

The Politicisation of the EU within and across Belgian Parliaments

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Abstract

The Treaty of Lisbon opened the door for the inclusion of subnational parliaments in the EU decision-making processes. However, authors have so far mainly focused on the involvement of national parliaments and only rarely included both regional and national parliaments in one single analysis. Consequently, we know little or none about the variation and, more interestingly, the relationship between multiple parliaments from different levels of governance within a Member State.

However, if one wants to study the role of parliaments from federal Member States in EU decision-making processes, it is crucial to examine the combined actions and relations among regional and federal parliaments regarding EU affairs. This paper therefore examines, in a comparative perspective, the politicisation of EU affairs within the Belgian House of Representatives, and the parliaments of Flanders and Wallonia (sample of the legislative period 2009-2014).

This version presents the first descriptive findings of manually coded parliamentary debates. It looks at which parties and members of parliaments participate in EU-related debates, and at the policy field and type of EU dossier under scrutiny. In a next stage, we aim at explaining variation in EU politicisation within Belgium, and what this means for inter-parliamentary relations within Belgium.

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) aspires to be a representative democracy. This goal implies a strong involvement of parliaments in EU decision-making. It also implies that parliaments and executives keep each other in balance. However, executives have been able to profit more from the multilevel structure of the EU than legislatures (Curtin 2014). To restore the balance, the European Parliament (EP) has been incrementally strengthened throughout consecutive Treaty changes. At the same time, it has become clear that the EP alone cannot guarantee the democratic control of the executives (Weiler 2012; Bellamy and Kröger 2016). The same treaty also granted national and regional parliaments a bigger role in the EU's multilevel political system, both within their respective national systems as across government levels.

Parliaments have several functions in political systems. One prominent function is to control the policies of the executives. In the multilevel environment of the EU this means in the first place direct participation in EU legislation by the EP and indirect participation by national and regional parliaments through scrutiny of national and regional governments' law-making activities in the Council. Scrutiny of national governments is crucially important as the EP is not capable to control the various EU policy-making instruments. EU legislation is only a small part of the policy output of the EU. In a lot of domains EU policies do not come about by legislation but by decisions taken by executives, such as the Commission, or non-majoritarian agencies and institutions, such as the European Central Bank (ECB). Examples of these include the European Semester and regulatory decisions in the financial sector for which the EP has a hard time to control executive decision-makers. National and regional parliaments may step in as an additional tool to control such policies.

Domestic level scrutiny of EU regulatory policies (be it legislation or other policy output) happens both ex-ante and ex-post and is in the hands of the European Affairs Committees (EAC) and standing committees (mainstreaming). This control also includes the scrutiny in the framework of the Political Dialogue and the Early Warning System. It happens by means of questions, ex-ante mandate-giving and ex-post implementation decisions. This type of national parliamentary involvement has been studied extensively, both at the national and the regional level, looking at institutional and behavioural variables, at aggregate as well as individual level (see. section 3 for an overview).

However, a lot of policies do not fall within the regulatory realm of the EU (single market and related domains), but touch upon core state powers such as fiscal policies and external relations. These decisions are most often not produced by the triangle of Commission,

EP and Council, but by executives such as the European Council, the ECB, the Foreign Affairs Council, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the European External Action Service and other agencies (de Wilde and Rauh 2015). The ordinary scrutiny mechanisms of parliaments do not function very effectively regarding these core state powers. The EP is at best only consulted, at the national level files only reach sporadically the EAC and hardly ever the standing committees.

In these areas, we touch upon a second and according to some authors (de Wilde and Raunio 2018; Winzen 2010; Auel 2017; Sprungk 2013) even more important dimension of national parliaments involvement in the EU: the account giving function *or communication function*. This parliamentary participation in European affairs can be defined as account giving by members of parliament (agents) to their electorates (principals). This type of activity does not take place in committees, whose work hardly reaches the public, but mainly in the more mediated plenary meetings of the parliaments via various types of debates, speeches and questions. Indeed, the gradual shift from the legislation producing *méthode communautaire* to intergovernmental policy-making has triggered increasing scholarly attention for plenary debates of domestic parliaments (de Wilde, several co-authored papers; Gava et al 2017; Winzen et al 2018), until now almost exclusively at the national level (except for Sierens and Brack who included the Belgian regional parliaments in their analysis).

Indeed, for most Member States, looking at the involvement of the national parliaments in EU politics is sufficient. However, in federal or quasi-federal Member States, subnational parliaments have competences that are highly Europeanised, such as environmental and agricultural policies (Vara Arribas and Bourdin, 2011; Schmitt et al. 2013; Randour, Wolfs, 2017; Randour, 2018). This means that these regional parliaments – just like their federal counterparts – have increasingly pooled legislative competences at the European level. The pooling of sovereignty also implies that regional legislative assemblies in these Member States are entrusted with the implementation of a vast amount of EU legislation (Bursens and Högenauer, 2017). Still, to our knowledge, empirical studies which examine parliamentary scrutiny of EU affairs in federal and quasi-federal Member States have rarely included both regional and national parliaments in their analysis. Often, scholars focus on national parliaments or regional parliaments, but not on both governance levels at the same time. Consequently, the relationship between multiple parliaments from different levels of governance within a Member State is rarely discussed or empirically measured. Yet, to comprehensively analyse how parliaments from federal Member States act on EU decision-

making processes, one must study the combined actions of regional and federal parliaments (i.e. the parliamentary system), at least for regionalised policies (Randour, 2018).

This paper intends to be part of these two emerging research agenda by (1) studying the account giving function of parliaments regarding EU policy-making and (2) by analysing the relationship between regional and national parliaments within a domestic parliamentary system. Hence, in this paper, the empirical focus will be on the debates during the plenary meetings of the Belgian House of Representatives, the Walloon parliaments as well as the Flemish parliament. This first draft has a descriptive aim as it seeks to map the variation in politicisation at the national and regional levels. In particular, we are interested in the following dimensions: what is the proportion of plenary debates that focus on EU policies; which political parties participate in the debates (including whether they belong to the government coalition or the opposition); which members of parliament participate and finally, what is the policy field covered by the parliamentary scrutiny? In this first stage, we coded manually and analysed a sample of 112 plenary meetings (2009-2014 legislature). Taking a federal Member State of the EU allows for taking on board regional parliaments and hence for a horizontal comparison between regional parliaments and a vertical comparison between the regional and the federal level.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next part, we briefly discuss some core features of Belgian federalism with a focus on the parliamentary system. The third section presents our current knowledge regarding national and regional parliaments involvement in EU affairs. Next, we develop some expectations regarding the variation of EU politicisation within and among Belgian parliaments. The empirical section presents the first findings of the coding of the plenary debates. We end with proposing the next steps of our research.

2. Belgian federalism and parliamentary system

Belgium is a federation with a set of distinctive features. It is a case of centrifugal and asymmetric federalism with two sets of constituent unit levels that enjoy substantive political autonomy over exclusive but incoherent packages of policy competences. Relations between the levels are primarily organized along inter-executive and intra-party lines. The Belgian territory is divided into three Regions (the Flemish Region, Walloon Region, and Brussels Capital Region), in charge of territory related policy competences, and three Communities (the Flemish Community, the Federation Wallonia-Brussels - formerly called the French Community - and the German-speaking Community), covering the three language groups and overseeing cultural and 'personalized matters'.

While both economy and language related factors have driven territorial reform for more than 50 years, the ethno-linguistic cleavage has been the dominant factor (Celis and Meier 2017). The Flemish Region and Community even merged their institutions under the label Flemish Community. On the French-speaking side Region and Community did not merge, but the linkage between the French-speaking inhabitants of the Brussels Capital Region and Wallonia has been increased as well, relabeling of what had been called the French Community as the Federation Wallonia-Brussels. The Federal Senate is a Senate of the Communities. Political parties have been split along linguistic lines since the 1960s, while employer organizations, trade unions and the rest of civil society have Dutch-speaking and French-speaking branches. Competences that matter differently for different Communities (education, culture) and Regions (economy, environment, agriculture) have been devolved leaving the federal level in charge of large parts of taxation, infrastructure, defense and social security.

The underlying logic of the federalization of Belgium has never been to stimulate cooperation among Regions and Communities, or between the constituent units and the federal level, but to pacify conflicting interests (Deschouwer 2005, 2012), leading to constituting entities that largely function independently from one another. While constituent units compete against each other (especially in exclusive policy competencies), the devolution of competencies has also required cooperation agreements between devolved governments, such as in public transport or the uploading and downloading of EU policies. The latter triggers instances of cooperative federalism among executives as Belgium has only one voice but several governments in charge of EU related policies (Beyers and Bursens 2006, 2013). Nonetheless, most mechanisms of cooperation and dialogue focus on solving problems, not on (proactive) cooperation. Such rules and procedures regulate conflicts of interest (dealt with by

the federal Concertation Committee), conflicts of competence (dealt with by the Constitutional Court), and allow for both the alarm bell procedure (dealt with by the federal government), and – in specific cases – double majorities in the federal House of Representatives (requiring not only a two-third majority overall but also a simple majority within each language group).

The Belgian parliamentary system is shaped by these basic principles. Belgian federalism is a type of legislative federalism, meaning that federal level as well as each Region and Community have their own legislature¹ (Deschouwer 2009: 58). Each government level has both legislative and executive authority over the competences they are constitutionally endowed with and their respective laws stand on equal footing. The absence of norm hierarchy has major implications for how the Belgian federation deals with binding agreements and laws that are adopted by international organizations as the EU: each level must prepare and implement the policies that fall within its domestic powers (the *in foro interno, in foro externo* principle). In this respect and 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’.

Since each parliament has full powers over its constitutionally assigned competencies and since a parliamentary act from one level cannot overrule an act of another level, Belgian parliaments are not formally stimulated to cooperate. In addition, the Constitution nor the Special Laws on State Reform mention parliamentary scrutiny of EU policies, and neither does the Cooperation Agreement which implements the drafting and representation of Belgian EU positions. These (quasi-)constitutional provisions have substantial consequences for the way parliamentary assemblies deal with the scrutiny of their executives’ EU policies. On an aggregate level the Belgian parliaments act in EU affairs according to what they are used to in general: bilateral scrutiny of their own executive, very little engagement in intra-Belgian cooperation and even less nor with the EP or parliaments of other Member States (Bursens et al. 2015; Delreux and Randour, 2015). Overall, Belgian parliaments are considered quite weak, juxtaposed to strong executives and dominant political parties in coalition governments (Deschouwer 2009; Delreux and Randour 2015).

What does this mean in practice? While all Belgian parliaments have access to legislative proposals of the EU, comparative studies show that they have hardly made use of

¹ 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 Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region on the regional level, the Parliament of the French Community (now called the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles) and the Parliament of the German Speaking Community on the community level.

the ex-ante subsidiarity control (Vara Arribas 2015, Fromage 2016), and to the extent that they did, they engaged within their own parliament without interparliamentary consultations (Bursens et al. 2015; Randour and Wolfs, 2017). Parliamentary scrutiny of EU policies takes place in standing committees and EU Affairs Committees (EACs). The Federal Parliament hosts the Advisory Committee on European Affairs which has a unique composition with members from the House, the Senate and even MEPs. The Walloon (and Brussels) parliaments have a committee exclusively dealing with EU affairs, while Flemish parliament merged EU and international affairs in one single committee. These committees mainly deal with broad and transversal issues, such as trade and migration, the transposition deficit or the (ongoing) revision of the executive Cooperation Agreement regulating EU affairs in Belgium. 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 parliaments². Furthermore, EU issues are also discussed in the standing committees that have the most Europeanized competences. This can take the form of joint committees of the EAC and a standing committee or by direct involvement of standing committees (Randour and Wolfs 2017). None of the Belgian parliaments possesses a mandating or a scrutiny reserve instrument, leaving all of them with just non-binding resolutions.

3. Literature review

The crucial role of national parliaments in the EUs representative democracy aspirations has inspired a substantial research agenda (see Hefftlar et al. 2015 and Randour 2018 for recent overviews). A first set of studies mapped the institutional adaptation of national parliaments (Norton 1996, Maurer and Wessels 2001), constructed typologies and rankings of national parliaments’ capacities (Auel et al. 2015; Rozenberg and Hefftlar 2015) and identified factors that explain the variation in scrutiny of EU policies by national parliaments (Raunio 2005; Karlas 2011; Winzen 2012). A second set of studies went beyond institutional capacities and

² 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 **19** directly tackled EU affairs (Randour & Brusens, 2016).

examined the behavioural (Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2008) and attitudinal Europeanisation of national parliaments, the latter looking for instance at intra-parliamentary dynamics (Auel and Benz 2005, Rauh and de Wilde 2017) and parliamentary staff (Högenauer and Neuhold 2015). The main conclusion in terms of explanations is that the variation in national parliamentary control on EU policies is to be found in both formal (e.g. capacity) and informal (e.g. parliamentary culture) institutional variables (Auel and Christiansen 2015).

In short, the study of national parliaments' role in EU-policy-making has expanded from hard to soft institutions, in terms of both dependent and independent variables. In addition, the literature on national parliaments has been geared primarily to the aggregated analytical level of parliaments themselves. Only a minority of empirical studies has looked inside parliaments and focused on lower levels of analysis. In this respect, some have studied political parties (Hoerner 2017; Gava et al. 2017; Finke and Herbel 2015; Senninger 2017), others parliamentary debates, finding that institutional resources and a Eurosceptic position foster such debates (Auel et al 2015), additionally pointing to European Council agendas and EU legislation as triggers for debate (Rauh and de Wilde 2018) and defining institutional capacity and Euroscepticism to be necessary conditions for debates on European Council meetings and legislative files (Winzen et al. 2018).

More recently the research agenda has broadened to the regional level, at least for those member states with regional legislative parliaments (Germany, Austria, Belgium, the UK, Spain and Italy and some peripheral islands of Finland and Portugal). Regional parliaments with legislative competences have entrusted with the implementation of a vast amount of EU legislation, therefore playing a crucial role in EU legislative decision-making. At the same time, the Lisbon Treaty has empowered regions by granting them access to the Court of Justice through the Committee of the Regions (Lisbon Treaty, Protocol 2, art. 8) and involving their parliaments in the ex-ante subsidiarity control of the Early Warning Mechanism (Lisbon Treaty, Protocol 2, art. 6). Regional parliaments have become part of an emerging EU multilevel parliamentary system inspiring authors to coin concepts as compound representation (Lord and Pollak 2010, multilevel parliamentarism (Maurer 2009) and Multilevel Parliamentary Field (Crum & Fossum 2009; 2012, Crum 2015), building on earlier insights by Benz (2003) and Hurrelmann (2007).

These theoretical insights eventually triggered empirical scholarly work which has followed the trail of the agenda on national parliaments, i.e. evolving from single case studies to comparative work, and broadening its scope from institutional to behavioural

Europeanisation (Auel and Christiansen 2015). Yet, until today it is still largely limited to the aggregated parliamentary level. Single country studies on German Länder (Abels 2013; 2105; Buzogany & Häsing, 2018), Austrian Länder (Bussjäger 2010; Miklin 2015), Italian Regioni (Nicolini 2015), Scotland (Carter and McLeod 2005, Högenauer 2015), Spanish Comunidades Autonomas (Castella Andreu & Kölling 2015) and Belgian Regions and Communities (Vanden Bosch 2014, Bursens et al. 2015, Randour and Wolfs, 2017, Sierens and Brack 2019) have found regional parliaments to make limited use of their scrutiny powers, even after the Lisbon Treaty had introduced additional opportunities.

More recent comparative work has focused on the subsidiarity control by regional parliaments, finding again 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 (Boronská-Hryniewiecka 2013; 2017; Schmitt *et al.* 2013, Vara Arribas 2015, Vara Arribas & Högenauer 2015, Fromage 2016. Another tool for regional parliaments to control is the mandating system. Abels (2017) concludes that regional parliaments hardly use mandates and that their use depends on the domestic institutional environment such as the existence of national level mandates and the nature of the bicameral system. Högenauer (2015) and Buzogany and Häsing (2017) looked at regional parliamentary staff and found their support very limited. Finally, 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.

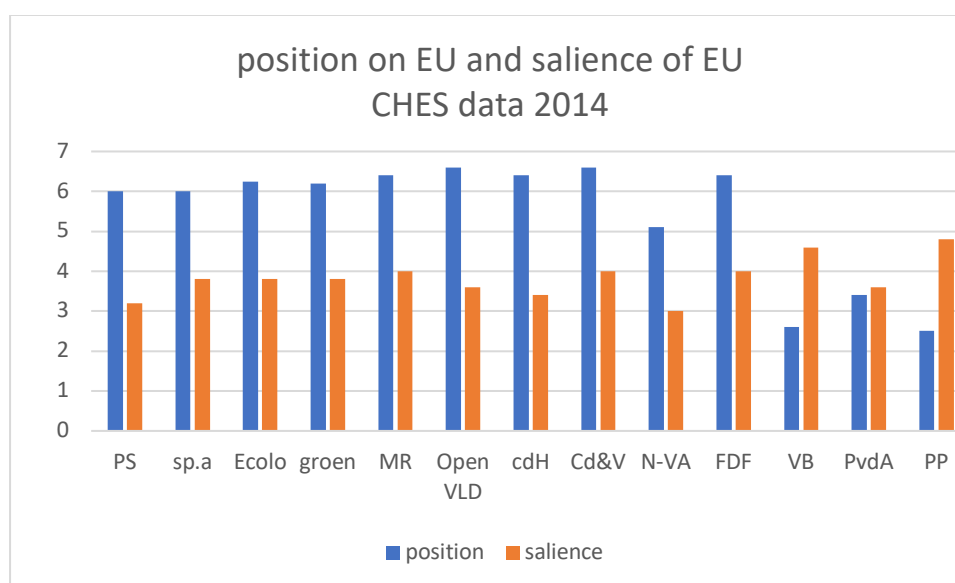
Högenauer indirectly studies individual members through parliamentary questions in the Scottish and Bavarian regional parliaments. She finds low levels of activity, but at the same time activity beyond the European Affairs Committees and activities with a distinct regional focus. Similarly, Randour and Wolfs (2017) report a clear focus of Belgian regional parliamentarians on the regional effects of EU environmental and agricultural policies. Schneider et al. (2014) has so far been the only comprehensive study of individual members at the regional level. Studying German regional parliamentarians, they found that perceived salience and perceived influence explain variation in EU-related activity of Länder parliament members.

4. Theory and expectations

This paper looks at the presence of EU in plenary debates. What is the proportion of debates that deal (partially) with the EU, who takes part in these debates and what topics do these debates discuss? In general, the literature has found that more institutional capacity and the presence of Euro-sceptic parties in parliaments are the basic conditions for EU related activities of national MPs. If neither of these is the case, the overall activity will be rather low (Gatterman and Heffler 2015; Auel et al. 2015; Rauh and de Wilde 2018). Specifically, on the Belgian case, the Belgian federal parliament is generally seen as one of the weakest in terms of institutional strength regarding EU affairs. When it comes to EU related activities, both Belgian chambers are positioned a bit higher but still at the bottom part of the rankings (see Auel et al. 2015 and earlier also Raunio 2005, 2008, Winzen 2012, 2013 for rankings based on different operationalisations). To our knowledge, there has not been a publication with a similar ranking of regional parliaments. As explained by Ladrech (2012, see. also Ladrech, 2016), few researchers have yet adopted a cross-national comparison perspective of subnational parliaments. Especially in empirical research, as ‘the extension of the Europeanisation approach to subnational parliaments has probably been undertaken, but not in a cross- national perspective due to the number of intervening variables – different behaviour even with one country, additional rules, additional electoral cycles, etc.’ (Ladrech, 2012: 2, see also Ladrech, 2016). Still, there exist studies weighing and ranking the institutional strength of regional parliaments within one country, but these are so far limited to Germany (correct?) (Abels, xxxx; Buzogany and Häsing, 2018).

So far, several explanations are pointed in the literature to explain the rather weak institutional powers and involvement of Belgian parliaments in the scrutiny of EU decision-making processes (see for instance Delreux, Randour, 2015). Belgium is usually considered one of the most ‘pro-European Union’ member states of the EU, preferring a strong supranational – and even federal – European Union. This pro-EU orthodoxy can be explained by practical factors, such as the omnipresence of European institutions in Brussels; Belgium’s economy, which is largely export-oriented; and its federal state structure, which makes living in a multi-level political system seem very natural in Belgium (Justaert et al., 2012). A federalist European policy has been an element of continuity in Belgium’s foreign policy since the 1970s.ⁱ Belgium has advocated a stronger supranational institutional framework and a considerable extension to the ‘Community method’, a strengthened role for the EU at the international level and own financial resources for the EU.

Phrased differently, 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 parties share a pro-European consensus. On a scale of 1 to 7 all mainstream political parties (social-democrats, Christian-democrats, liberals and greens) score 6 or more. Even the nationalists are considered to be quite positive towards the EU. Only the extreme right and extreme left parties are seen by experts as having a negative position towards the EU. Again on a scale of 1 to 7, experts think Belgian political parties are only moderately interested in the EU. The latter is confirmed by the political programs of the Belgian parties: only five to ten percent of the party programs are related to EU matters (Pittoors et al. 2016; Van Hecke et al. 2012). In short, only a small minority of Belgian political parties can be classified as Euro-sceptic, these are peripheral parties for whom the EU is not high on the list of political priorities.



Hence, the conditions that forecast parliamentary activity are rather bleak for Belgium. Weak parliaments combined with only a small proportion of Eurosceptic parties are expected to result in a rather low amount of EU related debates. The strength of political parties and the tradition of parties to do business outside parliament is an additional reason why we expect a rather low amount of EU-debates. In such conditions, the communicative function of plenary debates becomes even more important: the amount of EU-debates will depend on whether parties judge such debates as important channels to make their positions on the EU clear to their electorate. An additional reason to expect a rather low amount of EU-debates is that one might assume that the presence of Eurosceptic parties is more relevant predictor of EU-related

activity in the plenary compared to committees. Plenary debates deal more often with issues that trigger general positions regarding European integration (e.g. European Council conclusions on Brexit) while committees more often involve more technical discussions on concrete EU policies (e.g. implementation of EU legislation) (Rauh and de Wilde 2018).

Expectation 1: weak parliaments and low level of Euroscepticism result in a low amount of EU-related activities in plenary meetings.

In general, one can expect that the politicisation of national parliaments increases when the level of integration increases. The more issues the European level deals with, the more the national level is triggered to let its voice heard. This is also the case when looking at the communicative function: members of parliament can be expected to make clear to their voters that they are doing their representative job, also regarding EU policies (Rauh and de Wilde 2018). This paper is limited to the 2014-2019 Belgian legislature. As this time span was not marked by Treaty changes or other major shifts in competences to the EU level, we cannot test this expectation. Likewise, shifts in domestic competences can be expected to lead a shift in EU-related activities. Belgium is an excellent case in this respect. *We will be able to test this in a next version of the paper when we include earlier years for both the federal and the regional level*³. Another dimension related to time is the electoral cycle. We can expect less debates during national or regional electoral campaigns as the focus of members of parliament is on national or regional issues in national electoral times (Rauh and de Wilde 2018). Unfortunately, this is hard to test in the Belgian case as regional, federal and European elections are organized simultaneously. Still, as EU elections can be considered (but is it still really the case? see. recent evolutions) as ‘second order’ elections. Hence, it can be expected that even if regional, national and European elections take place at the same time, the focus will mainly be on the regional and federal elections.

(Expectation 2: more EU-competences result in more EU-related plenary activities.)

(Expectation 3: the more the regional level is competent for EU-competences, the more EU-related plenary activities in regional parliaments.)

(Expectation 4: there will be less EU-related plenary activities in times of national or regional elections.)

³ Overall, the objective of this research project is to adopt a longitudinal approach, studying the (evolution) of EU scrutiny through time by taking both institutional evolution at the domestic and European levels. In the case of Belgium, we would like to study (at least) the period 2000-2019, as to include the two latest State Reform that saw additional competences going to the regional level.

A similar argument can be formulated regarding policy domains. One can expect parliaments to discuss the EU-related issues that touch upon their competences. The consecutive Belgian territorial reforms have made the regional level competent for a series of domains in which the EU produces a lot of legislative and other regulatory output. The Belgian federal level, on the contrary, is mainly competent in core state powers (migration, fiscal policy, external security) and given the overall federal competence regarding the coordination of foreign policy, also for transversal issues such as Brexit of the EU budget. As EU-legislation is mainly dealt with in committees while core state issues are more likely to trigger the attention in plenary sessions, the locus of parliamentary EU work will vary (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014).

Expectation 4: *The federal parliament will host more EU related activities in its plenary sessions than the regional parliaments.*

We have argued earlier that the plenary sessions serve more a communication than a controlling function. Communication with voters (via mass media) is much more effective in case of highly salient and polarized issues. The impact of salience on EU scrutiny has already been shown in the past (see. De Wilde, 2008, 2009; de Ruiter, 2013; Saalfeld, 2005; Holzhaacker, 2002; Winzen, 2012). Salience ‘generally denotes the importance an actor attaches to an issue’ (Warntjen, 2012: 169). Following the rationale that parliamentarians make cost-benefit analysis before acting, the probability that a MP scrutinize the government is higher if the issue tackles major national interests and that the debate is voiced within the public opinion. Such issues are more likely to be linked to core state powers than to regulatory policy areas (e.g. Brexit versus agricultural price-setting), yet it can also be linked to highly mediatized issue (e.g. financial or immigration or environment ‘crises’- see. Auel & Hoing, 2014, 2015 on the financial crisis).

Expectation 5: *plenary meetings will primarily deal with salient issues.*

The EU deals with a vast array of policy fields. These are of varying importance and salience for political parties depending on their policy priorities and electoral strategies. In addition, members of parliament have limited resources and are forced to prioritize. They will select those issues that coincide with the core business of their party: social-democrats will focus EU social policy, greens on EU climate policy, nationalist parties on EU migration policy....,

Expectation 6: *Political parties will participate in those EU-related plenary activities that touch upon their ideological core.*

Members of parliament very often lack the EU-expertise. They need the support of their assistants and parliamentary staff to filter relevant EU files and to prepare amendments, questions and speaking notes (Schmidt, Ruys and Marx 2013). Engaging in debates related to legislation is more technical and requires more EU expertise (see Winzen et al 2018), but also more general issues need EU related expertise. Hence, staff is more relevant for committee work than for plenary debates. Regardless the type of work, parliamentary staff needs to be acquainted with the European institutions and its policies (see Högenauer and Christiansen 2015 for discussion on parliamentary staff). We can look at the effect of staff as EU support staff varies among the Belgian parliaments. The Flemish parliament hosts more administrative support than its Brussels and Walloon counterparts, but overall the number of administrators working on EU affairs is small, compared to other member states.

Expectation 7: *the more parliamentary staff (with EU expertise), the more the more EU-related plenary activities*

Several authors expect more activity from opposition parties, especially when these parties are confronted with a Eurosceptic public (Auel 2007; Navarro and Brouard 2014; Finke and Herbel 2015). On the one hand, the argument is that opposition parties will use plenary debates to show disagreement within the coalition or to draw attention to inconsistency of the coalition's EU positions. Opposition parties may use plenary debates to try to rebalance the information gap with the executives and majority parties regarding EU policies. In addition, Wonka (2016), who analysed the party politics of the Euro crisis in the German Bundestag, also demonstrated that opposition parties took a more critical stance than the parties of the majority towards the government actions (Die Linke). On the other hand, several scholars also highlighted what they call an '*opposition deficit in EU accountability*' (Rauh, 2015; Rauh and de Wilde, 2017) when analysing plenary debates in four national parliaments (Germany, UK, Spain, The Netherlands). According to Rauh and de Wilde (2017), '*it is opposition parties in particular that are dropping the ball by not debating Europe to a similar extent as government parties in plenary*' (Rauh and de Wilde, 2017:18). To sum up, further empirical research is needed to analyse under what conditions opposition parties participate in EU-related plenary debates.

Expectation 8: *Members of opposition parties will participate more (or less – both directions are possible) often in EU-related plenary activities than members belonging to the parties of the government coalition.*

Finally, Winzen et al. (2018) argue that EU-debates are not the most interesting debates for party elites such as party leaders or parliamentary group leaders. EU-matters are not the most salient for voters and often technical and complicated while party leaders need to communicate about the encompassing positions of the party. On the contrary, backbenchers and specialists may find in EU-policies what they need to show specific expertise.

Expectation 9: *party elites will participate less than other members of parliament in EU-related plenary activities.*

5. Data, method and preliminary analysis

5.1 Data and method

For this paper, we coded manually a sample of 112 parliamentary debates (legislative period 2009-2014 with a special focus on the years 2011 and 2012) of the Belgian House of Representatives, the Walloon and Flemish parliaments. An EU debate can be defined as a debate ‘that would have looked substantially different had the speakers not discussed the EU institutions and policies’ (Winzen et al, 2018: xx). Relying on manual coding involves a human component as opposed to, for instance, the automatic counting of words in a dictionary. However, upon reading the transcript, it is often clear whether a debate is about the EU or not, such as when a European Council meeting or the implementation of an EU law is on the agenda⁴. In practice, to identify EU debates within plenary meetings, one author of the article read the titles as well as the entire transcripts in the official parliamentary record of the three parliaments. For each plenary meeting, the following information were coded:

- (1) the total number of items on the agenda;
- (2) the type of parliamentary tools that are mobilized (i.e. Oral/actuality questions; debates related to a law proposal; resolutions; (political) debates – with no legislative objectives and finally);
- (3) the total number of items that can be considered as an EU debates and
- (4) the ventilation of EU debates across parliamentary tools;

⁴ In a next step of the project, we will check on a sample whether manual coding yields similar results than automated supervised classification methods (inter-coding reliability between the two methods).

This allows to measure the degree of politicization of the EU within plenary meetings weighed according to the total number of items on the agenda⁵. In addition, we also coded for **(i)** the policy field covered by the scrutiny; **(ii)** the overall number of speakers on EU debates (i.e. how MPs participate in the discussion); **(iii)** the political party of the speaker (i.e. and consequently, whether the MP is part of the majority or the opposition) and **(iv)** whether the EU debate focuses on specific EU legislative dossiers, EU institutions or events (e.g. a council meeting).

5.2 Preliminary findings: variation of the Politicization of the EU across Belgian parliaments

In this section, we present preliminary findings on the variation of the Politicization of the EU across Belgian parliaments, starting with the federal level and the House of Representatives.

The Belgian House of Representatives

To measure the politicization of the EU within the House of Representatives, a sample of 32 plenary meetings (on a potential maximum of 92) covering the years 2011-2012 was analysed. Out of these 32 plenary meetings, a total of 453 agenda items were listed (i.e. an item can be an oral question with one or several speakers, a law proposal with one or several speakers etc.). Overall, the share of EU related items is of 10,15% (46 EU items out of 453), which indicates a relatively modest level of politicization of the EU within plenary meetings.

The data also outlines the important share of different MPs participating in EU debates. Indeed, there are a total of 85 different speakers that participated in these EU debates, representing a share of 56,66% of Belgian MPs sitting in the House of Representatives (85 different MPs on a potential of 150). When looking closer at majority-opposition dynamics, the data shows that a majority of speakers come from opposition parties (55,36% of the speakers), with a weaker involvement of majority MPs (44,64%). In particular, two families of political parties perform relatively well amongst opposition parties. On the one hand, Green political parties – which forms a common parliamentary group in the House of Representatives – are performing relatively well amongst opposition parties, with a share of 34,41% of the speakers.

⁵ Several comments regarding parliaments rules. We checked for parliamentary rules on speaking turn and time to check whether the Belgian House of Representatives, the Walloon and Flemish parliaments can be compared. Overall, there are no major differences across Belgian parliaments. When speaking time may slightly differ across legislative assemblies, speaking turn follows the same pattern. For law proposals, all parliamentary groups are allowed to take turn, the coutume being that one speaker per group express the position of party. The same is true for debates related to the adoption of parliamentary resolutions. As for oral and actuality questions, they have first to be accepted by the president of the assembly, but all MPs can use this tool.

This score is particularly remarkable when considering the few seats that the Greens had, during this period, in the House of Representatives (13 out of 150) as well as the almost inexistent focus on EU environmental policies (see. *infra*). On the other hand, Belgian nationalist as well as Eurosceptic parties are also performing relatively well as the scores of NVA (Nieuw Vlaamse Alliantie) and of the VB (Vlaams Belang) indicate - respectively 25,81% and 19,35% of speakers amongst opposition parties (for 27 and 12 seats out of 150)⁶. This relatively high score can be explained, to some extent, by the importance of the immigration question during that period (i.e. immigration is an important aspect of their political priorities, see. *infra*). Finally, there no major differences across parties of the majority.

Now turning to the types of parliamentary tools mobilized to discuss EU issues, only two are mobilized by MPs from the House of Representatives. On the one hand, in absolute value, the EU was more frequently politicized using oral questions (57,55%, 26 oral questions on 45 EU items), but it only represents a share of 7,88% when weighed (26 EU oral questions on a total of 330 oral questions identified). On the other hand, EU debates related to law proposal represent a share of 42,22% of EU items (absolute value, 19 on 45 EU items) and 17,43% when looking at all law proposals (19 on 109 law proposal). In terms of policy field covered, two main policy fields are responsible for most of politicization of the EU: Economy and Finance (18 out of 45, 40%) and Justice and Home affairs (including immigration) 11 out of 45, 24,44%). This can in part be explained by the EU political agenda of the time period (2011-2012), as it was dominated by EU follow-up measures regarding the financial and Greek debt crisis. When looking at competences that are mostly regionalized in Belgium (i.e. Agriculture and Environment policies, both regulatory policies), these are not scrutinized extensively by the House of Representatives, with a share of respectively 2,2% (Agriculture) and 6,6% (Environment) of EU items discussed⁷.

In a few words, the preliminary findings related to the House of Representatives can be summarized as follows. First, the politicization of the EU within the House of Representative is relatively modest yet, the data also suggest the existence of a mainstreaming of EU affairs within the parliament, at least when looking at the share of MPs triggering the politicization of the EU. Second, the politicization of the EU is slightly dominated by MPs of the opposition. In this respect, two families of political parties are mostly responsible for the politicization of the

⁶ The rest of the scores goes as follows: FDF (Regionalist party – 1,08% of speakers) ; Lijst Dedeker (4,30%) ; independent (3,23%) ; Dutch speaking socialist party (10,75%).

⁷ The rest of the scores goes as follows: Social Policy (6,6%); External Policy (2,2%); Energy (mostly on nuclear energy following the Fukushima accident (8,8%); Transport (2,2%); Consumer protection (2,3%), Public Administration (2,2%); EU Integration (2,2%)

EU: The Green political family (Groen & Ecolo) as well as nationalist and Eurosceptic parties (NV-A and Vlaams Belang). Finally, the EU politicization is mainly centred around two main policy field of federal Belgium: Economy and Finance as well as Justice and Home Affairs.

The Walloon parliament

To measure the politicization of the EU within the Walloon parliament, a sample of 40 plenary meetings (on a potential maximum of 40) covering the years 2011-2012 was analysed. Out of these 40 plenary meetings, a total of 501 agenda items were listed. Overall, the share of EU related items is of 7,98% (40 EU items out of 501), which indicates a lower level of scrutiny than the House of Representatives.

The Walloon parliament is composed of 75 parliamentarians. When looking at the activity of RMPs on EU related dossiers, the data shows the presence of 74 speakers for the 40 EU items (hence, almost 2 RMPs on average are involved by EU debate) and a total of 34 different speakers (i.e. 45,94%). This finding suggests that a great share of RMPs are involved in the scrutiny of EU issues, but only on an occasional basis. Phrased differently, there are no 'EU specialist' in the Walloon parliament as this is the task of all RMPs. This ratio is not as high as for the House of Representatives, but it goes in the direction of a mainstreaming of EU affairs (Gattermann, Högenauer, Huff, 2015) within Belgian national and regional parliaments.

When looking closer at majority-opposition dynamics, and contrary to the House of Representatives, in the Walloon parliament it is RMPs from the majority that are mostly involved in EU scrutiny (75,67% of speakers), with a weaker involvement of opposition parties (24,32% of speakers). Still, the share of EU debates by political party is closely related to their share of seats in the parliament (at the exception of the Greens, see *infra*). In addition, during the period covered by the analysis, only 1 political party was in the opposition (i.e. the French-speaking liberals). Within parties of the majority, there also one clear tendency: Yet, one political party of the majority (the French-speaking Greens 'Ecolo') are much more frequently involved in EU debates than the other members of the majority.

Now turning to the types of parliamentary tools mobilized to discuss EU issues, the data shows more variation than in the House of Representatives. Indeed, Walloon RMPs were involved in four different parliamentary activities related to EU items: oral questions, resolutions, proposal of regional laws and political debates⁸. First, as for the House of

⁸ In the Walloon Parliament, there exist a different parliamentary tool than in the House of Representatives and the Flemish parliament: political debates with no specific legislative outputs. In practice, it takes the forms on an exchange of ideas between RMPs on a salient topic.

Representatives, the data indicates that the main loci where the EU is politicized is through the implementation of EU laws. Indeed, 20 out of the 40 EU items identified are related to discussion regarding law proposals (17,69% of all law proposals discussed in the Walloon parliament are EU related). The second most frequent parliamentary activity that triggers politicization of the EU is the use of oral questions (13 EU questions on 40 EU items). However, overall, oral questions are mostly mobilized for domestic politics, as EU oral questions only represent a share 3,90% of all oral questions. In addition, the Walloon parliament also discussed about EU-related resolutions (3 out of 40 EU items, 7,5%) and dedicated 4 political debates on EU issues (4 out of 40 EU items, 10%). No Eurosceptic parties were represented in the parliament during this period.

Finally, three main policy field triggers 75% of the scrutiny conducted on EU policies: Economy and Finance (30% of EU items); Agriculture (22,5%) and Environment (22,5%)⁹. This is an interesting finding as it suggests, especially regarding Agriculture and Environment (and to a lesser extent, Economic policies), that the Walloon parliament focuses on its core (regionalized) competences. Phrased differently, the most regionalized policies of the Walloon region are also the one that gather the most attention regarding EU affairs.

In a few words, the preliminary findings related to the Walloon parliament can be summarized as follows. First, the politicization of the EU within the Walloon parliament is relatively modest. Second, despite the low politicization, the data suggest the existence of a mainstreaming of EU affairs within the parliament, at least when looking at the share of RMPs do talk about Europe. Third, the politicization of the EU is slightly dominated by RMPs of the majority, with a particular high level of activity from the French-speaking Greens. Finally, the EU politicization is mainly centred around three main policy field that are, to a major extent, regionalized policies in federal Belgium.

The Flemish parliament

on a sample of 40 plenary meetings (on a potential of 91 for the years 2011-2012), we identified a total of 424 items on the agenda of the plenaries. Out of these 424 items, only 23 are specifically dealing with EU issues (5,43%). Consequently, the Flemish parliament is the Belgian parliament where the EU is the less politicized. It is also the Belgian parliament that has the weakest number of ‘different’ MPs getting involved on EU affairs: only 22 different

⁹ The rest of the scores goes as follows: Governance and EU integration (12,5%); Social Policy (10%); Transport policies (2,5%).

Flemish RMPs (on 124, 22,6%) got engaged in EU debates. Overall, there are no major differences between the number of speakers from the majority, but important variation exists across Flemish political parties. Most importantly, both Eurosceptic political parties (Vlaams Belang and NVA) are both increasing the politicization of EU affairs within plenary meetings. For instance, when the Vlaams Belang had 21 seats in the parliaments (16,93), it represents a total of 27,5 % of all speakers involved in EU scrutiny. The same is true for NVA, with respectively 16 seats (12,90%) while they have a share of 20% of the speakers on EU items. (...).

6. Discussion and next steps

The objective of this paper was to measure the politicization of the EU within and across Belgian parliaments. Indeed, we argued that to comprehensively analyse the impact of parliaments from federal Member States held in EU decision-making processes, one must study the combined actions of regional and federal parliaments (i.e. the parliamentary system), at least for regionalised policies. The case of Belgium is thus particularly relevant to analyse the vertical and horizontal relations of domestic parliaments regarding EU affairs.

Yet, this is only a preliminary descriptive draft on a sample of plenary meetings. Indeed, the main task in the upcoming months will be to continue the coding process to cover a 20 years period. This would allow to analyse longitudinally whether we observe an increase in EU scrutiny following recent institutional developments. Ultimately, we have also explanatory aims (see. expectations *supra*). In particular, the objective is **(1)** to explain variation between the Belgian domestic parliaments and **(2)** to understand the impact of the EU (i.e. understood as the Europeanisation of federal Belgium) on federal arrangements regarding the involvement of Belgium in EU decision-making processes. In this respect, this would be done using the Europeanization framework (i.e. see for instance Beyers and Bursens, 2013), a theoretical framework that is particularly well suited for our objectives.

Indeed, the Europeanisation of relations between territorial levels has been studied, but not very often and only with respect to relations between the governments of domestic levels, not parliaments (overview in Bursens 2020). In addition, when studying inter-parliamentary cooperation on EU affairs, the latter is mainly studied as relations between national or regional parliaments and the European sphere (Randour, 2018). Scholars study this relations either horizontally - with national parliaments of other member states - or vertically - relations within all sorts of European parliamentary cooperation structures (for an overview, see Hefftlar and

Gatterman 2015, Fromage 2016). Hence, this contribution 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). In particular, in forthcoming versions of the paper, we will look at relations between parliaments within federal member states or on the domestic parliamentary system. Hence, the article will position itself at the crossroad of two important literatures: the one on federalism (see. for instance Benz, 2017; Randour, 2018) studies and the literature focusing on the Europeanization of regional and national parliaments and on interparliamentary activism (Bolleyer, 2010, 2017¹⁰).

¹⁰ ‘As theoretically expected, inter-parliamentary activism is strongest in the US (separation of powers), non-existent in Canada (parliamentarism), with Switzerland (separation of powers bridged by party ties) located in between. Differences in institutional capacity played less of a role (Bolleyer 2017: 535).’

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