

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION - A POLICY CATALYST FOR REGIONAL
GOVERNANCE IN THE AREA OF RESEARCH

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Introduction

Since the 1980s coordinated research policy has been gaining a growing importance in the European Union (EU). This has been mandated through political declarations such as the Lisbon Strategy (2000), the launch of the European Research Area (ERA) in 2000 and the presentation of the Innovation Union plan (2010) tied to the rapidly increased monetary instruments. Financial commitments reaching 80 billion euros for the period of 2014-2020 marks a 46% budget increase for research and innovation funding (European Commission, 2011). As a result, research policy has become one of the central and most promising areas for regional growth for the European Union. The policy support for these processes is provided by the European Commission Directorate General (DG) Research and Innovation. Over the past few decades there has been a dramatic shift in the activities of the DG Research and Innovation. The organization has firmly established itself as a driver and catalyst for the regional policy change in the European Union.

The process has not been smooth do to the sensitivity of the policy sector. Research policy in the European Union is an area where a variety of interests, ideas and policy beliefs meet. Since the early stages of the development of the European research policy, there has been a lack of willingness from the member-states to cooperate with the European Commission. Research and innovation is a sector anticipated to contribute to country's economic growth and lead to competitive advantage over others. It also requires considerable resources and knowledge, which is easier to gain in collaboration with others. The European Commission has been actively providing the support for regional collaboration. Yet, the increased attempt to move decision-making power over to the EU level has created considerable resistance at the national level (Gornitzka 2009). There is the fear of loosing its exclusive authority to legislate, regulate and benefit from the progress made in research and innovation area.

During the past decade, this situation is slowly starting to change. The member-states are increasingly collaborating towards achieving the European-set targets in research policy, while the Commission has strengthened its position in providing policy support in the process. The role of the DG Research and Innovation has significantly strengthened since 2000, when several cross-regional strategic initiatives were introduced (e.g. the European Research Area, the Open Method of Coordination, European Semester, Innovation Union). With these steps a wide-reaching political support from the member-states' politicians has been obtained. To facilitate the dialogue, provide support in a non-

authoritarian way, the Commission has taken several important steps that have contributed to the institutional transformations within the DG Research.

The paper will examine the emerging role of the European Commission, Directorate General Research and Innovation in building linkages among the member-states and the other Commission Units while shifting its identity from being a small-scale funding agency into a major policy developer. The research questions that guide this study is the following: *How can we explain the emerging role of European Commission, DG Research and Innovation in facilitating research policy? What are the key strategies used triggering institutional transformations?*

Current literature in public policy is referring to the challenges of policy coordination in multi-level governance systems (Koch 2008, Edquist et al 2009; Bauer, Lang and Schneider 2012). By analysing the processes in the European Commission, this study is aiming to provide further insights on the dynamics of institutional transformations as they relate to policy coordination and regional governance. This knowledge is important in understanding the nuances of this gradual process, achieved through strategic initiatives that mobilize diverse groups of stakeholders in collaborative mode of policy-making.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws on the policy learning and institutional change theories. In order to analyze shifts in European research policy, it is necessary to clarify what are the indicators marking institutional transformation. According to Eckel, Hill and Green (1998, p.3) institutional transformation is characterized by the following: “1) altering the culture of the institution by changing select underlying assumptions and institutional behaviors, processes, and products; 2) is deep and pervasive, affecting the whole institution; 3) is intentional; and 4) occurs over time”. Similarly, Streeck and Thelen (2005) note that fundamental change occurs when multitude of actors switch from one logic of action to another.

The literature suggests several theories that explain the mechanism of such changes. For example, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) propose Punctuated Equilibrium Theory, where change happens as a result of sudden radical shifts. Kingdon (1984) emphasizes the “policy window” approach, where policies change during an unpredictable opportunity for policy advocates. More recent writings are increasingly supporting the view of gradual, non-linear policy change (Richardson 2000, Pierson 2004, Streeck and Thelen 2005). Thelen and Mahoney (2009) argue that far reaching change can be accomplished through the accumulation of small, seemingly insignificant accomplishments.

This study takes an approach where institutional transformations occur through changing operational logic. The change occurs when organization shifts from top-down regulative approach to network-based collaborative approach that emphasizes policy debate. Policy debates serve as a crucial setting that supports more horizontal, collaborative decision-making. Policy debates facilitate policy learning, which is in the heart of gradual

institutional change, creating ownership of decisions. Policy learning is defined as a cognitive process of updating one's beliefs about the key components of policy (Radaelli 2009). Sabatier (1988) suggests that policy learning is mainly about ideas that refine one's understanding of core policy beliefs and not necessarily about changing policy. Sabatier (1986, 1988) examines how new ideas get picked up and endorsed by experts. He argues that a variety of state and non-state actors form advocacy coalitions – interacting with actors who are sharing similar belief systems. Members of the coalition gather evidence to support their beliefs but also learn about the evidence and arguments of the opposing party. It is the analytical policy debates where the exchange of evidence takes place, leading to re-examining the policy beliefs of participants. In a similar vein, Jacobs (2009) emphasizes the importance of individual mental models in policy process. Mental models generate beliefs that influence decision-makers policy preferences. Advancing one's mental models occurs through knowledge exchange and the implementation of public policies. While participants in policy dialogue analyze and process information, emerging mental models channel the reasoning toward certain causal possibilities. Overall, it is the exchange of ideas in policy debate that serve as a powerful mechanism for policy change.

Policy learning processes have an impact on organizational change, as demonstrated the case of the European Commission. According to Bomberg (2007), policy learning is interest-infused. The learning process empowers the participants by providing them with an opportunity to export their policy preferences and styles to others. In addition, engaging in the facilitator role in knowledge exchange increases the legitimacy of the organizations supporting the process. Rather than impose any regulations to participants, the Commission experts are keen to facilitate some policy approaches over others, increasing their own organizational legitimacy (Bomberg 2007).

In addition to policy learning, political organizations drive legitimacy through issue-framing. Sutton (1999) notes that 'frame' relates to the way policy problems are defined, analyzing specifically what is included and excluded from consideration. The author suggests that framing works to 'distinguish some aspects of a situation rather than others'. Framing implies adopting certain norms and values in the organization's formal structure and its rhetoric. Legitimation through 'decisions' implies being seen to take action to respond to issues that have been framed as requiring political action (Boswell 2008). Information needs to be uniformly framed when distributed to different units, otherwise the goals are less likely to be achieved.

Drawing from the concepts proposed by the theory of institutional transformation (Eckel, Hill and Green 1998), as well as the scholars supporting process-based approach to policy change (Sabatier 1986, Boswell 2008, Jacobs 2009), the following framework is constructed to examine institutional transformations in DG Research and Innovation and in European research policy in general (See Figure 1). This approach focuses on the process of institutional transformation, where gradual change is a result of *shift in operational logic, policy learning* and *issue framing*. Shift in operational logic towards more horizontal, network-based practices provides opportunities for various stakeholders to influence policy processes. As a result of active participation, policy learning takes

place. Sharing policy beliefs and views leads to mutual learning and awareness of the policy situations in other member-states and in the Commission. Such learning triggers changes in policy behaviors, processes and policy products, which translate into institutional changes over longer periods of time. Issue framing strengthens the policy message across region and helps to establish the support from diverse stakeholder groups. The framework proposes that it is the new combinations of policy groupings, attitudes and behavior changes that result from issue framing and policy learning exercises that trigger institutional transformations leading to changes in regional governance.

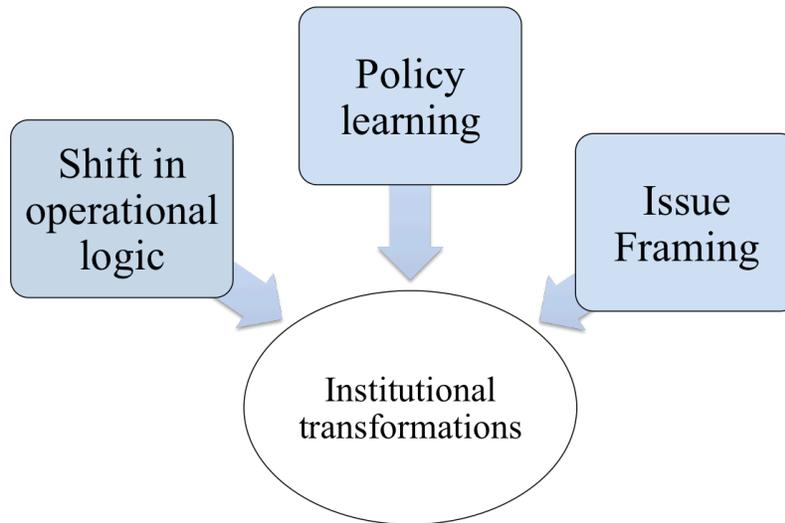


Figure 1. Framework for assessing non-linear process of institutional transformation. (Authors' conceptualization)

Drawing on the case of the European Commission, DG Research and Innovation, this study demonstrates how institutional transformations have taken place, exercising these three components in policy-making processes over several decades. As of today, the DG Research and Innovation has developed its role from being a simple research-funding agency without a significant mandate in regional research policy to becoming a key policy driver in research coordination initiatives across the European Union.

Methodology and Methods

In order to better analyze the nuances in the institutional transformations, qualitative data collection technique was applied. The first step involved gathering of the relevant documents (e.g. DG Research policy reports, European Commission communications, Council of the European Union conclusions, country-specific reports, policy statements, memorandums, minutes of the expert groups meetings). A content analysis of these documents (Weber 1996) was carried out, identifying several themes concerning the nature, focus, and targets of these strategic documents. Document analysis informed the basic understanding of the nuances in the process (nature of ideas communicated, the

shift in the key policy processes, the key stakeholders involved, the mandate of the working groups, the process and methodology used for the policy learning expert groups, the nature of the policy recommendations). Built upon the document analysis, the key informants were identified and an interview protocol was designed.

The second step involved conducting semi-structured in-person interviews with the DG Research and Innovation policy experts at the European Commission. The aim of the interviews was to confirm the initial findings from the document analysis and gain more detailed perspectives on the process. A total of 10 interviews were conducted in spring 2012 and fall 2013 in Brussels with the key policy experts across various Units (ERA policy and Reform, Innovation Union Policy, Horizontal Aspects, Best Practices for the Implementation of Innovation) within the DG Research and Innovation. In addition, a participant observation was conducted during a policy workshop on Socially Responsive Research in the fall of 2013 at the DG Research and Innovation premises where policy experts across the European Commission were present discussing the future policy trends. Also a 23 interviews were conducted with the member-states policy experts that participated in the OMC policy learning exercises.

The interviews, on average of 1 hour long, were recorded and transcribed. Collected data was organized, coded, and analyzed following standard procedures (Miles and Huberman 1994, Strauss 1987). Categorical themes were determined (open coding), establishing patterns of themes (axial coding, selective coding) and developing generalizations from the information provided through the interviews (Creswell 1998).

Findings

1. The process of institutional transformation

Innovation policy serves as a main component in recently introduced Europe 2020 strategy, next to employment, education, social inclusion and climate/energy sectors. To achieve the policy goals, a set of targets and key indicators in R&D have been developed. These indicators are closely monitored by DG Research and Innovation. The organization routinely collects and analyses research-relevant data from the member-states, provides policy reports on the policy progress, identifies challenges for each of the member-states, and proposes new directions in regional governance. Through these daily activities, the unit has gradually positioned itself as an organization that holds the cross-regional expertise and knowledge, who facilitates the progress of policy coordination in research and has an increasingly firm authority over European policy directions. The following key strategies have contributed to slowly overcoming the resistance from the member-states, building trust in its activities – *change in operational logic, policy learning and issue framing* - creating the space for the DG Research to become a catalyst in the process.

1.1. Shift in operational logic

Research and scientific cooperation have served as a foundation for European integration. The early start of the integration process was driven by the need for scientific cooperation

in coal and nuclear energy (Guzzetti 1995). As this area was vital for national security, the collaboration among the member-states was rather fragmented, lacking true interest and initiative. Competition and anticipated economic advantages through scientific discoveries have served as a key barrier for research collaboration among the member-states since 1950s. The early EU level research coordination can be described as having a fragmented nature (Guzzetti 1995, Gornitzka 2009). First of all, there wasn't a firm organizational structure in place. Research was a sector without a stable home within the Commission. The European level research policy was initially operated through DG Industrial Affairs (DGIII) and focused on applied research. In 1973, with the Commissioner Dahrendorf, research policy was included among research, science and education sector (DG XII), more oriented towards fundamental research and strictly connected to education policies (Guzzetti, 1995). Second, the vision and directions coordinated research policy changed with every new leadership. Vision for long-term European level scientific collaboration was not clearly articulated. The Commission's role was indirect, the member-states having sole authority over its activities and research directions.

The approach towards more coordinated activities in the area of research was taken after the start of the First Framework Program (1984). The Framework Program became a central European instrument for research funding across the member-states and was a step towards more coordinated policy approach in the European region (Gornitzka 2009). Even today, the Framework Program (now called the Horizon 2020 Strategy) serves as the most significant European level research-funding instrument (Van Vught, 2010). The creation of such a single program meant a gradual development towards more coordinated EU level research policy. Representatives from the member states were involved in designing the Framework Program, however, the right of initiative, agenda setting and funding decisions were left within the European Commission (Gornitzka 2009). As a result, the operational role of the Commission changed from being rhetorical to gaining a gradual leverage over the member-states. The policy development was still carried out by each individual member-state independently, but the Commission had resources and political support. The formal legal basis of the European Union was strengthened as well. First, the Single European Act (1986) established the commitment to create a single European market. The Maastricht Treaty (1992) further secured the overarching power of the European Union over member states, officially declaring the creation of the European Union and gradually introducing the common currency across the region, the Euro.

With the increased finances, the coordinating role of the Commission increased. In cooperation with the member-states, the Commission declared the research priorities and the research producers (universities, higher education institutions) had to align their research priorities to be eligible for research grants. Historically, the university as the core research institution has defined the nation state and its cultural role, serving as a gatekeeper for entry into national bureaucracies in Europe (Neave, 2001). With the increased emphasis on research, the institutional priorities got shaped according to the European needs leading to leading to resistance and opposition among the member-states towards the EU level policy directions. As a Commission expert comments: *'It was*

around 1990s when the member-states started to be less supportive of the Commission. Even the French, who were always enormously supportive, started to criticize the Commission.’ In this diffuse policy environment, a shift in policy-making was needed to change policy ideas and preferences among member-states’ policy makers. Rather than opting for legislative regulations, which would have increased the resistance among the member-states, a voluntary approach to coalesce national experts around policy coordination agenda was adopted.

In 2003, the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) as a policy approach was introduced as a ‘soft method’ for policy coordination. The OMC initiative in research policy was aiming to foster mutual learning through policy debates. OMC is viewed as voluntary and non-binding method of policy-making that focuses on policy learning, benchmarking, and exchange of best practices (Van Vught 2010, Borrás and Radaelli 2010, Warleigh-Lack and Drachenberg 2011). The process is guided and facilitated by the European Commission, DG Research and Innovation and the European Union’s Scientific and Technical Committee (CREST). It involves government experts, university administrators and academics from the member-states. It is a bottom-up approach that gives power to identify topics and propose policy recommendations in the hand of the member-state experts. This approach really emphasizes horizontal governance that would help to increase the influence of member-states’ experts and build trust among various stakeholders. As a Commission expert comments:

“What it really was all about was basically changing gear, in the way we were working with the member states. /.../ you need to put a lot more emphasis on the adaptation processes that the member states can undertake by themselves./.../ The more we look at the European problems, the more it becomes apparent that more needs to be done in terms of European integration, economic integration, political integration.”

Another expert reflects on the evolutionary shift towards more networked based horizontal way of coordinating policies:

“In the original text you’ll see that the Commission was supposed to coordinate the research policies of the member-states. That was totally impossible for many many years. So, now instead of saying that we are going to coordinate, we try to put together our resources and work together for advancing research wherever there is a possibility. Lets’ create a certain number of networks that can afterwards be sustained.”

The exchange of ideas and shared policy approaches through the OMC policy debates have gradually contributed to institutional transformations at the national and European level (Tamtik 2014). As noted by Innes and Booher (2003) the processes of collaborative dialogue helps to create a more adaptive and intelligent policy system in general. The most important contribution of the OMC policy debates is that it provides a formal setting where diverse interests can be presented, discussed and learned from. In this process of collaboration, the participants have an opportunity to become aware of the various arguments, challenges that are commonly faced and gradually build mutual understanding, necessary for taking a policy dialogue forward.

As demonstrated in this overview, the European Commission has shifted its operational logic from having indirect role to somewhat authoritarian role through finance distribution towards network-based horizontal policy-making process. By shifting its operational logic, the resistance and barriers between the Commission and the member-states have been replaced with increased participation and opportunities to influence the EU level policy decisions. By providing these opportunities, the Commission itself has taken a facilitators role in the process, broadening its mandate and taking the policy ideas forward.

1.2. Policy learning

One of the crucial dimensions in the dynamics of the OMC process is policy learning - a process of incorporating individual agency at the level of policy ideas and beliefs. Policy learning is understood as a process of updating one's beliefs or changing one's views about key components of policy through social interaction (Zito and Schout 2009; Radaelli 2009). It is a process that emphasizes knowledge exchange in which participants have the capacity to create increased awareness of the policy approaches, leading to the gradual ownership of decisions. Several authors have emphasized the importance of learning capacity, linking it to one potential mechanism for gradual policy change (Lundvall et al. 2002; Zito and Schout 2009; Radaelli 2009).

Policy learning is increasingly viewed as a governance method (Kaiser & Prange, 2004; Bomberg, 2007; Zito & Schout, 2009; Egan 2009). Schout & Jordan (2005) note that the focus of the European Commission on governance issues means less central control and more network-led steering, relying on learning practices. As learning arises out of communication, trust and open argument in a problem-solving environment (Hartlapp, 2009), exercises that enhance learning would potentially break the ice and generate close relationships among the countries. Yet, Toens & Landwehr (2009) state that engaging in policy learning can become a survival strategy for policy-makers to stay in power. Since the start of policy learning practices in its governance style, the European Commission has managed to increase its authority in research.

Policy learning initiatives have broadened the Commission officers' understanding on the specific policy issues of the member states, their political interests, views and stands regarding sensitive topics. First and foremost the mutual learning process has confirmed that the member-states are willing to come together and discuss issues on research policy for the first time. The EC policy-maker recalls realizing this potential for mutual cooperation:

“For the Commission it was very interesting and we learned a lot about how member states can act together in this area. /.../ We knew then already how member states felt to certain extent about areas where they can work together and where they want to work together or barriers for coordination in S&T processes. And this was overall very helpful and is still very helpful to know and we sometimes also go back to the reports when we try to initiate new activities.”

The policy learning initiatives provided ways for the EC policy makers to “test the waters” in order to understand what issues are sensitive to countries and which member-states might be less open to work together. That type of knowledge allowed the Commission experts to shape and modify their policy strategies in the future. During the policy discussions the Commission was able to support the creation of shared policy preferences among the member-states, enhancing the importance of policy coordination in research policy (Tamtik 2014).

The role of the EC participants in the process of knowledge sharing has been very important. Their knowledge contributions involved mainly administrative support but they also provided procedural knowledge, based on their experience on how the European level policy-process works. The EC experts offered advice on how to best formulate group objectives; they contributed statistical data, made sure that the objectives were in line with the Commission policy directions and helped with the drafting of group documents. Sometimes the Commission representatives provided legal advice regarding the European regulations. The Commission informants frequently viewed their role as the facilitators of the process (and not the leaders) that was led by the member-states. Especially those EC officers who had participated in the OMC group work themselves viewed the OMC as an opportunity to support the policy efforts of the member-states. The following quote is illustrative:

“The role of the Commission would be to organize this sharing of information, trying to make sense out of the diversity of situations, possibly identify best practices /.../ that one should take inspiration from. /.../ What the Commission can then do is to say, ok, now that you have accepted to discuss this, we have commonly identified different options and possibly the best option that we at Commission can spread and codify this best practice into a document.”

In addition, mutual learning exercises with the involvement of national policy experts have created a unique opportunity for the Commission administrators to establish a network of country-specific contacts. Such personal contacts were seen useful for providing up-to-date information on the current situation in the country. The experts also provided the Commission administrators an access to the most recent country-specific data related to research policy, useful for further strengthening the Commission’s position in the regional scale. Motivation to develop a network of experts in order to get information from the member states was commented as follows:

“I think my colleagues are trying to organize these mutual type of activities just also to stay in contact with research Ministries and to get information in order to fulfill that more heavy role in European semester.” (Commission expert)

The Commission experts were engaged in promotion activities of the results of the policy learning groups. They actively disseminated good practices to achieve consistency across national policy approaches. The Commission published several official reports based on the policy learning activities (ranging from 32 to 128 pages), which were disseminated to the representatives of all member-states through CREST and the European Commission. These reports were also made publicly available on the European Commission OMC

website. This knowledge dissemination function helped to further establish DG research position as a catalyst for increased policy coordination across Commission Units.

Policy learning works both ways. It creates access to the policy-making process of another member-state, allows sharing knowledge on the policies that work and triggers further analysis about whether certain policy approach would work in one's own country. Such an opportunity was welcomed by the member-states' experts as demonstrates the following quote:

"...even though we'll have the research policies as national responsibility, we do not operate in a vacuum, and it's always interesting to learn how other countries develop instruments and what kind of instruments they've used in their research policy./.../ in a way to get the best understanding of policy in other countries and to see if there would be anything to learn." (member-state expert, Norway)

Operating as experts in their respective policy areas, they were curious to study what new initiatives were emerging across Europe and what policy approaches seem to be useful.

Debates and sometimes emerging political tensions during the policy learning exercise seen to change the focus of learning. The emphasis shifted from the country-specific policy approaches towards learning about the organizational culture. Member-states experts commented on learning about the relationships between diverse stakeholders and mentioned gaining a better understanding of how big bureaucracies such as the European Commission operate. The following quote is representative:

"Also it was very interesting to discuss with people from the Commission and understand the differences because at the beginning someone just believes that the Commission is something uniform, that everybody works on the same line and that they have the same interpretation for the things. And then you realize that there are many many differences at the level of the Commission, its not something uniform."

As a result the member-states' policy experts became more aware of the diverse cultures within the European Commission, their particular struggles and challenges within the organization. This realization lead to increased understanding and support towards Commission's work. Ten country-experts reflected on better understanding the variety of policy-making approaches. Developing a mutual understanding on why certain directions have been pursued or why some of the Commissions' policy approaches were adopted was stated by the member-states.

1.3. Issue Framing

The importance of framing in institutional processes has been noted by many (Bolman and Deal 1991, Kezar and Eckel 2002). Leaders are encouraged to frame issues in certain ways so that organizational participants begin to understand the direction that the institution is heading. Chong and Drukman (2007) note that framing is a socially constructed reality, which affects the attitudes and behaviors of their audiences. Strong

frames are those that emerge from public discussion as the best rationales for contending positions on the issue.

Over the past decade, the European Commission has used numerous strategic initiatives and policy processes to frame the issue of increased coordination in research as a 'common concern'. Through such framing the political commitment across the member-states have been achieved. Political declarations such as the Lisbon Strategy (2000), creation of the European Research Area (2000), Europe 2020 Strategy (2012), Innovation Union agenda (2012) have all been endorsed by the member-states taking responsibility for increased collaboration in research. Only by providing the highest political level support can the process yield meaningful outcomes. Therefore the framing of learning needs to be relevant to the larger public and/or linked to the socio-economic benefits for the country.

To influence policy-makers, the European Commission has actively promoted and utilized the 'global competitiveness' frame. The Lisbon Strategy (2000) clearly states the ambitious goal to become '*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy*' with the help of a coordinated research policy. European Research Area's latest progress report indicates that Europe needs to increase its '*global competitiveness and capability to successfully tackle grand societal challenges*' (Council of the European Union, 2014). Global competitiveness agenda has been the underlying notion for achieving the European Research Area by 2014 and it has been the driving force for the Innovation Union. Through horizontal networking, creating joint declarations and proposing regional policy strategies, the Commission has been able to create ownership of decision among politicians and acceptance of these developments as necessary and beneficial for the member-states. By adopting the competitiveness frame, the stakeholders have given the mandate to the European Commission to increase its power to coordinate, monitor and regulate the member-states' policy processes.

Framing the issue as a 'common concern' that would bring significant benefits to the region was used among member-states researchers in European Research Area (ERA) activities. An ERA document, directed to member-states' researchers, lists all the potential benefits that researchers can expect as a result of increased trans-national cooperation. For example, increased policy coordination is seen to be useful as it helps to improve fragmentation of European market, so that more research-based employment opportunities will emerge. It also '*helps to attract talent, provide researchers with better skills for industry-collaboration, and ultimately increases quality of research, lowering costs*' (ERA 2012). In order to achieve these benefits, increased political commitment is required. Such a framing positions the Commission in the center of the policy developments, coordinating individual stakeholders to collaborate and make its own organization as a catalyst for change. This was the case in research policy but is evident also in environmental policies, social policy, employment policy, education and training policy (Trubek & Trubek, 2005).

The overexploitation of the competitiveness frame has created significant fatigue and exhaustion over the policy developments among the citizens of the European Union. The

support of the individuals towards the European policy directions has considerably decreased, the new wave of framing is tapping towards responding to societal needs. As a EC policy-maker comments:

“And looking at the result of UK elections, they are not very optimistic to the point where some politicians are exploiting this situation to promote their own agenda. European Union is blamed on everything that goes wrong in Europe. /.../ If you would try to make referendum in France, if a question contains even the words ‘European Union’ in it, the answer would be no.”

Such a strong citizen reaction to the European-level policy process has given an impetus for the Commission to act fast and change its framing strategy. As declared by the Commission’s recent policy documents (EU 2012, Europe 2020), the DG Research and Innovation is now increasingly engaged in ‘responsible research and innovation’ agenda, determined to bridge the gap between the scientific community and society at large. It aims to foster public engagement in civil society to respond to the needs of the citizens of Europe. The concern is expressed by the following quote by the Commission representative:

“I am the citizen like anybody else. The focus on competitiveness leaves out the social dimension in research. Look at the social disasters that we have in Europe /.../. If you think about the original common good issue, you have to ask – are we doing what a citizen expects to do?”

Overall, using the “responsible research’ framing strategy to influence major policy groups has the potential to influence public stakeholders’ attitudes and encourage support for the Commission initiatives. The strategy to influence different groups by applying different framing strategies is evident in the European Commission policy documents. The question becomes how the Commission is able to maintain the balance of the support towards its activities, so that everyone stays engaged and contributes to the processes in future.

2. European Commission as the catalyst for regional governance

Institutional transformation processes as described above has brought along important instrumental policy changes in the European governance that have gradually contributed to the shifts in the European research landscape since 2000. These transformations are examined in Table 1.

Table 1. Indicators for institutional transformations in the European research policy.

	European Commission	member-states
Policy behavior	-network-based policy processes; -policy learning initiatives; -issue framing	- developing gradual openness towards mutual collaboration; - building awareness toward EU level policy-making; - developing shared policy preferences
Policy process	- taking policy debates forward through organizational changes	- establishing new networks for information flows;

	(SFIC, ESFRI)	- developing new ideas, concepts and knowledge for policy processes
Policy products	-European Charter for Researchers; - Code of Conduct for Recruitment of Researchers; - Strategy for European Internationalization of Research; - new rules for funding programs -Transnational policy coordination is a policy objective in Horizon 2020	- enhancing national policy debates (e.g. developing research clusters, enhancing regional collaboration); - focusing on advocating for new initiatives (e.g. multilateral research projects, establishing science diplomatic posts)

The findings indicate a gradual paradigm shift in policy behavior in the European Commission, DG Research. Since 1980s up until 2000 the European research policy had a very limited scope and was mostly operating in the cycles of the Framework Programs for funding research projects of the member-states. As a result of network-based policies, policy learning initiatives and issue framing strategies, there is a significant transformation in the broader development of the EU's research and innovation policy. Through the mutual learning processes, member-states were able to pinpoint to several issues that needed political decisions such as mobility of researchers, internationalization strategy for research cooperation with countries outside of EU, and the development of large-scale research infrastructure projects, among others (Tamtik, 2012). Through policy learning process member-states indicated policy challenges and gave a clear mandate to the DG Research to take those policy discussions forward. During the policy discussions the Commission was able to support the creation of shared policy preferences among the member-states, enhancing the importance of policy coordination in research policy.

One of the first and significant policy discussions marking the start of DG Research' institutional transformation involved the issue of human capital – the researchers. Discussion around researchers' mobility were directly linked to the recruitment challenges, social security issues, visa problems and training opportunities. These topics needed additional expertise. In order to provide full leadership and carrying the policy discussions forward, DG Research had to reach out to other departments within the Commission – a role that it hadn't fulfilled before. The need for cooperation and additional knowledge from other experts created important new channels for information flow. To take research debates further, cooperation across the units and departments within the Commission was required. As an EC policy-maker reflected:

“You suddenly had an array of policy issues where DG Research, in order to try to move ahead with the EU research policies, found itself now in building up linkages and dialogues with a lot of the other policy departments in the Commission. Something that it didn't have up until that point. There was no real sort of discourse with the others.”

Another example marking noteworthy steps towards organizational changes was a setting up of a European level discussion forum aiming for developing large-scale research infrastructure projects – ESFRI (European Strategic Forum for Research Infrastructures).

The process did not involve representatives from every member state (probably due to a limited resource capabilities), nevertheless it was a step towards facilitating collaborative policy discussion that eventually led to over thirty different research partnerships with diverse pan-European interests represented.

Experts working on internationalization of research collaboration proposed to form a European level advisory body where politicians and government officials participate to discuss issues around international research cooperation and the European internationalization strategy of research. This policy idea was adopted and led to the formation of the Strategic Forum of International Cooperation in S&T in 2008 (European Council 2008). The Forum is currently functioning, composed of high-level political representatives of the member states and the EC.

Several policy documents were endorsed by the Commission. Those included the development of ‘The European Charter for Researchers’ and ‘The Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers’ – two policy guidelines promulgated in 2005¹. Four member-states’ experts noted that their collaborative work resulted in follow-up policy reports prepared by the DG Research staff, which has further informed the European policy debates on funding instruments. The member-states experts described gradual policy changes that were emerging from those policy documents:

“I think this study [OMC report] influenced the European Union as well. I think one or two years after our study was conducted, DG Regio came up with a sort of similar document or guideline on synergy of these areas. So with the time of one or two years they sort of embraced the work of the group and I think also now in the debate on the new SF programs for 2014-2020 you can see the elements of this process.” (member-state expert, the Netherlands)

These examples illustrate the contributions the Commission has made towards initiating new policy debates and strengthening an existing policy conversation at the European level.

Most research activity in Europe has historically taken place within national borders, supported and conducted by national institutions. The study findings reveal the emergence of gradual openness towards European level collaboration through policy debates. Following governments’ commitments towards building the European Research Area, the experts were becoming increasingly concerned about fragmentation of the national and European policy initiatives. The idea that European level policy coordination is important was expressed by several member-states policy experts. Here is an example:

“[W]e felt that it was time for a more systematic approach [at] the EU level to avoid the duplicity and segmentation. Because there were some activities at the member states level and some things done by the European Commission, but nobody in fact knew what the other side was doing.” (member-state expert, Italy)

¹ For the Charter and Code of Conducts see http://ec.europa.eu/eracareers/pdf/am509774CEE_EN_E4.pdf

The perceptions of the European Commission representatives provide additional evidence of the gradual shift towards collaboration:

“Well, I think the first and most important thing that I learned was that there is the willingness of member states to work together on this topic. It [internationalization of research collaboration] was a relatively new topic to work out a European perspective on how to go forward.”

Awareness of the EC decision-making process was built gradually, being part of the policy debate through the policy discussions. By working together, the country experts became increasingly knowledgeable of the decision-making processes in the European Commission. The policy views were shifting through sharing ideas, learning and accepting policy views of the other actors.

The findings show that the mutual learning process marks a novel way of expanding new policy networks for the country experts as well. Fifteen informants mentioned that participation in the OMC enabled them to get to know new people and establish professional contacts among other experts. While vertical relationships among EC policy-makers and country experts were recognized, horizontal networks among other country-experts were increasingly emphasized. According to Connick and Innes (2001) policy networks in collaborative governance contribute to social and political capital and can change the dynamic of political debate by sorting out issues before those arise at high political level. Current findings indicate that these new networks contribute to productive information flow among policy-makers. The following quote is illustrative:

“So I got to know the persons that I later on contacted in regards to other questions to hear what...how do they do these things in Sweden, for instance, or in Denmark. So to build up a network of contacts, I would say, is an outcome of this expert group.” (member-state expert, Norway)

Experts gained new concepts and ideas that helped to facilitate domestic policy processes. For example, a representative from Hungary provided evidence on increased coordination among national institutions. The expert described the lengthy process of getting people to think about possible collaborative synergies in research cooperation. This shift happened as a result of organizational change, where a specific administrative body was set up to coordinate the activities. Another expert from Sweden recalled how the participation of the OMC expert group drew attention and raised the topic of research funding above the other discussion topics related to research. As a result of active participation in the OMC group, the variety of ways in which the funds could be used to better facilitate innovation became apparent and triggered intense policy discussions at the national level. The expert recalled:

“The most important was that people started a long time discussion after many years when we discussed the next FP and the next SF. How could we do this better this time. I am not sure we have been successful but it is a little bit higher up in the agenda compared to the last time when we were working with the FP.”

These developments in policy process contribute to institutional transformation process. Country experts were able to expand their professional networks that create a tool for gaining new knowledge or policy ideas if needed for future policy decisions.

The findings confirm limited policy change at the national level, as suggested by some authors (Morano-Foadi 2008, Kröger 2009). However, more significant contributions involve indirect conceptual inputs. Several experts noted that participation in the OMC process helped partially strengthen or give an incentive for better focus of a policy debate taken at the national level. For example the expert from Germany noted that knowledge received from the OMC survey and subsequent discussions were applied to the further development of their national internationalization strategy in R&D. The same was confirmed by the expert from Austria. A representative from Norway argued that in this work they were expecting to strengthen the international cooperation dimension of their national policy directions. The following quotes are representative:

“Especially with science councillors, we didn't have or we only had one science councillor, I think, we will put more emphasis on having science councillors in other countries as well.” (member-state expert, the Netherlands)

“Nationally we used these themes and experiences of these kinds of studies to help getting our regions and departments within the municipalities towards this more cluster-based research approach. It was quite a shift in the mentality for our region. /.../ So, there were also political arguments where we could use this report in our case.” (member-state expert, Austria)

Experts noted that it was important to get new ideas about how to enhance research excellence in a country:

“And, of course, you also get quite good knowledge of what is happening in other countries, and what they do to promote research excellence, and you know where to go back and find information about a specific good practice, if you want to refer to it, in some other kind of setting.” (member-state expert, Norway)

In conclusion, the evidence of tangible policy outcomes resulting from the OMC process is limited. However, the OMC mutual learning initiatives have had significant impact on changing the policy preferences of country-experts towards increased openness for collaboration. In addition, the knowledge gained through the OMC process has had impact on national policy debates when topics get more attention at high political level or directing focus on particular initiatives (developing research clusters, multilateral research projects, establishing science diplomatic posts).

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper argues that the exchange of ideas through horizontal policy learning initiatives and specific framing strategies have gradually contributed to institutional transformations at the DG Research and Innovation. Such transformations have made the European Commission DG Research a policy catalyst in the regional governance increasingly

shaping the European level policy directions. The member-states have been provided a space for contributing concepts in these European level discussions. As a result, the member-states have gradually become more open to the idea of increased research cooperation across the region. Yet simultaneously, they have offered a mandate to the Commission to facilitate those ideas further.

There are several important factors that can strengthen organizational position in the regional governance. This paper shows how the processes of learning and knowledge sharing serve as a crucial driver for creating ownership of the decisions. The impacts of policy discussions in the open coordination approach must be understood in terms of circulating ideas, knowledge and concepts that have the potential to enter policy process indirectly. The most important contribution of the OMC policy debate is that it provides a formal setting where diverse interests can be presented, discussed and learned from. In this process of collaboration, the participants build trust, become aware of the various arguments and gradually build common understanding, necessary for taking a policy dialogue forward. As noted by Innes and Booher (2003) the processes of collaborative dialogue helps to create a more adaptive and intelligent policy system in general.

In addition, by changing policy coordination methods from top-down approach to more horizontal approach has contributed to increased acceptance of Commission activities by the member-states. There is a potential of altering underlying previous assumptions about resisting the operations of the Commission. According to the informants, the shift towards more inclusive approach in policy-making has provided an opportunity to get acquainted with the Commission's organizational culture, learn about their challenges and shape these high level policy discussions. This has brought the member-states closer to the Commission.

These institutional changes have not been a result of recent changes. This research confirms the argument made by Streeck and Thelen (2005), where institutional changes have occurred as a result of gradual and intentional everyday operations that might not be immediately noticeable. As a result of these little policy operations, the Commission has slowly but consistently moved its positioning on the regional scale, operating now as a key regional authority in research policy. It has gained certain political support, researchers can directly relate their challenges with the policy issues that the Commission is trying to address, and citizens are hoping to see more benefits in the society. By framing its operational agenda differently for each stakeholder group, the Commission has carved a channel to influence each group in a strategic manner. As noted by Gornitzka (2010), interaction between sectors that are built on different principles is a fundamental dynamic of change. DG Research has used the 'common concern' agenda for researchers, 'global competitiveness agenda' for politicians and 'responsive research' agenda to activate citizens. The question remains how sustainable are these framing approaches to maintain the organizational position in regional governance in the future. There is also the concern of activating the enthusiasm of young people in the Europeanization agenda. Is the concept of the European Union sufficiently attractive to have young people fight for it and maintain the regional position that has been achieved?

To conclude, issue framing, policy learning practices and horizontal approach to policy-making serve as significant aspects in institutional transformations. Those mechanisms can lead to more coordinated policy approaches within multi-level governance systems. The key issue is to find the right balance, so that the stakeholder groups do not feel controlled and everybody can benefit of those collaborations in a meaningful way. Clearly, these aspects have not been the sole mechanism for enhanced regional governance in European research policy, but it has definitely triggered several significant developments that cannot be ignored.

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