

**Who's fit for Europe? The Euro-fitness of Belgian regional parliaments  
and the implications for democratic participation**

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## **Who's fit for Europe? The Euro-fitness of Belgian regional parliaments and the implications for democratic participation**

*"We have more in common and more cooperation with the Scottish parliament than with the one down the street" (Informant from a Belgian regional parliament)*

With an increasing proliferation of regional bodies in Europe, the third level of Multi-Level Governance, that of sub-national entities is the focus of growing attention (Jeffery 1997, Keating 1998, Loughlin et al 1999, Hooghe and Marks 2001, Benz 2000, Benz and Eberlein 1998, 1999). Their role in applying, influencing and initiating European policy making is in evolution, although the real outcome and impact is perhaps debatable (Jeffreys, 2000), as is the extent to which being in the European Union somehow Europeanizes them (Olsen 2002). There are a number of normative reasons for why sub-national voices should have a greater play or say in European Union policy making and governance. There may also be an argument to be made in terms of efficiency: the better informed and participative regional law makers and administrative officials are in European Union affairs, the better policy can be adapted and implemented with regard to local conditions and sensitivities. The particular focus here is on the potential for the most obvious interface between the citizen and sub-national government: the democratically elected bodies, such as regional parliaments. To what extent can they provide a conduit for citizen interest and eventually also an identity of participation in the wider European Union from the lowest most direct level? To what extent are regional parliaments engaging in European debate and communicating this to their citizens? This paper focuses on 5 regional parliaments in Belgium and their fitness for Europe. Looking at the Belgian case it would seem that competencies and size are the most predictive for European fitness. However, in a larger international comparison, this may not actually be the case: vision and mission of members of parliament can be quite important in the way regional parliaments fill a European role and engage their citizens—e.g; Scotland (Bort 2002, Sloat 2001, Wright 1998), Germany (Liebert and Mueller forthcoming) or Catalonia (Morata et al forthcoming). Size and constitutional footing are only part of the explanation for the development or lack of development of a European profile.

While regional executives and administrations have been the focus of much research activity around the role of regions in Europe given their direct implication in the accession to and dispersion of the Structural funds, and there is a substantial literature on the role of the structural funds in the process of regionalization (Bache (1999) LeGalès and Lequesne 1997, Magone forthcoming), there has been relatively little attention given to the role of regional parliaments. This in part has an institutional explanation. Activity formally related to the EU in the Council of Ministers is led by executives and supported by administrators, while the elected bodies whether national or regional have no formal place in the decision making process. Also another explanation is that up until the 1990's there were not so many strong constitutional and legislative regions—but as Hooghe and Marks (2001) outline, there has been a strengthening of regional powers in the majority of the 15 member states. Newly created parliaments are attempting to flex their muscles so that we see an innovative dynamic in regional parliaments. This is reflected in the

organizational activity of the more powerful in transnational in associations. Finally, given the general dominance of administration and government in legislative initiation and policy making (Aberbach, Putman and Rockman, 1981, Laumann and Knokke) in any analysis of impact, the regional parliament is doomed to be playing a minor role.

Nonetheless, for the citizen, the parliamentarian is the logical link between his or her problem and a solution- and the parliamentarian is also a logical carrier and promoter of new sorts of identity. As the REGLEG argues (see web-site and position paper to EU convention of November 2002), more than half the citizens of Europe live in a region with legislative competencies, which is their first port of call with a political issue. There are some 78 legislative regions in Europe by latest count (see table in appendix). And while many of them are fledgling, or with only limited authority, they provide a new surface for citizen demands close to home. Further, there is some evidence that in coping with the new demands that European policies and Europeanisation pose, regional parliaments sometimes are forced to develop new approaches or innovate. Thus a number of arguments can be made for an investigation of the potential of regional parliaments in European integration to promote a more efficient and legitimate governance. In a report for the Flemish government, Vos and Boucké (2001) provide a thorough review of the main arguments to be found in the political science literature on what the added value of regional representation is in efficient management and in terms of democracy in the European Union.

The literature suggests to them that the regional level can be important in:

1. Protecting the principle of subsidiarity and counterbalancing centralist tendencies
2. Correctly and effectively implementing EU legislation
3. Governing more efficiently due to detailed knowledge of terrain and publics
4. Protecting cultural diversity, given that some regions originate in national or linguistic identity issues
5. Ensuring a favorable socio-economic climate
6. Stimulating modern forms of government
7. Fostering democracy

As the authors admit, propositions 1, 6 and 7 are closely related. They are also expressing a value belief about the potential form of the future Europe: 'The quality of the governance perhaps increases if all involved...are taken along together in the decision-making cycle' (2001:25). Decisions should occur close to those most likely to be affected and taking into account their preferences and needs. To do this, new means must be utilized maximally. If an effort is made to involve the affected in decision-making, democracy should be served.

The arguments of efficiency and democracy are not only to be found in the political science literature, but also used by the growing number of associations particularly concerned with the interests of various regions. Not only has there been a growth of governmental institutions at the sub-national level, but also these sub national organizations have resuscitated trans-national organizations with the purpose of lobbying the European Union for a bigger voice among other things. Table 2 demonstrates that many of these organizations were founded very recently. In many of their statements too, the normative democracy and efficiency arguments are to be found. For example in a

collective communication to the Working Group on Subsidiarity of the European Convention the AER, AEBR, CEMR, CPMR and Eurocities wrote:

*'we draw attention to the fact that some two-thirds of European legislation and programmes is implemented at local or regional level across Europe, and that, on this account, local and regional authorities are full fledged stakeholders in the European legislative system. Moreover, in a Europe of over 450 million inhabitants, the principle of proximity will be of ever-greater importance, if the union is not to be seen as too distant by our citizens'<sup>1</sup>*

To summarize, for students of regional politics, politicians and citizens the issue of the European capacity of regional bodies is important. Being capable of dealing with Europe is vital as Regions convert the European rules, are important partners and players in multi level governance, and answer to issues of democracy in areas where there is a nation of nationalities such as Spain, or Belgium or even the UK. Finally, the pressures of European integration can lead to innovation in governance practices. A possible hypothesis is that the more capacities and resources that a European regional parliament has in relation to European policies, the more Euro-fit it is, the more able it will be to further innovate. (Morata et al 2001, Liebert et al 2001).

### **Eurofitness for parliaments??**

Although European voice is a hotly demanded commodity for the organized regions and their spokesmen, it is not clear that this desire reaches down to the grassroots. To what extent are regional bodies ready and capable, or readying themselves to be *capable to participate and influence in European Union affairs?* In the late 1990's Alexander Heichlinger launched the idea of Eurofitness referring to the ability of regional and local administrations to 'stand in pole position in the contest to secure their locational advantage in Europe' (1998:1). The more Euro-fit an administration the better it could profit from the opportunities of European integration while avoiding extra costs that might be incurred by low information, or inappropriate measures that need to be translated to the local conditions. Eurofitness is relevant beyond the Europeanizing public administration. Logically in a democratic polity, these administrations are following direction from a political entity, in many cases a regional parliament, and thus parliaments too need to be competent to deal with Europe. Eurofitness can enhance legitimacy with the citizens. Having a good score card with Europe pays off in grants and support and also in affecting forthcoming measures.

Heichlinger's Eurofitness can be translated into several competencies:

1. The ability to apply correctly and translate appropriately to the situation relevant European directives and law
- 2 The ability to intercept signals from Europe of new decisions that are on their way to becoming, and further to influence them to better suit the local conditions

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<sup>1</sup> Communicaton from the European Associations representing Local and Regional Authorities to the members of the European Convention submitted on behalf of AER, AEBR, CEMR, CPMR and Eurocities: Debatre on the report of the Working Group on subsidiarity Plenary session 3-4 October 2002 to be found at [www.calre.net](http://www.calre.net) or at the European Forum Convention site.

3 The capacity to initiate policy suggestions relevant to own interests and to further regional causes using the European architecture

Ultimately Eurofitness also includes the ability to bring regionally identified citizenry into a multi level citizenship—just as Spain is filled with dual nationals (Spanish and Catalan) so must Europe perhaps best be filled with triple national identities. Euro fit democratic organs closest to the citizen could be effective in heightening a sense of belonging or loyalty (any Europe considering for example war would need a much firmer commitment from its citizens than is presently available).

### *Criteria*

To make some evaluation of the extent to which a regional parliament is Eurofit, we need an estimation of the degree to which parliaments can do the following:

- A Euro- fit parliament should be able to appropriately apply European directives,
- have some influence on the content of directives
- and perhaps at the Olympic level of fitness, also be capable of initiating new initiative.

Although there is a substantial research specialization in national parliaments (Norton 1994, Döring 1995, Wessels) and international bodies devoted to comparison (Interparliamentary Union), the comparative study of regional politic and parliaments is still in an embryonic phase (Down 1997, DeWinter and Türsan 1998). It is indicative that much of the available data collection comes from or is funded by the administrations of the more ambitious parliaments themselves.(see e.g. Denayer et.al. 2001, De Vos and Boucké 2001 ). These independent research efforts already support the hypothesis that the European process is leading to Europeanization through the sharing of good practices and ultimately to governmental innovation. Parliaments look to their European neighbors for good practices in parliamentary business as they face similar challenges.

However these comparative studies have been primarily devoted to the business of parliament itself, and much less to their ability to deal with the European challenge. The present project aims to compare parliaments on the following aspects<sup>2</sup> of Euro-fitness

1. *European competencies*: the kinds of European issues for which there is competency and the degree of institutional structures (responsible commissions, and supporting staff), the level of European focused activities and interests in plenary sessions and in committees and the resources provided
2. *Symbolic integration of European concerns and face towards the public* Relations to citizens and communication and extent to which European issues are taken up in the normal communications stream - an e-interface for regions?

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<sup>2</sup> The aspects of Eurofitness have been developed within the framework of the project Regional Governments and Good Governance in the European Union, coordinated by U. Liebert, University of Bremen and financed by the European Union 5<sup>th</sup> Framework.

3. *Networks in Europe*: extent to which the parliament participates in various regional and European wide relations with other parliaments and actors
4. *Commitment to higher representation and participation in a future Europe* Formal resolutions in support of initiatives for more representation in European decision making as parliaments

The information presented here is a result of interviews with civil servants<sup>3</sup> in the 5 regional parliaments in Belgium plus a consultation of their web sites during September and February 2003.

### **The Belgian case**

For a small country, Belgium has a lot of parliaments. With two national chambers (Senate and House of Representatives) and 5 sub national bodies (Council of the German German-speaking Community, Council of French speaking community, Parliament of Flanders, Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region, and Parliament of Walloon) one country provides a rich ground for comparative work (see Dewachter 2001, Deschouwer, L. De Winter, etc.) All of these parliaments are in constitutional regions.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Belgium there is a dramatic difference in the extent to which the various regional government executives (appointed by parliaments) and regional parliaments chose to exploit and expose connections with the European level. An easy explanation is that the regions pursue the European path when there are clear gains to be made in terms of internal agendas. For Flanders, which has the most powerful of the regional parliaments/governments in Belgium, the European Union level is clearly seen as a useful one for advancing its political goals as against the federal state (Keating and Hooghe 1996) as well as enhancing its international prestige. The Francophone Community, on the other hand, seems to find its window for prestige and contacts through the French language regional parliamentary association which it promotes on the top page of its website (Assemblée Parlementaire de la Francophonie Région Europe). The Walloon regional parliament closely collaborates with the French Community parliament in its external relations, as it includes in its 75-seat membership 19 members who also sit in the French Community Parliament. In 1998 the region signed an agreement for close collaboration between the administrative arms of the government concerned with international affairs..

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<sup>3</sup> Three of the informants had worked with their respective parliament for more than 10 years, sometimes from the inception, while the others were responsible for international affairs and public relations.

<sup>4</sup> The regions with an institutional base founded in (constitutional) law, including a legislative assembly, more than administrative powers and a degree of financial autonomy take on a special role in the multitude of third level governmental organs. Austria, Germany, Belgium and Spain with their federal structures, and to a lesser extent Italy, the UK, and even France have such structures. CALRE WRITE OUT, discussed in the paper is a particular organization originating in part in the frustration of these powerful regions to get their voice heard in policy making, when in fact it is they that must implement much European policy in their areas of competency.

## **The structure of regional and cultural parliamentary government in Belgium**

Professors of law often use the question 'how many parliaments does Belgium have?' as a trick question (Vuye forthcoming). That the Belgian state has a complicated form of government is an understatement. From 1970-2001 five different reforms of the state structure produced a federal state. The French-speaking community was interested in territorial authority (economic and social policy in their physical region), the Flemish were interested in cultural community authority. These two aspects do not overlap entirely physically, as the city and region of Brussels as well as two other areas (Voeren and Commins) are strongly linguistically mixed while being located in a uni-lingual territory.

All three cultural/linguistic communities have their own parliament and their own government (organized in the 1970's in cultural parliaments using representatives from the respective language groups in the national parliaments) Equally, all three territorial regions have their own parliament and their own government. However, in 1980 Flanders unified the competencies of culture and region in one parliament, so that there is one authority for the territorial matters of Flanders and the Flemish (Dutch speaking) population living in Brussels and Flanders. Bi-lingual Brussels itself posed a number of problems in this compromise solution. Located in Flemish territory, but predominantly French speaking and with a mission as a European capital and substantial foreign population, finding a governmental solution for Brussels took considerable time. The parliament for the capital region with responsibility primarily for the territorial matters of the Capital region was founded first in 1989. The first directly elected regional parliaments were instated in 1995, and second elections were held in 1999. The full term of the regional legislator is 5 years.

The parliaments legislate, passing decrees governing their area and population in their various areas of competence which can include: culture, language use, matters relating to the person, education, employment, economy and energy, physical planning, environment and water protection, public works and transport, city and local government, and science and research policy. Some of these competencies have some degree of overlap with responsibilities at the federal level, and a number of intergovernmental commissions have sprung up to coordinate these issues. In 2001 the competencies were further expanded to include of fiscal autonomy for several of the parliaments. The regions were given complete control over 12 different tax sources as well as the right, within federal controlled limitations, to grant taxation reduction or increases related to subject matter where they have competence. The competency over agriculture, foreign trade and development aid was also moved to the regions, and is so recent that it is not to be found even on the Flemish ministerial portfolios.

**TABLE 1: EUROPEAN RESPONSIBILITIES OF BELGIAN REGIONAL PARLIAMENTS**

| ASPECT   | FLEMISH PARLIAMENT                                    | WALLOON PARLIAMENT                            | BREUSSELS PARLIAMENT OF THE CAPITAL REGION   | PARLIAMENT OF THE FRENCH COMMUNITY                              | COUNCIL OF THE GERMAN-SPEAKING COMMUNITY                           |
|--|---|---|--|---|--|
| SIZE   | 124 (118 + 6)   | 75  | 75 (64 F/11 NL)  | 94 (75 + 19)  | 25   |
| GOVERNMENT   | PES/EDLR/GREEN  |   |  |   |  |
| FOUNDATION   | 1980  | 1980  | 1989   | 1970  | 1973   |
| DIRECT ELECTION                                    | 1995  | 1995  | 1995   | 1995  | 1995   |
| RESPONSIBLE MINISTER FOR EUROPE                    | DEWAELE MINISTER PRESIDENT                            | VAN CAUWENBERGHE MINISTER PRESIDENT           | DE DONNEA MINISTER PRESIDENT   | HASQUIN MINISTER PRESIDENT                                      | LAMBERTZ MINISTER PRESIDENT  |
| COMMISSION DEALING WITH EUROPEAN AFFAIRS           | COMMITTEE FOR FOREIGN AND EUROPEAN AFFAIRS            | COMMITTEE ON EXTERNAL RELATIONS               | COMMITTEE 1 ON FOR FINANCE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, BUDGET, PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND GENERAL ISSUES | COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND EUROPEAN QUESTIONS     | COMMITTEE 1 ON GENERAL POLITICS, PETITION, FINANCE AND COOPERATION |
| CHAIR  | LUC VAN DEN BRANDE (FORMER M-PRESIDENT <sup>o</sup> ) | PAUL FICHEROULLE                              | PRESIDENT OF PARLIAMENT  | JEAN FRANCOIS ISTASSE   | PRESIDENT OF PARLIAMENT ALFRED EVERS                               |
| SUB COMMISSION FOR EUROPE                          | NO  | YES ADVISORY MET 4 TIMES SINCE START 1999     | YES BUT INACTIVE   | YES NEW   | NO   |
| DEBATES ON EUROPEAN AFFAIRS                        | TREATY RATIFICATIONS AND SEVERAL OTHER OCCASSIONS     | TREATY RATIFICATION                           | TREATY RATIFICATION  | TREATY RATIFICATION   | ONLY TREATY RATIFICATION   |
| PARLIAMENT MEMBER IN CoR (12 BELGIAN FULL MEMBERS) | YES 1 AND 4 ALTERNATES                                | 2 FULL MEMBER (ALSO MEMBER OF PFC) 1ALTERNATE | NO ALL MINISTERS   | 1 FULL MEMBER (ALSO DEPUTY IN WALLOON PARLIAMENT <sup>o</sup> ) | NO ALL MINISTERS   |
| WEB SITE LANGUAGES                                 | NL, EN, F, D, ESP                                     | F   | F, NL, D, EN   | F   | D  |



## **European Competencies, activities and interests**

### *The international responsibilities and opportunities for regional parliaments in Belgium*

The regional parliaments examined here all have the constitutionally protected power (1993) to develop international relations policies and conclude international agreements in their areas of competence. It is primarily around treaty ratification that the parliaments investigated claim to deal with European issues. This occurs at the end of the process, so that parliaments are not engaged proactively in this process. European questions are seldom debated in plenary except as directly relevant to the ratification of treaties such as the Treaty of Maastricht, or Amsterdam. The largest parliament, in Flanders, claims to have debated specifically European issues only three or four times in the years of its existence. The frequency has not grown either. The other parliaments report that Europe in specific is only addressed in plenary sessions in direct relationship to treaty ratification.

The civil servants interviewed could unanimously envision a greater role for their parliaments on European questions. The Flemish respondent noted the frustration that parliamentarians feel in debate around legislative initiatives that are a result of changes in European directives or new levels of compliance in environmental affairs. Yet even though it is clear that European issues do come on to the agenda through the back door of legislative initiatives that have to be checked for compliance, interviewees did not see this as an indication of a growing engagement in European affairs on the part of parliamentarians. This in part comes from tradition, according to two of the respondents. The regional parliaments deal with local affairs, while international affairs are the business of the national parliaments.

### *Organization of European interests: executive domination*

Yet in fact, regions do have considerable responsibility; but in Belgium the executive and the administrative elite have been successful in monopolizing European issues (Dierckx et al) . The informant from the Walloon parliament emphasized that the regional ministers are in fact elected by the Parliament and accountable to them, so that the parliament has the power to control the work of the executive by questions, although this seldom occurs.

All the regions have one department or more in the administration that deals with European funds and European programs in their areas of competency. In terms of Europe, these relations are especially important as a potential source of funding through the European Structural Funds and employment and cultural initiatives.

All also maintain an office for a representation of their region towards the EU in Brussels, although for the German Community this seems to be primarily an office space. As an indication of growing interest however, the Germans will probably appoint two staff members to run the office in the near future. None of the parliaments report any direct relations with these offices that are staffed by members of the administration. Generally it is also the Minister President of the Region that is the responsible member of the executive for European Affairs. The Minister Presidents are also all full members of the Committee of the Regions (with the exception of M. Collignon of the Walloon parliament) It seems that that the executive is monopolizing the European attention, a phenomenon that happens at all levels of European governance.

There are interesting developments at the level of the Committees of Parliament, however. All parliaments have a committee where European Affairs is dealt with, usually the most prestigious committee, as it has to do with international treaties. Two are headed up by the President of Parliament itself, while the Flemish committee is headed up by the former Minister President Van den Brande, rather well known for his international ambitions for Flanders. Up until recently, the Flemish parliament was the only one that mentioned Europe in the committee title, but this year, the French Community added the phrase 'European Questions' to the title of its Parliamentary Committee on International Relations. These two parliamentary committees thus show promising developments, but they do not really share their deliberations with the parliament as a whole nor do they reach out to a wider public. And as can be seen by the titles of the commissions, they are often responsible for many other matters besides Europe. It would be misleading to say that Europe plays any kind of a major role here, and thus these parliaments have a long way to go to reach the Benchmark 2001 initiative taking of the Scottish parliament which has a Committee on European Affairs and publishes synopses of important European issues as well as a year report on their activities, a similar practice is upheld in some of the German regional parliaments (DeNayer et al 2001, Bort 2003).

Only one of the parliaments reported any specific or organized relations between their parliament and the country's or regional representatives in the European parliament. The Walloon parliament has an advisory committee on European Affairs, which includes 9 members of its parliament and the 6 members of the European Parliament from the French speaking community and is chaired by the president of the Parliament Collignon. However it has only met 4 times since its institution in 1999. In the German community, the MEP from the community has the right to deliberate on legislation. Given the small size of the Belgian political landscape, however and the organization of political parties with offices in Brussels, it is highly likely that information from the European parliament flows back from MEP's engaged in the party bureaus, even if not directly through to the parliament itself.

Thus, although the interest in European affairs is not concretely measurable in the plenary, the most open of parliamentary events, it is not absent. All the observers agreed also that interest in Europe had been increasing across the young life of their parliaments, even if in one or two cases, the special committees tended to monopolize the question, the fact that parliamentarians are confronted with harmonizing their legislative suggestions with European directives, as well as the increasing visitation by fellow parliamentarians from elsewhere in Europe has developed more of a sense of European mission. Again, this is especially so in the two parliaments with extensive bi- and multi-lateral ties with other legislative regions, the Flemish<sup>5</sup>, and the French Community. The Flemish representative noted that in the beginning of his posting, there had been virtually no foreign travel for Flemish parliamentarians, but that foreign study trips have been growing almost exponentially.

As far as infrastructural support to deal with European questions, their location in Brussels is a clear advantage for these parliaments, as is their multi-lingual capacity. Although none of the parliaments had a specialized documentalist for European documents, they all felt well supplied with access to European information. For the three

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<sup>5</sup> Note should include relationships with the motor regions for Flanders, the Francophonie connection for FPC.

parliaments based in Brussels, this is a physical self-evidence. The other parliaments cited the easy access to documents through the Internet. Yet again, even though none felt that lack of access to information was a handicap, it is also a contrast with those parliaments with specialized European services in their information departments that carry out awareness raising on breaking issues.

There was a unique opportunity to view the extent to which regional forces were interested in making an impact on European governance and sharing that with their constituents from June-December 2001 when Belgium was the host of the presidency of the European Union. All the government institutions were expected to play a role. Although the actual composition of the parliaments of Walloon/French Community and the Flemish parliament are not dramatically different, the accents placed during the presidency illustrated the strategy of the Flemish parliament and government to utilize European opportunities to wedge a more friendly hearing for the regional case in Europe. The French speaking representatives were invited along for part of the international ride, but did not exploit the opportunities in a way that is continually visible to the citizen on their website. Several of the parliaments noted that the presidency was one of the few times where questions on Europe came up in plenary sessions.

### **Relations to citizens and communication- an e-interface towards Europe and the globe: How does parliament symbolize its place in Europe?**

To what extent do these regional parliaments present a European face to the physical and to the electronic citizen (Coleman 1998)? We have looked above at the potential for European involvement, and seen that each of the parliaments could add a European dimension. It is not that they are forbidden to participate and try to influence European matters, or discuss and expose them as they affect the many competencies that are in the hands of these regions, but rather that the opportunities are seldom utilized. There are formal niches for European questions in each of the parliaments, and the regions themselves are represented in Brussels. Thus there is a place for a European face. To what extent do the parliaments promote this as part of their identities and symbolically integrate their European concerns into their face towards the public?

Other regional parliaments in Europe have dedicated newsletters to European concerns, hold open hearings and study days on European matters, or hold open committee meetings on questions where European measures have an impact. The parliament's web site can be a place where citizens can be informed of European measures through links at the most elementary level. The website can be utilized to measure and inspire public debate. For Belgium there was a golden opportunity to inform citizens with the European presidency of 2001. This was exploited heavily for launching regional demands (conference and declaration of Laeken—Vos, Boucké and DeVos forthcoming). As late as today, the hang over from the Belgian presidency still shadows the web sites of several of the parliaments. However, the fireworks from the Belgian presidency do not extend to any strategically formulated media philosophy on Europe for these parliaments.

The informants answered no to all measures of communication around Europe to the citizens. The parliaments do not busy themselves with this issue or see it as their responsibility. To the extent that parliamentarians see European issues as part of their communicative duty, it is in the framework of exchanges with other parliaments. It may

be that parliamentarians realistically believe that there are few votes to be found in talking about Europe with their local constituents.

Another possible measure of an eventual European mission is in language use, which while it is a sensitive issue in Belgium, is also crucial for an international mission. To what extent do parliaments provide public information about their workings in other languages than their official language? While the press and communications officers are admirably multi-lingual, (some being products of the bi-lingual civil service federal government,) there is a cleavage when it comes to accessibility of printed and electronic information. The material available electronically on the Walloon and French Community Parliaments is uni-lingually French, while the other parliaments are at least tri-lingual. In the case of Flanders, which hosted the year's meeting of the CALRE in October of 2002, the material on regionalism is in 5 languages!

To what extent can a citizen find that Europe is part of a region's identity using electronic sources? The development of e-government is uneven in Belgium, judging by electronic interfaces. Given its importance and immediate accessibility, as well as the ambitions of European Union to emphasize this mode of communication with the citizen, the Eurofitness of regional parliaments will be treated more in detail on this item.

In terms of communication strategy, the parliament is not always in autonomous control of its public relations. The smallest parliaments work closely with the administration to develop their web sites, for example, although all have independent parliamentary addresses. While the web competencies are uneven, it is notable that both the French Community and the Flemish Community initiated efforts to electrify the face of transnational regional organizations. The Flemish parliamentary leadership has attempted to be the web master for CALRE, while the French Community has done work for the Assembly of Francophone parliaments in Europe.

#### *Flanders*

The Flemish Government has an extremely positive European face, and Europe is to be found everywhere in its web site, but the focus is not really followed through in the parliamentary site. From the beginning of the powerful parliament in the eighties, Flanders has aimed for an international profile, claiming baldly that Flanders was the hub of the European wheel in its first years as a directly elected parliament (Van den Brande). Flemish politicians played a very visible role in the Council of the Regions in the first years of the Council (although they later seemed to discover other channels for influence, Bursens, Kerremans and Beyers). These ambitions are clearly visible in its present electronic face of the executive, where 'Flanders international' has the second rank in terms of government themes after the public administration. The European Union tops the sub themes in this section (however this link goes directly to the federal site about Europe as well as the europa.eu.int site, and does not provide new material). Thanks to its communication strategy towards the citizens, this is easily traceable in policy statements. The present government (delegated by the parliament) saw a very active role for itself in connection with the European presidency. The Beleidsbrief for 2002 notes that it was a central priority, and reports the information delivered to the parliamentary commission. Flanders worked for a strengthening of constitutional regions by organizing a conference on this theme, and succeeding in getting the inclusion of the concept of the region with legislative capacity included in the Declaration of Laken (December 2001). This resulted

in the important guaranteed access to the Constitutional Convention for these regions either through the Committee of the Regions or through the parliamentary delegations. Other initiatives have been towards the citizen, and especially the young citizen through media campaigns. An interesting quotation that indicates the view of the Flemish government on Europe, notes that its claims are based on being a 'legislating' region- and this means having parliamentary representation. The success of the constitutional regions in attaining a number of goals, according to the Prime Minister Dewael is related to their maturity in European affairs. This success 'proves the added value of regions with legislative competencies in a future Europe. The next step is to gain a structural anchor for this added value, for which Flanders will join with the other constitutional regions.' (Press release of the cabinet of Minister Patrick Dewael, Minister President of the Flemish government 11 January 2002.): (<http://portal.vlaanderen.be/pers.portal.vlaanderen.be> 25/09/2002).

In a special box on its own web site, the Flemish parliament highlights its only structural cooperation, namely with the Dutch Language Union, in which 11 members of the 2nd Chamber of the Dutch Parliament work with 11 members from Flanders. This forms an interesting diagonal parallel with the international approach of the French community parliament in Belgium, which puts its prime emphasis on European networking on the basis of French language, and only limited focus on its potential as a separate voice in the European process.

#### *Brussels Capital Region*

What can be more international-the Capital region is the second biggest home of diplomatic personnel in the world and also headquarters to more than 1500 governmental and non-governmental international organizations. The parliament's site has no mention of Europe at all. The website of the regional administration makes it seem that its business is quite parochial, and not directed toward becoming part of or influencing any of these bodies. The international aspect of the site is solely dedicated to the resident/visitor/business person who would be looking for information—while the citizenship concerns are kept at a strictly local level. No lobbying for independent status here. Yet the purpose of the Brussels-Europe Liaison office run by the government is '*to promote contact between Europeans and the Bruxellois, to make people more aware of the European idea ...to bring Europe closer to the citizen.*' ([http://www.blbe.irisnet.be/blbe/index\\_en.htm](http://www.blbe.irisnet.be/blbe/index_en.htm). Consulted 18 February 2003)

#### *Parliament of the French Community*

Europe on this site means the Assemblée Parlementaire de la francophonie européenne, where the representative of the parliament plays a leading role in the European regional group of French parliaments. Here the key is French speaking rather than the identity of region. Interestingly enough, however, besides the focus on language association, the web site also makes a great deal of the many bi- and multi-lateral accords with other parliaments, including the Flemish parliament in a Benelux interparliamentary association. However, in the part of the site presenting the parliament to the citizen, and to youth there is no reference made to the international goals of the parliament nor of its workings.

### *The Walloon Parliament*

The Walloon parliament has the simplest and least international of the web sites. This parliament is located outside of Brussels, and meets less frequently. The web site was rather dysfunctional in 2002, and now is better but quite bare-bones, providing information on the membership and responsibilities of the parliament and basic history but little pedagogical material, let alone information on the relations to Europe. However one useful feature is a list of the members with international representation. The Euro-fit citizen is left in the cold as there is little discussion of content and policy issues on the site. This despite the fact that the Walloon government Minister President is extremely engaged in European regional activities.

### **Membership in European networks**

Eurofitness implies receiving and exchanging information, and being pro-active receiving information in advance. This has been one of the main demands of the Committee of the Regions, to receive information on pending policies at the same time as the European Parliament to better be able to deliver advice and influence it. The same wish is expressed by parliaments through one of the newer organizations, the CALRE. A characteristic of the stronger regional bodies has been their extensive networking, not only in transnational European organizations, but also in smaller networks around specific interests. Some of these networks are directly stimulated by participation in the European policies themselves, as in networks around the fight against social exclusion or labor market projects.

The Belgian regions are definitely joiners. Find an organization devoted to some aspect of the European regional cause, and you will undoubtedly find Belgian members, to a much higher degree than for example other federalized countries such as Germany, or Austria. They have probably also disproportionately been presidents of important associations of regions (Chabert CoR, Van den Brande, ARE, DeBatselier CALRE, etc.) However, it is seldom the parliament that is the joiner, even if the delegations in some cases do seem to be parliamentarians appointed by the executive. The basis for appointment is not always immediately apparent when examining a selection of organizations, which devote themselves to regional issues at the European level.

The presidents of the Belgian regional parliaments have been relatively active in the last 3 years in generating network opportunities. The above-mentioned Belgian presidency was exploited to stimulate both inter-Belgian networking as well as initiating new contacts. Flanders scores the best in this, thanks to its long interest in a semi-national role for the region in policy making (as noted above). Although in honesty, most of the international networking initiatives are taken by the executive, this is one of the few areas where Belgian parliaments have demonstrated a degree of Eurofitness. They are (as in many sorts of European affairs) partners that are sought after due to their ability to work multi-lingually. While Danish parliamentarians are given extra language lessons, the average Belgian parliamentarian (who is almost always university educated) speaks 3 or more languages fluently.

**Table 2: Transnational organizations and Belgian regional parliaments**

| ASSOCIATION   | Membership base   | Belgian participation   |
|---|---|---|
| ARE Assembly of European Regions (1985)*  | Regional executives   | Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels and German community (French community not listed)   |
| IPU Interparliamentary Union (1889)   | National parliaments  | Belgian Senate and House of Representatives   |
| COSAC Conference of Community and European Affairs Committees of the parliaments of the European Union (1989) | European Parliamentary and National Parliamentary Committees on European affairs            |   |
| REG LEG Conference of Presidents of Regions with Legislative Powers (2000)*                                   | Executives of Regional Governments  | Wallonia and Flanders   |
| APF Assemblée parlementaire de la francophonie région europe (1987)   | Sub group of united parliaments of the French speaking world                                | French Community (Wallonia-Brussels)  |
| CALRE Conference of the European Regional Legislative Parliaments (1997)*                                     | Presidents of Parliaments of Regions with Legislative Power                                 | All regions represented   |
| CEMR Council of European Municipalities and Regions (1951)*   | Cities and Regions -- administrative(?)   | Union of Belgian Cities and Municipalities  |
| CLRAE Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe (1994-CoE formerly standing committee from 1957)   | Chamber of Regions Appointed by national government- 4 delegates                            | Ministers from German, Wallonian and Brussels government, Flemish parliamentarian   |
| Interparliamentary Consultative Council of the Benelux (????)   |   |   |
| CPI: Interregional parliamentary Council (????)   | Luxembourg, Rhineland -Pfalz, Nordrhein Westfalen, Saarland, Champagne-Ardenne and Wallonia |   |
| Assembly of Parliaments of Capital Regions (????)   | Madrid, Vienna, Brussels, Helsinki capital region councils                                  | Brussels  |
| Euroregio RhinMeuse (1976)  | German, Dutch and French border regions   | German community executive (provinces Liège, Limburg)   |
| EU CoR Committee of the Regions (1994)*   | Appointed by national government on suggestion of regional governments                      | 5/12 full members from Flemish parliament, 2/12 from Walloon-French parliament<br>4/12 alternates from Flemish parliament |

\* Organizations having submitted written communication to the European Convention on more extensive representation of regions Source: Reports from interviews with civil servants of respective parliaments supplemented by information from official websites. (March 2003).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Pending as some lack of correspondence between information at level of region and reporting on international web site.

Parliaments are usually asking parties in terms of inclusion in networks of decision-making, and this goes for the national as well as the regional parliaments. It is thus not surprising that the regional parliaments have few international memberships.

It is striking to note here that it is only the Flemish parliament that consistently delegates Parliamentary representatives to various European bodies. Apart from the CoR which includes parliamentarians doubling as a Walloon and French Community Parliament representative, and the Capital Region grouping, the other 4 Belgian regional parliaments play a very weak role in European networking<sup>7</sup>.

### **Views on participation in the future of Europe**

As we noted above, while all of the parliaments are involved in some kinds of regional networks, official representation in decision-making and ability to protest decisions as a parliament is very limited. Initiation right for regional parliaments is non-existent. The CALRE, the only international association directly representing the leadership of constitutional parliaments, has in an increasingly more organized fashion demanded a place for the legislative regions at the table of decision-making and also at the battlefield when decisions need to be contested. connected with the parliament. All of the respondents stated that the clearest position of their parliament on their participation in the future of Europe was in the resolution to support the Declaration of Brussels (CALRE 2003) passed by the CALRE on 29th of October 2002. CALRE declared among other things that

- Regions should be specifically identified in the language of the Treaty
- That regional autonomy should be recognized in the ratification process
- That the limits of European competencies based on subsidiarity be attributed so that regions can develop their actions in autonomy ‘an essential premise to improve the sense of belonging to the Union of its citizens’
- ‘the importance to guarantee the respect of the subsidiary principle and the share of competences by an ‘ex ante’ political control which would also involve the regional parliaments’
- to guarantee the right of regions with legislative power to go to the European Court of Justice
- ‘the importance of the participation of the regional parliaments in the cooperation between the European parliament and national parliaments –particularly within the COSAC’

Meanwhile the constitutional Convention of the European Union has had a working group on the role of regions in the future governance of Europe, in which the Belgian position is well represented. One of the 7 observers delegated by the Council of Regions is J. Chabert, who had been president of the CoR, and is a minister in the Brussels Capital Region Government. The Convention presidium official chairing the

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that there are substantial inconsistencies in the accuracy of membership lists of these organizations using their posted lists. For example the list of members of the CoR does not correspond with reports from the informants and the parliamentary websites.



second meetings of the working group is Jean Luc Dehaene<sup>8</sup>. The convention was heavily lobbied by a number of organizations representing the diverse regional interests, and in this process, the parliaments of the legislative regions took a role, but probably not the decisive role. While the legislative regions were jockeying for a privileged position among the regions, the position of the CoR is that the regions in all their diverse plumage from local municipalities to full fledged constitutional regional states, should be represented through the CoR.

There is no evidence that the various Belgian parliaments are actively following or participating in the future of Europe discussions, except through their representation in CALRE. It is evident though that both the CALRE and REGLEG strongly emphasize that a democratic Europe is one that has channels for representation of sub-national interests.

### **Eurofitness of Belgian regional parliaments in the changing institutional architecture of Europe**

The struggle in Europe between regions of different characteristics jockeying for representation is probably going to continue to be a feature of European institution building. The diversity of representation in the CoR frustrates the strong regions with different kinds of identities than in those present in countries with non-federalized or regional structures. This has taken form in the mushrooming of organizations of regions with legislative power, of cities and of other types of sub-national regions, and their attempts to lobby the European convention. The Council of the Regions has defended the position that the regional voice can best be one on the basis of sub nationality whatever the power. The counter arguments and proposals are fronted especially by groups such as CALRE (Brussels declaration 2002), which is specifically linked to regional constitutional legislatures search for a higher degree of legitimacy through a greater inclusion of the parliamentary voice.

Presently, the executive/government level dominates in EU decision making at the national level. The Belgian case shows that this dominance of the executive also colors the international relations of the region. Parliaments only marginally demonstrate interest in European questions in Belgium, and then primarily in a reactive mode. What is rather pitifully clear from this investigation is that at present it is not the parliamentarians themselves that are the asking party for further involvement in European questions. Further, the parliaments are only moderately equipped in terms of Euro-fitness and as instruments to engage the citizen in European debates from the regional frontline. The activities and institutional infrastructures take small account of European affairs, and the parliaments do little through their channels of communication to embed their region in a European context in their face towards the citizen. The most actively engaged in European affairs as a parliament is the Flemish parliament. Given the competencies, the size and resources, and the linguistic and cultural ambitions of the region, this finding may seem self-evident. While there are several very convincing reasons for Flanders to take a pre-eminent role in European questions in the Belgian context, it is also, according to observers, far from the case that this interest is democratically carried by the lowest level of parliamentarians. This is not to say that especially Flemish Belgian politicians do not play an important role in promoting a stronger position for regions in European

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<sup>8</sup> It is uncertain to this observer how important it is that the Presidency of the Association of the European Regions (ARE) is held by Valérie Giscard d'Estaing.

affairs- on the contrary, Belgian figures are strongly represented in virtually all organizations devoted to higher profiles for cultural, linguistic and regional identities in the European integration process. But the question is one of the executive elite rather than the lower elected representatives.

Using a comparative framework, it can become clear that it is not only competencies and resources that stimulate parliamentary activity on European questions. Other parliaments, including the often mentioned cases of Scotland, Catalonia and Baden-Württemberg with sometimes lesser competencies than the Belgian cases are presently more 'Euro-fit' to understand European initiatives, correctly implement European directives, and attempt to influence them (Denayer et al 2001, Vos and Boucké 2001). Leadership plays a role in innovation here.

The democratic participation of citizens at the regional level in making Europe work for them is still very much at a beginning stage. Looking comparatively at the situation of the many countries with regional authority can help identify what factors other than institutional pre-conditions are necessary to promote a more participative engagement with European affairs at lower levels. This sort of comparison and communication contributes to the learning process. The representatives from Belgian parliaments meeting in the context of transnational organizations learn not only about good practices from other countries, but also from each other. While it may seem that there is a long way for these parliaments to go from provincialism to Eurofitness, it must also be kept in mind that these competencies for international relations are less than ten years old, and that the possibilities of Europe are changing every day. It may be too early to entirely write off the democratically elected regional representatives as players in European policy making.

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<http://www.pcf.be>

<http://parlement.wallonie.be>

<http://www.bruparl.irisnet.be>

<http://www.rdg.be>

### *International organizations with relevance for regional Euro-fitness*

<http://www.are-regions-europe.org/>

<http://www.calre.net>

<http://www.calre.be>

<http://european-convention.eu.int>

<http://www.regleg.org>

<http://www.cosac.org/eng/basic/index.html>

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# Appendix

## Regions with Legislative Power ("RegLeg") in EU (Million Inhabitants) July the 1st 2001

| Country   | Number of Reg Leg | Inhabitants Inside RegLeg, Mio | Inhabitants Outside RegLeg, Mio | TOTAL, Mio |
|---|-------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Group A: The whole country consisting of RegLegs</b> |                   |                                |                                 |            |
| Austria   | 9                 | 8.1                            |                                 | 8.1        |
| Belgium   | 6                 | 10.3                           |                                 | 10.3       |
| Germany   | 16                | 82.2                           |                                 | 82.2       |
| Italy   | 20                | 57.8                           |                                 | 57.8       |
| Spain   | 17                | 39.8                           |                                 | 39.8       |
| Total   | 68                | 198.2                          |                                 | 198.2      |

|   |   |       |       |       |
|---|---|-------|-------|-------|
| <b>Group B: Part of the country consisting of RegLegs</b> |   |       |       |       |
| Finland   | 1 | 0.026 | 5.174 | 5.2   |
| Åland   |   |       |       | 0.026 |
| United Kingdom  | 3 | 9.7   | 50.3  | 60.0  |
| Scotland  |   |       |       | 5,1 * |
| Wales   |   |       |       | 2,9 * |
| Northern-Ireland  |   |       |       | 1,7 * |
| Portugal  | 2 | 4.8   | 5.2   | 10.0  |
| Azores  |   |       |       | 2.4 * |
| Madeira   |   |       |       | 2.4 * |
| Total   | 6 | 14.5  | 60.7  | 75.2  |

|                                 |  |  |      |      |
|---------------------------------|--|--|------|------|
| <b>Group C: No RegLeg in EU</b> |  |  |      |      |
| Denmark                         |  |  | 5,4  | 5,4  |
| France                          |  |  | 59.2 | 59.2 |
| Greece                          |  |  | 10.9 | 10.9 |
| Ireland                         |  |  | 3.8  | 3.8  |

|                 |  |       |       |
|-----------------|--|-------|-------|
| Luxemburg       |  | 0.4   | 0.4   |
| The Netherlands |  | 16.0  | 16.0  |
| Sweden          |  | 8.9   | 8.9   |
| Total           |  | 104.6 | 104.6 |

|              |                   |   |  |                                |
|--------------|-------------------|---|--|--------------------------------|
| <b>Total</b> | <b>74 RegLegs</b> | <b>212.7 Inhabitants<br/>Inside RegLeg,<br/>Mio</b> | <b>165.3 Inhabitants<br/>Outside RegLeg,<br/>Mio</b> | <b>378.0<br/>Total<br/>Mio</b> |
|              | <b>Percentage</b> | <b>56.3%</b>  | <b>43.7%</b>   | <b>100%</b>                    |