

ACADEMIC PAPER

Listen to us: How Dutch subnational governments together use public affairs to create a favorable position in the national and European political arenas

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Because of the devolution of tasks and powers from the national political level to subnational levels, subnational governments such as municipalities and provinces are increasingly compelled to express their interests in the national and European arenas. However, to achieve substantial weight, authority, receptiveness, and success in both arenas, active cooperation with other subnational authorities is needed. The question is to what extent subnational authorities acknowledge this need for cooperation and how this cooperation is being organized and structured. More specifically, in this study, the function and role of collective public affairs (PA) activities are investigated. Qualitative interviews with 17 PA professionals and 24 PA practitioners, experienced in working for subnational authorities, were held to find out how subnational governments in the Netherlands together organize PA in both arenas. The results show that subnational cooperation is of ultimate importance for creating a favorable position in these arenas. Such cooperation is favorable if subnational authorities together constitute a clear profile and render thematic collaboration in which the citizen is seen as the most important stakeholder. Further, the level of knowledge concerning the national and European arenas should be optimal among all parties involved in which the PA professional serves as a liaison officer who connects the various stakeholders.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite their initial dominance, national governments no longer have a monopoly in European politics (De Rooij, 2002). Multilevel governance has paved the way for subnational governments to become more and more visible in the European policy making process. Initially, with the founding of the European Regional Development Fund in 1975, the European arena was fore mostly directed to subnational themes as a way of promoting poor regions in the EU (Barlow, 1995; Werts, 2008, pp. 117–119). In subsequent years, the regional component within European policy grew, which led to a

doubling of the budget at the end of the 1980s (Werts, 2008, p. 311) and to the founding of the Committee of the Regions after the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. This, together with the devolution of tasks and powers from national level to subnational governmental levels, drew subnational governments into the European and national political arena (Dekker & Van Kempen, 2004; Salet, Vermeulen, Savini, & Dembski, 2015; Thierstein, 2015) and led to the appointment of subnational public affairs (PA) professionals who operate in these political arenas to guard subnational interests (Figuee, Gosselt, Linders, & De Jong, 2017). At the municipal level, cooperation with other municipalities was needed to improve the execution

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of these transferred tasks and powers and to reduce costs, and also to achieve substantial weight, receptiveness, and success in the national and European arenas (Bel & Warner, 2014; Seinstra & Sietsma, 2012, pp. 228–241). The question is to what extent subnational authorities acknowledge this need for cooperation and how this cooperation is being organized and structured. More specifically, in this study, the function and role of collective PA activities will be investigated.

1.1 | Subnational cooperation

Subnational cooperation enables subnational governments to keep fulfilling their public service delivery at the lowest costs possible, while it also ensures that these tasks remain the domain of subnational authorities (Hulst & van Montfort, 2007). Depending on, for example, the topic at hand and the exact arrangement of the cooperation, subnational cooperation knows a wide variety of forms and shapes (Hulst & van Montfort, 2007). On a more general level, subnational cooperation can be distinguished by two forms: occasional (individual and thematic) and collective (associational) cooperation. In this collective cooperation, subnational governments operate in the national and European arenas to draw attention to general municipal and provincial interests, for example, legislation and project funding. This study, however, focuses on individual (i.e., noncollective) subnational cooperation on issues not covered by the municipal and/or provincial associations.

Individual municipal and provincial interests concern interests that are not covered by collective cooperation. In these cases, individually operating subnational authorities cooperate with other authorities (domestic or abroad, i.e., cross-border cooperation) with comparable individual interests and then together enter the domestic or European arena to increase possible receptiveness for their interests. In the Netherlands, an example of this concerns the functional cooperation of 11 Dutch rural municipalities that advocate and lobby in both the national and European political arena, frequently opposing neighboring urban developments in the region as well as opposing to the dominance of the Randstad¹, the urban west of the Netherlands (De Rooij, 2002; Salet et al., 2015; Thierstein, 2015). On the other side, the same urban west initiated subnational cooperation in the so-called “G4,” which refers to the city network of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht. The G4 was founded in 1994 on the wings of Big Cities Policy (Dekker & Van Kempen, 2004) and has an own office in Brussels and is also (individually) participating in Eurocities, a thematic-oriented network of approximately 170 cities and partner cities in 35 European countries. Further, in the wake of the G4 cooperation, the G40 was founded—through iterations—as a network of medium-sized cities (100.000+ inhabitants) as a result of the Big Cities Policy initiated by the central government at the end of the 1990s (Dekker & Van Kempen, 2004). In addition to this, subnational governments develop their own initiatives, (more or less) apart from the municipal and provincial association. For example, cross-border cooperation

between German, Belgian, and Dutch subnational authorities, situated along both sides of the national borders (Van der Giessen, 2014) and the House of the Dutch Provinces (HNP), established in Brussels, housing the North Netherlands Alliance (SNN), the East Netherlands Provinces, the Randstad Region (i.e., the urban west of the Netherlands) and the South Netherlands Provinces (Kiers, 2014). The aforementioned forms of subnational cooperation aim to be helpful in influencing processes of decision making in the national and European arenas, and if effective, the more far away is merging and losing autonomy (Groenendijk, 2015; Van Schendelen, 2013, pp. 33–70; Marks, Hooghe, & Black, 1996). Besides this, operating in both political arenas creates the possibility for subnational authorities to make use of interacting mechanisms between these arenas (Figee, Gosselt, Linders, & De Jong, 2016).

1.2 | Influencing processes of decision making in the national and European arenas

To assist municipalities, provinces, and regional authorities in representing their individual interests in the European arena, Europe Decentral was founded in 2002. The main goal of Europe Decentral is to offer arena-wide knowledge for subnational operations in the European arena (Bridge, 2016). More specifically, knowledge sharing is provided concerning the correct application of European law and policy, keeping local and regional government employees abreast of European issues, such as state aid, public procurement, the environment, employment and social policy, culture and education, and the freedom of movement (Europe Decentral, n.d.).

Next to this, already in 1951, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions was founded in order “to influence European policy and legislation and to provide a forum for debate”. This council was followed in 1985 by the Assembly of European Regions in order “to establish the principle of subsidiarity [...], to promote regional interests [...], to embody and to reflect the regional dimension in Europe [...], and to ensure that regions remain a driving force for political, economic, and social development [...]” (Assembly of European Regions, n. d.; Hooghe & Marks, 1996). The question remains, however, how individual municipalities and provinces will pursue thematic cooperation in these arenas and how they structure this cooperation. Because national politicians are not automatically prepared (even despite regional roots) to benefit subnational interests, in order to be successful, subnational authorities need to formulate and organize a powerful message in togetherness. As a managerial policy instrument, PA has shown its strengths in doing so (Van Schendelen, 2013; De Lange & Linders, 2006).

1.3 | Subnational cooperation and PA

De Lange and Linders (2006) define PA as “a strategic management discipline, directed to the political, administrative realm the organization is functioning in or is going to function in” (p. 17). By means of PA activities, messages can be empowered while building relevant

¹The urban west of the Netherlands, the so-called Randstad (approximately 7 million inhabitants), includes the cities Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht and surrounding municipalities.

networks with (potential) private or public stakeholders (Mitchel, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Toth (as cited in Botan & Hazleton, 2006) describes how definitions of PA are pointing to “the building of relationships in the public policy arena” (p. 500), while referring to Grunig and Repper (1992), who stated that “Public Affairs applies to communication with government officials and other actors in the public policy arena” (pp. 117–157). For subnational governments, this means reconsidering their position regarding issues and themes they are or will possibly be involved in and regarding relationships with public stakeholders, such as other subnational governments, private stakeholders, and the national and European arenas (Figuee et al., 2017)

PA is only a young academic discipline, and a literature review by Bunea and Baumgartner (2014) shows that academic interest in PA fore mostly focusses on access to lobbying venues and decision makers, as well as lobbying strategies and the exercise of policy influence. Very few studies explored “how interest groups mobilize at EU level and maintain their organizations' support” (Bunea & Baumgartner, 2014, p. 1421), let alone how they operate in this in togetherness. The question remains to what extent subnational authorities acknowledge this need for cooperation and how this cooperation is being organized and structured. More specifically, in this study, the function and role of collective subnational PA activities will be investigated. This is leading to the following research question:

RQ: How are Dutch subnational governments together using and organizing PA in the national and European political arenas to draw attention to their interests?

2 | METHOD

Answering this research question requires insight into how individual subnational governments are modeling their organizations to implement PA operations in the national and European arenas and how these governments are managing their presence in these arenas. Qualitative interviews were employed in which 41 men and women—all familiar with subnational PA and recruited by snowball sampling—have been interviewed.

2.1 | Participants

The 41 respondents (24 PA practitioners; 17 PA professionals²; 34 male; aged between approximately 40–60 years) are or were working in all levels of subnational and national governmental affairs. They include public and private subnational PA professionals and PA practitioners, such as mayors, aldermen, city clerks, and subnational civil servants connected with PA activities at the municipal and/or provincial

²The PA professional is a PA practitioner as well, but the PA practitioner is not automatically a PA professional. PA practitioners may be familiar with PA but not in a professional way; they are mostly local and/or regional, provincial politicians and civil servants, or occasional delegates from the private or nonprofit sector, temporarily entrusted with PA tasks.

level. Furthermore, commissioners of the king (provinces), deputies (provinces), and members of (the European) parliament also participated. Some of the interviewees had been members of the national government as ministers or state secretaries. Most of the participants had worked in multiple functions during their careers. For example, they may have begun their careers as mayors, moved on to serve as commissioners of the king, and then become M(E)Ps, and then ministers; others may have proceeded in the other direction. Some of the respondents were or had also been members of a local or provincial council, of the Committee of the Regions, or of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe. Using this approach, a varied spectrum of 93 functions (32 local, 26 provincial, 23 national, and 12 European) became visible, at all governmental levels where subnational PA is executed and explored. The number of inhabitants of the municipalities, linked with the interviewed persons, varied from approximately 25,000 to approximately 820,000 inhabitants. The regions, linked with interviewed persons, are situated all over the country.

2.2 | The interviews

Four themes dominated the interviews: (a) how susceptible the national and European arenas are to subnational PA; (b) the extent to which subnational governments accept and embed PA in their organizations before entering the arenas (“internal”); (c) how subnational governmental organizations together implement PA in the arenas (“external”); and (d) the competences of the PA professional and PA practitioner. Before the interviews began, it was made clear that absolute anonymity was guaranteed. The interviews were conducted mostly in quiet, private rooms of municipal and provincial offices. Each interview took approximately 1.5 hr on average, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

2.3 | Analyses

First, all statements and issues mentioned by the 41 interviewees were collected by the first researcher in 1,003 key phrases.

Second, three outside coders, intensively instructed about the focuses of the interviews, collected all key phrases selected by the author from the interviews; they reconsidered the 1,003 key phrases. After debates and discussions, some key phrases had to be reedited by changing a single word or reformulated by changing more words. Sometimes new key phrases had to be added, sometimes key phrases had to be split up (in the case of two messages in one statement), or skipped, but 76% of the key phrases remained unchanged. This process led to a new corpus of 1,050 key phrases.

The third step was the coding of the new corpus of 1,050 key phrases using the four interview themes, as mentioned above. This step in the coding process resulted in 390 key phrases related to the susceptibility of the arenas, 173 key phrases related to the internal organization of subnational PA, 377 key phrases related to external organizational aspects of subnational PA in the arenas, and 110 key

phrases related to the competences of PA practitioners. Submitting this process to the kappa regime produced a result of 0.72.

For the coding of the 377 key phrases related to the external aspects of subnational PA, the principles of the grounded theory, as described by Corbin and Strauss (2008), were followed. Every key phrase prompted a debate between the first researcher and one of the coders about the content of this key phrase as related to the research question. The outcomes of these debates led to the following five codes: (a) *regional profiling*: importance of regional profiling (promotional activities, imaging, regional character and consciousness, cultural traditions, history, and regional leadership) for the purpose of subnational PA in the national and European arenas; (b) *thematic collaboration*: teaming up by finding shared interests; (c) *knowledge of the European and national arenas*: the necessity of having or acquiring content- and arena-related knowledge by subnational governmental organizations for PA operations in the national and European arenas; (d) *the citizen as most important stakeholder*: subnational cooperation and PA should be all about the citizens and serving their interests; and (e) *the PA professional as a liaison officer*: the role and function of the PA professional and the PA practitioner in the national and European arenas. These codes were submitted to the Cohen's kappa regime with a result of 0.61.

3 | RESULTS

In general, no respondent doubted the need for subnational cooperation in both the national and European arenas to empower subnational PA as, according to the respondents' statements, cooperation in the region plays a decisive role. Respondents argue that because the transition to a new regional policy in the 90s, that is, no longer supporting poor regions but supporting strong—regional—sectors by clustering economic activities, subnational governments have been forced to review their regional policies and to broaden subnational cooperation. More specifically, cooperation in the region became necessary “[because] by implementing communality in subnational interests the attention in the national arena to these interests will grow, including subnational influence, in such a way that the national arena is looking for a connection with the region.”

Following the respondents' statements, subnational cooperation in the arenas is successful only if subnational authorities together constitute a *clear profile* and focus on *thematic collaboration* in which the *citizen is put central*. Further, the *level of knowledge* concerning the national and European arenas should be optimal among all parties involved and *the PA professional serves as a liaison officer* who connects the various stakeholders. Below, all these factors will be outlined separately.

3.1 | Regional profiling

Regarding regional profiling, respondents referred to the historical and sociocultural imaging of a region, which may stimulate attention to regional issues in the European and national arenas and stimulate

regional consciousness at the same time. However, respondents showed ambivalence on this matter. On the one hand, regions know that profiling can be helpful in coloring collective PA operations. On the other hand, respondents said that it was important to be careful when using these distinguishing marks because of the danger of creating an image of “dusty, old-fashioned folklore, a not-in-my-back-yard attitude, ‘closed windows’ [...] hampering the advertising of strong regional points [and] creating distances in the national and European arena.”

Next, there are opposing interests of rural and urban areas components when it comes to regional profiling, for example, when smaller municipalities, surrounded by bigger, expanding counterparts, try to protect their rural characteristics. But as respondents noticed, there are differences between municipalities and provinces as well: “Municipalities engaged in regional cooperation generate identity and natural togetherness better than provinces do.” The reason is that one province can encompass more than one region (i.e., cooperating municipalities) and must accommodate regional differences: “In the national and European arena provinces are not very successful in the promotion of realized results by their own efforts,” a Commissioner of the King admitted. “Not having a regional mentality or regional identity are obstacles in provincial PA but so is provincial image building. When subnational governments cannot develop a marketing strategy for one common interest, it is impossible to create a sustainable long-run regional profile.” In sum, the usefulness of “regional branding” appears to be considered mainstream, as a municipal PA professional said, but ambivalence concerning regional profiling causes “growing regional inequality, [...] disturbing the subnational PA of the region as a whole.”

3.2 | Thematic collaboration: Theming to avoid merging

In general, large municipalities and cooperating provinces are seen to especially empower subnational PA. Respondents, working for “too small” municipalities (i.e., less than 50,000 inhabitants) considered merging to be a solution for empowerment in the European and national arena. They prefer however thematic cooperation because “ongoing processes of municipal up-scaling can split up subnational governments as a result of strong cultural differences. Thematic cooperation by a cross-over of official and administrative borders is a new form of regionalism and is more pragmatic.”

Similar to this use of themes, regions, that is, cooperating municipalities or provinces, are looking for connections with regions elsewhere, both in the home country and in the EU, to empower themselves. Subnational thematic governance could possibly reach stakeholders (including citizens, as interviewees stated) on the same theme(s) better than governance based on administrative entities such as merged municipalities and provinces: “Thematic governance is good for regional representation of interests. For the organization of subnational PA it can be important to stimulate the brainpower of stakeholders.” Subnational cross-border cooperation with, for example,

Belgian and German subnational governments in so-called “euregions” stimulated and supported by the EU by offering program funding, is a growing force in subnational empowerment, respondents stated. However, currently, official euregional representation in the European arena is still missing “because they (i.e., euregions) do not belong to common interests of the twelve (Dutch) provinces,” as a provincial PA professional stationed in Brussels stated. An “external orientation” may be a natural element in Dutch (subnational) politics because of the small scale of the country and the historical necessity to look beyond national borders, but daily experience paints another picture. “The bigger the distance to the national border, the more forced cross-border cooperation is as not the administrative and official borders but geopolitical borders are normative for cross-border cooperation,” a regional official manager said.

Furthermore, besides other subnational authorities, creating networks with private and societal stakeholders is suggested as a solution to empower the subnational position in the national arena: “Cooperation with the private sector and with [public] societal partners [e.g., hospitals, educational institutes] can help subnational governments to develop capacities. For subnational PA it is good to know that the solution for a problem is not a matter of action of one government; cooperation with relevant societal partners is necessary. For subnational PA it is essential to know that every relevant stakeholder is at the same time a lobbyist as well. These stakeholders could be helpful in the development of a vision about the future.” A private regional PA professional said that “strong and powerful cooperation at the regional level with private, societal partners is hard to disturb by others.” The first reason for this is that private, societal partners are mostly focused on one theme, which makes their cooperation stronger and less segmented than cooperation with public partners, who have more than one focus. The second reason is that “especially at the local level, field-players find each other mostly in a minute.” The third reason is that “for a private, societal partner, cooperation with subnational governments is an instrument to reduce costs.” Such networks create visibility, which is contributing to subnational countervailing power. “Subnational governments should have networks, should be creative, should look beyond their official borders and should look for cooperation with the private sector and educational institutes, like universities and other knowledge institutes. Thanks to the ‘neighborhood’ and ‘global village’ it is possible to develop worldwide regional networks with regional ‘ambassadors.’”

In sum, defining common issues by focusing on mutual interests creates relationships. In the words of a provincial official “[...] A lobby that is also directed to the solution of somebody else’s problems is appealing and creates a common interest.” City clerks (100,000+) and municipal and provincial PA professionals said that “Cooperation between subnational governments is successful by defining a common problem in which other subnational governments recognize themselves.” PA professionals point at the fruitfulness of fieldtrips, workshops, conferences, and visits to educational institutes, which, at the same time, contribute to stakeholder empowerment. However, subnational disagreements, for example, in case of

clashing interests of stakeholders and other involved subnational authorities, are “messing up subnational lobbying because in case of disagreements others can divide and rule. It is important to speak with one voice, to formulate common goals, and, if necessary ‘agree to disagree’ or discuss disagreements with partners as early as possible.” In such cases, subnational governments fear being forced to offer only “watered” compromises. To avoid disagreements, sharing of knowledge can be helpful but “coordination is a keystone.” A regional official pleads for the founding of “periodical meetings with stakeholders in order to share interests, to exchange information, to prevent misunderstandings and frictions and to stimulate regional warmth.”

3.3 | The citizen as most important stakeholder

Subnational cooperation and PA should be all about the citizen. The citizen is a “stakeholder” and “his well-being” should be served, as municipal PA professionals and PA practitioners stated: “Considering citizens as stakeholders is stimulating subnational PA [...] policy and must be explainable always to every citizen. Satisfaction of the citizen is the main goal.” However, this goal is dubious, as a Commissioner of the King stated: “The ongoing devolution [i.e., transfer of national tasks and powers to the subnational level] is leading subnational governments into the devolution paradox because policy comes close to the citizen now, but at the same time the municipal scale is turning out to be insufficient.” A European subnational civil servant warned: “After the introduction of themes in regional European policy, the EU has become more invisible for the citizen.” To bridge this distance, communication with citizens should be a “core-business [but] officials of societal institutions are clashing in policy because the communication with the citizen is obviously not yet well enough organized. Officials of societal, non-governmental institutions more often do not have any idea how they have to communicate with citizens who do not knock at governmental doors for their interests because of regional feelings but rather because of local or regional problems they experience at that very moment.” In other words, citizens experience acute problems in their street, their village, their city, and want to be heard immediately. Citizens feel themselves “victims of government’s dedication to efficiency, although they understand the government is not able to create customized policy. In citizens’ minds, regional warmth and feelings of ‘we versus them’ can come up as soon as the national arena is injuring their interests.”

In some cases, the citizen has been lost out of sight. Respondents refer openly and clearly to the money-driven focus in subnational PA, which aims to finance job-generating projects and transferred national tasks and powers. “Municipalities see their province as a money-machine, but it would be better when they look for cooperation with us,” a Commissioner of the King said. According to many respondents, this money-driven focus fosters interregional competition, which ultimately frustrates subnational cooperation: “PA changed from ‘quiet activities in the corridors of power’ into a fast, hard, money-driven business-activity, directed to accounting and book-keeping. Mostly

money is leading above everything and is more important than solidarity [...].” Or as one respondent noted: “Subnational presence in the European arena is not directed to citizens but is directed to doing business. Not only regional and/or provincial profiling and promotion are determining the organization of subnational PA, but more so is reciprocity, i.e., ‘getting something out’ and ‘bringing something in.’” Especially in non-Randstad regions, this money focus seems to be present. This may be understandable, as respondents explained, because regions outside the Randstad are suffering more from central budget regulations than subnational authorities inside the Randstad, which at the national level is seen as the “main ‘revenue model’ for ‘the Netherlands Company.’” Provincial PA professionals and a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) said that other, “rich provinces³ do not succeed to make clear which stimulating role they can play in the national economy.” PA professionals and a mayor also referred to the new regional policy to stimulate regional cluster economies: “Regions housing an internationally known, innovative company can generate a cluster of related companies together with relevant partners. Regions should show the national arena what they can offer ‘the Netherlands Company.’”

3.4 | Knowledge of the national and European political arenas

Sharing national and European arena knowledge is a recurrent issue, considered to be indispensable in shared PA operations: “Municipalities mostly have no idea what is going to be developed in the European arena related to regional policy.” Especially small municipalities (less than 50,000 inhabitants) are suffering from a lack of arena knowledge. City clerks mentioned that “small subnational governments should make better use of the knowledge in society, knowledge-institutes, and the private sector to develop their PA.” This is why it is essential, as a respondent said, “that subnational governments dispense their knowledge, experience and insights. [...] Development of knowledge creates understanding and support, and gives power to a way of thinking in European perspectives.” Moreover, cooperation is essential to attack the problem of knowledge shortage, which may become disastrous “because of the outreach of European legislation.” Next to the earlier mentioned cross-border cooperation and thematic cooperation, benchmarking with private and public stakeholders and networking in the national and European arenas are repeatedly emphasized as ways of overcoming the knowledge shortage.

Subnational presence in the European arena is “characterized by fragmentation,” a deputy said, because cooperation is not taken for granted as result of dominating self-interest. In other words: if possible, there is cooperation; otherwise there is not. This puts mutual subnational relations under pressure: “The cooperation among the twelve provinces is under pressure in the European arena because of separate

provincial self-interests; if proposals of the European Commission are related to financing, subnational governments cannot come to an agreement because of different subnational opinions about the way the funding should be divided.” Continuous exchange of arena-related information as a result of permanent presence in the arena may reduce fragmentation and the dominance of self-interest, respondents noted. Mayors and city clerks said that “For PA operations in the European arena it is essential to have footholds there [...] with our own civil servants, [where] regions in the European arena may connect with each other on relevant common policy themes [...] to join interests.” In the Committee of the Regions, considered by subnational governments to be such a European subnational foothold: “[...] municipalities and provinces are cooperating intensely [there] because of common subnational interests.”

3.5 | The PA professional as a liaison officer

Subnational cooperation is the people's business, respondents explained. In the words of a MEP: “[...] in politics, abstractions are never leading: people are leading, because of the adage ‘all politics is local.’” Respondents admit that more often subnational politicians became involved in PA policy “by accident”: After the elections, they received a portfolio that required them to run PA operations as a PA practitioner and forced them to take the reins of their predecessors and make the best of it. “Subnational politicians, with body and soul involved in their work, are heavy opponents or team mates, [but] sometimes subnational politicians are ‘amateur-politicians’ without relevant knowledge, subordinating national interests to subnational interests.”

The label of the PA professional is “liaison-officer,” as stated by a Commissioner of the King. He or she is the visible foothold of the home organization, accessible but maintaining some secrecy; but “essentially s/he is a public facilitator.” The PA professional is a five-legged sheep, bringing information into the arena, following “broadcasted” information (“following the tracks”), networking, communicating with other partners in PA operations, living more backstage and less publicly—but most of the time with secrets—and constantly guarding the relation of his/her municipal or provincial home organization with the arena she/he is working in: “The subnational PA professional in the European and national arena should spend half of his/her time on the forging of relations between governmental officials and private and public stakeholders.” However, she/he must also address colleagues from other regions. “The professional cannot become redundant because regional politicians have to travel around in their own region above all.” In summarizing words of a provincial PA professional: “[s/he has] a positive attitude and knows how to play games with own municipal and provincial rituals, sometimes in cooperation with the stakeholders but sometimes not. Also s/he has to manage relations not only externally but also internally, never losing the goals of the mission, and knowing himself or herself to be accountable for each of the partners.”

³In the beginning of this century (also non-Randstad), provinces sold their shares in energy companies. Some of these provinces invested this money only in dribs and drabs in the regional economy.

4 | DISCUSSION

The results of this research show that subnational PA in the national and European arenas means “fighting,” as respondents said, but not only there: fighting also takes place “at home” against resistance and shortcomings within the home organization. In answering the research question more specifically, first, the results will be discussed how subnational authorities can create a favorable cooperation, focusing on subsequently: (a) regional profiling; (b) thematic collaboration; (c) focus on the citizen; (d) the level of knowledge concerning the national and European arenas; and (e) the PA professional as a liaison officer. Second, based on the results of this study, it becomes clear that subnational cooperation differs per arena: The conditions and intensity in the national arena are not the same compared with the European arena. Third, the function and role of collective PA activities will be outlined, followed by suggestions for future research and a final conclusion.

4.1 | How to create favorable cooperation between subnational authorities

Subnational governments, seeking out *regional profiling*, move in an ambiguous way between two playing fields—the folkloristic and the thematic—by creating cluster economies. Municipalities, cooperating in themes and creating thematic regions, more or less successfully mix both approaches. Provinces cooperate as well—in a thematic way—but less intensively, also because, compared with municipalities, regional differences remain more dominant.

Second, regarding *thematic collaboration*, respondents mention that empowerment is needed to create substantive weight. Such empowerment can be achieved by means of creating networks with other regions inside or outside the own country borders, as well as with local private and societal partners.

Third, a clear focus on the needs of citizens may stimulate subnational cooperation. However, a *money-driven focus* is still present, which may ultimately frustrate subnational cooperation, as it aims to finance job-generating projects and transferred national tasks and powers but fosters interregional competition. Especially in smaller regions, this money focus seems to be present for mostly as these regions are suffering more from central budget regulations.

Fourth, the level and intensity of subnational cooperation is dependent on the *level of knowledge*. However, especially at the municipal level, this arena knowledge is alarming: the smaller the scale of a municipality, the more difficult it is to collect needed arena knowledge. Reciprocally, as argued by most respondents, the solution for obtaining this crucial arena knowledge is intensified cooperation, preferably thematic.

Finally, regarding *the role of the PA professional*, it becomes clear that subnational PA is the people's business: At the end of the day, the results of subnational PA operations should benefit civilians, and the PA work itself depends on the people “doing the PA job”—professionals and practitioners. Complicating factors, which create

distance from civilians, are the thematic approaches in both arenas and the need for subnational cooperation. This removes PA issues from the daily experience of civilians, also known as the devolution paradox.

4.2 | Subnational cooperation differs per arena

The results make clear that subnational cooperation may differ per arena, influenced by aspects of European origin aspects of national origin. In the *European arena*, subnational cooperation is undermined by municipal scale differences and by a lack of arena knowledge, or at least by an inadequate sharing of arena knowledge elsewhere at the subnational level. Further, a lack of subnational “Europeans in heart and soul” is also a reason that subnational cooperation in the European arena is undermined. Ideally, the subnational PA practitioner (a politician, civil servant, or Commissioner of the King) should be a “European,” but currently she/he knows that “European affairs” is not a popular theme to trigger politics electorally. Nevertheless, practitioners must go to Brussels, assisted by their subnational PA professionals, for whom the European dimension of their work is part of a day-to-day attitude. If there is no “europeanism” in the hearts and minds of the civil servants who are entrusted by their municipal or provincial organizations (which is the case in small municipal organizations), developing PA with a European dimension can become difficult—not only individually but also in cooperation with other public and private partners. Regarding organizational factors, municipalities and provinces are represented individually and collectively by their own offices in the European arena, but also collectively, in the Committee of the Regions, in order to merge general regional interests. The Committee illustrates the susceptibility of the EU to subnational interests, as anchored in EU treaties. Provinces (sometimes in occasional cooperation with other provinces) operate on their own in the European arena because of a diversity of interests (not covered by their formal collectiveness). However, municipalities, particularly cities, are mostly thematically united in the European arena; this is giving them a strong position.

Second, in the *national arena*, municipalities and provinces are “living apart together,” which means they try to deny their official and formal borders to achieve cooperation, if necessary, while keeping their own interests sharply in mind. “Denying borders” in thematic cooperation is also seen as an escape from the processes of municipal up-scaling. However, cooperation with stakeholders is not well developed yet. Instead, fieldtrips—“in the country” and in the national arena as well—are organized to improve networks and to create political entrances. Much is done at the subnational level to avoid disagreements, even when it leads to weak compromises. A major controversy in subnational cooperation is the confrontation between the urban west of the Netherlands, seen at the national level as the main engine of the national economy, and non-Randstad regions. As a result, cooperation, for example, between Randstad- and non-Randstad regions in case of parallel interests, is lacking.

4.3 | Subnational cooperation and PA

Our findings are in accordance with the observations of Seinstra and Sietsma (2012) and of Kiers (2014) that show how, outside the municipal and provincial offices, decentralized governments and administrations indeed have to strengthen their position by cooperation, that is, in the region and in the national and European political arenas, besides the collective, institutional cooperation they already have because of particular national associations (e.g., VNG (Vereniging Nederlandse Gemeenten), a collective in which all Dutch municipalities are represented). The good news is that subnational governments seem to understand the power of the political environment in which they operate and increasingly externalize actions to influence that same environment, retaining a lobbyist in an attempt to influence national and European policy (Loftis & Kettler, 2015). Also, other subnational governments are increasingly recognized as becoming actors to pay attention to as well. Because some regions are more successful in acquiring governmental attention and funding, cooperation at a subnational level is needed to neutralize this disparity (reference deleted for review purposes, 2016). However, as cooperation may undermine own interests, subnational cooperation has not yet fully developed. Subnational governments still seem to be resistant to lose autonomy and invest in cooperation, although participants argue that the more intense a cooperation is, the more effective subnational PA operations can be. Currently, money-driven considerations are dominating, not only linked with EU programming but also linked to cost reduction, underlining the analyses of Bel and Warner (2014). Municipal and provincial cooperation is mostly functional and/or thematic, in line with multilevel governance (e.g., Hooghe & Marks, 1996; Marks et al., 1996), where common, mutual interests are stimulating instruments (reference deleted for review purposes, 2016). This is common sense in the circle of PA professionals as shown in this study and in earlier studies (Figée et al., 2016, 2017). Therefore, the activities of PA professionals should not only be seen as a result of possible subnational cooperation, but these professionals could also play an active role in the process of initiating and stimulating subnational cooperation. With the growing position of subnational PA as a managerial policy instrument in municipal and provincial governmental offices, the subnational PA professional (and PA practitioner, such as subnational politicians) must improve the quality of collective subnational PA operations.

4.4 | Suggestions for future research

The focus of this study was on the external organizational aspects of Dutch subnational PA in the national and European arenas. Because of (rising) debates on renewing European cooperation after Brexit and on forms of federalism, the question may arise as to what extent these aspects are influencing the results of subnational PA. To obtain insight into these results, separate case studies are needed.

A second question may be how subnational PA is organized—externally—in other member states and to what extent subnational PA approaches are comparable. Related to this question is the relation of subnational PA to the national constitutional system in other EU member states and to the label “Europe of the Regions.”

Another relevant question may be to what extent subnational PA in the European arena is subordinate to the Anglo-American tradition, the Rhineland tradition, and Central- and East-European traditions. Subnational PA professionals and PA practitioners coming from these traditions are metaphorically flying in different aircrafts but directed to the same destination(s), namely, strengthening subnational interests. More research is required to illuminate the effects of those traditions on subnational PA interventions in the European arena.

5 | CONCLUSION

In the Netherlands, subnational cooperation in the national and in the European arenas is far from unified. Provincial cooperation is more frustrated by fragmentation than is municipal cooperation. At the municipal level, small municipalities are suffering from shortages in arena knowledge. However, if municipal or provincial authorities do cooperate, this cooperation is mostly thematic and occasional, which improves the sharing of arena knowledge and sets municipal up-scaling (i.e., merging) aside. Sometimes cooperating municipalities and provinces point to regional cultural profiling in PA operations, but because of their fear of “dusty folklore” and because of upcoming economic considerations resulting from changes in regional policy, regional profiling becomes economic profiling. The citizen is considered to be the main stakeholder, but in general, the presence of the citizen is lacking. The PA professional plays the central role in subnational PA, thus creating continuity.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author (J. F. G.). The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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