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PRESS RELEASE

Public employment in Belgium

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Public employment forms the subject of debate concerning such matters as the size of the public sector in Belgium in relation to other comparable countries, how it has varied over the years, and whether the ageing of the workforce may present an opportunity for adjusting the volume of employment in this sector. More generally, the underlying question concerns the extent to which public employment is a potential source of structural savings. That question is particularly relevant today as the budget position has worsened and the budgetary cost relating to population ageing is being felt more keenly. Yet the answer to this question is not simple, as it needs to take account of factors other than the wage bill, particularly the services performed for society and the operation of the administration.

The article is intended to contribute to the debate by analysing the most coherent possible set of statistics on the development and characteristics of public employment in Belgium.

According to the national accounts definition, the general government sector employed just over 800,000 workers in 2007. The sector's main employers are the Communities and Regions and local authorities, while the federal government and social security together account for only one-fifth. If the concept used is broader than general government, and includes heavily subsidised jobs (health, social work and service vouchers), public enterprises and market intermunicipal associations, there could be 1.4 million persons in public employment.

Over the long term, the variations in public employment correspond to the major fluctuations in budgetary policy. Employment in the general government sector expanded particularly strongly during the 1970s. Following a period of virtual stabilisation from 1982 onwards, employment in the sector increased again between 1997 and 2007. The analysis reveals that this expansion was not uniform across the branches of activity. During the recent period, employment has declined in defence and in some federal government departments, such as FPS Finance. Conversely, growth has been particularly marked in transport and in administration, especially where those services come under the local authorities or some federal departments such as justice.

All sub-sectors have shared in the employment growth recorded since 1995. Local authorities account for over 60 p.c. of that growth, and the Communities and Regions almost 30 p.c., the remaining 10 p.c. being due to increased employment at federal level, including social security. In the administration branch of activity, local authority recruitment did not relate to civil service functions but concerned social work (crèches, the Public Social Welfare Centre re-employment programmes, etc.), the police and cultural and sports positions.

Regarding the characteristics of public employment, an ever diminishing proportion of staff has civil servant status, and women are increasingly in the majority. Moreover, the standard of skills of public sector personnel is constantly improving. A more detailed study of the age pyramids showed that, taking account of current retirement and pre-retirement patterns, departures should be staggered without reaching disproportionate levels in the next five to ten years. However, the numbers leaving are expected to be greater in some branches, departments and institutions.