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The Europeanization of Regional
Development Policies in the Flemish Region

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Development Policies in the Flemish Region**

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The Europeanization of Regional Development Policies in the Flemish Region

Introduction

Theories of EC decision-making tend to be polarized around a supranational or a national focus. The first set of approaches assumes that there is a supranational institution that functions as a motor for the integration process. In this 'functional' view, the European Commission and the interests that are expressed at Community level are the driving forces behind the on-going process. On the other hand, theorists in the more 'realist' and 'intergovernmentalist' tradition claim that mainly national preferences can provide an explanation for the forward and backward steps in the creation of the supranational community. For instance, Moravcsik argues² that preferences at the domestic level are crucial to understanding European integration. Such preferences are aggregated inside central government, and expressed by the latter at Community level, where they are the object of intergovernmental, strategic interaction. A basic assumption of this approach relates to the rationality of state behaviour on the basis of domestically-constrained preferences. Moravcsik tests the validity of his theory against EC decision-making, especially at major turning points such as the Single European Act. Majone and Dehousse³, on the other hand argue, that a satisfactory explanation must include consideration of the role of the Commission and other supranational institutions. They label the Commission, for example, as a 'policy entrepreneur'. Each

¹ This paper has been presented in a slightly revised form at a Conference on *EC Cohesion Policies and National Networks* (Centre for European Studies, Nuffield College, Oxford), organized by Vincent Wright and Liesbet Hooghe. The author wishes to thank Yves Mény, Wolf Heydebrand, Giandomenico Majone (EUI, Florence) and Filip De Rynck (KU Leuven), who all gave comments on draft versions.

² *Preferences and power in the European Community*, 1993.

³ *The dynamics of European integration*, 1993.

of the explanatory frameworks contain some valid arguments that illuminate the diverse decision-making patterns at Community level, which can contribute to the understanding of institutional and policy innovations. The emerging picture is that no single theory can explain a complex and multi-faceted process such as the European integration.

Still, while all the current theories may have some value in offering a partial explanation of the European integration, it seems to us that most of the present authors leave one important aspect untouched. The emphasis is mainly put on the agenda-setting and on the decision of policies at Community level. What happens as regards implementation is hardly explained. Such a lack neglects one of the fundamental insights of public administration since Pressman and Wildavsky⁴, namely that one cannot analyze a policy process without looking at what happens after a decision has been made.

This paper takes the new Structural Funds regulations of 1988 as a point of departure, and focuses on some aspects of the implementation of European regional policy programmes in the Flemish region. Such an approach leads the observer away from the press covered European politics to the more daily routine aspects of the European bureaucracy and of its interaction with national administrations. It hopes to generate some insights in policy processes, which will show that the European Commission is not only a policy entrepreneur or an intergovernmental broker. It can also act as a mediator in purely domestic interactions, it can be used as a leverage by domestic actors in an internal bargaining process, and further still, it can function as an incentive to keep a policy implementation process going. These statements are specifically related to the policy sector of the Structural Funds, and need to be tested against the analysis of other policy sectors. It should be clear that the aim of this paper is not to give a critical assessment of the existing theories of EC decision-making. More modestly, it provides some empirical information that calls for a broader perspective on the whole process.

⁴ *Implementation*, 1973.

The analysis assumes that all the public and private actors in regional policies, from the local to the European level, are involved in what Ostrom calls an 'action arena'⁵. No *a priori* assumptions are made on the outstanding importance of certain actors, such as central government or the European Commission. This accords with the conclusion of Marks on structural policy that 'we are witnessing the emergence of *multilevel governance* in the European Community, characterized by co-decisionmaking across several nested tiers of government'⁶.

To show the extent, and the precise nature of the changes that can be observed, this paper will proceed by analytic induction. The case of regional development in Belgian Limburg is described in detail. The patterns that were discovered in this case will be confronted with those of three other regional development cases in the Flemish Region. Limburg provides the most important example of reconversion in the modern era of Belgian politics. It is chosen as a starting point, since the budgetary and organizational involvement of the European Commission in this case outweighs all the other cases. Thus, one could expect to find there the clearest indicators of changes following the intensive involvement of the EC.

To give a better understanding of the issues, the paper starts by outlining some basic principles of the Belgian federal state. The case of Limburg is introduced by a brief description of the policy problem and of the policies that were carried out (1987-1993). The ensuing patterns of the policy process are explored thereafter: the position of the region versus other actors at national and subregional level, the realization of the partnership principle, organizational innovations, the question of a rising technocracy and the extent of democratic control on the process. A final section of the paper compares the described patterns with the data from the other cases.

⁵ *A method of institutional analysis*, 1985.

⁶ *Structural policy and multilevel governance in the EC*, 1993, p. 407.

1. The structure of the Belgian state

The reform of the unitary Belgian state into a federal one should provide the answer for the co-existence of different language communities, and for managing differences at the political, economic and social level. These differences explain the will for self-government of Flanders, Wallonia and of the German speaking Community. A basic principle of the new state structure is the exclusiveness of competences. There is no hierarchy between the national level on the one hand, and the regional and Community level on the other hand. A national law cannot change a regional decree. So the Constitution tries to delineate clear packages of public functions that are attributed either to the national or to the subnational level. With the exception of agriculture and labour market awards, the Regions and Communities are exclusively competent for all aspects of the EC regional policy (e.g. infrastructure, economic policies, energy, transport policies, spatial planning, public investment and social policies such as education and vocational training). Thus, Regions and Communities are the only responsible governments for decisions on the content of Structural Funds programmes and on the implementation of such programmes.

Yet, this is the outcome of the evolution process which took place during the 1980s. The above-mentioned situation exists in principle since the state reform of 1980. However, the 1980 reform was, in the light of the reforms of 1989 and 1993, of only a modest nature. The 1980s was a decade of transition. Important competences such as education and public infrastructure, remained national until 1989. While the 1980 reform gave some key competences for an active regional policy to the subnational level, it retained some other functions at national level. This created a hybrid situation, which complicated regional policy-making as will be shown later in this paper. Another complicating factor was that national administrators had to be regionalized, and had to find a place inside a new Flemish bureaucracy. This was a gradual process, which was to deprive regional policy-makers of essential policy instruments for some time.

An inevitable consequence of giving exclusive competences to the Regions and Communities in relation to regional policy in 1980, was the institution of daily contacts

between this level and the European Community. However, the Constitution did not provide any legal basis for such contacts, since external relations were preserved as an exclusively national affair. The resulting conflicts created instability between the national and the regional level.

New regional governments were installed by the constitutional reform of 1980 which was a compromise between regionalist and unitarist viewpoints. The inconsistencies inherent in such a compromise were removed by the subsequent reforms of 1989 and 1993, which will probably create a more stable basis for the interaction between the national and the regional level. As far as regional policy is concerned, Regions and Communities received responsibility for education and public infrastructure in 1989. The 1993 reform stipulates that Regions and Communities are competent for foreign relations in the spheres of their own competences.

As far as provincial and local authorities are concerned, their position was weakened by the state reform. The new regional government manifested itself in policy areas where provincial and local governments had been active until then. Typically, for instance, is the shift in the notion of 'region'. National laws in the sphere of economic planning elaborated the notion of 'regional planning' by introducing new Regional Development Companies organized *on a provincial scale* in the 70s. However, the Flemish government that was established in 1980 became the dominant actor in regional planning and economic development. The prominence of the region as an ethnic unit led to an uneasy position for the 'Regional' Development Agencies. Founded as economic planning units in the framework of a law on national planning, they suddenly had to be incorporated in the Flemish institutional structure, which became the new and much more powerful 'intermediate' level.

2. Patterns of the policy process in the case of Limburg⁷

2.1. Socio-economic problem of the Limburg province

The province of Limburg had maintained a mono-industrial structure until late in the 60s, being dominated by the Coal Mining Company. The losses incurred by the mines were paid by the national budget, although the Company remained private. Since the losses were rising too high, the national government decided in 1986 to close some pits in the east, and to restructure the remaining ones in the west. A crisis manager, Thyl Gheyselinck, was appointed after a headhunting procedure. The national government gave Gheyselinck 99 billion Bfr⁸ to cover the total cost of the whole operation. The crisis manager asked for and was granted the full autonomy to dispose of this budget.

The closing of the eastern pits in 1987 implied the loss of 10,400 employees. Since the crisis manager quickly succeeded in implementing this first move, a part of the budget that was meant to cover exploitation losses could be reallocated to investment projects. In 1989, the Flemish Government became responsible for what is called the 'economic sectors of national importance' (i.e. steel, shipbuilding, textile, glass and mining). The high economic growth figures of that period allowed the Flemish Government to decide in 1989 on the closure of all the remaining pits. This meant the loss of another 5,600 jobs. The original plan foresaw a further exploitation of the western pits until 1996. Thus, more money from the original package was saved and became available for reallocation.

⁷ The section on Limburg draws on earlier research that was carried out at the KU Leuven. A more extensive publication on the case of Limburg can be found in De Rynck, Filip-De Rynck, Stefaan, *The organizational structure*, in: De Rynck, Stefaan, *Limburg and the European policy (1987-1991)*, Leuven, forthcoming. I am greatly indebted to Filip De Rynck (Department of Political Sciences, KU Leuven), with whom I carried out the research in Limburg. Ludo Struyven and Hubert Cossey (Higher Institute for Employment, KU Leuven) gave useful comments while carrying out the research.

⁸ Approx. 2.4 billion ecu.

When the decision to close the mines was taken at the end of 1986, the Flemish Government took the lead in designing the reconversion policy, in close cooperation with the European Commission. The decision-making for the reconversion happened totally isolated from what happened inside the Coal Mining Company. In this sense, the Flemish Government respected the national decision to grant Ghelyselinck a free rein.

The first result of the cooperation between the EC and the region came about in October 1987, with the approval of a National Programme of Community Interest, in 1988 expanded into an Integrated Development Operation (1987-1991). The European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the European Orientation and Guidance Fund for Agriculture, the European Coal and Steel Community all contributed to this programme. With the reform of the Structural Funds from January 1989 onwards Limburg has been recognized as an Objective 2 region (region in industrial decline). The Euro-jargon changed from Integrated Development Operation to Community Support Frameworks (an additional programme for 1989-1991, and a programme for 1992-1993 were approved). Limburg also received European support from Community Initiatives such as Rechar, Stride and Interreg. A calculation for the period 1987-1991 estimated the European subsidies for Limburg at 6.8 billion Bfr (approx. 175 mecu).

With the decision for an earlier closure in 1989, the Flemish Government decided also to expand the reconversion policy. The policy orientations were broadened to more social sectors such as welfare, housing and education. The European programmes, on the other hand, concentrate more on economic measures and on vocational training. Policy emphases in the economic policy include SME's, tourist sector, technology transfer, industrial estates and business centres, provision of cheap capital. The ECSC concentrates on what it calls the 'reclassification' of former miners. Rechar introduced a substantial package of environmental measures (clearance of former mining sites).

2.2. Structural Funds reinforce the regional factor

a. Region versus nation

The reform of the structural funds coincided with the reform of the Belgian state. The ERDF regulation of 1984 and the Structural Funds regulation of 1988 enhanced the influence of the European Commission in the policy-making process. The coincidence of supranationalization and regionalization has been noticed before by many scholars. Majone points to the loss of legitimacy of the nation-state, that is not able to solve economic problems in a national context, and to the element of cultural diversity as an incentive for regionalism⁹. The case of Flanders endorses the twinning of supranationalization and regionalization. The EC was a reinforcing factor for Flemish regionalism, although clearly not a driving force. The factor of organizational dynamics in the Limburg case offers an additional explanation to the economic and cultural variables.

It was clear in the middle of the 80s that the 1980 reform of the Belgian state produced an uncompleted, semi-federal structure. However, it was less clear at that time to what extent the next reform of the Belgian state (which took eventually place in 1989) would reinforce the regional factor. One of the elements for discussion was which status the regions should have in external affairs. Should they be allowed to conduct their own 'foreign' policy, at the detriment of the power of the national Ministry of Foreign Affairs? Was it feasible to let the regions have direct contacts with the European Commission? Confronted with the routine of policy-making and implementation this was a highly theoretical discussion. Daily contacts between the regions and the European Commission were inevitable for the preparation and implementation of Structural Funds programmes.

The necessity to redefine the region-nation relationship did not only arise in relation to external relations. In the case of Limburg before 1989 (i.e. a major step in

⁹ *Preservation of cultural diversity in a federal system: the role of the regions*, 1990, p. 75.

the transfer of competences from the national to the regional level), national administrators for labour market policies had to negotiate with regional Ministers in the policy process, since it was the Flemish Government that took the lead in the process. This led to some friction for the ESF-part of the programme, as will be explained later on. This situation illustrates that the political logic of the 1980 compromise, which transferred only some competences in the sphere of socio-economic activation, was not suited to dealing with the problem logic of making policies to combat area decline, especially in the light of the 'integrated approach' that was propagated by the Commission¹⁰.

The two problems, namely the international representation of the Flemish region and a further transfer of competences, were resolved in favour of the region. The Flemish region reinforced its position, firstly as a result of an offensive strategy in its interaction with especially the Foreign Ministry. The offensive strategy consisted in claiming a monopoly on the relationship with the EC in the preparation, decision and implementation of Structural Funds policies, amongst other policies. This strategy, based on crucial resources such as formal competence, co-financing budget and personal skills of politicians and administrators, was successful and enhanced the freedom to negotiate with the European Community¹¹. Secondly, the inconsistency between political and problem logic was eventually solved in 1989 by a further regionalization of state functions. This 'spill down' process was to continue after 1989, as will be shown with data from other cases (see third section). However, one should not forget that structural cleavages in the Belgian society¹² account for the most important explanation for the further regionalization.

¹⁰ The concepts 'political logic' and 'problem logic' are borrowed from Anderson, *The territorial imperative*, 1992.

¹¹ This led eventually in 1993 to a very radical decision, namely that the regions will be the only representatives of the Belgian State in Council of Ministers in areas relating to their exclusive competences. This takes the process a step further, since such decision implies that the regions are responsible for defending the Belgian viewpoint in intergovernmental and Community negotiations.

¹² Richer north versus poorer south, Dutch-speaking versus French-speaking, dominance of christian-democracy and catholicism in Flanders versus socialism and free thinking in Wallonia.

The regional factor was not only enforced by a domestic competition, in which the region used the EC as a leverage for enhancing its influence and spheres of competence. The EC itself gave incentives that strengthened the regional factor, by contacting and dealing directly with administrators and politicians from the regional level for day-to-day decisions, thus by-passing the national government which should be its official interlocutor. Further still, the European Commission signed also a document with a high symbolic value, namely the 'Future Contract for Limburg', which was to be the basis of a close cooperation between Europe and the Flemish region.

Limburg was one of the first major challenges for EC regional development policy since the new 1984 regulation. This regulation introduced the new ideas of 'partnership' and 'integrated approach', although hesitantly and only for the ERDF. Inside the EC bureaucracy a special DG was founded (DG XXII), with the aim of achieving a closer coordination between the several DG's involved in regional policy and to serve as the official channel for exchange of information between the EC and the (sub)national authorities. The relationship between this coordinating DG and the operational ones was not always very clear. This illustrates the experimental stage in which the realization of 'partnership' was situated at that time, horizontally (between the several bureaus of the Commission) as well as vertically (between the Commission, national, subnational authorities and private groups).

Some bureaucrats and Commissioners were very keen on the new ideas of 'partnership' and 'integrated approach'. They seized upon the Limburg problem as an opportunity to experiment with those principles, and urged the Commission to formalize the partnership idea in the province of Limburg. These (often Flemish) bureaucrats and Commissioners¹³ backed the proposal from the Flemish government to sign, together with the national and the provincial government, what was called a 'Future Contract for

¹³ For a full understanding of the reasons why the Commission signed the Future Contract for Limburg it is not only important to refer to the attitudes of some decision-makers inside the Commission. Also important were the pressure exerted by some MEPs, and the fact that the problem of mining industries was high on the European agenda at that time (cf. the strikes in England). Some Commissioners foresaw similar problems in their home countries in the near future, and were thus more ready to approve the signing of the Contract.

Limburg'. The text of the Future Contract was written by the Flemish Prime Minister in close association with EC officials. After some internal hesitation the Commission decided to sign the 'contract', which is in fact a mere statement of intention. Nevertheless, the contract remains an important document. It states that the four partners will cooperate to reduce the level of unemployment in Limburg to an 'acceptable level', and this in the course of ten years. The Commission never signed such a statement again. Juridically, the Commission could not bind itself for a ten year period, since the regulation provided development programmes on a five or three years basis¹⁴. Secondly, some people inside the Commission were reluctant to sign such a 'contract' with subnational actors.

The signing of the Contract is an important step by the Commission in recognizing the importance of the regional factor. Apart from its symbolic meaning the Contract provided a structure for decision-making and implementation of the Structural Funds programmes. It was agreed upon by officials of the EC and of the region at the time of negotiations on the precise formulation of the contract that a close cooperation would have to come about between regional and European officials. Indeed, representatives from these levels would form an inner circle of policy-making, and have the most significant influence on the content of the programme. This circle was formed on an interpersonal and interorganizational basis, and created its own dynamics which reinforced the position of the region and of the EC in the policy process.

b. Region versus subregional actors - the implementation structure of the Future Contract

The Future Contract provided a structure for the decision-making and the implementation of the regional policy. The structure is clearly based upon the

¹⁴ The contract has been used as an argument by the Flemish Government in the 1993 negotiations on the further recognition of Limburg for the period after 1993. Such arguments were necessary since the statistical criteria did no longer point to a problem of decline, compared to EC averages.

partnership idea. Key EC officials asked the Belgian authorities several times in the preparation stage (1986-1987) how they would organize the implementation of the policy, and how they would achieve the partnership principle in this respect. The endorsement of the EC, a major source of finance for the reconversion, substantiated the authority and the legitimacy of these innovative structures.

The core of the new structure is made up by the Interministerial Forum and the Permanent Working Group Limburg (PWL). The Interministerial Forum was meant to be the highest placed body at a strategic level. The Forum would make crucial decisions. The Permanent Working Group Limburg was conceived as a preparatory stage for the Interministerial Forum, and as a monitor for the implementation of the decisions.

The Interministerial Forum consists of ministers of the national and regional government, of executives of the provincial government and of the leading official of the European Commission. It meets under the presidency of the Flemish Prime Minister, who carries the ultimate responsibility for the reconversion policy. Actors representing private interests can be invited to the meetings, however without voting power. The national government had hardly any interest in these meetings, not only because they lacked the competences, but also because they were not very interested in meeting under the presidency of a regional minister.

The Interministerial Forum hardly ever met, although the provincial executive and trade unions urged for more regular meetings on several occasions. As a consequence, the core of the decision-making process shifted towards the Permanent Working Group Limburg. Thus, preparation of decision, decision-making and implementation were all carried out by the same body.

The composition of the PWL is as follows:

- all members of the Flemish Government (represented by members of their 'cabinet'¹⁵);
- the European Commission (DG XVI, DG V, the former DG XXII);
- some members of the national government¹⁶;
- administrators from the Flemish Administration;
- executives and administrators from the provincial government and from a para-provincial organization;
- the Regional Development Agency¹⁷;
- private interests (trade unions, employers).

Hierarchically, below the PWL, there are three local committees, one for each financial instrument of the Limburg programmes:

- the ERDF committee, chaired and coordinated by the Regional Development Agency;
- the European Social Fund (ESF) committee, chaired and coordinated by the PWL-coordinator;
- the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) Committee, chaired and coordinated by the PWL-coordinator.

The PWL is chaired by a representative of the Christian-democratic Prime Minister of the Flemish Government. For the coordination of the PWL-activities the Flemish Government hired a new official, who was directly attached to the Cabinet of the Flemish PM. Hereinafter the text refers to him as the PWL-coordinator. The text of the Future Contract defines his function as 'the permanent preparation and implementation of all possible discussions, consultations and decisions' that are necessary in the framework of the future contract. The broad definition of his function reflects the fact that the Flemish Government wanted to leave all options open for his role at the beginning of the process. The Commission strongly backed this construction, to which it subscribed by signing the Future Contract. In its view, a professionalization of the partnership structure would enhance the quality of the policy process. As was the case with the Flemish Government, it preferred to coordinate the policy process

¹⁵ The cabinet consists of a group of confidential collaborators of the Minister. It replaces often the administration for policy preparation and decision-making.

¹⁶ Without any substantial input into the discussions.

¹⁷ The Regional Development Agency falls under the tutelage of the Flemish Government. It is active in the field of SMEs, market research, planning and economic regeneration. The Flemish Government monitors the activities of the Regional Development Agencies, but their boards are made up of the provincial elite (provincial politicians, private interests). An official representative of the Flemish Government attends the meetings.

outside of the regular administrative structures, in a more flexible coordinatory cell that would operate without too many red tape.

From the outset the whole structure was heavily contested by the majority of the Limburg provincial government, and by the officials from the Regional Development Agency. The provincial government felt it was being excluded from the whole process. The Regional Development Agency felt that the presence of the PWL-coordinator was an intrusion by the Flemish Government on its spheres of activity (economic infrastructure, business centres, industrial estates, consultancy for SME's, technology). Indeed, the move by the Flemish Government towards a new structure for the regional policy was also motivated by the will to by-pass those two authorities¹⁸:

The reasons for this are, amongst others:

- In 1986-1987, there was a feeling inside the regional government that it had to give itself the profile of a valuable level of government, also with an eye to a future transfer of national competences. The Limburg problem became the first priority of the Flemish government, that was in power from 1985 to 1987;
- In the beginning of the process (1985-1988) the Flemish Government did not have a stable and established structure at its disposal to implement policy decisions. Both the provincial government and the Regional Development Agency were seen as legacies from the unitary Belgian structure, and distrusted by regional officials and politicians;
- The provincial politicians never defended a closure of the mines in public, since they considered this to be electorally damaging. The Flemish Government, which is more removed from the problem, had an easier task in building regeneration programmes on the assumption that the mines would be closed. This gave it a lead in the policy-making;
- The fact that the provincial elite (officials of the Regional Development Agency, provincial executives) could not base a regeneration programme on the assumption of a closure of the mines contributed to its exclusion from the inner policy circle. If one presumed that the miners would keep their jobs, this affected the planning of a social action programme. Officials from the EC, politicians and administrators from the

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that a body such as the Regional Development Agency, which is formally an instrument of the Flemish Government, had to be by-passed in the eyes of the Flemish Government.

Flemish and the local mining municipalities all judged the foreseen effort in the social and labour market sphere as falling far short of the real needs. The Flemish government and the PWL-coordinator drafted an alternative programme, with a clear accent on social intervention.

It was mentioned above that the failure of the Interministerial Forum to meet on a regular basis implied that its functions (strategic planning, crucial decision-making) shifted towards the Permanent Working Group Limburg. However, the Permanent Working Group is a broadly composed body, as was shown, with different interests. The goals of the Permanent Working Group, which as a mixed organ and artificial construction has no real identity behind it, are ultimately the goals of the government who created it, namely the Flemish Government¹⁹. The agenda-setting and decision-making of the Permanent Working Group are dominated by the Flemish Government, more specifically by the PWL-coordinator. Thus, the shift of functions of the Interministerial Forum towards the Permanent Working Group implied an increase in power for the PWL-coordinator. Apart from preparation of decisions and implementation he became dominantly involved in priority-setting and the division of the budget along the priorities. The latter happened in close coordination with EC officials. The agenda-setting, decision-making and implementation was consequently dominated by the PWL-coordinator. However, one should not forget that he worked under the general supervision of the Flemish Government, and that sensitivities of the coalition partners had to be taken into account.

Three factors account for this powerful position. Firstly, he was backed during the whole process by the 'Chef de Cabinet' of the Flemish PM, the most powerful man in the circles of the Flemish Government. Secondly, his good entranes in the European Commission and his interpersonal relations with some EC officials made him an excellent lobbyist, who was able to mobilize European money for Limburg. This gave him authority and legitimacy with all actors, even with those who were less sympathetic to his powerful position. Finally, the PWL-coordinator gradually built up

¹⁹ See Cassese, *Etats, régions, Europe*, 1981, p. 26 for a similar remark on the Italian ad hoc committees.

his power, by nominating himself as president of four other fora where key decisions are made or where the implementation is monitored (see further on).

c. Regional dominance versus partnership

Such a concentration of power of the region vis-à-vis the subregional level raises questions on the value of the 'partnership' structure, or at least on the value of partnership as it is sometimes idealized in the sense of conflict free cooperation. While the Limburg case provides evidence of a close cooperation between the EC and the region, it certainly does not provide a good example of partnership between the regional and subregional actors. One indicator for this is that the judgments of the PWL-coordinator have set aside all kinds of interests at some time in the policy process (provincial, Regional Development Agency, trade unions), except those of the European officials. Nevertheless, despite their weaker positions, subregional actors have several occasions for plugging in into the policy process. Decisions of the Permanent Working Group are prepared by the PWL-coordinator, but often after a broad and informal consultation with officials from the Regional Development Agency, with trade unions, with other local actors, as well as with Flemish administrators and EC officials. It is difficult to measure to what extent all these partners influence the eventual outcome. The three local committees, hierarchically subordinated to the Permanent Working Group, are more formalized occasions for subregional influence. Two arguments support this statement. Firstly, the Regional Development Agency chairs the ERDF-committee, which gives it some manoeuvring freedom. It sets the agenda of the committee. This allows the provincial elite to raise some project proposals which otherwise would never have got on the agenda. Still, when no consensus is reached at the committee stage, it is the Permanent Working Group that decides on approval of the project. Secondly, these committees consist each time of several actors that are relevant for the policy domains. They offer a chance to the local actors to enter in a discussion with the PWL-coordinator and the region. They function as a forum for consultation, for exchange of ideas and information.

Since the installation of these committees is an explicit requirement of the European Commission, according to the idea of partnership, one could label this an 'administrative additionality' that is brought into the process by the Commission. The additionality consists in the fact that such committees gather actors around the same table that did not communicate with each other before on a structural basis, although they were all active in the development of the same area. Moreover, the committees function as a kind of bridge between the area itself (and various actors there), the Flemish Government and the EC. They seem essential instruments for the coordination of the policy. But is that the realization of partnership? The problem with evaluating the existence of partnership is the inherent ambiguity in the concept. Partnership seems to imply a design of programmes in the sense of establishing objectives of a convergent character in view of the expectations of the actors involved. However, is such a concept then compatible with a development strategy that a partnership is supposed to produce, since the notion of strategy seems to imply clear choices? Since such choices have distributive consequences, the options chosen by 'the partnership' will always be the object of fragile consensus and subsequent conflicts.

The label of 'administrative additionality' that was used is somehow misleading, since it suggests that such committees have only a neutral role in guiding a smooth implementation. The fact is that individual projects are approved or rejected in these committees. The criteria for approval or rejection are not clear. Before the reform of the Structural Funds the Commission decided individually on every file. The reform was meant to introduce the principle of programming. The Commission wanted a more strategic discussion at a high level of decision-making, leaving the implementation to the local committees. This would also reduce the administrative workload of EC officials. The reform diminished the control of the Commission on the desirability of individual projects, without however an increase of the domestic discussion on desirability. The partnership structures got the control that was previously exercised by the Commission. However, the partnership is more biased towards compromise and packages than would be the case with a single organization. Criticizing other projects for instance, is often not done for fear of creating a boomerang effect in relation to ones own projects. Thus, from this point of view the reform merely created a greater

freedom to act for the domestic actors in the choice of projects to be funded by the Commission.

A final question that is difficult to avoid is the one of accountability of all these new structures. The partnership structures are clearly not Community organisms, nor are they regional or subregional bodies. They are a combination of all those actors, with often also private actors present. Cassese called similar new organisms in the Italian administrative system 'sans maître'²⁰. It is true that there is no control of directly elected bodies on the functioning of such organisms. Nor is it clear which executive controls the outcome of the process. In the case of Limburg, the European Commission and the region interact to such an extent that an external observer cannot attribute the policy outcome to one of the levels. There is clearly a problem of formal democratic control in such mixed structures. However, a partnership structure has at the same time a democratizing effect. The number of participants in the policy process increases, which means that the process is potentially more open. Secondly, the manifold partnership structures enhance the possible entries for actors in the policy process.

2.3. Implementing through the creation of new organizations

In the course of the reconversion process in Limburg new organizations were created, such as the Social Investment Agency, which provides subsidies for actions in the social sphere (investments and working costs for welfare, vocational training, education, housing, migrant policies), and the Guidance Agency for the Mining Area, which is an action oriented organization that tries to improve the position of the migrant miners on the labour market. The Agency performs all tasks in assisting low skilled unemployed in returning to work (guidance, training and mediation). The founding of the two organizations was directly related to the implementation of policies that were decided on by the European Commission and by the Flemish Government in the regional development programmes. The intriguing point is that their establishment was

²⁰ *Etats, Régions, Europe*, 1981, p. 24.

approved and endorsed by the Flemish Government, although they were designed to be active on the same fields where its 'regular' bureaucracies have responsibilities. Clearly, a choice was made not to implement all aspects of the reconversion policy through the bureaucratic apparatus that was already at the disposal, but to innovate through duplication.

a. The Social Investment Agency

Due to the earlier closure of the coal mines in 1989, money that had been reserved to cover further exploitation losses became available for new purposes. The proposal was made to create a special fund to support investments in the social sphere. The outcome of negotiations led to the decision to create a new organization, the Social Investment Agency. The PWL-coordinator endorsed the establishment of the agency, since he estimated that the new organization could be an appropriate solution for the difficult co-financing of ESF and ERDF funds in the sphere of vocational training. He was supported in this by the trade unions.

This latter point deserves more attention in the light of our argument. When the decision to close the mines was taken in 1986-1987, the PWL-coordinator, backed by some cabinet members in the Flemish Government and by EC officials, foresaw a huge need for vocational training and intensive mediation between supply and demand on the local labour market. A rough assessment of the needs at that time led to the decision by DG V to programme the allocation of 1.7 billion Bfr of ESF-money, mostly for vocational training, in a five year plan (1987-1991). The PWL-coordinator inserted in 1989 an ERDF investment budget for training infrastructure in the additional Community Support Framework (1989-1991). While the Commission approved this budget, the Flemish Government never foresaw an equal amount of co-financing money. This led to a situation in which European money was left untouched in 1987 and 1988.

The Flemish Vocational Training Agency could have served as a co-financier, since it is the regular instrument of the Flemish Government for active labour market policies (training, mediation, investment in own infrastructure). There are several reasons why the agency did not meet this task. Firstly, there was the period of

transition from a federal to a regional organization. Secondly, the board of the organization presents a typical example of a neo-corporatist structure, since it is composed of only private interests (trade unions and employers). The political system cannot always guide the agency in the desired direction. Thirdly, the organization has a highly centralized structure, which makes it often slow in responding to ad hoc problems that require other than a routine answer. Finally, there are political problems for the PWL-coordinator to steer the local activities of the agency in the reconversion policy. The Flemish Vocational Training Agency has always been dominated by the Socialist party, while the PWL-coordinator is perceived as being of the Christian-democratic side.

The function of the Social Investment Agency was to give a leverage to the co-financing of ESF and ERDF funds for the purpose of vocational training. This happened only in 1990, while the policy implementation had already started in 1987. Thus, ESF funding was lost due to the lack of co-financing money. The mounting pressure 'to do something' with this money, especially in the light of the closure of the mines, from trade unions, government and EC officials, is crucial to understanding the establishment of an organization that took up some functions which could have been executed by existing public organizations.

b. The Guidance Agency for the Mining Area

For the implementation of a social subprogramme financed by the European Coal and Steel Community (DG V), a local ECSC committee was established, with the PWL-coordinator as its president. The members of this committee were administrators and representatives of public and private interests that were closely connected with this field (trade unions of miners, municipalities, Coal Mining Company, local actors in the social field), to whom some regional and European officials were added. This committee was specifically responsible for the 'reclassification' of the former miners on the labour market. ECSC officials complained in 1987 about the lack of attention of the Belgian authorities on this issue, since the Belgian government devoted almost all of its attention to finding a socially acceptable formula for the redundancy of the

miners (exit grants, early retirement schemes). This lack of early attention was one of the causes of subsequent difficulties in the implementation.

A problem at the beginning of the policy process was namely, that a group of former miners were not suited to enrollment on the regular training programmes of the Flemish Vocational Training Agency. A more intensive guidance was needed for the low skilled migrants, who often lacked basic knowledge of Dutch. An initial concept to solve the problem of this group was worked out by the local actors in the ECSC commission. The proposal provided a Guidance Agency, which would closely cooperate with a new, locally embedded branch of the Flemish Vocational Training Agency, to provide active mediation. Although the Flemish Government made a formal request to the agency, it did not embark on this solution. This led eventually to the creation of a totally new organization, under private law, the Guidance Agency for the Mining Area. The agency offers training, as well as guidance and mediation, which is unique for a private organization. It has branches in the areas close to all the former mining sites. The new organization differs from the Flemish agency by its specific target group and by its individualized method of guidance²¹.

This 'innovation through duplication' was only made possible through the European financing. The rest of the organization's budget is provided by the Social Investment Agency. The matching of an available ESF-budget and a rising societal problem did not occur inside the existing apparatus. This increased the pressure on policy-makers, who decided that a new agency would be effective for the policy implementation. This is one of the explanations for the European endorsement of the Guidance Agency. Two other factors can be summed up as the following:

- In order to avoid questions from their immediate superiors, EC officials prefer a smooth implementation of the programmes, with a total expenditure of the allocated

²¹ It should however be noted that the original target group of 1988 (former miners of migrant origins) has already been extended towards other problematic groups on the labour market. The organization is in a constant search for new functions that it can fulfil, although the original policy document that was discussed by the Flemish Government stressed the temporary nature of this project.

budget. The lack of co-finances of ESF-money has already been mentioned. This problem would have been worse without the Guidance Agency.

- The EC officials work in an environment that is eager for new 'pilot' initiatives. The Guidance Agency is seen by some as testing ground to tackle the problem of how to address labour market issues caused by the closure of one specific industrial activity²².

c. Explaining innovations and consequences

The founding of the Social Investment Agency and the Guidance Agency as new organizations is a direct effect of the involvement of the EC in the policy process. The problem of an acute regional decline, due to the loss of around 17,000 jobs in three years time, combined with available money at the European level to tackle the problems that result from this crisis, explains the decision to duplicate the administrative apparatus. Two other explanatory factors are the rigidity to react of the part of central administration and agencies, and the skills of the PWL-coordinator to translate ideas into action. The PWL-coordinator became president of both new organizations. Polsby states that 'crises have to be managed to produce innovations, and the skills involved are probably beyond the resources of most would-be innovators to command'²³. The PWL-coordinator could indeed manage the socio-economic crisis in the Limburg province by the resources at his command: support from the Flemish Prime Minister, ultimate responsibility for drafting the regional development programmes in cooperation with European officials, concentration of power by dominating several fora and organizations, good entries at the level of the Commission. The aspect of crisis to which Polsby refers is essential to understanding the opportunity for innovation that was offered to him.

One of the primary reasons to create these organizations is thus the co-financing of European money. However, there is more than simple administrative efficiency. As

²² See Eichener, 'Social dumping or innovative regulation?', 1992, p. 53-54: inside the Commission, 'the structural conditions of recruitment and career favour a tendency to support new ideas'.

²³ *Political innovation in America*, 1984, p. 171.

Rose writes: 'many new ideas are ignored for years. Adoption is often contingent upon an exogenous crisis generating sufficient dissatisfaction to create a demand for doing something new'²⁴. Both organizations are new forms for their policy sectors, and work according to different standards compared to existing practices. There is not only duplication, but also innovation, which is part of the problems that their activities caused for organizations in their environment.

The professional staff of the Social Investment Agency developed proposals that affected the position of catholic and public schools, of public or private training agencies, of housing companies in which provincial politicians have an important stake. These can be seen as attempts to depoliticize the allocation of public money. The fact that proposals of the staff touched upon the existing equilibria between the organizations of the Catholic and Socialist pillar created huge tensions in the board, where all the different interests were represented. Another example of interorganizational tensions are situated in the co-financing of ESF-money. Once the agency was there, it mobilized a lot of local actors by matching ESF-money with a co-financing budget²⁵ and channelling this through to individual projects. Almost automatically, the agency became then involved in the process of planning the need for training programmes and in elaborating a new procedure for mediation between supply and demand on the local labour market. This in turn led to frictions with the regular apparatus, such as the Subregional Employment Commission²⁶. Eventually, in October 1993, the decision was made by the Flemish Government to abolish the agency, due to the strenuous relationship between some members of the board²⁷. Nevertheless, despite its short

²⁴ Rose, *What is lesson-drawing?*, 1991, p. 12.

²⁵ Apart from providing for a co-financing subsidy, the agency gave also a pre-finance. The administrative procedure to obtain ESF money is a burden that prevents smaller organizations from participating in the training policy. Because of the procedure, they would have to prefinance themselves the European money that is granted to them. The Social Investment Agency solved this problem by its method of pre-financing.

²⁶ This Commission, organized on a provincial scale in Limburg, has an advisory status on labour market policies. It advises the Flemish policy and the Flemish Vocational Training Agency to which it is closely tied. The Commission is dominated by the trade unions, which are also present in the board of the Social Investment Agency.

²⁷ The direct reason was connected with a scandal of corruption in the reconversion policy.

existence and the confrontation with its environment, the agency had proven its capacity to function as a policy innovator in some areas.

The case of the Guidance Agency is different, and seems to be a more lasting and successful innovation. The Guidance Agency is a problem-solving agency, and is thus not involved in the allocation of public money. The sector of vocational training in the Flemish region is organized in a neo-corporatist way. Employers and employees allocate the public money towards training programmes. On the contrary, the Guidance Agency receives its money through new channels, and is ruled by a totally different kind of board than the Flemish Vocational Training Agency²⁸. Combined with its innovative method in the sector, this endorses the argument of a new form of organization compared to the traditional one. The local basis of the new agency implies also a shift of power away from the regional level towards the locality in labour market policies.

The existence of the new organization challenges the routine ways of working in the vocational training sector. Faced with analogous experiments of a more modest scale in other areas, the Flemish Vocational Training Agency came under pressure to decentralize its organization. The decision to decentralize has recently been made²⁹, which is however no guarantee that it will be put into practice.

From the onset, political tensions rose around the existence of the Guidance Agency. These tensions are rooted in organizational and ideological preferences. The socialists of the Limburg province saw the new private organization as an intrusion by the Christian-democrats in the labour market policy. The fact that the PWL-coordinator

²⁸ Members are: the 5 mining municipalities, provincial politicians and para-provincial organizations, trade unions, employers from the construction and the metal sector, the local branch of the Flemish Vocational Training Agency, the Coal Mining Company, the Social Investment Agency.

²⁹ A similar remark was made by Cambridge Economic Consultants Ltd, which studied the Guidance Agency as one in a sample of local actions (Leda). 'The guarantee of future funding has given the institutions the freedom to experiment with the delivery of training and enterprise assistance outside the framework of mainstream policies. Their successful track record has now prompted changes in the approach of national training agencies, both in Limburg and elsewhere' (*Ergo research and evaluation*, s.d., p. 26).

himself became coordinator of the Agency and the fact that most of the mayors of the municipalities in the board were Christian-democrats contributed to this perception. In the view of the socialists, vocational training and guidance should be dominated by the regular Flemish Vocational Training Agency. An ideological argument about the role of the public sector was mixed up with organizational considerations. As said already the training agency is dominated by the Socialist party at the level of the Flemish Government.

The basis of the problems of both organizations are that they touch upon existing patterns of 'pillarized neo-corporatism'. Neo-corporatist structures are deeply rooted in some Belgian and Flemish decision-making structures, however with the specificity that functional interests such as trade unions are always organized along ideological ('pillarized') lines. This system is more complex than a straightforward representation of functional interests. Additional problems arise when local organizations touch upon established spheres of influence. A fragmentation of public functions, such as is the case in regional development programmes and a fortiori in Limburg, undermines the monopoly of corporate-pillarized interest mediation at the central level. Chances for unpredictable patterns increase, when a trade-off between functional and pillarized representation occurs also at the local level. The case of the Guidance Agency is an example of a local choice for pillar interests above corporate ones. The creation of the agency was heavily opposed by the socialist pillar, which found its interests better defended at the central than at the local level in Limburg, where Christian-democrats tend to dominate. Thus, although absorption of ESF-money was clearly in the interest of the working class and the unemployed, the Guidance Agency was opposed by the socialist trade union.

2.4. A rising technocracy ?

This section addresses the question whether the changes in the policy process lead to an increase or decrease in technocracy. The evidence however goes in both directions.

a. The Coal Mining Company

There is a striking similarity between the position and the fate of the general manager of the Coal Mining Company and the PWL-coordinator. As stated in the introduction, both professionals occupied the central place in two separate decision-making centres. The former one was headhunted from Shell Portugal to become responsible for the closure of the mines, the latter one was attracted to coordinate the European programmes and other reconversion initiatives.

The similarity lies in the fact that both disposed over considerable resources, and tried to neglect political influences in the allocation of these resources as much as possible. Gheyselincx, the general manager of the Coal Mining Company, asked and received a budget of 99 billion Bfr³⁰ to close the mines over a period of ten years. The national government gave him 'carte blanche' to spend this money how he liked. It was indicative in this respect that he could appoint all members of the board himself³¹.

Since he could exploit his skills as a negotiator with the trade unions, a much earlier closure was achieved. Thus, money that was allocated for exploitation losses could be reallocated to investment projects. The general manager defended the viewpoint that he achieved these savings and that, consequently, he was the one to make investment decisions. This argument won the day, and gave one man the power to decide whether or not to participate in often major investment projects, and to finance them with public money. There were no visible political constraints on his activities. Guidelines such as spatial planning requirements, the number of jobs to be created, capital return, were absent. In a letter in 1993, some time after his resignation, the general manager stated that the politicians had never made clear to him what the

³⁰ approximately 2.4 billion ecu. Few people inside national government estimated that this budget would meet the needs, since the Ministry of Finance made calculations arriving at 200 billion Bfr (4.8 billion ecu).

³¹ See Vandekerckhove, *De miljarden van KS*, 1993, p. 65 who quotes the Minister of Finance saying to the general manager: 'I know we agreed you would have all power, but the law states that a board should be appointed. Maybe you could agree on this if we let you decide on the members'.

specific purpose of his budget was: should he try to achieve as much capital gain as possible, or should he direct his attention at the creation of jobs and the welfare of the province? The absence of such criteria illustrates the absence of politics in stating a clear mission for the new Coal Mining Company. However, the politicians, who were happy to stay at the sidelines during the closure of the mines, reappeared on the scene, awakened by the reallocation opportunities. The general manager resigned because of the political pressure on his activities in 1991. His resignation meant the end of a five year technocratic era in the Coal Mining Company, and opened the way for a struggle between mainly Christian-democrats and Socialists to gain control over the remaining budget of the company.

b. The PWL-coordinator

The position and role of the PWL-coordinator is somehow analogous. He was also attracted as a 'neutral' figure to coordinate the reconversion process. The Flemish Government found him in the administration of a mining municipality where his actions for reconversion were apparently a success.

The evidence given above shows how his function was gradually enlarged, from policy preparation and implementation towards decision-making and bargaining over priorities. As he built up his power by cumulating several positions, he became a crucial allocator of resources. The legitimacy for performing this function came partially from the support of the Flemish Prime Minister. Another supporting element were his good entries in the European Commission. He has the necessary skills to deal with the European bureaucracy, and managed thus to mobilize a lot of European money for Limburg.

The bargaining happened at several levels. Inside the Social Investment Agency, for instance, he had to deal with the provincial executive and private interests. Instead of assuming a reconciliatory role, as could be expected from a 'neutral' coordinator, he clearly expressed his own preferences towards the desirable policy choices. Thus, the allocation of the budget of the Social Investment Agency became the object of a

bargaining process between expert and political considerations that were both represented in the board. A second example of bargaining is the negotiations on the European development programmes, which happened mostly between the PWL-coordinator and EC officials. This is a clear bureaucratic framework, in which the same administrators responsible for the implementation also prepare the decisions. The role of the executives in this priority-setting, as could be observed during the research, is minimal.

The rising role of professional experts in priority-setting and bargaining provides first evidence of an increase in the technocratic nature of the policy process. A second element is revealed in the implementation stage. The implementation of policies is in the Flemish political system a highly politicized matter. Administrations are run by politically appointed civil servants. Clientelism runs high and is one of the factors that can lead to distortions of original policy plans. The involvement of the cabinets of each Minister in the implementation is a third politicizing factor, since the cabinet monitors all crucial steps taken by the administration. The Limburg case provides evidence of a rolling back of this politicization, since the implementation was dominated by the professional PWL-coordinator.

Finally, the position of EC officials itself leads to more expert influence in the decision-making. The composition of the Interministerial Forum is illustrative of this. The Forum is made up of executives from three Belgian levels of government, to which an EC bureaucrat is added. Other formalized occasions, such as meetings of the Permanent Working Group and, more importantly, informal meetings provide for ample opportunities for EC officials to influence policy choices and budgetary trade-offs between the several subprogrammes, such as e.g. infrastructure, tourism or technology transfer. Their legitimacy to act like this comes not only from the fact the Commission co-finances the programme, and is thus seen as an actor who should have co-decision power. The fact that the regional representatives accept their influence in the policy process is also explained by the expertise that EC officials bring into the diagnosis of the problem and into the discussions on alternative solutions.

The analogy between the position and role of the PWL-coordinator and the general manager of the Coal Mining Company goes on, since also the PWL-coordinator became gradually a more contested figure. Eventually in 1993, due to a major political crisis caused by the allegations of corruption, the whole reconversion structure had to be revised. The existing structure made the work of the PWL-coordinator already extremely difficult anyway. A similar overtaking manoeuvre as the one that befell the manager of the Coal Mining Company befell the PWL-coordinator. A necessary precondition for this was the change of party coalition in the Flemish Government at the end of 1988, with the entrance of the Socialists. The socialist party of Limburg used its channels with central decision-makers to curb the influence of the PWL-coordinator, and to appoint people next to him. However, their entries at the Flemish level were not so good, due to internal party tensions.

Two other factors account for the stalemate in which the reconversion structures would end in the beginning of the 90s. The provincial elections of 1991 brought a Socialist-Liberal-Nationalist coalition into power, an historical event in a province that was always dominated by the Christian-democrats. The new coalition was outspokenly hostile towards the PWL-coordinator, since it regarded him and the Flemish Government as rivals in the whole process. However, this was also the case with the former Christian-democrat coalition, which gave rise to internal party tensions. A more structural variable is necessary to explain why the attitude of the provincial government could become more outspoken at that particular time.

A highly charged feeling of crisis was present in Limburg from 1986 onwards. There was a general consensus of the high risks for the society that would follow from the closure of the mines. The whole operation of closing went more smoothly than expected. Due to a boost in the economic growth, the decision to close all mines earlier than originally planned could be taken in 1989. From then onwards the feeling of a crisis gradually disappeared. Unemployment remained high, but that was more a structural problem of female work seekers, than an acute problem of male ex-miners that came in two big waves (1987 and 1989) onto the labour market. The 'rallying around the flag' that is present in times of crisis disappeared as well, and opened more

space for partisan preferences to enter the policy process. This put ever tighter constraints on the activities of the two professionals, who were both eager for the quick translation of ideas into action and who were always oriented towards experimenting and policy innovation. The reference to Polsby who associates high partisanship as a condition which only allows for incubated, incremental innovation has already been made. Heydebrand states that technocratic strategies 'tend to develop in response to accelerated change in the context of a near-permanent state of crisis, i.e. environmental conditions of turbulence, uncertainty and complexity'³². The argument of rising technocracy was supported by the rising role of professionals, by the rolling back of politicization in the implementation process and by the position and role of EC officials. However, the case suggests that this rise was more an historical contingency, due to the crisis situation, than a structural evolution.

As to the position and role of the European Commission one should point to its ambiguous effects on the technocratic nature of the policy process. On the one hand, EC officials are experts with an unclear accountability, who get involved in bargaining over priorities. On the other hand, the Commission's ambition to introduce partnership structures implies an attempt towards grass-roots participation, and towards an increase in the potentialities for actors 'to plug into the system'³³.

2.5. Representational democratic control

A striking feature in the Limburg policy process is the total absence of directly elected councils at all levels (local, provincial, regional). There has never been a democratic moment, which could at least formally legitimate the outcome of the bargaining between the different levels of government. The submission of the programmes to directly elected councils would often be practically impossible, given the limited deadlines the Commission imposes for the presentation of the programmes

³² *Technocratic corporatism*, 1983, p. 97-98.

³³ Heineman, *The world of the policy analyst*, 1990, p. 113.

and the slowness with which democratic organisms proceed. A complicating factor for a possible control is that the priorities are set by the Permanent Working Group Limburg, a body that is chaired and coordinated by the Flemish Government, but to which others tiers of government and private interests are party. Can one tier of the legislative branch control the policy outcome of a mixture of public and private actors, of a mixture of political appointees and administrators? There seems to rest a challenge here for creative thinking on democracy.

However, the fundamental explanation for the absence of a democratic discussion lies in the Belgian political culture. Socio-economic policies are in general the object of decision-making amongst private interest groups, with sometimes the government as a mediator or an entrepreneur. There is no tradition of parliamentary intervention in such matters. This explains why there has never been a demand from the side of parliamentarians to organize a discussion on the choices of the reconversion policy. This raises then the question to what extent 'Europe' affects the existing patterns of involvement of private interests groups in the whole process. The fact whether the EC deprives such groups of their existing level of influence needs further investigation.

3. Patterns of the policy process in the Limburg case, judged against the empirical evidence of the other cases³⁴

The following six patterns of the policy process can be observed in the case of Limburg. These will be further explored with the data of other regional development cases. These cases are Turnhout (National Programme of Community Interest 1987-1991, objective 2 1989-1993), the Hageland (objective 5b 1989-1993) and the Westhoek

³⁴ Again I would like to thank Filip De Rynck, who helped in analyzing the empirical material of the Westhoek. See De Rynck-De Rynck, *European support for the Westhoek*, paper presented at the ECPR workshop, 1992. Erwin Vanherle supported me for the research in Turnhout. See De Rynck-Vanherle, *Le rôle des syndicats dans les programmes Européens de développement*, Leuven, 1993.

(Integrated Development Operation 1987-1991), all situated in the Flemish Region. Occasional references shall be made to the Walloon Region³⁵.

3.1. The region managed to reinforce its strong position vis-à-vis the nation. This position was inherently strong due to the principle of exclusive competences in the Belgian state. Structural Funds policies gave the region a kind of 'implied powers' in external relations. The region could use the EC for a leverage in its interaction with central government to obtain this and other competences formally. The recognition of the regional fact by the EC, as shown in the signing of the Future Contract, was important from a symbolic point of view.

This is a common pattern to all cases. For instance, the case of the Hageland provides an additional evidence in the sphere of domestic policy-making. The Hageland is a 5b-region. Thus, the national Ministry of Agriculture plays an important role in the policy-making. There was a conflict between the region and the Federal Ministry on the competence to coordinate the programme, which has been resolved in the latest constitutional reform (1993) by giving the region the competence for coordinating such rural development programmes. This provides for further evidence of the 'spill down'-argument.

The relative insignificance of the federal government in the policy programmes of the Structural Funds (objectives 2, 3, 4 and 5b) can be illustrated by referring to the weight of the federal co-financing budget in the total Belgian co-financing. The federal authorities pay not more than 4.2%, while the rest is co-financed by subnational authorities (the region of Brussels 1%, the Flemish region 44%, the Walloon Region 34%, the French Community 16.5% and the German Community 0.5%)³⁶.

³⁵ All references to the Walloon region come from Vincent Lepage (Rider, Louvain-la-Neuve).

³⁶ Community Support Frameworks (1989-1993). The percentages are calculated on the basis of the planned budget.

The preparation of the new programmes for the period 1994-1999 broke with the last relic of the unitary tradition of regional policies in Belgium. National traditions were still influencing the regional policies of 1989-1993 in a fundamental way, by imposing an ethnic balance on the division of the total Structural Funds budget. A calculation of the Flemish and Walloon benefits always showed a division close to 50-50. This allocation did not correspond to the socio-economic situation, but the ethnic balance in Belgian politics has always been more important than statistical criteria. These criteria showed e.g. a GDP/inhabitant (mean for 1986-1988) for the Flemish region of 101.3 against 83.4 in the Walloon region (Eur 12=100)³⁷. The recognition of Hainaut as an objective 1 region, for which the Walloon region heavily lobbied in cooperation with the federal government, breaks with the tradition of balancing the benefits between the two ethnic communities in favour of a more objective approach that concentrates efforts on the most deprived. The application of the statistical criteria, which was attempted several times in the past by the European Commission, is the most significant retreat of rules that were still lived up to because of a unitary reflex. The Walloon region will profit from this, since it will concentrate the Structural Funds money on its poorest region. The particular case of Hainaut illustrates that supranationalization is for Belgian politics not only a manner to increase the effect of macro-economic policies on an internationalized economy, which is the classical argument to explain the loss of legitimacy of the nation-state in economic policy and the need for European integration. It is also a way to rationalize the internal allocation problem in interventionist policies by directing the budget to the least developed areas³⁸.

All these factors underline the reinforcement of the regional factor by the EC. The driving force behind Belgian regionalism, however, are the cultural and linguistic differences between the two communities. EC related economic and organizational

³⁷ Commission of the European Communities, *The regions in the 1990s*, 1991, p. 102.

³⁸ This confirms the following statement of Hirschman (*Political economy and European integration*, 1981, p. 281): 'With integration the aggrieved region can put its case ... before a new forum. This regeneration of voice can be one of the major benefits of integration'.

dynamics speed up the process of reform, and support the argument that supranationalization and regionalization are closely related.

3.2. The region is the dominating actor in the agenda-setting, decision-making and implementation of the regional development programmes. It dominates the interaction with all subregional actors in this process.

These patterns seem to be unique for the case of Limburg. In the Westhoek, Turnhout and the Hageland the programme is drafted and the implementation is monitored by subregional actors. The Flemish Government serves merely as the official transmitter of these programmes to the European Commission. In the case of the Westhoek the Regional Development Agency is the only coordinator for the programme. In the two other cases, the role of coordinator is shared by the Regional Development Agency and an intercommunal association³⁹.

The Flemish Government comes in as an important financer of the programme, but on the whole it does not object to projects that are proposed by the coordinators in the local committees. It has its agenda set by the subregional level, and leaves the decision on the appropriateness of the projects most of the times to the partnership structure. The regional dominance in the Limburg case disguised this pattern, which is common to the three other cases.

Even more, the region is sometimes by-passed by subregional actors in the decisional game for individual projects. The case of the Westhoek provides, for some single projects, for examples of a bargaining process between the EC, the region and the Regional Development Agency, in which the EC and the Regional Development Agency practically forced the region to co-finance some environmental projects that ran counter to the official policy principles of the Flemish Minister. A similar pattern of

³⁹ In some areas communes founded an intercommunal association for economic development policy. These operate often in a tensed relationship with the Regional Development Agencies. These tensions are exacerbated for having influence in European programmes.

subregional actors using the EC for a leverage in a bargaining game with their 'superior' authorities is seen in the Leader-programme in the Hageland. In this case the intercommunal association made an aggressive use of its information on EC policy principles with Leader. The intercommunal association and the Leader officials of the Commission shared the same values that should guide rural development. This coalition forced the Federal Ministry of Agriculture to back down from its original intentions with the Leader programme. This shows that, although some general patterns in the central/regional-local relationships can be discovered, there are always some unpredictable games being played.

The explanation of the uniqueness of the Limburg case relates to several factors. Most importantly, Limburg was a top priority for the Flemish Government. The Flemish Government wanted to impress itself in this case where the national government had failed for several years. Moreover, the closure of the mines led to a situation of crisis, with a high visibility of the problem and an extensive coverage by the media. The enormous amount of money that was poured into the province makes Limburg also particular in comparison with other cases. The other cases provide examples of areas which have been less developed areas for a long time, without a sudden structural crisis due to the closure of one dominating sector. Policy-making there was more 'business as usual', which implied that the knowledge, information and expertise at the local level were sufficient as input for the development programmes. The policy in these cases is more in accordance to the well-established measures of intervention that were already in place before the EC involvement. A faster implementation of projects seems to be the most striking change. Thus, the EC tend to strengthen the position of the existing subregional elites in these areas.

In order to avoid misinterpretation of this second pattern, one should point to the great interwovenness between the different levels of the Flemish political system. Officials and politicians of the communal, intercommunal and provincial level are regular guests of the Flemish cabinets. Moreover, some of them work in these cabinets. 'Dominance' of one actor becomes a somewhat blurred concept in this perspective, and should certainly not be read as 'antagonism'.

3.3. Due to the EC, new local committees which are created to monitor the implementation of the programmes. Such committees provide for an administrative additionality, since they gather mutually dependent actors from different levels around the same table. These committees are supposed to implement the strategy that was decided upon in the Community Support Frameworks. The link between the strategy and the projects is not always very clear.

The functioning of these local committees, which exist in every area since their existence is a formal request by the European Commission, is still the object of a learning process. In all areas the working of the committees is of the same nature. Discussions on the opportunity of projects are rather rare. Participants in the committees refrain from criticizing the proposals endorsed by other actors. The only substantial critique comes from the European Commission.

Going to the grassroots implies a loss of control of the Commission on the opportunity of projects. This decrease in control was not replaced by a control of the partnership, which is more biased towards compromising and give-and-take attitudes. For instance the local committees do not have clear criteria by which to judge the value of the project proposals. Decisions are thus made on an ad hoc basis. The Commission tries to compensate its loss of control by tighter on-going evaluations, which will be carried out by independent evaluators⁴⁰.

3.4. The classic, bureaucratically organized administration at the disposal of the Flemish Government is too rigid, lacks innovatory capacity and planning culture to respond adequately to the societal problems of the locality. Combined with the European money that is available for these problems, this raises the pressure on public and private actors to find other ways of organizing the policy. The creation of new

⁴⁰ Of course the Commission has an important gate-keeping moment when it negotiates on the content of the programmes with the Member-states, since it has to approve the priorities, subprogrammes, and since it inserts in these programmes an ex ante evaluation.

organizations, which can act more according to the local needs and which consequently compete with the existing apparatus, was the outcome of this in the Limburg case.

The fact that the Flemish administration lacks the capacity to react responsively to the local needs is confirmed by evidences in all other areas. The centrally organized Flemish Vocational Training Agency failed to co-finance the total ESF budget in Turnhout and the Westhoek. The strong presence of local coordinators in the ERDF programmes (intercommunal association, Regional Development Agency) in the Westhoek, the Hageland and Turnhout points to the same argument. Without an active and aggressive strategy of these local actors, the Westhoek and Turnhout would never have got a regional development programme, since the Regional Development Agency and the Intercommunal Association were the only actors who kept a possible recognition of their areas as less developed zones on the European and regional agenda.

However, this lack of responsiveness alone is not enough to generate the phenomena that were observed in Limburg. The enormous amount of money available, the presence of a socio-economic crisis and the skills of key figures were crucial factors that were mentioned before and that led to the 'innovation through duplication' and to new organizational forms such as the Guidance Agency.

3.5. The case of Limburg provides evidence of a growing influence of experts in priority-setting and allocation of resources, and attempts to diminish the political influence in problem-solving and implementation.

The priority-setting and negotiation on draft versions of development programmes occur in diverse patterns. In Turnhout and the Hageland there were always preparatory meetings in which attempts were made to maximize input from local actors. This has to do with the presence of an intercommunal association, which is situated close to the field. The eventual decisions were taken by a combination of administrators, and local and provincial politicians from the Regional Development Agency, intercommunal association, trade unions and employers' associations. The

decision-making thus has a broader base in these areas. Input is maximized, which consequentially leads to a bargaining process between the actors, sometimes with mediation by the region. The allocation of the Structural Funds often exacerbates the latent tensions between the intercommunal association and the Regional Development Agency, two actors with rivalling ambitions in economic policy planning. The eventual outcome is a programme in which all actors find satisfaction. In these two areas the mere requirement of presenting a draft programme to the European Commission generated a more broad discussion among diverse interests.

As was mentioned earlier, the bargaining in Limburg was more restricted to an inner policy circle, where appointed experts had the most influential voice. This was even more so in the Westhoek. That programme was elaborated by the staff of the Regional Development Agency. The only input for changing the original policy choices came from DG XVI-officials. By comparison with Turnhout and the Hageland, the absence of an intercommunal association accounts for the lesser extent of participation of the area itself in policy-making, and for a more minimal input of ideas in the process. The attitude of the staff of the Regional Development Agency accounts for this as well. The top officials are involved in these kinds of policies since decades, and consider such matters as part of their natural monopoly. It is significant in this respect that even the board of the Regional Development Agency itself, made up half of provincial and municipal politicians, and half of private interests, never had a discussion on the priorities for the programme.

3.6. The regional development programmes are prepared, decided on and implemented by structures in which executives of several governmental levels are mixed with each other. There is no control of directly elected bodies on their activities.

The absence of control by directly elected bodies is a common pattern to all cases. There were no broad discussions in the provincial councils or in the Flemish council on the economic development choices for the areas. There is only a minor control exercised with the yearly approval of the budget, which however gives no

insight into substantial policy priorities. Such a situation reflects the general weakness of directly elected bodies in the Belgian and Flemish political system, which is related to the consociational and neo-corporatist characteristics of it.

The absence of control by directly elected bodies does not automatically imply that the process was not democratic. It means that the representational democracy was not effective as a controlling mechanism. But there are other factors that control policy-making. Interest groups, and especially trade unions, have an important place in informal and formal decision-making structures. This implies that their leaders are offered input opportunities. Often information sessions are organized for their rank and file. Also, the fragmentation of the policy implementation structures leads to internal checks and balances.

A comparison between the four cases shows that the negotiations on the programmes in Turnhout and the Hageland happen on a broader basis than in the other cases. For Limburg, particular factors were invoked earlier to explain the pattern of policy-making. What accounts then for the more open process in Turnhout and the Hageland in comparison with the Westhoek? A striking difference in the latter case is the absence of an intercommunal association. It is this absence that allowed the Regional Development Agency to dominate and monopolize the whole policy process. In the other cases, the mere presence of intercommunal associations made interorganizational bargaining at the local level unavoidable.

Finally, we would like to formulate a hypothesis for further research concerning democratic control and the realization of partnership. To gather actors for the implementation of regional policies into local committees where additional subsidies are allocated to individual projects, is relatively easy. Each actor has a clear interest in participating. One could call this a minimal form of partnership, generated by the power of the purse. To gather the same actors to elaborate a common strategy - which implies a bargaining process, in which each actor has to give up his loyalty in favour of a loyalty towards the partnership - is less evident. Actors prefer to identify themselves with their own constituency and not with a more abstract partnership.

although they realize that such an identification could make sense from the viewpoint of strategic planning. Anderson writes for instance that local authorities 'have proved unbending in their desire to retain autonomy and control over resources when confronted with efforts to coordinate local government responses at the subregional or regional level. As democratically elected and therefore accountable public organizations, this is an understandable reaction, however detrimental it may prove to regional corporatist aspirations'⁴¹. This makes the link with what was mentioned earlier: the partnership has an unclear accountability. It may be so that the question of accountability has to be solved first in order to optimize the functioning of the new partnership structures.

There is an indication that confirms this hypothesis in the Flemish cases. The broader consultation in the cases of Turnhout and the Hageland was related to the fact of more intense interorganizational bargaining there. This was in turn caused by the intercommunal associations that operate in these areas. One could add to this that these associations have the less developed zones as their 'constituencies': their territory is recognized as a whole by the EC. Together with the local embeddedness of these organizations, this leads to a clearer and more local accountability, which could explain the greater participation of local authorities in the process (and thus the better functioning of the partnership).

Conclusion

This paper analyzed four cases of Structural Funds programmes in the Flemish Region. It did not try to single out the position of the European Commission and the effects of its involvement. That seems to be a logical consequence of the assumption of multilevel governance. The unit of analysis was an action arena, a somehow blurred concept which leads the researcher to an enormous amount of empirical information on resources, strategies and interaction. This working paper provides for a first attempt to

⁴¹ *The territorial imperative*, 1992, p. 190.

order this empirical data for the Limburg case, and to discover more general patterns in a comparison with the Westhoek, Turnhout and the Hageland.

The fading away of the nation-state is common to all cases . This is a fundamental rupture with the politics of the past. The EC played a supporting role in this gradual process, which is basically caused by cultural diversity. A second general pattern is the absence of representational democracy in regional policies. This is more 'business as usual' in Belgian/Flemish politics. The phenomenon seems to be intensified by the EC. The partnership structures mix executives of several levels to such an extent that the outcome of the process cannot be attributed to one single actor. There is no parallel combination of directly elected councils to which these outcomes could be submitted. The hypothesis was raised whether such a lack of accountability of the partnership is not its fundamental weakness. The lack of accountability could point to a decreasing extent of democratic control. However, and this is a third common pattern, at the same time the partnership broadens the basis for the policy process.

The other phenomena of the Limburg case that were discussed did not find a counterpart in the Westhoek, the Hageland and Turnhout. The dominance of the region vis-à-vis the subregional actors was particular for Limburg. The problem became a top priority on the political agenda. The three other cases suggested more an inverse relationship. In these cases the major influence on the content of the programmes lies at the more local level. This 'dominance' of the subregional actors should be seen in the context of the Flemish political system, where the distance between periphery and centre is very small. Officials and politicians of the local level operate often at the same time in Flemish cabinets, or are at least regular visitors. The EC reinforced the domestic patterns of regional dominance in Limburg and of the subregional elites conducting their 'business as usual' policies in the other areas.

The realization of partnership broadens the basis for policy-making in all cases. But this happens to a different extent. The existence of an intercommunal association leads to more discussion in the area itself, since it makes interorganizational bargaining

with other policy actors necessary. The absence of such an association in the Westhoek led to a more closed pattern of policy-making.

The influence of experts seems to be related with the amount of openness of the partnership. In the Westhoek, the staff of the Regional Development Agency closed its doors to decide on the development programme. The process in the Hageland and Turnhout offers more opportunities for input of local actors. The rise and fall of expert influence in Limburg is due to particular factors. The situation of crisis and the following disappearance of this, the amount of money involved, the skills of experts and the shift in the political balance of the province explain why problem-solvers became dominant in the allocation of resources and why this situation could not last.

The situation of crisis and the skills of innovators in Limburg account for the founding of new organizations, which were necessary to keep the implementation of European programmes going. The Social Investment Agency and the Guidance Agency are new forms of organizations. They cannot be compared to other organizations in the policy sectors where they are active. They developed a new approach in some policies such as labour market and education, and were ruled by a different kind of board in comparison with the 'regular' organizations. This provides a second fundamental rupture with past traditions, this time however unique for the case of Limburg.

A hypothesis for further research however could be that the same phenomenon can be seen in other areas, but that we do not see it. Polsby was cited for his distinction between acute and incubated innovation. Limburg was classified as an example of acute innovation. It could be that the same innovations are gradually introduced in other areas, at a much slower pace. The position of the Flemish Vocational Training Agency, as was mentioned, is contested in all areas, since it does not serve as a sufficient co-financer of ESF money. This is the heart of the problem in understanding the innovations in Limburg. In other areas local actors can, for the moment, do nothing more than make grudging complaints about this situation, and can try to rely on themselves by offering small training projects. There is clearly a problem

floating around. ESF money provides a part of the solution. Local skills and societal pressure seem to lack to match these factors.

The introduction to this paper promised to describe the role of the Commission in the policy process and more specifically in the implementation. This is especially important, since current theories of EC integration tend to focus on the agenda-setting and decision-making, and conclude either that the Commission is a 'broker' of national interests or a dynamic 'policy entrepreneur'. Hardly any attention is given to the implementation stage, which reveals other roles. As said the analysis of multilevel governance makes an assessment of the role of one single actor complex. Undoubtedly, the Commission has a stake in such phenomena as the increase of innovatory capacity or the shifts of power, but these phenomena are more adequately explained as the result of interorganizational dynamics. Still, some patterns can clearly be discovered. Firstly, the Commission can function as a motor, which puts pressure on domestic actors to implement programmes. Deadlines are imposed, money is made available, ideas are raised in informal meetings: all of which contributes to the pace of the process. Secondly, the Commission can be used to gain leverage by national and subnational actors, to increase or confirm their influence, or to clear stalemates during the process. Thirdly, the Commission operates as a kind of depoliticizing factor. It sets requirements such as long term planning, priority-setting and evaluation (ex ante, on going, ex post) which constrain more arbitrary forms of decision-making.

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