

Invitation and call for research notes

**Third Meeting of  
COST Action IS0601  
“Comparative Research into Current Trends  
in Public Sector Organization – CRIPO”**

**3-4 June 2008  
University of Utrecht  
Utrecht  
The Netherlands**

**Chair :** Prof.dr. Geert Bouckaert (Public Management Institute)

**Vice-Chair:** Prof. dr. Per Laegreid (Rokkan Centre – University of Bergen)

[www.soc.kuleuven.be/io/cost/](http://www.soc.kuleuven.be/io/cost/)

In this call for research papers, it is outlined what kind of papers should be delivered to the Utrecht meeting, what focus they should have, and how the subsequent steps will look like. Also included is a preliminary agenda of the COST meeting in Utrecht. First, we recall the aim of the Utrecht meeting and some important decisions that were made at the Madrid meeting.

## **1. Aim of the third COST-meeting**

The COST-Action started officially on 27 March 2007. On 18-19 September 2007, a second joint meeting of the Management Committee and the working groups was in Madrid (INAP).

The main work package for the COST action for the first operational year is to assess the state of the art re. research on the central themes of the COST Action. These central themes are:

- the changes in autonomy, control and coordination of public sector organisations (agencies and other bodies)
- and the effect of these changes on the performance of public sector organisations

During the first meeting the relevant research of the COST partners was mapped and two working groups were defined (WGI on autonomy, control and organisational performance; WGII on specialisation, coordination and systemic performance).

Two activities have to be tackled in the first year of the project: the first level comparison of existing data (A2) and development of upgrading strategies for empirical research (B1).

Therefore, the following activities have been programmed for the next meeting in Utrecht (June 2008) in relation to the above mentioned goal:

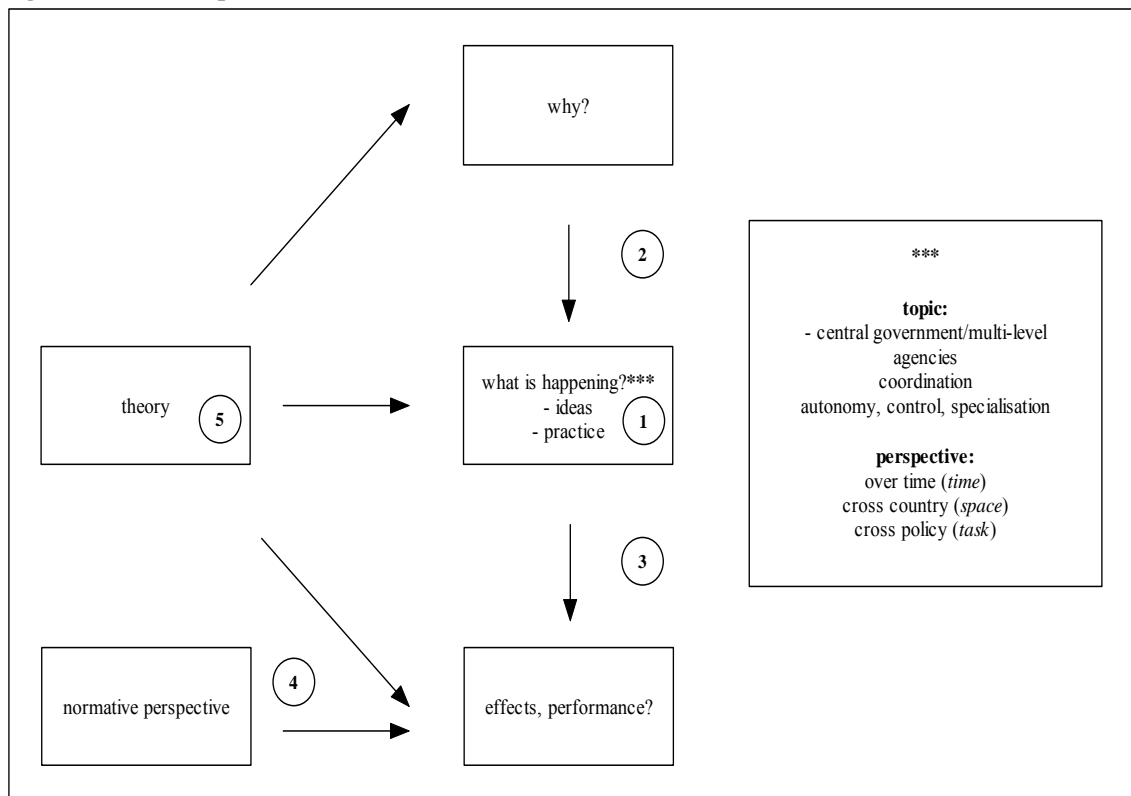
- A.2: First level comparison of existing data
  - Each country team should produce notes on methodologies and results of current research. WHAT, WHY and EFFECTS. These notes will have to be submitted well in advance of the Utrecht meeting (in April).
  - The working groups chairs will review, discuss and compare the notes in order to draw lessons and feed a more general discussion. These reviews will review theories, methodologies and results with respect to the different research questions (what, why and effects).
- B.1: Developing upgrading strategies
  - Based on review of current methodological experiences, there will be a suggestion/discussion of further development of methodology. Emphasis will be given to the draft of case study formats and the expansion of the COBRA network (in terms of quality and quantity).
  - The results with regards to improved methodologies should facilitate the training of Ph.D. students within the COST Action project.

In order to discuss the review notes and the optimal agenda and approach for the Utrecht meeting, an extra meeting of the chair, vice-chair and the working group leaders will take place one month before the Utrecht meeting. The Cost budget has been adjusted to provide resources for such an extra meeting.

## 2. Important decisions of the Madrid meeting

### 2.1. A modular approach

Figure 1: research questions



Regarding autonomy and control of public sector organisations, as well as coordination of these organisations, the following kinds of research questions will be tackled in a modular approach:

1. The **WHAT**-question. WHAT is happening? Is a descriptive part.
2. Then the **WHY-question**. More analytical part.
3. What are the **effects** of the reform?

4. From a **normative perspective (learning lessons for practice)**

5. With **theoretical interpretations**

→ **over time, space and tasks.**

During the Utrecht meeting we will decide what minimal set of research questions has to be dealt with by the research partners and what different research packages we will define in our modular approach. In this modular approach each research partner can decide what extra packages she will include, depending on its resources.

## 2.2. Two complementary working groups

**Table 1 Focus of the working groups**

WG I Autonomy, control and organizational performance	WG II Proliferation, coordination and systemic performance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• focus on autonomy, control and performance of individual agencies               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Extent and kind of agencies, autonomy and control</li> <li>○ Evolution and changes</li> <li>○ Causes / explanations</li> <li>○ Effect on performance of individual agencies</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Level of governance of individual agencies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on how groups of organizations are coordinated and coordinate among themselves               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Extent and kind of proliferation</li> <li>○ Extent and kind of coordination</li> <li>○ Evolution and changes = WHAT?</li> <li>○ Causes/explanations = WHY?</li> <li>○ Effect on performance of policy sector (networks or system)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Level of governance of policy domain</li> </ul>

Although both working groups focus on different topics, they should converge, as it is suggested by the next Table 2, in terms of methodology (quantitative – qualitative) and scope (organizational – policy sector). At the Utrecht meeting it will be decided what the modular approach entails for each working group.

**Table 2 Methodology interchange**

	WG I Autonomy, control and organizational performance	WG II Proliferation, coordination and systemic performance
Quantitative / general	X→	

Qualitative / policy sector	↓	
		↑ ←X

In each of the working groups the following aspects should be studied and developed:

- Theory
- Methodology (mixed methods)
- Data
- Policy recommendations

Also these elements are potential outputs of the COST action, like improved theories, methodologies, policy recommendations. Another output should be a joint research proposal for international (EU) funding.

Both WGs are specialised and (to some extent) complementary. But there should be enough cross-cutting linkages and a lot of mutual involvement. Therefore, membership is open and not mutually exclusive

A suggestion would be :

- meeting of WGs take place subsequently, so everybody can take part
- Or separate simultaneous meetings with WGs and substantial joint plenary meeting afterwards

During the Utrecht meeting, the meetings of both WGs will take place subsequently in plenary sessions. Several researchers seem to be interested in joining both working groups.

### 3. Main research questions and more specific subquestions of the Cost Action

Figure 1 presents the broader research framework and refers to the 5 basic research questions. In table 1 we have tried to elaborate these research questions in more specific subquestions for the two basic themes (autonomy and control on the one hand and proliferation and coordination on the other hand).

<b>General and specific research questions on Autonomy, control and organisational performance (WG1)</b>	<b>General and specific research questions on Proliferation, coordination and systemic performance (WG2)</b>
<b>1. Descriptive WHAT-question: What is happening ? → over time, space and tasks.</b>	
<p><b>1.1. On the level of ideas</b> When was the ‘autonomous agency model’ (or models) introduced in the country under study? What are the characteristics of this model? On what kind of normative ideas is this model based? What are the normative ideas about autonomy and control of public sector organisations? → document and discourse analysis, interviews with key respondents ...</p>	<p><b>1.1. On the level of ideas</b> What are the normative ideas about proliferation and coordination of public sector organisations? (e.g. Is there a preference for more hierarchical ways of governance and coordination, or rather market- or network-based ways?). How does this evolve over time? → document and discourse analysis, interviews with key respondents ...</p>
<p><b>1.2. On the level of general mapping of public sector organisations and agency-related reforms</b> How many and what types of autonomous public sector organisations (or more general public sector organizations) exist in the countries under study? How does their institutional design look like<sup>1</sup>? In which policy fields and with which tasks? What is their importance in the state apparatus? What is the evolution of autonomous public sector organisations over time? → document analysis, interviews with key respondents ...</p>	<p><b>1.2. On the level of general mapping of public sector organisations and agency-related reforms</b> What is the proliferation of public sector organisations and agency-like bodies (in general, in different policy fields, with different tasks) ?  → document analysis, interviews with key respondents ... → answers to these questions can be largely based on the mapping van public sector organisations/public sector organisations (see question 1.2. within the theme on autonomy and</p>

<sup>1</sup> How can the institutional design of autonomous agencies be described, for example in comparison to other countries? For example, what is their legal status, hierarchical subordination, legal position of staff, way of financing, supervision arrangements, etc.?

<b>General and specific research questions on Autonomy, control and organisational performance (WG1)</b>	<b>General and specific research questions on Proliferation, coordination and systemic performance (WG2)</b>
<p>1.3. <b>On the level of individual public sector organisations</b>            What is the level of autonomy of these bodies? How are these bodies controlled by their political principals/parent department/ other actors? How does this change over time, policy fields and tasks?<sup>2</sup>            → survey (e.g. COBRA) or case studies ...</p>	<p>control)</p> <p>1.3. <b>On the level of groups of public sector organisations</b>            How are these bodies coordinated by their political principals/parent department/ central departments/ other actors (vertical coordination)? How do they coordinate and collaborate among themselves (horizontal coordination)? What instruments and mechanisms of coordination are used to join up actors in a specific policy sector? How does this change over time and tasks?            → survey (e.g. COBRA) or case studies ...</p>
<p><b>2. Explanatory WHY-question: Why is this happening? – Why is this like that?</b></p>	
<p>2.1. <b>On the level of ideas</b>            How can we explain the adoption of the ‘autonomous agency’ model in this country, at that time? For example, what was the political and economic context at the time? Did NPM ideas play a role? To what extent does agencification fit with existing politico-administrative traditions?<sup>3</sup> → document and discourse analysis, interviews with key respondents ...</p>	<p>2.1. <b>On the level of ideas</b>            How can we explain the adoption of a specific coordination model in this country, at that time? For example, what was the political and economic context at the time? Did NPM ideas play a role? To what extent does the type and shift of coordination fit with existing politico-administrative traditions?            → document and discourse analysis, interviews with key respondents ...</p>
<p>2.2. <b>On the level of general mapping of public sector organisations and agency-related reforms</b>            Why and under which conditions do politicians choose to create autonomous public sector organisations? How can their decision be explained, e.g. is it a paradigm shift, or was it induced by self-serving motives<sup>4</sup>?            → document analysis, interviews with key respondents, case studies ...</p>	<p>-</p>
<p>2.3. <b>On the level of individual public sector organisations</b></p>	<p>2.3. <b>On the level of groups of public sector organisations</b></p>

<sup>2</sup> What types and degrees of autonomy are attributed to autonomous agencies? How can this be measured? Are there different types and degrees of freedom for different types of agencies (task, size, policy sector, legal status), and if so how can these be explained? (See review note of WG leaders on autonomy and control for the meeting in Madrid written by van Thiel, Barbieri and Yesilkagit)

How do politicians and parent departments steer/control/manage autonomous agencies? What kind of steering instruments are used or have been developed for this purpose (ex ante, ex post, performance indicators, contracts, and so on)?

How do agencies and parent departments balance the trade-off between autonomy and control (accountability, steering, audit, board, patronage)? What (new) instruments are developed for this purpose (e.g. new forms of accountability)? How do agencies cope with the actors and pressures of their environment (‘fit’)? (See review note of WG leaders on autonomy and control for the meeting in Madrid written by van Thiel, Barbieri and Yesilkagit)

<sup>3</sup> See review note of WG leaders on autonomy and control for the meeting in Madrid written by van Thiel, Barbieri and Yesilkagit.

<sup>4</sup> See review note of WG leaders on autonomy and control for the meeting in Madrid written by van Thiel, Barbieri and Yesilkagit.

<b>General and specific research questions on Autonomy, control and organisational performance (WG1)</b>	<b>General and specific research questions on Proliferation, coordination and systemic performance (WG2)</b>
Which factors (e.g. task, date of creation, policy field...) help to explain the level of autonomy and the kind of control of these bodies ? → survey (e.g. COBRA) or case studies ...	Why are specific instruments and mechanisms of vertical/horizontal coordination used in specific circumstances (e.g. in different policy fields)? How can we explain shifts over time with regards to the mechanisms and instruments of coordination used? → case studies or survey ...
<b>3. Evaluative EFFECT-question: What are the effects of this?</b>	
3.1. What is the effect of agencification on the functioning and performance of public sector organisations ? What is the effect of autonomy and specific ways of control? What are strengths and weaknesses? → survey (e.g. COBRA) or case studies (document analysis, interviews) ...	3.1. What is the effect of proliferation and coordination on the performance at the level of policy sectors or groups of organisations? What is the effect of specific ways of coordination? What are strengths and weaknesses? → case studies (document analysis, interviews) or surveys...
3.2. How to measure organizational performance? Elements like (see Boyne 2002/2003; see COBRA) <sup>5</sup> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal management</li> <li>• Outputs: quantity and quality of services</li> <li>• Efficiency: input/output ratios</li> <li>• Effectiveness: achievement of formal goals</li> <li>• Responsiveness: including satisfaction by users, citizens, staff</li> <li>• Democratic outcomes: accountability, equity, probity, participation</li> <li>• Impact</li> </ul>	3.2. How to measure systemic performance? Elements like (see e.g. literature on coordination and on network performance): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degree of actual level of cooperation and collaboration between actors</li> <li>• Strengths of networks</li> <li>• Extent of well-coordinated policy / uniformity in implementation</li> <li>• Policy impact and effectiveness...</li> <li>• Accountability at the level of policy sectors</li> <li>• Stability / flexibility of the system</li> </ul>
<b>4. Normative question: How should it optimally be? What can we learn for practice?</b>	
4.1. What lessons can we learn for the practice of agencification, agency autonomy and control?	4.1. What lessons can we learn for the practice of agency coordination?
<b>5. Conceptual and theoretical question: What theories have most explanatory power in this regard?</b>	
5.1. What concepts and theories are appropriate to interpret and explain <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- changes in ideas</li> <li>- creation of public sector organisations</li> <li>- level of autonomy and control</li> <li>- effect of agencification, autonomy and control</li> </ul>	5.1. What concepts and theories are appropriate to interpret and explain <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- changes in ideas</li> <li>- proliferation of public sector organisations</li> <li>- (changes in) level and kind of coordination</li> <li>- effect of proliferation and coordination</li> </ul>

**Table 1. detailed research questions**

<sup>5</sup> See the review note on performance related research by Hammerschmidt and Randma for the meeting in Madrid

## 4. Call for research papers for the second meeting of COST

The papers which are to be delivered should optimally encompass a full paper with research results and a short research note on methodology assessment:

### 4.1. A full substantive paper with research results

As one of the tasks for this year of the COST-Action is the first level comparison of existing data, the substantive full papers should discuss results and findings that arise from existing research. The aim should be to work towards an edited **book** or some other kind of publication. Therefore the papers should optimally be of a **publishable quality** (containing clear research questions, methodology, analysis and results). Probably, the discussion of results and findings of existing and current research will be an ongoing activity within the COST action, which will take place at each meeting.

*In general the full paper should deal with one or more questions, listed in table 1, either on the subject of **autonomy, control and organisational performance**, or on the subject of **proliferation, coordination and systemic performance** (or both).*

There are three options to consider when choosing the approach for this full substantive paper:

- **Option 1** is to write a **review paper** which summarises, reviews and discusses the different results of own existing research. In this paper the research team tries to give an overview of the results and findings for these of the five basic research questions, which are listed in table 1, on which the research team has worked in the past. The discussion of the results on the different research questions occurs in a systematic way, so that the paper gives a representative picture of what the findings of the research are. Such a paper is quite hard to write, because giving enough information for the paper to be selfstanding is hard to combine with giving a full overview, whilst guaranteeing a publishable quality of the paper.
- **Option 2** is to write a selfstanding **focused paper**, based on existing or current research, on one of the five research questions (or their subquestions), which are listed in table 1. This paper should be of a publishable quality (or at least of a quality which allows the paper to be presented at a conference). This paper could then potentially be presented and discussed in full at one of the panels at the ECPR Conference of the Standing Group on Regulation (5-7 June 2008), which takes place just after the Cost Meeting. The paper could also be presented at another conference, of course.
- **Option 3** is mainly for those research teams which have no existing or current research on autonomy, control or coordination of public sector organisations. These research teams are encouraged to write a paper on one of the subquestions

of the **descriptive** WHAT-question (see question 1 and subquestions 1.1.-1.3. in table 1). The aim is to encourage those research teams to start their empirical research on **autonomy, control or coordination** of public sector organisations with some first descriptive mapping of ideas, reforms or organisations. This paper can also focus on a subset of public sector organisations, like service delivery or regulatory organisations. This paper could then potentially be presented and discussed in full at one of the panels at the ECPR Conference of the Standing Group on Regulation (5-7 June 2008), which takes place just after the Cost Meeting. The paper could also be presented at another conference, of course<sup>6</sup>

**Research teams could consider to write joint papers together with the other research team of the same country which is involved in the COST Action. Or research teams of different countries can opt to write comparative papers.**

The research teams should inform the working group leaders (see list at the end of the document) which option they decide to take and what will be the focus of their full paper by the **end of January**. The working group leaders may send additional and facultative information on the full papers, if such extra information is requested by the COST partners.

The role of the working leaders would be to review the papers of the different research teams and make some comparative conclusions. This review paper, done by the working group leaders, can be rather short and can become (part of) an introductory or concluding chapter in an edited book, afterwards.

#### **4.2. A short note on methodology assessment**

The second objective of the Utrecht meeting is to develop upgrading strategies for empirical research on autonomy, control and coordination in order to facilitate new data gathering by the different partners. For example, it was already decided at Madrid that during the Utrecht meeting we should critically assess and amend the COBRA questionnaire on agencies, if we decide to use that methodology in some of the countries (either in a large-scale survey, or within some case studies). When revising the COBRA questionnaire during the meeting in June, special care will be taken to preserve maximum comparability with the existing COBRA databases of the involved teams.

The short note on methodology assessment should thus critically discuss the merits and drawbacks of methodologies and measurement instruments you have used in existing or

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<sup>6</sup> Since some of the teams have already done some descriptive work on autonomy, control and coordination of public sector organisations, we will collect their papers (or references to published articles) and post them on the COST website (<http://soc.kuleuven.be/io/cost/>). This will be done in order to provide some sources of inspiration to teams that still have to start their research on these matters. We will keep you informed about the progress of putting these papers on the web. See in the meanwhile for some papers of some of the teams: <http://www.publicmanagement-cobra.org/pub/paper.htm>

current research (or which you plan to use in the future) with regards to autonomy, control and coordination of public agencies.

*This short note is particularly important to deliver, in case you use a methodology or measurement instrument, which, according to you, could be used by other cost partners as part of the cost-related research.*

You should discuss the method and components of the measurement instruments, discuss the strengths and weaknesses and propose improvements.

- More specifically,
- the research teams which have worked with the COBRA questionnaire, *or would like to do so in the future*, should review this instrument and formulate proposals for improvement, new questions, tips from those who have carried it out already for those who plan to, suggestions for future [comparative] analyses of the data)<sup>7</sup>.
- The teams which do *not* plan to use the COBRA questionnaire in the future has to write a short note about their current/planned research methodology. Interview schemes or case study designs of several of the partners may be usefull in other parts of the research (they may help to answer some of the questions posed in table 1).

The role of the working leaders will be to review the methodological parts of the papers of the different research teams and make conclusions. This review paper can be rather short and will serve as discussion document during the methodological sessions of the cobra meeting.

### 4.3. Practicalities and deadlines

The research teams should inform the working group leaders (see list at the end of the document) which option they decide to take and what will be the focus of their full paper by the **end of January**. The working group leaders may send additional and facultative information on the full papers, if such extra information is requested by the COST partners.

All the full papers and all short methodological notes will be send to all the participants of the meeting well in advance. Therefore we would like to ask you to send your research paper by **7 MAY 2008** to both the following addresses:

- Assist. Prof. Dr. Koen Verhoest: [koen.verhoest@soc.kuleuven.ac.be](mailto:koen.verhoest@soc.kuleuven.ac.be)
- Jürgen Spanhove: [jurgen.spanhove@soc.kuleuven.be](mailto:jurgen.spanhove@soc.kuleuven.be)

The working group leaders then review the papers received with respect to

- the results and findings
- the methodological discussions

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<sup>7</sup> The COBRA questionnaire has been applied in surveys, but can also be applied in case studies. See for the questionnaire: the document 'Common Data in de COBRA-research' and the appendices on <http://www.publicmanagement-cobra.org/survey/index.htm>.

The Chair, Vice-chair and working group leaders meet before the June meeting in order to prepare the meeting and to discuss further details of the modular approach.

Further information will be posted on the website [www.soc.kuleuven.be/io/cost/](http://www.soc.kuleuven.be/io/cost/)

### **5. ECPR Conference of the Standing Group on Regulation (5-7 June 2008)**

The cost meeting is scheduled, just before the conference of the ECPR-Standing Group on Regulation. Papers related to cost, could also presented at panels of this conference (**deadline 15 February**). There will be two streams at the ECPR Standing Group on Regulation Conference with three panels, which are related to the central themes of COST.

- One stream related to autonomy and related issues of (regulatory) agencies (organised by Kutsal Yesilkagit and Joergen Groennegaard Christensen)
- One stream related to proliferation and coordination of (regulatory) public sector organisations (organised by Per Laegreid and Koen Verhoest and with several COST members involved as panel leaders)

More information on these streams will follow later, but some general information is already available on [http://regulation.upf.edu/index.php?id=utrecht\\_2008](http://regulation.upf.edu/index.php?id=utrecht_2008)

## 6. Agenda for COST meeting in Utrecht

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Third meeting of the Management Committee (MC) and meeting of the Workgroups (WG's) will take place on **3-4 June 2008 at the University of Utrecht, Utrecht, The Netherlands**

Local organizer: Prof. Dr. Kutsal Yesilkagit

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### Monday 2 June 2008

18.00 Pre-meeting of Chair, Vice-Chair and Working group leaders

### Tuesday 3 June 2008

10.00-12.30 Official start of the Cost-Meeting and Joint meetings of the WGs

12.30 - 13:30 Lunch

13.30 - 17:00 Joint meetings of the WGs

17:00-19:00 Meeting of the Management Committee

20:00 Dinner

### Wednesday 4 June 2008

09:00-12:30: Joint-meeting WGs

12:30-13:30: Lunch

13:30-18:00: Joint meeting WGs

### **Work agenda for Joint meetings of the WGs**

1. Welcome and presentation of new partners
2. Joint meetings of the WGs
  - a. **Section on comparison of existing data**
    - i. Discussion of results and findings of existing research on Autonomy, control (WG I)
    - ii. Discussion of results and findings of existing research on Autonomy, control (WG I)
    - iii. Discussion of results and findings of existing research on proliferation and Coordination (WGII)
  - b. **Section on methodology and upgrading strategies**

- i. Critical discussion and improvements of methodologies to study autonomy and control, incl.
    1. Presentation and critical review of COBRA questionnaire
  - ii. Critical discussion and improvements of methodologies to study proliferation and coordination
  - iii. Developing the modular approach, what methodology to use for which research question (see table 1)
  - iv. Discussing next steps
3. Place and date of next meeting
4. Miscellaneous
5. Closing

More details on the exact program and place, as well as the agenda for the meeting of the management committee will follow later.

Further information will be posted on the website [www.soc.kuleuven.be/io/cost/](http://www.soc.kuleuven.be/io/cost/)

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## **List of chair, vice-chair and working group leaders**

**Chair – Geert Bouckaert** geert.bouckaert@soc.kuleuven.be  
**Vice-Chair – Per Laegreid** per.lagreid@aorg.uib.no

### **Working group leaders**

#### **WG I Autonomy, control and organizational performance**

- **Dario Barbieri** dario.barbieri@unibocconi.it
- **Sandra van Thiel** vanThiel@fsw.eur.nl
- **Tiina Randma** tiina.randma-liiv@ut.ee

#### **WG II Proliferation, coordination and systemic performance**

- **Koen Verhoest** koen.verhoest@soc.kuleuven.be
- **Salvador Parrado** sparrado@poli.uned.es
- **Gerhard Hammerschmid** gerhard.hammerschmid@wu-wien.ac.at