Nom et prénom du promoteur : Esposito Giovanni

Faculté : Philosophie et Sciences Sociales

Service : CEPAP                                     N° du service :  N/A

CPI : 124          Tél. intérieur : 02 650 34 82          E-mail : giovanni.esposito@ulb.be

## 1. Résumé du projet en anglais (2000 caractères espaces compris)

Freedom of Information (FOI) laws are vital to fostering government transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in democracy (Hood, 2006). FOI enables citizens to access government-held information while obligating public officials to disclose it. Advances in ICTs, such as emails and digital platforms, have further enhanced the ability to scrutinize government actions (Margetts and John, 2024). As a result, FOI laws have been rapidly adopted worldwide as a cornerstone of democratic governance (Michener, 2011). However, despite their widespread adoption, these laws are poorly implemented, with governments frequently failing to meet FOI obligations (Michener et al., 2021). Using field experiments, scholars have examined how bureaucratic discretion affects FOI requests submitted via email. These studies show that bureaucrats' decisions to disclose information are influenced by requester characteristics, such as social status (Cicatiello et al., 2024) and gender (Michener & Rodrigues, 2015). Only one study has examined FOI requests mediated by digital platforms in Germany, showing that requests addressing high-accountability topics, like government spending or security, are more likely to receive responses while low-accountability topics, such as individual needs, are frequently ignored (Trautendorfer et al.,2024). This study aims to advance FOI research in Belgium, contributing to comparative studies in this field in two ways. On one hand, it deepens my existing research line, which uses field experiments to examine email-mediated FOI requests in Belgium (Esposito et al., 2024a; Mabillard et al., 2024). On the other, it launches a new research line exploring the role of digital platforms, an understudied area, particularly in Belgium. By analyzing FOI requests submitted through *Transparencia.be[1]*, a leading Belgian FOI platform, this research will address a novel question: *How do public bureaucrats discriminate among platform-mediated FOI requests in Belgium?*

---

[1] See Annex 2 for the formal support of Transparencia.be for this project, specifically highlighting their availability to provide access to the collected documents.

## 2. Budget détaillé soumis pour un FER (1 page max)

The proposed budget supports the advancement of my research agenda on transparency policy and FOI laws by funding two critical components.

First, it facilitates the dissemination of findings from the data collected through my field experiment in Belgium (see Section 3 of this proposal for details). This will be achieved through participation in leading international conferences, including the ECPR in Thessaloniki, the IPPA in Chiang Mai, and the EGPA in Glasgow. These opportunities will allow me to engage with global experts, receive valuable feedback, and establish collaborations to enhance the impact of my work.

Second, the budget provides the resources necessary to conduct a comprehensive empirical study on FOI requests submitted through the Transparencia.be platform. This includes funding for research assistants to collect and analyze data, training to ensure effective use of AI tools, and essential equipment. The study will build a robust dataset to explore the determinants of bureaucratic responsiveness, enabling the publication of high-impact research and laying the groundwork for future comparative studies.

| Category | Cost (€) |
|---|---|
| **Conference Attendance** | |
| *ECPR conference* | |
| Registration Fee | 150 |
| Travel Costs | 700 |
| Accommodation | 600 |
| Per Diem | 250 |
| *IPPA conference* | |
| Registration Fee | 475 |
| Travel Costs | 1200 |
| Accommodation | 500 |
| Per Diem | 200 |
| *EGPA conference* | |
| Registration Fee | 650 |
| Travel Costs | 500 |
| Accommodation | 480 |
| Per Diem | 200 |
| **Total** | **5905** |
| **Empirical Study** | |
| Research Assistants[2] (5 months, 4 individuals) | 44800 |
| AI Subscription (5 months) | 138 |
| Laptops for Data Collection (4) | 6000 |
| Fieldwork Costs (3 meetings) | 225 |
| **Total** | **51163** |
| **Grand Total** | **57068** |

More details about the unitary costs of each category are available in Annex 1.

---

[2] French traslation "Jobistes"

### 3. Situer la demande dans le contexte des activités du promoteur (1 page maximum)

My research project on FOI laws builds on nearly a decade of scholarship in **public policy and administration**, with an increasing focus on transparency and FOI. My earlier work examined the **governance of large infrastructure megaprojects**, emphasizing the **critical role of transparency** in fostering trust and enabling effective collaboration among public, private, and civil society stakeholders (Esposito et al., 2021; 2022; 2024b; Arda et al., 2024). These studies revealed that inadequate information-sharing and accountability often lead to public distrust and opposition to major infrastructure initiatives, which, under certain circumstances, can escalate into large social movements against perceived useless or imposed megaprojects.

Transparency also emerged as a key theme in my research on **sustainable urban development policies**, where I emphasized the **importance of transparent collaboration** among governments, civil society, and private organizations to achieve successful outcomes (Galego et al., 2024; Esposito et al., 2024c; 2024d; Clément et al., 2024). These studies demonstrated that insufficient information-sharing frequently results in fragmented governance and stakeholder disengagement, which, again, has the potential to trigger social movements and protests. These findings reinforced my interest in FOI laws as tools for enhancing transparency and accountability in public governance.

Over the past two years, I have focused on **FOI laws**, conducting a **field experiment in Belgium** to identify barriers to their implementation, including regional disparities and bureaucratic discretion (Esposito et al., 2024a; Mabillard et al., 2024). This experiment was also an **active pedagogy exercise involving 45 students enrolled in the 2022/2023 edition of my course "Innovations in Policy Evaluation" within ULB's Master in Public Administration**. The data gathered from this experiment deepened my understanding of how transparency policies function in practice and the challenges of ensuring equitable access to government-held information. It also laid the foundation for my role as a member of the local organizing committee of the **8th Global Conference on Transparency Research** (GCTR) in May 2024. Following this, I collaborated with GCTR scholars through the **EU's Civic University Alliance** to establish a network of universities and civil society organizations aimed at replicating my experimental study on Belgian FOI laws in other countries where the implementation of these laws remains underexplored. This network will meet for the first time in March 2025. It includes Wits University (South Africa), Makerere University (Uganda), the University of Bucharest (Romania), and the University of Lausanne (Switzerland). Field experiments in these countries are integral to the **ERC proposal** I submitted in October 2024. This extensive research background has also informed the panel "Design, Implementation, and Challenges of Transparency Policies", which I will co-chair with Prof. Mabillard (ULB) at the upcoming International Public Policy Association (IPPA) conference in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Currently, **my research spans three interconnected areas**: (1) megaproject policy, with a recent focus on how such projects are framed in the electoral manifestos of European political parties, analyzed through the Comparative Manifesto Project database; (2) multi-stakeholder collaboration in sustainable urban development policies; and (3) bureaucratic discretion in the implementation of FOI laws. This proposal directly builds on my prior research, particularly the third research area, by addressing the **gap between the formal adoption of FOI laws and their real-world implementation**. I am currently working on a paper leveraging data collected from my previous field experiment, analyzing it through the lens of behavioral policy theories to explore the role of cognitive biases in bureaucratic discretion. I aim to present this paper at the 2025 conferences of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) and the European Group for Public Administration (EGPA). Additionally, I have established collaborations with the *Transparencia.be* platform to analyze FOI requests submitted through it, further expanding my work on the implementation of transparency policies through ICTs.

## 4. Stratégie générale de financement du projet (1/2 page max)

This project seeks funding to support two essential components of my research on transparency and Freedom of Information (FOI) laws: (1) the dissemination of findings from my field experiment in Belgium, and (2) an empirical study analyzing FOI requests submitted through the Transparencia.be platform.

**Dissemination** (2025, Y1 to Y9): Funding is requested for attendance at three major conferences—ECPR (€1,700), IPPA (€2,375), and EGPA (€1,830)—to present findings, engage with global experts, and establish collaborations. These events are vital for strengthening the impact of my research and fostering broader academic and policy networks.

**Empirical Study** (Y9/2025 to Y6/2026): This labour-intensive study will involve training non-professional research assistants (i.e. jobistes) to code approximately 100,000 FOI requests submitted through Transparencia.be between 2014 and 2024. The assistants will be trained to extract data on request topics, tone, status (resolved, ignored, refused), and other relevant variables. The collected data will enable me to write at least two high-impact academic papers:

1. The first paper will examine how the topic and tone of FOI requests affect platform-mediated information disclosure.
2. The second paper will use "if-and-if" methodologies for policy evaluation to assess whether the entry into force of FOI-related regulatory provisions in different points in time since 2014 has improved the platform's effectiveness in mediating information disclosure.

To achieve these goals, the budget includes:

- Personnel: Hiring four research assistants (jobistes) for five months to process and code data (€44,800).
- AI Tools: Subscriptions to assist in data extraction and processing (€138 for five months).
- Equipment: Purchasing four laptops for data entry (€6,000).
- Fieldwork: Travel and coordination with Transparencia.be (€225).

The requested funding is critical to completing this ambitious project. It will result in reusable datasets, important research contribution, and practical insights for improving FOI laws and their implementation. The study will also significantly advance the understanding of how digital platforms mediate transparency policies.

5. Liste des crédits sollicités auprès d'autres sources de financement extérieures à l'université et qui sont directement liés à la demande introduite auprès du FER

ERC Starting Grants 2024 (Title of the research proposal: TRANSACT)

6. Pour chaque crédit sollicité, veuillez fournir les informations suivantes :

- **Le bailleur de fonds**

European Research Council (ERC)

- **La date de dépôt**

15/10/2024

- **La date d'octroi**

August 2025 (planned)

- **Le montant sollicité pour l'équipement et pour le fonctionnement**

The total budget for my TRANSACT project is €1,499,994, strategically allocated across key categories to ensure the project's success while adhering to ERC guidelines.

1. The majority of funding (€1,120,107) is dedicated to personnel costs, covering the salaries of the Principal Investigator (PI), two Postdoctoral Researchers, and two PhD students. These team members will lead field experiments, data analysis, and result dissemination over the project's five years. The PI's time represents an 80% commitment, with additional funding allocated for two Postdocs (Y1-Y4) and two PhD students (Y1-Y5).
2. Equipment (€6,000) provides computers for team members, while consumables (€31,220) fund data analysis tools, fieldwork travel, transcription services, and citizen scientist training workshops.
3. Travel costs (€35,000) enable participation in 15 conferences, ensuring the dissemination of findings and networking opportunities. Additionally, publications and dissemination (€25,000) cover conference fees, open access publications, and website development to maximize accessibility and outreach.

Finally, other direct costs (€188,410) include participant incentives for citizen scientists, fees for practitioner experts contributing to FOI analysis, and audit costs. This balanced budget ensures the project's ambitious goals of advancing FOI research and public engagement are met efficiently.

- **Le statut de la décision d'octroi (octroyé avec les montants obtenus ou non octroyé ou en attente de décision avec la date prévue pour la décision)**

March 2025 (planned decision date)

- **Une brève explication du lien entre le financement et la demande FER**

My ERC project focuses on launching a series of innovative field experiments grounded in a novel theoretical framework. These experiments aim to advance our understanding of bureaucratic discretion by studying how it operates in the context of email-mediated FOI requests. The goal is to develop a comprehensive framework for conducting field experiments that investigate the decision-making processes and behavioral patterns of public officials when responding to such requests. Conversely, this FER proposal takes a complementary but distinct approach by examining bureaucratic discretion in platform-mediated FOI requests. This is achieved through document analysis of a large dataset of FOI requests submitted via the Transparencia.be platform. By analyzing key factors such as the topic and tone of the requests, this study explores how these variables influence the likelihood and type of response from public officials. While both projects investigate the implementation of FOI laws mediated by ICTs, they do so using different methodologies and perspectives. The ERC project focuses on

experimental designs to explore discretion in email-mediated requests, while the FER proposal leverages document analysis to understand platform-mediated discretion.

Pour les demandes qui ne peuvent faire état d'une liste de crédits obtenus ni d'une liste de crédits sollicités à un des outils du FNRS (CDR, PDR, EQP, …) ou auprès d'autres bailleurs de fonds, veuillez ajouter un bref un argumentaire expliquant pourquoi la demande est difficilement finançable par les budgets des bailleurs de fonds habituels de la recherche (1/2 page max).
N/A

## Documents à fournir en plus du formulaire

- Liste des publications extraites de DI-fusion du promoteur (ou du groupe concerné) limitée au cinq dernières années
- Bref CV du promoteur (max. 4 pages)

# References

Arda, L., Esposito, G., & Wilderom, R. (2024). Sense and sensibility: Narrative strategies shaping megaproject development. *Project Leadership and Society, 5,* 100118. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.plas.2024.100118

Cicatiello, L., De Simone, E., Di Mascio, F., Gaeta, G. L., Natalini, A., & Worthy, B. (2024). Response, awareness and requester identity in FOI law: Evidence from a field experiment. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization, 220,* 12–30. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2023.06.009

Clément J., Esposito G. & Crutzen N. (2024) The citizen's seat at the table: Balancing interests for inclusive public-private partnerships in sustainable urban projects. paper presented at 40th EGOS Colloquium 2024 "Crossroads for organizations: Time, Space, and People", University of Milan Bicocca (Italy).

Esposito, G., Cicatiello, L., Mabillard, V., & Gaeta, G. L. (2024a). Toward a citizen science framework for public policy evaluation: Lessons from a field experiment on Freedom of Information laws in Belgium. *Evaluation, 0(0).* https://doi.org/10.1177/13563890241270195

Esposito, G., Felicetti, A., & Terlizzi, A. (2023). Participatory governance in megaprojects: The Lyon-Turin high-speed railway among structure, agency, and democratic participation. *Policy and Society, 42(2),* 259–273. https://doi.org/10.1093/polsoc/puac029

Esposito, G., Taffoni, G., Terlizzi, A., & Crutzen, N. (2024b). Between institutions and narratives: Understanding collective action in innovation policy processes. *European Policy Analysis*. https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1224

Esposito, G., Terlizzi, A., & Crutzen, N. (2022). Policy narratives and megaprojects: The case of the Lyon-Turin high-speed railway. *Public Management Review, 24(1),* 55–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.1958041

Esposito, G., Nelson, T., Ferlie, E., & Crutzen, N. (2021). The institutional shaping of global megaprojects: The case of the Lyon-Turin high-speed railway. *International Journal of Project Management, 39(6),* 658–671. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2020.12.008

Esposito, G., Terlizzi, A., Desdemoustier, J., Pichault, F., & Crutzen, N. (2024c). Smart City Development as Public Entrepreneurship: An In-Depth Case Study of Mayoral Action Based on Actor-Network Theory. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2024.2329672

Galego, D., Esposito, G., & Crutzen, N. (2024). Sustainable urban development: A scoping review of barriers to the public policy and administration. *Public Policy and Administration.* https://doi.org/10.1177/09520767241266410

Hood, C. (2006). Transparency in historical perspective. In C. Hood & D. Heald (Eds.), *Transparency: The key to better governance?* (pp. 3–23). Oxford University Press.

Mabillard, V., Esposito, G., Cicatiello, L., Gaeta, G. L., & Pasquier, M. (2024). Barriers to freedom of information: Insights from an experiment in Belgium. *International Journal of Public Administration.*https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2024.2378329

Margetts, H., & John, P. (2024). How rediscovering nodality can improve democratic governance in a digital world. *Public Administration, 102(3),* 969–983.

Michener, G. (2011). FOI laws around the world. *Journal of Democracy, 22(2),* 145–159.

Michener, G., Coelho, J., & Moreira, D. (2021). Are governments complying with transparency? Findings from 15 years of evaluation. *Government Information Quarterly, 38(2),* 101565. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2021.101565

Michener, G., & Rodrigues, K. (2015). Who wants to know? Assessing discrimination in transparency and freedom of information regimes. In *Proceedings of the Global Conference on Transparency Studies.*

Trautendorfer, J., Schmidthuber, L., & Hilgers, D. (2024). Are the answers all out there? Investigating citizen information requests in the haze of bureaucratic responsiveness. *Governance, 37(3),* 845–865. https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12619

# Annex 1 – Budget's unitary costs

## Part 1: Funding for Conference Attendance

To continue my research by presenting and disseminating findings from the field experiment, funding is requested to cover attendance at the following conferences:

1. **ECPR Conference in Thessaloniki (Travel and Attendance: 2025)**
   - Registration Fee: €150
   - Travel Costs (Flights and Local Transport): €700
   - Accommodation (5 nights at €120/night): €600
   - Per Diem (5 days at €50/day): €250
   - **Total**: €1,700
2. **IPPA Conference in Chiang Mai (Travel and Attendance: 2025)**
   - Registration Fee: €475
   - Travel Costs (Flights and Local Transport): €1,200
   - Accommodation (5 nights at €100/night): €500
   - Per Diem (5 days at €40/day): €200
   - **Total**: €2,375
3. **EGPA Conference in Glasgow (Travel and Attendance: 2025)**
   - Registration Fee: €650
   - Travel Costs (Flights and Local Transport): €500
   - Accommodation (4 nights at €120/night): €480
   - Per Diem (4 days at €50/day): €200
   - **Total**: €1,830

**Total for Conference Attendance**: **€5,905**

## Part 2: Empirical Study on FOI Requests Through Transparencia.be

This study requires funding for data collection, research assistants, AI training, and equipment.

1. **Research Assistants (4 individuals)**
   - Total hours worked per assistant: 800 hours (5 months at 40 hours/week)
   - Hourly rate: €14
   - Salary per assistant: €11,200
   - **Total Cost for 4 Assistants**: **€44,800**[3]
2. **AI Training for Research Assistants**
   - Monthly Subscription for 5 months (€30 converted to euros at €0.92/USD): €138
3. **Laptops for Data Collection**
   - Quantity: 4
   - Estimated Cost per Laptop: €1,500
   - **Total**: **€6,000**
4. **Fieldwork Costs for Collaboration and Meetings**

---

[3] If we plan for 5 months of work with 4 researchers, each working 40 hours per week, we estimate that approximately 250 documents will need to be processed collectively per day to complete the dataset of 100,000 documents (this is the amount of documents that according to Transparencia.be could be found in their platform database). This means each researcher will process about 63 documents per day. This wil be possible thanks to AI assistance.

- o Travel for meetings with Transparencia.be (3 visits to Brussels):
  - Fieldwork Transport + Lunch for Interviewees: €75 per meeting
  - **Total for 3 Meetings**: **€225**

**Total for Empirical Study**: **€51,163**

# Grand Total for Research Project (€57,068)

- **Conference Attendance**: €5,905
- **Empirical Study**: €51,163

# Annex 2 – Formal support of Transparencia.be to the research project

**From:** **Transparencia Belgium** audit.citoyen.quartier@gmail.com  📎
**Subject:** Soutien Formel de transparencia.be Re: Demande de soutien formel pour projet de recherche FOI
**Date:** 21 November 2024 at 16:42
**To:** ESPOSITO Giovanni giovanni.esposito@ulb.be
**Cc:** Transparencia@p-installe.be

TB

Cher giovanni,
Bravo pour ce beau projet FOI.Par la présente je t'assure du soutien formel de Transparencia.be vu que ca aidera à analyser notre site

Claude Archer



Le mer. 20 nov. 2024 à 17:55, ESPOSITO Giovanni <giovanni.esposito@ulb.be> a écrit :

Bonjour Claude,

Suite à nos échanges précédents, je me permets de te recontacter concernant mon projet de recherche, qui vise à réaliser une analyse systématique des quelque 100 000 demandes FOI envoyées aux administrations belges au cours des dix dernières années, et pour solliciter le soutien formel de Transparencia.be.

Concrètement, le projet consistera à recruter quatre assistants de recherche (appelés "jobistes" dans le jargon administratif de l'ULB) pour extraire et analyser les demandes FOI selon plusieurs critères, notamment :

- Le statut de la demande (résolue, en attente, sans réponse, etc.)
- Le type de réponse (réussie, partiellement réussie, refusée, ignorée)
- La juridiction concernée (fédérale, régionale, communale).

Les financements obtenus permettront également de présenter les résultats de nos travaux dans le cadre de conférences académiques. En particulier, ils incluront les données issues du field experiment mené au cours de l'année académique 2022/2023 avec mes étudiants de master, auquel Transparencia.be a contribué de manière significative.

Je reste à ta disposition pour fournir plus de détails ou organiser une réunion si nécessaire. Par ailleurs, pourrais-tu me faire parvenir un courrier ou un e-mail confirmant le soutien formel de Transparencia.be à ce projet ? Cela renforcera considérablement ma proposition et démontrera la pertinence de cette collaboration.

Je te remercie d'avance pour ton temps et ton soutien, et je me réjouis de pouvoir collaborer davantage avec Transparencia.be dans le cadre de ce projet ambitieux.

Bien cordialement,

Giovanni Esposito, PhD

Professor of Public Policy and Administration
Director of Centre d'Etude des Politiques et de l'Administration Publique (CEPAP)

Université Libre de Bruxelles
Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences
Building S - Office 15.127
Av. Jeanne, 52
1050 Brussels  - Belgium