Bourgeois, Clara; Fuertes, Vanesa and Zimmermann, Katharina: Do politics matter in employment policy processes at the local level? France, Germany and the United Kingdom compared. Paper presented by Katharina Zimmermann at the 11th Annual ESPAnet Conference: Social Policy and Economic Development; Poznan, Polen, 4.09.-05.09. 2013.

Abstract: Employment policy is a key issue in most, if not all, European countries. Often regulated at the national level, this policy area is, nevertheless, also a local matter addressed in different ways in different welfare states. Many factors influence the manner in which the national and local level develop and implement employment policy. And, as Bonoli argues, the politics variable has not been yet resolved (Bonoli, 2010). Here, the paper builds on Lowis’ (1972) and Windhoff-Héritiers’ (1987) path-breaking approach on the relationship between policies and politics. It focuses on the implementation process of a redistributive policy in the context of different multi-level frameworks. It is argued that at the local level, the relevance of the politics variable —understood as the political strategies of, and the role and positions held by, elected representatives—for implementation processes in employment policies differs highly according to the national institutional framework, and might also differ from one municipality to another. This hypothesis will be tested by drawing on the findings of qualitative case studies conducted in three countries with different institutional frameworks: France as a centralised country, Germany as a federal one, and the United Kingdom as a devolved one.

Empirical analysis has been conducted in each country at the local level, in the framework of a European FP7-project: LOCALISE. Preliminary results show that policy making and policy implementation of employment policies at the local level differ from one country to another and the politics variable has an impact on both factors. Moreover, employment is a policy field often used in a strategic way at the local level, and it witnesses power arguments among elected bodies. In France, where employment policy is centralised, politics does not strongly affect the nature of employment policy at the local level (policy paradigm and its formulation), but it plays a strong role regarding implementation in terms of target groups, geographical application, cooperation schemes, and legitimizing strategies. In the UK, characterised as a devolved country, employment policy is highly centralised while other policy fields are devolved to the regional/national administrations. In this instance, politics could indirectly affect employment policy via policy making and implementation in fields strongly related to it. In Germany – although a federal country – local politics seem to have a surprisingly low relevance for implementation of nationally dominated employment policies. Here, the relationship between local public administrations and politics has crucial impact on the outcome of the implementation processes.

This paper first describes the level of discretion of the politics variable at the local level with regards to employment policy, and the significance of this policy field for local elected members in each country. It then analyses the relationship between politics and employment policies, both during policy making and implementation, at the local level. The main theoretical contribution of the paper consists in the discussion of our findings with regards to the way politics variable at the local level affect local employment policies.