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Experts Networks and the European Commission on Demographic Change

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Summary

This paper examines who populates the expert and policy network around demographic change issues in Europe. We examine how competing policy departments in the European Commission Directorates-General (DGs) deal with the issue of Europe’s changing demography, as well as discuss the role of external experts on demographic change. Our findings suggest that on demographic change issues at the EU level, DG EMPL has taken the lead, while DG ECFIN is the secondary actor. Still, internal European Commission dynamics mean that the lead actor on demographic issues has less autonomy in articulating a funded and clear policy position on how to address them. As a consequence, there is little institutional memory and hardly a depository of activity on demographic change. While outside expertise comes primarily from demographers, and other scholars concerned with demographic change, they are primarily an academic community rather than heavily engaged in European policy formulation. As a consequence of these dynamics, the European mode of governance on demographic change issues suffers from a lack of both flexibility and direction. It is an important slow-burning issue that is captured by neither the ‘new intergovernmentalism’ nor the ‘new supranationalism’ in post-crisis European governance strategies. Rather, demographic change issues largely operate in a vacuum and make only sporadic appearances on the EU agenda.

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Introduction: Europe's Demographic Trends

The combined processes of demographic ageing – below replacement-level fertility rates and increasing life-expectancy – confront the EU with a dual challenge: one economic and one social (see also May 2005, p. 836). First, as the working-age population (WAP) decreases, meaning that fewer people enter the labor market than leaving, economic growth will in the future rely solely on productivity gains and increases in the employment rate of the WAP (European Union 2015, p. 52). The European WAP has started decreasing in 2012 (European Commission 2012, p. 57), and it is projected that this decline will result in a sustained decrease in the number of persons in employment, which can no longer be offset by increases in the employment rate from 2022 onwards (European Commission 2012, pp. 29–30).

Historically, economic growth rates in the EU were composed of employment growth rates and productivity growth rates of around 1% each annually, resulting in an average of 2% GDP growth. Therefore, as employment growth turns negative, productivity growth rates would in the future need to exceed 2% annually to maintain the desired levels of GDP growth (European Union 2015, p. 47) – a scenario last observed in 1995 for the Euro area (European Central Bank 2016). Even the optimistic projections of the Commission's Ageing Report forecast productivity growth not to exceed 1,4% annually on average for

the period 2013-2060 (European Commission 2015, p. 44). Thus, demographic ageing will have severe consequences for the EU's economic growth and global competitiveness.

Secondly, notwithstanding the fact that the remarkable rise in life expectancy (80.6 years in 2013) is a phenomenal social achievement, this development comes with a serious social challenge as well. As the proportion of the WAP declines relative to the young and old cohorts outside of the labor market, a shrinking workforce will – *ceteris paribus* – have to provide for more people outside the workforce, corresponding to a significant increase in the overall dependency ratio,¹ and the old-age dependency ratio (European Commission 2012, p. 27).²

At the same time, the cohort of the so-called oldest old (85 years+) is growing at the fastest rate, implying that health care expenditure will increase significantly among member states (European Commission 2015, p. 126) and that the topics of pension sustainability and

¹ The overall dependency ratio is defined as all people outside the working age population (0-14 years and above 65 relative to the 15-64 year cohort) (European Commission, 2012, p. 27). It is projected to increase from 52.6% in 2015 to 71.6% in 2040 (Eurostat, 2017).

² The old-age dependency ratio is defined as the age group of 65 years and above relative to the working age population (15-64 years) (European Commission, 2012, p. 27). This is projected to increase from 28.8 % (2015) to 46.4% (2040) (Eurostat, 2017).

adequacy need to be addressed. Whereas pension sustainability has received a great deal of attention among EU member states, which project a stable share of GDP spending on public pensions for the period 2015-2060, the adequacy dimension has according to the OECD been neglected (OECD 2015, p. 9). Indeed, old-age poverty is quickly on the rise in *inter alia* Germany (c.f. Bertelsmann 2017), and fears about losing national identities due to demographic developments have been drivers of xenophobia and right-wing populism, most notably in Germany where former Bundesbank manager Thilo Sarazin became a star of the right-wing movement by linking the two issues in his 2010 bestseller “Deutschland schafft sich ab” (Germany abolishes itself).

More generally within Europe, demographers have suggested that without raising taxes to address demographic change, the decline of welfare states and support for European institutions is simply a matter of time (Demeny 2016), especially as social unrest builds over issues such as the adequacy of aged care (Cangiano 2014) or the employability of youth. We understand these demographic trends as a challenge to Europe in that these changes exert social pressures that are not immediate but can fester over time. Demographic change includes both obvious pressures from informal migration (a ‘fast-burning’ crisis in 2015-6), as well more ‘slow-burning’ pressures through the realignment of social expectations on issues such as when to

form a family, where job opportunities lie, etc. (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2016).

Our approach is informed by work in the ENLIGHTEN project that focuses on how authorities and social actors view actualities and narratives of change in the European Union, and on how policy programs address current social experiences, as well as what policy frames are being developed by experts to acknowledge or redress changes in social expectations (for the full conceptual framework see Seabrooke and Tsingou 2018). This framework extends earlier insights from crisis management literature (Boin et al. 2005) to suggest that in fast-burning crises how authorities and social actors understand the tempo and intensity of change is important, with an emphasis on policy firefighting and alleviating “external” shocks (see Coman 2018).

Slow-burning crises differ in that the primary activity is in the diagnosis of the problem among expert groups and policymakers, who can then articulate a frame on how to address what is viewed as a significant socio-economic problem. If these frames are not developed then social actors may well change their expectations on what authorities, such as the European institutions, can do for them, and if they should receive their support.

While the migration crisis was perceived as a fast-burning crisis, our investigation concentrates on how demographic change

is viewed primarily as a slow-burning crisis within Europe, or not a crisis at all. We establish how the issue is being framed within EC DGs, as well as among external experts (for a more global application see Seabrooke and Tsingou 2015).

In what follows we discuss: a) the construction of the “DemEx” database

within the ENLIGHTEN project on demography experts in Europe; b) the practicalities of how the EU can address demographic challenges through its legal architecture; c) internal dynamics within the EC DGs on demographic change issues; d) EC-external expert dynamics; e) dynamics among the external expert community.

A. Data and Methods – Building the DemEx Database

This paper relies on three sets of data: primary documents derived from EU output related to the demographic dimension since the start of the 1990s; an extensive social network analysis (SNA) based on participation in key events and citation in key policy outputs; and a range of semi-structured interviews with key high-level professionals from within and outside the European Commission.

The content analysis serves as a form of triangulation (Bowen 2009), providing insights into major trends across time and shifting focus areas. A total of 55 documents were identified and coded according to the major topics addressed. Secondly, a novel dataset of demography experts was created based on participation in 23 key expert groups, conferences, seminars and workshops since the 2006 Communication “The Demographic Future of Europe” (European Commission 2006), which marked a renewed ambition of the

European institutions to address demography at the EU level. This data was supplemented by the citation networks of the flagship Ageing and Demography reports. The resulting “DemEx” Database consists of 856 individuals (nodes) tied together through 4,569 affiliations.

To highlight interrelations among the nodes, standard centrality measures were applied, and a Louvain cluster analysis (Blondel et al. 2008) was conducted to highlight community structures in the field. Thus, the SNA’s purpose is to map the social capital structures among actors and to identify key individuals. Finally, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with central nodes within the Commission and among the expert community to critically assess the results from the SNA and to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics that drive the governance process. An indicative set of questions asked during interviews is listed in Box 1.

Box 1. Interview themes

Topic	Questions
<i>Issue Distinctions</i>	What are the major political aspects/solutions to the demographic challenge?
	How rigid do you perceive the borders between different sub-fields to be?
	Is the EU's handling of these issues facilitating interdisciplinary approaches and learning to a satisfactory extent?
<i>Expert Input</i>	What types of resources might lead to improved access to the Commission?
	Are you aware of ways in which expert input is being used by Commission actors?
<i>Perceptions of EU leadership</i>	How has policy focus shifted over time?
	How can one explain the ups and downs in EU leadership on the topic?
	How do you perceive the current approach of the EU?
	What role do expert networks play in framing the EU approach?
	How could the process be improved?

B. The Legal Basis for European Action

The demographic dimension is addressed in European Union work at several institutional stages: The European Semester, the Social Policy Committee, various Commission Directorates General, and the European Parliament. With the Commission's focus on establishing best practice and defining examples of good governance, thus defining role models among the member states, it is worth zooming in on the processes that eventually define the analytical basis for how demography and ageing societies are addressed in European discourses.

The major sequential outputs from the EU on the issue are the Ageing Reports, the Demography Reports, and the Pension Adequacy Reports.

The importance of the analytical groundwork at the Commission is reinforced by the mixed competencies in social policy-related fields: In many areas related to demographic change, the EU and member states enjoy shared competencies for which the principle of subsidiarity gives the right to legislation to member states,

whereas the EU's role is limited to support and complement member state efforts. Providing ideational guidance and establishing examples of good governance is thus essentially what the EU can do. The legal basis is thereby given by Article 3 TEU and Article 9 TFEU, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights which *inter alia* includes the right to reconcile family and professional life (Article 33), a right to social security (Article 34) and a right to health care (Article 35). Whereas implementation remains in the hands of member states, the EU in general and the Commission in particular deliver crucial analysis and ideational leadership to frame a European approach to the shared challenges of ageing societies and demographic transitions.

The European Commission addresses demographic change and ageing as intertwined phenomena at multiple stages with little coordination efforts between the different Directorates General. Based on the outputs produced and the networks analyzed, four DGs and Eurostat are involved to different degrees.

First, Eurostat provides the analytical background data on demographic developments and economic and social indicators.

Second, DG EMPL delivers the sequential Demography Reports with a focus on the social implications of societal changes.

Third, DG ECFIN publishes the analytical flagship report on the issue, called "Ageing Reports" and plays a crucial role in the European Semester.

Fourth, DG HOME is involved to the extent that third-country migration is used in relation to mitigation of demographic pressures, a concept most (in)famously associated with the 2000 UN Report on Replacement Migration. Lastly, DG JUST is involved in certain aspects related to internal mobility and legal questions.

The task of understanding the EU's efforts in the governance of demographic change is therefore a complex undertaking. Three dimensions need to be addressed.

First, how is work at the Commission coordinated between DGs and what is the nature of this coordination? Is it a spirit of cooperation or do competitive struggles over alternative narratives prevail? And how are the institutional dynamics within the Commission affected by fast-burning events that could provide an impetus for spill-over effects?

Second, highlighting how Commission actors (DGs) are organizing and utilizing networks of external expertise can allow us to better understand where policy input is originating from. This is important since the complexity of the demographic issue confronts bureaucrats with a three-fold challenge of uncertainty, controversy and open-endedness that is very similar to that

of issues such as internal mobility (c.f. Hasselbalch 2018). That is, there remains a degree of uncertainty as to the interaction of processes resulting in demographic trends; the statistical picture does not resemble popular mood (which is especially the case for the pension sustainability issue); and the statistical picture allows for multiple policy equilibria, the choice of which depends partly on the values of decision-makers (May 2005, p. 832). The inclusion of external expertise can help

bureaucrats to reconcile some of the complexity and increase the (throughput) legitimacy of their position.

Third, and following on from the second dimension, it is also important to understand the dynamics among the external actors. What types of actors do we see? How do they cooperate, and which ones are crucial in establishing shared understandings of good science and norms and values?

C. Divergence in DG views on Demographic Change

At the European Commission, the main institutional actors are the Directorates General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (EMPL), and Economics and Finance Affairs (ECFIN).

Each DG publishes its own reports, the Ageing Report is produced by ECFIN and the Demography Reports by EMPL. The different foci of the reports are highlighted by an analysis of the citation networks: for example, the Reports published since 2007 (five Demography Reports and two Ageing Reports) share only one citation.

Additionally, some other characteristics are worth highlighting. Academic citations in the Ageing Report are attributed as follows: 54% to trained economists and 7,5% to demographers. Almost half (46%) of the cited academics are affiliated with US universities and research institutes. On the

other hand, the Demography Reports rely to an overwhelming extent (95,5%) on scholars from European Universities and research institutes in their academic citations. Scholars come from a wider range of academic backgrounds: 36% are trained economists, 22% are demographers, and others include researchers in sociology, history, health, and medicine.

This underscores the economic approach of the ECFIN department, and a reliance on approaches that are not embedded in the specific contexts of the European Union. DG EMPL, on the other hand favors an approach that is rooted in the European context and puts emphasis on the social investment dimension to address demographic change.

This distinction between a monetarist and an interventionist camp along the two

departments was confirmed to us throughout multiple interviews with senior EC-officials. It is also in line with other research on skills and ‘brain drain’ issues in the ENLIGHTEN project (Hasselbalch 2018).

In the next stage of the research, we see in the composition of Commission in-house experts that DG EMPL has the quantitative lead.

First, the network analysis, which covers the period of 2006-2017, identified 60 out of a total of 112 EU actors as Commission staff (plus 10 Eurostat staff), thus highlighting the important role of the Commission’s own staff in the policy process.

Second, within the Commission, 56% of actors were affiliated with DG EMPL. DG ECFIN experts account for 11% with the remaining experts working in DG HOME, JUST, EAC and JRC.

Quantitatively, there is thus little doubt as to the leading role of DG EMPL, a result that was confirmed in interviews: DG EMPL is the main agent, as stated by a former Commissioner in an interview. This leading role is further manifested in the multiple Communications, Green Papers and White Papers relating to demographic change since 2006 under the leadership of DG EMPL. The 2006 Communication on the Demographic Future of Europe, the 2008 Renewed Social Agenda, the 2010 Green Paper on Pension, the 2012 White Paper on

Pension, the Social Investment Package, and more.

However, crucially, the internal dynamics within the Commission worked in another direction as our interviewees continuously highlighted:

We [DG EMPL] are their [DG ECFIN’s] supplement. Previously, we were more equal in the analytical processes and political priorities, which we haven’t been for a number of years. Now, DG ECFIN is acting as the President’s right hand. Senior Official, DG EMPL

A former senior official in DG EMPL noted that in the post-crisis period, especially 2011-14, the prominence of DG ECFIN grew, so that

the Secretary General always took the side of the DG ECFIN. Partially because they were the first ones to seriously increase their power after the crisis in 2008 and 2009.” Former Senior Official of DG EMPL

DG ECFIN’s political priorities of stabilizing public finances in the wake of the financial crisis using austerity policies (see Blyth 2013) are therefore, according to our interviewees, also dominating the overall EC approach to the demographic issue.

This can be illustrated by a quote from a personal advisor to President Juncker, maintaining that the demographic dimension was a minor challenge and

nothing to be dealt with by the Commission, which – as the advisor claimed – is right to focus on the sustainability of public finances:

When you live 20 % longer and I take 20 % of your monthly pension, you'll get exactly the same amount. You just feel poorer. These are allocational things [...]. People think they have an entitlement to retire. Forget it! This is

an insurance product! [...] It's a policy of let the markets rule. Advisor to President Juncker.

Not seeing demographic change as a “real issue” and employing an already existing ideational discourse stemming from a fast-burning crisis, narrows the possibility of experts to define issues and introduce novel ideas.

D. The External Expert Consensus

With institutional supply of access points diminishing and internal competition between departments overshadowing substantive debates, much is left to the ecology of external experts to drive the political debate. The organization among external experts is, however, limited.

Our social network analysis captured 587 external actors as having been involved in EU-led events and outputs related to demographic change. Firstly, external actors are overwhelmingly academics. 44% are affiliated with Universities and a further 13% with research institutes. 15% represent interest groups, and the private sector is represented by 10%, mostly through BusinessEurope.

The strongest groups within academia based on their professional education are economics (101), sociology (33), political science (28), medicine (27), demography (25), and various aspects of health sciences

(14). The most significant institutional network among these is Population Europe, linking 26 individuals. Importantly, many of these feature prominently on the applied centrality measures: six out of the ten highest scoring external experts on the betweenness score have links to the network. This indicates that members of this sub-network are well-positioned to broker and exert control over information flows within the larger network by linking several sub-groups.

The group of Population Europe affiliated experts is relatively homogenous. This is true for the social capital characteristics as well as the academic norms and values. When the SNA is grouped into community structures in which all actors belonging to a certain group are closer to each other than to any other node in the network (Henriksen and Waldstrøm 2016), we observe that a majority of experts affiliated with the population network are grouped in

the same community, indicating similar ego networks.

The demographic community of external experts, defined as people working primarily with demographic issues in a holistic context rather than sub-sections such as pensions, is densely connected and exhibits characteristics that allow few outliers. The first characteristic is that the field is relatively small (a characteristic of relevance to demographers themselves as we found in our interviews).

This has two implications. First, and most obviously, people know each other and are in regular contact. Secondly, the network is centered around research institutes (e.g. MPIDR, ViD, INED, NIDI, CED, and the Oxford Institute for Population Ageing) which are regularly evaluated for their performance. These evaluations tend to be done by their peers from other research institutes. As the founder of Population Europe suggested:

We all go to the same meetings and someone who takes a PhD here goes off to Vienna and the other way around. So, we all work closely together. We evaluate each other and give each other high grades.

According to the Director of the MPIDR this dense interaction results in a field that is characterized by “a general spirit of cooperation and collaboration”.

The second characteristic is that the field is committed to common academic norms. Demographers are data-driven and very cautious about becoming involved in predictions. Political activity is not incentivized through funding structures. Population Europe, for example, was funded out of the research budget of the Max-Planck institute. The effect is that the demographic community by and large shows very little commitment to get their message out to the wider public and to political circles. This was particularly highlighted by the President of the Migration Policy Institute:

Formal demographers don't care much about how you might take or not take what it is they are offering in order to solve the particular problem. They are creating a new framework - a theoretical way of thinking - on these issues and the necessary mathematics that will make other formal demographers understand it and move the ball forward.

Peter Hall famously stated that alternative policy ideas only gain traction and practical leverage when they provide answers to concrete political problems (Hall 1993, p. 290; Heins and de la Porte 2015, p. XIII). However, in the case at hand, introducing ideas and novel discourses about the best solutions to the substantive issues only translates into power when such discourses acknowledge and account for the specific demands of EC officials; a process that is better explained through the supply-

demand framework of Bouwen (2002). Thus, a powerful solution is one that takes into account the power dynamics and dominant discourses within the Commission and allows the respective actors to reinforce or transform these dynamics in the policy outcome. Put differently, expert advice is not judged solely on the grounds

E. Expert-DG Interactions

The Commission Directorates engage extensively with external experts in the demographic field. This process has been largely institutionalized through multiple expert groups, forums, conferences and round-table discussions. For the period covered, 586 external actors were identified, and their links traced so as to allow to identify central nodes in the network.

Building on the insights from the previous section, it is important to understand, how this engagement with external expertise was facilitated. Do experts have access to the powerful ECFIN service? And if so, how do they differ from other external actors? The short answer is no. 10 out of the identified 25 events and expert groups were headed by DG EMPL including a series of demographic forums, which brought together experts from academia, the private sector, member states, and civil society organizations, and played an important role in driving the issue at the employment service.

of its substantive contribution to the solution of the societal challenge. Instead, a premium is put on the solutions that allow EC officials to put these ideas into practice with an aim of legitimizing their pre-existing policy enterprise and to introduce the ideas as hinges (Seabrooke 2014, p. 53) in the competing grand paradigm.

The importance of DG EMPL as a facilitator for access is reinforced by the results of the SNA. The closeness centrality measure, which provides a measure of how close one actor is to everyone else in the network, and thus serves as a proxy for the pace with which one actor can spread and obtain information in the network, is dominated by DG EMPL staff. Indeed, among the entire EC staff, EMPL occupies the first ten positions. Policy input is therefore densely concentrated in this DG.

An advantage of such concentration is that expert input can more easily be coordinated and translated into day-to-day work. However, it also comes with a backlash. When the Juncker administration entered, with it a new set of policy priorities and norms entered the Commission work.

The newly appointed heads of DGs were instructed to follow Juncker's approach of focusing "less on the peanuts", and according to one interviewee, they were strategically chosen so as to place Commissioners in DGs for which they were

the least in agreement with a European approach. The purpose of this maneuver was to enforce “professionalism and allegiances”.

For DG EMPL, the result was that demographic change as a free-standing issue with a designated unit was dropped with the departure of Commissioner Andor in 2014. Politics, as another interview pointed out, was more interested in the short-term challenges. Consequently, with perceptions of a fast-burning Euro crisis dominating the political agenda, demography “was not an issue at all” (Interview with Senior Official, DG EMPL). And moreover, the institutional mandate was to some extent lost. On the question of who is responsible for demographic change after the unit was dropped in 2014, we received the following illuminating answer:

I think it has been less targeted. If you ask me who does demographics, you won't get an answer. I have a personal interest. So, people would probably approach me, but my portfolio doesn't include explicitly demographics. Who's in charge with demographics? Nobody.
Senior Official, DG EMPL

In sum, then, the internal-external dynamics between Commission activity and in-sourcing of expertise suffered a double challenge originating on the one hand from the typical fate of slow-burning issues in times of fast-burning issues, and on the other hand a new administration that

arguably devoted fewer resources to the topic.

Hence, with fewer resources and more powerful competing issues, demography was lost along the way. Key events such as the demography forums were subsequently outsourced to Population Europe, which is, as discussed above, a network of leading demography academics in Europe. This has weakened the access points for academic experts to directly engage with the Commission.

To stimulate a policy direction on demographic issues in 2011 Commissioner Andor proposed to bring forward a new Communication on demography. In fact, in July 2010 Commissioner Andor highlighted that “demographic change will be one of the main challenges of my term as Commissioner” (Laszlo Andor, 2010).

This was supported by the, at that time, Director for Social Policies and Horizon 2020. The aim of this Communication was to bring the issues of ageing, demographic change, mobility, migration, future trends for the financing of education, and health care into a single framework (Interview with former Senior Official at DG EMPL), thus introducing a life-course approach to the Commission's handling of demographic issues. There was at that time political will and commitment within DG EMPL and “significant support” (Interview with former Commissioner) among member states to

bring forward such a Communication. This did, however, never happen.

According to a former Senior Official in DG EMPL, the reason for the Communication to be turned down was twofold:

It was stopped by the Commission and the central office of the Secretariat General for two reasons: Officially, because demography was not something supposed to be dealt with in social policy [...] and then the migration issue. They felt that we should not talk about migration because it was politically so explosive. Former Senior Official, DG EMPL

From the above quotes, two aspects become apparent.

First, the SG possesses significant agenda-setting powers that can be used to turn the demographic issue into a *non-issue*, resulting in a disconnect between ageing, demographic change and the social dimension, effectively ruling out a life-course approach. This is reinforced by the documented position of the ECFIN service, operating as the SG's "right hand".

Second, it reinforces the policy dilemma which the EC faces when addressing "hot potato" aspects of the solution, in this case migration, skewing the addressed challenges towards a *bias of mobilization*.

However, this case illuminates the interplay between internal dynamics within the

Commission and the use of external experts further. The demographic issue was not dropped because the proposal for a Communication was rejected. Instead, it was re-packaged and introduced into the Social Investment Package (SIP).

The 2013 SIP is one of the key EU responses to the social dimension in a post-crisis setting (de la Porte and Heins 2014). Framing social policy as investment rather than cost, the SIP can be understood as a break with the dominant austerity paradigm favored by the EC at that time (Kvist 2015). Demographic issues were deliberately placed into this framework by DG EMPL with the hope that they could have a life there (interview with former Commissioner).

Nonetheless, the challenge of explicitly addressing the issue of public investments remained a challenge, with the SIP largely viewed as a cost by the DGs, and not an investment (interview with former DG EMPL official).

The corresponding expert group ("Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion") was composed of 12 individuals, ten of which were affiliated with universities/research institutes. The relative dominance of academics affiliated with business/economics universities (five individuals) was no coincidence as the group's informal task was to translate the known set of solutions into a language that stood a chance of gaining ECFIN's approval.

The re-packaging and integration of the demographic material into the SIP acknowledged and followed the dominant discourse of the ECFIN service. Indeed, the SIP has been criticized as being part of the monetarist paradigm and leaning on supply-side politics (Heins and de la Porte 2015, p. 36; Streeck 2014). DG EMPL at that time had to show sensitivity towards the structural political setting, and address the social dimension of demographic change without making it too explicit.

Notwithstanding the monetarist language, the SIP introduced aspects of lifelong learning (p. 14), poverty eradication (p. 5),

Conclusion

In sum then, ‘throughput legitimacy’ in the governance of demographic change is under pressure (Schmidt 2016). Albeit formally living up to the requirements of open and inclusive policy processes, the internal processes of the EC render this engagement largely irrelevant since the ECFIN service exercises a form of *Deutungshoheit* – the capacity to have the exclusive authority to interpret – over the demographic issue.

Demographic issues have become integrated into a larger ideational struggle between interventionist and laissez-faire paradigms. Yet expert involvement on the side of the EMPL service is not solely focused on gathering expertise and

gender equality (p. 7) and social exclusion (p. 2) (European Commission, 2013). Substantially, then, the SIP is a social investment strategy that is “fit to cope with many societal challenges” (Kvist 2015, p. 147). However, the argument for addressing demographic issues had to remain in the dominant reasoning among DGs, and the SIP was still viewed as a cost (see also de la Porte and Natali 2018). As a former DG EMPL official put it:

At the end demography became a little bit of an annex to the SIP and was lost in the whole thing.
Former senior DG EMPL official.

developing the best solutions according to the leading experts in the field. Expert involvement also becomes a means to develop hinges, adopt the language of the dominant paradigm and introduce interventionist policy ideas through the back door.

The internal power battles sideline accountability concerns. The social dimension of the demographic issue is left to the marginalized Commission services who additionally face an unanimity trap since large member states possess a *de facto* veto power for non-desired policy solutions such as, for example, migration.

As such, because demographic change issues exist in a vacuum they are not part of the development of a post-crisis ‘new intergovernmentalism’ in the EU (Bickerton et al. 2015), nor are they part of the ‘new supranationalism’ – both modes of governance require strong political salience for action (Dehousse 2015; Schmidt 2016; Carstensen and Schmidt 2017). Rather, in accordance with our framework, demographic change issues are viewed by many as a slow-burning crisis for Europe,

and by some prominent experts and policymakers as not at crisis at all, but an issue that the market will correct.

The diffused management of the demographic issue further undermines transparency concerns: with demographic issues increasingly being downgraded as a background factor to more pressing issues, it becomes difficult to get a comprehensive picture of what the European institutions are doing.

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