

# Who decides on public policies, and why? The case of public transport in Flanders

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## **ABSTRACT**

The central research topic of this paper focuses on the influence public agencies (as administrative actors) have in the policy decision-making process. All too often, it is assumed that policies are shaped and decided upon by political actors, and that administrative actors are only implementing policies. This paper reports on a case study that investigated the influence of political and administrative actors in the policy-making process in the field of mobility (public transport) in Flanders (Belgium). The paper has a descriptive, as well as an explanatory component. Firstly, I have looked at which actors really decide on the content of the policy (preparation, determination, implementation, evaluation). I found that the policy process is indeed to a large extent dominated by politicians. But in some cases and depending on policy-program, also the public agency may be able to influence the policy decision-making process in a considerable way. Secondly I present an explanatory model that tries to explain why public agencies may or may not be involved in the decision-making process. This model encompasses 7 factors that can be related to principals and agents incentives and capacities to take or (in the case of the principal) grant some policy decision making authority to the agency. The empirical data on which this paper is based come from a single embedded case study (1 organisation – the Flemish public transport company, 2 policy programs) for which I conducted an extensive document analysis, and a series of written questionnaires and oral interviews with people that are embedded in Flemish mobility policy.

## **PROBLEM DEFINITION**

In the first part of this article, I introduce the research questions, the empirical context in which the research will be conducted, and the main concepts that are dealt with in this research.

### *Research topic and questions*

The discussion about the involvement of administrative actors in the policy decision-making process is a discussion that has lasted for a long time in both academic and practitioner's circles. Although some academics do not agree that the policy-operations divide (the strict dichotomy between policy making as a politician's prerogative, and policy implementation as an administrative task) is a real feature of the NPM ideal type agency ("the dog that did not bark", Pollitt et al. 2004), many Western governments have attempted to install executive agencies that have a task in implementing policy, during their recent public sector

reforms<sup>1</sup>. A clear case is New Zealand where the reforms adopted the principle of single-purpose agencies and divided responsibility (Boston et al in Christensen and Laegreid 2001), or “the decoupling of policy advice and execution agencies, and the separation of outputs and outcomes as distinguishing the responsibilities of ministers and CEO’s” (Hood 1990). Recently however, as Gregory (2002) observes, the governmental policy is to reverse the negative effects of the “fragmented” public sector in New Zealand (“putting the public sector together again”): “coordination efforts are to reverse the policy-operations split of the reforms of the eighties and nineties, seeking for a better integration between operational outputs and policy outcomes”. The Next Steps program in the UK also has some features of the policy-operations divide. As it is explained by Derek Lewis, in Schick (2002) “the aim of Next Steps was to describe more precisely the respective jobs of ministers and civil servants ... ministers being responsible for setting policy ... civil servants in charge of making it happen, having the autonomy to get on”. These two examples show that in pioneering NPM countries such as New Zealand and the UK, the policy-operations divide was a substantial part of the agencification reforms. If agencies are “vehicles of NPM” and the policy-operations divide is part of the NPM-doctrine (Gruening 1998), then there is a “doctrinal” justification to consider this feature as a part of the ideal type agency. NPM is a reaction to the “old bureaucracies” that combined policy work and implementation in the same often very large administrations (Schick 2002). In terms of Aucoin (1990), the policy-operations divide is justified by NPM-advocates by referring to two major sets of ideas. Firstly, the primacy of politics school urges for a political domination of policy-making. Secondly the managerialist school urges for a better specialization of tasks (single-purpose agencies, closer to citizens, efficiency etc.). Also in countries where NPM has only been adopted in later stages, the policy-operations divide has been a substantial ingredient in the attempt to reform the public sector. For example in the Flemish governmental public sector reform project (BBB: “Beter Bestuurlijk Beleid”, or Better Governmental Policy), much emphasis is put on the policy-operations divide, resulting from the primacy of politics (Memorandum of Understanding Decreet Bestuurlijk Beleid):

*“The aim of the primacy of politics and ministerial responsibility is to conduct policies that are democratically legitimised ... this is best achieved through a clear and consistent division of tasks and responsibilities in the Flemish public sector: (1) between politics and administration (policy determination versus policy support and policy execution), (2) between policy support and policy execution (department versus agency) and (3) between politics and citizens and societal actors.”*

Some authors thus observed that *“many countries that have implemented NPM reforms increased horizontal specialization of administrative functions ... often coupled with a clearer separation of political and administrative functions of which the goal is a sharper structural separation of tasks related to policy advice, regulation and control, ownership, purchase and provision and so on”* (Christensen and Laegreid 2001). As such we can consider the policy-operations divide, part of the specialization doctrine of administrative reform (Hood & Jackson in Pollitt et al. 2004), as being part of the agencification reforms that came along with NPM.

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<sup>1</sup> Pollitt et al. claim that the policy-operations divide is not part of the NPM for both doctrinal (e.g. purchase-provide instead of policy-operations divide) and empirical reasons (where the policy-operations divide does not form a part of the agency movement, e.g. some agencies are purposely designed for policy roles, like regulatory agencies or agencies with an advisory task).

Although normative practitioner doctrines such as NPM have inspired governments to establish agencies that had their main tasks on the “operations”-side of the “policy-operations coin”, several authors have found that the empirical reality may be different than the normative and doctrinal prescriptions suggest. According to Jacobsen (2006) there has been many research (e.g. Svava 1998, 2001, Aberbach et al 1981, Aberbach and Rockman 1988, Kingdon 1995) that showed an “extensive, though varying, intermeshing of the two spheres [political and administrative]”. This view is formulated by Svava (1998, 2001) who claims that the “politics-administration dichotomy is an aberration”. Based on research – mainly in US local governments – Svava proposes an alternative model of complementarity:

*“There are shifting boundaries in both the policy and administrative arenas and changes in the behavior of both the sets of officials [politicians and bureaucrats]. Council members are more active in initiating specific policy proposals in response to pressing problems and more wary of accepting the manager’s recommendations, they are less interested in defining the mission of the city and setting long-term goals. Council members are voting less attention to broad oversight of administration and are more concerned about intervening in response to specific complaints. Managers are not more active in policy but rather more exposed as policy initiators – particularly concerning goals and long-term approaches”.*

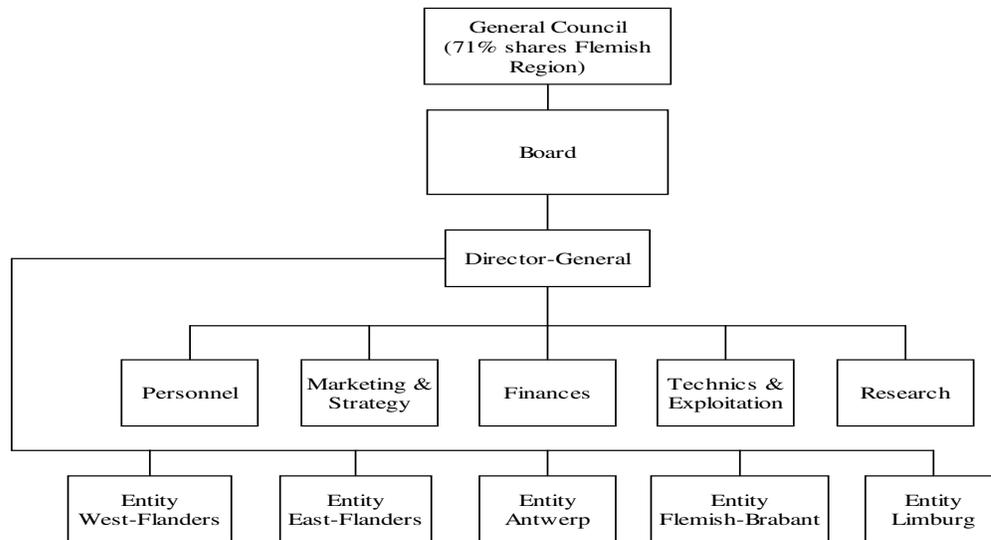
In this view, complementarity entails “ongoing interaction, reciprocal input, and mutual deference between elected officials and administrators. Administrators help to shape policy and they give it specific content and meaning in the process of implementation. Elected officials oversee implementation, probe specific complaints about poor performance and try to fine tune in performance problems” (Svava 2001). Research by Jacobsen in 30 Norwegian municipalities (2006) shows further that the relationship between the political and administrative sphere is a variable “opening up for the possibility that it may vary among contexts, structures, demographics and over time”. Fedele et al. (2005) point at a similar phenomenon: “the experience in many countries highlights examples of minister’s involvement in agency managerial and operational matters ... [on the other hand, also] the study of two agencies in Italy seems to indicate an influential role of the executive agencies in the policy formulation process, with a potentially ‘political’ role”.

The practitioner’s and academic interest in this topic, has inspired for an in-depth investigation of the policy-operations divide in practice. Therefore, two key research questions are formulated, that will be refined during the conceptual discussion in the next section of this article. The first research question is descriptive, and looks for what actors decide about the content of the policy. The second question is explorative-explanatory, and tries to figure out why these actors are so much (or so poorly) involved in the policy decision-making process.

### ***Empirical context***

#### *One agency*

The empirical setting of investigation is the Flemish public sector. Because of the complexity of the concept of policy autonomy (cf. infra), I decided to study one single embedded case study. The case organization I selected is the Flemish Public Transport Company (VVM De Lijn), which is a large player in the field of public transport and mobility. It was established in 1991 as a merger of three regional public transport companies. It is a territorially decentralized organization which has one central headquarters, and five regional (one per province) offices. It also has a board, headed by a president and representing the key share- and stakeholders of the VVM such as the government, the Flemish local and provincial authorities, and the unions.



The VVM is one of the largest public companies in Flanders, with over 7000 employees (of which 80% blue collar such as technicians and bus drivers). It is a functionally decentralized agency, with a public law legal personality. Its task is principally to provide public transport which means organizing and providing bus and tram services all over Flanders. The political oversight authority of the VVM is the Minister of Mobility, and his/ her cabinet of advisors (politically appointed advisors). The administrative oversight authority is the unit of Persons Traffic and Airports, which is a unit of the Administration of Roads and Traffic, itself a sub-division of the Ministry of the Flemish Community<sup>2</sup>.

*Two policy programs*

For investigating the extent to which the agency is involved in the policy decision making process in the field of public transport and mobility, I selected two policy programs: “basic mobility” and “Pegasus”. The choice for both policy programs is inspired by the sampling logic for my case study which is crucial in small-N case study research (see e.g. Van Thiel 2000). Both policy-programs have some similar, as well as different features. Firstly, there are some important *resemblances* between both policy programs. Both policy initiatives are relatively recent which is what makes them easily accessible for conducting research. Next to that both

<sup>2</sup> This is the administrative situation in the period before BBB was implemented.

policy-programs have a relatively high impact and visibility. Basic mobility is the restructuring of the supply of public transport in the whole Flemish region, and in every single local authority. This policy affects virtually every citizen, and especially the users of the public transport. Pegasus mainly affects the region of the Flemish Diamond<sup>3</sup> and the people who live there (57% of total population in Flanders), and a lot of home-work travellers, as the region hosts many employers (more than 60% of the workforce is located in the Flemish Diamond). In both programs, the VVM is the implementer of the policy, by delivering public transport services. For basic mobility there are implementation projects in all local authorities in Flanders (the level of implementing basic mobility is the local authority or a cluster of local authorities). For Pegasus one clear example of an implementation project is the so called Minder Hinder measures<sup>4</sup> in Antwerp. Furthermore, both policy-programs stem from policy needs that are politically and societally recognized. This can be illustrated by the fact that both programs address problems that are related to two of the key-pillars of the Mobility Plan Flanders: (1) guaranteeing access to mobility for every citizen in Flanders and (2) guaranteeing the accessibility to the Flemish economic centres. As such, basic mobility is part of the social policy component of public transport, whereas Pegasus is to be considered as part of the societal component of public transport. Finally, both programs are also to a large extent financially comparable. Although the realization of all projects in the Pegasus-plan would cost approx. 1,15 billion euro (investments), the realization of parts of Pegasus via the Minder Hinder measures stand for a cost of approx. 50 million investment costs (buying trams and buses) and an annual exploitation cost of 21 million euro (during the renovation works). The continuation of the initially temporary Minder Hinder measures in the future will cost 13 million euro annually (exploitation cost of continuation of Minder Hinder measures). Basic mobility costs 125 million euro annually at top speed implementation from 2007 on (approx. 86 million in 2004).

Notwithstanding these similarities, there is *one crucial difference* between both policy programs as well. The level to which the policy program of basic mobility is formalized and detailed is much larger than the level to which the policy program of Pegasus is formalized. In terms of Huber and Shipan (2002) this means that the policy of basic mobility is spelled out with a much larger level of detail compared to the policy of Pegasus. The bottom line is that basic mobility is arranged via a decree that was voted in Parliament, and via accompanying governmental decisions. These regulations arrange the way basic mobility is to be implemented in the field with a large level of detail (which suggests that the level of formal autonomy or discretion of the VVM in implementing the policy is low). Both large parts of the content of an implementation project in the field, as well as large parts of the process and procedure of how a project is to be implemented, are strictly regulated by this formal framework. Secondly, by having arranged basic mobility via a decree, a commitment has been made which has direct political and budgetary consequences. Basic mobility is defined as a right for the citizens in a decree and as such it has to be implemented within the time set and with budgets that have to be reserved for implementing the services that guarantee this right. On the other hand, the policy of Pegasus

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<sup>3</sup> The “Vlaamse Ruit” is the economic centre of Flanders. This region, in English the “Flemish Diamond”, is located between the cities of Antwerp, Ghent, Brussels and Leuven.

<sup>4</sup> “Minder Hinder” is the total of measures taken to decrease the negative effects of the renovation of the R1 in 2005-2006 (ring road Antwerp, one of the busiest highways in Europe). This renovation decreased the capacity of the R1 with 15%, hence large traffic problems were expected. The Minder Hinder measures had to anticipate these traffic problems (by amongst other temporarily increased supply of public transport by the VVM).

is only formalized to a small extent. Its formal status is a policy plan that has been taken up in the governmental agreement, implying a commitment by the government to take initiatives that start the implementation of the Pegasus-plan. Such a commitment has less direct consequences than a decree as it is not implying a right that has to be fulfilled by law. Next to that, the way the implementation projects that are under the Pegasus-umbrella are to be implemented is specified in a less detailed way as is the case for basic mobility. The formal discretion of the VVM in implementing the projects of the policy of Pegasus can thus be considered as much larger than is the case for the projects under basic mobility.

## WHO DECIDES ON POLICY?

### *Concept and method*

In order to be able to answer our first (descriptive) research question, a two step approach is followed. Firstly, I identified the main policy decisions that were taken during the policy decision-making process (via document analysis). Secondly, I investigated to what extent the various actors in the policy field were engaged in taking these decisions. Therefore, I used a very broad concept of policy autonomy for my research purposes (Verschuere 2006): *the level to which a given actor decides on the content of the policy (broad sense). These decisions about the content of the policy are taken during different stages in the policy-process, each stage having its own distinct features, involving different kinds of policy-choices to be made and policy-decisions to be taken.* The different stages I distinguish between are the preparation-, determination-, implementation- and evaluation-phases. As such, “policy autonomy” is about “taking or at least influencing decisions about policy content” which is conceptually not the same as “delivering policy advice”. Delivering policy advice is a role which agencies take up in a lot of instances (Brans et al. 2003), and can be defined as the set of activities that are undertaken with the aim to optimize the policy-design of an actor, the policy-decision by an actor or the policy-processing by an actor. As such delivering policy advice is not equal to deciding about the content of the policy, or making policy-decisions. In fact an agency that delivers a large extent of policy advice (during the conception of a decree for example) may have large policy autonomy in the case the suggestions made by the agency – in its role as policy advisor – about the desirable content of the policy have been taken over by the eventual policy decision-makers. Next to that, the same agency may have low policy autonomy in case the suggestions by the agency have been rejected. Policy autonomy as I have conceptualized is also different from the formal policy decision making in the political arena. If we only would look at policy autonomy in the sense of the ability to take the formal decision that approves the policy, then no agency would have policy autonomy, as in a democracy the formal policy decision is a prerogative of elected politicians (e.g. parliament voting a decree). My conceptualization of policy autonomy is to be considered as the extent to which the agency has had input in, or influenced the eventual content of the decisions that were made about the policy in different stages of the policy process (thus not only in the determination-phase, but also during the preparation, the implementation and the evaluation).

For answering my descriptive research question I rely on two data-sources. Firstly I collected all kinds of documents on the policy programs under scrutiny which I analysed in a qualitative way. I systematized these documents, and I summarized these documents by only retaining the crucial information (“what decisions are taken”, and “who has taken these decisions”). Secondly, I distributed a standardized questionnaire to 41 key-respondents (24 responded, approx. 60%). These respondents were very diverse (people from VVM, from the ministerial cabinet, independent experts, MP’s, etc.) but have in common that they are very familiar with the policy-programs under scrutiny. The respondents had to tick the influence of actors in the policy decision-making process on a 1-10 scale. The data from these questionnaires were quantified and used for a quantitative analysis (“who has taken the decision about the policy?”). Based on both data-sets, I was able to draw a triangulated picture on what actors were involved and to what extent, in the decision-making process on the policy of “basic mobility” and “Pegasus”, per policy phase (preparation, determination, implementation and evaluation).

## ***Empirical results***

*What actors decided on the policy of basic mobility (policy program 1)?*

The *preparation* of basic mobility took place in the period before 2000 and involved mainly decisions on the vision about what basic mobility is and on the principles about what the policy should look like. In this phase “basic mobility” as a policy issue was defined and refined. Firstly, the goals of the policy were specified. Essentially basic mobility wants to resolve the problem of “traffic poverty” and mobility inequality in society. Secondly, the intention to formalize this policy via decree was expressed in order to define “basic mobility” as a social right. This social right applies to “all citizens, in all region of Flanders”, notwithstanding special attention is given to certain groups that are considered risk-groups and as such vulnerable for suffering from traffic poverty (disabled people, elderly people, people living in rural areas etc.). Thirdly, the intention has been expressed to delivering basic mobility by specifying explicit output norms for the public transport services. Public transport is to be delivered within acceptable time-limits and distance limits, and therefore norms and criteria should be developed (frequency of service, number of bus stops, amplitude of service etc.). Fourthly, the belief was growing that not only service delivery norms were necessary but that also a new and modernized system of organizing the public transport network was considered necessary (net-standardization) within which the public transport supply of public management should be framed (the later “netmanagement”, cf. infra).

In 2001 the decree on basic mobility was voted in the Flemish Parliament and in 2003 two important Governmental Decisions (concerning basic mobility & netmanagement) were accepted. As such, the policy was politically determined and approved in this period. The major decisions that were made in the determination phase of the policy of basic mobility deal with the content of the decree and the content of the governmental decisions. The goals, as well as the target groups of the policy were decided upon already to a large extent during the definition of the policy in the preparatory phase, and are reflected in the decree and

the governmental decisions. What has been decided in this stage, are the principles within which concrete norms and criteria for service delivery should be framed. These principles have been formalized in the decree, and the norms and criteria have been arranged via the governmental decision on basic mobility that accompanies the decree. The norms deal with frequency of service, maximum waiting time between two bus-services, and the distance between home and first bus stop. Another key decision that was made in the governmental decision on basic mobility is about the program of implementing the policy of basic mobility. A formula for making an objective needs-analysis is decided upon (“in which local authorities does the supply of public transport deviates the most from the norms of basic mobility?”). Based on this formula a priority list was made that arranged the order of implementation of basic mobility in the Flemish local authorities. Also netmanagement has been determined. This is the system which has to be applied by the VVM in order to build their net of public transport lines all over Flanders in the most efficient way. Essentially, netmanagement defines the quality criteria upon which the public transport network needs to be organized. As such this system of netmanagement is considered to be the most important instrument to realize the policy of basic mobility.

The implementation of basic mobility started in 2000, although the decree and governmental decisions were not politically approved by then. Therefore, the implementation of basic mobility can analytically be studied in two phases: the implementation that took place before and after 2003 (date of formalization of the policy in decree and governmental decisions). Considering the implementation of the policy, two crucial policy-decisions are important. Firstly, on the program-level one has to decide where (in which local authority) the policy should be implemented first (knowing that by 2006 every local authority in Flanders should have basic mobility according to the decree). Therefore, an objective needs-analysis was made that compared current and desired supply according to the norms of basic mobility, in every local authority. Because the norms for service delivery were not specified yet in the period 1999-2000, one relied on norms from the draft versions of the decree and the governmental decisions. Based on this needs-analysis a priority list of local authorities is made that determines the implementation order of the policy of basic mobility. Secondly, at the individual project-level one has to decide how basic mobility will be implemented in the field. This is the question how to achieve the norms of the decretal framework. Important decisions are about what public transport lines need to be organized, what vehicles (types of buses) need to be used, and where the services need to be supplied. Individual implementation projects have to be drafted and implemented at a very operational level: deciding where to drive, when to drive, what vehicle to drive etc.

The evaluation of basic mobility is done on two levels. First there is the annual evaluation of individual implementation projects by an audit commission (composed by the VVM, the oversight administration, the stakeholder-organization, and an external auditor). The main task of this commission is to check whether the service levels in individual projects meet the decretal norms. In these annual individual project evaluations the VVM delivers data about the bus-lines and based on these data it is controlled whether the evaluation criteria are met. Secondly there is the program-wide evaluation which has been done in 2005 and still continues. In this evaluation the map of Flanders has been taken and blind spots (places where no projects have been

implemented yet) are identified. Based on this evaluation a decision was made about how the remainder of implementation projects will be executed. The evaluation of basic mobility did not put the policy itself into question, because government and minister have repeatedly expressed their belief in the principles of the policy. What has been questioned however was the way in which the policy should be implemented in the future. This was also recognized in some interviews I conducted: “the evaluation is not about the policy of basic mobility as such, but about how to implement basic mobility in the most efficient and effective way”. The comparison that was made in the evaluation between the still existing blind-spots on the one hand, and the budget that is available for completing basic mobility on the other hand, has urged for a “pragmatic” implementation (reality check of theoretical norms of the decree, cf. supra). Resulting from this evaluation, two crucial decisions have been made. Firstly, the decision to strictly prioritize the projects (local authorities) that have not been served by now. Secondly, in implementing the policy, some pragmatism is needed. Therefore 10 criteria are developed that should be taken into account, and that deal with the way how basic mobility is to be implemented in a more realistic and efficient way ( e.g. which vehicles to use, how frequent and when the services should be delivered, etc.).

Having presented the major policy decisions that were made in the different stages of the policy process of basic mobility, the question remains what actor(s) have influenced or shaped these decisions.

Policy-phase	Period	Key policy-decisions made	Input VVM	Key actor
Preparation	-2000	Mainly decisions about the principles of the intended policy -Policy goals and societal effects to be reached. -Intention for a decree	LOW	Minister and cabinet of Mobility
Determination (decree & governmental decision basic mobility)	1999-2002	Mainly choices about the content of the policy -Service delivery output norms -Refinement and explicitation of output norms	LOW	Minister and cabinet of Mobility
Determination (governmental decision netmanagement)	2001-2003	Mainly decisions about quality norms and standards for public transport delivery and public transport networks	HIGH	-Minister and cabinet of mobility -VVM central services
Implementation before 2003 (program)	1999-2002	Mainly decisions about the process of implementing the policy: priority list for implementation	LOW	Minister and cabinet of Mobility
Implementation before 2003 (projects)	2000-2003	Mainly decisions about how individual projects should be implemented in the field	HIGH	VVM provincial entities
Implementation after 2003 (program)	2002-2005	Mainly decisions about the process of implementing the policy: priority list for implementation	HIGH	-VVM (central and entities) -Minister and cabinet of Mobility -Oversight administration
Implementation after 2003 (projects)	2003-	Mainly decisions about how individual projects should be implemented in the field	HIGH	VVM provincial entities
Evaluation	2005	Mainly decisions about pragmatic implementation of the policy in the field	HIGH	-VVM central -Minister and cabinet of Mobility

The table above is the summary of the answers to this question. It shows what actor(s) was (were) decisive in the key policy decisions made about the policy of basic mobility I discussed above. It also shows the input or influence of the key implementing agency VVM. Per phase in the policy cycle, the table shows the triangulated research results (data in the table are based on both the documentary analysis, as well as on the questionnaire analysis, cf. supra). As the table shows, the policy of basic mobility has been determined to a large extent by the minister of Mobility and his cabinet. The principles of the policy (outcomes, goals to be reached) have been prepared to a large extent politically. Other actors, like the VVM, were only to a very small extent involved. The same pattern can be observed in the determination-phase of the policy. The content of the decree and of the governmental decisions has been decided upon to a large extent by the minister of Mobility, without any significant input from other actors. The only exception is the governmental decision on netmanagement, in which the VVM was able to set some directions about how to organize the public transport nets. The third important decision that was largely taken by the minister alone, has been the program of implementing the policy. At this stage, priority lists of local authorities where basic mobility needed to be implemented, were set. From then on, the influence of the VVM started to grow. Especially the provincial entities of the VVM (responsible for delivering public transport services in their province) started to dominate the decision-making process, that was more and more operational by then (individual project decisions: where to drive, when to drive, what vehicles to drive etc.). Finally, at the time of the program-wide evaluation of the policy of basic mobility, the decisions were to a large extent shared by the minister of Mobility and by the VVM central services (decisions about the future of the policy).

*What actors decide on the policy of Pegasus (policy program 2)?*

At the end of the nineties societal consensus started to grow that one of the key policy issues for the future was the preservation of the accessibility of the “Flemish Diamond”, the economic heart of Flanders. One of the measures to be taken to fight ever growing traffic jams and traffic congestion was the development of a high quality public transport net. Around 2000 three issues came together. Firstly the key policy goal for future mobility policy was set by the Mobility Plan Flanders and by the parliamentary debates surrounding this Plan. One of the key pillars of this Plan was that the Flemish Diamond as a region should be kept accessible in the future. Therefore traffic jams should be attacked and a long-term public transport strategy for the largest cities and their suburban regions should be developed. Secondly it was clear that part of the solution lay in an ameliorated public transport net. Therefore a high quality net of public transport (buses and trams) should be developed. Thirdly, and contrary to basic mobility (which is a policy that applies to the whole of Flanders) this policy is specifically targeted at a specific region and as such mainly applies to the people that live there and that work there. In this preparatory phase which precedes the drafting and the determination of the eventual plan important strategic choices thus have been made about the importance of the issue of accessibility, and the likely role to be played by public transport in a policy towards such guaranteed accessibility.

In 2003 the eventual choices were made about how the problem of the accessibility in the region could be addressed by the use of public transport. These choices are made explicit in the Pegasus-plan, which is the merger of the plans that were developed earlier by the VVM provincial entities for the cities of Antwerp and Ghent and for the Brussels region. These separate plans were taken together in an overall plan for the Flemish Diamond. In this plan the policy goals and the desired policy output have been made concrete. The plan contains mainly choices about how public transport may help to reach the policy goals expressed. The aim is to reach extra travellers for public transport and to decrease traffic jams in the region. This goal is operationalized in explicit targets (80 million extra travellers for public transport by 2025), to be reached by ameliorating the bus and tram net in the region. As such crucial decisions have been made about what the ambition is, what the time-frame is what infrastructure is needed, what type of vehicles are to be used, and about where the services have to be ameliorated or extended.

Pegasus, which originated as a “plan” that has to address the mobility needs that were identified earlier, became “official policy” in 2004 when the new Flemish government (Leterme I) took up the entire Pegasus-plan in its governmental agreement with the ambition “to start taking action for the realization of it”. Unless basic mobility which is a middle-long run project that is formalized in a decree and has to be implemented by a date that has been specified in advance, Pegasus is a long term policy project which is not formalized in a decree (cf. supra). The implication is that the Pegasus-plan is to be realized and implemented piece by piece in function of budgetary and policy opportunities, whereas for basic mobility an implementation program is made that orders the implementation of individual projects in the field (cf. supra).

So far only few projects under the umbrella of Pegasus have been started with implementation. One example is the Minder Hinder measures. Several decisions had to be taken as to the content and the process of the implementation of Minder Hinder. Firstly, the choice was made to increase the existing capacity of buses and trams. New trams and buses were ordered for increasing the frequency of service delivery, the capacity of the public transport and for organizing new transport trajectories. Related to this decision also the network of public transport had to be re-arranged into a new exploitation model (choice of trajectories, choice of vehicles for different trajectories, choice of frequency of service delivery on trajectories, and choice of linking the trajectories into the existing network). Secondly, procedural choices were made about the way in which the measures need to be implemented. It has been decided that the measures had to be overviewed by an administrative steering group consisting of all actors involved in the Minder Hinder measures, and presided by the administration of the Flemish Community. Next to that and more specific for the public transport measures, a provincial audit commission was organized for evaluating the measures. Finally it was decided that the buses and trams that were ordered would be financed by a public-private partnership that was established in 2003 for financing mobility investments in Antwerp (NV Beheersmaatschappij Antwerpen Mobiel).

As the Minder Hinder measures (public transport) are some of the first implementation projects of the larger Pegasus plan (which has a time frame from 2003-2025), and the Pegasus plan is not implemented totally so

far, the evaluation can only be focused on implemented exploitation projects such as the Minder Hinder measures public transport. In 2005 the Minder Hinder measures were evaluated and the results of the evaluation were presented to a provincial audit commission. The bottom-line was that the measures had been very successful. A considerable increase of public transport travellers has been observed. Based on these positive evaluations the decision was taken that the initially temporary measures (only for the time of the renovation of the ring road) should be made permanent (or at least a large part of the measures).

Coming back now to our first research question - what actors have been the key decision-makers during the policy process of Pegasus -, the table underneath summarizes the results of the empirical investigation. The table shows triangulated proofs gathered from both documentary and questionnaire sources.

Policy-phase	Period	Key policy-decisions made	Input VVM	Key actor
Preparation	-2003	Mainly strategic vision building about the role of public transport as part of the solution for guaranteeing accessibility in Flemish Diamond	HIGH	-Minister and cabinet of Mobility -VVM central administration
Determination	2002-2003	Mainly decisions about the public transport service delivery (output) in the future, in the region of the Flemish Diamond (output targets)	HIGH	VVM-entities
Implementation (content of the measures)	2002-2004	Decisions about the public service delivery output and how to deliver it in a specific implementation project of Pegasus (realizing parts of the Pegasus plan)	HIGH	VVM-entities
<i>Implementation (decisions on process of implementation)</i>	2002-2004	<i>(inconclusive results)</i>	(-)	(-)
Evaluation	2005	Decisions about the permanent continuation of the public transport supply after the Minder Hinder project has been realized.	HIGH	-VVM -minister and cabinet of Mobility

As the table shows, VVM had a considerable input in the preparation and determination phases of the policy. In the preparation phase, the VVM central services, together with other key actors in the mobility debate, were influential in the vision-building about mobility in the region of the Flemish Diamond. In the determination phase, the key actor was the VVM provincial entities that developed the concrete plans on public transport amelioration in the region. This plan was later politically accepted and approved by the government, in its governmental agreement. The same conclusion can be made for the implementation of the Pegasus plan via the Minder Hinder measures in Antwerp. Here it was the VVM provincial entity of Antwerp that developed and implemented the public transport measures under the Pegasus-umbrella (“what” measures to implement). In the evaluation phase of the policy, when the decision was taken to continue the successful Minder Hinder measures (that were originally only temporal, for the time of the renovation-works), a strong coalition of VVM and minister of Mobility was able to prepare this decision, and to push it through. The results of the analysis on what actors decided on the decisions about the process of implementing are inconclusive (see *italics* in table above). The questionnaire analysis reveals a large influence by the VVM at that stage, but this finding cannot be supported by the document analysis.

## *Discussion*

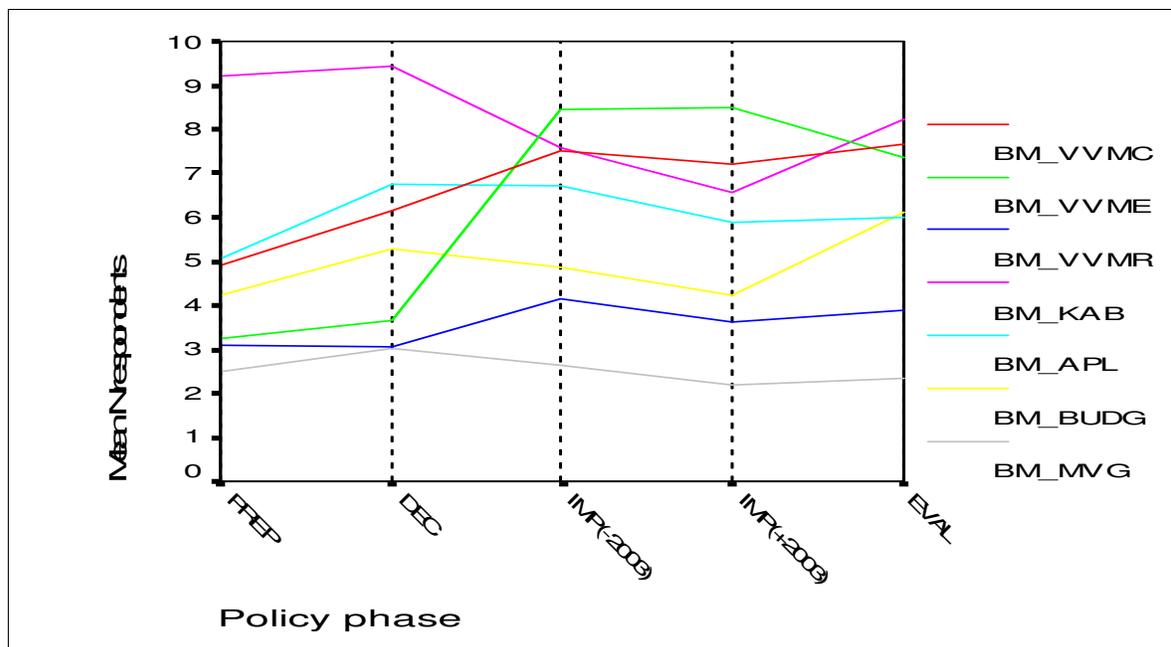
The results of my analysis show that the extent to which the agency (as administrative actor) is involved in the policy decision-making process may vary on three levels: between policy-programs in which the agency is involved, between policy-phases of the same policy-program (assuming that in all phases decisions are taken), and also between actors embedded in the agency (central management, provincial entities, board of the agency).

Firstly, there are some differences *between policy-programs* to be observed as to the agency's influence in the policy process. For example, the input by the VVM in the policy of Pegasus is higher than the input in the policy of basic mobility in both the preparation- and determination phases. The VVM seems to have had a large input in the decisions concerning the vision and principles of the policy of accessibility of the Flemish Diamond, and the role of the public transport in this (during the preparation phase). Next to that and during the determination-phase, the policy-vision that was prepared to a large extent by the VVM has also been formalized eventually in a politically approved plan as it was conceived by the VVM. Contrary to the policy of Pegasus, the VVM hardly had any input in the vision-building about the role of the public transport in the policy of equal access to mobility via public transport (basic mobility).

Secondly, there are also differences to be observed as to the policy autonomy of the agency *between phases of the policy cycle*. I found that the level of input by the VVM in the implementation- and evaluation-phases of both policy programs is high. In the case of basic mobility this high policy autonomy is related to the fact that the VVM designs the implementation-projects and implements them in the field. Often this happened and happens in a pragmatic way, whereby the norms for service delivery that have been formalized in the decree are not followed for the full 100 percent. In the case of Minder Hinder, the high policy autonomy in the implementation indicates a high degree of freedom in the design and implementation of public transport measures in the field. This finding shows that in both policy-programs that are strictly regulated, and in policy-programs are less regulated (Pegasus), the autonomy of the agency in implementing the policy may be high. In the former case, high policy autonomy must be considered as delivering services in a way that deviates to a certain extent from the formalized prescriptions. In the latter case, high policy autonomy must be considered as the extent to which the agency has the nearly total freedom, within the budgets accorded, to decide by what service delivery a defined policy-goal has to be reached (and how the services need to be delivered).

Thirdly, the empirical investigation shows that in both cases, the policy process is to a large extent *dominated by the interplay between the political principal (minister of Mobility) and the implementing agency (VVM)*. Other actors input in the policy process is less pronounced (e.g. administrative oversight ministry, other ministers and ministries than the portfolio minister, parliament, stakeholders etc.). This observation is not surprising and may be explained by features of the policy-making process in Flanders which are reflected in my case study as well.

Policy-making and making policy-choices is a political prerogative. In a situation in which the political decision making process is dominated by large ministerial cabinets of advisors (personal political secretariats of the minister), these findings just reflect this decision making practice (which is not to say that actors in the oversight administration may not be involved in *supporting* the decision making process, cf. Vancoppenolle 2006). Next to that, the policy-making capacity of large public agencies (like the VVM) is becoming more and more an important factor in the decision making process, which may be related to the finding that the policy autonomy of the VVM is increasing during the later years of my analysis-period. The weak role of the administration (except during the implementation-phases) in policy decision making may be explained by the fact that the core-administration mainly has an oversight role (e.g. on finances and on the content of the policy). Moreover, the agency (as an important player in the policy process) is not a homogeneous player. There is considerable variation between the policy influence of the central management, the provincial entities, and the board of the organisation. The figure underneath visualizes one another as to the relative influence in the policy program of basic mobility<sup>5</sup>, of the different actors in the policy process. This figure is the result of the quantitative questionnaire analysis. On the X-axis are the different stages of the policy cycle. On the Y-axis the influence of the actors in the policy process on a 1-10 scale is represented. The colored lines represent the actors in the policy process<sup>6</sup>. The score (influence on 1-10 scale) an actor has in a given policy phase is the unweighted average of the scores that were attributed by the respondents to the questionnaire (N respondents is 24). The respondents were asked for “the influence of actor X in policy phase Y of the policy program Z, 1 representing no influence, 10 representing very large influence”.



<sup>5</sup> A comparable figure for the policy program of Pegasus can be presented. I only show the figure for basic mobility, for supporting my point about the potential large number of different players in the policy decision making process.

<sup>6</sup> VVM central management (VVMC), the VVM board (VVMR), the VVM provincial entities (VVME), the cabinet of the oversight minister of Mobility (KAB), the oversight unit from the Ministry of the Flemish Community (APL), the cabinet of the minister of Budget (BUD) and the other units from the Ministry of the Flemish Community (not oversight, MVG).

As the figure shows, and as I already showed above, the policy decision making process is mainly dominated by the minister of Mobility, and by VVM-actors (central and provincial entities, not the board). Other actors only sporadically tend to show some – but not very large – influence (according to our respondents). For example, the cabinet of the minister of Budget has increased influence in the decision-making process (because of the increasing cost of the program, and the subsequent strive for economy and efficiency in implementing the program).

## **EXPLAINING POLICY AUTONOMY**

The descriptive research resulted in some interesting conclusions that urge for some explanations. Therefore, in the second part of this paper I will address these issues, and present an explanation for the observed policy influence of the key actors in the policy process.

### ***Method and data***

The empirical data for answering the explanatory research questions come from 32 face-to-face interviews with key respondents. These respondents are the same respondents I addressed with the written questionnaire for the descriptive research (41 people were invited, 78% of the respondents I addressed agreed with a face-to-face interview). The interviews were of a semi-structured nature. I started with the presentation of the results of the descriptive analyses by presenting the observed level of policy autonomy of the VVM in the different policy phases of both policy programs to the respondents. I asked whether the respondent could agree with these observations concerning the level of policy-autonomy of the VVM, per policy-program (basic mobility and Pegasus) and per phase of the policy-cycle, which provided me with extra evidence for the validity of my descriptive findings. The core of the interview was identifying the conditions by which the observed policy autonomy can be explained. I asked the respondents *“how they would explain the observed level of policy autonomy, or the observed level of influence in the policy-decisions made by the VVM”*. This question was repeated for all policy-phases of both policy-programs. First, I let the respondents build their story about the factors that – according to them – contribute to the level of policy autonomy observed (open question). Second, I presented a list with general explanatory factors to the respondent that potentially may help to build, add or complete their story<sup>7</sup>. This process was repeated for every phase of both policy-programs.

The data I received from these interviews were analyzed in two steps. *Firstly* I made a respondent sheet per individual respondent which enabled me to arrange the data per respondent. In these sheets the data for explaining the levels of observed autonomy were arranged per policy-program and per policy-phase by

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<sup>7</sup> This list of potentially explanatory factors is very general in nature, in order to make complex theoretical concepts “understandable” for the respondent. It contains variables that were selected for their potential explanatory value for the level of policy autonomy observed. These variables or factors are based on the macro-theoretical frameworks and the existing empirical explanations for autonomy in the literature.

writing down the relevant pieces of text<sup>8</sup> of the interview recordings as answered literally by the respondent. In a *second step* the individual respondent sheets are taken together in a framework that allows for comparing policy-programs and policy- phases. This results in aggregated summary tables per policy phase. Aggregated summary tables contain all the relevant statements made by all respondents about the policy autonomy of the VVM in a particular policy-phase of a particular policy-program. Based on these summary tables I looked for patterns of recurring explanations for the observed policy autonomy via the coding of the statements in the summary table of the policy-phase in case.

## ***Empirical results***

The table below summarizes my model for explaining policy autonomy of agencies. I have to be careful however, as this model is empirically grounded in only one case study. Therefore, I would rather classify it as a hypothetical model that needs to be tested and investigated further.

FACTORS ↓	PREP		DET		IMP		EVA	
	BM	PEG	BM	PEG	BM	PEG	BM	PEG
<i>Capacity of the agency</i>	■	■	■	-	■	■	■	■
<i>Political context around the policy</i>	-	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
<i>Role-perception agency in policy-decisions</i>	■	■	■	-	■	■	-	-
<i>Functionality for agency (to be involved in decision making)</i>	■	■	■	■	-	■	■	■
<i>Functionality for oversight authorities (for having agency involved in decision making)</i>	■	-	■	-	■	■	-	-
<i>Relationship agency-oversight authorities</i>	■	■	■	■	-	-	■	-
<i>Attitude of the agency towards the policy-program</i>	■	■	-	-	■	-	-	-

The model consists of 7 factors that may influence the extent to which the agency (as administrative actor and implementer of the policy) is able to to play a role the policy decision-making process. In the table, I show per factor, in which policy-program and in which policy phase an influence has been found in my case study (■ yes / - no).

### *Capacity of the agency*

I firstly found that the extent to which agencies influence the decisions in the policy-making process, is determined by the capacity of these agencies to be involved in the decision making process. The influence of this factor was found in different phases in the policy cycle and over different policy-programs. The empirical findings show that large levels of capacities of the agency can be related to high levels of policy autonomy,

<sup>8</sup> Only relevant pieces of interviews were written down in the sheets. Relevant pieces of text are the interview-extracts that deal with the subject of inquiry. By making this selection while filling in the sheets, all “distortion” (not relevant extracts) was filtered. Distortion has shown to often occur in the interviews, and happens when the respondent starts “to talk away” of the subject.

whereas small levels of capacities can be related to low levels of policy autonomy. “Capacity” may firstly be conceptualized as the ability and skills of the agency to be involved in policy-related work (having the necessary skills to “think” about policy, to build visions). The lack of sufficient skills to “think” about future policy and to help developing policy visions was related to the poor influence of the VVM during the preparation of the policy of basic mobility, whereas increased policy-capacity by the time of the preparation of the policy of Pegasus could be related to the higher levels of policy autonomy observed. Equally, during the programming of the policy in the implementation phase of basic mobility, when a method for needs-analyses and priority lists for implementing individual projects needed to be developed, this capacity is related to the extent to which the agency is involved. The increase over time of these skills (reflected in the increase of policy workers in a newly established policy cell e.g.) within the agency has led to an increased influence of the VVM in developing priority lists.

Capacity may also be considered as the “technical expertise” of the agency that is required for dealing with their task. This kind of capacity was found to be a factor that is mainly related to the level of policy autonomy of the agency in the determination-, implementation-, and evaluation phases of the policy. I found that the presence of this (quasi-monopolistic) technical expertise of the VVM can be related to large levels of policy autonomy (or policy-discretion) during the implementation of public transport projects under basic mobility and Minder Hinder. I also found that the large influence of the VVM in the evaluation phase of the policy was positively related to the technical knowledge and availability of policy data within the agency. Thirdly, during the determination-phase of netmanagement (basic mobility), the large capacity of the agency that is the result of their knowledge of the field and their implementation-expertise, has been related to large levels of policy autonomy in determining the governmental decision (determining a system that organizes the implementation of public transport projects).

Capacity is thus found to be a strong driver for policy autonomy in my case. To a large extent, this “capacity” may originate from organizational structural features (structural capacity, see Egeberg 2003). In this respect, these structural theoretical perspectives would explain autonomy as being the result of the extent to which structural features of the agency lead to the necessary capacities for the agency (to be able) to be involved in policy decision making processes. These perspectives thus claim that organizational capacities are function of internal organizational structural features. The presence of organizational units that deal with policy work, the presence of a skilled workforce of highly educated people that are employed in these policy-units, features of organizational specialization and the centralization of the policy-capacity of the organization seem to contribute positively to the level of policy-making capacity or technical expertise of the organization (Egeberg 1995). Also Carpenter (2001) found that organizational capacity and expertise, resulting from strong leadership, talented offices that are coherent, and offices in which turnover is minimized (stability, experience), is one important factor for establishing the reputation and legitimacy of the agency upon which it can rely to “forge” decision making autonomy. Similar claims about the importance of organizational capacity and expertise were advanced by Hammond and Knott (1999). These authors argued that specific leadership and skills of the management may be a prerequisite to advance the preferred policy of the agency. Krause

(2003) argued that organizational stability is important for the agency to be able “to handle” discretion, and Hawkins and Jacoby (2004) have argued that agency-expertise and knowledge of the agency may be important resources for the agency to be able to have discretion or autonomy in (implementing) policy.

*Political context around the policy program*

Contrary to the capacity-factor, the influence of the political context on the level of policy autonomy is not straightforward. I found that both “supportive” and “rather hostile” political contexts (towards the policy-program at stake) may constrain or enable the level of policy autonomy the agency enjoys. In the first case, not much political or societal opposition for the policy is observed (large political agreement over party-borders in the coalition e.g.), while in the latter case the policy is opposed to a large extent.

Firstly, I found that a supportive political context around a policy program may be related to low levels of policy autonomy of the agency. In the determination of basic mobility, the political context of the day showed some opportunities to have the policy-program voted in a decree. A new governmental coalition, the better budgetary context and the relative power position of the minister of Mobility in the government, created the room for having the decree basic mobility voted. This opened a “window of opportunity” for the minister of Mobility to have his decree approved politically (voted). This supportive political context urged the minister to take quick action (having the decree voted quickly), which in the same run also decreased the opportunities for other actors (e.g. the agency) to be involved in the decision making process. I only found this relationship for the determination of the policy of basic mobility (not for Pegasus), which suggests that specific features of the policy-program may mediate the influence of political context on the level of autonomy of the agency observed: contrary to the policy of Pegasus, the policy of basic mobility (a) was largely prepared by the political oversight authorities (reflecting that this policy is high priority for them) and (b) had to be formalized strictly (by a decree) because the program was highly contested by other political parties (notwithstanding the governmental context was temporarily supportive to have the decree voted, the salience of the policy remained high). To a certain extent, this shows that “institutional decision making rules and roles” that apply, may constrain the decision making behavior of the oversight authorities (Knott and Hammond 2003). Similarly, Scott’s regulative pillar (2001) suggests that regulatory processes (e.g. decision making processes in a governmental coalition) will determine, constrain and regularize behavior. Actors will pursue their self-interest (their preferred policy) within the constraints of the regulative decision making processes. In the case of the determination of the decree basic mobility, the minister was able to have his preferred policy approved, within the decision making process of the governmental coalition of the day. To a certain extent the governmental situation opened a window of opportunity for the minister to have his preferred policy approved within the decision making arena of the government. The combination of this window of opportunity, with decision making rules and roles that apply in the government, urged the minister for fast decision making, resulting in decreased chances for other actors to be involved in the decision making (to a certain extent they were “taken at speed”).

I also found that in some cases a supportive political context may be related to large levels of policy autonomy of the agency. The political context around the policy of Pegasus has always been rather supportive. Through the whole policy cycle, I could observe large levels of policy autonomy of the VVM. “Political context” is conceptualized broad here, as the level of general political and societal support for the policy-program<sup>9</sup>. In the case of the preparation and determination of the policy of Pegasus, the supportive political context was characterized by a widespread political agreement about the policy-problems to be addressed and about the measures to be taken (to resolve the accessibility-problems of the Flemish Diamond). In this context, the agency was left the room and opportunities to develop the policy, and to have the policy approved politically as it was conceived by the agency. Also in this case, specific features of the policy program may mediate the influence of political context on the level of autonomy observed. Contrary to the policy of basic mobility, the policy of Pegasus (a) has been prepared predominantly by the agency (thus being high priority for the agency itself) and (b) is not intended to be formalized strictly (no direct consequences attached to the policy, e.g. budgetary consequences). Under these conditions, a supportive political environment may enable the agency to exert more policy autonomy (in preparing and determining the policy). Also in the implementation and evaluation of Pegasus and Minder Hinder, a supportive political context enabled for large policy autonomy of the VVM in the decision making process. Again, the supportive political context (all actors involved recognized the problem to be addressed) and the fact that the measures in the end turned out to be a huge success, increased the political support of the program after the evaluation (“no politician would dare to turn back the measures”). These findings suggest that level of policy autonomy of the agency may also be explained by the agency’s assessment of opportunities that emerge in the political environment. More specific, agencies may determine their decision making behavior in response to needs that emerge from the (political) environment. The notion of strategic contingency for example, claims that agencies may match their strategies to the need for action and being responsive to policy-related evolutions in the environment (Hult 2003). In the case of Pegasus, the large level of policy autonomy can be explained as the agency strategically proposing solutions for policy-problems that are prominent on the policy agenda and that are shared among many political parties. The level of autonomy is then the result of responsive behavior of the agency with regard to a policy program that receives wide political and societal support.

Thirdly, I found that a rather “hostile” political context may be related to large levels of policy autonomy of the agency. I observed that during the later implementation-phases and the evaluation-phase of the policy of basic mobility, the political context around the policy became increasingly salient (“hostile”). The fact that the policy was set more and more under pressure politically, was found to be related to high levels of policy autonomy of the VVM during these phases. The rather “hostile” political context is characterized by the fact that the new governmental coalition of 2004 has altered the power relationships (and the relative power position of the minister of Mobility in the coalition), and the policy-priorities in the government. The new governmental coalition in 2004 was composed of some powerful political parties that questioned the policy-program, and that intended to decrease the budgets for the policy of basic mobility (and public transport in

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<sup>9</sup> Whereas above the political context is defined as the situation in the government of the day (rather narrowly defined as the interaction between political parties in the government of the day).

general). In this situation, the demand for “pragmatic” implementation of basic mobility grew. As such the large policy autonomy of the agency may be explained by the fact that the VVM – as implementer of the policy with the technical expertise and data – is the key actor to propose how and what “pragmatic” implementation should be, and how the policy should be conducted in the future. A more cynical explanation could be that the political oversight authorities responsible for Mobility pass the hot potato to the agency for taking decisions in times of increased political turbulence around the policy. To a certain extent this latter finding (salient policy, high autonomy for the agency) contradicts the claim that in highly salient policy issues the agency will tend to be steered more strictly (Pollitt et al 2004, Hart 2002) or will have the incentive to demand less discretion (Krause 2003).

#### *Role perception by the agency*

The agency’s perception about the role it has to play in the policy-cycle, and how this role is to be fulfilled, can also determine the level of policy autonomy. This factor was found to mainly play a role in the preparation- and implementation phases of both policy-programs. The concept of “role-perception” may firstly be considered as the perception of the agency whether it has to be involved in the decision making process in a certain policy-phase or not. This kind of role-perception may predominantly help to explain the level of policy autonomy of the agency in the preparation-phase of the policy. I found that the VVM shifted from seeing themselves as merely an implementing agency, to an agency that perceives to have a large role to play in policy-preparation and vision-building in the policy-field as well. This observation has found to be related to the different levels of policy autonomy observed between the preparation of basic mobility and the preparation of Pegasus. By the early 2000’s, when the policy of Pegasus started to be prepared, the VVM more and more started to perceive itself as a policy-agency. This shift in role-perception may help to explain why the VVM had large levels of policy autonomy during the preparation of Pegasus. To the contrary, during the preparation of basic mobility and during the determination of the decree (period before and around 2000), the VVM merely saw its role as being a policy-implementer (delivering public transport services), which may be related to the low levels of policy autonomy during the preparation of basic mobility (and during the determination of the decree basic mobility). Thirdly, also during the programming of the implementation in the later phases of basic mobility, the fact that the VVM started to consider themselves more and more as a netmanager that has a role to play in thinking about public transport delivery priorities, may explain the large policy autonomy during this phase.

Secondly, the concept of role perception may also be considered as the agency having a clear view about how the policy should be implemented in the field. The agency may be “used to” deliver services in a particular way (“implementation-customs”). The high levels of policy autonomy in implementing the policy, which I found for both policy-programs, can be explained by this kind of entrenched vision of the agency about how (and in what way) the services need to be delivered. This is, for example, observed in the development of the implementation-projects of basic mobility. From their experience and customs in delivering public transport projects, that was built up in the years before, the VVM had a clear idea how a public transport service is to

be implemented effectively and efficiently (delivering public transport was their core-business). In many cases (implementation projects), this idea of the VVM about how to deliver services conflicted with the vision about how basic mobility should be implemented (according to the decretal principles), leading to deviations at the micro-levels of individual projects. Also during the implementation of the later implementation projects of basic mobility (from 2003 on), and in the implementation of Minder Hinder, the VVM had a clear idea about how public transport projects should be implemented. But here (from 2003 on) the VVM started to reason more and more from a policy-focus, by looking at public transport service delivery from their role as the mobility manager and netmanager for the public transport in Flanders. In this respect, projects of public transport delivery are not considered any longer as “individual” projects by the VVM. Instead, in the implementation of individual projects, the VVM increasingly started to reason from a larger network perspective: individual public transport projects fit into the larger public transport network.

As such, perceptions of the agency about the role it has to play in the policy decision making process will determine the incentive of the agency to be involved in the decision making process. Role-perceptions of actors can be considered as a core-variable in cultural-institutional perspectives (Thoening 2003) and in the so-called normative pillar of institutions (Scott 2001). The role-perception of agencies is a factor that is internal to the organization and may be defined as the belief of how actors are supposed to behave (or what behavior is “appropriate”). The assessment of appropriateness will be done by the actor via comparing actual behavior to the normative value-frameworks, roles, and routines that apply and are internal to the organization. Role-perceptions of the agency may determine whether it is appropriate to be involved in the decision making process (“are we an agency with a policy-role?”), but may also prescribe how the policy should be implemented. During the implementation of policies, implementation-customs of the agency (“we have always implemented our services in this way”), and features of how the agency sees its role in the policy-process, may help to explain why the agency is involved in autonomous decision making. These role perceptions are internalized by the organization over the years, but may also find their origin in the environment of the organization, via norms and values that originate in the “institutional environment” of the organization (Hult 2003). The influence of concepts such as normative frameworks, organizational cultures or values on the level of autonomy of public organizations is also recognized by other authors. Yesilkagit (2004a) found that organizational cultures strongly affect the relationship of the agency with the environment (e.g. the oversight authorities), and that the organizational culture developed over time by agencies may be a trigger for demanding certain levels of autonomy and creating expectations of the agency about its role in the policy domain. Gains (1999, 2004) showed that customs and traditions derived from the past such as existing formal and informal constitutional and institutional arrangements in governmental departments to a large extent determine the features of the minister-agency relations that are at work today in next steps agencies (via mechanisms of path dependence). Moynihan and Pandey (2006) found that features of organizational cultures may help to explain the level of (managerial) autonomy in public agencies. According to the latter authors, agencies with a strong managerial and entrepreneurial culture tend to demand and receive more managerial autonomy (contrary to agencies with a bureaucratic culture).

### *Functionality (for the agency)*

The assessment by the agency whether it is functional to be involved in the decision making process, can also be related to its level of policy autonomy. I observed in my case-study that this concept mainly seems to play a role in the preparation-, determination- and evaluation-phases of the policy. I found that in some cases the agency may perceive the involvement in the policy decision making process as being functional or advantageous, while in other cases it may be “dysfunctional” to be involved in the decision making process. In the preparation-phase of the policy for example, the incentive to be involved in the development of a policy that seems “promising” for the agency, may be larger. In the determination- and evaluation-phases of the policy, the functionality to be involved in the decision making process may be induced by the need to steer the eventual direction of the policy. As such the involvement of the agency may be functional to be sure that eventual policy-decisions “match” with the agency’s needs or preferences.

In the case of the preparation of the Pegasus-plan the pro-activity of the VVM in the decision making process (large policy autonomy) may be explained by the belief of the VVM that this policy can bring a lot of advantages for the agency. Extended public transport service delivery in the region of the Flemish Diamond was a key priority for the VVM for a long time. They saw an opportunity in this policy to become larger and to attract more travellers because they believed that in this region the gains for them as a public company were largest (demand for public transport is considered to be largest in this region). Moreover, this was a great opportunity for the VVM to actualize what they wanted for ages (extending their service delivery and developing high quality transport nets in the Metropolitan centres). Also being largely involved in the implementation of Minder Hinder was an opportunity for the VVM. They realized very quickly that Minder Hinder (a temporary measure) could be a stepping-stone for starting to realize the implementation of the larger Pegasus-plan for the Antwerp-region. I further found that in the policy-program of basic mobility, being involved in the determination of the eventual decision netmanagement may have been functional or advantageous for the VVM. Being involved in the decision making process created some room of opportunities for the agency to “adapt” or “mould” initial policy choices (that was prepared by and originated with the oversight authorities). As such, being able to determine the governmental decision of netmanagement was a chance for the VVM to help making concrete how public transport services should be organized in the future (netmanagement stood for a system of how to organize public transport at a higher level). In the case of Pegasus, I found that being involved in the determination of the policy (that was to a large extent prepared by the agency itself) may be considered advantageous for the agency. The advantage for the agency to be involved is to be sure that the initial policy-design (prepared by the agency) is not adapted or changed too much by other actors in the decision making process. Also in the case of the evaluation of basic mobility, being involved in the decisions about the future direction of the policy created opportunities for the agency to help to forge the eventual decision that the service delivery levels of basic mobility would be kept on a high level (in times that the policy-program becomes more politically salient and contested). Basic mobility was a program that has led to a large growth of the VVM in the years before (in terms of personnel, budgets, travellers etc.), and the VVM wanted to preserve this position. In the case of the evaluation of

Minder Hinder, the VVM believed that a positive evaluation of the policy-measures would increase the chances to have these (initially temporary) measures continued. The continuation of the measures is important for the VVM, as it can be considered as a step-stone to Pegasus (a long term policy goal of the VVM).

I also found that the perception by the agency of “dysfunctionality” of the policy-program may be related to the low levels of policy autonomy of the agency. During the preparation of the policy-program of basic mobility, the observed low levels of autonomy of the VVM may be related to perception by the VVM that this proposed policy-program was not perceived as advantageous or even as being “dysfunctional” for them. The last thing the VVM wanted at this time was a revolution in public transport (which basic mobility was). The VVM rather wanted continuity and stability in turbulent times (stabilization in number of clients, internal problems that were the result of the merger of 1991), and to a certain extent they “feared” the policy. This suggests that the incentive by the agency to be involved in the decision making process of a policy-program of which they think it is not advantageous or functional (for them as an agency), may be smaller.

The general conclusion is that the incentive of the agency to be involved in the policy-process is also determined by (1) the extent to which the agency perceives the policy-program as being functional for them (“what is in the policy for us?”) or (2) the extent to which the agency perceives being involved in the policy-decision making process as being functional for them (“what can we get from being involved? E.g. adapting policy-proposals to own needs, guarding advantages of the policy.”). Firstly, the assessment by the agency of the opportunities or gains that are in the policy will create the incentive for the agency to be involved in the preparation of and vision-building around the policy. Secondly, the level of policy autonomy of the agency will likely be higher when the agency has an incentive to be involved in the decision making process (“is it functional or advantageous to be involved?”). Functionality may lay in the fact that (a) the agency wants to be sure that the policy is to be implemented in a realistic way (as they are the eventual implementers) or (b) that the agency wants to be sure that the policy will be determined eventually exactly as they have prepared it. This conclusion suggests that there is a difference between a policy-program that has been prepared by other actors (in the case of netmanagement the political oversight) and a policy-program that has been prepared intensely by the agency itself. In the former case the functionality for the agency’s involvement in the determination of the policy will mean that they want to mould or adapt other actor’s initial decisions into eventual decisions that reflect their priorities or needs. In the latter case the functionality means that they want to be sure that the policy will be determined exactly as they have prepared it. Thirdly, the level of policy autonomy of the agency in the evaluation phase of the policy will be higher when the agency perceives being involved in the evaluation as functional. The functionality may stem from the need to steer the evaluation in one or another direction and being sure that based on the results of the evaluation the preferred future direction of the policy can be determined (e.g. in my case continuation of service delivery in the policy-programs of basic mobility and Minder Hinder).

*Functionality (for the oversight authorities)*

The case study analyses further show that the involvement of the agency in the decision making process may also be considered as being advantageous or functional (or not) for the oversight authorities. When the oversight authorities perceive that the involvement of the agency in the decision making process of the policy is dysfunctional, the level of policy autonomy of the agency is likely to be low. During the preparation- and determination phases of basic mobility, the involvement of other actors in the decision making process was not considered necessary or functional for the oversight authorities. In the case of the preparation of basic mobility the minister and his cabinet had an interest in guarding the development and the direction of their policy-idea as close as possible, in order to be sure that the policy would be developed exactly as they intended. In the case of the decree and the governmental decision basic mobility, the involvement by other actors was considered rather dysfunctional as the minister wanted to be sure that the the policy lines he developed himself would become formal policy just as he had intended (and adaptation of these policy lines by allowing input of other actors would not have been accepted). I also found that during the first programming-phase of the implementation of basic mobility, the cabinet insisted on taking the main decisions themselves, because they wanted to be sure that the implementation would start as soon as possible, and that no suspicion would occur that the implementation of the policy was not objective or arbitrary (developing priority lists and doing needs-analyses). The fact that dysfunctionality for the oversight authorities may lead to low levels of policy autonomy by the agency may be mediated by features of the policy-program (I did not observe this relationship for Pegasus): (a) basic mobility is a program that was a high priority policy for the political oversight authorities (it was their “idea” and they wanted to push through this policy at whatever cost), and (b) basic mobility was to a certain extent a contested policy-program in the political environment (the program itself did not receive wide political support, and also the VVM was initially reluctant towards the policy).

To the contrary, I found that when the oversight authorities perceive that the involvement of the agency in the decision making process may be necessary or functional, the likelihood that the agency enjoys a large level of policy autonomy is higher. For example, in the case of the determination of the governmental decision netmanagement, the input of the VVM was necessary for the oversight authorities. The VVM as implementers were the ideal actor to develop a system for smooth implementation of basic mobility and public transport projects in general (which was netmanagement), because they knew how to develop such a framework from their expertise with implementing and organizing public transport. This may also explain why the involvement of the VVM was large in the implementation phase of Minder Hinder. For developing and implementing this policy-project, the VVM was needed for their capacity and expertise. Minder Hinder was a crucial policy-project that had to be developed very quickly, and that was considered very important by the political world (in general). The combination of having to deal with a crucial policy-project, together with the unique expertise of the VVM to have such projects designed, may explain the functionality of the involvement of the VVM in Minder Hinder for the oversight authorities. In this sense, the level of “functionality” is a matter of relative capacities and resources between actors in the decision making process. The lack of these capacities or resources in the oversight authorities may be determined by organizational

features of oversight authorities, such as absence of time, resources, or workforce in the cabinet to closely monitor the implementation of the policy in detail. Resource dependence theories (cf. Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) would explain the level of autonomy of the agency as being the result of mutual dependence between organizations for each others skills, knowledge and expertise. This suggests that differences in information-levels between the focal organization and other actors in the environment, may lead to relative capacity-levels (for fulfilling the task e.g.). The “technical”- or task-environment will thus define the dependence of one actor or another for having the job done. The dependence of one actor on another may become critical in the case the actor with the information advantage is a large organization, when the range of alternative information suppliers is small, and when the discretion over the resources by the supplier is large (Hult 2003). The level of dependence of the oversight authorities for the skills of the agency may also be related to the concept of “technical uncertainty”. In the case of a highly complex task, oversight authorities may have the incentive to delegate decision making tasks to experts in the autonomous agency (Moe 1990, Elgie 2006).

#### *Relationship between the agency and the political principal*

Features of the relationship between the minister (or political oversight authorities) and the agency, are also a part of the explanation for the level of policy autonomy observed. This factor seems to occur predominantly in the preparation and determination-phases of the policy. I found that the relationship between the minister and the agency may be “good” (in the case mutual trust and support exist), or may be “rather poor or weak” (in the case the mutual trust and support are absent).

In the preparation-phase of basic mobility, the VVM had low trust in the promises made by the minister concerning the policy-program. Basic mobility was presented as having the promise of being a policy program that had a lot of (budgetary) resources in it for the VVM. But in these days, the VVM could not be convinced of this, because they came from a period in which they suffered from cutbacks. In this period and in the decennia before, public transport has been at the tail-end when it comes to receiving governmental budgets. Therefore the VVM was rather sceptical and did not completely trust the budgetary promises by the minister. In this context of low trust, the incentive of the VVM to be involved in the preparation of a policy - of which they believed it would never be approved - may have been low, resulting in subsequent low levels of policy autonomy. During the determination phase of the governmental decision netmanagement however (2002), I found that the perception by the VVM about the level of seriousness and concreteness of the policy has changed. The agency noticed that the policy of basic mobility was serious, and that the budgetary promises were real and large. This increased the trust-levels of the agency in the oversight authorities. The belief that the policy was real and that the ministerial promises were kept, may have increased the incentive for the agency to become more involved in the decision making process. Next to that, by the time the governmental decision of netmanagement was determined, also the mutual trust between agency and minister started to ameliorate because of interpersonal linking-pins between the management of the agency and the minister. Both shared the same (ideological) vision about public transport policy, and were affiliated to the same political party. Further, I found that the extent to which there is mutual support between the agency and the

minister for the policy-program at stake, may be an important factor for determining the level of policy autonomy of the VVM. This has been shown during the determination and preparation phases of Pegasus. Having a minister and an agency that are on the same page about the policy program, and consider this policy as a priority, may result in a very strong politico-administrative coalition to have this policy prepared and determined (approved politically), as it was intended. As such, an agency may be left a lot of discretion for developing policies when it is backed-up by a minister that strongly supports these policy lines. According to Laegreid and colleagues (2005, 2006), high levels of mutual trust and support between the agency and the oversight authorities may be assumed to decrease levels of cultural collusion between agency and minister, increasing the levels of leeway that is left to agency, because the agency is trusted to make the “right” decisions. Also other authors found that large political support for the agency may lead to larger autonomy of the agency. Moynihan and Pandey (2006) claim that politicians are likely to provide autonomy to an organization they trust, has a strong track-record and is unlikely to use their autonomy in an undesirable way. Moreover, Carpenter (2001) found that agencies with a good reputation, a strong legitimacy and being embedded in strong political networks may be able to “forge” their policy autonomy. Verhoest (2003) found that agencies showing an open and consistent attitude towards the political principals may enjoy larger levels of autonomy (or lower oversight control).

#### *Attitude of the agency towards the policy program*

As a final factor in my model I discuss the attitude of the agency towards the policy program at stake, which may be rather “positive” or rather “negative”. The attitude of the agency towards the policy-program can be induced by a “normative” belief of the agency about whether (a) the proposed policy (during the preparatory work of the policy) seems to deal with some societal problems or needs in the policy field, in the way these problems should be dealt with, and (b) whether the issues with which the proposed policy deals with are the right issues to be addressed as a policy priority (according to the agency). As such, this “normative” belief in a policy-program goes further than the assessment of functionality of the policy program by the agency (cf. supra). Functionality is about observed “utilities” or gains, whereas the “normative attitude towards the policy” is much more value-driven (“what are the needs and the priorities of and for public transport?”). According to this logic of reasoning, the agency poses the question whether this policy matches with its vision about how policies should address policy-problems in the policy field. This vision of the agency about how policy should be conducted in the policy field may be inherited from past experiences and customs in conducting policy of the field. Over time these experiences and customs may have become the “norm” in the agency. In the case the organizational “norm” fits with the “norm” proposed by the policy, there may be an incentive for the agency to be involved in the decision making process. To the contrary, in the case there is a “misfit” between the normative frameworks of the agency and the norm proposed in the policy this incentive may be absent. This factor is likely to be related to cultural-institutional theories, that would explain decision making behavior of agencies as being largely culturally determined and based on “internalized” normative and value-frameworks (Thoenig 2003, Laegreid et al 2005, 2006a).

In my case study I found that the agency's more positive attitude towards the policy program at stake is, the more policy autonomy is likely to occur in the preparation-phase of the policy. Especially in the case of the policy of Pegasus, this is found to be the case. Extending service delivery and developing high quality transport nets in the densely populated region of the Flemish Diamond, has been priority number one for the agency since decennia. The VVM had a firm belief that the policy of Pegasus was addressing the right policy-problems in the field (fighting congestion in the Flemish Diamond via extended public transport). Hence when the debate about the accessibility of the Flemish Diamond is launched politically (e.g. parliamentary debates around the Mobility Plan Flanders), the VVM has an incentive to jump on the wagon and to be closely involved in preparing public transport policies that address this issue. As such, this policy-program was not only functional for the VVM (cf. supra promise of growth of the agency), it was also considered by the VVM as an appropriate policy-program (the needs addressed with this policy are real and urgent).

To the contrary, during the preparation of the policy-program of basic mobility, and during the preparation of the first implementation program of basic mobility (implementation-phase), the negative attitude of the VVM towards the policy-program has shown to be related to low levels of policy autonomy in the decision making process. In these days (before and around 2000), the VVM was not in support of public transport policy-programs as proposed with basic mobility. They believed that basic mobility was the wrong policy in the field of public transport. The VVM has always been used to work demand-related (delivering where the needs are highest) and in an efficient and economical way (a heritage from the past when the resources for public transport were poor). Basic mobility to the contrary stood for a supply-model of public transport, and induced the perception in the VVM of "spending money" (delivering services where the demand is low is very costly, "empty buses also have to be paid").

## *Discussion*

Having reviewed the empirical results of my case study, we now can answer my second – explorative-explanatory – research question. I have been able to draw a quite accurate picture of why my case organisation is involved, or not, in the policy decision making process of the two policy programs under scrutiny. Based on this evidence, I have tried to construct a model consisting of 7 factors, that can help to answer the higher level of abstraction research question under what conditions agencies (in general) enjoy policy autonomy or not (or influence the policy decisions). This model suggest that explanations for agency's policy influence or autonomy are "multi-factor", "multi-actor", policy program-specific and policy phase specific. The drawback of this model, however, is the poor empirical basis in which it is grounded. I performed only one case study, which may be a threat to the external validity of the model.

### *Multi-factor model*

A first point of discussion is that the model suggests that the policy autonomy of agencies is likely to be determined by an interplay between various factors. Some of these are internal (organizational) factors, other

factors are external to the organization (environmental). However, both internal and external factors have in common that they may determine the capacities and incentives of actors in the policy decision making process, which may result in a certain level of policy autonomy of the agency. Speaking in macro-theoretical terms, the model suggests that the actors<sup>10</sup> in the decision making process may be driven simultaneously (1) by factors that constrain their capacities or abilities for behavior, (2) by factors that induce an appropriateness-logic, and (3) by factors that induce actors to calculate consequences of their behavior. The table shows how the factors of my explanatory model can be related to the macro-theoretical discussion

Capacities / Abilities		Appropriateness		Consequence
<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>	<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>	<i>External</i>
Capacity of agency	Functionality oversight authorities (dependence)	Role perception of the agency	Trust of agency in oversight authorities (for reality of policy)	Functionality for oversight authorities (preferred policy, blame-shifting)
	Mutual trust and support between agency and oversight authorities		Normative attitude of agency towards policy-program	Functionality for agency (preferred policy)
	Features of the political decision making arena			Features of the political decision making arena
	Opportunities in political context for agency (supportive or hostile)			

Firstly, actors may be able (or not) to be involved in the policy decision-making process. Both internal and external factors may determine the extent to which the agency and the oversight authorities are able to be involved in the decision making process. An internal factor is the structural capacity of the agency to deal with the task. An external factor is the dependence of the oversight authorities for the agency's expertise (functionality for oversight authorities to rely on agency's expertise), which is a matter of capacity distribution between actors in the environment. Another external factor is the level of mutual support and trust between agency and minister, from which the allowance of the minister to let the agency take the decisions may result. A third external factor is the decision making process in the political arena. I showed that the decision making process in the government, and the necessity of the oversight authorities to take fast action, may decrease the ability of the agency to be involved in the decision making. A final external factor is related to features of the policy-program. The political situation (which can be supportive or rather hostile towards the policy) may create the opportunities for the agency to be involved in the decision making process.

Secondly, being involved in the policy decision-making process (or not) may be the result of an actor's assessment of what is the appropriate behavior. Firstly, internal role perceptions will determine the extent to which the agency considers being involved in the decision making process as appropriate. An external factor that is policy program related, and that may induce the appropriateness of the agency to be involved in the decision making process, is the extent to which the agency trusts that the policy proposed by the oversight authorities is "real" and "serious". A second external factor is also related to the policy-program, and concerns the extent to which the agency has a positive normative attitude towards the policy ("is this the right

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<sup>10</sup> This model essentially contains two key actors: the (management of) the agency and the political oversight minister because the model I present is grounded in my case study, which showed that (in my case) the policy decision making process is dominated by these two actors. Other actors at agency-level (e.g. governing board) and at principal-level (e.g. oversight administration, minister of Budget) are external to the model, although I do recognize that these actors may play their role in the decision making process as well.

policy to be conducted in the field?”). In case of a positive attitude, the agency may consider involvement in the decision making process as being more appropriate than in the case of a negative attitude towards the policy program.

Thirdly, I found that external environmental factors may be an incentive for the agency, as well as for the oversight authorities, to behave according to a consequential logic (calculating consequences, functional behavior). It may be functional for the oversight authorities not to have the agency involved in the decision making process, in order not to have their preferred policy compromised. On the other hand, the oversight authorities may it also find functional to pass the responsibilities (for decision making) to the agency (“blame-shifting”, passing the hot potato). It will depend on the policy program’s features (e.g. salience, preference distribution in the environment) what functional behavior of the oversight authorities will look like. Also features of the political decision making arena (e.g. the way decisions are taken in the government) may determine the behavior of the oversight authorities. According to this logic, the oversight authorities will take as much as possible advantage of the situation in the political arena to have their preferred policy decided upon (preferences and incentives to behave in one or another way are then determined by the decision making practice in the governmental arena). Next to that, also the agency may attune their behavior according to calculation of consequences. Agencies may find it worthy to be involved in the decision making process for bringing the policy in line with their preferences (preferred policy).

The observation that agency’s autonomy is not to be explained by uni-dimensional models, is also recognized by Laegreid et al. (2005): *“one has to look for explanations among structural features, cultural variables and environmental variables ... instead of deriving hypotheses based on one dominant logic, the challenge is to develop more complex propositions about how agencies work in practice ... there is also a need to look for other variables derived from several theoretical perspectives in order to gain better understanding of the variation in agency control and autonomy”*.

#### *Multi-actor model*

A second point of discussion is that the model suggests that the policy autonomy of agencies is likely to be determined by an interplay of the ability (capacity) and incentives of *both the agency and the oversight authorities* to take or grant autonomy. I repeat the remark that the model I present consists of two key-actors, the management of the agency and the political oversight authorities (the functionally responsible minister, in my case the minister of Mobility). This reduction of the model is necessary because the model is grounded in my case study, which showed that the policy-processes of Pegasus and basic mobility were dominated by these two actors. Other actors at agency-level and at the level of the oversight authorities, are external to this model. The model suggests that the level of involvement of the agency in the policy decision making process will thus be determined simultaneously by the relative capacity-distribution between agency and oversight authorities, and by the incentives of both actors. The contribution of the model presented above to the discussion about agencies’ autonomy, is that it combines explanations that see autonomy of the agency as the result of decisions made by oversight authorities, with explanations that see autonomy of agencies as the

result of agency's own actions and behavior. Many contributions in the literature focus on only one set of explanations. For example authors that rely on structural policy theories for explaining autonomy levels, focus on deliberate action by oversight authorities from which agency-autonomy results (Moe, 1990, Yesilkagit 2004a, Yesilkagit and Christensen 2005). In these explanations, the agency seems to be a passive actor to a certain extent. This view on autonomy has been challenged by other authors who explain autonomy as the result of behavior by agencies, and consider the oversight authorities as rather being passive actors (Krause 2003, Carpenter 2002). This debate has also been observed by Hammond and Knott (1999) who see a juxtaposition of "authors that claim that public managers are heavily constrained by political and institutional forces, so that they have little room for discretion, and authors that claim that public managers are able to forge changes in policies". The model presented above suggests an in-between position, and shows that the policy autonomy of agencies is the result of the interplay of both the agencies and the oversight authorities capacities and incentives to "take" autonomy or to "allow" autonomy for the agency. Next to that, the model further suggests that autonomy may be something that the agency desires, but equally that autonomy is something that may be less desirable by the agency (e.g. Krause 2003). In other words, it may be "functional" or "dysfunctional", and it may be "appropriate" or "less appropriate" for the agency to be involved in the policy decision making process. This finding shows that it might be wrong to assume that agencies in any case will want to take as much autonomy as they can, hence being as much as possible involved in decision making processes.

#### *Program-specific explanations*

Thirdly, I found that the explanations for the observed level of policy autonomy of the agency may differ between policy-programs in which the agency is involved. I found that one and the same agency may have a positive attitude towards one policy-program in which it is engaged, while it may have negative attitudes towards other policy programs. The *"attitude of the agency towards the policy"* for example is highly program-related and shows that it may be important to acknowledge differences between policy-programs in which the agency is involved. I further showed that also the *"functionality for the agency"* to be involved in the decision making process may be an important factor for determining agency's autonomy. What "functionality" means will also be determined by specific features of the policy-program at stake. In the case the policy was prepared by the agency (thus reflecting the policy-preferences of the agency), it can be advantageous for the agency to be strongly involved in the determination-process of the process, to guard that the initial policy proposals are also politically approved accordingly. In the case the policy has been prepared mainly by the oversight authorities, it may be functional for the agency to try to "adapt" initial policy proposals made by others to their own preferences. Equally, I found that it may be *"functional for the oversight authorities to have the agency involved in the decision making process"* or not. Again, I suggest that it will depend on features of the policy-program in case whether agency-involvement in the decision making process will be considered functional by the oversight authorities or not. In policy-programs that are high priority for the oversight authorities and that are contested in the (political) environment, involvement of other actors (such as the agency) in the decision making process may be considered "dysfunctional" for the oversight authorities (because they want

to be sure that their preferred policy would not be adapted too much in the decision making process). In other policy-programs that are not high priority for the minister and that are hardly of any political salience, the incentive of the oversight authorities to steer the agency may be much lower, potentially resulting in large levels of autonomy for the agency (cf. Pollitt's "poor parenting"-model, 2002). The observation that autonomy of agencies may vary per policy-issue, and that explanations for levels of policy autonomy should be considerate of this, has also been shown by Hammond (2003) who found that the "preference-variable" (the extent to which actors in the decision making process prefer a certain policy or not) may vary per issue-area (or per policy program) and that as a result "the bureaucratic autonomy of the agency may be expected to vary as well". According to Hammond, specific features of the policy-program such as preference distribution of the actors involved, will most likely help to determine how levels of policy autonomy may be explained.

#### *Phase-specific explanations*

Explanations also seem to differ between policy phases. Some examples can be given from the case study to underpin this point. I found that the factor "attitude of the agency towards the policy-program" is particularly relevant for the extent to which the agency is involved in the preparatory stage of the policy. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that attitudes of the agency towards the policy program will mainly be formed during the early preparation-phases of the policy, when the policy is designed. Next to that the mechanism of "functionality for the agency" was found to play a large role in those policy-phases where the "real and definitive" decisions about the policy are made, such as the determination-phase and the evaluation-phases of the policy. Thirdly, also the influence of "capacity" may differ per policy-phase. In those phases where the policy is designed and decided upon (e.g. preparation and determination), actors with policy-capacity or the capacity to "think" about policy will dominate process. On the other hand, in those phase where the policy is implemented, another kind of capacity – the operational expertise of service delivery in the field – will be determining the actor that takes or influences the key decisions.

#### *External validity*

The model I presented above is grounded within a single embedded case study (1 organization, 2 policy-programs), which puts external validity under pressure. Some features of my case organization (although selected carefully, cf. supra) may influence the research results. My case organization VVM is one of the largest agencies in Flanders. The size of the agency may influence their capacity to be involved in the decision making process (size, personnel, financial), as well as their salience (visibility, budgetary impact). As a result, other and smaller agencies may be less visible (salient) and may have fewer structural capacities than my case organization, which may affect some of the independent variables in the model I presented above. Next to that the VVM has also evolved into a company with a very good reputation in the wider environment (performance, appreciation-scores etc.), which may influence variables such as political support and trust. This may be important, provided that the reputation of the agency in the wider environment is related to the

level of political support for the agency, from which increased autonomy may result. Comparative future research should be aware of these case-specific features. A second issue of external validity is that the operationalization of the abstract factors in the model may be different in different contexts and settings (e.g. different agencies, or different countries). For example what “political context” means in one particular agency (or policy-program, or even country) may be different from the meaning of “political context” in another agency. Based on my case-study, I have been able to define and operationalize this concept in a specific way for my case-organization, but this operationalization may be different for other cases (when doing comparative research).

## CONCLUSION

This article has tried to provide an answer on two important research questions in the study of politico-administrative relations: what actor(s) in the policy-process decide on policies, and why? I found that the practitioner-model of the policy/ operations divide – politicians decide on policy, agencies implement these policies – needs to be refined in several ways. In my case study, I found that the political oversight authorities (the portfolio minister) still is the most important and decisive actor in the policy making process, but also that the implementing agency may be able to exert a lot of influence in the decisions taken, depending on policy-program and policy-phase. The search for an explanation for this shifting influence of the agency in the policy process, resulted in a model for explaining agency’s policy autonomy (influence), empirically grounded in a single embedded case study. This model shows that (1) many factors and logics altogether play a role, (2) both principal’s and agent’s capacities, preferences and incentives have to be taken into account, and that (3) explanations may differ, both per policy-program as well as per policy-phase under scrutiny. The model also still suffers from some weaknesses, however. The most important one is the model’s poor empirical basis. Next to that, the relative explanatory power of individual factors, and the effects of individual factors on one another have not been specified yet. Finally, the model still leaves room for bringing in other actors in the policy process besides political principal (minister) and agency (e.g. administrative oversight, stakeholders, etc.). Keeping these drawbacks in mind, I propose some suggestions for further research.

*Firstly*, the explanatory factors derived from the model I presented above need to be “translated” for other contexts (other agencies in Flanders, agencies in other countries) and tested in these contexts. The higher level of abstraction of the seven factors in the model should enable for a conceptualization of these factors for the purpose of research in other contexts. *Secondly*, the relationship between the variables in the model, and their (potential) effects on each other need to be explored further. One important example from my model can be illustrative for this. I found that in some cases agencies that are in a highly salient political context may still be able to enjoy a lot of discretion, contrary to what other authors (Pollitt et al 2002, Pollitt 2000) claim. This finding could be explained by the effect of a third variable, e.g. mutual trust. It could be that even in salient contexts, where large levels of oversight steering can be expected, the agencies are still allowed a lot of discretion under influence of the mutual trust variable (in this case, high trust of oversight authorities in the agency). Another example may be that “political context” interacts with “capacity of the agency”. The

political environment may create the room for involvement of the agency in the policy decision making process (e.g. societal pressure to address a policy-problem), but the agency will only be able to help attacking the policy problem, when it also has the capacities to be involved in the decision making process. *Thirdly*, the relative strength and prevalence of the variables in the model need to be tested further. More specifically, the prevalence of one or another variable (at the expense of another variable) may be different in different contexts. To a certain extent this still unsolved problem can be related to the so-called “mix of action-logics” which argues that actors may behave differently in different situations (Pollitt et al 2004, March and Olsen 1998). In other words, in determining decision making behavior, logics of appropriateness and consequences can be mixed. This means that one or another behavioral logic will prevail depending on the context or the situation at hand. As such, the incentive of agencies for taking autonomy, or the incentive of the oversight authorities for allowing autonomy, can be induced by different logics in different contexts. *Another* important challenge for further research will be to bring also other actors (besides agency management and oversight minister) in the model, in order to be able to specify the roles played by other ministers in the governmental coalition (e.g. minister of Budget), pressure groups, parliament, and the board of the agency for example (cf. authors that focus on multiple principals, ‘t Hart 2002, Hawkins and Jacoby 2004, Koppell 2003, Knott and Hammond 2003). *Finally*, future research should be aware that explanations for policy autonomy may to a large extent depend on the policy-program or the policy-phase under scrutiny. Therefore, research designs need to be specific in defining the policy-program and the policy-phase under study.

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