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Reconsidering Party Europeanisation: A Case Study of the Flemish Political Parties

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Abstract

This paper presents a re-consideration of the concept of europeanisation, focusing particularly on party organisation. It argues that europeanisation should not be measured by looking at party change, but rather should focus on the way parties organise to interact with the EU as such. In an attempt to further our understanding of the relation between national parties and the EU, it aims to combine insights from both the europeanisation and federalism research. As such, it present a 'federal' model of organisational party europeanisation and tests this on the Flemish parties, based on interviews with Flemish party officials. It is argued that parties mirror their own organisation to the institutional set-up of the EU. The paper concludes that this argument generally holds, although more research is needed to further explicate certain outstanding issues. Particularly, it is shown that parties exhibit similar cleavages as the EU polity, as the paper finds both intergovernmental and supranational dynamics in their organisation, as well as clear distinctions between what happens at the national and the European level. The paper is divided in three parts. First the existing literature will be reviewed and the federal model will be developed. Then the results of the case study will be presented. Finally, concluding remarks include an overall appreciation of the model and some thoughts on how to move forward.

Introduction

Notwithstanding the fact that research on the europeanisation of EU member state institutions, from policies to parliaments, has grown significantly since the 1990s, the link between European integration and political parties has overall received less attention. Particularly, the way national political parties organise vis-à-vis the EU has remained somewhat under-researched. So far, most of the literature on national party europeanisation has focused either on conceptual discussions (Ladrech, Robert 2002, Mair, Peter; Graziano, Paolo; Vink, Maarten 2007, Ladrech, Robert 2012), on how parties have adapted their policy platforms in terms of EU positions and issue salience (de Vries, Catherine E. 2007, De Wilde, Pieter 2011, Green-Pedersen, Christoffer 2012), or on the autonomy of MEPs (Raunio, Tapio 2000, Scully, Roger 2001, Raunio, Tapio 2002, Mühlböck, Monika 2012, Mühlböck, Monika 2012). Research on the europeanisation of national party organisation, however, has not received an equal amount of scholarly attention. With the notable exception of Poguntke et al. (2007), systematic comparative analysis is lacking. Moreover, the current literature often reaches "apparently contradictory conclusions" (Scully, Roger 2001); on the one hand arguing that the EU increases incentives for parties to change, while also highlighting a general absence of change.

To be sure, scholars might have good reason not to spend too much time assessing the europeanisation of national party organisations, or even national parties in general. About two decades ago, Mair argued that, so far, there was little europeanisation to speak of, claiming that "of the many areas of domestic politics that may have experienced an impact from Europe, party

systems have perhaps proved to be most impervious to change" (Mair, Peter 2000) — a claim that was largely confirmed some years later by Poguntke et al. (2007), who focused specifically on the europeanisation of party organisations. However, their focus on europeanisation as party change neglects the organisation of parties vis-à-vis the EU in itself. For that reason, this paper does not focus on whether European integration generated party change, but rather on how parties organise to interact with the EU as such. In doing so, it combines insights form the literature on europeanisation with that on federalism. Federal scholarship has, after all, a long tradition of research on how parties act and organise in multi-level systems.

From this perspective, europeanisation is not measured by the adaptations that parties go through, but rather by the way they interact and coordinate with the EU level. The central assumption of the paper is that parties mirror their own organisation to that of the state in which they operate. Hence, the central these is that when organising for interaction with the EU, parties will also mirror the institutional set-up of the EU. Understanding the EU as a decentralised multi-level system that incorporates both intergovernmental and supranational dynamics, the paper measures europeanisation by looking at four indicators: coordination with the Europarty, coordination with MEPs, coordination with executives in the Councils, and the intra-party decision-making process on EU issues. It is expected that europeanisation will remain a rather limited and elite-driven affair, with rather little coordination between governance levels. Using the Flemish case at a test for this model, the paper finds its central assumption broadly supported. Flemish parties exhibit similar cleavages as the EU polity, as the paper finds both intergovernmental and supranational dynamics in their organisation, as well as clear distinctions between what happens at the national and the European level.

The paper will unfold in three steps. First, it will outline the literature on party europeanisation and argue for an alternative, more outcome-oriented understanding of the concept. Second, the Flemish case will be presented, focussing particularly on the four indicators of europeanisation. Finally, the paper considers whether its model holds and what the case study findings reveal about both the party as an organisation and the EU as a governance level.

Party europeanisation: what's in a name?

There is a lot of conceptual obscurity surrounding the concept of europeanisation, particularly when applied to political parties. According to a review by Peter Mair (2007), research on the europeanisation of political parties has expanded in three waves. The first wave reflects the "earliest tradition" in party europeanisation research, when "scholars have sought to trace the origins and development of transnational — and specifically trans-European — party federations" (Mair, Peter; Graziano, Paolo; Vink, Maarten 2007). The second wave of research shifted focus away from the origins of these so-called Europarties to "the shape and dynamic of the parties and the party systems as they function within the European Parliament", and more generally partisan dynamics within EU institutions (ibid.). Finally, the most recent wave of research has shifted away from the European level and is now "primarily concerned with the extent to which 'Europe', however defined, plays a role in party programs, party ideology and party competition at the national level" (ibid.). One can add party organisation to this latest wave of research, and it is the focus in this paper.

Definitions of party europeanisation

However, different definitions of the concept of europeanisation are used simultaneously, ranging from the very broad to the rather narrow. As Ladrech argues, "in its broadest meaning, [europeanisation] refers to responses by actors — institutional and otherwise — to the impact of European integration" (Ladrech, Robert 2002). Similarly, Mair has said that europeanisation is generally considered to occur "when something in national political systems is affected by something European" (Mair, Peter; Graziano, Paolo; Vink, Maarten 2007). In addition, Börzel, argues that europeanisation should not be considered only as a "top down mechanism" in which the European level asserts influence on the national level, but as a more complex process in which

also the "bottom-up" movement from the national to the European level should be taken into account (Börzel, Tanja A.; Bulmer, S.; Lequesne, C. 2005).

One of the most authoritative definitions has been developed by Ladrech and Radaelli. In 1994, Ladrech defined the europeanisation of national politics as an "incremental process re-orienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that [EU] political and economic dynamics become part of the organisational logic of national politics and policymaking" (Ladrech, Robert 1994). Building on this definition, Radaelli argues that europeanisation refers to the process by which the EU 'way of doing things' becomes "incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies" (Radaelli, Claudio 2000). At least equally important, Radaelli also elaborates on what europeanisation is *not*. Europeanisation, in his view, does not correspond with harmonisation or convergence among the various national actors in the EU; nor with political integration as such, which is the driver of europeanisation (Radaelli, Claudio 2000). As such, this Ladrech/Radaelli definition of europeanisation considers europeanisation mainly as the "adaptive response" (Ladrech, Robert 2002) by national actors, including political parties, to changes in their political environment brought about by ongoing European integration.

The europeanisation of party organisation

Building on this definition, Ladrech (1994, 2002) developed a framework with five possible dimensions of investigation: programmatic change, organisational change, changes in party competition, party government relations, and relations beyond the national political system. He and others further elaborated on these dimensions. Raunio (2002), for instance, conducted research on the impact of European integration on the autonomy of party leadership and Hix (2002) considered the independence of MEPs, while others studied the influence of European integration on national party manifestos (Deschouwer, Kris; Van Assche, Martine 2003, Pennings, P. 2006). A lot of attention has also been dedicated to the impact of European integration on the politicisation of the EU in the national political arena (de Vries, Catherine E. 2007, De Wilde, Pieter 2011, De Wilde, Pieter; Zürn, Michael 2012, Miklin, Eric 2014, Senninger, Roman; Wagner, Markus 2015, Kriesi, Hanspeter 2016, Kröger, Sandra; Bellamy, Richard 2016). Peter Mair has also devoted a lot of his time to studying the europeanisation of party systems (Mair, Peter 2000, Mair, Peter 2007, Mair, Peter; Graziano, Paolo; Vink, Maarten 2007). In comparison, the europeanisation of the organisation of national political parties has received a rather limited amount of attention.

One of the main endeavours to fill this void was Poguntke et al.'s edited volume on the europeanisation of national political party organisations (Poguntke, Thomas; Aylott, Nicholas; Carter, Elisabeth; Ladrech, Robert; Luther, Kurt Richard 2007). Understanding party organisation as "the informal and formal distribution of power within a party", they assess the extent to which European integration has induced organisational adaptation in favour of both party elites and those specialising in EU affairs, such as MEPs and EU policy experts (Poguntke, Thomas; Aylott, Nicholas; Carter, Elisabeth; Ladrech, Robert; Luther, Kurt Richard 2007). Their argument largely rests on two assumptions: on the one hand, the growing importance of the EU decisions for national legislators; and on the other hand, the executive bias in the EU, by which national executives have an informational and institutional advantage over other domestic actors. While the former accounts for the growing influence of parties' EU specialists, the latter explains the increasing centralisation of power with the party leadership. More specifically, they broadly look at three sets of indicators to measure party europeanisation: (1) control by the party leadership over to actions of their delegates at the EU level; (2) the weight of MEPs and other EU-related staff on internal party decision; and (3) the sheer number of EU experts active in a party. They conclude, however, that parties only show a very limited adaptation to the EU: while parties are indeed increasingly centralised, there is no proliferation of EU specialists within parties, nor do these specialists witness a meaningful increase in influence (Poguntke, Thomas; Aylott, Nicholas; Carter, Elisabeth; Ladrech, Robert; Luther, Kurt Richard 2007). As such, they come to the conclusion that the EU is largely absent within national political parties and that, in turn, national political parties are largely absent in the EU.

The current literature thus approaches the europeanisation of party organisations in two rather distinct ways. On the one hand, authors such as Poguntke et al. (2007) focus on *internal* party

dynamics and the centralisation of power with those few involved in EU decision-making. On the other hand, authors such as Raunio (2002) and Hix (2002) focus more on the *external* principal-agent mechanisms of control and autonomy of party agents across governance levels. All of them, however, seem to indicate that parties respond meagrely respond to the existence of the EU, and fundamental adaptive change stays out. The europeanisation of national party organisations thus does not seem to be the most rewarding of study subjects.

Organisational europeanisation: process or outcome?

What all these studies have in common, however, is an understanding of europeanisation — in line with the Ladrech/Radaelli definition — as a process of change. They assume that parties will organise differently today than they used to in the past, as a consequence of European integration. Their main point of reference is a *process* of adaptive change. That most studies find there is little to no europeanisation thus means that parties do not organise differently today than in the past, which is somewhat counterintuitive. After all, there is a new European decision-making process in which party representatives participate, there are new political actors in MEPs and Commissioners, and a new electoral arena in the European elections. To assert that parties have not adapted to these new circumstances feels somewhat awkward, as it is simply not possible for them *not* to interact with this new governance level and its actors — and hence it is not possible for them *not* to organise in a certain way as to manage this interaction. That former studies have not been able to find evidence for europeanisation (as a process) means that parties have not altered their fundamental party organisation, but indeed it does not mean that parties have not one way or another organised to interact with the EU. As one of our respondents said, his party simply incorporated the new EU level into the existing party structures but did not in any way alter the basic structures of the party — he was adamant in refusing to call it 'party change'. This rather exclusive scholarly focus on europeanisation *as a process* somewhat neglects its outcome dimension, i.e. the way in which parties organise to interact with the EU. The question this paper aims to address, therefore, is not about the process of adaptation parties have undergone, but rather: how do parties organise to interact with the EU level and what explains variation between parties? To answer this question, we aim to combine the europeanisation literature with a much older scholarly tradition: federalism.

Europeanisation and federalism: brothers in arms

Although scholars on party europeanisation have not been focussing too much on the issue, the organisation of parties across governance levels has received quite some attention from scholars working on federal and multi-level politics. According to Deschouwer (2006), parties operating in federal systems are confronted with challenges in both the horizontal and vertical direction. Horizontally, parties need to manage territorial variation between the various regions in which the party is active. Vertically, parties need to ensure a proper "linking of activities and strategies at two different levels" (Deschouwer, Kris; Katz, Richard S.; Crotte, W. 2006). It is this second, vertical aspect, which is referred to as vertical integration, that is of particular relevance when considering the organisational europeanisation of political parties. Thorlakson defines vertical integration as "the extent of organisational linkages, interdependence and cooperation between federal and state party organisations in both the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary arenas" (Thorlakson, Lori 2009). In a similar vein, Dyck states that "if a political party functions more or less successfully at both levels of government and of the relations between the two levels are generally close, it can be called an integrated party" (Dyck, Rand; Bakvis, H. 1991, cited in: Filippov, Mikhael; Ordeshook, P. C.; Shvetsova, O. 2004).

Being somewhat of the father of this strand of research, Smiley (1980) has argued that there are three ideal types of parties in multi-level systems: integrated parties, split parties (with weak cross-level linkages) and truncated parties (active on only one political level). In a comprehensive work on the organisation of multi-level parties, Detterbeck (2012) further elaborates on the notion that, as with federal states, also federal parties can be assessed based on the combination of self-rule and shared-rule. Based on this assumption, he develops a typology that categorises parties ranging from unitarist (highly centralised), to autonomist parties with multiple centres of power (Detterbeck, Klaus 2012). The main indicator he uses to classify parties in this typology, is the

extent to which central leadership has control over its branches, or, inversely, the extent to which regional branches have autonomy from central leadership.

Although this model is obviously not directly applicable to the relation between national parties and the EU — and, in so far as we know, has not yet been applied to the EU — it nonetheless offers valuable insights in how parties organise in multi-level systems. Particularly, building on a long tradition of federal scholarship on the issue, both Thorlakson (2009) and Detterbeck (2012) come to the conclusion that parties more or less mirror their own organisational strategy to the national institutional set-up. Detterbeck is clear in concluding that "parties which have become heavily involved in state institutions and which focus on policymaking in parliaments and governments are likely to mimic the degree of territorial interdependence in their internal organisation" (Detterbeck, Klaus 2012). Similarly, Thorlakson argues that "the institutional environment is shaping the organisational strategies of parties" (Thorlakson, Lori 2009). Put differently, it is suggested that parties in more decentralised states will also organise in a less centralised way, and vice versa.

Considering how the theoretical foundations for studying and explaining party europeanisation are still rather general, this 'federal' observation might be a very interesting point of departure. Indeed, as Mair has already argued some time ago, it is rather unclear and difficult to distinguish "what precisely it is in the national political system that can be affected, and what it is in Europe that does the affecting" (Mair, Peter; Graziano, Paolo; Vink, Maarten 2007). Insights from federalism might be very useful for hammering out the mechanisms behind what we observe, and provide tentative answers to Mair's conundrum. Put differently, if (1) europeanisation is to be understood as the way parties organise to interact with the EU level, and (2) parties are prone to 'mimic' the institutional set-up of the MLG system in which they operate, then we can expect party organisations to somehow mirror the workings of the EU institutions and its decision-making process. Taking this as the main starting assumption of this paper, the question then becomes: what are the main characteristics of the EU institutional set-up and how would parties mirror these? As will be shown below, this model is strongly grounded in both the federal and europeanisation literature, and aims to combine both to come to a more holistic understanding of the europeanisation of party organisations.


A 'federal' model for the study of organisational europeanisation

As explained above, the main assumption is that parties mirror their organisation to the institutional set-up of the EU. As such, the dependent variable is the way parties organise to interact with the EU, while the main independent variable is the institutional set-up of the EU. Although the federal nature of the EU is a topic of heavy (political) debate, one can nonetheless safely state that the EU constitutes a decentralised multi-level system that incorporates both intergovernmental and supranational dynamics. There are several different characteristics hidden in this description, but the most obvious one is the multi-level nature of the EU. As a multi-level system the EU has been compared with cooperative federalism, in which "the vast majority of competences are concurrent or shared" so that the different governance levels have to cooperate intensively to make and implement policies (Börzel, Tanja A.; Hosli, Madeleine O. 2003). Indeed, the central role of member state representatives in the EU decision-making process is one of the EU's most prominent institutional features. Not only are member states responsible for the domestic implementation of EU legislation, in addition, "there is hardly any area in which the EU can execute its competencies without the consent of the member states" (Börzel, Tanja A. 2005). Not to mention the fact that the EU is dependent on financial contributions from the member states. Actors the national and European levels are thus interlocked, resulting in a strong incentive for parties to coordinate the actions of their agents at the different levels (Deschouwer, Kris; Katz, Richard S.; Crotte, W. 2006).

Most importantly, as Deschouwer argues, in a cooperative system "intergovernmental politics become party politics and vice versa" (Deschouwer, Kris; Katz, Richard S.; Crotte, W. 2006). As they are forced to cooperate, the actions of political actors on one level become important for actors on the other level, thus creating a situation of mutual dependence on several fronts (cf. infra). This situation of mutual dependence creates incentives for parties to install both formal and informal coordination mechanisms between the different actors involved in the EU decision-making

process. Considering parties using the traditional "three faces" approach and taking into account to EU's decision-making process, one can identify six actors involved. At the national level there is the party on the ground, the party in central office and the national parliamentary party group (NPG). At the EU level, there is the party in executive office (active in the Councils), the European parliamentary party group (EPG) and the Europarty. This creates a model of quite a few possible lines of coordination, as depicted in Figure 1. Considering how we are particularly interested in coordination regarding EU actors, the focus lies with the three actors active at the EU level and purely national horizontal coordination is entirely not taken into account.

Figure 1: coordination lines
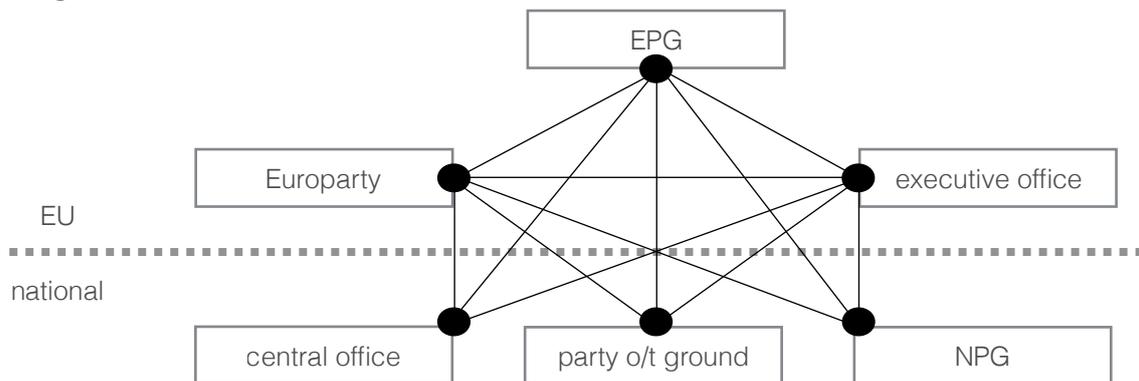
First, coordination with(in) the Europarty takes to form of both formal congresses and informal meetings among representatives of the national parties. It can be measured by considering the amount of time and effort national parties put in participating in these (in)formal gatherings — i.e. the number of meetings they have, as well as the quality and quantity of people they delegate. Second, coordination with the EPG essentially comes down to coordination between the national party leadership and their MEPs, which can take the form of formal feedback instruments (e.g. regular reporting of activities), vote instructions issued by the party leadership or the occasional informal update. Third, coordination with the executives active in the Councils is somewhat more tricky, as executives act as representatives of a country (government) and not directly of a party. Nonetheless, when it comes down to the practice of coordination, ministers are just as much agents of the party as are MEPs, and so similar coordination mechanisms might apply: formal and informal feedback, as well as vote instructions. Finally, in addition to coordination with these different actors 'individually', a good indication of how parties deal with the EU can also be found in the way it decides on its positions regarding EU issues — who is involved in this process and who has the final say? Are these positions supported by the entire party following a broad internal debate, or are they pushed through by a small elite of EU pundits? This process can be measured by looking at the existence, membership and importance of internal EU working groups, but also the input and weight of EU experts, MEPs, ministry cabinets, etc. on the final position.

All in all, the cooperative nature of the EU creates several incentives for national parties to put in place coordination mechanisms between their national and European actors. Depending on actor, these mechanisms might take different forms, as described above. However, our model would be wanting if we only consider the cooperative nature of the EU. In fact, the other institutional characteristics of the EU significantly temper these cooperative incentives and moderates the mutual dependence that is the main source of these incentives. Further investigation of the EU's institutional structure allows us to formulate a number of EU-wide expectations, as well as to identify more specific variables that may account for variation between parties.

The EU as a cooperative multi-level system

As mentioned above, there are some general incentives for parties to ensure proper coordination between their national and European actors. The cooperative nature of the EU ensures that actors at both levels are interlocked and mutually dependent in the decision-making process, thereby forcing them to coordinate their actions. One can identify three ways in which this is so. First, the

EU multi-level system forces parties to play a multi-level game. This implies that parties simultaneously need to participate in decision-making at the supranational level, while being "responsible and accountable to their domestic populations in order to retain their political legitimacy" (Bellamy, Richard; Weale, Albert 2015). As such, it is important to maintain coherence in party positions across levels, as parties unable to account for their actions at the supranational level will face weakened legitimacy. The actions of an actor at the European level thus both depend on and influence the actions of an actor at the national level, and vice versa. Actors thus "rely on each other for their survival and success" (Filippov, Mikhael; Ordeshook, Peter. C.; Shvetsova, Olga 2004). Of course, parties with higher internal dissent on the EU will respond different to this incentive than more cohesive parties.

Second, coordination within parties also enhances the stability of the multi-level system, as the possibility to resolve tensions between governance levels within the party allows parties to prevent them from overflowing into a constitutional crisis. Indeed, Detterberck argues that "integrated parties can be powerful mediators between governmental levels" (Detterbeck, Klaus 2012), essentially becoming "problem-solving agents of federalism" (ibid., 19). Parties are thus themselves responsible for the survival of the system. Of course, as Filippov et al. argue, "there is nothing inherently good and noble about parties per se that prevents them from participating in those disputes that threaten federal stability" (Filippov, Mikhael; Ordeshook, Peter. C.; Shvetsova, Olga 2004). In the case of the EU, it is indeed very clear that some parties actively aim for a destabilisation and even total abolishment of the multi-level system. These anti-EU parties will likely organise very differently from parties with a more pro-EU position, which prefer a stable institutional system.

Finally, from a policy-making perspective, considering how national actors are strongly involved in decision-making at the EU level, coordination between actors active at several levels will ensure both more efficient policy-making and more influence for the party. For a minister, for example, it is good to know in advance whether his own domestic parliamentary majority will back his proposals at the EU level. In the words of Thorlakson: "integrative linkages (…) can reduce the coordination costs of policy-making for the party" (Thorlakson, Lori 2009). Similarly, coordination between party actors in the Council and the EP "strengthens their party's position in the legislative process" (Mühlböck, Monika 2012). Addressing issues internally and coordinating a unified front across governance levels can thus be considered to be in the self-interest of parties. The growing competences of the EU and the increasing policy constraint its institutions place on national governments only increase the need for and appeal of influencing EU policy outcomes (Hix, Simon 2008), thereby further enhancing the need for and appeal of coordination. Of course, this effect increases the more competences the EU has and hence the more constraints it can issue. Parties in 'core EU' countries — i.e. those member states that have transferred the maximum possible amount of competences to the EU — will therefore feel this incentive more strongly than others.

However, although these three factors indeed highlight the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of actors on different governance levels, there is more to the EU's institutional structure than its cooperative nature. Particularly, while the EU is obviously highly decentralised, it is also characterised by two parallel representative and decision-making systems: one intergovernmental, the other supranational. Each of these institutional system function according to different logics and have a profound impact on the cooperative nature of the EU.

The EU as an executive intergovernmental system

Intergovernmental negotiation based on territorial representation is a vital part of the EU decision-making process. Intergovernmental negotiations, where states rather than parties are being represented, take place in the context of the Councils, as well as Intergovernmental Conferences (IGCs). While member state governments are the 'masters of the treaties' during IGCs, they also participate in the legislative procedure in the Council of Ministers, while setting out the EU's long-term strategy in the European Council. This intergovernmentalism, however, is strongly reminiscent of executive federalism, which refers to "the processes of intergovernmental negotiation that are dominated by the executives of the different governments within the federal system" (Watts, Ronald 1989). In an executive federal system, all relations between member states are dealt with

by the national executives. It is somewhat opposed to parliamentary federalism, where inter-state relations are dealt with through designated assemblies (e.g. the US Senate or German Bundesrat). The executive nature of EU intergovernmentalism is also highlighted by the literature on the executive bias in the EU, which refers to the idea that the EU legislative process is by and large dominated by executive actors at the expense of other domestic actors, mainly national parliaments (Carter, Elisabeth; Poguntke, Thomas 2010). This bias is largely due to the fact that these executive elites require a significant amount of autonomy in order to be able successfully negotiate with their counterparts at the EU level. Consequently, the autonomy they require in the context of intergovernmental negotiations means that they can hardly be held accountable by anyone back home — and even less so since the extension of qualified majority voting in the Council.

In addition to what Poguntke et al. have coined the "disaggregation of the party in public office, with substantial fissures opening between the parliamentary party and the executive" (Poguntke, Thomas; Aylott, Nicholas; Ladrech, Robert; Luther, Kurt Richard 2007), this executive bias also significantly limits the cooperative nature of the EU. In effect, executive federalism leads to a situation where "politicians in opposition at both levels are to an overwhelming degree 'locked out' (…) of effective influence", while also national parliaments "have no real alternatives to ratifying decisions reached in intergovernmental negotiations" (Smiley, Donald V. 1980). Moreover, executive negotiators do not act according to a partisan logic but rather follow a territorial logic — which means that they "are seldom mobilised along transnational party lines, and decision outcomes instead tend to reflect issue-specific coalition patterns" (Tallberg, Jonas; Johansson, Karl Magnus 2008).

In short, the EU's intergovernmental system limits political interaction with domestic actors to the bare minimum, as it gives national governments massive amounts of autonomy vis-à-vis their parliaments and effectively locks out the opposition. For that reason, one can generally expect coordination with the executive office to be limited to policy-technical issues that have practical use for an executive, i.e. information about implementation etc. Moreover, parties in opposition are indeed cut off from a vital source of information and power regarding EU decision-making, and are thus very much likely to organise differently than parties in government. While parties in government can make use of the 'easy' way of exercising influence through their ministers, opposition parties are forced to look for alternative ways and are thus likely to organise accordingly. Particularly, they might seek to balance the loss of executive influence by building coalitions at the EU level — either with parties in their Europarty that *are* in government or with allies in their EPG.

The EU as a second-order supranational system

Contrasting the EU's intergovernmental system, many have also observed a strengthened supranational logic in the EU, as witnessed by the growing powers of the EP in the EU decision-making process. Particularly the Lisbon Treaty consolidated the supranational logic by introducing the Ordinary Legislative Procedure as the main procedure for the vast majority of EU legislation, thus putting the EP on the same level as the Council of Ministers. The EU was effectively turned into a bi-cameral system (Mühlböck, Monika 2012). For national parties this meant that the activities of their MEPs became increasingly relevant, as they are now in a position to actively shape EU legislation. This situation has led some to investigate the straddled position of MEPs, who are caught between loyalty to their national party and loyalty to the EPG — their "two principals" (Hix, Simon 2002, see also: Lindberg, Björn 2008, Lindberg, Björn; Rasmussen, Anne; Warntjen, Andreas 2008, Rasmussen, Anne 2008, Mühlböck, Monika 2012). In any case, the strengthened supranational logic of EU decision-making indubitably created incentives for coordination between MEPs ad their national party.

However, European elections are still widely considered as second-order national elections (Reif, Karlheinz; Schmitt, Hermann 1980, Marsh, Michael 1998, Mair, Peter 2007). This means that, in general, people consider European elections to be less important than national elections and cast votes on national issues rather than actual European issues. As long as the EU is considered second-order, then, the actions of MEPs have little to no effect on the electoral performance of

their party. Hence, the need for coordination is strongly diminished as there is no real mutual dependence. The overall politicisation of the EU as well as its salience for a party in particular are thus important moderators for the way parties organise: where the EU is politicised, parties are likely to put more emphasis on coordination than where the EU is effectively a non-issue. Additionally, European legislation is known for its technical complexity that requires policy specialisation among MEPs. Poguntke et al. argue that this leads to a detachment of MEPs from the rest of the party, as they are recruited "by virtue of their specialist knowledge or training in European affairs", rather than their intra-party career (Poguntke, Thomas; Aylott, Nicholas; Ladrech, Robert; Luther, Kurt Richard 2007). Generally, coordination with MEPs is thus unlikely to happen on a regular basis and, if so, to be policy-technical in nature. Indeed, while they might offer party leaders and cabinets valuable expertise, the nature of the EU system means that MEPs have little to offer the party in terms of electoral performance.

The EU as a decentralised multi-level system

It seems rather obvious that the EU is a decentralised system — what with the national level being the main locus of political power — but the consequences this has for the organisation of political parties are quite undervalued. For one, following the general assumption that parties mirror the institutional structure of the EU, this means that one can at least expect fairly weak Europarties. Particularly the fact that member states rather than EU institutions still hold the taxing and spending power means that parties are unlikely to centralise at the EU level (Chhibber, Pradeep; Kollman, Ken 2004, Thorlakson, Lori 2009). That the Europarties are currently little more than loose associations of national parties is thus not very surprising. However, Thorlakson (2009) argues that, while the decentralisation of the state explains the decentralisation of the parties in it, it does not explain the way the different party branches influence each other. As an alternative explanation, he points towards party family. For example, social-democratic parties have a history of organisational centralisation, which might explain why he finds that their lower branches currently have very little influence in the federal party. This might be indicative also for the way parties interact with the EU. Although the exact ins and outs of this mechanisms need to be fleshed out in more detail, one could assume that traditional governing parties in Western-Europe, with a long tradition of European cooperation and integration, are organisationally more attuned to the EU and Europarties than other parties. In any case, party family and duration of EU membership can provide important information regarding the variation in the way parties coordinate with their Europarty.

At the same time, the literature on federalism also highlights the fact that decentralisation does not promote strong coordinative linkages. Deschouwer argues that in decentralised federations, "it is not unlikely that the parties organise separately for regional and national matters, as in Canada, or simply fall apart into separate regional parties, as in Belgium" (Deschouwer, Kris; Katz, Richard S.; Crotte, W. 2006). Applying this logic to the EU, this means that national parties are likely to organise differently regarding the EU than regarding the national level. In a way, this explains why previous research has not found evidence for organisational europeanisation — considering the decentralisation of the EU, it is indeed predictable that parties will simply park the EU in a separate structure without going through any major party reforms. Regarding intra-party coordination, this also means that parties are unlikely to install far-reaching coordination mechanisms that span the entire party, but will rather separate the EU issues from the national issues. As a consequence, the intra-party process of determining the EU position is likely to remain very much an elite affair — dominated by those who are involved in EU issues, i.e. the leadership, cabinets, policy experts and MEPs.

In summary, if one (1) defines organisational europeanisation as the way parties organise to interact with the EU and (2) assumes that parties generally mirror the institutional reality of decision-making, then one can expect parties to face rather contradictory and diverging incentives. On the one hand, the cooperative nature of the EU as well as the growing supranational logic of its decision-making process would give parties important incentives to install coordination mechanisms. On the other hand, the executive, decentralised and second-order nature of the EU essentially diminish these cooperative features and thereby the incentives for coordination. Considering these very different incentives, one should expect parties to have responded to them

in various ways and install very different types of organisation. A few tentative moderators have been highlighted above to explain this variation: the opposition/government status of a party, the politicisation of the EU, the internal cohesion/dissent on the EU issue, the party's EU position, as well as the party family it belongs to, the duration of the its country's EU membership and the number of competences transferred to the EU.

Overall, one can nonetheless also phrase some general expectations. First, given the fact that the main locus of political power in the EU remains with the member states it is highly likely that coordination will remain overall rather limited. Yes, the EU has gained significant powers over the years and this will undoubtedly have sparked a certain interest among parties, but parties are still generally inclined to focus its organisation around where power can be found, which is at the national level. Coordination with the EU level will thus not be high on a party's agenda — but it will be on it. Second, as the decentralised nature of the EU generates a separation of national and European matters, it is expected that the EU will remain an elite affair, with only a small party elite of leaders and experts making the decision on the party's EU position. Finally, executives enjoy a tremendous amount of autonomy on EU decision-making as a consequence of the EU's intergovernmentalism. In terms of coordination, the party in executive office is thus expected to hardly participate in political coordination, but rather maintain functional links with experts on EU matters and policies. In short, the europeanisation of party organisation is expected to be overall rather limited and remain an elite affair, with the executives being largely shielded from accountability. Variation between parties is expected to be explainable by the moderators mentioned above.

In the next section, this 'federal' model of party europeanisation will be tentatively tested on the Flemish political parties. In line with the indicators outlined above, the study will focus on coordination with the executive office, the MEPs and the Europarty, as well as the overall internal decision-making on EU positions. Of course, considering how this is a one-country study, not all moderators outlined above can be assessed. Moreover, this model is only a first attempt at combining two large and complex bodies of literature. The federal scholarship on political parties has so far only scarcely been applied to the EU context specifically, while the literature on europeanisation has not at all taken federalism into account. The model presented above is a first attempt to do just that. Nonetheless, it holds the promise of providing a valid and comprehensive framework for the study of the relation between the EU and national political parties. About a decade ago, Mair argued that it is increasingly unclear what it is at the EU level that does the affecting, and what it is at the national level that is affected. This model is a tentative endeavour to provide an answer to that challenge.

Testing the model: the Flemish parties

To test the model outlined above, an exploratory study was conducted among Flemish parties. A number of interviews were conducted among five political parties: Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (OVLD), Groen, Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams (CD&V) and Socialistische Partij Anders (sp.a). The parties included in the study represent a wide range of political families, as well as opposition and governing parties (Table 1). The respondents include both MEPs and party staff (for example, political secretaries and EU experts). The aim of the interviews was multifold: (1) to see whether the indicators proposed above are relevant; (2) to get a general insight into how the party organises to deal with the EU; (3) to see if our model makes any sense; and (4) to hint at possible explanations. All interviews started with an introduction to the broader research project, explaining its focus on organisational europeanisation. The respondents were asked very open questions, so as to allow them to give us a broad view on these issues and generally the europeanisation of their party. The discussions went in different directions, but throughout all interviews three main topics were discussed at length: (1) the overall organisation of the party; (2) the formal and informal mechanisms of coordination that exist between the national and the European level; and (3) the process by which party (EU) positions are formed.

Party	Europarty	EPG	Party family	Status
OVLD	Alliance of Liberal and Democracy for Europe (ALDE)	ALDE	Liberal	Government
N-VA	European Free Alliance (EFA)	European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	Conservative/ regionalist	Government
CD&V	European People's Party (EPP)	EPP	Christian-democrat	Government
sp.a	Party of European Socialists (PES)	Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	Social-democrat	Opposition
Groen	European Green Party (EGP)	Greens-EFA	Green	Opposition

Coordination with the Europarty

Europarties are not really parties. They are trans-national party federations that gather like-minded parties and serve as forums for discussion among them. In line with this general appraisal, not a single respondent indicated that the Europarty has any organisational sway over its member parties. They are not at all involved in coordinating electoral strategies for European election, in building and promoting a common political 'brand' among its member parties, or in any other involved in national parties' organisation. This weakness is particularly visible in the appreciation of the Europarty programme, which is denounced by all parties as being too vague to be of any real value as benchmarks for national programmes. The reason for this is that they need to bridge at times very diverging national positions. ALDE, for example, harbours two Dutch liberal parties — both the hard liberal VVD and the left-liberal D66. Similarly, the EPP gives shelter to Orban's Fidesz party, which is at odds with several Western-European christian-democrat parties. Bringing all these parties to accept a joint programme inevitably leads to agreeing on the lowest — and, in this case, rather low — common denominator. Nonetheless, respondents from most parties (expect for N-VA) did indicate that they check their own national programmes against the Europarty programme — just to make sure that any inconsistencies won't be held against them later on. Other than that, however, parties vary significantly in their dealings with their Europarty and it is very difficult to draw general observations. Depending on what aspect of the Europarty one looks at, parties can be grouped together differently. Most respondents indicated that Europarties are platforms to gather information on what's going on elsewhere in the EU and build good relations with other parties within their family, but the extent to which they appreciate and use this platform notably varies.

First, two extremes can be pitched against each other: on the one hand, N-VA is not all involved with its Europarty; on the other hand, CD&V has made the EPP somewhat of a priority over the past decades. For N-VA, the EFA serves as a useful phonebook when they want to connect with regionalist parties, but that is about where coordination ends. For example, the Flemish nationalists are not part of the same EPG as their fellow EFA parties. In fact, they insisted on complete autonomy from any European organisation, including the EFA and their EPG (cf. infra). By contrast, for CD&V the EPP structure plays a major role in how it deals with the EU. CD&V respondents indicated that by investing heavily in having their people on key positions in the EPP and building a network among the EPP members, CD&V is able to punch significantly above its weight at the EU level. The EPP is not merely a platform, but serves as a leverage to have a relatively small party gain vital international information, contacts and prestige. Even beyond the EPP, CD&V invests in building trans-national Christian-democratic networks — for example through the informal 'Rheinland Group', which gathers the Flemish, Dutch, German and Luxembourgish Christian-democrats. One respondent indicated that, although the EPP does not formally or even directly

have an influence on CD&V positions, the regular contacts at all party levels does generate an associative effect — meaning that despite the absence of strong formal procedures, a regular exchange of information and opinions does generate some kind of consensus at the EU level that trickles down to the national party.

OVLD and sp.a can be placed in between N-VA and CD&V. The Flemish liberals and social-democrats have somewhat similar experiences with their Europarties, respectively the PES and ALDE. Both participate in the annual conference and pre-summits organised by their Europarty. Both value their Europarty as a platform and respondents indicated that their activities and events are important ways for the party to stay in touch with its peers across Europe, and to get its hands on information that it would otherwise not be able to attain. However, both are also rather sceptical about the potential for Europarties to broker common positions among its members, as they need to bridge at times very diverging national positions. Moreover, they also indicated that their party leadership is not overly keen on spending too much time and effort on the Europarty. The main reason for this is that their party is too small to carry much weight in the Europarty hierarchy and decision-making process. As a respondent from sp.a said, being an opposition party in one half of a small country, sp.a cannot hope to have the same weight as, for instance, the German SPD or (at least until recently) the French PS. The party leadership is thus not willing to invest much in the Europarty, as they do not see consider the return on investment as adequate.

Finally, Groen has only recently got seriously involved in the EGP — itself a relatively young venture, having been founded in 2004. While Groen is generally also rather iffy about the successes of the EGP to build common positions among its member parties, respondents have nonetheless indicated that Groen is investing heavily in getting involved with the EGP. They are particularly working on the professionalisation and democratisation of their delegation to the EGP. One respondent indicated that the very fact that these delegates now are 'officially elected' representatives of the party compels the leadership to spend more time developing that position. Of course, unlike the other parties (expect N-VA) Groen does not participate in pre-summits, as the EGP does not organise them due to the fact that they have little to no members who can participate in Council meetings. This naturally lowers the power the EGP can wield and the information Groen can hope to gain from participating in the EGP. Nonetheless, respondents indicated that Groen is investing in expanding the capabilities of the EGP to build joint positions among its members, as they believe this facilitates Groen to continue its national opposition at the European level.

Overall, it is difficult to draw general lines in these observations. On the one hand, there are some differences between new and old parties. While CD&V, OVLD and sp.a can rely on Europarties that have been around for decades and have (albeit weak) established party structured, Groen and N-VA are still in the process of building these. On the other hand, government or opposition status does not seem to matter greatly in the way parties interact with their Europarty. Becoming a major government party has not resulted in more Europarty coordination for N-VA, nor has being a systematic opposition party prevented Groen from engaging with the EGP. While sp.a does indicate that becoming an opposition party has somewhat diminished the added value of engagement, from this preliminary study it would show that its interaction with the PES does not differ greatly from OVLD's interaction with ALDE. The most remarkable observation is CD&V intense cooperation with the EPP as opposed to N-VA's general indifference to the EFA. If anything is likely to explain these ways of interaction, party family does indeed seem to matter most.

Coordination with MEPs

Regarding coordination with MEPs, one can generally observe that MEPs enjoy a great degree of freedom to fulfil their function as they see fit, with little to no steering from the party leadership. As for the formal processes of coordination, a common feature among all parties is that MEPs have a seat in the parties' executive committees. Most respondents indicate that the EU is a fixed topic on the committees' agenda, and MEP(s) report on what is going on in the EP. While in most parties membership is granted *ex officio*, in OVLD members need to be elected — meaning that if no MEP is elected, no one reports on the EPG's activities. N-VA also requires all of its parliamentarians to submit regular activity reports. No other party does this, although they all do have some kind of

international secretary. Yet only with Groen and sp.a does this secretary have the explicit task of following up on the work of MEPs. All parties included in the study also have some kind of internal working group in EU issues, yet the function of these working groups varies significantly (cf. infra) and do little in terms of cross-level coordination. Overall, these formal feedback requirements provide a steady stream of information from the European to the national level. However, this is a one-way stream, as the party does not in turn provide steering or guidance to its MEPs. For example, vote instructions simple do not occur for MEPs. There is also no formal mechanism for MEPs to coordinate with other actors within the party, as they are free to interact with the party on the ground, the NPG or ministers as they see fit.

This brings us to the informal mechanisms of coordination. These seem largely to depend on to the personal inclination of the MEP or specific political circumstances. Informal coordination with the NPG does not happen in any systematic way, and ministerial cabinets — one of the main coordinative actors nonetheless — only seek after MEPs for their expertise. Similarly, whether or not an MEPs connects with the party on the ground is almost entirely up to the goodwill or desire of the MEP in question. However, only Groen seems to systematically invest in generating a broader interaction between national party actors (including members) and the EU level. Similar initiatives exist in other parties, notably CD&V and sp.a, but these are entirely based on the drive of an individual MEP rather than carried by the party as a whole. Overall, beyond formal feedback requirements, coordination with MEPs thus remains rather limited. While Groen and sp.a provide some kind of steering in the form of their international secretary, generally the national leadership simply expects MEPs to follow the party line but leave them to do their thing in the EP largely autonomously. In fact, respondents indicate almost unanimously that the only moment coordination with MEPs happens is either when an issue is highly politicised or sensitive nationally, or ex-post when an MEP did a stupid.

Nonetheless, respondents have given rather different reasons for why their MEPs are given such a rich amount of autonomy. The respondents from Groen highlighted that their party has an ambiguous relationship with — not all members are equivocally fans of free trade or austerity — and so the leadership tends to downplay the issue, leaving it EU specialists to deal with it. Moreover, they also said that the vast amount of experience and expertise of Groen's one MEP, Bart Staes, enables him to virtually determine the party's EU agenda all by himself. Respondents from OVLD, by contrast, have indicated that the complete lack of differing views on the EU within the party, make coordination on the EU rather redundant. It was said that both the membership and leadership of the party is so overwhelmingly 'pro-EU' that investing in coordination is not considered worth the effort. Also sp.a and CD&V consider coordination not worth the investment, but from a different angle: EU issues are simply not salient enough to be electorally decisive, so coordination occurs only when this becomes the case. Finally, N-VA is — again — a rather peculiar case. Following the massive electoral victory in 2014, they not only became part of the Belgian federal government, but also saw their number of MEPs quadruple. By consequence, nearly all EU experts within the party were promoted to MEP. Since they were not replaced nationally, they are now the party's main (if not only) source of EU expertise. This also creates the rather unique situation that N-VA's current MEPs execute the programme they themselves wrote. This obviously gives the MEPs great authority on all EU matters and rather far-reaching autonomy from the party leadership.

Overall, one can thus say that MEPs, for a variety of reasons, enjoy great autonomy and that coordination is reduced to a limited form of formal reporting to the national leadership and, when in government, the occasional providing of expertise to executives. Any type of coordination that goes beyond this depends on the politicisation of the issue at hand or on the actions of the MEP in question — either he/she did something the party did not like, or he/she might be proactive in seeking to connect with others in the party. In any case, while the minimal coordination with MEPs is common among all Flemish parties, they vary considerably in the reasons why this is so. While the politicisation of a particular issue is certainly of great importance, also the internal cohesion/ dissent over the EU, as well as the possession of expertise on EU matters matter. In short, the party keeps half an eye on what is going on in the EP, but provides active steering only when

absolutely necessary. Only Groen and sp.a have a specific member of staff dedicated to keeping an eye on what their EPG is doing.

However, one could to a certain extent argue that MEPs are simply being incorporated in the existing party organisation. Even in Belgium, a known particracy, party leadership does not discuss its MPs activities beyond general reporting, unless it is of major electoral importance for the party. They leave the daily coordination and steering to the NPG leadership. To a certain extent, they do the same with MEPs. While respondents do indicate that the number of interactions with the EPG is very meagre when compared to interactions with the NPG, the organisation structuring these interactions seem to be highly similar. The main difference, however, is that the NPG leadership is part of the national party (and often its general leadership), while the EPG leadership more often than not has nothing to do with the national party. By applying the same formal organisation structure to its MEPs as to its MPs, national parties have thus largely outsourced the coordination of its MEPs to an extra-party EPG leadership, without installing compensatory informal coordination mechanisms. This is most clearly explicated by one respondent from OVLD, who said that the EP is just an additional parliamentary layer that was simply plugged into the existing formal party structures without fundamentally altering them. Although most parties thus apply some kind of business as usual logic to their MEPs, this has resulted in a separation of national and European party dynamics. Indeed, by organising in largely the same way, parties, paradoxically, created a distance between themselves and their agents in the EP.

Coordination with executives

When it comes to coordination with members of the national executive, it is difficult to separate formal from informal processes. Naturally, most ministers are also party of the party leadership and keep an eye on what's going on within the different political arena's. However, when it comes to their actions at the EU level, they are first and foremost representatives of the national governments, rather than their respective party. Ministers and their cabinets prepare the position of the Belgian government — which is to be represented in the Council — in line with their party's objectives, but once this position is set they take off the partisan hat and put on the government hat. This means that the (formal) coordination with their party largely ends to moment the government position is set. Nonetheless, respondents indicate that their ministers do report to their national party leadership about the debates in the Council during committee meetings. It is highly dubitable whether they will actually report on the details of negotiations and the deals they broker to anyone other than their executive peers and (elite) party leadership. Still, respondent from both OVLD and N-VA report that ministerial cabinets are the most active liaisons between governance levels — on the one hand gathering expertise from the EU level and on the other hand disseminating this information to other branches within the party. Yet this coordination would seem very much focused on an exchange of technical information rather than on forming a coherent position across governance levels. Ministers do not really have to worry about not getting support from their parliamentary majority as long as they have the support of the government — for that reason, respondent indicate, ministers and cabinets are more interested in the expertise M(E)Ps can offer them rather than on coordinating a political position. In line with the results found by Mühlböck (2012), although there is an almost daily exchange of information with cabinets, ministers seem to care very little about coordinating positions with their M(E)Ps and act rather autonomously from their party once the government position is set. However, coordination with the executive remains largely a black box that needs further illumination.

Internal decision-making

The final aspect of the empirical analysis concerns the internal decision-making on the EU position of the party and the people involved in this process. In general, respondents indicate that the EU position of the party is prepared in working groups before being judged by the party leadership and finally approved at the party congress. While all parties generally maintain this formal way of reaching a position, the people who participate in the preparatory working groups and the extent to which either the leadership or the congress actually discuss this position tend to vary.

All Flemish parties have a working group dedicated to European (and international) affairs, which brings together MEPs, EU experts, *cabinetards* and, to a lesser extent, party members to discuss

the EU position of the party. However, the interviews indicate that while the EU workings of N-VA, OVLD and sp.a tend to be dominated by party elites, those of CD&V and Groen are more conductive to a broader input from party members. Notably, Groen goes further than any other party in promoting a broad debate on EU issues within the party. Its EU working group developed a "EU toolkit" — a playbook for organising thematic EU info session for local party branches. The aim of these info sessions is to increase the awareness of party members concerning the EU, how it works and what it does. However, in none of the Flemish parties are the reports of these working groups binding and the party leadership is free to disregard its conclusions entirely. Nonetheless, respondents indicate that the leadership is only vaguely aware of the debates that take place in these working groups, regardless of who participates in them, and generally accepts the conclusions that result from them.

Most respondents stress, however, that this lack of participation from the leadership is not because it does not care, but because the EU does not *demand* their attention in the same way national issues do and, as such, is not given any. This general lack of participation of the party leadership in debates over the EU is largely due to the fact that dealing with the EU is simple not electorally relevant, and in some cases also risks creating unnecessary schisms within the party. As one respondent said, "all politics are local" and the leadership's aim is to win elections, which means focusing on those issues on which the party can score points and gain votes. The EU, so the respondent said, is not an attractive vote-gainer mainly due to an overall lack of media attention. National politics score better, so naturally get more attention within the party and from the leadership than European politics. This overall low saliency also result in generally low levels of knowledge among party members and limited discussion about the EU at party congresses.

Nonetheless, throughout the interviews to important features were highlighted. On the one hand, both N-VA, who gained executive office, and sp.a, who lost executive office, indicated a shift in intra-party debate on the EU. In both cases, being in office gives rise to more interest and attention to European issues. It is likely that being able to participate in high-level Council meetings not only more directly confronts the leadership with the EU, but also sparks interest among party members. On the other hand, respondents also indicated that the debate on European affairs within the party is highly dependent on the amount of attention (inter)national media pay to it. The constant news about migration, the Greek debt crisis, Brexit and foreign elections such as in France and the Netherlands, essentially force the party to take a stand on EU-related issues. One respondent said that the many crises the EU is currently facing and the increase in media reports on European issues raise the need for public profiling: parties cannot *not* react to these issues and have to find a way to connect their EU position with their broader party image. As a result, debate on European affairs become more relevant for the party leadership and interesting for party members.

On average, however, the EU position of a party is determined by those people who are either bound to it professionally or those who have a very strong personal interest in it. The heavyweights in these debates are mostly MEPs and EU experts, who are generally able to determine the agenda and direction of the debate. The leadership generally only participates on issues with national electoral significance, while party members altogether show little interest in European affairs. Internal decision-making on the party's EU position does seem to remain largely an elite affair, with only Groen and CD&V actively promoting a broader debate within the party. Again, however, this promotion is driven by proactive MEPs and enjoy only lukewarm support from the party leadership.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to reconsider the concept of organisational party europeanisation. It was argued that the focus of past studies on europeanisation as a process, which showed that parties do not *change* in response to the EU, neglects the fact that parties do in one way or another organise to interact with the EU governance level. Rather than focusing on change, however, this paper wanted to focus on how parties organise their interaction with the EU. In doing so, we have connected two great bodies of literature, europeanisation and federalism, to develop a 'federal' model of party europeanisation. The main assumption that drives this model is that parties will

mirror their own organisation to the way the state in which they operate is institutionally structured. This model is centred around the understanding of the EU as a decentralised multi-level system that incorporates both intergovernmental and supranational dynamics. Building on these institutional features of the EU, the model claims that the europeanisation of party organisation is expected to be overall rather limited and remain an elite affair, whereby European and national issue remain largely separated and the executives are shielded from political accountability. Additionally, based in this understanding of europeanisation, four indicators to measure it were presented: coordination with the Europarty, coordination with MEPs, coordination with ministers (regarding their activities in the Council), and the intra-party decision-making process on the party's EU position. This model was then tested on the Flemish political parties:

- Regarding coordination with the Europarty, parties varied significantly and no clear-cut institutional cleavages could be discerned. While N-VA did largely ignored the EFA, CD&V was greatly invested in the EPP, Groen endeavoured to professionalise the EFA, and both sp.a and OVLD had rather mixed feelings regarding, respectively, the PES and ALDE. Differences between parties might partly be explained pitched traditional versus new political parties, but, as suggested by the literature, more research should be devoted to the role party family plays in this interaction.

- Regarding coordination with MEPs, one can say that MEPs, for a variety of reasons, enjoy great autonomy and that coordination is reduced to a limited form of formal reporting to the national leadership and, when in government, the occasional provision of expertise to executives. Any type of coordination that goes beyond this depends on the politicisation of the issue at hand or on the actions of the MEP in question — either he/she did something the party did not like, or he/she might be proactive in seeking to connect with others in the party. It may be argued, however, that this is not that different from how national MPs are treated. In a way, by applying the same organisational logic to MEPs as to MPs, parties have effectively outsourced the daily coordination of their MEPs to an extra-party EPG leadership.

- Regarding coordination with executives, the study made clear that this is still largely a black box. It would seem that formal coordination with the party *about what ministers do in the Council* hardly exists at all. Coordination with the party takes place during the definition of the government's position, but once this is set ministers represent the government rather than the party in the Council. Nonetheless, informally there seems to be more at work. Ministerial cabinets are in daily contact with all branches of the party and are said to play a pivotal role in the dissemination of information among them. Whether we can discern any regularities in these informal practices is still uncertain, however, and will need to be addressed more in detail in future research.

- Regarding the intra-party decision-making process on the party's EU position, most parties follow the same formal pattern: first it is prepared in a working group, then assessed by the leadership and finally presented and voted on at a party congress. However, while Groen and CD&V try to open up these working groups to allow a broad debate, in most other parties these workings groups are dominated by EU specialists. Moreover, the leadership generally only show lukewarm support for these initiatives and do not actively participate in the debate. Although in the case of Groen and OVLD this has to with, respectively, the dissent/cohesion over the EU within the party, mostly the EU simply does not have sufficient electoral value and media coverage to attract attention from the leadership — or the party membership at large.

What do these results say about the validity of our 'federal' model? Generally, it would seem that the general assumption, that parties will mirror the EU, holds. While there certainly is a certain degree of coordination, parties, similar to the EU, are split along two institutional cleavages.

- On the one hand, one can observe a certain 'vertical' split between the European and national level. Institutionally, the EU is strongly decentralised — or, put differently, vital powers are located at the national level — while the second-order nature of the EU further enhances the separation of the two governance levels. Although the same organisational logic is applied to

national and European politics, the two nonetheless remain organisationally separated and coordination mechanisms remain limited. This shows clearly in the fact that most respondents stressed the importance of public and/or media attention for the EU in order for it to be discussed by the party nationally. In other words, what parties do at the national level and what they do at the European level only connect when an issue is big and important enough to bridge the gap. As such, the decentralisation and second-order nature of the EU seem to create a rift within parties.

- On the other hand, one can also observe a 'horizontal' split between intergovernmental and supranational dynamics. As the EU shows both intergovernmental and supranational features, so too can one observe differences in the way parties organise regarding either type of institution. Intergovernmental relations, be it in the Council or through Europarty pre-summits, are highly elite affairs. Supranational politics in the EP or Europarty conferences, however, draw much less attention from the party leadership and is left to EU specialists. This is also clearly shows in the observation that national and European *political* arenas seem to be largely separated, while the *policy* arenas seem well connected. While respondents indicated that exchange of policy-technical information happens on a daily basis, coordination regarding the political side of European decision-making is virtually non-existent. Similar to the intergovernmental/supranational split in the EU, parties thus organise differently when interaction within each system.

The general assumption of the model thus seems to hold. Still, there remain some important shortcomings. As already mentioned above, the model needs to be further elaborated in order to better assess the impact of party family on party europeanisation as well as the black box that executive coordination currently still is. Additionally, further research needs to be done on what this actually means for the party as an organisation as well as for the EU as a governance level. Although this is only an exploratory study, this paper puts forward two general conclusions.

For one, as far as the Flemish parties go, they interact with the EU is if it were an *issue*, but hardly as a *polity*. Taking into account the conclusions that coordination seems to occur on a technical but not a political level, an image emerges of the EU as a governance level that matters only for hammering out the technicalities of particular policies, but hardly as a level where national parties participate in a political debate on the direction of those policies. The party leadership is barely if at all interested in participating in political debates at EU level, leaving that mostly to its EPG. As such, party leaderships treat the EU as they would any other topical political issue, meaning it is debated when it is important — much as they would debate mobility issues when they become important — but is shoved from the debate once another issue becomes more important. That is not to say that there is no political debate at the EU level about the policies it pursues, only that national parties are barely involved in this debate and are not interested in getting involved. The EU, therefore, is not considered by national parties as a genuine political level of governance.

Although this situation might have some shrug and say "*et alors*", considering the important function of parties as a bridge between citizens and policies, and additionally the impact the decisions made at the EU level have on our daily lives, it is in fact a rather disturbing image. Imagine a Belgium where the Flemish parties would only discuss policies made at the federal level in terms of their technical implications, without having an ardent political debate about them at the both the Flemish and federal levels — despite the fact, indeed, that they participate in the process of making those policies at all levels. Such a situation would raise quite some eyebrows, yet it is exactly the image that our pilot study sketches when it comes to the EU. Still, one could question whether the national level and the European level are so easily comparable. EU policy-making is in many, both procedural and substantive ways very different from the national level(s). The debate on whether parties *should* pay more attention to the EU links strongly to its democratic deficit and is of tremendous importance, and therefore needs to be discussed in a more systematic way in future research.

Furthermore, our results would support the findings of Poguntke et al. (2007) that the process of European integration has generated a disaggregation of the party in public office, leading to a separation between the parliamentary party and the party in executive office. Beyond that,

however, this study would also support Luther's (2008) argument that parties are organised stratarchically when dealing with the EU. The dual rift we have observed within parties would add to the argument of stratarchy that there co-exist several structures within a singly party's organisation. As explained above, while a specific national structure co-exists with a European structure, the latter is also characterised by co-existing intergovernmental and supranational structures. Echoing also Filippov et al. (2004), this paper would thus further argue for dispensing the notion of parties as unitary actors. Indeed, "although parties are sometimes well-organised hierarchical entities with a definitive leadership, a coherent political agenda, and tangible resources, more often than not they are none of these things" (Filippov, Mikhael; Ordeshook, P. C.; Shvetsova, O. 2004). However, one could equally turn around this argument and question the compatibility of traditional party organisations (hierarchical, coherent) with the multi-level context in which they operate today. Indeed, beyond confirming the existing analysis that the EU is first and foremost an elite executive and expert undertaking, this also puts to question to compatibility of the traditional way in which parties are organised with building a supranational (or, as some would have it, post-national) democracy. Further research should not only assess the weakening grip parties have on policies, but also the shift away from parties as the spills of democracy.

As such, a deeper understanding of the way in which parties organise for Europe allows us not only to further understand the nature and evolution of the political party as an organisation, but also touches upon the fundamental discussion regarding the democratic deficit of the EU and offers important perspectives on how to deal with it. European integration constitutes a challenge that goes to the very heart of a political party, as it significantly constraints the freedom of national party-politicians on both the left and the right to conduct the policies they want. Parties can, for example, "no longer promise to protect national champions from competition (as this would breach EU competition rules) … [or] promise to remove social protections or costs for small businesses (as this would go against EU social regulations)" (Hix, Simon 2008). Regardless, however, the results of the pilot study make clear that the EU is far from becoming a genuine political level of governance, as parties are still mainly organised to discuss political issues at the national level rather than participate in discussion at the European level. National parties, despite their crisis and decline in the past decades, are nonetheless still the main bridge between citizens and policies. Yet this bridge function is not at all reflected in the way parties organise vis-à-vis the EU: in most parties EU decisions are made by a handful of party elites with only feeble accountability vis-à-vis the rest of the party. To further substantiate this claim and also provide some ideas how to move forward from this situation, however, a more in-depth study of the europeanisation of national party organisation is required.

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