the distributed points.

It is worth noting that these countries were actually favourites for all 25 member states. Figure 2 seems to support the ‘best practice’ hypothesis. Three of the five most important tutors represent what is currently perceived as the successful Nordic model, whereas the United Kingdom and The Netherlands have been portrayed as examples of successful Anglo-Saxon and continental European countries, respectively. Moreover, all these countries combine a high GDP per capita with (in recent years) a high level of economic growth compared to the other EU countries. Additionally, the member states in question have either a low deficit on public finances or a budget surplus, which sets them apart from the other EU member states.13
The countries are grouped below in relation to similarities between their economic–political backgrounds for the purpose of analysing which groups EU member states have learned from:

1 Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland and Sweden.
2 Continental European countries: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg and The Netherlands.
3 South European countries: Cyprus, Malta, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain.
4 Anglo-Saxon countries: Ireland and the United Kingdom.
5 Eastern and Central European countries: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Czech Republic and Hungary.

Categorizing countries in groups is not an unambiguous exercise (Campbell and Pedersen, 2006). The above groupings have been inspired to some extent by Esping-Andersen’s most recent grouping of countries into three types of welfare state based on the differences in their economic–political institutions (1999). In the first type, the universal (or ‘social democratic’ as termed by Esping-Andersen) welfare state, welfare policy is based on the equal inclusion of every citizen, relatively simple rules and high public expenditure. Moreover, the universal welfare state combines universal welfare programmes with predominantly liberal economic policies. Denmark and Sweden are EU countries with this type of welfare state.

The second type of welfare state is the selective or liberal one, with welfare policy based on focusing economic means on citizens with special needs. This type is relatively cheap. The selective welfare state model combines selective welfare state policies with liberal economic policies. The United Kingdom and Ireland are examples of European states in this category.

The third type may be denoted the conservative welfare state model. Welfare policy includes everyone, but only up to a fixed (relatively low) level, as selection criteria for awarding welfare benefits are to a large extent based on privileges such as employment and seniority. This type of welfare state is frequently just as expensive as the universal type, because coverage for privileged groups in the case of unemployment or retirement is often higher than in the universal model. The conservative welfare state also combines welfare policy with an interventionist economic policy. Examples of the practical application of this model are Germany, France, Italy, Portugal, Greece and Spain.

In categorizing EU member states in this article, I have divided the group of continental European welfare states into two sub-groupings. South European countries are thus placed in one group because they share similar positions in a range of policy areas based on a common socio-economic structure (for instance, a business structure based on Mediterranean produce, tourism and textiles) (Nedergaard, 2005b: 302). The other group, a new grouping consisting of new member states from Eastern and Central
Europe, all had planned economies previously and do not have Western welfare traditions.

The above groupings are to some extent pragmatic and not based on stringent criteria, and of course this is why they are subject to debate. The sole aim is to divide the EU into reasonable and similarly sized groups of countries that in a range of relevant areas have a sufficient number of similarities for it to be considered reasonable to put them in the same grouping.

The general image emerges from Table 1, which illustrates a clear tendency for the Nordic countries to function as tutors. Continental European and Anglo-Saxon countries are tutors, too, whereas East European and South European countries are tutors only to a very limited extent. (The Table has been adjusted to take account of differences in group size and the impossibility of countries learning from themselves).14

Table 1 indicates that Nordic countries learn from other Nordic countries to the same degree as they learn from continental European and Anglo-Saxon countries. Continental European countries primarily learn from Nordic European countries, but also from other continental European countries. South European countries learn from the Nordic countries, the continental European countries, and particularly the Anglo-Saxon countries. Anglo-Saxon countries primarily learn from the Nordic countries, but also from the continental European countries. Eastern and Central European countries learn from the Nordic countries, the continental countries

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Groups of countries that learned (learning countries)</th>
<th>Nordic countries</th>
<th>Continental- European countries</th>
<th>Anglo- Saxon countries</th>
<th>South European countries</th>
<th>Eastern and Central European countries</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nordic countries</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>46</td>
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<td>Continental-European countries</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Anglo-Saxon countries</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>South European countries</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eastern and Central European countries</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Total percent</td>
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<td>101</td>
<td>99</td>
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<td>N =</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>90</td>
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14 The Table has been adjusted to take account of differences in group size and the impossibility of countries learning from themselves.
European countries and the Anglo-Saxon countries. It is thus possible to draw the following conclusions on the basis of Table 1: (a) most countries learn from countries that currently experience the most success, and (b) there is a weak tendency to learn relatively more from one’s own grouping of countries, but this process occurs within the framework of (a).

The conclusion on the basis of the European data is that the ‘best practice’ hypothesis regarding learning is strengthened. The existence of successful practices seems to be the factor generating tutors. However, learning processes also take place within the group of countries that have the best practices and are perceived to be the most successful. When officials from tutor countries learn from other groupings, there is a slight tendency to learn more from groupings that are closer to home in terms of political and economic background. Conversely, it holds true for the group of least successful countries (i.e. the South European and Eastern and Central European countries) that there is no internal transnational learning within these groups, while almost none of these countries have acted as tutors. Hence, the analysis lends most support to the ‘best practice’ hypothesis, whereas the ‘most similar’ hypothesis is also supported to some extent. The analysis shows that high growth in GDP per capita is insufficient to attain the role of tutor (as Eastern and Central European countries are at the top on this scale) unless factors such as a high GDP per capita in absolute terms point in the same direction (on this scale, Eastern and Central European countries are at the bottom).

**Analysis of the Nordic Data**

The Nordic data were collected from almost 100 committees with OMC characteristics. Initially, I sought to contact approximately 1200 members, alternates and observers from the Aaland Islands, Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. My contact strategy was the same as when collecting the European data (by email and telephone). During the process I excluded approximately 250 of the original 1200 respondents. Typical reasons for exclusion were officials figuring twice in members’ lists, officials not participating in any meetings within the previous year, or who had participated but in no more than two meetings.

This left 754 respondents, alternates and observers; 398 of the 754 answered the questionnaire, i.e. an overall response rate of 52.8%. All countries and semi-autonomous areas were represented, with Denmark, Sweden and Norway slightly overrepresented. In addition, I received 156 valid answers to the question of from whom each country had learned most; 30 respondents replied that they had learned from all countries and 7 that it depended on the policy area. The total number of responses was 193, i.e. a response rate of 25.6% for this particular question, which means that 48.5% of those who answered the questionnaire also answered the question about who they had learned from in particular. Respondents typically indicated between one and four tutors. Every time a country was mentioned as a
tutor I awarded it a point, which in total meant 289 points for distribution between the potential Nordic tutors.

A number of comments in the Nordic survey supported the ‘best practice’ hypothesis. Officials thus claim to learn more from Nordic countries with a ‘strong tradition as far as health and safety at work are concerned’; from countries with ‘systematic research’; because they are ‘more advanced’ in my area; because they have ‘solved certain problems before us’; because they ‘are ahead of us as far as food regulation is concerned’; because ‘Sweden is more advanced as far as legislation is concerned’; because they ‘are ahead of us when it comes to knowledge of the field’; because ‘certain administrative reforms have been implemented earlier on in other Nordic countries’; because ‘Denmark has been active in making initiatives … They have been innovative and active’; because ‘Denmark is ahead of the other Nordic countries in the area of food hygiene’; because they have ‘legislation of high class’; because they are ‘ahead of us as far as development and R&D financing is concerned’; because ‘they are ahead of us in certain areas’, because members from Sweden ‘have shown scientific strength’; because of the ‘high quality of economic analysis’; because ‘they have great experience in the implementation of food and nutrition policy’; because they are ‘world leaders in the field of production of bio energy’; because they have ‘a better focus on innovation and regional development’; because of ‘successful programmes’; because they are ‘ahead of us in similar fields of problems’; and because ‘they are more competent than Sweden’.

On the other hand, a significant proportion of comments support the ‘most similar’ hypothesis, namely that countries primarily learn from other countries with the same economic–political background. For example, respondents stated that they learned from countries that they were ‘most in tune with’; if ‘their systems are like ours’; because we are in ‘comparable situations as far as development and politics are concerned’; because ‘we have a similar kind of financial market infrastructure’; because we have ‘similar problems, but different solutions’; because they have ‘the same kind of problems’; because of ‘linguistic and cultural similarities’; because ‘Denmark has the same kind of approaches and goals concerning vocational education and training’; because they have the ‘same kind of business conditions’; because ‘we are facing the same kind of problems due to the fact that we have similar infrastructures’; because ‘they have a fishing industry at the same level as ours’; because of ‘similar types of laws’; because of the fact that the ‘fundamental ideas about society resemble each other’; because ‘we have the same attitude to the area’; because they have the same ‘kind of experience that I have’; because of ‘common culture, linguistic similarities and — in the case of Denmark — close legal links’; because of ‘similar challenges’; because ‘they are close to Norway in terms of geography and ways of organizing things’.

Figure 3 shows that Denmark and Sweden receive the most points as tutors. After Denmark and Sweden rank Norway and Finland, but Finland only receives little more than half the points of Denmark and Sweden. Iceland receives a third of the points that Denmark and Sweden receive,
while the semi-autonomous areas (Faroe Islands, Aaland Islands and Greenland) receive very few points.

The ranking of the Nordic tutors is exactly the same as in the European survey, which strengthens conclusions regarding the direction of learning processes in the OMC committees irrespective of European or Nordic committee. Conversely, it is more difficult to argue than in the case of the European learning processes that Denmark and Sweden have the best economic–political performance in the Nordic context. Norway has the highest GDP per capita, the lowest unemployment and the highest surplus on public finances of all the Nordic countries. This is to a large extent due to oil-related revenues. Hence, economic–political performance has to be conceived in broader terms than pure economic indicators are, which in an EU context would place Denmark, the United Kingdom and Sweden at the top. A possible interpretation is that respondents implicitly operate with a scale of evaluation that takes into account that the special economic–political performance of Norway does not stem from its inherent setup. In this view, economic–political performances have been cleansed of oil revenues.

Many respondents find that the Nordic countries have similar political and economic backgrounds, even though responses to the questionnaire emphasize the existence of differences (and similarities between just two or three of the Nordic countries) with regard to business climate, EU membership, language, political and administrative systems, and that these differences affect mutual learning processes.

Two of these differences are analysed more thoroughly in Tables 2 and 3. These are differences stemming partly from EU membership and partly

![Allocated Points to Tutors in OMC Committees Under the Nordic Council of Ministers](image-url)
from the traditional distinction between different political–administrative models in the Nordic countries: regarding the latter, the main distinction is between the west Nordic countries that previously pertained to the Realm of Denmark–Norway and on the other hand the east Nordic areas and countries that previously pertained to Sweden (Jacobsson et al., 2004: 16–17).

| Table 2 | Who Learns From Whom? Nordic Groups of Countries (Total Sum in Percent of Allocated Points) divided in EU Member States (Finland, Sweden and Denmark) and Non-Member States (Norway and Iceland) in Percentages |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Groups of countries that have learned (learning countries) | Nordic EU Member States | Nordic EU non-Member States |
| Nordic EU Member States | 65 | 66 |
| Nordic EU non-Member States | 35 | 34 |
| Percent | 100 | 100 |
| N | 113 | 114 |

| Table 3 | Who learns From Whom? Nordic Groups of Countries (Total Sum in Percent of Allocated Points) divided in West Nordic Countries (Denmark, Norway and Iceland) and East Nordic (Sweden and Finland) Countries in Percentages |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Groups of countries that have learned (learning countries) | West Nordic countries | East Nordic countries |
| West Nordic countries | 49 | 36 |
| East Nordic countries | 51 | 64 |
| Percent | 100 | 100 |
| N | 152 | 75 |
Tables 2 and 3 provide an overview of learning differences between the two groups of Nordic countries. Both tables have been adjusted for differences in group size and the impossibility of countries learning from themselves. Semi-autonomous areas have been excluded as these would otherwise distort the picture because of their size.

Table 2 indicates that officials and other members of the Nordic OMC committees primarily learn from other Nordic EU member states. This applies to members of the Nordic OMC committees from non-EU members, too. Actually non-EU member states learn most from EU member states, which is also because the EU member states are the most popular tutors.

Interestingly, Table 3 illustrates that officials from west Nordic countries learn equally from both groups of countries, whereas east Nordic countries learn primarily from other east Nordic countries.

I interpret these facts as follows: the ‘best practice’ hypothesis adequately explains mutual learning processes between the Nordic countries, whereas the ‘most similar’ hypothesis can only to limited extent explain the variation between the Nordic countries. This is possibly because these countries are so alike and the minor differences mentioned by respondents probably do not have any impact on Nordic cooperation. Exploration of the Nordic data thus strengthens the conclusion that the ‘best practice’ hypothesis is the more important one, and that the ‘most similar’ hypothesis can explain some variations within the framework of the ‘best practice’ hypothesis.

Conclusions

The main question that this article seeks to address is who learns from whom in the Nordic and European OMC committees? The aim is to contribute to the research literature on Europeanization by exploring the ‘horizontal’ direction of Europeanization. In this context, not just the European OMC committees, but also what I define as the Nordic OMC committees, are the objects of inquiry. Both types of OMC committee provide insight into the direction that Europeanization is taking, because each contributes to the test of hypotheses on mutual learning processes (and both types cover only some of the European countries). The hypotheses of the article have therefore been tested twice, which strengthens the prospect of solid conclusions on cause–effect relationships.

The article has therefore sought to contribute in two research areas: first, in mutual learning processes within the overall framework of international soft governance instruments, and, second, at the concrete level, in the discussion of Europeanization through horizontal processes by analysing and theorizing on their direction.

Based on both the research literature and the relevant theoretical literature, I have contended two — not necessarily mutually exclusive — hypotheses on determinants of the direction of mutual learning processes at the general level and in connection with horizontal processes of Europeanization at the concrete level.
I denoted the first hypothesis as ‘best practice’. This hypothesis asserts that, in the case of relative policy failure, learning is most likely in a policy area where the country in question cooperates with others. This situation generates uncertainty and renders officials extremely susceptible to bringing home new suggestions from international learning-oriented committees with the goal of solving national problems. I denoted the second hypothesis the ‘most similar’ one. It predicts that learning most likely occurs between representatives from countries with comparable normative and cognitive institutions, which in this context were operationalized through a comparison of the countries’ economic–political backgrounds based on the authoritative groupings in the field of comparative political economy. Both hypotheses were drawn up in accordance with the assumptions in organizational–institutional theory.

I adhere to Lakatos’s (1970) perspective on scientific hypotheses, which implies that hypotheses can rarely be completely verified or falsified, but instead ordinarily strengthened, modified or weakened.

The dominant tutors were Denmark, the United Kingdom and Sweden (according to the European data) and Denmark and Sweden (according to the Nordic data). These are at the same time the countries with the best economic–political performance in recent years, if the extraordinary Norwegian oil rents are deducted from the equation. The result of this hypothesis testing is relatively clear: in regard to both the EU and the Nordic cooperation, the ‘best practice’ hypothesis is strengthened. This indicates that the economic and political performance of countries is a co-determinant of the direction of the horizontal Europeanization processes.

Besides the fact that countries learn most from best-performing countries, there is another (albeit less pronounced) tendency for countries to learn more from the ‘most similar’ countries. This tendency is most marked in the EU’s OMC committees. Even though the data accord most backing to the ‘best practice’ hypothesis, the ‘most similar’ also retains some currency in explaining mutual learning processes in OMC committees. Analysis of the Nordic data material does not show the significance of the ‘most similar’ hypothesis quite as unequivocally, apparently because the differences between the Nordic countries are too small to have an isolated effect on learning processes. The ‘most similar’ hypothesis thus seems generally to be subsumed under the ‘best practice’ hypothesis and, secondly, to be most significant in the context of relatively large differences. However, the consequence is that horizontal processes of Europeanization may be expected to lead to already similar countries becoming even more alike, whereas differences between very different countries remain. However, this tendency should not be overstated.

So, what is the explanation for respondents greatly emphasizing similarities in political and economic background as determinants of the direction of mutual learning processes? It could be that respondents in their references to similarities in economic–political background conceive this in wider terms than I do, when I categorize the Nordic and European countries. Some may even perceive all of the EU as having a similar
economic–political background. In which case it is obviously only the ‘best practice’ hypothesis that explains the relations between tutors and learners.

Finally, it should be noted that this article has not investigated whether learners actually implement what they claim to have learned from tutors. Studies of implementation require another methodological framework from the one used here.

Notes

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1. I argue below that the cooperation committees under the Nordic Council of Ministers have the same functions as the OMC committees in the EU.
2. As of 2006, there are almost 100 different cooperation committees under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers covering areas such as: the Arctic, sustainable development, children and youth, energy, business, fishermen, consumers, research, higher education, agriculture and forestry, culture, foods, gender equality, legislation, the environment, economics, regional policies, school cooperation, social and health policies, language, transport and future education.
3. According to Radaelli, this strategy has been successful, i.e. because the OMC was thus embedded in what he denotes as ‘a master discourse of competitiveness’ (2003a).
4. However, it should be emphasized that the OMC does not necessarily only imply horizontal processes of Europeanization. Actually the opposite is often true (see, for instance, de la Porte, 2002), but the scope of this article is limited to considering the horizontal processes.
7. The Employment Committee (EMCO), the Social Protection Committee (SPC), the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT) as well as the Economic Policy Committee (EPC).
8. All the Nordic committees are smaller than the European committees, as far fewer countries and territories are represented.
9. Moreover, ACVT includes members from interest organizations. However, these were not included in the survey.
10. Even though responses were anonymous, it was necessary to know the country of origin of the respondent.
11. However, the contents of learning processes play a role when I discuss why officials from the various committees assert that they learn from particular countries. However, this is only valid to the extent that one differentiates between learning in different policy areas (i.e. the employment policy area and the social policy area).
12. Members were asked to complete the questionnaire only if they actively participated in the work of the committee.
13. The key indicators are not discussed here, as that is beyond the scope of the article. However, they are publicly accessible through the OECD webpage.
14. The learning score calculated in Tables 1, 2 and 3 has been standardized to reflect how many countries a group of countries can possibly learn from. Hence, if
‘Ngroup’ is set to reflect the number of countries in a group and ‘Npot.learn’ is set to reflect the number of countries it is possible to learn from, then the formula ‘Learning points / (Npot.learn/Ngroup) = standardized learning’ has been used.

15. See note 2 above.

16. Furthermore, I received a number of responses from participants, alternates and observers from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, who participate in the Nordic–Baltic network on health and nutrition. However, none of these responses has been included in the analysis.

17. Comments from respondents have been translated from the Scandinavian languages into English by me.

18. As is the case for the European data material too, a presentation or analysis of these key indicators is beyond the scope of the article. They are available in the online OECD statistics.

References


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