Inside the Social Open Method of Coordination: The hard politics of ‘soft’ governance
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The European Social Fund and domestic activation policies: Europeanization mechanisms

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Working with the European Social Fund has fundamentally changed people's minds about the activation of people who are really far from the labour market. Before the European Social Fund came into play, these people were simply considered as 'lost' (Interview Pcsa3). This claim by a former political advisor to the Belgian federal government is puzzling, to say the least. Is it really possible that the modest sums of money spent on activation policies in Belgium through the European Social Fund (ESF) could lead to such a cognitive shift? And why is this claim confirmed, with more or less the same wording, in interviews with experts working with the ESF at European, national, regional and local level (Interviews Agency/Fl1, Uvc/Wal, Pcsa1, Pcsa3, Min/Si2, Cec1, Agency/Fl2)? Taking this empirical puzzle as a starting point, this article will analyse in more detail what the ESF has meant for activation policies in Belgium and how this European policy instrument has been able to influence domestic policy-making at local, regional and national policy levels.

Starting as a retroactive instrument used by Member States to finance their vocational training programmes in the 1950s and 1960s, the ESF evolved into a more pro-active European...
employment policy instrument, closely coupled with the European Employment Strategy (EES)\(^4\) at the end of the 1990s.

In the current European Union (EU) employment governance setting, the ESF's principal objective is to provide financial support for actions taken within the framework of the EES so as to realize common objectives, such as raising employment rates, preventing long-term unemployment, and stimulating equal opportunities and labour-market inclusion for specific social groups (Brine, 2002; European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2006; Kilpatrick, 2006).

Although the ESF currently constitutes an integral and crucial part of European employment policies, relatively few studies address the broader long-term domestic effects of the ESF or account for mechanisms generating specific domestic outcomes (for example, Bache, 2008; Graziano and Vink, 2007; López-Santana, 2009). This can partly be explained by the fact that the ESF is mostly dealt with in the broader framework of European cohesion policy, which made its activities less visible and harder to disentangle from those of the other Structural Funds. Within the social sciences, three major approaches can be schematically distinguished in the literature on the ESF. A first strand contains economic assessments using macro models to determine the effects of EU Structural Funds on growth, employment and the reduction of regional welfare differences (for example, Bachtler and Gorzelak, 2007; Boldrin and Canova, 2003; Ederveen et al., 2003). Yet, because the Structural Funds mainly focus on ‘lesser developed’ states (for example, Spain, Portugal and the central Eastern Europe (CEE) countries), these studies rarely refer to the older members. Furthermore, these macro-economic models have been criticized as being imprecise (Cappelen et al., 2003) and as providing insufficient insights into the actual workings of the Funds’ interventions at the micro level (essentially the projects and instruments) (Ederveen et al., 2003; Hart, 2007). As already indicated, they also provide little information about the specific and separate effects of the ESF.

The second strand of literature has mainly been concerned with the role of the Structural Funds in the creation of a ‘multi-level governance’ system in the EU (Bache, 2007; Hooghe, 1996; Hooghe and Marks, 2001). As a matter of fact, the term ‘multi-level governance’ was first developed in the context of European cohesion policy, drawing attention to the fact that the Funds had offered considerable support for sub-national action (Allen, 2005; Marks, 1993). Yet, while this strand of literature provides a helpful insight into the redistribution of powers within Member States, it does not directly address the Europeanizing impact of the ESF on policy fields such as employment (see, however, Bache, 2008). The literature on multi-level governance focuses, moreover, on the interplay between the national and regional tiers and largely neglects the local policy levels.

\(^4\) The 1997 European Council of Luxembourg initiated the European Employment Strategy (EES), which can be considered as an Open Method of Coordination avant la lettre, using non-binding recommendations from the Council to Member States to coordinate national employment policies. Member States adopt employment guidelines (political priorities) and explain, through National Strategic Reports (NSR) how they will implement these guidelines domestically. The EES is supported by a Mutual Learning Programme.
A third strand of literature links the Structural Funds to liberal intergovernmental ideas of side-payments and package deals: the allocation of Structural Funds serves national commercial interests as they constitute the necessary spoonful of honey (or side payment) which enhances the credibility of interstate commitments with a view to larger EU compromises, for example, to smoothen the effects of enlargement, and secure the transition towards economic and monetary union (EMU) (Allan, 2005: 218; Bache, 2008: 48; Lange, 1993; Moravcsik, 1998: 272, 446). From this perspective, ‘the ESF is less an instrument of social and employment policy than a side payment to induce poorer Member States to accept deep economic integration’ (Majone, 2005: 190).

This article adopts a radically different perspective. Rather than focusing on the ‘macro’ effects, we try to understand the ‘micro’ mechanisms of one of the Structural Funds, that is, the ESF. We contend that the ESF is part and parcel of the EU employment governance toolkit and aim to understand how exactly it can ‘dynamise’ domestic policy networks. In our view, the ESF has influenced domestic policies through three different mechanisms. The most important mechanism is strategic ‘usage’ of the ESF by domestic actors. Usage refers to the transformation of EU resources into political practice with the intention of pursuing a specific goal: influencing a particular policy decision, increasing one’s capacity for action or one’s access to the political process (Erhel et al., 2005; Jacquot and Woll, 2003: 6).

A second mechanism is aid conditionality (Dobbin et al., 2007), by which we mean that the ESF can influence domestic policies through the different requirements that are imposed on those making use of their funds. A third mechanism that helps to explain how a rather small financial fund influences domestic policies, is learning (Visser, 2005; Zeitlin and Pochet, 2005), meaning that domestic actors change their policy orientations because of their participation in the ESF. In practice, the mechanisms we identify are sometimes intermingled, and at times the lines between them are blurred. Mostly, however, it is possible to empirically distinguish one mechanism (or sub-mechanism) from another.

We first discuss the analytical framework and the case of Belgium. We then shortly present an overview of data and methods and outline the main results of our empirical analysis. We will argue that over the last decade, the ESF has had a catalytic impact on activation policies in Belgium; first on the innovation of activation instruments, second on the governance of employment policies and third on shifts in policy framing. In the subsequent section, we explain how different mechanisms (leverage, conditionality and learning) generate these effects and how they can account for differential effects in different regions. We conclude by summarizing our framework, suggesting its usefulness for analysing other domestic settings and European instruments, and highlight some transnational implications of our analysis.

9.1 Case and analytical framework

For various reasons, Belgium is an interesting case for studying the operations and effects of the ESF on domestic activation policies. First, as in other western European countries, the focus of Belgian employment policy-making has shifted from employment protection to employment
promotion over the past 15 years; likewise there has been an expansion of active labour market programmes and a policy shift towards activating people outside the labour market, to increase not only macro and micro competitiveness but also stimulate social inclusion (for example, Marx, 2009; van Gerven and Beckers, 2009). This raises the question of the role the ESF has played in this evolution. Second, the development towards activating policies in Belgium has gone hand-in-hand with the increasing devolution of employment policies. Due to several state reforms over the past 30 years, employment policy has become a shared responsibility across the federal and various regional governments of the country, with the regions enjoying competences in employment policies that are more relevant to the ESF (that is, job search assistance), while the federal government ministers to the more ‘classic’ competences (that is, labour law and social security). Because of the existence of three powerful regional governments (Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia), alongside a federal government, Belgium can be regarded as a ‘laboratory’ to test the differential regional and federal impact of the ESF. The intricate and highly devolved structure of Belgian employment governance can serve as a substitute for transnational comparison.

To account for variation between the regions, this article will analyse how ESF funds have been appropriated differently by the various political and social actors in Belgium. Because we analyse both ESF funding managed by the national (federal) administration as well as ESF funding managed by the different regional governments, we can trace the differential effects of ESF money. As has already been indicated, ESF funding only makes up a small share of Belgian employment budgets. From 1990 to 2006, the allotted Belgian ESF budget more than doubled: from about 55 million European Currency Unit (ECU) (the ECU was a basket of the currencies of the European Community Member States used as the unit of account of the European Community before being replaced by the Euro on 1 January 1999, at parity) per year (1990–2) to more than €100 million per year for 2000–6. Yet the ESF only accounted for about 1.3 percent of the total public expenditure on employment measures between 2000 and 2005. The largest part of the Belgian ESF budget is granted to Flanders and Wallonia. For 2000–6, Flanders received approximately 48 percent and Wallonia 37 percent of this budget, while the remaining 15 percent was distributed between the federal level (9 percent), Brussels (3 percent) and the German-speaking Community (1 percent) (Commission of the European Community and Belgian Federal Government, 2000). When only preventive measures are taken into account, the Fund accounts for approximately 4.5 percent of total public expenditure. Figure 9.1 shows that on the regional level, this varies between 3 percent (Brussels) and 6 percent (Flanders). Because the Belgian Federal government has little competences with regard to activation policies, their ESF money flows almost entirely to local ‘Public Centers for Social Assistance’.

These preventive labour market measures include: (1) individual action plans for job seekers, (2) vocational training, (3) job incentives, (4) labour market integration of the disabled, (5) direct job creation and (6) incentives to stimulate business creation. (Eurostat (2006) LMP Database, www.employment.belgium.be/WorkArea/showcontent.aspx?id=12862).
ESF budget for active labour market measures includes measures on ‘availability’ and ‘entrepreneurship’ (Flanders); ‘preventive labour market policy’, ‘labour market integration’ and ‘labour market counselling’ (Wallonia); ‘social inclusion and prevention of unemployment’ (Brussels).


As the ESF operates at different levels of government and supplements domestic spending, it is not self-evident to assess its ‘net impact’ or distinguish the extent to which ESF interventions have driven policy initiatives or played a catalytic role in domestic labour-market interventions. To differentiate analytically between the role of domestic policy-making and EU policies, we make careful use of ‘process tracing’ or a causal reconstruction that seeks to identify the different mechanisms through which the ESF produces differential outcomes in the three Belgian regions. According to the literature, analyses of mechanisms produce deeper causal knowledge of social processes and their interrelations (Elster, 2007; Hedström and Swedberg, 1998; Mayntz, 2004). Social mechanisms are ‘causal generalizations about recurrent processes’ which seek to explain a given social phenomenon – a given event, structure, or development – by identifying the processes through which it is generated (Mayntz, 2004). The distinction between mechanisms and effects is thus helpful for framing our investigations analytically. The identification and clarification of social mechanisms explaining how the ESF produces different outcomes in different regional contexts helps us better understand why the ESF creates such
substantial effects and how different political actors at different policy levels intervene in this process.

9.2 Data and methods

The primary data for this case study are semi-structured interviews with 28 key policy experts involved in (national, regional and local) ESF management in Belgium and at the EU level. They were selected through a so-called snowball procedure, either because of their (leading) function, or because they were considered important players by their peers (see Annex 1 for more details on interviewees).

Other data were collected or re-analysed to corroborate and help interpret interview data. We analysed a range of official documents (parliamentary proceedings, reports of the Court of Auditors and so on), evaluation studies at both the European and national levels, assessments of the consecutive ESF programmes drawn up by universities and consultancy firms, as well as administrative data on the activation of minimum income beneficiaries through ESF resources. Triangulating sources helps mitigate the limitations of reliance on individual sources.

Where it concerns the timeframe of our inquiries, we started our analysis in 1988, because that year witnessed a major restructuring of the ESF: an agreement was struck to double its financial resources (by 1993), specific objectives were assigned to the ESF, and the core principles of programming, concentration and partnership were added to the additionality requirement (Council of the European Union, 1988a and b). As we will demonstrate, these principles are all key factors in explaining the ESF’s influence and in the operation of the mechanisms we identify.

Some reasons accounting for the ESF’s ability to enact change include the policy framework directly imposed upon the Member States through the ESF and general Structural Funds regulations. Others can only be explained by the strong link between the ESF and the EES. Although the ESF differs significantly from the EES in terms of its legal status, procedures and governance, the Structural Funds reform of 1999 codified an important functional relationship between these two instruments (Hartwig, 2007: 122–3). The ESF regulation of 1999 stipulates that the Fund should support policy measures of the Member States that are in line with the EES (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 1999). Furthermore, the plans drawn up by the Member States in the context of the ESF are evaluated by the Commission ‘in the light of consistency of the measures envisaged with the national plan for implementing the European employment strategy’ (Council of the European Union, 1999: Art. 15 §3). The 2006 regulation on the ESF for the current programming period (2007–13) adopts an even more tailored approach to use of the ESF to achieve EES-objectives (Kilpatrick, 2006). None of the other Open Methods

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6 The 28 interviews we mainly draw upon are directly concerned with the ESF. For corroboration and inspiration, however, we also made use of a broader set of about 100 interviews which were conducted in the framework of the ETOS-research project (cf. note 1).

7 The Member States are required to ensure that ‘the actions supported by the ESF are consistent with and contribute to actions undertaken in pursuance of the EES’ (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2006: Art. 4). In addition, Member States shall ‘concentrate support, where the ESF can contribute to
of Coordination (OMC) have such a strong link to the ESF. In our analysis we aim to disentangle the effects of the EES and the ESF through the mechanism of conditionality. We will argue that the requirement to spend ESF-money according to the EES framework has not only reinforced the latter, it has also given the ESF a new legitimacy and relevance.

9.3 The impact of the ESF on local and regional activation policies: reviewing the empirical evidence

In recent decades, the ESF has supported very broad and diverse interventions in Belgian domestic employment policy. In partnership with various levels of government, it has channelled its support into strategic long-term programmes (implemented through myriads of projects) in order to advance the modernization of the labour market and the employability of the workforce. The heterogeneous, long-term and programme-based nature of the ESF makes it difficult to assess ESF interventions separately, or to evaluate their short-term impact. The research challenge is therefore to look for broader and long-term influences of the ESF on local, regional and national policy dynamics. We discuss three types of impact (on innovation, governance and policy-framing). The next section will then explain the mechanisms through which these different effects have been generated.

9.3.1 Driving innovation in activation instruments

First, the ESF has stimulated innovation in the instrumentation of Belgian active labour market policies, in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. It inspired the use of specific methods for labour market counselling and career guidance. Although similar forms of counselling for the unemployed already existed in Belgium, the ESF introduced fundamental reforms to these services. For instance, counselling for young job seekers was previously voluntary, but under ESF impetus it became compulsory for all job seekers after 6 months of unemployment (Interview Pes/FI). Furthermore, there was wide agreement among our Flemish and Walloon expert interviewees that the ESF was a key factor in introducing the modular structure of career market guidance, which divides the job-seeking process into different subsequent actions, including intake interviews, vocational training, on-the-job guidance and personal training. This process is adapted to the needs and wishes of the unemployed in order to improve their prospects for successful labour market entry (Commission of the European Community and Flemish Government, 2000; Commission of the European Community et al., 2000). The ESF also improved the practical toolkit for improving the skills of the workforce through education and training. Examples include the introduction of vouchers to finance training and the establishment of specialized training centres both for employees and unemployed persons (in policies, on the implementation of the relevant employment recommendations made under Article 128(4) of the Treaty and of the relevant employment-related objectives of the Community in the fields of social inclusion, education, and training').

8 It can be noted that the ESF Regulation for the 2007–13 programming period also links the ESF to the OMC on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2006), but this recent programming period is outside the scope of our research.
Wallonia the Competence Centres were given a huge boost by ESF funding) (Interview Permrep/Wal, Pes/Bru1, Cec1, Agency/Fl1, Pes/Fl, Agency/Fl2, Min/Fl2, Agency/Wal).

Similar innovations in the toolkit of activation policy can be found at the local level. For instance, methodological tools specifically aimed at the socially excluded (people living on a minimum income) were developed through ESF projects. These tools, which were built on pre-existing ad hoc practices, mainly aimed at providing training (including in basic skills). They were widely distributed among hundreds of local Public Centres for Social Assistance (PCSA), where they found fertile ground because the existing employment training services at the end of the 1980s were not adapted to the specific needs of those who were (really) far from the labour market. Some of our interviewees also pointed to ESF-induced working methods such as working with groups of welfare clients, as opposed to the long-standing tradition of considering the guidance of social assistance clients as ‘individual’ work (Pcsa3, Agency/Wal).

A second category of ESF innovation is the introduction of quantitative monitoring and the evaluation of labour market policies in the three regions. As different levels of government have to account for their use of funds, the ESF has encouraged the institutionalization of monitoring systems and evaluation tools (Council of the European Union, 1999: art. 40; interviews Permrep/Wal, Cec1, Pes/Fl, Agency/Fl2). The strict requirements for evaluating national programmes financed by the ESF have accelerated the introduction and use of quantitative objectives, indicators and benchmarks to measure the evolution and performance of labour market and ESF-related projects. As one key expert puts it: ‘without the direction of the ESF, the creation of the Brussels Observatory for the Labour Market and Qualifications would have been unthinkable’ (Interview Pes/Bru1).

In sum, the ESF seems to have provided a ‘creative margin’ for experimentation and innovation of Belgian labour market policies (LMP), especially during the 1990s. An ESF programme manager contends: ‘the ESF creates an additional policy space. Through working with projects, and not structural funding, you can develop new things, experiments, in the shadow of ministerial or government policies’ (Interview Agency/Fl2). Another interviewee referred to the ESF as ‘our daily vitamin cure’ (Interview Pcsa1). This said, one should not idealize the ‘innovative’ character of ESF projects: both evaluation reports and our interviewees confirmed that in practice a part of ESF funding ends up being ‘structural’ funding, that is, it is used to finance mainstream (already planned) initiatives.

### 9.3.2 Effects on the governance of employment policies

The ESF has, moreover, affected domestic activating policies in Belgium by altering the institutional configuration or the field of actors involved in the preparation and implementation of those policies. As previous research on the domestic effects of EU cohesion policy has shown (for example, Bache, 2007), Europeanization can transform domestic governance by fostering cooperation between actors at different levels of government and between the public and private sectors. Our analysis shows that working with the ESF has had various effects on the territorial restructuring and governance of domestic Belgian employment policies.
First, there is extensive evidence that the ESF has stimulated governments to collaborate both with each other and with external partners (non-profit organizations, trade unions and private employment agencies) for the development and implementation of ESF projects (Nicaise, 1995). More generally, these partnerships have encouraged the greater involvement of non-state actors in employment policy and stimulated partnerships between public and private actors. This effect is clearly the strongest in Flanders, where ESF support has in some cases led to the launch of consortia: structured forms of cooperation between different actors to improve the services offered to jobseekers (Interview Agency/Fl2). In Brussels, the collaboration between the public employment service (ACTIRIS) and more than 100 non-profit-making associations, public centres for social assistance and so on, is supported by an ESF-funded database where reliable information on the career path of a job seeker can be consulted by all actors involved (Interview Pes/Bru1). The Brussels public employment service furthermore seized the ESF to set up collaboration between different regional actors with a view to increasing the availability of childcare. This is quite striking because organizing childcare is a jealously guarded competence of the (linguistic) Communities in Belgium, and not of the (territorial) regions. In Wallonia, ESF funding has remained to a much larger extent a ‘closed shop’ for public authorities, so that initiatives to strengthen collaboration are often restricted to these institutions (Interviews Agency/Wal, Uvc/Wal).

The ESF’s push for cooperation is also tangible at the local level: there has been a slow but certain trend towards more formalized cooperation amongst (smaller) Public Centres for Social Assistance, and between the PCSA and other local actors (Cap Gemini, 2003). Our interviewees confirmed that working with the ESF enabled the PCSA to strengthen their institutional position at the local level through such new forms of cooperation. In part these innovations were introduced by Art. 6 of the ESF regulation (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 1999), which seeks to stimulate innovative partnership-based local projects involving cross-level (for example, regional–provincial or regional–municipal) cooperation (Ferrera, 2005: 190). Finally it should be noted that via the ESF, international partnerships have also been stimulated, which offer important opportunities to look beyond the borders of Belgian LMPs and beyond the existing regulations and laws (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2006: Art. 3 §6)9.

A rather ambitious attempt to stimulate cooperation between the regions was the ESF-NAP Impact Assessment Cell (ENIAC), which was created in 2000 and financed by the ESF. According to a cooperation agreement between the various government levels, the new institution was designed to: (1) analyse the impact of the EES and the ESF on the Belgian LMPs; (2) support the follow-up of the implementation of the employment guidelines (which was perceived as problematic by the European Commission); (3) enhance the coordination of the NAP by supervising the coherence of the regional contributions (ESF-NAP Impact Assessment Cell, 2006). So on paper Belgium had a joint strategic management structure to coordinate the implementation of the ESF and the National Action Plans for Employment (Hartwig, 2002). The

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9 For example, a Swedish–Belgian collaboration resulted in the introduction of an annual publication of gender statistics. Other examples include the Walloon job clubs and experience certificates (Interview Pes/Fl, Agency/Fl2, Agency/Wal).
European Commission, which took the initiative of creating ENIAC, saw it as a ‘best practice’ and referred to it as such on many occasions (Interviews Min/Empl, Cec3).

In practice, however, ENIAC faced multiple obstacles, including a very complex organizational structure and the perception that the objectives of ENIAC ran counter to the shift towards increased regional autonomy in Belgium: the regional entities saw the tool as a kind of supervision and were hostile to any attempt at ‘coordination’ by the federal level. For these reasons ENIAC could not fulfil its role as a policy evaluator, and the structure was abandoned after 3 years. Remarkably, however, ENIAC continues to exist in practice: the regional experts who were involved in the initial ENIAC structure continue to meet on a regular basis so as to continue the work on the common set of labour market indicators that was developed between 2000 and 2003. As one knowledgeable expert put it ‘ENIAC is dead, long live ENIAC’ (Interview Pes/Br1). In the absence of the shadow of the federal level ‘controlling’ the work of the Regions, they coordinate their own work, be it on a purely informal basis and with the (smallest) Region, Brussels Capital, in charge of organizing agendas and meetings.

A second ‘governance’ effect is the result of the public tendering procedures used by public employment agencies when granting ESF funding. As such, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions and private employment agencies can enrol in ESF tendering rounds (Interviews Pes/Br1, Pes/Fl, Agency/Fl2, Min/Fl2, Agency/Wal). As a result of this, greater discipline and transparency were introduced into the system of award funding. This is because service providers (social partners, NGOs and so on) that want to spend European money must comply with the public procurement requirements. The system of tendering is now being used in the three regions in Belgium. Many of our interviewees agree that this has raised the quality of the provision of services (Interviews Agency/Fl2, Agency/Wal, Cec1).

Third, through the ESF, sub-national governments were, for the first time, given a formal role in the EC policy process. Until 1989, national governments had dominated both EC-level negotiations and the domestic implementation process. As indicated in the literature on multi-level governance, the ESF structure and procedures were instrumental in loosening the monopoly position of central governments and in creating a system of non-hierarchical governance in which sub-national authorities no longer had to channel all their claims through central authorities (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). Consequently, the ESF has been perceived as an instrument whose purpose is ‘not just to improve the efficiency of regional policy, but to give it features specifically designed to penetrate national policy processes’ (Allen, 2005). Moreover, through the decentralized administration of the ESF, regional bodies assumed a greater role in the administration and implementation of the programme (for example, designing their own ESF programmes). Different respondents confirmed that, by offering substantial funding for sub-national policies and providing multi-level decision-making channels, the ESF has acknowledged and reinforced the employment competences of regional actors and contributed to the development of regional employment policy frameworks in Belgium (Interviews Pes/Fl, Min/Si1).
9.3.3 Shifts in policy framing

As the main financial tool translating strategic employment goals into concrete action, the ESF has functioned as a driver of ‘policy shifts’ by helping to implement new policy concepts in the national, regional and local LMPs. According to some interviewees, a by-product of this dynamic is the maturation of ‘a European state of mind’ with regard to employment and LMPs (Interviews Pes/Fi, Agency/Wal). Yet as we will see below, this does not happen ‘automatically’: although governments have to adapt their policies to fit into the ESF framework, they also use ESF funding as a source of legitimacy for new policy directions.

The most important example of the impact of the ESF on the cognitive and normative framing of the Belgian LMPs can be found in the shift towards preventive and active LMPs throughout the 1990s; for it was the ESF that, in the early 1990s, directed its focus toward the prevention of long-term unemployment, while most governments and public employment services were still concentrating on reactive measures. Moreover, while domestic LMPs used to focus on high unemployment, the ESF stimulated a shift towards focusing on low employment. It did so by financing projects on education and training both for the unemployed and employees in certain economic sectors, in order to prevent them from becoming long-term unemployed.

The shift towards activation has without doubt been most tangible at the local level. As highlighted in the introduction to this article, many professionals working in the municipal Public Centres for Social Assistance consider that working with the ESF fundamentally changed their cognitive and normative ideas about the activation of people who are far from the labour market. This is not to say that these PCSA did not have the legal potential to pursue activating policies before the ESF came into the picture (in 1988). In practice, however, the activating potential of the law was not exploited on a large scale by the PCSA well into the 1980s. And when welfare clients were activated, this was largely focused on their reintegration into social security rather than into the labour market (Bodart and Nicaise, 2005:10–11).

This passive approach towards welfare beneficiaries can only be understood by considering the broader socio-economic situation at the time. Some of our interviewees explained that in the midst of the severe economic crisis of the 1980s, there were already so many ‘unusual’ unemployed persons (that is, with decent qualifications and work experience) that persons belonging to ‘target groups’ (for example people living on minimum benefits, low-skilled people and so on) were simply not taken into consideration as ‘potential’ for the labour market by employers and the regional public employment services alike. For this reason the latter institutions (VDAB in Flanders, FOREM in Wallonia and ORBeM in Brussels) would not even list these ‘difficult’ groups as job seekers. This situation changed dramatically with the arrival of ESF resources at the local level: hundreds of ESF projects were set up by the PCSA during the

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10 In fact, Article 60 §7 of the 1976 law establishing the PCSA gave these centres the possibility of guiding their clients towards the labour market; either indirectly, by offering them education and training; or directly, by employing their social assistance clients within their own service or ‘detach’ them to a social enterprise.

1990s, leading to a sharp increase in the number of participants in training programmes. As the first evaluations of these ESF programmes showed that the majority of people activated through this kind of scheme were still active on the labour market 2 years after their training (Bodart and Nicaise, 2005:11), the activation of people who are far from the labour market became to be considered not only as a feasible but also as a desirable policy practice, at least in Flanders. In Brussels and Wallonia actors remained, and still remain, far more sceptical (Interviews Pes/Fl, Agency/Wal, Permrep/Fl), partly in view of the different labour market situation.

A second shift in policy framing where the ESF had an additional and catalytic role is in the increased tailoring of the Belgian LMPs to the needs of specific target groups, such as women, the handicapped and migrants. The target group focus was seen—in the three regions—as an essential part of the ESF programme and as a precondition for granting financial assistance to the Member States (Appeltsans, 2004; Commission of the European Community and Flemish Government, 2000; Commission of the European Community et al., 2000). By providing funding for projects that promote equal access to the labour market for targeted social groups the ESF has helped in refocusing labour market policies towards vulnerable social groups. Evaluation studies indeed show that certain target groups (including youngsters, migrants and people with low educational levels) are overrepresented in ESF-financed labour market guidance programmes in Flanders (Bollens et al., 2005).

9.4 Tracing mechanisms of change and explaining regional differences

How is it that the ESF can have such diverse and significant effects (driving innovations in activation instruments, changing employment governance and inducing shifts in policy framing), notwithstanding its limited financial weight? And why do these effects differ between regional entities within a single country? Both questions can only be answered by unravelling the precise mechanisms through which the ESF impacts upon activation policies at local, regional and national policy levels. As already indicated, we distinguish between three such mechanisms: leverage, conditionality and learning.

9.4.1 The leverage effect

In our view, usage provides the first key to understanding the differential effects. Indeed, the empirical evidence shows that innovation and an increased focus on activation were not initiated by the ESF, but rather by policy entrepreneurs at the national, regional and local level. These actors actively used the ESF, alongside other, domestic, instruments at their disposal, including national and regional financial instruments, legislation and expert groups. ESF funding did not put activation on the political agenda by itself: it is the fact that a variety of actors has appropriated the instrument to further their own political agendas, which ensured that the activation debate penetrated considerably faster to a variety of national, local and regional actors. In other words: the ESF served as a selective amplifier (Visser, 2005) for activation policies. Four concrete examples may illustrate this point.
A first example shows how the ESF was used to circumvent a situation of political stalemate. The former Secretary of State for social integration explains that in the midst of the economic crisis and stringent budgetary policies of the 1980s, the Public Centres for Social Assistance had been given important additional tasks (including dealing with the new phenomenon of political refugees) while being confronted with compelling scientific evidence that ‘work’ was the best way out of poverty for their clients. Thus, there was an ‘objective need’ to give them additional resources (interview Mincab1). But the only argument that would have been able to convince the then liberal Treasury Minister (Guy Verhofstadt) to free scarce resources, namely using additional resources for activating minimum income beneficiaries, was vetoed by another powerful coalition partner in the federal government. Indeed, for the French-speaking social democrats (Parti Socialiste) strengthening activation obligations of people who depend on social assistance was unacceptable, since this would also involve sanctions in case of non-compliance. In this political labyrinth the ESF, in the words of the former State Secretary, ‘became available precisely at the right time’: since neither issuing new legislation on activation nor obtaining additional domestic financial resources were possible, the ESF made it possible to circumvent the political stalemate at the national level by attracting EU funding while pushing activation policies directly at the local level (Interviews Mincab1, Mincab2).

A second example that can be seen as ESF leverage concerns the strategic interpretation of the ESF’s policy goals (as initially formulated). More particularly, it is clear that a variety of actors at the regional, national and European level have been able to stretch the objectives of this labour market fund to use it, for more than two decades, for setting up projects that were principally aimed at fighting social exclusion. In spite of the formal focus on labour market and economic development, those involved in the ESF at the European Commission, the Member States and subnational actors created sufficient room for manoeuvre to implement a local ‘under the radar’ social inclusion policy. As a former Head of Unit in the European Commission explained: ‘we and everybody else cheated and used it as a social inclusion strategy. But we could not draft legislation that said that’12 (Interview Cec1).

A third example of leverage concerns the use of partnerships at local level. In the context of the ESF, the partnership principle requires national governments to cooperate with actors at the regional, local and supranational (European Commission) level for the preparation and the implementation of ESF programmes. Over time the Commission pushed for and secured agreement on a greater role in the partnership for non-state actors (Bache, 2008: 24). As a result, the local Public Centres considerably increased their chances of getting an ESF project approved if they drew up partnerships: either with other Public Centres and public employment agencies; or with non-state actors such as employer’s organizations, trade unions and social NGOs (Service Public de Programmation Intégration Sociale, 2007).

A last example of leverage is planning: being involved in ESF procedures commits authorities to spending priorities for a seven-year period (the duration of a typical ESF programming period).

12 The EU’s competence in the field of poverty is strictly limited to coordination of policies, with the explicit exclusion of any harmonization measures.
This obviously stretches beyond the duration of any local or regional legislature (typically 5 years) and:

forces people into medium-term planning in terms of action and financing, which is a hugely important discipline even for countries like Belgium, the Netherlands and France. ... This is fundamental in the area of social inclusion, because you will never get any finance minister to commit money seven years ahead for projects in area of social inclusion without this kind of framework. (Interview Cec1)

In other words: by making use of the ESF’s long-term time horizons, actors at different levels strategically obtained a budgetary commitment to activation policies for a much longer period of time than they experienced before. Other interviewees confirmed that they ‘were used to working with a budget for one single year. Even though changes are noticeable in the political mentality, looking ahead remains difficult for the cabinet, since their reality ends at the next elections’ (Interview Agency/FI2).

### 9.4.2 Conditioning financial support

As already discussed, ESF money needs to be spent on European Employment Strategy priorities. It is crucial to understand that the functional relationship between these EU instruments cannot be discarded as symbolic politics. The requirement that the EES objectives are taken on board in the ESF programming is strictly monitored by the Commission in order to ensure that the EES and the ESF can mutually reinforce each other. Thus, a former Head of Unit in the European Commission explains that:

the big change was in 1999, when all of a sudden the light bulb was switched on and people said ‘shouldn’t we be spending this money in order to achieve a political objective?’ ... So we suddenly had a coherent Employment Strategy, we had a financial instrument of some size, and it became obvious that the two should actually reinforce each other. The EES has given a frame and the direction to the ESF, which has been hugely useful, essential really. The EES has legitimized the ESF in many respects, making it more visible and much more relevant.

(Interview Cec1)

In turn, the requirement to spend the ESF in the EES framework has also reinforced the latter: non-compliance with the EES objectives gives the European Commission real (as opposed to symbolic) powers to block unjustified ESF funding, as happened when several Member States tried to use the ESF to fund primary and secondary education (Interview Cec3). The Commission’s strong influence has thus been important in establishing the functional relationship between the ESF and EES: although political actors within Member States predominantly accept the strategic coupling of both instruments, they try to appropriate ESF funds for their own political or administrative needs (cf. Hartwig, 2007: 137).

The requirement to spend ESF money on EES objectives results in relative concentration of spending efforts. In the case of the Public Centres for Social Assistance, for instance, the ‘tiny’ EU
funding constitutes a significant percentage (between 10 percent and 30 percent) of the activation budget of the participating Centres (Interviews Pcsa1, Pcsa2, Min/Si2). Moreover, in the developmental period of activation policies (at the end of the 1980s), this rather small ESF budget had a great importance. For many (smaller) PCSA, for instance, the availability of ESF funds meant the difference between having a social assistant to help welfare beneficiaries make their way onto the labour market, or not having personnel for this task at all. In other words: initially, the ESF resources were ‘all or nothing’ in terms of activation for small- and medium-sized Public Centres for Social Assistance. The concentration mechanism is also key in understanding the differences in ESF take-up between the Belgian regions: especially in the first decade of its operation the concentration of the federal ESF budget on labour market guidance was met with particular scepticism in Brussels and Wallonia, partly because of the much heavier socio-economic problems in those two regions as compared to Flanders. As a matter of fact, the effectiveness of investment in guidance towards the labour market was much higher in the latter region, mainly because of the lower rates of (long-term) employment (Cap Gemini, 2003).

Member States are not only required to concentrate ESF spending, they also have to take into account the additionality principle, which implies that (sub-)national governments are required to spend EU funds in addition to any planned expenditures. This principle, which was strongly reinforced by the Commission from 1988 onward (Bache, 2008:24) gave ample space for innovating activation policies through the PCSA: local governments allowed some ‘playing around’ with this money, which was sometimes considered as relatively ‘cheap’ (as half of it came from the EU). Moreover, the decision to commit ESF money to a new initiative can be made relatively quickly:

When we want to try something new through the usual administrative and political channels, it takes three years before the law or decree is passed through Parliament. Thanks to ESF, we can try something out much faster without the necessity to create rules. Even if the ESF is very complex to manage, it is actually very supple if you want to launch something new. If it works well, we can always transpose it to a law or decree afterwards.

(Interview Agency/Wal)

The additionality principle aids understanding of the puzzling differences in ESF take-up between the regions. The simple economic reality is that Flemish local authorities had (and still have) far more domestic resources at their disposition than their Walloon or Brussels counterparts. For example, after the Saint-Catharina agreement in 1989, the Flemish communities and the PCSA received a bonus of 500 million Belgian francs (approximately €12.4 million) for projects aimed at combating poverty, integrating migrants (Vanhercke and Campaert, 2009; Vranken and Geldof, 1991), which enabled them to meet the EU’s additionality requirement much more easily.

There is a third condition for entitlement to ESF money: ‘sound financial management’. The Commission’s supervisory role implies that it must check whether the money is spent correctly, that is, the error rate of ESF projects may not exceed the 2 percent limit set by the European Court of Auditors. Although these controls contributed to pushing for greater transparency in
the financing structures of the partners involved in ESF projects, they are experienced as a (very) heavy burden. More generally, many of our respondents refer to the well-known administrative complexity of the ESF. A high-ranking Commission official even referred to it as ‘still complicated, still difficult, it’s frightening actually, you know, it’s just frightening’ (Interview Cec1). The burden of sound financial management becomes the more compelling if one takes into account that ESF money needs to be spent quickly: the notorious ‘n+2’ rule stipulates that money which has been assigned should be spent within 2 years, or it goes back to the EU. By contrast, the European Commission is far less interested in assessing whether the money is well spent in substantive terms. In a nutshell, it seems that the condition of sound financial management has led to a situation in which the requirements of correct (from an accounting point of view) and timely spending are considered more important than respecting substantive requirements.

This principle of ‘sound financial management’ has important implications for the varied take-up of the ESF: while the financial controls and continuing management problems of the federal ESF are seen as problematic in all three regions, the effect on non-take up is clearly more significant in Wallonia, where the intrinsic motivation to participate is already lower (see above). Hence the increasing gap between the percentage of PCSA participating in the ESF in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels.

9.4.3 Varieties of policy learning

A final mechanism that helps to explain how a small financial fund still has significant effects is learning. Or, to be more precise, varieties of learning. Our empirical analysis suggests that at least three types of learning are promoted through the ESF.

First, all actors simply ‘learn’ how to use the ESF: they readjust their strategies, which enables them to pursue the same objectives in a new context. While discussing the leverage effect, we have already explained how national politicians and bureaucrats learned how to use the ESF and no longer see it as a threat. From this perspective one can understand why consecutive federal ministers for employment resisted strong pressure from the regions as well as the European Commission to transfer the remainder of the (tiny) federal ESF budget to the regions (Interview Cec3). This first type could be considered as a ‘thin’ (or strategic) learning type.

Our interviews also provided some (prudent) examples of mutual learning, namely learning through ‘a combination of enhanced awareness of different approaches and performance standards elsewhere on the one hand, and reflexive self-assessment, including improvements in institutional capacity for information gathering and monitoring on the other’ (Zeitlin and Pochet, 2005: 479). While mutual learning from other Member States is often quoted as an important added value of ESF involvement, learning about other Belgian practices is seen as even more important in the Public Centres for Social Assistance. Some PCSA assisted in sessions during which PCSA exchanged (good and bad) experiences, also across the language frontier in Belgium: ‘On several issues we learned from each other. Project Cycle Management, for example, is something our Walloon colleagues introduced before we did, and we fully copied it from them’ (Interview Agency/Fl2). In another example: ‘we learned a lot from the models used in Flanders
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concerning the social economy' (Interview Agency/Wal). There are also illustrations of transnational learning, as was the case with the job clubs or the Flemish legislation on the local and neighbourhood services that drew directly from a foreign ESF project (Interview Agency/FI2). In some cases foreign policies are examined during study-visits, which are described as an ‘eye-opener’, making actors reflect upon their own practices and ideas (Interview Agency/FI2). Other interviewees confirmed that exposing local experience to others gives a clearer vision of one’s own practices through a ‘mirror effect’ (Hamel and Vanhercke, 2009).

The learning taking place between the Belgian Regions in the context of the ESF should not be idealized: there is no ‘structural’ exchange of ideas. As these exchanges take place in a purely informal setting they entirely depend on personal ties: ‘we used to inform each other about our activities, but we are in the dark about what Flanders or the German Community have been doing during the past programming period’ (Interview Agency/Wal). And yet there is a clear demand amongst many of our respondents to increase efforts with regard to a more structured exchange of information and experiences between the regions in the context of the ESF, on the condition that it is about learning, and not about ‘assessment’ or ‘coordination’.

A final sub-mechanism through which key actors change their goals and preferences is diffusion: unlike the two learning mechanisms described above, diffusion does not presuppose there are actors purposefully looking for ideas or solutions to problems they are faced with. It rather ‘happens’ because actors are influenced by ‘ways of doing things’. The most significant example of this is the ESF support for local labour market projects (see above), through which the idea of activation of welfare clients became generally accepted. While a small elite was already convinced of the value-added of activation, involvement in these ESF projects ensured that this conviction spread to a much broader circle of actors. Our interviewees refer to this in terms such as ‘trickling down of ideas’ and ‘changes in mentality’ (Interviews Pcsa1, Agency/Wal, Min/FI1, Mincab2, Pcsa3). As a result it was not only accepted that people far from the labour market could be activated, but also that they should be. In other words: involvement in the ESF ultimately contributed to a shift in normative orientations of national and local policymakers about activation of welfare clients.

9.5 Conclusions

Our analysis has illustrated that even modest ESF funding can work as a driver of significant domestic policy shifts. In the case of Belgian domestic activation policies, as we have argued, the ESF has had a catalytic impact on the innovation of activation instruments, the governance of employment policies and on policy framing. We have clarified and explained these effects by tracing three different mechanisms through which the ESF operates. Arguably the most significant mechanism, namely usage, implies that the ESF does not work ‘by itself’; the effects we have identified are only possible because key policy entrepreneurs at different levels seized the window of opportunity and created leverage through the ESF, among others, by pressing governments into long-term commitments and setting up strategic partnerships. The fact that ESF spending has been made conditional is equally important, first by linking it to the
achievement of the EES objectives (concentration on labour market initiatives), second by requiring that EU funding is matched by domestic funding (additionality) and third through stringent financial controls. In addition, (mutual) learning experiences bring about cognitive and normative shifts in activation policies, including with regard to those who are far from the labour market. In a nutshell, the creative use of the highly constraining ESF framework has ensured that considerable EU and domestic resources are committed – for an unusually long time span – to a broad range of national, regional and local activation initiatives. Arguably these long-term effects go beyond the goals of the actors who initially shaped the ESF; over time, for instance, the objectives of this labour market fund have been stretched for setting up projects aimed at fighting poverty.

With regard to the regional comparison, our analysis has provided several explanations for the different impact and take-up of ESF resources between the Belgian regions: the Walloon and Brussels regions are faced with a much greater socio-economic problem than Flanders, they have less access to resources to match EU funding with an equivalent domestic counterpart, and they operate in a regional political context, which is not very favourable to the idea of activation. Finally, the practice of setting up partnerships with non-state actors is less developed in Wallonia and Brussels than in Flanders, where the monopoly of public employment services had already been breached at the beginning of the 1980s.

What are the implications of our analysis for further theoretical and empirical investigations? If the arguments presented in this article have merit, we think there are implications for first, multi-level governance research, second, comparative or transnational research on the ESF and third, research on broader EU employment governance.

A first set of implications concerns research on multilevel governance and Structural Funds. In line with the literature, we found that the partnership requirement of the ESF fed into pressures for regionalization in decentralized Member States such as Belgium (cf. Marks, 1996: 413). Yet, our findings also show that the ‘triad dynamic’ between regions, nations and the EU institutions (Bache, 2008: 167) is by no means a zero-sum game. At least in Belgium, the use of the ESF did not equal a decline in central state power (although it had a positive effect on the development of regional employment policy (cf. pp.008)). In an institutional context of decentralization of activation policies, the federal government learned that through the ESF it could circumvent political and budgetary problems within the federal government by increasing investment in guidance and training, even if these are clearly regional competencies.

This brings us to a second set of implications, namely whether some of our findings could apply to other Member States. Our analysis focused on Belgium, where the ESF represents a modest 2 percent of labour market expenditure. One may expect however that the effect of the ESF is far more significant in countries such as the Czech Republic, where ESF resources approximately equal the total national resources devoted to active labour market policy measures, that is, about 0.2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) (Sirovátka and Rákoczyová, 2009), or Greece, where the ESF represents approximately 40 percent of expenditure on labour market policies (Interview Cec1). Future research could furthermore assess whether variations in some of the scope conditions of ESF effectiveness (socio-economic problems, the role of different sets of
actors, the distribution of labour market competencies, the sequencing of pick-up of ESF resources) have led to different effects on other ‘compound polities’ such as Austria, Germany, Spain and Italy, all of which are states ‘with a combination of a proportional representation system, corporatist policy-making processes, and regionalized or federalized structures’ (Bache, 2008: 3). It is interesting to note that claims that the ESF has induced policy change have been made for Germany (changing its focus to a preventive approach to unemployment) and Ireland (changing its mindset about the provision of childcare) (House of Lords, 2010: 14).

A third set of implications concerns the place of the ESF within the broader context of EU employment governance. Making ESF funding conditional on compliance with the political objectives of the EES gives a strong incentive to local, regional and national actors to take the EES priorities seriously. Non-compliance with these priorities may lead to ESF funding not being committed by the European Commission. In our view, the increasing integration between the ESF and EES suggests that the linkages between the various EU employment instruments have to be studied more closely (cf. Kilpatrick, 2006; Trubek and Trubek, 2005). Most of the literature examines various European policy instruments independently from one another. Yet, in order to understand certain shifts in domestic employment policies, one has to examine how different instruments work together to enact such change. For example, many observers have labelled the EES as a weak and ineffective instrument with limited empirical results (for example, Citti and Rhodes, 2007; Idema and Kelemen, 2006). Mostly this was attributed to the fact that ‘the mechanisms to bring about change [for example Peer Review, benchmarking, naming and shaming] are weak’ (Daly, 2007). Yet, interestingly, these negative assessments scarcely take into account the ESF’s financial underpinning of the EES.

It may indeed be true that there is a problem of effectiveness with regard to the EES: public and private actors will not automatically buy into the EES as it lacks the more obvious sticks and carrots generally available under legislation and under financial instruments. Yet, our analyses show that the financial incentives of the ESF have amplified the effects of the EES, while the latter has provided stronger legitimacy for the ESF (see also López-Santana, 2009).
### Annex 1: List of interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Function of respondent</th>
<th>Interview date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agency/FL1</td>
<td>Director, Flemish ESF Agency</td>
<td>April 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency/FL2</td>
<td>Programme manager, Flemish ESF Agency</td>
<td>December 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency/Wal</td>
<td>Director and Deputy Director, ESF Agency of the Walloon Region and French Community</td>
<td>December 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cec1</td>
<td>Former Head of ESF Coordination Unit, European Commission</td>
<td>December 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cec3</td>
<td>Programme Manager, European Commission</td>
<td>March 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min/Empl</td>
<td>Two senior civil servants, Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue</td>
<td>February 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min/FL1</td>
<td>Policy Advisor, Work and Social Economy (WSE) Department of the Flemish Government</td>
<td>March 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min/FL2</td>
<td>Policy Advisor, WSE Department of the Flemish Government</td>
<td>May 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min/SI1</td>
<td>President, Federal Public Planning Services (FPPS) Social Integration</td>
<td>February 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min/SI2</td>
<td>Head of ESF Unit, FPPS Social Integration</td>
<td>February 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min/SI3</td>
<td>Two senior civil servants, FPPS Social Integration</td>
<td>October 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mincab1</td>
<td>Former Minister for Employment and Federal State Secretary for Equal Opportunities</td>
<td>June 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mincab2</td>
<td>Former Head of Cabinet, Federal State Secretary for Equal Opportunities</td>
<td>June 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mincab3</td>
<td>Former ESF advisor, State Secretary for Equal Opportunities</td>
<td>March 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pcsa1</td>
<td>Head of subsidised projects, Public Centre for Social Assistance (PCSA)</td>
<td>March 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pcsa2</td>
<td>Director, Department for Social Integration and Head Social Worker</td>
<td>April 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pcsa3</td>
<td>Human Resources manager, PCSA</td>
<td>April 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permrep/FL</td>
<td>General Representative of the Flemish government at the Belgian Permanent Representation to the EU</td>
<td>October 2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Permrep/Wal</td>
<td>General Representative of the Walloon Region at the Belgian Permanent Representation to the EU</td>
<td>December 2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pes/Bru1</td>
<td>Head of ESF Unit, Brussels Employment Service (ACTIRIS)</td>
<td>November 2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pes/Bru2</td>
<td>Two ENIAC Experts Brussels Labour Market and Qualifications Observatory, ACTIRIS</td>
<td>March 2008</td>
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<td>Director, Flemish Public Employment Service (VDAB)</td>
<td>November 2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uvc/Wal</td>
<td>Head of Service, Union of Walloon Cities and Municipalities</td>
<td>April 2008</td>
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References


