Not balanced and hardly new: the European Commission's quest for flexicurity

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1. Introduction

Within a very short period of time, 'flexicurity' has become one of the more fashionable elements of the European political discourse addressing social and economic policies in general and employment policies in particular. Whereas, until the end of 2004, the concept of flexicurity was discussed largely in a small academic circle, today it is at the top of the European agenda. First and foremost, the European Commission has become a fervent promoter of flexicurity, urging member states to adapt national employment policy strategies accordingly. However, the Commission is not the only European actor to embrace flexicurity. Following the Commission's lead, also the European Parliament, the last couple of EU Presidencies, the European social partners, as well as the Council of Europe, have in one way or another underscored the importance of flexicurity in solving Europe's labour market problems. Hence, a European flexicurity consensus seems to have emerged. One result of this is that there is mounting pressure to adopt flexicurity in national-level employment policy.

In this paper we will discuss the rise of flexicurity in Europe and, in particular, the reasons why the Commission has embraced the concept and what meaning it has given to it. In the next section a brief account of the origins of the flexicurity concept will be provided. Section 3 briefly shows that a consensus has emerged at the European level concerning the importance of flexicurity to solve Europe's labour market problems. In section 4, we will discuss why flexicurity has become so popular at European level, concentrating on the case presented by the European Commission. Section 5 discusses the Commission's interpretation of the concept and section 6 offers conclusions.

2. The flexicurity concept: a concise history

The concept of flexicurity was first employed in speeches and interviews by Dutch sociologist Hans Adriaansens in the mid-1990s in the Netherlands, in the context of the preparation of the Dutch Flexibility and Security Act and the Act concerning the Allocation of Workers via Intermediaries (Wilthagen and Tros 2004; van Oorschot 2004). These two acts aimed '… to inject additional flexibility into the labour market by relaxing dismissal laws and the rules to start a temporary work agency on the one hand, while generating a higher level of security for employees in flexible jobs on the other (Wilthagen et al. forthcoming).' They were a typical product of the Dutch Polder Model as well as the 'purple' (labour-liberal) coalition government of the 1990s, aiming to reconcile the interests of employers and workers, strengthening both competitiveness and protection. As a result, the Dutch flexicurity model was born. Dutch flexicurity promotes the use of atypical, flexible types of employment; at the same time it provides such flexible types of employment with similar rights concerning working conditions and social security as standard employment.

Adriaansens' neologism was rapidly picked up by a group of labour market researchers, first in the Netherlands (e.g. Wilthagen 1998, 2002; Muffels et al. 2002), but then also in Germany (Keller and Seifert 2000; Klammer and Tillmann 2001), Denmark (Madsen 2002, 2003) and Belgium (Sels and van Hootegem 2001; Sels et al. 2001). In subsequent years researchers in a growing number of European countries became involved in research dealing with flexicurity and, by 2006, flexicurity seems to have put down firm roots in the European academic community. One result of this is that Denmark has been discovered as an alternative to the Dutch flexicurity model. The Danish flexicurity model, rather than being concerned with atypical types of employment, rather builds on (i) flexible standard employment, resulting from low employment protection; (ii) extensive unemployment benefits providing income security to the unemployed; and (iii) active labour market policies aimed at skill upgrading and activation of the unemployed (Madsen forthcoming). What the models share is that, in both cases, the importance of social dialogue as a means to devise and legitimize flexicurity policies is underlined.

These two national cases have roused the interest in flexicurity of both the academic community and, as will be discussed below, politicians and policymakers. This interest stems to a large extent from the fact that both countries have managed to improve their labour market situation remarkably since the mid-1990s, reducing unemployment rates to the lowest and employment rates to the highest levels in Europe. Increasingly, the flexicurity models of the two countries have been put forward as the explanation for these successful labour market developments. It is questionable, though, to what extent this is indeed the case. Dutch employment and unemployment rates are favourable largely because of a high share of part-time employment (now close to 50 percent): when calculated in full-time equivalents the Dutch employment rate is actually similar to the German rate and below that of countries like Spain, France or Greece (WRR 2007: Table 2.2). And in the Danish case the importance of the country's flexicurity model seems overrated. Indeed, it is inevitably an excessively reductionist enterprise to seek to explain labour market success or failure solely by the type of labour market regulations. More complex approaches, taking into account elements like macro-economic conditions, wage policies, fiscal policies, industrial relations systems and others, are required. For examples of such more complex explanations of the Danish success and revival since the mid-1990s, see Campbell et al. (2006) and Larsen (2002).

Another reason for this growing interest in flexicurity seems to be that it constitutes an alternative to the bankrupt neo-liberal view of the labour market which dominated the debate during much of the 1980s and 1990s. Exemplified by the OECD Jobs Studies (OECD 1994), this view argued for extensive deregulation and flexibilisation of the labour market, starting from the assumption that, by and large, all forms of employee protection and social security interfere with the proper functioning of the labour market and therefore, in the end, negatively affect economic growth and employment creation. However, by the end of the 1990s, the fallacies of this view had become only too apparent, so much so that even the OECD itself retracted many aspects of its radical stance; in particular it had to admit that there is no clear relation between the level of employment protection in a country and its level of unemployment (OECD 2006: 96-100, 1999). The Dutch and Danish experience are interpreted as proof that alternative approaches to simple deregulation can be successful in providing high levels of flexibility, without this being at the cost of increased workers' insecurity. Hence, flexicurity would offer options for a market with a human face, fitting European varieties of capitalism better than the deregulation approach which dominates American capitalism.

The Dutch and Danish models also illustrate that a variety of versions of flexicurity are possible. Indeed, in much of the academic literature flexicurity is, in theory at least, presented as a set of alternative combinations between different categories of labour market flexibility and security, often illustrated by a matrix indicating possible combinations and trade-offs (Figure 1). Flexicurity is about achieving new and positive combinations between one or more types of flexibility and one or more types of security. Such positive combinations should lead to win-win situations in which (i) employers benefit from high levels of flexibility, which is expected to be good for economic dynamism and employment creation; and (ii) this flexibility is made acceptable to workers because it is accompanied by high levels of security. Also, the weight of flexibility and security is in principle equal: flexibility is seen as a precondition for security, while security is seen as a precondition for flexibility.

Figure 1: combining flexibility and security

Flexibility/security	Job security	Employment security	Income security	Combination security
External-numerical flexibility				
Internal-numerical flexibility				
Functional flexibility				
Wage flexibility				

Note: see Annex Table 1 for a definition of the various types of flexibility and security.
Source: Wilthagen and Tros (2004: 171).

Hence, the empirical content of flexicurity is, in principle, open, making it a somewhat ambiguous concept that is open to very different interpretations. It also points to the obvious fact that while flexicurity is a relatively new concept, there have been a number of earlier attempts to pursue win-win situations following a flexicurity-type of logic. Already in the aftermath of the Second World War Gösta Rehn (1988) targeted the problem of reconciling liberty and security ("*frihet ok trygghet*") together with full employment and low inflation rates. The Rehn model claims that flexibility and mobility of workers are both the means and the goals to a dynamic economy, and that mobility combined with full employment assures that workers enjoy high levels of security as well. He further argued that those who become unemployed should be provided with active and passive labour market policies to stabilise their income situation and enable them to find new employment. The model thus combined extensive external (dismissal) flexibility and geographical mobility to the benefit of employers, with the security for employees provided by full employment and labour market policies.

Another example would be Streeck and Sorge's model of diversified quality production (DQP), which, where labour market institutions are concerned, builds on strong job security, continuous skills upgrading and high internal and functional flexibility (Sorge and Streeck 1988; Streeck 1991). Here high job security acts as a kind of 'beneficial constraint' (Streeck 1997, 2004), as an incentive for employers to invest more in the knowledge and skill of their workforce and to develop strategies of internal functional flexibility. This would then be a way of achieving competitiveness based on the full use of human resources. In addition, DQP underlines the importance of codetermination and collective bargaining as means of reconciling workers' and employers' interests.

3. A European consensus on the importance of flexicurity

'This concept of "flexicurity" is a way of ensuring that employers and workers feel they have the flexibility, but also the security they need.'

José Manuel Barroso [1]

'Je pense enfin à la nécessité de créer de nouvelles formes de flexibilité et de sécurité – ce que l'on appelle la "flexicurité".'

Vladimír Špidla [2]

As is apparent from the above quotes, by 2006 the European Commission, and in particular the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (DG Employment), had thoroughly embraced flexicurity as a cure for Europe's labour market problems, a wide range of forums and means having been used to promote the new approach. Indeed, employment Commissioner Špidla, Commission President Barroso, and other Commission officials, have spoken out in favour of flexicurity on numerous occasions. What is more, the Commission took the initiative to organise a tripartite social summit on flexicurity in October 2006, to mark the launching, in cooperation with the social partners, of a process to establish common flexicurity principles that can guide national employment policies. In line with this, the Commission's 2006 *Employment in Europe* Report devotes an important part of its analysis to the issue and proposes a range of so-called pathways towards flexicurity. In addition, flexicurity is at the heart of the Commission's green paper on labour law, its proposal for labour law reform in Europe. Hence, the Commission is following an extremely comprehensive and multifaceted strategy to advocate flexicurity.

Apart from the Commission, other European actors have also jumped on the flexicurity bandwagon, often following the Commission's lead. Flexicurity was high on the agenda of two so-called informal meetings of the European ministers of employment and social affairs, organised by the Austrian EU presidency (January 2006) and the Finnish EU presidency (July 2006). The Employment Committee and Social Protection Committee of the Council of the European Union both set up working groups on the issue, producing background documents and policy documents. The issue has also been discussed by the European Parliament (EP) and EP president Josep Borrell stated in early 2006 that: 'There is growing agreement on the benefits of the "flexicurity" model.'[3]

The Commission initiatives on flexicurity have been received with interest by the main European workers' and employers' organizations. The European Trade Union Confederation initially welcomed the European initiatives in this area, even though it is cautious about the shape such initiatives should take (ETUC 2006). The biggest European employers' organization, Euro Business (former UNICE), has also called for flexicurity (e.g. UNICE 2006), while the European Employers' organisation for small enterprises UEAPME recently claimed that flexicurity is the key to modernise labour markets (UEAPME 2006). Additionally, the Work Programme of the European Social

1 2006 European Year of Workers' Mobility Launch Conference, Brussels, 20 February 2006.

2 Session plénière du CES, Bruxelles, 21 April 2006.

3 http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/public/story_page/048-4983-031-01-05-908-20060203STO04982-2006-31-01-2006/default_en.htm

Partners 2006-2008, although it does not mention flexicurity as such, lists the 'balance between flexibility and security' as one of the main issues on which they plan to elaborate a joint analysis (ETUC et al. 2006).

Hence, there seems to be a consensus among the main players at the European level that the European labour market needs flexicurity. It has become a prominent catchword in the European political discourse and, considering the agenda for the near future, including the Commission's initiative concerning the development of common flexicurity principles as well as inclusion of the issue on the agenda of the European social dialogue, this prominence seems bound to increase.

4. Why does the European Commission promote flexicurity?

The rapid rise of flexicurity begs the question why the concept has been so widely adopted at the European level. Here we will consider this question, concentrating on the European Commission, the pivotal European actor in this respect.

Flexicurity largely falls into the realm of the EU's European Employment Strategy (EES). The EES is considered to be a major element of the Commission's Lisbon Strategy and to work towards the employment targets defined by this strategy. It is one of the main examples of EU soft regulation (López-Santana 2006; Jacobsson 2004), based on common objectives (full employment; quality and productivity at work and strengthened social cohesion and inclusion), EU guidelines and recommendations, a set of indicators for monitoring, as well as policy learning and policy transfer through the Open Method of Coordination (OMC).[4] In the Commission's proposal for a council decision on the guidelines for the employment policies of member states in 2006, the EES formally adopts flexicurity, stressing that 'the importance of further measures to improve the adaptability of workers and enterprises is frequently neglected. Greater attention should be given to establishing conditions of "flexicurity" and better links between the tax and benefits systems, and to actively involve the social partners (Commission 2006).' The employment guidelines for 2007 then reiterate the need to foster policy pathways towards flexicurity (CEC 2006d).

Here we want to argue that it is no coincidence that the Commission has adopted the flexicurity concept and included it in the EES. We claim that the flexicurity concept is compatible in a number of ways with the Commission's roles and discourse in the area of economic and social policy in general and employment policy in particular. The main, sometimes overlapping, factors here are the compatibility of flexicurity with (i) the role of the Commission as disseminator of knowledge and 'best practices'; (ii) its role as a broker between interests; and (iii) its discourse on the European Social Model (ESM) as well as the relation between competitiveness and social cohesion. This multiple compatibility makes flexicurity a useful and powerful discursive tool strengthening the Commission's (soft) regulatory capacity towards the member states. We now turn to discuss these three factors in more detail.

4 For overviews of the EES, see: Watt (2004) and Casey (2004). On the OMC employment see: Zetlin et al. (2005) and Borrás and Jacobsson (2004).

The Commission as disseminator of knowledge and 'best practices'

One of the main objectives of the EES is that of policy-learning and policy transfer through the OMC. The Commission plays a central role in this process, comparing practices in the different member states and identifying and disseminating 'best practices' (Jacobsson 2004; Casey and Gold 2005). To identify successful countries, the employment rate, i.e. the percentage of the working-age population in employment, is possibly the indicator that carries most weight. This is the case in particular because the employment objectives of the Lisbon Strategy have been phrased first and foremost in terms of the overall employment rate as well as the employment rate of particular groups (e.g. women, youth), and also because the EES focuses on the employment rate rather than on other indicators.

In 2005, the two member states with the highest employment rates were also the two main national cases associated with the flexicurity concept, i.e. the Netherlands and Denmark. According to Eurostat data, the best performer in 2005 was Denmark with an employment rate of 75.9 percent of the 15-64 population, followed by the Netherlands with 73.2 percent. Both countries by far outperformed the EU25 average of 63.8 percent. As mentioned earlier, this strong performance is often argued to be, to an important extent, an outcome of the two countries' flexicurity approaches, a conclusion also shared by the Commission.[5] It comes then as no surprise that the Commission has identified flexicurity as a best practice that it should disseminate.

Flexicurity hence becomes a clear example of how the political discourse of EU institutions and academic research are intertwined; research serves the Commission to legitimize its positions and to appear politically and ethically neutral (Crespo Suárez and Serrano Pascual, 2005; Jepsen and Serrano Pascual 2005). By disseminating this concept, it attempts to frame and structure the debate on employment policies in Europe as well as European employment relations (ibid.).

The Commission as a broker of interests

One of the roles or functions of the Commission is that of a broker of or mediator between economic interests and between (national) political interests (Teague 2001; Smith 2000; Tsakatika 2005). One manifestation of this role is that the Commission endorses and supports the so-called European Social Dialogue, European sectoral social dialogue and the involvement of national-level social partners in the design and implementation of employment policy. As to the latter, national unions and employers' organizations are expected to play an important part in the EES processes, including the preparation of National Action Plans, even though in practice their input remains weak (e.g. de la Porte and Nanz 2004).

Furthermore, the Commission has to reconcile different political and/or national constituencies, resolving (latent) conflicts or deadlocks between different national positions or between supra-national political coalitions. This is also of importance in the context of the EES, if only because of the wide diversity of national labour market and industrial relations models.

[5] However, as mentioned earlier, this link is not so obvious and neither can the Dutch performance, based on part-time employment, be so straightforwardly taken as a good example.

The Commission's role as a broker has for long been apparent in some elements of the EES, and it is here that flexicurity has become a useful discursive tool. Already the first employment guidelines, adopted in the context of the EES in 1998, called on the social partners to negotiate a 'balance between flexibility and security', under the so-called adaptability pillar, one of the four thematic pillars of the guidelines. This embodied, on the one hand, an attempt to reconcile the interests of employers and workers, as was clearly underlined by the then Director General of DG V (the then equivalent of DG Employment), Allan Larsson: 'Public policy must reconcile the need of enterprises for flexibility with the need of workers and citizens for security in change.'[6] On the other hand, it represented a kind of brokerage between the positions of various member states. In the first half of the 1990s in many of the member states right-of-centre governments were in place and the accent of the labour market debate was on deregulation. However, a number of more labour-oriented governments were subsequently voted into power (e.g. the Blair government, the Kok government), employment became the major issue in a number of election campaigns (UK, France) and the simplistic deregulation approach came under pressure. This produced the right conditions for the Commission to introduce the 'balance between flexibility and security' into the guidelines, with assurances that all members would find their position somehow reflected.

The call for a balance between flexibility and security has remained part and parcel of the employment guidelines until today, expressing the continued commitment of the Commission to its brokerage function. In a way, the Commission was already on the flexicurity line before the concept became popular. Hence, when the concept of flexicurity emerged in the public debate, it was only a small step to adopt it, since this neologism can be used as the expression of this same position, including the importance given to social partners. It is seen to embody a compromise and to be instrumental in creating consensus between opposite views.

Lisbon, European capitalism and the European Social Model

Because of its dual character (flexibility and security), as well as its close links to social dialogue, the flexicurity concept also fits neatly into the broader Commission discourse concerning the ESM and the Lisbon strategy. The Lisbon strategy adopted in 2000 sets out to make the EU '… the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment by 2010.' The Lisbon strategy underlines the EU's commitment to a 'European' type of capitalism as opposed to American capitalism. 'European' capitalism is concerned with strengthening the role of markets and fostering economic growth; however, it also makes a clear commitment to the objectives of full employment and stronger social cohesion. What is more, it fosters the participation of unions and employers' organisations in the design and implementation of policy.

These are all key elements of the European Social Model which starts from the idea that economic and social progress should go hand in hand (Jepsen and Serrano 2005: 234) and builds on the notion of social citizenship, referring to rights to education, health services and social security. Ever since the term ESM was launched by Jaques Delors in

6 Allan Larsson, Director General, DG V, UK Presidency Conference 'From Welfare to Work', Newcastle 23 June, 1998.

the mid-1980s, the Commission has regularly underwritten its commitment to the ESM and to reconciling economic and social concerns. The Commission has also been advocating a modernisation of the ESM, to adjust it to the challenges of globalisation, technological change and societal developments like the ageing of the population. One of its guiding principles in seeking to achieve such modernisation is to strengthen the role of social policy as a productive factor (CEC 2000: 5). Hence, not only are economic and social objectives to be reconciled, but social policy is expected to play a role in achieving economic objectives.

Flexicurity is easily fitted into this discourse and in fact can be promoted as the nutshell illustration of these views. One single word can be used to express the interlinkage between the economic and the social, between markets and social protection. And this is indeed what the Commission has been doing lately.

Summarising, it is no accident that the flexicurity concept has been adopted by the Commission. It strengthens the Commission in its role both as disseminator of knowledge and 'best practices' and as broker of interests, and it resonates very well with its discourse on the ESM and the link between economic and social policy. The combination of these three factors means that the flexicurity concept constitutes a powerful discursive tool for the Commission, one which can provide legitimacy for its political position, facilitate its attempts to frame the European debate on employment policy, and strengthen its regulative capacity towards member states.

5. The Commission's interpretation of flexicurity.

In section 3 it was argued that there is a European consensus on the importance of flexicurity. Earlier however, in section 2, it was argued that flexicurity is an ambiguous concept open to very different interpretations and that a variety of versions or models of flexicurity are possible. This begs the question to what extent the various European actors have the same interpretation of flexicurity and to what extent we can really speak of a consensus. A difficulty in answering this question is that not all of these actors have clearly defined views on the issue. Not surprisingly, the European Commission, the most fervent promoter of flexicurity at the European level, has advanced most in this respect. In recent documents and speeches it tries to develop a coherent position, even though, as will be discussed below, several questions remain. Here we will discuss the Commission's position and consider to what extent it involves a balanced redefinition of flexibility and security, and to what extent it proposes something new.

The Commission's conception of flexicurity is embedded in its broader view of the direction in which the globalised economy and the European labour market are heading. Strong emphasis is placed on the need to constantly adapt to the ever-changing demands of the global economy and on the need for a better responsiveness of the EU economies. For the labour market, this means, in the Commission's view, that transitions between different jobs and different labour market statuses (employed, unemployed, inactive) necessarily become more frequent. Labour markets hence have to become more flexible and adaptable, and workers have to accept more frequent transitions and make sure they are employable; at the same time, they have to provide certain types of security to make this mobility acceptable to workers: 'The greater flexibility needed to face the increasing transitional nature of today's labour market needs to be combined with security in terms of long-term employability of the workforce (CEC 2004: 159).' Flexicurity should provide adequate bridges during periods of labour market transition (CEC 2006a: 39).

A rebalancing of flexibility and security through flexicurity is also needed, the Commission argues, to address the problem of labour market segmentation and precarious employment: 'The current balance between flexibility and security in many Member States has led to increasingly segmented labour markets, with the risk of augmenting the precariousness of jobs, damaging sustainable integration in employment and limiting human capital accumulation (CEC 2006a: 31).'

Within this context, in the annex to the 2006 progress report on the Lisbon strategy, the Commission outlines a vision of flexicurity based on five elements (CEC 2006a: 31-40):

- the availability of contractual arrangements, providing adequate flexibility for both workers and employers to shape the relationship according to their needs;
- active labour market policies should effectively support transitions between jobs, as well as from unemployment and inactivity to jobs (activation);
- credible lifelong learning systems to enable workers to remain employable throughout their career;
- modern social security systems that ensure that all workers are adequately supported during absences from the labour market and to facilitate labour market mobility and transition;
- active involvement of the social partners, partnerships and consensus.

These five elements point towards a vision of a labour market in which flexibility for employers is provided by frequent transitions of workers between jobs and between labour market states; and where security for workers follows from support in fostering employability, active labour market policies aimed at making transitions run smoothly, and social security support during periods without employment.

In addition, the Commission increasingly sees dismissal protection as hampering the much needed flexibility. It places the emphasis on adaptability, mobility and transitions, and downplays the importance of job protection. Indeed, Employment Commissioner Špidla frequently argued that flexicurity is '… a policy which is geared more to the protection of people than to the protection of jobs. By way of illustration: when a ship sinks, the most important thing is not to save the ship but to save the people on board.'[7] Also, in many occasions, the Commission underlines the positive contribution to flexibility of the low level of dismissal protection in Denmark (e.g. CEC 2006b: 13). More specifically, in the 2006 *Employment in Europe* report, it argues that, 'The main thrust of the EU recommendation on flexicurity is to encourage a shift from job security to employment security flexicurity (CEC 2006: 78)'. Hence, the Commission indeed favours an increase in labour market flexibility for most EU countries, an increase that it believes should be achieved through increased mobility, the use of more non-standard types of employment and reduced job protection.

7 Informal Ministerial Meeting, Villach (Austria), 20 January 2006.

Clearly, such increased flexibility would negatively affect 'traditional' types of security for workers and would lead to more unstable employment with less tangible guarantees. Hence, according to the Commission, increased flexibility should be compensated for, or made acceptable, by 'new' forms of security. But what exactly are these new types of security? Two elements seem to be crucial here: employability and the modernisation of social security systems.

Employability is seen as the key for individuals to be able to make transitions from job to job, and from unemployment or inactivity to employment. Individuals derive security from employability, since it improves their employment chances. As Barroso put it: 'It is a fact of life that people may experience spells of unemployment but, by improving their skills, they will be in a position to find a new job as quickly as possible.'[8] Lifelong learning is the key to this type of security; the constant upgrading of skills would improve chances of finding a job and reduce chances of becoming unemployed.

The modernization of social security systems should be aimed, it is argued, at ensuring that all workers are adequately supported during absences from the labour market and at facilitating labour market mobility and transition. But what would such modernization entail? In the Commission's analysis of reform practices in the member states, such modernization is referred to, first and foremost, as having the goals of '… reinforcing the incentives to take up a job and remain in work longer, as well as offering personalised support to those furthest away from the labour market (CEC 2006b: 11).' This activation- and make-work-pay-inspired perspective of social security reform aims to increase employment rates by getting as many people as possible into employment. Means to this end are making work more attractive or, rather, restricting access to benefits, inducing the unemployed or the inactive to take up any type of employment, and providing support in finding or preparing for employment through active labour market policies, especially for the more marginalized. No clear position is taken on what 'adequate protection during absences from the labour market' would consist of.

Summarising, the Commission's flexicurity concept calls for (i) higher flexibility through the increased use of flexible contracts and the limiting of job protection; and (ii) increased security through lifelong learning which is supposed to improve employability. In addition, activation policies are supposed to foster labour market participation and reduce unemployment, through the strengthening of active labour market policies and the reduction of the disincentive effect of benefit entitlements.

The content the Commission gives to the flexicurity concept raises at least two basic questions. One of these is whether we can consider this an equal rebalancing of flexibility and security. The proposed increase in flexibility is undoubtedly detrimental to the job security of workers.[9] Would the 'new' security, to be achieved through employability and activation, balance such further flexibilisation?

8 2006 European Year of Workers' Mobility Launch Conference, Brussels, 20 February 2006.

9 This is not to say that all types of flexibility are negative for workers. For example, certain types of working time flexibility or possibilities to work reduced hours can also be beneficial for workers, providing them with wider possibilities to control when they work and to combine work and non-work activities.

The Commission's position strongly points towards a change in the notion of security, which moves from being understood as protection against risk to the capacity to adapt to change by means of a process of constant learning (Serrano Pascual 2004). 'Old' types of security are deemed to obstruct the necessary flexibility and should be reduced.[10] This concerns, in particular, a tightening of benefit schemes where they are 'generous', and a reduction of employment protection. The 'new' security should facilitate flexibility and is based on learning. Learning should lead to greater adaptability and employability, which in turn should lead to employment, considered the best recipe for security.

The Commission's flexicurity reasoning also points to a change in the notion of solidarity. It suggests that competitiveness is the key to solidarity, downplaying the need for redistributive solidarity and emphasising what Streeck (1999) termed 'competitive solidarity'. Competitive solidarity is used to describe a 'new' solidarity that is based on accepting that in the need to '… adapt to the new economic circumstances, national communities seek to defend their solidarity, less through protection and redistribution than through joint competitive and productive success – through politics, not against markets, but within and with them, gradually replacing protective and redistributive with competitive and productive solidarity (Streeck 1999)'. The Commission's interpretation of flexicurity fits this perception of solidarity, by emphasising the need to facilitate labour market adjustments (i.e. with the market), and at the same time providing protection in the sense of enabling the worker to make these adjustments and to transit between various labour market states.

Hence, in Commission-style flexicurity increased flexibility is not matched by increased security, but rather by a change from 'old' to 'new' types of security, obviously implying a decrease in the 'old' types. This does not seem to be an even deal nor a win-win approach in which workers and employers are both and evenly catered to. The emphasis is evidently on increasing flexibility, and even the social policy side of the equation seems to be aimed at making labour markets more flexible rather than at providing types of security that make increased flexibility acceptable or mitigate its negative effects. This can hardly be considered balanced. The employers' demand for increased flexibility is neatly served in the Commission's proposals, while workers as well as the unemployed and inactive see their job protection and income security decline, in exchange for lifelong learning and active labour market policies. Compared to 'old-style' job protection and income security the 'new' security also seems rather intangible. Although it is in general true that the better qualified have a lower risk of unemployment, access to education or training does not provide enforceable guarantees to the individual.

The second question to be raised is: what's new? Does the Commission really put forward a new perspective on labour market reform or is flexicurity simply a new way of selling the same message? Here the answer can be fairly short. The major, explicit, elements of the Commission's flexicurity vision (i.e. more flexible contracts, lifelong learning, employability, activation, make work pay, active labour market policies and social partnership) have been part and parcel of its labour market discourse and of the

[10] This position also ignores the fact that even with 'old' types of security high levels of flexibility can be achieved, notably working time and functional flexibility.

EES for quite some time. Hence, in this sense, the new emphasis on flexicurity seems like old wine in a fashionable new bottle.

What *is* new, though, is the prominent place flexicurity is acquiring in the Commission's employment policy, as well as in the renewed Lisbon strategy. Indeed, lately there has been little attention paid to the broader EES as such, which now seems to stand in the shadow of the more confined flexicurity approach. The Commission insists heavily on its importance in solving Europe's labour market problems and on the need for the member states to implement flexicurity strategies. Whereas formally the Commission argues that each country should implement its own flexicurity policy, shaping it in a way that fits national circumstances, it does strongly promote the particular version of flexicurity discussed above. As a result, there is a risk that European employment policy is being narrowed down to this limited version of flexicurity. This would only serve to strengthen the emphasis of the European project on economic goals, while social Europe becomes further marginalized.

Conclusions

Flexicurity is the new buzzword in the European debate on the labour market. Most importantly, in the past year or so, it has emerged as the central concept in the European Commission's employment policy. Following the Commission's lead, many other European actors have shown great interest in flexicurity, in the solutions it promises for Europe's labour market problems, and in its promise to create win-win solutions taking equal account of employers' and workers' interest. Hence, a European consensus on the importance of flexicurity has emerged. However, for the moment it seems that only the Commission has developed a more precise notion of what flexicurity is supposed to mean.

In this paper we have discussed the reasons why the Commission has embraced flexicurity and what meaning it has given to the concept. We argue that the Commission has adopted flexicurity because it is compatible with its roles and discourse concerning employment policy. This concerns, in particular, its role as a disseminator of knowledge and 'best practices', its role as a broker between divergent interests, and its discourse concerning the European Social Model, the Lisbon strategy and the relation between competitiveness and social cohesion.

The Commission presents flexicurity as a new way of dealing with the globalised economy, as a new and balanced approach to create the flexibility needed by enterprises while at the same time providing security to workers. However, disentangling the Commission's position shows that its concept of flexicurity is not balanced and hardly new. It is not balanced because, instead of creating a win-win situation, it favours flexibility over security and employers' interests over workers' interests. It is not new since all major elements of the Commission's flexicurity vision have been part of its labour market discourse and of the EES for quite some years already. The Commission's flexicurity position also confirms its emphasis on economic instead of social goals and its reconceptualisation of security from protection against risk to the capacity to adapt to change, and of solidarity from redistributive solidarity to competitive solidarity. What is new, however, is that flexicurity seems to be gradually replacing the broader EES and represents a narrowing down of European employment policy.

Other European actors are in the relatively early stages of developing a more precise position on what flexicurity model they support. It remains to be seen how they will react to the Commission's position and hence what the future of flexicurity will be in Europe. It seems unlikely, however, that the Commission's flexicurity view constitutes a European consensus. Especially from the side of the European trade unions and the left-of-centre fractions of the European Parliament, opposition to this view can be expected.

Annex Table 1: Types of flexibility and security

Types of flexibility	
External numerical flexibility	Adjustment of employment volume by way of an exchange with the external labour market; involving lay-offs, temporary work, fixed term contracts.
Internal numerical flexibility	The temporal adjustment of the amount of work within the firm, involving practices as atypical working hours and time account schemes.
Functional flexibility	Organising flexibility within the firm by means of training, multi-tasking and job-rotation, based on the ability of employees to perform various tasks and activities.
Financial flexibility	The variation in base and additional pay according to the individual or firm performance.
Types of security	
Job security	Security deriving from employment protection legislation, etc., limiting the employer's possibility to dismiss at will.
Employment security	Adequate employment opportunities through high levels of employability ensured by e.g. training and education.
Income security	The protection of adequate and stable levels of income.
Combination security	The security of a worker of being able to combine his or her job with other responsibilities or commitments than paid work.

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