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THE PEER-REVIEW MEETINGS IN THE EUROPEAN EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY: DYNAMICS, OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITS FOR MEMBER STATES' LEARNING

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The Peer-review Meetings in the European Employment Strategy: Dynamics, Opportunities and Limits for Member States' Learning

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L'idea alla base di questo approccio è che sia non solo desiderabile ma istituzionalmente possibile muovere verso forme di politica «civile», informate a quel «pluralismo ragionevole» che Rawls ha indicato come tratto caratterizzante del liberalismo politico. Identificare i contorni di questa nuova «politica civile» è particolarmente urgente e importante per il sistema politico italiano, che appare ancora scarsamente preparato ad affrontare le sfide emergenti in molti settori di policy, dalla riforma del welfare al governo dell'immigrazione, dai criteri di selezione nella scuola e nella pubblica amministrazione alla definizione di regole per le questioni eticamente sensibili.

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KEYWORDS

OMC, peer-reviews, Europeanization, policy learning, policy transfer

ABSTRACT

THE PEER-REVIEW MEETINGS IN THE EUROPEAN EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY: DYNAMICS, OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITS FOR MEMBER STATES' LEARNING

This paper fits in with those studies which, relying on a 'Europeanization' perspective, have tried to assess the influence that EU open coordination processes (Open method of coordination-OMC) can possibly produce on member states' (MS) policies. Notably, this paper focuses on a single component of those processes: the Peer-review meetings (PR) which have been held since 1999 in the framework of the European Employment Strategy (EES). Being the aim of those meetings the promotion of dynamics of 'mutual-learning' and policy transfer among the participant countries, they have the potentiality for being a central venue through which EU OMC can exert an influence on MS' policies. Nevertheless, the academic literature has seldom studied them. This paper tries to plug that gap. First of all, we will provide a description of those meetings: their organization, their evolution and the roles of participating actors. Second, mainly relying on the literature on policy and organizational learning, we will try to assess potentialities and the limits for MS' learning arising from those meetings. Finally, we will advance some hypothesis about the path of the influence possibly exerted by those meetings on the national levels (identifying the relevant facilitating and constraining factors), thus providing some elements for sketching a 'map' that guides further empirical analysis on national cases.

THE PEER-REVIEW MEETINGS
IN THE EUROPEAN EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY: DYNAMICS, OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITS FOR MEMBER STATES' LEARNING[1]

INTRODUCTION

The European Employment Strategy (EES) is a process launched in 1997 by the European Union (EU) in order to coordinate member states' (MS) employment policies. It relies on the procedures characterizing the so called 'Open Method of Coordination' (OMC)[2], a EU mode of governance aiming at "spreading best practices and achieving greater convergence towards the main EU goals" (European Council 2000, § 37). Convergence should be obtained by 'orienting' national policies towards common goals, while leaving to MS a large autonomy about actions through which reaching those goals. OMCs are procedures of 'soft law': decisions taken in those contexts are not binding and no legal or financial sanctions are provided if MS do not comply with them. In other words, MS' compliance should be a voluntary act. Given that peculiarity, OMCs have increasingly attracted the interest of the academic literature. Scholars queried whether OMCs were really capable of exerting any influence on domestic policies, what kind of influence and through what mechanisms. Briefly summing up the main findings of the literature on OMC[3], one can say that there is a substantial agreement concerning the kind of influence those processes are potentially able to exert, while some doubts exist on the scope of influences effectively exerted. First of all, OMC are deemed potentially able to produce (or contributing to produce) substantive changes in national policies at the cognitive and political (policy agendas) levels as well as changes in specific policy programs. However, while several studies have provided evidence of changes at the cognitive level or in national agendas,

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[1] A first version of this paper was presented during the 'XXV Convegno della Società italiana di Scienza Politica' (Palermo, 8-10 September 2011). I would like to thank professor Renata Lizzi for precious advice given in that occasion as well as afterwards.

[2] The EES is the oldest OMC. It is a Treaty-based process relying on an iterative cycle (originally annual, starting from 2005 it develops in a three years time span). Constitutive elements of the cycle are: 'Guidelines for employment' established by the Council of Ministers; the drafting of 'Employment chapters' in MS' 'National Reform Programmes' for the Lisbon Strategy; the joint examination of those chapters by the Council of Ministers and the European Commission (EC) and the subsequent elaboration of 'Joint employment reports' (JER) including the benchmarking of national situations (Cambridge review); Peer-review meetings for identifying, discussing and exchanging good practices; the possibility to address country-specific 'recommendations'.

[3] See in particular Ferrera and Sacchi (2005), Graziano (2004), Kröger (2009), Trubek and Mosher (2003), Trubek and Trubek (2005), Visser (2005), Zeitlin (2005, 2009).

OMC's direct influence on national policies or specific programs appears more limited[4]. Second, a widespread consensus exists on the fact that OMC exerted a procedural influence on domestic levels: in other words, changes concerning the procedures for elaborating policies, decisional modes and styles, the number of actors involved in the elaboration and implementation of national policies (and the quality of their involvement), the administrative capabilities of national administrations have been detected[5]. Turning to the 'mechanisms' through which OMC is supposed to exert an influence on domestic levels, different types (alternative to imposition and sanctions) have been identified: external pressure, socialization and discursive diffusion, deliberation and mutual learning, financial support, party politics, creative usage by domestic actors.

Nevertheless, assessing such an influence on domestic levels involves formidable conceptual and methodological problems: in particular, how be sure that possible changes in domestic policies and procedures depend on OMCs and not on other (EU, international or domestic) dynamics? In order to overcome that problem, some precious suggestions come from the literature. Jonathan Zeitlin (2009, 215) suggests to combine different research strategies and, particularly, to engage in "contextualized process-tracing, in order to identify and assess the practical influence of the OMC (alongside other factors) on domestic actors, debates, procedures, and policies in specific contexts (national, temporal, sectoral)". Sandra Kröger (2009, 8) advices to resolve OMCs into their constitutive elements (the elaboration of guidelines, indicators, objectives, benchmarking and peer-review meetings, recommendations) and "[to] engage in thick process tracing in order to develop plausible narratives" about their respective influence on domestic levels.

Moreover, before undertaking empirical analysis, it is important to clearly define the characteristics of the mechanism of influence that is supposed to operate: it is

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[4] With reference to the EES, case studies included in Pochet et al. (2005) and Heidenreich and Zeitlin (2009) provide some evidence of shifts in national policy orientation and thinking (also) due to the incorporation of EU concepts and categories into domestic debates (concerning, for example, the shift of emphasis from reducing unemployment to raising employment rates, from a curative to a preventive approach to fight unemployment, the introduction of concepts such as 'flexicurity' or 'making work pay'). In some cases, those cognitive shifts, particularly pronounced in the new MS (Zeitlin 2009, 218), have contributed to change domestical political agendas by placing new issues on it or by pushing up or reframing already existing issues. Turning to cases in which the EES is supposed to have contributed to changes in MS' specific programs, examples include (Zeitlin 2005, 451-452; 2009, 219-220): activation and unemployment prevention policies is countries like France, Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands; tax-benefits reforms (France and Germany); active ageing and lifelong learning (France, Germany); reducing gender and ethnic segregation (Denmark and Sweden); promoting gender mainstreaming (in most MS).

[5] According to Zeitlin (2009, 221), procedural shifts in governance and policy making arrangements possibly due to an influence of the OMC processes such as the EES include: a reinforced horizontal coordination and cross-sectoral integration between interdependent policy fields; improvements in national steering capacity; the enhancement of vertical coordination between levels of governance; an increased involvement of non-state actors; the development of new horizontal and/or diagonal networks for participation of non-state and subnational actors in EU policy making processes.

plausible that different mechanisms operates following peculiar logics and scholars have not always been precise in defining them (Hartlapp 2009)[6].

In other words, in order to develop "credible narratives" on OMC influences on the domestic levels, researchers should focus on specific OMC components, identify the mechanism through which they are supposed to operate, and, through process-tracing (George 1979; George and Bennett 2005), verify if any influence on national levels developed. Indeed, process-tracing is a very useful research strategy, especially if one want to identify "[…] the intervening causal process— the causal chain and causal mechanisms—between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable" (George and Bennett 2005). However, as Pascal Vennesson (2008, 235) points out, process-tracing is not about "telling a story", neither a random search. Before undertaking an empirical research, one needs some theoretical points of reference, a sort of 'map' for the analysis. In our case, this means that, after having selected the component of the OMC to be investigated, one should carefully describe its functioning and identify the expected mechanism of influence. Then, relying on that description (as well as on interviews, documentary analysis and on the relevant literature) one should speculate about the characteristics of the process of influence on domestic levels: its contents, its potential path, the factors that could facilitate or hamper it.

That is what we will try to do in this paper, focusing on the potential domestic influence of peer-review (PR) meetings hold since 1999 in the framework of the EES. We will focus on that component of the EES for two reasons. First, being the promotion of mutual learning dynamics and the transfer of good practices the aim of those meetings, they concern a key feature of OMC processes. Second because, despite their centrality, few studies focused on the analysis of those events and of their potential influence on domestic levels[7].

In section one—after a snapshot presentation of the EES in the period 1997-2011—we will describe the 'functioning' of PRs, basing on relevant documents and on interviews[8]. In section two, relying on the foregoing description and on the literature on organizational and policy learning, we will assess the characteristics of learning dynamics potentially developing from PRs (being mutual-learning the expected mechanism of influence on domestic policies). In section three, we will ar-

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[6] "In most studies on the OMC, the relationship between EES and change in national policies resembles a black box. Many studies on the OMC assume implicitly or explicitly that the transfer mechanism in the 'black box' is learning. [However] there is still a lack of systematic in-depth analysis showing that observable policy changes are due to learning by actors or the overall political system" (Hartlapp 2009, 4).

[7] Exceptions are: Ballester and Papadopoulos (2009), who provide a quantitative overview of the Peer-review Programme in the period 1999-2008; Casey and Gold (2005), whose analysis refers to the first three years of the Peer-review Programme (1999-2001).

[8] We rely on 6 exploratory, semi-structured interviews to actors involved in the Peer-review meetings. Notably, as DG Empl. representatives (1), as members of the Mutual Learning Support Unit (1), as members of the Employment Committee (1), as independent experts (2), as MS' representatives (1).

gue that the learning process has some similarities with what Richard Rose (1991) defines 'lesson-drawing'. Finally, in section four, we will identify the factors potentially able to influence the process, thus sketching a 'map' for empirical analysis.

1. THE PEER-REVIEW MEETINGS IN THE EUROPEAN EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY

1.1. The European Employment Strategy

The decision to create a 'European' strategy aiming at the coordination of MS' employment policies was formalized in 1997 when, following the Amsterdam Treaty, a Title on 'Employment' (Title VIII, art. 125-130) was added to the Treaty establishing the European Community. In the new Title VIII (art. 127 § 2), it was recalled that the achievement of a high level of employment is one of the objectives of Community policies and activities: for this purpose "Member States, having regard to national practices related to the responsibilities of management and labour, shall regard promoting employment as a matter of common concern and shall coordinate their action in this respect within the Council […]" (art. 126 § 2). The European Community contributes by "[…] encouraging cooperation between Member States and by supporting and, if necessary, complementing their action" (art. 127 § 1). Notably, according to the provisions of art. 125, MS and the Community committed themselves to "[…] work towards developing a coordinated strategy for employment and particularly for promoting a skilled, trained and adaptable work force and labour markets responsible to economic change […]". Whilst articles 128-130 of the Treaty described the procedural aspects of the EES[9], it was in occasion of the Extraordinary Council meeting on Employment (Luxembourg, 20 and 21 November 1997) that the specific goals of the strategy were defined and the first set of Employment Guidelines for 1998 were agreed (European Council 1997; Council of Ministers 1997). The latter (19 in total) can be grouped under four main headings (the four 'pillars' of the EES): (i) improving employability; (ii) promoting a new culture of entrepreneurship; (iii) favouring and encouraging the adaptability of firms and workers; (iv) strengthening equal opportunities policies. While these four pillars remained unchanged until 2002, following the conclusions of the Lisbon (2000) and the Stockholm (2001) European Councils, the EES was enriched with quantitative targets to be reached by 2010: to raise the employment rate to 70%; to increase women's employment rate to 60%; to raise

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[9] Notably: art. 128 foresaw the establishment of the annual guidelines for employment policies, the annual national reports on MS' employment policies (National Action Plans for employment - NAP/Empl.), the joint examination of those plans by the Commission and the Council of Minister and the elaboration of the Joint Employment Reports, the possibility of addressing specific recommendations to MS; art. 129, by foreseeing the possibility of undertaking initiatives aiming at the exchange of information and best practices, was the juridical base for the organization of peer review meetings and the creation of the Mutual learning Programme (see Section 1.2 below); art. 130 foresaw the creation of the Employment Committee which is still playing a key role in the operations of the EES (including the elaboration of common indicators).

older workers' employment rate to 50%. Considering their different starting point, MS were expected to fix national quantitative targets[10].

More important changes of the procedures and the contents of the EES were introduced in 2002 and in 2005. Following the results of the first evaluation of the EES, it was agreed during the Barcelona European Council (2002) that it was necessary to simplify the strategy, to better tune it on the targets of the Lisbon Strategy and to reinforce the role and the responsibilities of social partners concerning the implementation and the monitoring of the guidelines. On the procedural side, some changes were undertaken for streamlining the EES with the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines (see Pochet 2005); on the substantive side, the four pillars of the EES were replaced by three 'overarching objectives': 1) full employment; 2) quality and productivity at work; 3) social cohesion and inclusive labour markets. At the same time, the Employment Guidelines were reduced to 10 (each of them including various sub-measures) and it was agreed to maintain them stable for a three years period.

Further changes intervened in 2005. On the governance side, the procedures of the EES were further integrated with other processes developed in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy and better coordinated with EU macro-economic policies. Since then, the EES has thus developed on three-year cycles based on: a 'Strategic report' illustrating the political priorities of the Lisbon Strategy concerning its economic, employment and environmental dimensions (elaborated by the EC and endorsed by the Council of Ministers and the European Council); a set of 'Integrated Guidelines' (Broad Economic Policies guidelines + Employment Guidelines) approved by the Council of Ministers; the draft, in the first year of the cycle, of 'National Reform Programs' concerning the different aspects of the Lisbon Strategy (but especially focusing on growth and employment) and the draft of annual 'National Implementation reports' on the Lisbon Strategy; the Joint examination by the EC and the Council of Ministers of the 'employment chapters' of the 'National Reforms Programs' and, if the case, the elaboration of recommendations to specific MS (proposed by the EC and approved by the Council of Ministers); the organization, on annual basis, of Peer Review meetings organized in the framework of the so called 'Mutual Learning Programme' (see Section 1.2).

On the substantive side, the three overarching objectives decided in 2003 continued to inform the employment part of the Integrated Guidelines for 2005-2008 and 2008-2011. However, in order to reach those objectives, MS were invited to focus on three priorities: 1) attract more people into employment and modernise social protection systems; 2) increase the adaptability of workers and enterprises

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[10] Moreover, following the Conclusions of the Lisbon (2000) and Stockholm (2001) European Councils, the Employment Guidelines for 2001 were complemented by six horizontal objectives: 1) to increase the employment rate; 2) to improve the quality of employment ('more and better jobs'); 3) to define a coherent and global strategy for lifelong learning; 4) to involve the social partners in all stages of the process; 5) to have a balanced approach to the four pillars; 6) to develop relevant social indicators.

and the flexibility of labour markets; 3) investing more in human capital through better education and skills.

1.2. From the 'Peer-review Programme' (1999-2004) to the 'Mutual Learning Programme' (2005-in progress)

With the launch of the EES, it was deemed necessary to improve and systematize the activities of exchange of information and experience on MS' employment policies already carried out by the EC during the '80s and '90s (see European Commission 1995). To that purpose, the 'Peer-review Programme on Active Labour Market Policy' was launched in 1999 and, in the same year, PR meetings were organized in the participating countries. As stated in the JER for 1999:

> *the purpose of the peer review is to submit policies which are considered by individual Member States as examples of good practice[11] to multilateral and independent expert assessment, with a view to their dissemination [...] The essence of this method is an examination of the transferability of a policy presented by a "host country" by several interested "peer countries"* (European Commission 1999, 74).

In that period, PRs essentially consisted in a seminar hold in the country that presented its good practice (identified in its 'National Action Plan for employment') to a group of other countries. MS' participation was a voluntary decision and there were no limits to the number of PRs organized during the year neither to the number of states allowed to attend single meetings. The evaluation of the selected practice was based on a number of 'expert papers' produced by independent experts from both the host and the peer countries. Sometimes, those seminars were complemented by a site visit, aiming at illustrating how the practice worked 'on the ground'. The meetings were open to: national independent experts selected by the external consultancy that supported the Directorate General for Employment (DG Empl.) in the organization of the meetings; government officials from both the host and the peer countries; representatives from the EC; staff from the consultancy. The results of the meetings were published on the program's website.

Ended in 2004, the 'Peer-review Programme' was judged quite satisfactory. However, in order to improve its effectiveness, it was deemed necessary to: (a) improve the dissemination of the selected good practices; (b) involve social partners and civil society; (c) integrate PRs in a more articulated framework and rationalize them by focusing on specific policy priorities. Following those indications, starting from the end of 2004 the 'Peer-review Programme' was incorporated into the 'Mutual Learning Programme' (MLP). The latter is based on annual cycles including:

– *'Thematic review seminars'* (twice a year), with an agenda-setting role for the MLP. They consist of discussions about 'priority themes' annually identified by the Employment Committee (EMCO). The focus should be on the main policy

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[11] In the community speech, the expression 'good practice' relates to "[...] those policies or measures whose implementation in a given country or region met with good overall results, and that have the potential to be used elsewhere" (European Commission 1998, 26).

challenges and approaches (from national and EU- wide perspectives) within the selected policy area. Those seminars are attended by: EC representatives, government officials from MS, experts, and stakeholders.

– '*Peer review meetings*' (six a year) focusing on domestic good practices related to the priority themes debated during the Thematic review seminars.

– *Follow-up and dissemination activities* intended as a further occasion to identify and exchange good practices, by developing trans-national partnerships and networks. They should foster mutual learning within and between MS by involving all the relevant decision-makers and stakeholders involved in the most effective policies identified during PRs.

1.3. The peer-review meetings during the MLP

Thus, starting from 2005, PR meetings have been included in the more comprehensive framework of the MLP. This framework includes a programmatic moment (Thematic review seminars), an operative moment (PR meetings) and follow-up and dissemination activities. Compared with the previous period, the purpose of PRs has not changed:

> *A PR is a method based on the exchange between a Host Country, which presents an effective policy measure, and up to 12 Peer Countries, which are interested in learning from the Host Country's experience. A PR provides a direct opportunity for participants from all of the countries to discuss and examine various aspects of the policy example, including the results, success factors, resource implications and structural arrangements. Moreover, it underpins the mutual learning process by enabling the participants to draw lessons and insights, and to consider the potential for transferability into their own national setting*[12].

However, some aspects of the process were modified. A limit to the number of PRs organized yearly and to the countries allowed to attend each PR has been established (six PRs with up to 13 countries, including the host country). Moreover, roles and tasks of participants have been clearly defined in detailed 'notes' sent to them before the meetings by the DG Empl. and the 'Mutual learning support unit' (MLSU)[13]. Those organizational changes, which reflect the experience accumulated during the 'Peer review Programme' and the results of internal evaluations, are due to the need of improving the process by fully exploiting the meetings: PRs last only one and a half days, it is thus necessary that all participants know in advance what is expected from their participation.

Coming back to the organization of the meetings, the first step is to establish the annual calendar, identifying participating countries and the practices to be reviewed. The decision to host a PR is up to states that voluntarily express their interest to the DG Empl. Countries proposing a good practice must write a *country fiche*, a brief document (1-2 pages) illustrating the practice and its impact. The proposal may concern: a single measure; a set of measures; aspects of governance or

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[12] 'Explanatory note for peer-reviews'. Not published note from the DG Empl.
[13] The MLSU is the consultancy that supports the EC in the organisation of PRs.

delivery[14]. Moreover, the practice should be: directly linked to the theme or sub-themes of the MLP; a concrete response to one or more Employment Guidelines; possibly linked to the activities of the European Social Fund. It is particularly important that evaluation results or monitoring data about the practice exist. Country *fiches* are discussed by the proponent state with the MLSU and the DG Empl. and sometimes initial proposals are modified. Finally, the DG Empl. decides the practices to submit for PRs and establishes the final annual working program. At this point, the DG Empl. invites EMCO members to diffuse the final program in their countries, in order to find states interested in attending the meetings as peer countries. Countries participating the MLP[15] voluntarily decide whether propose themselves as reviewers: if the number of requests exceeds the limit of 12, the final decision about the participants is up to the DG Empl.

Once participant countries have been selected, the MLSU (in collaboration with the DG Empl.) coordinates the preparatory activities for the meetings. The MLSU must: contact and assist national ministries responsible for the organization of the PR; select independent experts who will attend the meeting; diffuse the *background documents* produced by participants. Before the meeting, the following documents must be produced:

– a *'Host country discussion paper'* elaborated by the host country independent expert. This paper (maximum 15 pages) should have a well defined structure: the expert must describe the main features of the measure reviewed, inserting it in the wider context of the national labour market situation. Drawing on the results of existing evaluations, both success factors and problems encountered in the design and implementation of the practice must be highlighted. Finally, a preliminary analysis of the potential of transferability of the measure in other contexts must be provided. In elaborating that paper, the independent expert should keep in touch with national officials charged of the management of the measure, acquiring the relevant monitoring or evaluation data and interviewing actors concerned by the measure.

– *'Peer countries comment papers'* (up to 5 pages). Written by the peer countries independent experts (and diffused at least a week before the meeting), they represent a reaction to the 'Host country discussion paper'. Peer countries' papers should contain: considerations about the labour market situation in the peer

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[14] Considering PRs hold from 1999 to 2008, Ballester and Papadopoulos (2009) cluster the discussed policy measures into four groups: 1) skills and preventative measures (including preventative approaches, training and education, early school leaving, long term unemployment and Public Employment Services); 2) financial incentives measures (including taxes on labour, incentives to work, subsidized employments); 3) activation promotion measures (active labour market policies, active ageing, combination of measures included in points 1 and 2; 4) labour contract measures (including work organization, flexibilization, labour contracts, gender mainstreaming).

[15] In addition to EU member states, the MLP is open to all countries involved in PROGRESS ('Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity'): EFTA/EEA countries (Liechtenstein, Norway, Iceland), candidate countries and potential candidate countries (e.g. Turkey, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia).

country; an evaluation of the policy measure reviewed; an assessment of its success factors and a discussion about its transferability (potentialities and limits).

— *Other (not compulsory) documents:* host and peer countries can produce (and sometimes they do produce) an *'Official paper'* illustrating the position of national governments about the topic. Those papers are generally elaborated by officials working in the administration or in agencies charged with the management of the practice under review. Those papers are not always produced and, more often, government representatives' positions are orally expressed during the PR.

An 'ideal' PR meeting should include the following stages[16]:

— *Plenary session.* The purpose is to "showcase" the practice under review: its functioning is illustrated, it is inserted in the wider context of national and EU policies and it is compared with similar practices in other countries. Presentations are done first by the host country independent expert, then by the host country government representative (often supported by other officials more directly involved in the management of the practice) and by a representative of the EC. After those introductory presentations, the discussion is open to the other participants: peer countries' government representatives (who should discuss the practice in relation to the situation in their own countries and in the wider EU context, advancing ideas and comments) and independent experts.

— *Site or study visit.* The aim of the site visit is a better illustration of the practice by showing "the policy in action". Participants visit enterprises or institutions where the practice is implemented and they have the opportunity to talk to the delivery staff and/or the beneficiaries. Alternatively, a session in which subjects concerned by the practice present their experience can be organized.

— *Working groups discussion.* While, in the plenary session, the practice is reviewed in general terms by all the participants, this session allows a more in depth analysis. On the basis of the paper presented, the MLSU groups the participants into smaller working groups. That allows a more interactive discussion and a deeper exchange of opinions. Reviewers can pose questions or ask for an explanation on specific aspects of the practice. Moreover, "this is also a good opportunity to be sure that there is a good understanding of the practice and that we can discuss about its transferability to the home context" (Interview MLSU staff).

— *Final plenary session.* At this stage, participants exchange further opinions about the practice, especially focusing on the potential transferability in their domestic context. To this regard, both facilitating and constraining factors should be highlighted. Then, the main messages emerged from the PR are recalled. Finally, there are the concluding interventions from the EC representative and from a host country representative (the latter is often a high level official who tends to give a more political statement of the topic).

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[16] In order to enhance the effectiveness of PRs, it is necessary to fully exploit the time. The meetings are structured into sessions and 'key questions' to be answered during each session are previously defined by host countries in collaboration with the MLSU. However, also a certain degree of flexibility is needed: if it is useful for the participants, MLSU staff must be ready to modify the program.

A week after the meeting, the MLSU draws and send to participants an *'Executive Summary'* containing the main results of the PR. Up to four weeks after the meeting, a *'Full summary'* is drawn up. The summaries as well as the documents presented during the PR are uploaded on the MLP website[17]. Moreover, the MLSU encourages participants to give feedbacks with the aim of improving the organization of the meetings and creating a network among participants. Synthetic reports about the results of PRs are sent to the EMCO. Finally, every year, on the basis of the results of the Thematic and PR meetings, the EC produces a *'Thematic synthesis paper'* that summarizes the discussions held and the results of the MLP.

2. CHARACTERISTICS, OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITS OF 'MUTUAL-LEARNING': THE CASE OF PEER-REVIEWS

In social sciences, 'learning' is a quite slick notion: indeed, using Jack Levy's (1994) words, it is a "conceptual minefield". The notion has been employed in a variety of ways, by several authors, in different disciplines[18]. Those contributions differ both on the conceptual ("what is learning?") and the methodological sides ("how to demonstrate its existence, distinguishing it from other phenomena?"). While it is not possible here to give an account of the academic debate around the concept, some general remarks on its utilization in this paper are necessary. For this purpose, it seems particularly useful to integrate contributions from organizational and policy learning literature.

'Learning' is here conceptualized as a process of knowledge acquisition and diffusion with cognitive implications for individuals and organizations. Clearly, this conceptualization is too generic and of little use for policy analysis. Further specifications are needed. First of all, the knowledge that is the base for learning processes can be produced in a variety of ways: basically, one can learn from its own experience or from others. Second, we are not interested in all an individual can learn. Dealing with public policy, we are talking about *knowledge:* (a) *related to the policy process;* (b) *acquired by individuals involved in that process, recognizing that knowledge as relevant for it;* and, (c) *able to diffuse knowledge in venues where decisions about policies and political strategies are taken.*

Regarding the first point, knowledge may concern policy problems, contents, goals, instruments and implementation designs, but it can also concern the strategies employed by actors in order to 'push' their preferred policy solutions (May 1992). According to Peter May (*ibidem*), we should distinguish among 'instrumental policy learning' (i.e. about policy instruments and implementation designs), 'social

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[17] http://www.mutual-learning-employment.net/

[18] On 'organizational learning', see Argyris and Schön (1978), Hedberg (1981), Fiol and Lyles (1985), Levitt and March (1988), Huber (1991), Gherardi and Nicolini (2004); on 'policy learning', Bennett (1991), Bennett and Howlett (1992), May (1992), Levy (1994), Stone (1999), Gualmini (2005).

policy learning' (about policy problems, scope, goals), 'political learning' (concerning the political feasibility and the general policy process)[19]. Turning to point (b), individuals are central to every learning process. They are generally considered as 'agents of learning' (Argyris and Schön 1978; Shrivastava 1983): organizations learn through their members, who act on behalf of the organization (Argyris and Schön 1978), acquiring information deemed potentially useful for the organization (Huber 1991). Therefore, we consider (policy and political) 'learning' primarily as a process of knowledge acquisition by individuals involved in the policy process (elected officials, bureaucrats, stakeholders, parties' members, experts...) who recognize that knowledge as relevant for public policies or for their strategies in the policy process. This conceptualization has several implications. First, 'learning' should be linked to a certain degree of 'accuracy' (Etheredge and Short 1983), as individuals should interpret acquired information, recognizing their relevance. This is important in order to distinguish 'learning' from other phenomena such as generic diffusion or copying. However, 'learning' does not necessarily imply an increase in effectiveness (see Huber 1991; Levy 1994). Concerning the consequences of learning, it is important to underline that it does not automatically imply any behavioural change[20]. As Bennett (1991) points out, it is necessary to distinguish between knowledge acquisition and knowledge utilization: learning is primarily linked to cognitive processes—that involve changes in beliefs or confirmation of possessed beliefs (Levy 1994)—and its first implication can be a change in the *possible* behaviour (e.g. new policy alternatives) of an organization (Huber 1991). Changes in *actual* behaviours (e.g. then leading to policy change) are not an automatic consequence of learning, depending also on factors other than the process of knowledge acquisition.

So far, we referred to learning as to a process that mainly concerns individuals: what about the links between individuals and organizations in learning processes? As said, individuals are central to those processes but "organizations do not drift passively with their members' learning […] Organizations can be thought as stages where repertoires of plays are performed by individual actors. The actors act but they are directed" (Hedberg 1981, 6). Clearly, the characteristics of an institutional setting where knowledge is produced, acquired, and diffused influence 'learning' processes. After having been acquired by the members of an organization, individual knowledge must be diffused in that organization and embedded in something like an "organizational memory"[21]: it should become an 'organizational

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[19] Otherwise, Bennett and Howlett (1992, 289) distinguish among: governmental learning, lesson-drawing and social learning.

[20] However, it is difficult to assess cases of policy learning if there are not visible changes (Bennett and Howlett 1992).

[21] The ways in which individual knowledge can be transferred into an organizational knowledge have been conceptualized recurring both to structural and cultural factors. Popper and Lipshitz (1998, 170) postulate the existence of 'organizational learning mechanisms', "[…] institutionalized structural and procedural arrangements that allow organizations to systematically collect, analyze, store, disseminate, and use information relevant to the performance of the organization and its members". On the other side, "effective organizational learning is contingent on establishing a culture that promotes inquiries, openness and trust. [This is] an intangible 'software' face that consists in shared values and beliefs that ensure that

knowledge'. It is not clear how much individual learning should be diffused in the organization in order to be considered knowledge possessed 'by the organization'. Strictly speaking, also knowledge possessed by a single member is part of the 'organizational memory' and could be (potentially) used in organizational activities. Moreover, Huber (1991, 90) invites to distinguish between the existence of organizational learning and its breadth. Consequently, also the knowledge relevant to the policy process possessed by a single member of an organization involved in that process should be taken into account: it is not possible to exclude that it can be used (also in the future) in the policy process. However, one should admit that such a 'single-handed knowledge' has little possibility to influence organization's cognitions or behaviours. A way to solve the puzzle is to link the existence of learning to the position of individuals who possess that knowledge. In other words, we refers to policy learning as knowledge acquired by any member of an organization involved in the policy process (a government, a department, a party…) that reaches individuals or groups of individuals potentially able to influence the process (for occupying decisional roles or being otherwise able to influence decisions)[22]. If that does not happen, we are facing a case of 'audience experiential learning' (March and Olsen 1975).

Summing up, learning processes can follow different pathways. In the remaining of this section, we will try to describe the characteristics of the learning process potentially originating from PRs considering the following dimensions (Bennett and Howlett 1992): the 'source' of learning, its content and the potential consequences, the subjects who should learn (and the 'learning agents'), their motivations.

Where should learning process originate?
PR meetings can be considered as 'inter-organizational networks'. As Jean Hartley and John Benington point out, 'learning' developing from those contexts is influenced by the characteristics of the network: "effective knowledge transfer and application […] depend crucially on how the network is formed and sustained, how differences of perspectives and conflicts of interest within the network are talked, how knowledge is shared and applied, under what circumstances, and with what advantages and disadvantages for whom" (Hartley and Benington 2006, 102). In PR meetings, participants coming from different organizations are expected to play well defined roles. Consultancy staff is expected to facilitate discussions, officials from the EC should introduce a 'community point of view' on the subject

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the mechanisms produce actual learning (i.e. new insights and behaviors) and not mere rituals of learning" (*ibidem,* 172). According to the authors, cultural aspects that can enhance organizational learning are: continuous learning, valid information, transparency, issue orientation, accountability (Popper and Lipshitz 2000). On the notion of 'organizational memory', see Walsh and Ungson (1991).

[22] In the organizational literature, cases in which individual knowledge fails to be transferred at the organizational level are considered as 'incomplete learning cycles': 'audience experiential learning' (March and Olsen 1975), 'fragmented learning' (Kim 1993). Obviously, in those cases it is likely that individuals will not codify acquired knowledge and they will forget it: those are cases of 'situational learning' (Kim 1993).

discussed, independent experts should present a 'technical' analysis of the measure under review, while government representatives should express national governments' positions[23]. Considering the participants, it is likely that PRs produce a 'coordinative discourse', a "discourse [consisting] of the individuals and groups at the center of policy construction who are involved in the creation, elaboration, and justification of policy and programmatic ideas [and] who seek to coordinate agreement among themselves on policy ideas" (Schmidt 2008). However, OMCs are political contexts and, as Claudio Radaelli (2004, 3) observes, "learning in a political context is not a truth-seeking exercise. It is a political exercise". Moreover, "[…]success is a problematic, often ambiguous, always political notion. It is not an objective entity […]" (*ibidem*, 10). PRs are about the analysis and the transfer of 'good practices': the risk is to adopt a one-size fits all attitude, that is to think that practices successful in one country must be successful in all the other countries, not considering contextual peculiarities and political constraints. This attitude is carefully avoided in the PRs. As actors involved point out:

> *mutual learning primarily concerns the exchange of ideas. Some MS think that they have not best practices to discuss but they must not have the best practice by far. They should present a practice that they think is working in their context and discuss it with the others. This is all about mutual-learning: exchanging ideas and experiences* (Interview DG Empl.).

> *One tries to be 'attractive' in relation to the topic but nobody says: 'now, I will show you how the world works'. On the contrary, one tries to explicate that there is an analysis of the situation (an analysis that is peculiar to that country) and that, after having evaluated a series of issues, the government decided to utilize the device under review. Then, on the basis of their experiences, representatives from the other countries pose some questions* (Interview government official).

The attempt to link technical and political considerations about the practice under review (and the potential for its transferability) is evident in documents produced for the meetings and in the tenor of interactions between experts and officials. It is quite clear what is the appropriate way to behave: discussions are disciplined by the search for an equilibrium between technical and political considerations and by the need not to bypass respective roles. As a participant points out:

> *There is a sort of agreement about the behaviour to be adopted during the meetings: we try to be 'urbane and polite'. Sometimes, politically thorny issues emerge from experts papers or from government representatives' speeches but nothing of awkward is never happened. Sometimes, parts of the experts' papers are confuted but generally this concerns nuances. Independent experts have a high degree of credibility, they are academics: while some details can be stressed, the overall insights from experts' papers are never contested* (Interview government representative).

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[23] Concerning participants, it is important to note the absence of politicians. How much that influence the development of the meetings is to be assessed. However, it can be said that, to a certain extent, bureaucrats acting as government representatives substitute them.

Drawing on those considerations, we can say that PRs are settings characterized by discourses following a 'coordinative logic'. They have the potentiality for producing 'reflexive knowledge' (Schön and Rein 1994), that is knowledge produced through a process in which a plurality of individuals variously involved in policy-making reflects—through a continuous exchange of information and experiences—on their actions, detecting strength and weakness points (Vesan 2008). Finally, it is important to highlight that learning dynamics are here 'horizontal' and can follow different directions: peer countries could learn from the host country, they could learn from each other, and host countries could learn from peer countries (learning is 'mutual').

What is possible to learn and with what consequences?

PRs concern concrete measures, set of measures, aspects of governance or delivery. So, learning primarily consists of an improved knowledge of participating states' employment policy instruments and programs. This is what May (1992) describes as 'instrumental policy learning', a kind of learning that requires "[an] improved understanding of policy instruments or implementation based on experience or formal evaluation [and that can lead to] understanding of sources of policy failure, or improved policy performance in reaching existing goals" (May 1992, 336)[24]. Jelle Visser (2005, 180) argues that the EES is based on dynamics of 'adaptive learning', that is, it is a context where "[...] there is full agreement about what the problem is and why it is important (the ends are given), and all attention can go to finding adequate solutions (the means to the ends)". PRs represent an occasion to reflect on the adequacy of existing solutions (in terms of programs and instruments) for coping with the identified problems and effectively reaching established goals. Consequently, turning to the potential influence on participating countries, knowledge about foreign practices developed during PRs may:

(a) simply lead to an improved understanding of those practices;

(b) lead to an improved awareness of their own practices, their limits and their assets (maieutic or reflexive effect)[25];

(c) contribute to shifts in domestic programs and instruments (modifying existent ones or introducing new ones)[26]:

  (c1) as a consequence of an autonomous reflection about the limits and the assets of domestic policy devices originating from knowledge acquired during PRs ['start-up effect'][27];

  (c2) through the transfer of the foreign program (or part of that program) reviewed during the meeting (direct policy transfer).

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[24] As reported by Casey and Gold (2005), specific PRs may deal with wider issues than policy instruments and programs. However, other components of the EES are devoted to the identification of problems and to the definition of goals.

[25] "Mirror effect" (Hamel and Vanhercke 2009).

[26] Learning in OMCs may consist of 'fine-tuning existing policy instruments' or 'keeps goals intact but modify instruments' (Trubek and Mosher 2003, 46).

[27] That could be at the base of what Rose (1991) defines 'inspiration', that is a situation in which foreign programmes are used as an intellectual stimulus for developing a novel programme without an analogue elsewhere.

Finally, considering that independent experts must evaluate the practice reviewed following a detailed *schema* and that, in doing so, they should collaborate with national administrations, it is possible that knowledge about the modes of evaluation of domestic measures may develop. This could potentially lead to a fourth type of effect on domestic levels consisting in:

(d) the introduction of specific features in the evaluation of MS' employment policies[28].

Who should learn?

The final recipients of learning in PR are those actors who have responsibilities about the management (design and implementation) of employment policies at all the levels of domestic governance. That is, primarily, civil servants and politicians. This implies that knowledge acquired at the community level (PRs) should be transferred and diffused in domestic administrations and decision-making circles. The link between the community and the domestic levels is represented by government officials who attend the meetings. They should act as 'learning agents': "after the PR, [they] are encouraged to communicate the results to [their] colleagues and other interested parties at national, regional and local level [e.g.] by circulating the Executive and Full Summaries of the PR as widely as possible"[29]. Moreover, in order to contribute to and fully take advantage from discussions, ideally they should have responsibilities and knowledge related to the specific topic of PR. Government representatives are thus central for many reasons: they should possess adequate technical skills for assure an effective discussion during the meeting and they should occupy a role of responsibility in domestic administrations for assuring the emergence of political issues during PRs but also for being able to diffuse the results of the meetings.

Why would a country like to learn?

States voluntarily decide if hosting or attending a PR. However, this is not always the case. MS are often reluctant towards the participation in PRs, especially as host countries. They think that they have not good practices to propose or they do not want that their practices are reviewed. Consequently, it happens that DG Empl. officials adopt a pro-active attitude: after having identified domestic practices to be reviewed, they engage in "a long and careful work of 'gentle persuasion'" (Interview DG Empl.) in order to convince states to host or attend a meeting. This persuasion is mainly directed to national representatives in the EMCO Committee. Furthermore, sometimes, through informal contacts in the EMCO, host countries insist on specific states (or groups of states) participation. Thus, motivations for attending a PR are various. Countries host a meeting fully voluntarily because:

(a) they deem they have an objectively interesting practice to propose to others;

(b) they are introducing a relatively new measure and they are interested in advice from other, more experienced, countries;

(c) they wish to do a sort of marketing of their programs.

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[28] Thus contributing to the enhancement of national institutional capabilities (Ferrera and Sacchi 2005).

[29] *'Explanatory note for peer-review for governmental representatives'*, not published note from the DG Empl.

Also, countries can be 'induced' to host a PR by the EC because:
(d) the EC deems that they have particularly interesting practices to present.

Countries can decide to participate as peer countries fully voluntarily because:
(e) they are genuinely interested in the practice reviewed (e.g., it is relatively new for them, they are facing similar problems, or it is a measure already in place in their context but they can learn something else).

Countries can be 'induced' to participate as peer countries by:
(f) the EC, because it deems that they should learn about the topic;
(g) the host-country: as a form of 'kindness' (e.g. because the PR risks to be not 'full-booked'); because the host country is genuinely interested in their participation (e.g. because those states have a huge experience in relation to the topic under review)[30].

3. DRAWING LESSONS FROM PEER-REVIEWS?

The process of learning that can potentially develop from PRs displays similarities with what Richard Rose (1991; 1993; 2005) defines 'lesson-drawing'. Lesson-drawing concerns specific and concrete programs in operation elsewhere. It implies a problem-oriented search: policy-makers look elsewhere because they face with disaffection towards domestic programs. The first stage in lesson-drawing is acquiring knowledge about the foreign program: policy-makers are supposed to go elsewhere not only for analyzing foreign documents but also for talking to people concerned by the program. Then, the acquired information should be used for elaborating a 'conceptual model' of the foreign program, that is, a synthesis illustrating its main features. By comparing the foreign model with a model of the national program that created disaffection, policy-makers should be able to draw a lesson, that is "[…] an action oriented conclusion about a programme or programmes in operation elsewhere" (Rose 1991, 7). A lesson aims at introducing a new program in domestic setting relying on some elements of the foreign program[31]. A lesson is more than an evaluation of a foreign program: it should also include the analysis of the factors influencing its feasibility in national contexts. However, Rose (1991; 2005) points out that drawing a lesson does not imply its adoption in the domestic setting: "lesson-drawing [simply] expands the scope for choice in the national political agenda" (Rose 2005, 23). Also, a lesson can consist of a negative example and, even if the lesson is judged 'technically' positive, other

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[30] Motivations (b), (e), (g) are examples of 'learning ahead of failure' (Visser 2005).

[31] "The object is not to photocopy that programme, but to make use of what you have learnt abroad to create a programme that can be put into effect here" (Rose 2005, 79). Different types of lesson-drawing may occur (from 'copying' to 'selective imitation'), depending on how many elements of the foreign program are transferred into the new domestic program (*ibidem*, 81).

(mainly political) considerations affect the opportunity to use it in order to introduce a new program.

PRs can prompt lesson-drawing dynamics. First, they concern specific and concrete programs. Second, 'Host country discussion papers' represent a model of foreign programs[32], while 'Peer-countries comments papers', with their emphasis on the national situation and on the potential transferability of the foreign program, could represent a good input for the comparisons between the two models (that is at the basis of lesson-drawing). Moreover, Rose talks about policy-makers that directly draw information from all actors involved in the program examined: site visits represent a good opportunity for doing that. However, compared to Rose's description of lesson-drawing, two important differences emerge. First, 'conceptual models' are elaborated by independent experts and not by government representatives. Are the latter able (or willing) to draw a lesson based on information produced during the meetings (or to diffuse that information in their national context for a lesson being drawn)? Second, lesson-drawing is a problem-oriented search: policy-makers voluntarily search elsewhere for a solution to domestic problems. As stated in section 2, this is not always the motivation that induces countries to attend PRs.

4. CONCLUSIONS. LEARNING FROM PEER-REVIEWS:
A MAP FOR EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

In this paper, we argue that PR meetings can be considered as inter-organizational networks characterized by the presence of a variety of actors involved in the employment policy process at both the European and domestic level. The characteristics of actors involved, documents produced, and discussions conducted during the meetings make them contexts where a 'reflexive knowledge' on participant countries' employment practices can be produced. The main purpose of PRs is the promotion of dynamics of mutual-learning: knowledge is developed by the exchange of experience among participants coming from different MS and all countries can potentially learn something from the others. Given the contents of practices reviewed, learning mainly concerns domestic programs and instruments (instrumental policy learning). Moreover, possible dynamics of learning originating from PRs have some similarities with what Rose defines 'lesson-drawing'. In this paper, policy learning has been broadly defined as a cognitive process consisting in the acquisition of knowledge recognized as potentially useful for the policy

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[32] It is interesting to note the similarities between Rose's 'conceptual model' of foreign programs and 'Host country discussion papers'. A model should be a generic description of how a program works that must identify: laws and regulations, organizations responsible for the program, personnel and money required, program's outputs, recipients and goals (Rose 2005, 72). 'Host country discussion papers' must describe policy measure in terms of: objectives; target groups; timeframe; geographical and sectoral scope; procedures and staff resources for implementation; financial, legal and institutional framework.

process (by individuals involved the process itself) and in the diffusion of that knowledge in decision-making venues. Although they are strictly linked, it is useful to distinguish among knowledge creation, acquisition, diffusion, institutionalization and utilization. Knowledge produced in PRs is acquired by national government representatives. Those officials should diffuse it into their administrations and other organizations involved in the policy process. Intuitively, more knowledge is diffused among actors involved in the policy process, greater is the possibility for learning to produce consequences for domestic policies (in maieutic, 'start-up' or substantive policy transfer terms). In particular, in order to contribute to policy change, knowledge should reach decisional venues.

However, learning from PRs is a complex process involving different levels of governance. Its development can be influenced by a variety of factors that must be considered in empirical analysis (Table 1).

At the community level:
• *Organizational factors:* first, it is necessary to assess how much specific PRs reflect the ideal model presented in section 1. Are those meetings 'complete' in terms of documents produced, timing and modalities for their diffusion? Second, one should look at participants, particularly at government representatives: who are they? What are their skills and what is their role in domestic administrations? Third, one should look at the motivations inducing a state to host or attend a PR. Finally, one should focus on the tenor of discussions held: how much were 'technical' and 'political' considerations relevant? What judgments about the transferability of the practice were expressed? On what basis?
• *Policy factors:* that is, factors concerning the specific practice reviewed during the meeting. What it was (a single measure, a set of measures, etc.)? Did it satisfy the required characteristics (see section 1)? Moreover, one should verify the salience of the topic in the general context of the EES: is it recalled in other relevant policy documents (e.g. Joint Employment Reports)? Discussions on that topic have been held in other settings (e.g. EMCO)? Recommendations to specific MS have been issued? In the latter cases, it is possible to assume the action of mechanisms of influence other than learning (e.g. external pressures). Finally, one should consider if, apart from the EES, other EU initiatives related to that topic have been undertaken.
• *Political factors:* it seems important to consider the overall political situation at the European level, that is positions and preferences inside EU relevant political institutions (notably, the EC and the Council) on the discussed topic.

At the domestic level:
• *Organizational factors:* once government representatives come back home, knowledge acquired should be diffused within their administration and, possibly, reach the political level. Here again, one should look at officials attending the PR: what is her/his role in the national administration? How much is she/he close to political levels? What is she/he supposed to do once come back (e.g., are there formal procedures for reporting about the results of PRs)? Moreover, it is also

useful to look at government representatives' attitudes in participating to that meetings: what are their expectations before the meeting, how they consider their participation (e.g. an interesting opportunity or a formal task). Second, one should look at the characteristics (both in structural and cultural terms) of the affected administration: how is it organized? What about its internal channels of communications and the systems through which information is acquired, distributed, interpreted and stored? What are its characteristics in terms of organizational culture and, particularly, what is its attitude in relation to 'evaluation exercises'?[33]

• *Policy factors:* first, it is necessary to consider the domestic situation in relation to the practice under review: do similar practices exist? Second, one should look at the constellation of domestic actors involved in policy-making: what are their beliefs, preferences, strategies? How much are they aware of discussions developed at the community level? In fact, changes in domestic policies could depend on the action of domestic actors, without any link with the community dimension.

• *Political/institutional factors:* first, one should consider the form of the State: what level has competences in relation to the practice discussed during the PR? Second, one should look at the characteristics of the political system: what are the components of political majorities and their preferences? What are their attitudes towards the EU integration process?[34] Is there continuity in governments? What are political elites' attitudes towards knowledge and policy evaluation? What is the relationship between political and administrative levels (modes of interaction and exchange between political and bureaucratic élites)?

Finally, one should look at possible influences coming from the international level (e.g. discussions developed in the context of the OECD Job strategy). Are domestic actors aware of those debates?

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[33] On the importance of evaluation for learning, see Rist (1994).
[34] As noted by Gwiadza (2011), national parties' attitudes towards the EU is to be considered as crucial for predicting the possible influence that EU OMC can have on domestic contexts.

Table 1. Factors potentially influencing learning dynamics from PR meetings

Level	Organizational Factors	Policy Factors	Political/Institutional Factors
EU (PR and EES)	• Correspondence between actual meeting and 'ideal' organizational requirements • Official representatives' level • Peer countries motivations • Tenor of discussion	• Contents of discussions • Correspondence between the good practice and the criteria for selecting a good practice • Salience of the reviewed practice in the EES	• Positions and preferences of relevant EU Institutions (EC, Council)
Domestic	• Structural and cultural features of National administrations • Level of governments' representatives inside their National administrations • Procedures for reporting about the meeting • Government representatives' attitudes towards participation in PR meetings • Administrative systems for information acquisition, dissemination and interpretation • Communication channels and organizational memory • Organizational cultures	• Domestic situation compared to the practice reviewed • Domestic salience of the practice reviewed • Constellation of domestic actors in the policy domain	• Form of the State • Domestic level with legislative competences in relation of the reviewed practice • Characteristics of the political system • Parties attitudes towards the EU integration process • Modes of interaction between political and administrative levels
Extra-EES		• Other EU interventions in relation to the reviewed practice • Intervention from other international organizations (e.g. OECD)	

As evident, to empirically demonstrate the influence of PR meetings on domestic policies, one should be able to orient himself in a maze of possible influences and obstacles related to different levels of governance. Furthermore, in order to attribute that influence to the effect of learning dynamics, one should be able to follow the stream of knowledge from PRs to domestic decisional venues: through interviews and documents analysis, one should find evidence that elements of discussions held in PRs are also found in domestic discussions about policy instruments. Anyway, it is unlikely that any influence on domestic policies (especially in terms of policy change) comes exclusively from a specific component of the EES (PR meetings) and is exclusively attributable to a single

causal mechanism (mutual learning). It is more likely that influences arise from multiple dynamics, originating from multiple venues at different level of governance and attributable to the action of a variety of causal mechanisms. However, for not losing one's way in the maze, it is necessary to individuate a specific venue, a specific mechanism and a supposed pattern of influence that serve as *fil rouge* for empirical analysis. So doing, it will be easier to individuate factors relevant in producing an influence on single empirical cases, assessing what is their configuration and their relative importance.

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