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## Slow adapters or active players? Belgian regional parliamentarians and European affairs after Lisbon

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### ABSTRACT

How do members of regional parliaments engage in EU policymaking? This paper examines how and why members of the Walloon, Flemish and Brussels regional parliaments vary in their EU-contacting activities, by adapting a German survey. Belgium makes a relevant case, as the ‘in foro interno, in foro externo’ principle entitles regions to conduct foreign policy, including EU affairs in those areas they possess internal competency. Our data show that the level of EU-contacting activities of Belgian regional parliamentarians is overall low, mainly directed towards informational activities and taking place in the direct environment of the parliamentarians. The variation in EU-related activities is best explained by individual-level factors such as the perceived salience of Europe for their own careers, their perceived influence on EU policymaking and their position towards European integration.

**KEYWORDS** European Union; regional parliaments; Belgium; Europeanisation; federalism

### Introduction

Member States have defined the European Union (EU) in its basic treaty as a representative democracy (art 10.2 TEU), a qualification that implies the representation of EU citizens via direct and indirect channels of participation. Historically, scholarly attention was first directed towards the directly elected European Parliament (EP), seen as the counterweight representative institution and conceived as the democratic rescue of the EU. Yet, other authors advocated that at least part of the remedy needs to come from the level of the Member States (Maurer, 2002), or even that the EU must ultimately base its legitimacy on national democratic institutions (Bellamy & Kröger, 2016).

Taking this argument one step further, still other authors argue that the parliamentarisation of the EU should also include the regional level

(Bursens & Högenauer, 2017), as studying the national parliamentary level alone would show only a partial image of the EU-related activities taking place within the national *parliamentary system* for the case of several Member States. In contrast to some critical opinions of the role of regional parliaments in the European parliamentary system (see, eg Crum, 2016; Patzelt, 2016), several scholars argue that the search for representative democracy in the EU should be broadened to the regional level (Abels, 2016; Auel & Grosse Hüttmann, 2016), at least for those Member States that have regional assemblies with legislative powers (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Italy and some peripheral islands of Finland and Portugal).

This paper contributes to the latter research agenda by discussing the EU-related activities of Belgian members of regional parliaments (MRPs) from 2014 to 2019. More precisely, the first objective is to measure the EU-contacting activities of Belgian MRPs to *collect information* on EU affairs, as well as to coordinate and adopt a common position in order to *influence* EU policymaking. As a second step, we also aim to explain the variation of EU-contacting activities across Belgian MRPs. To that end, we replicate and adapt a survey developed for German MRPs by Schneider et al. (2014). Our data outline that the number of EU-contacting activities of Belgian MRPs is low, they are mainly directed towards informational activities and they take place in the direct environment of MRPs (ie at the regional level, within their political party and mostly with other parliamentary actors). Our analysis shows that variation in MRPs' EU-related activities is best explained by individual-level factors, more specifically the salience of EU affairs for MRPs' own work, their perceived influence and their position towards European integration.

## Regional parliaments and EU integration

For some authors, regional parliaments have become part of an emerging EU multilevel parliamentary system, described as a balancing act between the direct representation of citizens through the EP and indirect representation of the EU's constitutive units, both Member States and their regions (see Hurrelmann, 2007). Lord and Pollak (2010) coined the term 'compound representation' (see also Benz, 2003), while Maurer (2009) wrote about multilevel parliamentarism, and Crum and Fossum (2009, 2012) introduced the notion of the Multilevel Parliamentary Field. Despite these innovative *theoretical insights*, regional parliaments, including the Belgian ones, are yet to be extensively investigated in *empirical scholarly work*.

Overall, the research agenda focusing on regional parliaments' position in the EU has evolved from single case studies to comparative work, has broadened in scope from institutional to behavioural Europeanisation and is still largely limited to studying the aggregated parliamentary level. From

single-country studies, we have learnt that German Länder parliaments make varying, but overall limited use of the Lisbon Treaty provisions (Abels, 2016). In addition, Buzogány and Häsing (2018) found that variation in the parliamentary scrutiny powers of German *Landtage* is best explained by a combination of institutional factors (vote share in the *Bundesrat* and the economic potential of EU integration) and partisan factors. 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), and this is still the case after the coming into effect of the Lisbon Treaty (Miklin, 2016). 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 display very limited activity regarding EU policies (Bursens et al., 2016; Randour & Wolfs, 2017). Regional parliaments have also been examined in a comparative perspective, mainly focusing on the subsidiarity control by Member States' parliaments. They observed differentiated but overall quite limited use of the Early Warning System (EWS), mainly due to differences in the understanding of subsidiarity, divergent interests in legislative proposals and at different levels of (institutional) capacity. Even when they engage in the EWS, regional parliaments are confronted with a very short timeframe while national parliaments are not even obliged to engage their regional counterparts or take regional opinions into account (Abels, 2017; Fromage, 2016).

Finally, sketching a research agenda for regional parliaments in the EU, Bursens and Högenauer (2017) called for a complementary focus on the EU-related activities of individual MRPs. As far as we know, Schneider et al. (2014) is 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 the EU-related activity of Länder parliament members. Building on their work, this paper looks at the behavioural response of Belgian MRPs from 2014 to 2019, addressing the question: *what explains the variation in EU-contacting activities among Belgian MRPs?*

## Understanding the involvement of Belgian MRPs in EU affairs

The Belgian parliamentary system is shaped by the basic principles of the Belgian constitution: all government levels have both legislative and executive authority over the competences they are constitutionally endowed with, and their respective laws stand on equal footing. In fact, Belgium has – next to the two chambers of the federal parliament – five directly elected regional parliamentary assemblies: the parliament of the Walloon Region, the parliament of the Brussels Capital Region, the parliament of the

French-Speaking Community, the Parliament of the German-Speaking Community and the Flemish Parliament (a single assembly for the merged Flemish Region and Flemish Community). Since each of these parliaments has full powers over its constitutionally assigned competencies, and since a parliamentary act from one level cannot overrule the act of another level, Belgian parliaments are not formally motivated to cooperate. The far-reaching autonomy of Belgian subnational entities entails that each level must prepare positions for and implement EU policies that fall within its jurisdiction, a principle known as *in foro interno, in foro externo* (Beyers & Bursens, 2013). In response to the subsidiarity clause in the Lisbon Treaty, Belgium therefore made clear (in Declaration 51 to the Treaty) that ‘National Parliament’ in the Belgian case means ‘national parliamentary system’ (Randour, 2021b), making Belgium an interesting case for the investigation of MRPs’ EU activities.

More precisely, all Belgian regional parliaments have established a European Affairs Committee (EAC). While the Flemish parliament merged EU and international affairs into a single committee, the Walloon and Brussels parliaments opted for a regular EU affairs committee as of the 2014–2019 legislative term. In addition, EU affairs are also discussed in the sectoral committees that deal with highly Europeanised competences such as environment and agriculture (Randour & Wolfs, 2017). The extent to which these committees scrutinise EU affairs varies across committees and parliaments (Delreux & Randour, 2015; Randour & Bursens, 2019).

Overall, Belgian federal and regional parliaments act in EU affairs according to what they are used to in domestic politics: scrutiny of their own executive and very little engagement in intra-Belgian cooperation (Bursens et al., 2016; Randour & Bursens, 2019). Within the Belgian political system, parliaments are considered quite weak compared to the strong executives and dominant political parties in coalition governments (Deschouwer, 2012; Meier & Bursens, 2021; Randour, 2020). We therefore expect a limited number of EU-contacting activities by Belgian MRPs, with a greater focus on information gathering than on influencing activities.

### Explaining variation in EU-related activities by individual and organisational features

What explains the variation in EU-contacting activities among Belgian MRPs? In terms of explanatory variables, we follow Auel and Christiansen (2015) and Schneider et al. (2014) in looking for explanations in both institutional capacities (organisational variables) and motivational incentives (individual-level variables).

At the *individual level*, a first factor that may affect MRPs’ EU-related activities is the salience of the EU to their political careers. Salience ‘generally

denotes the importance an actor attaches to an issue' (Warntjen, 2012, p. 169). In this respect, de Ruiter (2013) emphasised the salience of the national level in explaining the extent of parliamentary scrutiny in national parliaments. More specifically, we consider that the salience that MRPs attach to EU affairs for the success of their career is significant in explaining their investment in EU-contacting activities. This means that the salience of EU issues may vary across MRPs, especially among those with an interest in those regional policy competences that are highly Europeanised. Hence, *the more MRPs perceive the EU as important for their own career, the higher their EU-contacting activities will be (H1)*.

A second factor is whether an RMP perceives herself/himself as having an influence on EU policymaking. In this regard, the Lisbon Treaty has empowered regions in different ways (access to the CJEU, the EWS). Regional parliaments have become part of an emerging EU multilevel parliamentary system, offering new opportunities – beyond traditional parliamentary tools – to get involved in EU policymaking. Following Schneider et al. (2014), we expect that *MRPs perceiving themselves as influential players in EU affairs will engage more actively in EU-contacting activities (H2)*.

The third factor deals with the position of MRPs towards European integration. Euroscepticism in particular has been identified as a key variable to explain the strength of oversight institutions within parliaments (Raunio, 2005; Winzen, 2012). However, when it comes to the degree of activity of individual parliamentarians on EU affairs, Auel et al. (2015) found that Euroscepticism – whether in public opinion or among political elites – only constitutes a limited incentive for engaging in EU affairs. Likewise, Schneider et al. (2014) did not find any impact of Euroscepticism on the EU-related activities of German MRPs. They underline that less visible and more informal aspects of MRPs' EU-related activities are more difficult to use for the mobilisation of Eurosceptic voters, and are therefore less attractive for Eurosceptic MRPs. We therefore expect that *the more MRPs consider that EU integration has already gone too far, the lower their EU-contacting activities will be (H3)*.

At the organisational level, we look at the increasing 'mainstreaming' of EU affairs (Gattermann et al., 2015) beyond EACs, and we expect that MRPs who specialise in certain policy fields will be more active in EU affairs. On this matter, Sierens and Brack (2021, p. 13), studying the scrutiny of Brexit within Belgian national and regional parliaments, highlight that 'the different issues emphasised at different levels seem to depend on the formal distribution of competences (agriculture, fishery), and the main regional infrastructures (ports and airports)'. Similarly, Randour and Bursens (2019) found that Belgian regional parliaments tended to scrutinise in more details the policy fields that are the most Europeanised (ie agricultural and environmental issues). We therefore expect *MRPs belonging to highly*

*Europeanised committees to be more likely to show higher levels of EU-contacting activities (H4).*

A second variable looks at opposition–majority dynamics within parliaments. As highlighted by Sprungk (2010) and Auel (2007), political groups supporting the majority have two advantages over opposition MPs: an informational advantage thanks to direct access to the government, and greater (institutional) resources. Consequently, majority parties are less dependent on third-party information (fire alarms oversight) to hold the government accountable. However, governments are not solely accountable to their parliamentary majority. As agents of voters (the ultimate principals), ‘even opposition parties hold certain rights vis-à-vis governments’ (Sprungk, 2010, p. 5). In terms of empirical findings (Rauh & de Wilde, 2018), analysing plenary debates in four national parliaments (Germany, UK, Spain, The Netherlands) highlighted what they identified as an ‘opposition deficit in EU accountability’. Yet, more recently, Karlsson and Persson (2020) brought more nuance to these findings, observing that there was more opposition in the EACs than previously assumed. As empirical findings so far are inconclusive, we don’t formulate specific expectations regarding majority–opposition dynamics, but only control for its impact.

### Research design: data and operationalisation

While our research design is largely based on Schneider et al. (2014), we adapted the survey to take two important specificities of the Belgian federation into account: the absence of state-wide political parties and, consequently, the higher degree of party fragmentation. More specifically, we distinguished between MRPs’ contact with colleagues from the same party in another parliament (eg between members of the Walloon and the Brussels parliament) and contact with colleagues of the same political family (eg between members of the French-speaking social-democrat PS and the Dutch-speaking social-democrat SP.A – now Vooruit).<sup>1</sup> In addition, it is important to note that some parties or party families are not present in all regional parliaments (eg the Flemish nationalist N-VA are present in the Flemish and Brussels parliaments but have no equivalent in the Walloon parliament). This situation leads overall to a higher degree of party fragmentation.

To measure the involvement of individual Belgian MRPs, we collected data on the subjective evaluation of parliamentarians in three Belgian regional assemblies: the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels parliaments. Using online and paper questionnaires, available in French and Dutch, 289 parliamentarians received an invitation to participate in the survey between May 2016 and February 2017. In a first step, MRPs received an invitation to participate in an online survey in May 2016. In a second step, a paper version of



the survey was distributed to Belgian MRPs between November 2016 and February 2017. We were able to collect a total of 93 answers, out of which 83 were fully completed and used for the statistical analysis. This resulted in a relatively low but acceptable (see Bailer, 2014) response rate of 28.81 per cent, very similar to the 28.5 per cent response rate of Schneider et al. (2014).

Regarding the representativeness of the responses, we looked at differences across parliamentary groups within language communities (ie Dutch- and French-speaking). In this regard, the response rate is slightly skewed in favour of Dutch-speaking MRPs: the percentage of MRPs included in the statistical analysis represents 31.45 per cent of the total population of Flemish MRPs, 28 per cent of the Walloon parliament and 25.84 per cent of the Brussels parliament. Due to the low number of French-speaking respondents (14 out of 72) in the Brussels parliament compared to Dutch-speaking (9 out of 17 MRPs) one, the outcome for the Brussels parliament is not representative of the Belgian population as a whole. Our sample is also slightly skewed when looking at parliamentary groups within language communities. In the French-speaking community, the sample is fairly representative for Défi (+0.41 per cent), the greens of Ecolo (+0.41 per cent) and the liberals of MR (+2.85 per cent), while we observe a slight imbalance regarding the social-democrat PS (−3.95 per cent) and an overrepresentation of the Christian-democrat cdH (+5.72 per cent). In the Dutch-speaking community, our sample is fairly representative for Groen (−0.88 per cent) and the extreme right Vlaams Belang (−0.80 per cent), yet more imbalanced for the others. The Christian-democrat CD&V (−10.15 per cent) and the social-democrat SP.A (−4.48 per cent) are underrepresented in the sample while the liberal Open VLD (+10.06 per cent) and the nationalist N-VA (+6.96 per cent) are overrepresented.

We now turn to the operationalisation of the dependent and independent variables. In terms of the dependent variable, we look at variation in the contacting activities of Belgian MRPs when coordinating and adopting a common position in order to *influence* legislative and other policymaking dossiers that are initiated at the EU level, and to *collect information* to control the executives' EU policies. Specifically, the activity of parliamentarians was measured by asking MRPs about their contacts with (1) parliamentarians or party members, (2) members of the executive, (3) administrative officials and (4) interest groups (see Appendix 1 for a list of actors included in the survey). For each of these categories, we drew distinctions between territorial levels (regional, national and European) and party affiliation. MRPs had the possibility of assessing their contact on a total of 106 items, 53 regarding informational activities and the same number regarding coordination activities. Respondents answered on a five-point scale ranging from

‘never’ (coded 0), ‘several times a year’ (1), ‘every month’ (2), ‘every week’ (3) to ‘every day’ (4).

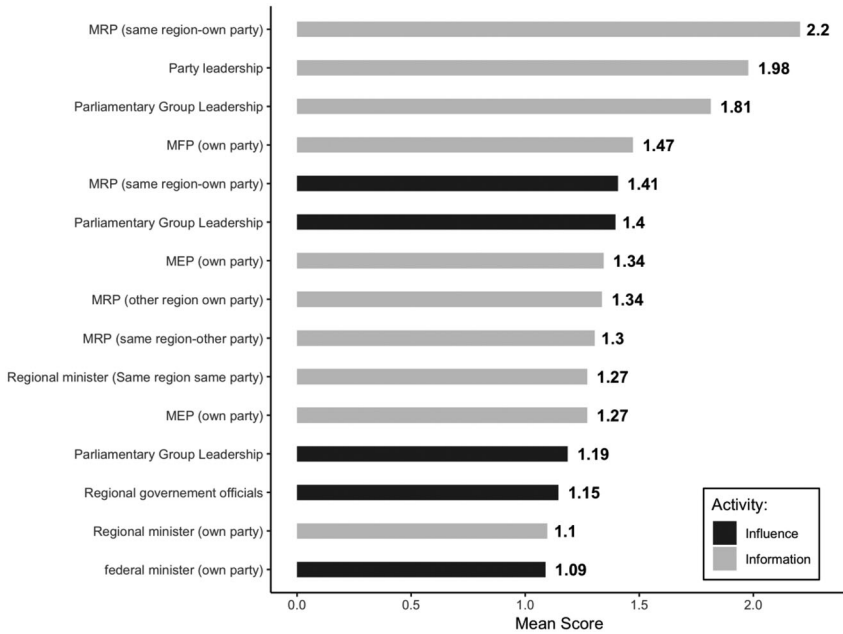
Based on these categories, we operationalised parliamentarians’ activity by constructing an additive index aggregating MRPs’ contacts across the different actor groups and activity types. Specifically, for both types of activities, we first summed the scores of parliamentarians for each item across the four actor types. This gave us eight categories, whose scores we standardised to a ‘zero-one’ interval for comparison.<sup>2</sup> In a second step, we added up and standardised the four categories of each activity to get the score per activity type. Finally, the total activity is the average of the scores of the two types of activities.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the operationalisation of the independent and control variables, perceived salience<sup>4</sup> was measured by asking MRPs how important the EU is for the success of their political career (11-point scale ranging from 0 to 10). Regarding their perceived influence on EU affairs, we asked respondents whether they felt influential with respect to legislative proposals made by the European Commission, ranging from ‘no influence’ and ‘small influence’ to ‘medium influence’, ‘big influence’ and ‘very big influence’. Regarding Euroscepticism, we asked whether respondents think ‘EU integration has already gone too far’ or should ‘be further advanced’ (11-point scale ranging from 0 to 10). For the majority–opposition variable, we coded 1 if the MRP was a member of the majority and 0 if not. As regards the Europeanised environment of MRPs, we coded 1 if the parliamentarian was part of the EAC or belonged to the environment or agricultural committees and 0 if not. Finally, while Schneider et al. (2014) controlled for gender and seniority in their survey – with no significant effect found – we opted to control for the impact of the language community (as this is a major characteristic of Belgian federalism) and whether the MRPs felt bonded to the EU level (using an 11-point scale ranging from 0 – ‘totally disagree’ to 10 – ‘totally agree’).

## Findings: Belgian MRPs as slow adapters

### *What activities do MRPs deploy and who do they contact?*

Five main observations should be outlined (see [Figure 1](#)). First, the EU-contacting activity of Belgian MRPs is mainly limited to informational purposes, and these contacts are limited to the direct environment of MRPs (ie members of their political party and/or members of their parliament). More precisely, 8 out of the 10 most contacted actors were contacted for informational purposes. In addition, the data also highlight the weak engagement of the MRPs across French- and Dutch-speaking



**Figure 1.** Perceived EU-contacting activity of Belgian MRPs on a 0-to-4 scale. MFP = Member of the federal parliament; MEP = Member of the European Parliament.

MRPs, confirming our expectation of little engagement in intra-Belgian cooperation.

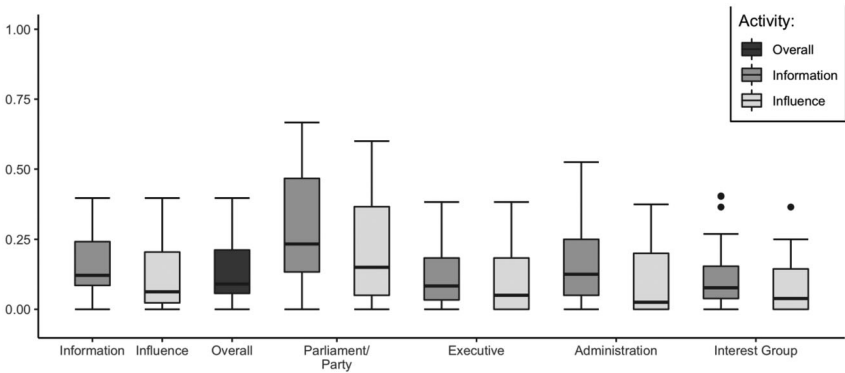
Second, the empirical analysis underlines the well-established importance of political parties in Belgium ('partitocracy') and their influence on the behaviour of parliamentarians (Deschouwer, 2012). Yet, this role is limited to the MRPs' own political party, and contact with MRPs from other political parties only appears once in the top 15 of the most frequently contacted actors. Third, staff from regional ministries constitutes the most relevant and the only non-partisan contact in the top 15 (ranked 13th). Overall, MRPs do not have a lot of contact with actors situated outside of the political system, and this is particularly the case for interest groups, which do not even appear in the top 15. Fourth, when Belgian MRPs go beyond their own parliament, they first try to get information via a parliamentarian from their own party in the federal parliament (ranked fourth in the top 15), closely followed by contacts with MEPs; in this case, both for informational and influencing purposes (ranked respectively 7th and 12th). This finding outlines that MRPs do not systematically bypass the national level to get information directly from the European level. Finally, 5 out of the 15 most frequently contacted actors are linked to contacting activities aiming at coordinating a common position to influence policies. As for information-gathering activities,

MRPs mainly rely on contact with their direct environment; ie MRPs from their own party.

While building a single aggregated score to evaluate MRPs' degree of EU-contacting activities, we found that there is an overall low degree of activity (0.13) with, as expected, a higher degree of activity for information-related activities (0.16) than for influence-related actions (0.11) (see Figure 2). As underlined by Schneider et al. (2014), this is not surprising, as such coordination activities are more resource-intensive than activities geared towards informational purposes. In addition, we observe an important variation across the different groups of actors that are contacted: Belgian MRPs rely mostly on contact with members of their parliament and party, both for informational (0.28) and influence purposes (0.19). Interestingly, our findings also underline that beyond their direct environment, MRPs favour non-partisan information from the administration (0.14) before relying on the executive (0.1). Finally, we notice that the interquartile range is rather high, indicating that MRPs differ to a large extent in their EU-contacting activities.

*What drives MRPs' EU-related activities?*

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the individual-level variables. The average perception of the importance of the EU for all respondents is 3.344 (on a scale from 0 to 10), suggesting that MRPs generally do not perceive European issues as important for the success of their own political work (standard deviation: 2.389). More than 40 per cent of our respondents even consider European issues to be unimportant (values between 0 and 3). Likewise, the perceived influence of regional parliamentarians on EU proposals (measured on a five-point scale) is very low (a mean value of 0.587 and a standard deviation of 0.713). More than half of the respondents perceive



**Figure 2.** EU-contacting activity and contacts across groups.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of individual-level variables used in the regression analysis.

	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	Mean	St. Dev.
Perceived salience	93	0	9	3.344	2.389
Influence on EU proposals	92	0	3	0.587	0.713
Euroscepticism	87	0	10	6.678	2.197

themselves as having no influence (a score of 0), and not a single parliamentarian considers him- or herself to have a strong or very strong influence. Finally, MRPs take a rather negative position on European integration (average Euroscepticism = 6.678 on a scale from 0 to 10), with a majority of them (60 per cent) having an intermediate position on the Euroscepticism scale (a score from 4 to 7).

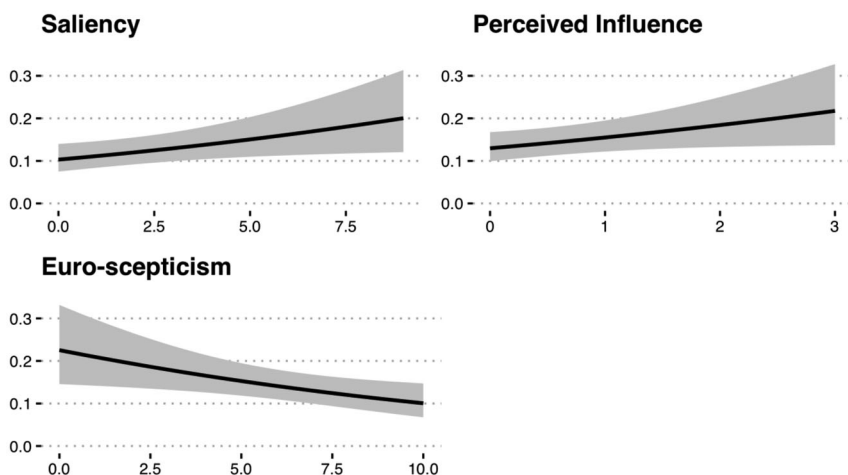
Since our variables are continuous proportions, bounded between 0 and 1, we conducted fractional logistic regressions to test our hypotheses. Fractional logistic regressions are designed to model variables that assume values in the standard unit interval [0, 1], such as rates, percentages and proportions (Papke & Wooldridge, 1996). Table 2 displays the results for three different models. In the first two models, individual and organisational factors are tested block-wise. The last model is a full model, including all independent variables as well as the control variables.

In the first model, the three individual factors are found significant, and in the expected direction. An increase in perceived salience, as well as in the perception of MRPs' own influence on EU legislative proposals, increases the extent of EU activities. This is not the case regarding the degree of Euroscepticism: the more Eurosceptic an MRP is, the lower its EU-related activities. The second model tests the impact of organisational variables: both being members of a Europeanised committee (ie EACs, environment or

**Table 2.** Effect of individual and organisational factors on MRPs' extent of activity.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
<i>Individual factors</i>			
Saliency	0.07** (0.03)		0.09** (0.04)
Perceived influence on EU affairs	0.29*** (0.96)		0.20* (0.96)
Euroscepticism	-0.08** (0.04)		-0.96** (0.04)
<i>Organisational factors</i>			
Europeanised Committee and EAC		0.14 (0.18)	-0.10 (0.17)
Majority party		0.28 (0.19)	0.14 (0.16)
<i>Control</i>			
Linguistic community: Flemish			0.5** (0.17)
Bond EU			0.15*** (0.04)
Constant	-1.8*** (0.32)	-2.15*** (0.21)	-3.03*** (0.41)
Observations	83	83	83
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> (correlation squared)	0.174	0.033	0.34

Note: Entries are the unstandardised beta coefficients with robust standard errors (SE) reported in parentheses. Significance: \* < .10; \*\* < .05; \*\*\* < .01.



**Figure 3.** Marginal effects of the significant independent variables.

agricultural committees) and belonging to a party of the majority have a positive effect on the level of activity, but neither effect is statistically significant. Noteworthy is that the explained variance of the first model is higher ( $R^2 = 17$  per cent) than that of the second ( $R^2 = 3$  per cent), suggesting that individual-level factors have higher explanatory power than organisational factors.

Finally, these findings are confirmed by the full model ( $R^2 = 33$  per cent). The effects of individual-level factors remain statistically significant, and in the same direction as in the previous models. In sum, these results support the hypotheses regarding the effect of individual factors on the MRPs' involvement in EU affairs, but provide little-to-no support for the hypotheses dealing with organisational factors. Neither committee membership nor belonging to a party from the governing majority are significant.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 3 visualises these marginal effects of the significant independent variables. We limited the number of control variables to ensure validity in the models. We controlled for the perceived bond of MRPs, with the EU finding a significant and positive relation. We also found that Flemish MRPs are significantly more active. Finally, as a robustness check, we also conducted three OLS regressions (which were used by Schneider et al., 2014) and found similar results (see Appendix 2).

## Conclusion

This contribution used an elite survey to map and explain the EU-contacting activities of members of regional parliaments in Belgium. Overall, we found a very low level of EU-contacting activities, in line with – but even lower – than

the findings of Schneider et al. (2014) on German Länder assemblies. At first glance, this is astonishing, in particular when considering the (1) peculiar constitutional position of regional assemblies within the Belgian *parliamentary system*, (2) their direct involvement in the EWS compared to other regional parliaments (Belgian regional assemblies can submit reasoned opinions without interference from the national level) and finally (3) the fact that this survey was conducted seven years after the Lisbon Treaty, thereby leaving sufficient time for Belgian regional parliaments to adapt to the new institutional opportunities.

However, comparing this finding to the one of German and Belgian national parliaments, but also to the actual use by Belgian parliaments of the EWS, it becomes far less surprising. Indeed, despite a slight increase in the last year – thanks to the activity of the Flemish parliament (Randour, 2021a) – Belgian federal and subnational parliaments rarely made use of the ex-ante subsidiarity control (Delreux & Randour, 2015; Fromage, 2016). This low level of activity can be explained, in part, by the ‘improvised cooperation’ (Délpérée & Dopagne, 2010, p. 63) around the EWS. Despite discussions regarding the development of an ‘interparliamentary cooperation agreement’ to implement the EWS in Belgium in December 2005 (in anticipation of the ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe), the latter agreement was only formally adopted in July 2017. This means that for almost 12 years, there was no formally recognised institutional framework regarding the implementation of the EWS in Belgium. In addition, the overall involvement of Belgian parliaments in EU affairs remained limited to institutional and administrative adaptations, while the actual political scrutiny of European affairs in Belgium remains occasional (Delreux & Randour, 2015). This tendency is also confirmed when looking at the OPAL institutional and activity scores (Auel et al., 2015): the House of Representatives and the Senate are considered two of the weakest parliaments in the EU.

In addition, those activities that do take place are mainly geared toward the collection of information on EU issues. Efforts to coordinate positions to influence EU policies are even less frequent. The direct environment of the own political party and of other actors at the same regional level seems to be the natural habitat of Belgian MRPs to develop EU-contacting activities. In other words, EU activities mainly have a within-level character, while political parties constitute the pin linking the regional, the national and the European levels. This role of political parties not only confirms the overall crucial position of parties in Belgian politics (Deschouwer, 2012) but is also in line with the findings of the German case (Schneider et al., 2014). Indeed, similar to German political parties (Wonka & Rittberger, 2014), Belgian parties act as crucial multilevel organisations. In addition, MRPs address the EU through the federal level rather than directly, which

confirms the enduring importance of the federal level in Belgium, another feature of Belgian politics related to the EU (Beyers & Bursens, 2006, 2013).

The limited level of perceived activity correlates with a series of other observations from our survey. First, 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 (Sinardet & Bursens, 2014). In particular, evidence for this is observed in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES): Belgian data reveal that the salience of European issues is only moderate. This trend is confirmed by the political programmes of the Belgian parties, and by the number of EU-related questions asked in the federal parliament, which paint an even bleaker portrait than the ‘moderate’ description the experts give to the Belgian situation. Only 5–10 per cent of the party programmes is dedicated to EU matters (Pittoors et al. 2016). Overall, it can thus safely be assumed that the salience of the EU in Belgian parliaments has been – and still is – very low, at least until 2012 (Van Hecke et al. 2012). Secondly, regional MPs attribute to themselves a very low impact on EU policies. Overall, the results of fractional logistic regressions indicate that the involvement of Belgian MRPs depends more on the individual than on organisational factors. At the individual level, EU-related activities are positively correlated with the importance an MRP attaches to the European level, and negatively to the degree of Euroscepticism, while at the organisational level, only the language community to which an MRP belongs is significantly related to EU involvement. To conclude, the low level of EU activity clearly defines the Belgian regional parliamentarians as slow adaptors, confirming the evidence of other federal Member States. Hence, from the regional perspective, the development of an EU multilevel parliamentarism is still a long way off.

Yet, this overall low level of activity does not mean that Belgian parliaments are powerless when dealing with EU affairs. As the ratification of the CETA treaty reveals, on an occasional basis, Belgian regional parliaments can be active and even affect EU decision-making processes. In this respect, according to Bursens and De Bièvre (2021), the resistance of the Walloon (and other French-speaking) region(s) vis-à-vis CETA can mainly be explained – in addition to their constitutional capacity to do so – by a combination of a high degree of societal mobilisation (ie salience for civil society) with party politics and, in particular, the existence of different governing coalitions across and within governance levels (ie between the Regions and Communities and between the regional and federal level). This finding outlines that despite the importance of individual-level explanations, as shown with our study – organisational factors can also play a role, but that one needs to go beyond the traditional majority–opposition explanation to look at the existence of varying governing coalitions across and within governance levels.



## Notes

1. To examine the effect of these changes and thereby check the robustness of our analysis, we also ran the analyses (1) using only 'the same party' categories and (2) merging, for each level, the 'same party' and 'same political family' categories by keeping only the maximum values. The results remained substantively the same in both cases.
2. In line with Schneider et al. (2014), we standardised taking into account the total number of possible contacts for each MRP, dropping the category 'non-applicable'. We also kept all cases with not more than 25% missing values for all items at the lowest level of aggregation (the eight indicators).
3. For each aggregation step, the Cronbach's Alpha, which takes into account the correlations between all items, was greater than 0.81, indicating a high degree of internal consistency among the activity dimensions. The reliability of this operationalisation is discussed more elaborately in Schneider et al. (2014).
4. It is noteworthy that we adopted a narrower definition of salience than the one used in the German survey. While the latter defined salience both in terms of electoral and policy-influencing benefits, our question was limited to benefits related to their *own career* (ie electoral benefits).
5. As a robustness check, we also ran additional models controlling for gender, without this variable affecting the results nor being significant (see, Online Appendix 3).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).



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## Appendix 1: List of the actors included in the questionnaire regarding information exchange and coordination of common positions in EU politics

Category of actors	Items
Members of Parliament and parties	1. Leadership of my party 2. Parliamentary group leadership of my party 3. MPs of my party in my region 4. MPs of other parties in my region 5. MPs of my party in other regions <b>6. MPs of my political family in other regions</b> 7. MPs of other parties in other regions 8. MPs of my party (federal level) <b>9. MPs of my political family (federal level)</b> 10. MPs of other parties (federal level) 11. MPs of my party family in parliaments of other EU member states 12. MPs of other party family in parliaments of other EU member states 13. MEPs of my party 14. MEPs of my political family 15. MEPs of other party families
Members of the executive	1. A regional minister of my party in my region 2. A regional minister of other parties in my region 3. A regional minister of my party in other regions <b>4. A regional minister of my political family in other regions</b> 5. A regional minister of other parties in other regions 6. A federal minister of my party <b>7. A federal minister of my political family</b> 8. A federal minister of other parties 9. A minister of my political family of other EU member states 10. A minister of other party family

(Continued)

Continued.

Category of actors	Items
	of other EU member states 11. Belgian European Commissioner and members of his personal cabinet 12. Belgian staff in cabinets of other European Commissioners 13. European Commissioners from other EU member States 14. Commissioners from my party family and members of their personal cabinets 15. Commissions from other party families and members of their personal cabinets
Administrative and ministerial officials	1. Staff members in regional ministries 2. Staff members in federal ministries 3. Staff members in the federal parliament <b>4. Staff members in my regional parliament</b> 5. Staff members in ministries of other EU member states 6. Staff members in the Directorate Generals of the European Commission 7. Staff members in the Council's Committee of Permanent Representatives <b>8. Staff members representing the Belgian regions in the Belgian permanent representation</b> <b>9. Staff members working in a bilateral office in relation to the EU (eg Vleeva)</b> <b>10. Other staff members working in ministries</b>
Interest groups and associations	1. Unions in Belgium 2. Unions in other EU member states 3. Unions at the EU level 4. Employers' associations in Belgium 5. Employers' associations in other EU member states 6. Employers' association at the EU level 7. Business associations in Belgium 8. Business associations in other EU member states 9. Business associations at the EU level 10. Non-governmental organisations in Belgium 11. Non-governmental organisations in other EU member states 12. Non-governmental organisations at the EU level <b>13. Other interest groups or organisations</b>

Items in bold were added to the Belgian survey to cope with the specificities of the Belgian political context. The questions as well as the dataset used for this study are available online, on the following webpage <https://researchportal.unamur.be/en/datasets/belgian-regional-rmps-survey-dataset>.

## Appendix 2: Complementary OLS regression following Schneider et al. (2014)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
<i>Individual factors</i>			
Saliency	0.01* (0.004)		0.01** (0.004)
Perceived influence on EU affairs	0.04*** (0.01)		0.03*** (0.01)
Euroscepticism	−0.01** (0.004)		−0.01** (0.005)
<i>Organisational factors</i>			
Europeanised Committee and EAC		0.02 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)
Majority party		0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
<i>Control</i>			
Linguistic community: Flemish			0.05** (0.02)
Bond EU			0.01*** (0.01)
Constant	0.15*** (0.03)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.03 (0.04)
Observations	83	83	83
$R^2$	0.20	0.03	0.33
Adjusted $R^2$	0.17	0.01	0.27
Residual Std. Error	0.09 (df = 79)	0.09 (df = 80)	0.08 (df = 75)
F Statistic	6.47*** (df = 3; 79)	1.30 (df = 2; 80)	5.28*** (df = 7; 75)

Note: Significance: \* $<.10$ ; \*\* $<.05$ ; \*\*\* $<.01$ .

### Appendix 3: Full models with gender as control variable

	(1) Fractional logistic	(2) OLS
<i>Individual factors</i>		
Saliency	0.08** (0.04)	0.01** (0.004)
Perceived influence on EU affairs	0.22** (0.11)	0.03** (0.01)
Euroscepticism	−0.10** (0.04)	−0.01** (0.005)
<i>Organisational factors</i>		
Europeanised Committee and EAC	−0.12 (0.16)	−0.01 (0.02)
Majority party	0.14 (0.19)	0.5** (0.02)
<i>Control</i>		
Linguistic community: Flemish	0.51*** (0.19)	0.05** (0.02)
Bond EU	0.16*** (0.05)	0.01*** (0.01)
Gender	−0.11 (0.17)	−0.01 (0.02)
Constant	−2.99*** (0.44)	0.03 (0.05)
Observations	83	83
$R^2$	0.20	0.03
Adjusted $R^2$	0.17	0.01
Residual Std. Error	0.09 (df = 79)	0.09 (df = 80)
F Statistic	6.47*** (df = 3; 79)	1.30 (df = 2; 80)

Note: Significance: \* $<.10$ ; \*\* $<.05$ ; \*\*\* $<.01$ .