

## **Slow Adapters or Active Players?**

### **Belgian Regional Parliamentarians and European Affairs after Lisbon**

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#### **Abstract**

*Since the introduction of the Lisbon Treaty, the development of a multilevel parliamentary system has gained attention of EU scholars. Nevertheless, studies so far mainly focused on the involvement of national parliaments whereas only a few studies dedicated attention to the adaptation of subnational parliaments to the European integration. In addition, studies on regional parliaments so far focus mainly on their institutional response, giving less attention to the strategies and behaviour of parliamentarians at the individual level.*

*This paper fills that gap by analysing, in a comparative perspective, the perceived activity of Belgian regional parliamentarians (RMPs) in EU affairs. Indeed, following the 'in foro interno, in foro externo' principle, Belgian regions are responsible to conduct foreign policy (including EU affairs) for areas of their competency. Consequently, the scrutiny of EU affairs in Belgium should not only take place in the national parliament, but should also trigger attention in regional assemblies.*

*By analysing the activity of RMPs, this paper aims at understanding to what extent and how Belgian regional parliamentarians informed themselves on EU affairs and how they influence their executives' EU policies. This paper presents preliminary empirical data collected by an online survey in all three Belgian regional parliaments (Flemish, Walloon and Brussels parliaments). The questionnaire is based on a previous survey conducted in Germany (Schneider et al. 2014), and adapted to the Belgian context.*

## **Introduction: Why studying regional parliaments' role in the EU**

The EU is described in the literature as a multilevel political system in itself, which has moved far beyond a mere international organization or regulatory agency (Follesdal and Hix 2006). Interestingly, when negotiating the basic treaty, member states chose to characterize the EU polity as a representative democracy (art 10.2 TEU). The latter can be achieved through various ways of citizen representation (input legitimacy), transparent decision-making procedures and rules (throughput legitimacy) and delivery of broadly acceptable policy solutions for societal problems (output legitimacy). In theory then, the institutional set-up of the EU as a whole should live up to conditions of democratic legitimacy. Yet, so far the EU multilevel political system is best illustrated by the predominance of executive actors in its decision-making processes. While the European Council is already the prime example of a set of executive actors taking the lead in agenda-setting, a substantial number of member states even propagates a further increased role for the European Council granting it *de facto* decision-making power. In addition, some EU agencies, such as the European Central Bank enjoy far-reaching policy autonomy while the European Commission increasingly relies on executive measures such as delegated acts. Finally, alternative tools and procedures such as the Open Method of Coordination and the European Semester put executive actors in a beneficial position vis-à-vis legislative actors (Bursens and Högenauer 2017). These trends clearly put the claim that the EU is a representative democracy to a test.

In this paper, we see the parliamentarisation of EU affairs as a necessary condition for representative democracy in the EU polity. Involving parliaments allows to counter-balance the gradual but clear shift towards the dominance of executive institutions and non-majoritarian agencies in EU policy-making and helps to tackle the legitimacy crisis in the EU (Follesdal and Hix 2006). Crum and Fossum (2009) for instance argue that parliamentary representation is the most suitable way of ensuring political equality and public deliberation, which are by others identified as crucial criteria for democratic legitimacy (Bellamy & Kröger 2012). Taking this argument one step further, we believe that the parliamentarisation of EU affairs should not only take place at the European and national levels, but should also include the regional level, at least for the parliaments with legislative competences. Phrased differently, as the EU is composed of multiple layers, also its democratic set-up – and

especially parliamentary representation – needs to be multilevel (Bursens and Högenauer 2017).

This parliamentarisation process of the EU has already been discussed in the literature with a main focus on the EP and on national parliaments. On the one hand, the attention of scholars was first directed towards the European Parliament (EP), seen as the counterweight representative institution and conceived as the democratic rescue of the EU. Yet, despite its increased role in the EU decision-making processes and the standardization of the co-decision legislative procedure between the EP and the Council of the EU, it has become clear that the EP alone cannot live up to these high expectations. Indeed, the EP is still short of full parliamentary powers, as it lacks for instance the right to initiate legislation, even with respect to exclusive EU competences. Hence, several authors argue that parliamentarisation at the EU level alone is not sufficient and that at least part of the solution is additionally, maybe even primarily, to be found at the level of the member states (cf. Maurer 2002).

On the other hand, and in light of these findings, some authors contend that that the EU will ultimately need to base its legitimacy on national democratic institutions (Weiler, 2012) and plead for a reconnection of national parliaments with EU institutions (Bellamy and Kröger, 2016). For instance, the Brexit debate prompted both academics and politicians to reflect on an enhanced role of member state's parliaments. This is illustrated by the proposition to introduce 'green card' or 'red card' mechanisms, allowing a group of national parliaments to propose new legislative proposals to the European Commission or to effectively block EU proposals (Kreillinger, 2015). In sum, the crucial role of national parliaments has been taken up by a substantial number of scholars (e.g. Norton 1995; Maurer and Wessels 2001; Kiiver 2006; Goetz & Meyer-Sahling 2008; Cooper 2012; Raunio 2011; Winzen 2012) with a clear revival over the last few years (Hefftler et al. 2015, Auel & Christiansen 2015; Sprungk 2016; Bellamy and Kröger 2016). For most member states, looking at the involvement of the *national* parliamentary level in EU politics suffices. Yet, in certain Member States, doing this would give only a partial image of the activities taking place in their national *parliamentary system*.

Despite some rather critical opinions of the potential role of regional parliaments in the overall European parliamentary system (see Patzelt 2015; Crum 2015), we argue with others that the focus should be broadened to the regional level (Auel and Grosse Hüttmann 2015, Abels 2015), at least for those member states hosting parliaments with legislative powers (Germany, Austria, Belgium, the UK, Spain and Italy and some peripheral islands of Finland and Portugal). Regional parliaments have increasingly pooled legislative competences – just as their federal counterparts – with the European level. When loss of sovereignty is used as an argument for reconnecting national parliaments with European policy-making, this should also apply to regional assemblies with legislative competences. The pooling of sovereignty also implies that legislative regional assemblies in these member states are entrusted with the implementation of a vast amount of EU legislation, therefore playing a crucial role in EU decision-making processes.

This is especially true since the Lisbon Treaty, as regions have been empowered in different ways such as the increased access to the Court of Justice through the Committee of the Regions (Lisbon Treaty, Protocol 2, art. 8) and, especially relevant for regional parliaments, the ex ante subsidiarity control through the Early Warning Mechanism (Lisbon Treaty, Protocol 2, art. 6). Hence, regional parliaments are an indispensable part of an emerging EU multilevel parliamentary system, which comes down to a balancing act between direct representation of citizens (through the European Parliament) versus indirect representation of its constitutive units, both member states and regions. This perspective has been taken by Hurrelmann (2007), Lord and Pollak (2010), who have coined the term of compound representation (see also Benz 2003), by Maurer, using multilevel parliamentarism (2009) and by Crum and Fossum (Crum & Fossum 2009; 2012, Crum 2015), who have proposed the notion of the Multilevel Parliamentary Field. Despite all these theoretical insights, regional parliaments have hardly been discussed in empirical scholarly work. For instance, the recent 2013 Journal of European Integration special issue on representation in the EU, nor the 2015 West European Politics and the 2016 Comparative European Politics special issues on parliaments in the EU pay attention to the regional level, while the Palgrave Handbook of National Parliaments in the EU (Hefftlar et al. 2015) only devotes one chapter to the regional level (Vara Arribas and Högenauer 2015).

This paper fills that gap and compares the EU-related activities of Belgian parliamentarians during the ongoing legislative term (period 2014-2016) in the Brussels, Flemish and Walloon parliaments. Doing so allows assessing the actual *input legitimacy* provided by Belgian regional parliaments in the EU multi-level system. More precisely, the objective is to measure the EU related activities and to explain, at the individual level, the ongoing variations of activity between parliamentarians. Three potential explanatory variables at the individual level are discussed: the perceived salience of EU affairs for regional MPs, their perceived impact on EU decision-making process and finally, their position towards the European integration. This paper presents the first descriptive statistics issued from an online survey among all Belgian regional MPs which was initiated in the Spring of 2016, inspired by a similar survey in Germany (Schneider et al. 2014).

The structure of the article goes as follows. The next section presents a state of the art on the role of regional parliaments in EU affairs, assessing what we know from empirical studies and pinpointing shortcomings in the literature. Second, the main features of the Belgian political system are introduced and the institutional developments in the Walloon, Flemish and Brussels regional parliaments regarding EU affairs are described. Third, the analytical framework and the dependent and independent variables of this study are introduced. The fourth section presents the empirical measurement of our dependent variable and discusses our empirical findings using preliminary descriptive statistics. The paper ends with a concise conclusion and an outline for further development of the paper.

### **Regional Parliaments: what do we know so far from empirical studies**

Empirical studies on regional parliaments in the EU can be grouped in two broad categories. On the one side, several articles focus on single country or even single region studies of one of the federal or quasi-federal member states. On the other side and more recently, regional parliaments have been scrutinized in a comparative perspective. Still, almost all of these focus on the institutional capacities and aggregate responses (parliamentary level) to the pooling of powers at the European level. Therefore, we only have limited knowledge of the variations between policy fields and of individual behavior of regional parliamentarians regarding EU affairs (with the exception of Schneider et al, 2014, see *infra*). This contrasts with studies looking at national parliaments for which the scope has been broadened over time from institutional Europeanisation to attitudinal Europeanisation (Goetz and Meyer-

Sahling 2008) or, put otherwise, from institutional capacities to parliamentary behavior (Auel and Christiansen 2015). The following section proposes a brief state of the art on the role of regional parliaments in EU affairs.

From single country studies we have learnt that German Länder parliaments make varying, but overall limited use of the Lisbon Treaty provisions and the domestic constitutional reforms. Their main strategy is to control EU positions of the respective regional governments, sometimes through binding mandates (Abels 2013; 2015). Austrian Länder parliaments are diagnosed as rather weak when compared to Länder executives who try to control the federal government's EU positions (Bussjäger 2010). Miklin (2015) sees only little change after the Lisbon Treaty stipulations on subsidiarity. A similar conclusion can be drawn for Belgium: despite the far-reaching autonomy of regions and communities, and of their parliaments, several authors concur that regional parliaments only display very limited activity regarding EU policies (Vanden Bosch 2014; Bursens et al. 2015,). The findings for the quasi-federal states point into the same direction. Nicolini (2015) defines Italian regional assemblies as weak players in EU politics: if any, involvement in EU policies runs through the regional governments. In the UK, the empirical focus has been on Scotland: Carter and Mcleod (2005) and more recently Högenauer (2015) stress the strong powers of the Scottish parliament to control the regional government, but they find these powers hardly used in practice, and hence evaluate also the Scottish parliament to be only moderately engaged. The findings on Spain are very similar: limited involvement and hardly any use of the new provisions of the Lisbon Treaty (Castella Andreu & Kölling 2015).

Only recently, regional parliaments have been scrutinized in a comparative perspective. A first set of comparative studies focuses on the subsidiarity control by member states' parliaments. Studies find differentiated but overall quite limited use of the Early Warning Mechanism (EWM), mainly because of different perceptions of subsidiarity, divergent interests in legislative proposals and different level of capacities. Even when they pick it up, regional parliaments are confronted with a very short time frame and national parliaments are not obliged to engage their regional counterparts or take regional opinions into account while formulating an opinion (Boronská-Hryniewiecka 2013; Schmitt *et al.* 2013, Vara Arribas 2015, Vara Arribas & Högenauer 2015, Fromage 2016). In addition to these studies,

Högenauer (2015) compares regional parliamentary staff and finds it very limited. She argues that this is causing problems in terms of data-collection and data-management, but nevertheless points to the staff's crucial function in signaling cases and drafting opinions. Bussjäger (2015) finds that most legislative regional parliaments have only low esteem and expectations of the Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies (CALRE), which illustrates the low interest in formal interparliamentary relations of regional assemblies.

Finally, individual members of regional parliaments' EU-related activities have rarely been studied. A notable exception is the study of Schneider et al. (2014) on German regional parliamentarians. They found that perceived salience and perceived influence explain variation in EU-related activity of Länder parliament members. As this is a pioneering article, the authors express doubts about the direction of the causality and call for more (panel) data to check their findings. Following the tracks of Schneider et al. (2014), a study on the Belgian regional parliamentarians may be a valuable contribution. Therefore, this paper looks at behavioral responses of members of Belgian regional parliaments, arguing that it is important to look at what is (formally and informally) done by members of regional parliaments, and not only at what they can do or are allowed to do according to constitutional provisions or internal rules of procedure. Hence, this paper accepts the invitation of Auel and Benz arguing that 'In order to assess the true Europeanisation of parliamentary democracies one has to look beyond the formal institutions and take the strategies into account, which parliamentary actors develop to deal with their power or lack thereof' (Auel and Benz, 2005: 388).

### **The case of the Belgian regional parliaments**

In this section, the main features of the Belgian federal system are presented as they have an important impact on the parliamentary system and on the scrutiny of international and European affairs. Also the formal EU scrutiny mechanisms and institutional developments in the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels parliaments are briefly discussed.

With regard to the Belgian political system, we need to point to the unique constitutional features of its federal system and the consequences for its parliamentary system. The core features of the current Belgian federation are quite complex: Belgium consists of a federal

level and a double federated level of three Communities (Gemeenschappen / Communautés) and three Regions (Gewesten / Régions), with a special status for the Brussels Capital Region. Belgian federalism is a type of legislative federalism, with no hierarchy of norms between the federal and regional levels. Government levels have both legislative and executive authority over the competences they are constitutionally endowed with and their respective laws stand on equal footing. This absence of norm hierarchy has major implications for how the Belgian federation deals with internationally binding agreements and laws: each level has to prepare and implement those international policies that fall within its powers: the *in foro interno, in foro externo* principle. This entails clear repercussions for the organization of its parliamentary democracy. Each level (federal, region, community) has its own legislature, resulting in a total of seven chambers<sup>1</sup> (Deschouwer 2009: 58). This paper focuses on the parliaments of the three regions only, as regional competences have been much more Europeanized than community competences.

In addition, Belgian political parties and other elites are still on average pro-European while EU issues are no top priority. Evidence for this is observed in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES): the Belgian data reveal that the salience of European issues is only moderate, while they also show that most, if not all Belgian parties share a pro-European consensus. This trend is confirmed by the political programs of the Belgian parties or the number of questions asked in the federal parliament. A look at these data actually reveals that the picture is even bleaker than the 'moderate' label the experts give to the Belgian situation. Only five to ten percent of the party programs are related to EU matters, while the number of questions in the federal parliament related to the EU only once topped the two percent mark. In addition, the Constitution nor the Special Laws on State reform mention parliamentary scrutiny of EU policies (Delreux and Randour, 2013, 2015). Neither does the Cooperation Agreement which implements the drafting and representation of Belgian EU positions. Overall it can thus safely be assumed that the salience of the EU in Belgian parliaments has been very low, at least until 2012 (Van Hecke et al., 2012).

Let's turn now to the Belgian parliaments. Since each parliament has full powers over its constitutionally assigned competencies and a parliamentary act from one level cannot

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<sup>1</sup> The federal House of Representatives and Senate on the federal level; the Flemish Parliament (a merger of the assemblies of the Flemish Region and Flemish Community) the Parliament of the Walloon Region, the

overrule the act of another level, Belgian parliaments are not stimulated to cooperate. These constitutional provisions and the according political practices have substantial implications for the way parliamentary assemblies deal with the EU. On an aggregate level regional parliaments act in EU affairs according to what they are used to in general: bilateral scrutiny of their own executive and very little engagement in intra-Belgian cooperation. Overall, they are considered quite weak, with strong executives and dominant political parties in coalition governments (Deschouwer 2009). This observation also applies to EU related politics and policies (Delreux and Randour 2015).

To determine the extent to which parliaments developed an institutional response to the pooling of preferences at the EU level, we now discuss the informational and constraining resources of Belgian regional parliaments regarding EU affairs (see Winzen 2012). In response to the subsidiarity clause in the Lisbon Treaty, Belgium added Declaration 51 to the Treaty to be in line with its constitution. Belgium made clear that 'National Parliament' in the Belgian case means 'National Parliamentary System'. This allows all Belgian parliaments to have a say in the EWM. All Belgian regional parliaments have now access to legislative proposals of the EU. In practice, however, regional parliaments, and the federal parliament, for that matter, have hardly made use of the ex ante subsidiarity control (Vara Arribas 2015, Fromage 2016), and to the extent that they did, they engaged in it within their own parliament without interparliamentary consultations (Bursens et al. 2015). As for the regional level, but to lesser extent, Belgian regional parliaments have administrators filtering the documents coming from the EU before sending notice to parliamentarians (Schmidt, Ruys and Marx 2013). The Flemish parliament hosts more administrative support than its Brussels and Walloon counterparts, but overall the number of administrators working on EU affairs is relatively weak.

All parliaments have proved in the last year, but at different rhythms, to undergo institutional transformations. While the Walloon and Brussels parliaments made the choice to create a committee exclusively dealing with EU affairs, the Flemish parliament merged EU and international affairs together in one committee. All three committees are chaired by the president of the parliament. For the period between June 2014 and June 2016, the Flemish *Commissie voor Buitenlands Beleid, Europese Aangelegenheden, Internationale*

*Samenwerking en Toerisme* met on average twice per month, the Walloon EAC met 1,5 per month and the EAC of the Brussels parliament (period July 2015-2016) met the least: only 0,5 meetings per month<sup>2</sup>.

The subjects discussed in these committees mainly deal with transversal EU issues, illustrated in that period by discussions about TTIP, CETA, EU asylum and immigration policies but also domestic issues, such as the transposition deficit or the (ongoing) revision of the executive Cooperation Agreement regulating EU affairs in Belgium. Yet, one important difference has to be made between the EACs of the Flemish and Brussels parliament on the one hand, and the one of the Walloon parliament on the other hand. The functioning of the Walloon EAC resembles closely to a 'working group' focusing on only a few EU issues, rather than a traditional broadly oriented committee. The practice shows that the committee mainly organizes hearings with regional, national and EU actors (officials, interest groups, experts etc.) and produces reports and (non-binding) resolutions, and that no time is devoted to core parliamentary tools (e.g. parliamentary questions), as it is the case in the Flemish and Brussels parliaments<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, EU issues are also discussed in the sectoral committees that have the most Europeanized competences. This can take the form of joint committees of the EAC and a sectorial committee or by direct involvement of sectoral committees. Randour and Wolfs (forthcoming 2017) discussing the parliamentary scrutiny of the 2014 CAP reform illustrates this trend, at least for salient EU topics. Yet, none of the Belgian parliaments possesses a mandating or a scrutiny reserve instrument, leaving all of them with non-binding resolutions.

Finally, as is the case for the federal parliaments (See. Delreaux and Randour, 2015), Belgian regional parliaments do not extensively invest in formal parliamentary cooperation. This is found both at the domestic level (intra-cooperation, see. supra) and with respect to the EP and parliaments of other Member States (inter-parliamentary cooperation). Yet, Bursens et al. (2015) observe that the Flemish parliament invests more in inter-parliamentary

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<sup>2</sup> The parliaments of the Brussels region only recently (July 2015) created a committee exclusively dealing with EU affairs. The above average is thus calculated on a period of 11 months. Please note that for the parliament of Brussels, data available on the official website are incomplete.

<sup>3</sup> In the period June 2015-June 2016, 7 parliamentary questions of interpellations were asked in the EAC of the Brussels parliament. In the same time, 253 parliamentary questions were asked in the Committee for international and EU affairs of the Flemish parliament, out of which xx directly tackled EU affairs.

cooperation than its Walloon and Brussels counterparts. While this observation is true for cooperation taking place at the EU level (e.g. joint committees with the EP), this image is more nuanced when looking at other types of cooperation, for example, at the regional level. Indeed, the Walloon parliament is part of the *Conseil parlementaire interregional* (CPI), a forum regrouping French regions, German Länder, Luxembourg, the Walloon region and the French speaking and German community in Belgium. The position to adopt at the CPI and the outcome of the Council are discussed on a regular basis in the Walloon EAC.

### **An analytical framework: measuring and explaining variation**

Describing responses to European integration is only one part of the research agenda on regional parliaments (Bursens and Högenauer 2017). Addressing the question what explains the variation of responses between parliaments and among members of parliaments is a more ambitious and interesting task. However, in order to explain variation, we first need to define what exactly varies. For this, we have to look at the function of domestic parliaments in the EU political system. More explicitly applied to the regional level, Bursens and Högenauer (2017) contend that regional parliaments have three major ways of participating in EU policy-making: influencing the policy-making activities of EU institutions (the gatekeeping legislative function), attempting to control how their regional and national governments act in EU policy-making (the scrutiny function) and seeking to network with other legislative or executive actors in the multilevel environment to support the two main functions: parliaments can build coalitions with other actors to improve their ability to influence legislation or to gather information that they can use to control their executives.

In terms of our *dependent variable*, we look at variation in legislative and scrutiny activities of individual members of the parliaments of the three Belgian Regions. More precisely, the dependent variable is defined as the *activity* of Belgian regional parliamentarians. This activity can be grouped in two types of activities: *getting information* on EU negotiations or planned legislations and *influencing* policies that are initiated at the EU level by coordination position and strategies. In practice, the activity of parliamentarians was measured by asking questions to regional MPs' about who they contacted to get information and influence EU issues with parliamentarians or party members, members of the executive, administrative officials and interest groups and associations; and at which level of governance the latter

operated (regional, national, European levels). Respondents answered on a 5 points scale ranging from 'never' (coded 0), 'several times a year' (1), 'every month' (2), 'every week' (3) to 'every day' (4).

In terms of *independent variables*, what we take from Auel is that she looks for explanations in both institutional capacities and motivational incentives, the latter measured by the degree of support for European integration. In a recent study (Auel and Christiansen 2015) she uses a wide set of variables to study national parliaments in EU affairs: next to the EU institutional context (which is similar for all), she points to the domestic constitutional context (domestic arrangements, resources, procedures) and rational incentives (electoral incentives, perception of impact). Members of parliament are rational actors, they have to decide how they invest their limited resources, how to make use of institutional opportunities. They can engage in EU related activities because of career or electoral goals – i.e. show vote seeking behavior (which depends on public opinion positions and salience) or because of policy influence goals – i.e. displaying policy seeking behavior (which is contingent upon government or opposition positions or coalition governments) (Auel and Christiansen 2015: 269-270). Auel and Christiansen also add sociological incentives as alternative explanations: norms and values, such as parliamentary culture (cooperative vs confrontational culture), attitudes towards European integration and parliamentary roles may explain engaging in EU related activities.

This paper ultimately aims at examining the impact of the perceived saliency of the EU, perceived influence and positions towards the EU integration process on the EU related activities regional parliamentarians display.

## **Method and data**

To measure the involvement of Belgian regional MPs at the individual level, we collected data on the subjective evaluation of parliamentarians of the three Belgian regions: Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels Capital region. Using an online standardized questionnaire, available in French and Dutch, 289 parliamentarians received an invitation to participate in the survey via their official email address. Out of the 290 parliamentarians contacted, only

32 completed the entire questionnaire so far, a response rate of 11%<sup>4</sup>. This has several implications for this first version of the paper. First, variation in the response rate exist between parliaments: while the Walloon parliament has the highest response rate, it is still only of 13,3 % (10 full answers on 75). The Flemish parliament has 11,2% (14 full answers on 125). What is so far problematic is the response rate for the parliament of the Brussels Region with 8,7 %, where in addition a great imbalance is observed between French speaking and Dutch speaking members (almost 28% for the Flemish (5 on 18), only 4 % of the French speaking (3 on 72)). Finally, some parties are almost absent (Dutch and French speaking Greens, Vlaams Belang), others are under represented (CD&V, Sp.a ) while still other parties over-represented (NV-A; Open VLD, PS). In addition, in the Brussels Parliament, 66% of Dutch speaking respondents are part of the liberal party (Open-VLD). Hence, at this stage, drawing statistical conclusions is a bit early. Still, using these preliminary data allows some mapping tendencies at the regional level.

## **Analysis and discussion**

The section starts by measuring the EU related activity of Belgian regional parliamentarians: the contacts of RMPs to get information or influence EU policies with different groups of actors are discussed. The rest of the section presents descriptive data regarding potential independent variables in a next version of the paper.

### *Regional MPs' Activity in EU Politics: who they contact to get information and influence*

When looking at regional MPs EU-related activities, several tendencies are observed (see table 1). First, regional parliamentary involvement in EU affairs is mainly geared towards informational purposes. More precisely, eight out of ten most frequently contacted actor groups have been contacted for informational purposes. Second, political parties of regional MPs play a crucial role for EU-related activities as the seven first most contacted actors come from the regional MP's own party. Put differently, regional MPs favor their own working environment for their EU-related activities. On average, regional MP's from the same party contact each other several times per month to exchange information on EU

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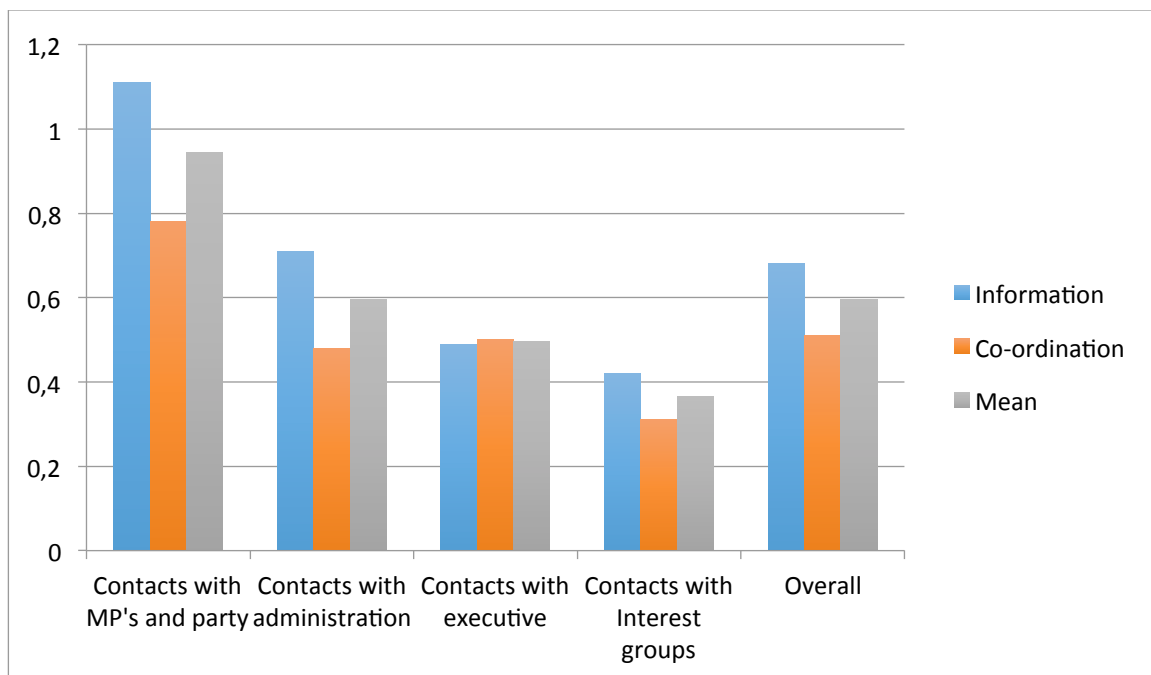
<sup>4</sup> The data-collection started in May 2016 and is currently still running. Regional parliamentarians received the first invitation to participate at the beginning of May 2015, a reminder was sent at the beginning of June and a round of phone calls (mainly to secretariats and assistants) was conducted at the end of June.

issues, and more than several times per year to coordinate common positions. Coordination activities or strategies are defined as contacts with the purpose to influence EU policies. The head of the party, but also ministers from their region and party are important political allies and sources of information. Third, preliminary data even demonstrates that regional MPs go first for actors from the same level of governance. For example, contacts to co-ordinate positions with MEP's from their own party only rank twelfth, therefore lagging behind the regional and to some extent federal level. Indeed, the regional level is predominant, with 8 out of the 15 most contacted actors while the federal level is less well represented with six groups of actors. Fourth, staff from regional ministries and from federal ministries constitute the most relevant non-partisan contact source and overall the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> most contacted actors. Finally, what this ranking also allows to notice is the almost total absence of contacts with actors from the interest groups category. Despite this, it is interesting to notice that both for information exchange and for coordinating positions, Belgian NGO's are the most contacted actors in all three parliaments, closely followed by employers' associations.

|           | <b>Actor contacted</b>                                          | <b>Type of activity</b>          | <b>Mean</b> |
|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>1</b>  | <i>A parliamentarian of my parliament, my party</i>             | Information                      | 2,25        |
| <b>2</b>  | <i>The cabinet of my party (federal)</i>                        | Information                      | 1,75        |
| <b>3</b>  | <i>Minister of my region, my party</i>                          | Co-ordination of common position | 1,63        |
| <b>4</b>  | <i>Minister of my region, my party</i>                          | Information                      | 1,62        |
| <b>5</b>  | <i>The head of my parliamentary group</i>                       | Information                      | 1,60        |
| <b>6</b>  | <i>A parliamentarian from my parliament, my party</i>           | Co-ordination of common position | 1,48        |
| <b>7</b>  | <i>A parliamentarian of the federal parliament, my party</i>    | Information                      | 1,39        |
| <b>8</b>  | <i>A parliamentarian of my parliament, from another party</i>   | Information                      | 1,34        |
| <b>9</b>  | <i>Officials from regional ministries</i>                       | Information                      | 1,33        |
| <b>10</b> | <i>Officials from the federal ministries</i>                    | Information                      | 1,27        |
| <b>11</b> | <i>The cabinet of my party (federal)</i>                        | Co-ordination of common position | 1,26        |
| <b>12</b> | <i>MEP's from my party</i>                                      | Co-ordination of common position | 1,16        |
| <b>13</b> | <i>Officials from the regional parliamentary administration</i> | Information                      | 1,13        |
| <b>14</b> | <i>A federal minister of my party</i>                           | Co-ordination of common position | 1,10        |
| <b>15</b> | <i>A federal minister of my party</i>                           | Information                      | 1,09        |

**Table 1:** Rank-order of the 15 most frequent contacts. Evaluation on a 5 points scale (Never 0; Several times a year 1; Every month 2, Every week 3, Every day 4).

Overall, the average extent of activity of Belgian regional MPs is rather low, with an aggregated mean of 0,51 (on 4). Yet, the frequency of contacts varies according to functional groups and type of activity. As illustrated in figure 1, the mean score is slightly higher for informational than for policy influencing coordination activities. As argued by Schneider et al. (2013), this makes sense as coordination activities are more resource-intensive than information strategies. Looking at the differences between functional groups, it is clear that MPs and party members are the most contacted actors, whether for exchanging information or coordination positions. At the second position, when regional MP's favor contacts with the administration to get information, when they wish to coordinate, they tend to prefer going to the executive. Finally, as already discussed previously, interest groups are the actors that are the less contacted.



**Figure 1:** Scope of regional MPs' EU activities by type of activity and groups of actors.

Yet, at this stage, these results need to be interpreted cautiously for two reasons: our sample is not yet complete and standard deviations are consequently high, showing the variety of behavior between parliamentarians.

### *Understanding Regional MPs activity in EU Politics: description of potential explanatory variables*

This next section presents descriptive statistics on three individual level explanatory factors which we intend to use in future explanatory analyses. First, regarding the salience of the EU for parliamentarians, Regional MPs were asked to evaluate to which extent dealing with EU questions was important for the success of their political career. In other words, do they consider that tackling EU issues is important for their work and re-election. More precisely, they had to position themselves on a scale ranging from 0 (no importance) to 10 (really important). Second, regarding the impact of the perceived influence of Regional MPs on EU projects, they had to answer to one question asking which was their influence on projects from the EU, federal and regional level. Respondents were asked to position themselves on a 5 point scale, ranging from no influence (coded 0), little influence (1), medium influence (2), strong influence (3) to very strong influence (4). Third, to evaluate the position of MPs towards EU integration, they had to position themselves on a scale ranging from 0 – meaning the EU integration has already gone too far – to 10, meaning that EU integration should be more developed. Before discussing the preliminary results, table 2 displays the descriptive statistics for the individual-level variables that are analyzed in this paper.

|                                            | <b>Flemish<br/>parliament</b> | <b>Walloon<br/>parliament</b> | <b>Brussels<br/>parliament</b> | <b>All<br/>parliamentarians</b>      |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>Perceived saliency</b>                  | 3,8<br>(N=14)                 | 3,75<br>(N=12)                | 3,41<br>(N=12)                 | <b>3,66 (on 10)</b><br><b>(N=38)</b> |
| <b>Influence on EU<br/>proposal</b>        | 1<br>(N=13)                   | 1,16<br>(N=12)                | 0,5<br>(N=12)                  | <b>0,89 (on 4)</b><br><b>(N=37)</b>  |
| <b>Position towards EU<br/>integration</b> | 5,9<br>(N=11)                 | 7,75<br>(N=8)                 | 6,6<br>(N=7)                   | <b>6,72 (on 10)</b><br><b>(N=25)</b> |

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics of individual-level variables**

First, the average perceived saliency of the EU for all respondents is 3,66 (on 10), which indicates that MPs perceive EU issues as rather non-important for the success of their own

political career, with little variation between the three Belgian parliaments. More precisely, 63,2% of respondents consider the EU as not salient (from 0 to 4) for the success of their political career when only 14% of respondents choose to consider the EU as salient (From 8 to 10). Also here, there is no major variation between the Walloon, Flemish and Brussels parliaments.

Second, the average perceived influence on EU proposal is very low, with a mean of 0,89 (on 4) on a five-point scale. An overwhelming majority of respondents (86,5%) considers that they have no or little influence, while only 5,4% of parliamentarians consider to have a very strong influence or strong influence. The rest perceives influence as 'medium' (8,1%). Interestingly, this is very specific to EU affairs. Quite logically, Regional MPs perceive their influence to be stronger regarding regional projects (2,47) – medium to strong – than for federal projects (1,18). Another remarkable feature is the fact that MPs from the Brussels parliament always scores the lowest, meaning that they perceive their influence as generally weaker than their Walloon or Flemish counterparts<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, when looking at the position of parliamentarians towards the EU, the tendency is quite clear with a mean of 6,72, meaning that most MPs consider that the EU integration should go deeper. Still, when looking at the perceived attitude according to the spoken language, the picture is more nuanced. It is clear that the French-speaking MPs would like to EU to develop deeper (mean of 7,8) while Dutch-speaking parliamentarians are more cautious about more EU integration, (mean of 5,9). Again, these results must be taken cautiously, since there is an overrepresentation in the sample of NV-A deputies, Flanders nationalist party, calling itself 'eurorealist'.

## Conclusion

We started this paper by stressing that if the EU wants to live up to its self declared goal of a representative democracy, it should evolve its multilevelness both at the executive and the legislative side. The development of such a multilevel parliamentary system has recently gained attention of EU scholars. However, the regional dimension has largely remained

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<sup>5</sup> A full table presenting the data for all three parliaments and all three levels of governance is available in the annexes of this paper.

under the radar despite the obvious relevance for the 8 member states hosting legislative regional assemblies. This paper focuses on the members of the 3 Belgian regional parliaments. Moreover, we don't focus on what regional parliaments can or allowed to do, but examine the actual activities of the parliamentarians. The ultimate aim is to explain the variation in EU activities. At this point however, the data-collection has not yet been completed. The empirical analysis is therefore limited to a description of the dependent and of some independent variables. Some preliminary findings can nevertheless be highlighted.

Overall, we find a very low amount of EU-related activities. This finding is in line with the conclusions of Schneider et al. (2014) with respect to the German Länder. Those activities that take place are mainly geared toward the collection of information on EU issues. Efforts to coordinate position with the purpose to influence EU policies occur less frequent. The environment of the own political party and of other actors at the regional level seems to be the natural habitat to develop EU related activities. In other words, EU activities mainly have a within-level character, while political parties constitute the linking pin between the regional, the national and the European level. This role of political parties confirms the overall crucial position of parties in Belgian politics (cf. Deschouwer 2009) but is also in line with the findings of the German case (Schneider et al. 2014). In addition, regional actors seem to address the EU through the federal level rather than directly, which confirms the enduring importance of the federal level, which is another feature of Belgian politics related to the EU (Beyers and Bursens 2006).

The limited level of perceived activity correlates with a series of other observations from our survey. First of all, regional parliamentarians report a low salience of EU issues, which is a Belgian feature that has been found before, not only at the level of politicians, but also within mass media and at the level of the general public (Beyers and Bursens 2013). Secondly, and related to the previous, regional MPs attribute themselves very low impact on EU policies. Thirdly, and this has also been documented before (Van Hecke et al. 2012), members of the regional parliaments show a high level of support for European integration.

To conclude, the low level of activity clearly defines the Belgian regional MPs as slow adaptors, confirming the evidence of other member states. Hence, from the regional

perspective at least, EU multilevel parliamentarism is still a long way off. The correlation with the perception of low salience, low impact and a pro-EU position invites to develop hypotheses with respect to the impact of the latter on the activities. Together with a more completed data-collection this will allow us in a next draft of this paper to assess on the individual level the causal relationship between perception and attitudes on the one hand and activities on the other.

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## Annexes

### *Annex 1: Response rate by party group in proportion of their % of seats (own data)*

| <b>Flemish Parliament</b> |                            |                            |                                  |                                 |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>Parties</b>            | <b>Seats in parliament</b> | <b>Number of responses</b> | <b>% of seats in parliaments</b> | <b>% Response rate by party</b> |
| NVA                       | 43                         | 8                          | 34,6                             | 57%                             |
| CD&V                      | 27                         | 2                          | 21,8                             | 14,2%                           |
| Open VLD                  | 19                         | 3                          | 15,3                             | 21,4%                           |
| Sp.a                      | 18                         | 1                          | 14,5                             | 7,4%                            |
| Groen                     | 10                         | 0                          | 8,1                              | 0%                              |
| Vlaams Belang             | 6                          | 0                          | 4,8                              | 0%                              |
| Union des francophones    | 1                          | 0                          | 0,9                              | 0%                              |
| <b>Total</b>              | 124                        | 14 (on 124) – 11,3%        | 100%                             | 100,00%                         |

| <b>Walloon Parliament</b> |                            |                           |                                  |                               |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>Parties</b>            | <b>Seats in Parliament</b> | <b>Number of response</b> | <b>% of seats in parliaments</b> | <b>Response rate by party</b> |
| PS                        | 30                         | 5                         | 40                               | 50%                           |
| MR                        | 25                         | 3                         | 33,3                             | 30%                           |
| CdH                       | 13                         | 2                         | 17,3                             | 20%                           |
| ECOLO                     | 4                          | 0                         | 5,4                              | 0%                            |
| PTB-GO                    | 2                          | 0                         | 2,7                              | 0%                            |
| PP                        | 1                          | 0                         | 1,3                              | 0%                            |
| <b>Total</b>              | 75                         | 10 (on 75) – 13,4 %       | 100%                             | 100,00%                       |

| Parliament of the Brussels capital region |                            |                           |                                  |                               |
|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>Parties</b>                            | <b>Seats in parliament</b> | <b>Number of response</b> | <b>% of seats in parliaments</b> | <b>Response rate by party</b> |
| NVA                                       | 3                          | 0                         | 3,3                              | 0%                            |
| CD&V                                      | 2                          | 0                         | 2,2                              | 0%                            |
| Open VLD                                  | 5                          | 4                         | 6,5                              | 50%                           |
| Sp.a                                      | 3                          | 1                         | 3,3                              | 12,5%                         |
| Groen                                     | 3                          | 0                         | 3,3                              | 0%                            |
| Vlaams Belang                             | 1                          | 0                         | 1,3                              | 0%                            |
| PS                                        | 22                         | 2                         | 24,6                             | 25%                           |
| MR                                        | 17                         | 0                         | 18,9                             | 0%                            |
| CdH                                       | 8                          | 0                         | 8,9                              | 0%                            |
| Défi                                      | 12                         | 1                         | 13,4                             | 12,5%                         |
| Ecolo                                     | 8                          | 0                         | 8,9                              | 0%                            |
| PTB-GO                                    | 4                          | 0                         | 4,4                              | 0%                            |
| Independant                               | 1                          | 0                         | 1,3                              | 0%                            |
| <b>Total</b>                              | 89                         | 8 (on 89)                 | 100%                             | 100,00%                       |

## Annex 2: Perceived influence on EU, federal and regional projects

|                                       | <b>Flemish parliament</b> | <b>Walloon parliament</b> | <b>Brussels parliament</b> | <b>All parliamentarians</b> |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>Influence on EU projects</b>       | 1<br>(N=13)               | 1,16<br>(N=12)            | 0,5<br>(N=12)              | <b>0,89 (on4)</b><br>N=37   |
| <b>Influence on federal projects</b>  | 1,31<br>(N=14)            | 1,25<br>(N=12)            | 1,01<br>(N=12)             | <b>1,18 (on 4)</b><br>N=38  |
| <b>Influence on regional projects</b> | 2,64<br>(N=14)            | 2,5<br>(N=12)             | 2,25<br>(N=12)             | <b>2,47 (on 4)</b><br>N=38  |