

IMPLEMENTING EU LIFELONG LEARNING POLICY THROUGH OPEN METHOD OF COORDINATION IN NEW MEMBER STATES:

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC, SLOVAKIA AND SLOVENIA

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The open method of coordination ('OMC') as new mode of European governance holds great potential to change and improve different aspects of education policies in individual EU member states. Due to its soft/non-obligatory way of influencing, it is particularly interesting to investigate how different member states have adopted to it and how they change their own education policies with final aim of achieving EU goals (benchmarks) in this field. From that perspective the article focuses on exploring the processes of translating objectives defined at the European level in the field of education and training into particular national and regional education policies in three new member states (the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia). The article aim is through comparative analysis investigate various national structures and procedures of putting the EU education policy objectives into practice at national level. In this way, the analysis endeavours to detect various factors that have an impact on the implementation process and reaching EU objectives in the field of education and training in new member states. The article concludes that despite some differences between investigated countries relatively good results are possible to reach without exploiting all the potentials of OMC, especially these one related to good governance.

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1 INTRODUCTION

During the 1950s and 1960s, education did not represent a “natural dimension” of the development of the European integration.² Until the early 1970s, the Council of Europe was the main intergovernmental forum for cooperation. In the framework of the European Community, the first meeting of ministers of education in the Council took place in November 1971, while the first Community action program on education was established in February 1976. In 1992, education finally gained recognition in the Treaty as this sector was incorporated into the Maastricht Treaty (Article 126). Today, education and training has finally been given a policy framework and an integrated action program, both of them devoted to the major ambition of achieving a European area of lifelong learning. Simultaneously, education and training are at the heart of the economic and social development of the European Union (hereinafter: EU). Nonetheless, at this point it is necessary to emphasize that education and training are policy fields where harmonization of the national laws and regulations with the EU legislation is not required. In this respect, the aim of the EU is primarily to contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between member states and by supporting and complementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the member states for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity. However, on the other hand, at the EU level we are able to find many decisions, resolutions and declarations referring to education, including, for example, equal opportunities for all, efficiency at school, mobility in higher education, foreign language education, safety at school, policy of non-discrimination, educational technologies and distance learning, lifelong learning, academic and vocational certification, quality of education, educational statistics, development of general and vocational training, education and possibilities of employment etc. All these activities in the EU context have common nomination – (voluntary-based) cooperation among member states.³

In this respect, taking into account the EU context, in the field of education and training has been introduced the so-called open method of cooperation (hereinafter: OMC). The OMC is a relatively new method of European cooperation based on voluntary cooperation between EU member states and EU institutions

² See Jones, D. Peter. *Space, Place and Scale: Reframing the Open Method of Co-ordination for »Education and Training 2010«*, at the Panel on Shaping European Education Agenda European Union Studies Association Conference Brussels and Leuven, Belgium, 2007. Available at <http://www.bris.ac.uk/education/research/centres/ges/gesresearchstudents/peterjones/publications/pdj1> (3 May 2008).

³ See European Commission. *The History of European cooperation in education and training. Europe in the making – an example*. Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2006; Hingel, J. Anders. *Education Policies and European Governance Contribution to the Interservice Groups on European Governance*, 2001. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/governance/areas/group12/contribution_education_en.pdf (28 May 2008); Walkenhorst, Heiko. *The Changing Role of EU Education Policy: a Critical Assessment*, 2005. Available at http://aei.pitt.edu/3177/01/Walkenhorst_EUSA_2005_final.pdf (3 May 2008).

on those policy fields where treaties establishing European Communities give small or even zero competencies for direct decision-making in the framework of EU institutions.⁴ Although already in 1990s the EU policy process contained many elements of the OMC, the method was formally introduced with the Lisbon Strategy.⁵ Hence, the Lisbon Strategy is perceived as a starting point of the OMC. Due to the nature of education as a policy field in which EU member states desire to maintain national sovereignty and the simultaneous awareness of the meaning of education for achieving the EU's strategic goals which cannot be achieved through 27 inconsistent national education systems, by introducing the OMC the Lisbon Strategy established a common European education space in which (hitherto completely heterogeneous) education systems could connect to create a uniform core of lifelong learning.⁶ The Lisbon process and introduction of the method formed the basis for installing the sector in the broader EU context and for legitimising its position in European integration.⁷ In this respect, the OMC represents a milestone in European education policy since it is believed to increase and strengthen the education sector at the EU level, while opening it up to influences from other fields (economic and social policy).⁸ The core of the OMC process in the field of education represents the Working Program Education & Training 2010.⁹

The article focuses on exploring the processes of translating objectives defined at the European level in the field of education and training into particular national and regional education policies. The article aims to investigate various national structures and procedures of putting the EU education policy objectives into practice at national level.¹⁰ In this way, the analysis endeavours to detect various factors that have an impact on the implementation process and reaching EU objectives in the field of education and training. In relation to main

⁴ See Dehousse, Renaud. *The Open Method of Coordination: A New Policy Paradigm?*, 2002. Available at <http://eucenter.wisc.edu/OMK/Papers/Dehousse.pdf> (4 May 2008).

⁵ See Laffan, Brigid and Colin Shaw. *Classifying and Mapping OMC in different policy areas*, 2005. Available at http://www.eu-newgov.org/database/DELIV/D02D09_Classifying_and_Mapping_OMC.pdf (4 May 2008).

⁶ See Gornitzka, Lse. *Coordinating policies for a »Europe of knowledge«, Emerging practices of the »Open Method of Coordination« in education and research*, 2005. Available at http://www.arena.uio.no/publications/working-papers2005/papers/wp05_16.pdf (3 May 2008).

⁷ Lse Gornitzka, *The Open Method of Coordination as practice – A watershed in European education policy?*, Working Paper No. 16 (Oslo: Arena Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo, 2006).

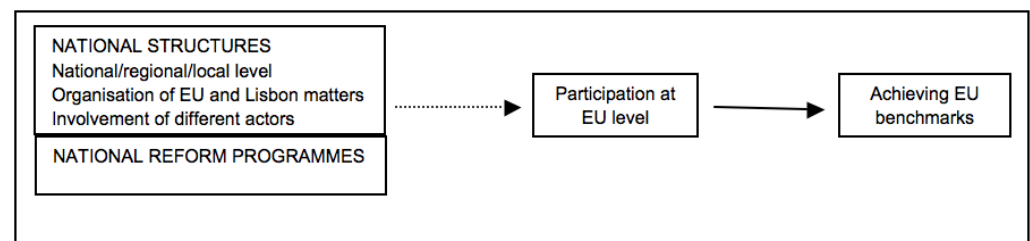
⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁹ Lange, Bettina and Nafsika Alexidou. *Governing through learning about policy: just all words? An introduction to policy learning in the context of open methods of co-ordinating education in the European Union (EU)*, 2009.

¹⁰ One of the most visible tools of OMC in implementing the EU objectives in the national education system is the revised approach in achieving the goals of Lisbon Strategy and EU Work Programme Education and Training 2010 (benchmarks). We should take into consideration that EU goals are also defined as particular outputs of the Education, Youth and Culture Council (e.g. in form of conclusions, recommendations, etc.), by best practices of member states presented in the work of clusters, by particular proposals resulting from various expert studies and analysis published by the European Commission or other EU bodies (e.g. Eurydice, Cedefop, etc.)

four elements (stages)¹¹ in OMC and emphasis from the White Paper of the European Commission on European Governance, we focused our comparative research on these points: 1) National structures (division of national/regional/local level, organisation of EU and Lisbon matters, involvement of different actors - stakeholders, social partners etc.); 2) National Reform Programmes within the Lisbon Agenda (documents); 3) Participation of national countries at EU level; 4) Achieving EU benchmarks.

PICTURE 1: THE PROCESS OF TRANSLATING OBJECTIVES DEFINED AT THE EU LEVEL IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING INTO EDUCATION POLICIES OF EU MEMBER STATES



We compare these aspects in three new member states: the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia, which became members of the EU in 2004. All of them are also involved in the project of Central European Cooperation in Education in Lifelong Learning (hereinafter: CECE). We conducted the comparative research on the basis of analysing National Progress Reports (2005, 2007, 2009) and National Strategies for Lifelong Learning.¹² In addition, we balanced these (possibly) subjective data¹³ with analysis of countries participation in clusters and peer learning activities, and with analysis of achieving EU benchmarks. In this relation we analysed European Commission' Progress Reports¹⁴ to see what they tell us about the performances of three analysed member states. The article proceeds as follows. First, reasons for different implementation of OMC in member states are observed. Second, the article exposes some peculiarities of implementing the OMC in new member states. Third, comparative analysis

¹¹ These elements are: fixing guidelines for the Union combined with specific timetables for achieving the goals which have been set in the short, medium and long terms; establishing, where appropriate, quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks against the best in the world and tailored to the needs of different member states and sectors as a means of comparing best practices; translating these European guidelines into national and regional policies by setting specific targets and adopting measures, taking national and regional differences into account; periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review organised as mutual learning processes.

¹² We do not go into detail with the content of the different strategies. We use them as points of reference in relation to be able to identify attitudes towards cooperation within OMC among member states.

¹³ Some authors warn that member states in their qualitative National Progress Reports can only express their symbolic compliance with EU education policy and goals. From that perspective relevance and neutrality of presented data in National Progress Reports can be doubtful.

¹⁴ Progress Towards the Lisbon Objectives in Education and Training – Indicators and Benchmarks.

of implementation of EU lifelong learning policy through OMC in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia is conducted. Finally, conclusion presents the syntheses of main findings.

2 REASONS FOR DIFFERENT IMPLEMENTATION OF OMC IN MEMBER STATES

The OMC as a form of cooperation between member states in the field of education was launched with the Lisbon Strategy in 2000. Before that, national education systems in EU in accordance with Maastricht treaty¹⁵ had been developing autonomously without (almost) any EU impact, while education had traditionally been a policy area anchored nationally. From this perspective, national education systems nowadays could differentiate because of different historical experiences, traditions, institutional infrastructure, size, dependency (on the EU), political culture, different stage of economic, cultural and political growth and powerful societal groups. In given circumstances member states could - depends on their needs, priorities, capabilities - sovereign decide, with which institutional frameworks and national strategies they would adopt to reach Lisbon goals. The willingness to change may also relate to member states' expectations towards EU cooperation within education policy.¹⁶ Member states are not passive receivers of EU policies. Instead, they are included in the complex process of selectively adopting policy instruments.¹⁷ Namely, EU member states select by themselves the means they perceive as useful (either upon recommendation or their own selection) in the context of their individual capabilities.¹⁸

The political institutional capacities in terms of structures in education policy are very different from member state to member state. According to different

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¹⁵ "The Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity."

¹⁶ Louise Munkholm and Ulrik Kjrlsen Olsen, *Open Method of Coordination within EU Education policy An Analysis of the Potential for Europeanisation* (Roskilde: Roskilde University, 2009), 35.

¹⁷ See Alexiadou, Nafsika. *The Europeanisation of education policy – changing governance and »new modes of coordination, Defining the European Education Agenda*. Available at <https://camtools.caret.cam.ac.uk/access/content/group/41d114c3-04b1-4898-8047-9c413ab94fab/Cambridge%20Meeting/Cambridge%20Working%20Papers/Nafsika%20Alexiadou%20paper.pdf> (29 May 2008).

¹⁸ See Kohl, Jürgen and Tobias Vahlpahl. *The »Open method of coordination« as an Instrument for Implementing the Principle of Subsidiarity?* 2005, 6. Available at http://aei.pitt.edu/6104/01/n62_kohl-vahlpahl.pdf (29 May 2008).

authors¹⁹ this difference in structures creates a basis for domestic change, in order to become more alike and thereby be able to compete with the other member states. We should take into consideration that the specific nature of OMC education makes it hard to document whether domestic changes within education policy are a result of an EU process within the framework of the OMC, or initiated from home.²⁰

3 OMC IN NEW MEMBER STATES

When we are talking about implementation of OMC, it is also important to look at the time of EU accession of particular member state. We hypothesise that new member states have similar starting points for cooperation within the OMC framework given their level of experience with EU cooperation. Because of OMC softness, non-obligatory nature and rules, it is possible that different member states have developed different frameworks of its implementation. We hypothesise that different framework of OMC implementation at national level result in different levels of activity at the EU level and different achieving of EU goals (benchmarks in the field of education). It is in accordance with De la Rosa suggestion²¹ that since OMC legal basis is poorly identified—and insufficiently clarified by the draft constitutional treaty—the application of the OMC in its entirety to the new member states runs the risk of generating a sense of disorder, which might obfuscate the priorities themselves.

The effective implementation of the OMC in an enlarged Europe presupposes, in the light of the considerations made during the preparations for the new member states, the adaptation of its objectives and its indicators, whilst at the same time ensuring a great degree of appropriation of its method.²² The principal challenges need to be faced by each new member state as regards education and the principal measures should be adopted to transpose the joint objectives

¹⁹ See Büchs, Milena. *Methodological and Conceptual Issues in Researching the Open Method of Coordination*, 2003. Available at <http://www.xnat.org.uk/PDFs/SeventhSeries/Seminar%201%20Researching%20the%20European%20Social%20Model%20from%20a%20Comparative%20Perspective.pdf> (6 August 2008); Dehousse, Renaud. *The Open Method of Coordination: A New Policy Paradigm?*, 2002. Available at <http://eucenter.wisc.edu/OMK/Papers/Dehousse.pdf> (4 May 2008); Heidenreich, Martin in Gabriele Bischoff. *The Open Method of Coordination: A way to the Europeanization of social and employment policies?*, 2006. Available at http://eucenter.wisc.edu/OMC/New%20OMC%20links/Heidenreich-Bischoff%20jcms_796.pdf (6 August 2008); Radaelli, M. Claudio. *The Open Method of Coordination: A new governance architecture for the European Union? Preliminary report*, 2003; Sacchi, Stefano. *The open method of coordination and national institutional capabilities The Italian Experience as a Heuristic Case Study*, 2004. Available at http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/5/9/8/3/pages59836/p59836-1.php (4 August 2008).

²⁰ Łse Gornitzka, *The Open Method of Coordination as practice – A watershed in European education policy? Working Paper No. 16* (Oslo: Arena Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo, 2006), 48.

²¹ Stéphane de la Rosa, "The Open Method of Coordination in the New Member States – the Perspectives for its Use as a Tool of Soft Law," *European Law Journal*, 11, 5 (2005), 623.

²² Stéphane de la Rosa, "The Open Method of Coordination in the New Member States – the Perspectives for its Use as a Tool of Soft Law," *European Law Journal*, 11, 5 (2005), 634.

of the EU on education into national policies. Administrative bodies in the new member states need to acquire knowledge of the structure of the education OMC, especially the different types of indicators involved.²³ The new member states have yet a lot to learn when it comes to being part of EU cooperation as such. Moreover, one could argue that new member states' expectations are different than the ones of old member states, as the latter would suggest further development from a level that the new member states have yet to reach²⁴. These new member states that were accustomed for decades to live in a system of "democratic centralism", may have difficulties to familiarize with the new mechanisms of "democratic experimentalism" represented by OMC.²⁵ Nevertheless, the preparation of the new member states for the procedures of the OMC is a slow but quite clear process that tends to distort the institutional equilibrium underlying this method.²⁶

The question of applying OMC in the education sector could be seen, therefore, not only as a question of how far we go with Europeanization of our educational policies, but also as one that can help us renew our national ways of governing our own education system.²⁷ This view is in accordance with Hodson and Maher²⁸ thinking that "OMC is designed not only to deliver new policy outcomes but also to act as a process for improving policy formation".

4 COMPARING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EU LIFELONG LEARNING POLICY THROUGH OPEN METHOD OF COORDINATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, SLOVAKIA AND SLOVENIA

In this part we investigate the processes of translating objectives defined at the EU level in the field of education and training into education policies in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia. We focus on various national structures and procedures of putting the EU education policy objectives into practice at national level. In this respect, we focus on the following four dimensions: 1) the role of different (sub)national structures (division of national/regional/local level, organisation of EU and Lisbon matters, involvement of different actors -

²³ Ibid., 626.

²⁴ Louise Munkholm and Ulrik Kjrlsen Olsen, *Open Method of Coordination within EU Education policy An Analysis of the Potential for Europeanisation* (Roskilde: Roskilde University, 2009), 36.

²⁵ Gábor Halász, *European co-ordination of national education policies from the perspective of the new member countries* (Sint-Katelijne-Waver: Consortium of Institutions for Development and Research in Education in Europe, 2003), 12.

²⁶ Stéphane de la Rosa, "The Open Method of Coordination in the New Member States – the Perspectives for its Use as a Tool of Soft Law," *European Law Journal*, 11, 5 (2005), 627.

²⁷ Gábor Halász, *European co-ordination of national education policies from the perspective of the new member countries* (Sint-Katelijne-Waver: Consortium of Institutions for Development and Research in Education in Europe, 2003), 5.

²⁸ Daniel Hodson and Imelda Maher, "The Open Method as a New Mode of Governance," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 39, 4 (2001), 719–746.

stakeholders, social partners etc.), 2) the National Reform Programmes within the Lisbon Agenda (documents) as core documents of lifelong learning; 3) participation of representatives of member states in activities at the EU level, and 4) achieving EU benchmarks.

The role of different (sub)national structures

In order to better understand the national contexts with regard to the mechanisms of implementing EU objectives in the field of education and training into national education systems of the three examined countries the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia, first, we need to have a closer look on the organisation of their education systems with special view to EU matters. In three examined countries there are differences in organisation of education systems, while Slovenia as well does not have formally established regions. Administration responsibilities are distributed among the national authorities, local authorities, and schools.²⁹ In the Czech Republic the responsibility is distributed among the central government, regions (which are 14) and communities. Regions are given a high degree of autonomy.³⁰ Regions are responsible for education on their territory and also formulate long-term objectives for their territory in compliance with national objectives every four years. On the regional level also training activities and Human Resource Development Regional Councils have been established.³¹ The communities are responsible for compulsory schooling. They establish and administer basic schools and also nursery schools which are not compulsory.³² In Slovakia, the Ministry of Education is a central body of the execution of state administration in education and checks up this execution. Above all it determines the network of education establishments, principles of pedagogical management of schools. General administration at regional level is represented with the regional school offices (eight offices). Their seats and territorial area of competence are identical with the seats and territorial area of competence of the self-governing regions and by self-governing region. General administration at the local level is in competence of municipalities.³³

From the viewpoint of OMC, the White Paper of the European Commission on European Governance and in accordance with principle of subsidiarity,

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²⁹ See Eurydice. *Organisation of the education system in Slovenia 2008/09*, 2009c.

³⁰ See Eurydice. *Organisation of the education system in the Czech Republic 2008/09*, 2009a.

³¹ See European Commission. *Implementing lifelong learning strategies in Europe: Commission Progress report on the follow-up to the Council resolution of 2002. EU and EFTA/EEA countries*, (2003), 5.

³² See Eurydice. *Organisation of the education system in the Czech Republic 2008/09*, 2009a.

³³ See Eurydice. *Organisation of the education system in Slovakia 2008/09* (2009b), 2.

the decisions should be taken at the lowest (local, regional) level. Radaelli³⁴ and Zeitlin³⁵ argue that OMC should exploit knowledge from local level and in that way foster bottom-up learning which enables good EU governance. We have to mention that even if there are regions not formally established in Slovenia, in the field of lifelong learning (hereinafter: LLL) Slovenia set up eleven specialised centres including Regional Training Centres able to act as providers and/or catalysts for LLL schemes Guidance and Counselling Centres for Adult Education.³⁶ Every centre plays the role of coordinator between relevant players in the local environment (social partners, learning providers on all levels, local authorities, employment services) and therefore enables process of mutual learning and cooperation at lowest level without formally established institutions.

When we compare Organisation of Ministries of education from the viewpoint of organisation of EU matters we see that all three countries have got only one Department (Unit) for EU Affairs in the entire ministry. There are slight differences but such a department, which does not have its variation in any other sections of the ministry, is obliged to communicate with particular experts from other departments of other sections, who do not deal with EU matters on daily basis and who in many cases see the tasks connected to EU agenda rather as an uneasy burden. As a result, such a perception of the EU-related tasks in other departments has its influence on the particular expert outcomes that are produced at the request of the EU Department to be presented at the EU level.³⁷

Beside the (re)organisation of Ministries structures examined countries also established special bodies for implementing Lisbon strategy. Usually these are *ad hoc* inter-ministerial committees or working groups set up when appropriate.³⁸ All the examined countries reports that Coordinating Units or rather the Lifelong Learning Section of the Ministry, which coordinates "the national Lisbon processes", does not have direct powers over the activities of other Sections, Departments, or Units of the ministry which were given the tasks to fulfil. As a result the extent of the real participation at the implementation of the EU

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³⁴ See Radaelli, M. Claudio. *The Open Method of Coordination: A new governance architecture for the European Union?* Preliminary report, 2003; Radaelli, M. Claudio. Who learns what? Policy learning and the open method of coordination, Paper presented at Conference: Implementing the Lisbon strategy »policy learning inside and outside the open method«, European Research Institute – University of Birmingham, 2004.

³⁵ See Zeitlin, Jonathan. *Introduction: The Open Method of Coordination in Question*, 2005. Available at <http://eucenter.wisc.edu/OMK/Papers/EUC/JZPP/introduction.pdf> (4 May 2008).

³⁶ See European Commission. *Implementing lifelong learning strategies in Europe: Commission Progress report on the follow-up to the Council resolution of 2002. EU and EFTA/EEA countries* (2003), 7–8.

³⁷ See Central European Cooperation in Education in Lifelong Learning. *The Evaluation Analysis of Applying the Open Method of Coordination in the Field of Education and Training in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia*, 2008.

³⁸ See European Commission. *Implementing lifelong learning strategies in Europe: Commission Progress report on the follow-up to the Council resolution of 2002. EU and EFTA/EEA countries* (2003), 6.

objectives into the national educational system depends primarily on the extent of individual initiative of the respective ministerial body.³⁹

With regard to the involvement of the Permanent Representation of the three countries to the EU in Brussels in the EU coordination process in the field of education and training, obviously it varies among the countries. At all levels and especially at the Education Committee level the strongest involvement of the Permanent Representation is evident in case of Slovakia. As for the Czech Republic and Slovenia, their Permanent Representations work more as a "translator" of the capital's position to the EU's context, hence, the position of the national ministries is stronger than in case of Slovakia.⁴⁰

From the viewpoint of OMC it is important that responsibilities are clearly defined. From the organisation of EU matters in the field of education in three examined countries we see very complex system of relations (between many ad-hoc established intra- and inter- ministerial bodies). The countries have quite similar organised systems but the question is how the real communication between them really works, taking in consideration the soft nature of OMC and lack of control which can mean that actual (in)formal processes are different or almost absent as they are defined. This is in accordance with perceiving of some authors⁴¹ that flexibility and non-obligatory nature of OMC can simply lead to non-appliance in member states.

As obstacles in implementing OMC in national education policy, the examined countries highlights the lack of culture in thinking beyond the limited national (or institutional) scope of action, in taking into consideration other alternative views, interpreting things in a broader perspective and the domestic developments (e.g. implemented from the European Structural Funds) and the representation/coordination of EU affairs takes place separated from each other. The communication between the department responsible for the development and the department responsible for EU relations is in most countries occasional, and this has not been fully remedied by establishing a forum on ministerial or governmental level. There should be established better communication channels between different actors, especially the Department/Unit of EU Affairs and the department responsible for development and planning, especially the

³⁹ See Central European Cooperation in Education in Lifelong Learning. *The Evaluation Analysis of Applying the Open Method of Coordination in the Field of Education and Training in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia*, 2008.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ See Alexiadou, Nafsika. *The Europeanisation of education policy – changing governance and »new modes of coordination, Defining the European Education Agenda*, 2007. Available at <https://camtools.caret.cam.ac.uk/access/content/group/41d114c3-04b1-4898-8047-9c413ab94fab/Cambridge%20Meeting/Cambridge%20Working%20Papers/Nafsika%20Alexiadou%20paper.pdf> (29 May 2008).

ones administering European Social Fund.⁴²

Halász⁴³ agree with importance of connection between Departments/Units of EU Affairs and the ones administering European Social Fund and argue that important fractions of education policy may come under Community control even within the framework set by the Treaty. Since in these countries, education and training reforms were realised in the framework of European development (structural) policy with resources coming from the taxpayers of other countries, it is natural that the community have to take a strong responsibility on how these resources were used and therefore have important impact on national education policies. All the examined countries report that they actually broadly use European Social Fund for implementing their national education reforms.

Finally, in three examined countries not only governmental actors play role in the field of making and implementing lifelong learning policy. There are evident some examples of involving stakeholders and social partners. In the Czech Republic several representatives of social partners are members of the Intra-ministerial Coordination group, besides the expert officials from the Ministry, experts from cooperating public institutions and officials from other relevant ministries. European Commission expose Czech Republic also as good example by establishing Councils for human resources development at the regional level, which should be an instrument for coordination and creation of a consensus on the priorities of a specific policy amongst a large number of independent entities active in the particular area (organizations of employers and employees, enterprises, educational institutions, civic and special-interest associations, etc.).⁴⁴ On the other hand there are weaknesses and deficiencies in involving the stakeholders into the debate on the EU matters that would be initiated from the Ministry. None of the Council documents are consulted with wider scope of stakeholders. As threat of successful implementation of Lifelong Learning Strategy in Czech Republic they also mention lack of interconnection of policies in the areas of education, industry, health, social services and culture.⁴⁵

Within the agenda connected to the formulation and monitoring implementation of the National Reform Programmes, in the respective Lisbon working groups

⁴² See Central European Cooperation in Education in Lifelong Learning. *The Evaluation Analysis of Applying the Open Method of Coordination in the Field of Education and Training in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia*, 2008.

⁴³ Gábor Halász, *European co-ordination of national education policies from the perspective of the new member countries* (Sint-Katelijne-Waver: Consortium of Institutions for Development and Research in Education in Europe, 2003), 2.

⁴⁴ See European Commission. *Implementing lifelong learning strategies in Europe: Commission Progress report on the follow-up to the Council resolution of 2002. EU and EFTA/EEA countries* (2003), 7.

⁴⁵ See Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of Czech Republic. *The Strategy of Lifelong Learning in the Czech Republic* (2007a), 49.

in Slovakia there are involved various representatives of employers, labour unions, academic community, non-governmental organisations, regional self-governments, etc. Social partners can also have their representation in 17 expert groups.⁴⁶ They are involved at national, regional and local level. Also the idea of learning regions, which are supporting the networks of stakeholders at local level is being actively fostered.⁴⁷ If even there are various ways of involving stakeholders and social partners, Slovakia highlights that strategically based communication with the stakeholders is rather minimal or non-existent.

In the Progress Report from 2007⁴⁸ it is written that strategy for lifelong learning in Slovenia was created within the framework of the Ministry of Education and Sport, so the main stress is on solutions and measures which are directly connected with the field of education and training. Other fields, e.g., the economy, are mainly responding to the proposal. It is still hard for the idea to be accepted that the question of lifelong learning is not a 'problem' only of education and training. Slovenia also complains of the lack of 'effective engagement of trade unions' and also reports that 'LLL, as a subject of social dialogue, is not sufficiently developed at the top, as well as at sectional or enterprise level'.⁴⁹

Although each of the three surveyed ministries can offer some examples of good practice, the involvement of stakeholders is generally insufficient. The reasons for that are usually the personnel shortage of the relevant departments to deal with communicating and coordinating with the stakeholders and the lack of initiative of the stakeholders themselves.⁵⁰ Copsey and Haughton⁵¹ explain that the legacy from the former communist regimes plays a key role. This is among other aspects reflected in a "lack of highly developed mechanisms of accountability" and an absence of institutionalised forums for open and transparent interaction among government and key interest groups. From the viewpoint of OMC it is important that institutions work in an open manner and actively communicate about what the EU does and the decision it takes with

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⁴⁶ See Ministry of education of the Slovak Republic. *Slovakia National Report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme* (2005), 5.

⁴⁷ See Ministry of education of the Slovak Republic. *Slovakia National Report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme* (2005), 12.

⁴⁸ See Ministry of education and sport of Slovenia. *Slovenia National Report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme*, 2007b.

⁴⁹ See European Commission. *Implementing lifelong learning strategies in Europe: Commission Progress report on the follow-up to the Council resolution of 2002. EU and EFTA/EEA countries* (2003), 9.

⁵⁰ See Central European Cooperation in Education in Lifelong Learning. *The Evaluation Analysis of Applying the Open Method of Coordination in the Field of Education and Training in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia*, 2008.

⁵¹ Nathaniel Copsey and Tim Haughton, "The Choices for Europe? National Preference Formation in Old and New Member States," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 47, 2 (2009), 282.

various stakeholders.⁵² In the process of implementing the EU objectives into the national level, crucial role plays the involvement of all relevant stakeholders.⁵³ Support for various mechanisms and forms of cooperation between the sphere of education and social partners at all levels is also important for harmonizing education and the requirements of the labour market. At a national level, policies should primarily be coordinated in the areas of education, employment, qualifications and support for enterprises, where it would be useful to reconsider the need for a coordination body extending over the sectors.

National Reform Programmes within the Lisbon Agenda: core documents in the field of lifelong learning

Like for many other EU member states it is also hard to distinguish between influence stemming from the EU level and from other international organisations such as OECD, UNESCO and the Council of Europe in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia. For example, debates around the concept of lifelong learning have been going on for years within the OECD before they were taken over by the EU.⁵⁴ Anyway, clear overlapping with the goals, agreed on the European level, can be identified in all key areas of reform of the education system in examined three countries. Taking into account the accession process, it was necessary to respond to initiatives on the EU level to draw the particular member state closer to the trends of the EU and to link some of the key aspects of the national education system with the European education area.⁵⁵ Most countries strive to implement lifelong learning principles in different components of the education and training systems through new legislation or, most often, appropriate amendments to the existing legislation. Thus, many acts have been revised or are in the process of revision with the view to integrating lifelong learning priorities and principles.⁵⁶ From the standpoint of lifelong learning, strategic documents of the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia are either placed in a specific context, i.e. they are concerned with more general aspects of social and economic development, the labour market and human resources, or they are

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⁵² See European Commission. *European Governance – A White Paper*. Brussels: European Commission (2001), 10.

⁵³ In the field of education policy they usually are: teachers, school leaders, universities, parent's associations, non-governmental organisations, civil society etc...

⁵⁴ See Eurydice. *Lifelong Learning: the contribution of education systems in the Member States of the European Union. Results of Eurydice Survey* (2000), 8.

⁵⁵ See Central European Cooperation in Education in Lifelong Learning. *The Evaluation Analysis of Applying the Open Method of Coordination in the Field of Education and Training in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia*, 2008.

⁵⁶ See European Commission. *Implementing lifelong learning strategies in Europe: Commission Progress report on the follow-up to the Council resolution of 2002. EU and EFTA/EEA countries*, (2003), 5.

directly related to aspects of education.⁵⁷ The educational system is then seen in these documents as one of the basic pillars of the development of lifelong learning.⁵⁸ All of three countries use the term lifelong learning in accordance as it was defined in the Memorandum of the European Commission and have used Memorandum as a starting point for preparing their own Strategies of lifelong learning.

Comparing three core documents in the field of lifelong learning in three examined countries' Lifelong learning strategies, we see that they have quite different structure⁵⁹ and content related to specific national context (tradition, current situation, national goals in the field of education and training). All of them were prepared on the basis of preliminary analyses of others already accepted Lifelong learning strategies and analyses of national current situation. For example Slovakia evidence basis for identifying strategy's content was SWOT analyses of the educational sector pointing out the fact that Slovak educational and guidance system has been reacting insufficiently to labour market needs over last decades.⁶⁰ In the Czech Republic Lifelong strategy SWOT analyses of concept of lifelong learning is also presented. Only Slovenian Lifelong strategy is not translated in English and therefore cannot be accepted for other interested actors.

As we see the measures supporting lifelong learning are an integral part of several concept documents and action plans, which were prepared and adopted in accordance with the European trends. Number of national strategies in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia under the umbrella of Lisbon Strategy many authors explain by the historical background of being part of a communist regime which explains the high motivation and willingness of reforming and

⁵⁷ For example such documents in the Czech Republic are: The National Strategic Reference Framework of the CR 2007 – 2013 (2006), The National Lisbon Program 2005 – 2008 (National Program of Reforms in the CR) (2005), The Strategy of Economic Growth (2005), The Convergence Program of the Czech Republic for 2006-2008 (2005), The Strategy of the Human Resources Development (2003), Long-term plan for education and development of the educational system in the Czech Republic (2005, 2007), The National Strategy of Education for Sustainable Development (2007). Documents evident in Slovakia are: The Competitiveness Strategy of Slovakia until 2010 (2005), National strategic reference framework of the Slovak Republic for years 2007 – 2013, Millennium – the National program of education and training in the Slovak Republic (2001). In Slovenia some of the documents are: Slovenian Development Strategy (2005), Reform Programme for Achieving the Lisbon Strategy Goals (2005), National Strategic Reference Framework and Operational Programme for Human Resources Development, Resolution on the Adult Education Master Plan (2004), National Programme of education for democratic citizenship and education for human rights (2004), Guidelines for Education for Sustainable Development from Pre-school to Pre-University Education (2007).

⁵⁸ See Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of Czech Republic. *The Strategy of Lifelong Learning in the Czech Republic* (2007a), 19.

⁵⁹ Lifelong learning strategies in examined countries are also different length: the Czech Republic 92 pages, Slovakia 31 pages, Slovenia 52 pages.

⁶⁰ See Ministry of education of the Slovak Republic. *Slovakia National Report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme* (2007b), 2-3.

experimenting seen in the new member states after 50 years of inertia.⁶¹

Participation of representatives of the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia in clusters and peer-learning activities

In the field of participation in clusters and peer-learning activities (hereinafter: PLA) there are many similarities between analysed countries. Analysis of participation in existed clusters⁶² of the Working programme Education & Training 2010 shows that examined countries shows similar range of activities. The Czech Republic and Slovakia are formally participating in six of ten existing clusters, Slovenia formally take part in five of them. Slovakia and Slovenia hosted one PLA, while the Czech Republic hosted two of them. Countries explain that their representation might fluctuate due to personnel shortage or personnel changes in the ministry or relevant expert institutions.

Cluster members are delegated to the individual clusters by the ministerial area which is in charge of the given topic. In all the three countries the cluster member is given a great autonomy in his/her performance by the Coordinating body. However, in the Czech Republic and Slovenia the aspect of coordination is rather minimal or existent at all. The cluster members are given "total" independence in which way and to what extent they utilise the knowledge and experiences gained in clusters in their work at the national level. They largely use the information gained at the EU level in their own work, but they are not obliged to distribute it in any established way to the relevant experts or policy makers. The extent, how they disseminate findings and insights and inform relevant colleges overly depends on personal involvement of the cluster member.⁶³ From that point of view the background of cluster members, if rather of an expert nature or policy and decision making, is very crucial with regard to the cluster's actual impact on the national level. The cluster member is often just an expert without any decision-making competences or without a direct influence on determining national policy.⁶⁴

The outputs of the cluster might be very influential in determining and realising national policies. However due to the lack of institutional support and limited power in the following process, the European Commission loses track completely, when the national experts go home. Because of the lack of

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⁶¹ Louise Munkholm and Ulrik Kjrlsen Olsen. *Open Method of Coordination within EU Education policy. An Analysis of the Potential for Europeanisation* (Roskilde: Roskilde University, 2009), 45-46.

⁶² Modernisation of higher education, Working group on adult education, Information and Communication Technology, Key Competences, Making best use of resources, Math, Science and Technology, Recognition of Learning outcomes, Teachers and trainers, Teachers and trainers in VET, Access and Social Inclusion.

⁶³ See Central European Cooperation in Education in Lifelong Learning. *The Evaluation Analysis of Applying the Open Method of Coordination in the Field of Education and Training in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia*, 2008.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

institutional support results of clusters work often don't reach the policy makers in national countries. From that propose European Commission have started with meetings of Directors General at the EU level where the results of clusters are directly presented to them (not only with meetings but also with publishing Policy handbooks). Another view is that participation in cluster is not absolutely necessary for national reforms in particular area. For example in National Report from 2009 Slovenia explained: "We are not actively participating in the key competences cluster, but we do take into consideration the available results of the cluster's work in policy formulation and make use of them in the implementation of measures."⁶⁵ If even participation in activities at EU level (in clusters and peer learning activities) is not crucial for gaining information for national reforms, it is very important from the standpoint of participative nature of OMC and bottom-up policy learning where sharing experiences and finding solutions for common problems should take place between wide range of actors from the lowest (local/regional/national level).

Achieving EU benchmarks in the field of lifelong learning and translating them into national context

When we compare the achieving of EU benchmarks – significant differences can be seen between examined three countries. The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia⁶⁶ are significantly beyond average in two of five benchmarks of the EU; the number of early school leavers is traditionally low and for a long time under 10% and over 90% of 22-year old with completed upper secondary education puts the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia high above the average of both the EU and the EU benchmark (85%). The main difference between countries is evident at benchmarks "low achievers in reading" and "adult learning participation", where Slovenia is above the average and where the Czech Republic and Slovakia do not reach not only EU benchmark but also not EU average. Different situation is at benchmark "MST graduates". It is interesting to compare achieving benchmarks with participation in clusters and organising PLA. For example both Czech Republic and Slovakia hosted PLA in the field of adult education, if even they are beyond the EU average. That shows that the aim of PLA activities at EU level is not only sharing best practices, but practices as such. Slovakia in its National report from 2005 explains that even though Slovakia is at present behind the 12,5% benchmark in lifelong learning of adults, the implementation of the planned fiscal stimulation of lifelong learning together with effective utilisation of sources of the European Social Fund makes the achievement of this benchmark feasible and are able to present

⁶⁵ See Ministry of education and sport of Slovenia. *Slovenia National Report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme* (2009), 2.

⁶⁶ We have to mention that Slovenia does not formally measure the percentage of "early school leavers" and that value is only estimation of Slovenian Statistical Office.

its experience to other member states.⁶⁷

PICTURE 2: ACHIEVING BENCHMARKS IN THE FIELD OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, SLOVAKIA AND SLOVENIA

BENCHMARK / COUNTRY	Early school leavers;		Low achievers in reading		Upper secondary school		MST Graduates		Adult learning participation	
EU benchmark 2010	<10%		<20%		85%		15% growth		12,5%	
	2000	2008	2000	2006	2000	2008	2000	2008	2000	2008
The highest country	5,5	5,0	7,0	4,8	94,8	92,3		164	20,5	32,4
The lowest country	54,2	39,0	41,3	53,5	40,9	53,0		-3,6	0,9	1,4
Average EU	17,6	14,9	21,3	24,1	76,6	78,5		33,6	7,1	9,5
Czech Republic	5,5	5,6	17,5	24,8	91,2	91,6		96	*	7,8
Slovakia	5,6	6,0	*	27,8	94,8	92,3		129,9	*	3,3
Slovenia	7,5	5,1	*	16,5	88,0	90,2		8,3	*	13,9

* Data not available. Source: European Commission (2009): Progress Towards the Lisbon Objectives in Education and Training – Indicators and Benchmarks.

The Lisbon strategy make high demands of the national education policy, thus making a broad information campaign necessary. Many of those involved find the process to be too complex and feel that it required a clearer structure. Examined countries agree that public reflection if the country's achievements within the Education & Training 2010 does not usually draw any substantial media attention (contrary to the OECD PISA study). The process of "naming and shaming" thus works only at the level of EU meetings. In that manner attempts must be made to separate the co-ordination and reform processes from the pure expert level and to win broader public for the implementation of the European objectives. Overall, the above-mentioned performances show that the member states have different strengths and weaknesses in the five-benchmark areas, and that no country is falling behind in all areas. The examined new member states are comparable with other member states and are in some cases even behind EU average.

5 CONCLUSION

In the article we analyzed the processes of translating objectives defined at the EU level in the field of education and training into national education policies in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia. The main aim of the article was to investigate various national structures and procedures of putting the EU education policy objectives into practice at the national level. In this way, the analysis made an effort to detect various factors that have an impact on the implementation process and reaching EU objectives in the field of education and training. While observing results of national education systems, the conducted study showed that all analyzed factors matter: the role of (pre-established) national structures, the National Reform Programmes within the Lisbon Agenda

⁶⁷ See Ministry of education of the Slovak Republic. Slovakia National Report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme (2005), 4.

and participation of representatives of member states in activities at the EU level. However, despite there are some differences between them, all of them are in general able to achieve EU benchmarks in the field of Education and training. They all have different strengths and weaknesses in the benchmark areas, but they are in general comparable with other member states, while in some cases they are even above the EU average. In our opinion, especially two factors are of special importance: 1) different institutional structures, dealing with EU matters; and 2) different approaches of implementing lifelong learning strategies. Differences in these two factors between analyzed member states are rather significant. The first reason for this is the soft nature of OMC. While the second reason, and at the same time a common nomination in all three investigated member states, represents the problem that OMC's potentials in the field of education and training are not being fully exploited. Our analysis showed that the procedural processes that characterise the OMC are gradually being disseminated in the new member states at the administrative level, but the question of the participation of various (especially non-governmental) stakeholders and social partners still remains open. It seems this question is very sensitive issue in all three analyzed countries and the solution to it will have to be found in the long term.

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