



Regional public affairs activities in The Netherlands: How to gain ground in the national and European arena

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**Edward L Figuee, Jordy F Gosselt, Paul Linders
and Menno DT De Jong**

University of Twente, The Netherlands

Abstract

The role of regional authorities is undeniably increasing in Europe. Due to increasing regionalism efforts within European Union (EU) member states and to the fact that EU legislation is affecting subnational authorities more and more directly, these authorities are not only striving for influence in the national arena, but in the European arena as well. The primary task of a public affairs (PA) practitioner working for a regional government in the EU is placing regional interests on national and European political agendas. However, since regional PA is a rather young discipline, opposite to PA in the private sector and in national government, much is unknown about the way regional PA practitioners are operating in the national and European political arenas, and how these arenas are receiving the subnational PA practitioners. In this study, 41 Dutch PA practitioners and PA receivers were interviewed about their opinions on and experiences with regional PA in both arenas: What are the relevant characteristics of these arenas for regional PA activities, and how are regional PA practitioners managing arena characteristics? The results show that at the national level, it is a struggle to find recognition for regional issues, due to dominant high-profiled regions, centralisation tendencies at the national level and a more general non-subnational attitude. At the European level, regional issues are more welcome, but regional PA practitioners have to overcome the dominant national interests of member states.

Keywords

Arena characteristics, arena interaction, regional policy, regional public affairs

Introduction

The role of regional or subnational authorities¹ is undeniably increasing in Europe. Due to increasing regionalism² efforts within European Union (EU) member states and due to the fact that EU legislation is affecting subnational authorities more and more directly, these authorities are not only striving for influence in the national arena, but in the European arena as well. This article focuses on the Dutch case

of subnational public affairs (PA), in particular on how subnational authorities gain ground in the

Corresponding author:

Jordy F Gosselt, Department of Communication Studies,
University of Twente, Drienerlolaan 5, 7500 AE Enschede,
The Netherlands.

Email: j.f.gosselt@utwente.nl

national and European arenas in order to draw attention to their regional interests. For the private sector in The Netherlands – a relatively small country with an age-old external orientation – PA is a useful instrument with which to create a relationship with society. Influenced by positive results in the private sector, local, regional and central authorities took over this policy aiming to improve their connections with civilians and finding their way to the European levels (Barents, 2008; Seinstra and Sietsma, 2012; Van Schendelen, 2013).

Such policy change may be explained by the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (Baumgartner, Jones and Mortensen, 1993; Baumgartner et al., 2009), stating that long periods of policymaking stability and policy continuity may be disrupted by short but intense periods of instability and change. Indeed, after turbulent years including, for example, the Paris 1968 Revolt, the Vietnam War, increasing media influence (television) and the Prague Spring, in the mainstream of awakening civilian awareness, relationships between civilians and constitutional authorities changed. A generally expressed need of the younger generations is to “to break up encrusted social, political, cultural and economic structures instigated a shift in the thinking of what a democracy should be like” (Schulz-Forberg, 2009: 30). Citizens became more and more assertive about their interests and were asking for more influence in decision-making at all political and administrative levels (Van Doorn, 2009; Aerts and De Goede, 2013: 23–107). Consequently, subnational governments had to redefine their positions and become more or less as assertive as their awakened citizens. They started looking for possibilities to place subnational interests on the agendas in the national and European arenas (Derksen, 1996: 75–85; Engels and Fraanje, 2013: 80–89), and creating coalitions and cooperation that seemed usual and advantageous at the European level (Seinstra and Sietsma, 2012; Boogers, 2013; Barron and Hultén, 2014). From a EU perspective, it was important to involve every level of the decision-making process in policy implementation, as legitimacy, effectiveness and visibility of the EU are guaranteed by the contributions of all actors (Assembly of European Regions, 2010; James, 2010). When studying the agenda of the European Council between

1975 and 2010, Alexandra et al. (2012: 81, 84) found “strong evidence” for the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory. Looking at the European Council, “as [the] main venue for setting the agenda on high politics”, mirroring “national executives”, they mention the Single European Act (1986) as a starting point for regional funding in the EU (Werts, 2008), and as a starting point for regional governments to look for possibilities to enter the European arena as well.

Europe of regions

At the summit of the European Council in Paris in 1972, the Head of States decided to raise the European Regional Development Fund, at the request of the United Kingdom, Italy and Ireland, because of a growing need to stimulate solidarity and to create a situation such that poor regions in member states could share in the growing prosperity (Werts, 2008: 11, 88, 117–119). This fund got a boost with the summit in Milano, 1985, where the decision was made to adopt the Single European Act 1986 in order to create space for the internal market, including the regions. Werts is speaking of milestones in the history of the EU, referring to the three main subjects that were introduced by Jacques Delors (1985–1995 chairman of the European Commission) in 1988, namely doubling regional support, programming of expenses and reduction of agricultural support (Werts, 2013: 311). The Maastricht summit in 1992 became the start of a European regional policy with the establishment of the Committee of the Regions (Werts, 2008).

With the Maastricht treaty, European cooperation became closer and warmer, at all levels. Indeed, research (Marks et al., 1996) proved that multi-level governance developed because of the new intergovernmental structures in European cooperation. This means that in all kinds of governmental decision-making, more government levels could be involved at the same time: European, national, regional (provincial) and local (municipal), based on subsidiarity, that is, the “closest” government is involved (Hooghe and Marks, 2001; Jordan, 2001). The Committee of the Regions, busy strengthening its position in the Brussels arena, started to consider itself as “the national guard of subsidiarity” (Barents, 2008: 427),

as it tried to create a strong position for regions, but this was without permanent fruitful results. According to Hamedinger and Wolffhardt (2010), referring to a “revolving research agenda”, Europe is mattering the cities but not (that much) the other way around, because europeanization in the cities is ‘refracted by mediating factors’ (pp. 227–236).

During the European Convention (2002–2003) about the (failed) possibility of a European Constitution, the ambitions of the Committee were limited because “in no way a contradiction could be established between the state and the regions” (Barents, 2008: 405). Nevertheless, the regions have become a meaningful factor in European policy (Judt, 2015: 38–40) because of the ever-existing multi-level governance, as described in the White Paper Const-IV-020, p. 7, 80th session, 17–18 June 2009, which explains that the relation between multi-level governance and the principle of subsidiarity should be considered inextricable. This regional recognition stimulated regional profiling, as local (municipal) and regional (provincial) administrations tried to make use of the new possibilities at the European level, which emphasised their economic powers and distinguishing marks at subnational levels. In order to create countervailing power, regions started to invest heavily in profiling, and subnational PA became an essential activity (Porter, 2003; Van Elmp, 2011; Van Keken, 2011).

Subnational public affairs

Initially, subnational PA was rather incidental, for example, when a regional issue becomes of national importance (e.g., regional disasters). In these cases, Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), primarily loyal to their faction (Vollaard et al., 2015: 99–183), strengthened their political position within the arenas by exploiting their regional roots; as such, roots may increase receptiveness. However, at the same time, increasing devolution, i.e., transmission of national tasks and powers to subnational levels (Verhoest, Vervloet and Bouckaert, 2003; Barber, 2013) was uploading subnational governments, and they started to appoint civil servants or hire consultancies to not only “guard” subnational interests, but also to

influence national and European agendas to strengthen subnational positions in the execution of national and European policy targets. Furthermore, larger cities started to appoint representatives in Brussels and the national arena, and municipal and provincial interest organisations founded offices in the arenas as well. The magnitude of this process is illustrated by the fact that regional officials from one country sometimes outnumber their peers in the national PR (Tatham and Thau, 2014: 16–17).

In other words, subnational authorities found their way into the national and European arenas (Marks et al., 1996; Van Schendelen, 2013: 33–70; Mamadouh, 2001), and the first expressions of subnational PA were born (McGrath, Moss and Harris, 2010). This was the beginning of a new policy at these levels: initially hesitant (Man, Straetmans and Annard, 2001), but slowly growing into a steamer of strategic and tactic activities. Linders and De Lange (2003) define PA as “a strategic management discipline, directed to the political, administrative realm the organisation is functioning in or is going to function in” (p. 17). With the growing position of subnational PA as a managerial policy instrument in municipal and provincial governmental offices, the subnational PA practitioner had to improve the quality of subnational PA operations, for instance by complementing relevant governmental documents with European aspects (Steunenbergh, 2007). The times of amateurism and well-intended efforts to seek attention for subnational interests were over (Van Schendelen, 2013: 67–70). Professionalism was required to achieve successes in the national and European arenas, characterised by Van Schendelen (2013) as “PA Management”. However, both the national and European arena have their own customs and habits, rituals, processes and procedures that affect receptiveness to PA activities (Van Schendelen, 2013), and the PA professional who works for subnational governments in those arenas will have to deal with all those aspects.

A recent literature review of 196 scientific European PA studies (Bunea and Baumgartner, 2014) shows that academic interest in European PA has increased since 1992 (Maastricht Treaty) and 2007 (Lisbon Treaty), and that most studies originate from the UK and Germany. In general, all studies

can be divided into lobbying stages. In the European PA literature so far, the focus has primarily been on access to lobbying venues and decision makers, as well as lobbying strategies (41%) and on the exercise of policy influence (12%). Very few studies (4%) explored “how interest groups mobilise at EU level and maintain their organisations’ support” (Bunea and Baumgartner, 2014: 1421). Furthermore, very few comparative studies exist that concentrate on the similarities and differences between arenas, while more and more subnational authorities evidently have to deal with that circumstance. Bunea and Baumgartner’s literature review (2014) also shows that most studies are single-case studies, related to one particular policy area (for example, agriculture). Finally, throughout the years, case experiences about PA in a European context have been published to disseminate all kinds of arena-connected information. Although also informative for subnational authorities, these studies primarily focus on corporate lobbying (e.g., Barron and Hultén, 2014; Bernhagen and Mitchell, 2009) and state lobbying (e.g., James, 2010; Steunenberg, 2007). However, due to the unique role, characteristics and increasing importance of subnational authorities, a scientific analysis is needed of the way subnational authorities are managing their interests in the national and European arena by means of multiple PA activities.

Focusing on PA, the aim and focus of this study is to assess the interactional process between subnational authorities and receivers of their PA activities in an explorative sense. We explicitly choose the point of view of all three relevant actor groups involved: officials working for subnational authorities; officials working in the national and/or European arena; and the messengers (i.e., PA professionals and PA practitioners). This approach enables us to get insight in the way subnational PA professionals and PA practitioners manage arena properties and arena determinants, and to answer questions including the following: how do subnational governments prepare PA operations in the arenas; how do they position and characterise themselves in order to gain attention; and how do they manage interactional arena connections? Regarding the arena(s), valuable knowledge can be gained

about whether administrative and political arena receptiveness and dynamics differ, while the role and features of the PA practitioner will be discussed as well. In summary, based on the above, the following research question is proposed:

RQ: How are regional PA practitioners operating in the national and European political arenas, and how are these arenas receiving the subnational PA practitioners?

Methodology

At the onset of this study, it became clear that subnational PA activities in the national and European arena can neither be seen separately from the way subnational governments are organising PA in their (municipal and provincial) home organisation, nor can they be seen separately from the PA practitioners involved. That is why three domains have to be considered: (1) the landscape of the two arenas; (2) the subnational municipal and provincial home organisation; and (3) the competencies of PA professionals and PA practitioners. This article focuses on the first domain: the landscape of the two arenas. We used a qualitative research method to learn what PA professionals, PA practitioners and PA receivers experience in their daily practice, and how they experience the political and administrative landscape of the national and European arena, from the perspectives of their own organisations, values and experiences. In 2013 and 2014 we interviewed 41 respondents with ample experience with subnational PA.

Respondents

The subnational “scenery” in The Netherlands consists of 390 municipalities (approximately 170,000 civil servants) and 12 provinces (approximately 12,000 civil servants), each with their own governments, councils and administrative organisations. Cooperating municipalities and cooperating provinces are considered “regions”, sometimes with their own councils, staffed by members of the participating municipal and provincial councils. These regions, which in the Netherlands are not constitutionally anchored, are mostly focusing on particular

themes (e.g., regional healthcare, infrastructure, spatial planning). In the Dutch context, MPs and MEPs are elected on national electoral lists; regional roots are of complementary importance when it comes to their position on these lists. Regarding the potential participants for this study, a distinction is made between PA practitioners and PA professionals. PA practitioners are persons practising PA, not as a profession, but as subnational official politicians who are temporarily entrusted with PA activities. PA professionals are persons practising PA as their profession, sometimes as a subnational civil servant, sometimes as a consultant. In other words, every professional is a practitioner but not every practitioner is a professional. By means of snowball sampling, 41 respondents were recruited consisting of 24 full-time (public and private) Dutch subnational PA practitioners (mayors, aldermen, city clerks and civil servants connected with PA activities, Commissioners of the King (provinces) and Deputies (provinces)) and 17 subnational PA professionals (municipal/provincial as officials and in the private sector as consultants, in The Hague as well in Brussels), MPs, MEPs and (former) members of the central government, familiar with subnational administrations). The interviews were not focused on comparing municipal and provincial PA practitioners (officials and politicians). Approximately 25% had executed several PA functions in their career, for instance starting as mayor, then Commissioner of the King, then M(E)P, minister or vice versa. Some respondents also were or had been a member of a local or regional council. This creates an overview of 93 functions: 32 local, 26 provincial, 23 national and 12 European. The average age of the respondents was 40–60 years (34 male, seven female). The number of inhabitants of the municipalities the respondents represented varied from 35,000 to approximately 820,000. The provinces (or regions) they represented were situated all over The Netherlands.

All interviews were in Dutch and took place in municipal and provincial offices or public places in either The Hague or Brussels. In most cases, the interview location was determined by the respondent to ensure that the respondent would feel comfortable and speak freely.

The interviews

To discover which arena characteristics influence subnational PA operations, the arena aspect of the interviews was directed towards the following: (1) how to choose subnational issues “to touch” national and European agendas; (2) arena processes, that is, “internal” aspects; and (3) arena procedures, that is, “external” aspects. The following items were discussed in the interviews: local and regional characteristics regarding regional cooperation, policy, interests and identity; arena susceptibility; arena interactions; and PA policies of municipal or provincial home organisations.

Coding and analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Following the cross-sectional code and retrieve principle based on Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), a qualitative analysis of the interviews by four coders, who were extensively trained, was organised to uncover the main topics and categories mentioned by the respondents across the entire data set. Every time a respondent uttered a statement (small or big), a key phrase was formulated to catch the thoughts, opinions or experiences of respondents regarding the national (Dutch) arena, the European (Brussels) arena and the municipal or provincial office. This resulted in an initial number of 1003 key phrases.

Subsequently, two external coders checked the collected key phrases, comparing them to the original interviews for adequacy and exhaustiveness. After this round, some key phrases were edited (reformulating a part of the key phrase, adding a word or changing a word for clarification); some key phrases were not only re-edited, but also reformulated and sometimes split up (e.g., because of two messages in one key phrase) after discussion; the majority of the key phrases remained unchanged. Including the split up key phrases, 47 new phrases were added. The final number of key phrases totalled 1050.

The next step involved the selection of key phrases that pertained to the landscape of the national and European arenas. All key phrases were categorised using four codes: the national/European arena; the subnational home organisation (internal); the

subnational home organisation (external); and PA competencies. Two independent coders reached a Cohen's kappa of .72. This step resulted in 390 key phrases about the national and European arenas.

Using a process of Grounded Theory, six main themes emerged from these 390 key phrases. A fixed distinction between some codes appeared to be impossible, as in practice the "gaining ground" activities could consist of a mixture of multiple activities, depending on the character of the PA file. When multiple codes were addressed, the key phrase was split up. The six codes are as follows: (1) arena susceptibility: the extent to which the national and European arenas are open to subnational interests; (2) arena interaction: the interplay between the national and the European arenas; (3) arena processes: the way the national and European arenas consider and handle subnational interests; (4) regional differences: eye-catching regional features (e.g., of a geographical, social, economic or cultural character) that may affect attention in the national and/or European arenas; (5) PA processes at the subnational level: the way subnational governments operate in the national and European arenas to get attention for their interests; (6) (Euro)parliamentarian affinity with subnational interests: how MPs and MEPs perceive subnational interests.

All variables were carefully defined in a codebook that could be consulted at all times. Substantial coding practice took place to ensure that coders understood what qualified as evidence of each variable. Based on a selection of 100 key phrases, a Cohen's kappa of .68 was achieved. The first author then used the codebook to finish coding the remaining key phrases.

Results

The six main themes, as mentioned in the *Methodology* section, are "the echo" of the opinions and experiences of the 41 respondents. Even though no clear dividing lines existed between the codes, this section presents the results per code.

Susceptibility of the national and European arenas

According to almost all respondents, the European arena is in principle susceptible to subnational

(regional) interests. The national arena (The Hague), however, is basically not, unless in extreme situations such as "social misery" (e.g., after bankruptcy of a big company, destroying regional employment in an extreme way). Not one respondent was positive about the way the national arena is handling subnational interests. In order to enter this arena, subnational governments "have to fight", as respondents characterised the situation. The most prominent argument mentioned by respondents is the arena attitude at the national level, that is, a general political and administrative non-interventional attitude towards regional interests. In the words of a Commissioner of the King:

Because subnational governments cannot produce enough countervailing power towards the central government, they have no other choice than to fight for their interests.

According to most respondents, due to centralism, national issues are prioritised in the national arena, both in ministries (administrative) and in parliament (politics). At the national level, there is a lack of empathy for "daily life" in subnational administrations due to a lack of knowledge about regional issues. The low-ranked position of regional interests is caused by the national focus of most parliamentarians. This frustrates subnational policies for acquiring national attention for their regional interests. Another factor mentioned is the switch at the national and European levels from a traditional regional policy of support for weak regions towards a more business-orientated sector approach that focuses on the rate of return on investments. A countryside mayor says:

Municipalities have to fight in the national arena, because there is no affinity with local daily life.

The regional focus in the national arena may be poor, but there is an advantageous aspect, according to respondents: because of this anaemic focus, local and regional authorities are forced to cooperate when it comes to weighty regional (mostly economic) aspects, by means of linking municipal and provincial agendas with national agendas. Furthermore, subnational administrations are driven together because of the dominance of "The Netherlands Ltd

Company”, which outflanks regional aspects, ongoing austerities, the general attitude of “withdrawing” tendencies at central governmental level and, finally, the disappearance of the opinion “that the government fits all”. Knowing that they are on their own and looking for other possibilities to seek attention for their interests, subnational administrations are becoming allies willy-nilly.

According to the respondents, subnational interests are also under pressure at the European level, because of an increasing dominance of national interests. This means that the European arena can be classified as a fighting arena for subnational interests as well. Respondents are referring to a misapprehension at the national level that the current Dutch subnationalisation of national tasks and powers to municipalities and provinces (mainly in youth care, in care for the elderly and in regional employment) will strengthen the position of subnational governments in the European arena, because this national policy of subnationalisation is not “a European affair”. The influence of Dutch subnational governments in the European arena is basically smaller than in the national arena, another respondent concluded, because the European arena involves 500 million people and the national arena approximately 17 million. Dutch subnational PA in the European arena is primarily directed to collecting knowledge about this arena, according to this respondent, because this knowledge is inadequate at the subnational level. In general, in the European arena, the regional focus may be larger than in the national arena, because most member states (not The Netherlands) are regionally orientated, and delegate regionally orientated parliamentarians. That is why Dutch subnational PA is still, according to this respondent, mostly limited to the relevant directorates-general (“ministries”) of the EU. In the words of a countryside mayor:

I accept that there is a kind of realism, but when parliamentarians [also with regional roots] are coming here in times of elections [...] and when they are elected, entering the House of Parliament, they forget about you, because they have to obey the parliamentary disciplines of their political parties. Later on, when they visit my place again, I see how they struggle to explain to my citizens why they couldn't do

what they had promised [in former visits to the same location].

Interactions between the national and European arenas

According to respondents, both the national and the European arenas have their own law and order, but they are interacting permanently and influencing subnational PA activities differently. Policy programmes at the national level sometimes depend on decision-making at the European level, including financial programmes, and vice versa. The arenas are not strictly separated. Subnational authorities (in some cases operating in both arenas at the same time) have to deal with those interactional influences.

According to respondents, the disadvantages of both the national and the European arenas' susceptibility, as mentioned in the section above, could be compensated partly by the interactions between both arenas. For instance, competition between both arenas can make subnational PA in the European arena more effective than in the national arena, since most respondents consider the national arena's susceptibility to regional issues to be low. The opposite can happen as well: collected information in the European arena can be useful in the national arena. As a Brussels respondent says:

The national arena is focused on recovering grounds “at home” which were lost in the European arena.

This respondent is referring to common experiences at the national level, indicating that the influence of European legislature is diminishing (“undermining”) national powers and even sovereignty. In the respondents' answers, this is a recurring aspect of arena interactions. According to them, the position of the national arena is threatened from two sides: from the European arena getting more influence on national agendas, and from the increasing presence of regions in the European arena, bringing in regional competition. This means, according to respondents, that despite openness in the European arena to regional affairs, the subnational PA professional and PA practitioner must bring everything into play there, to gain attention for subnational interests.

Another aspect of the arena interaction is the system of co-financing in the European arena. Usually, the EU is only willing to finance if other (national, regional or local) investors are willing to finance as well. For example, the European Fund for Regional Development is partly financing projects within four priorities (innovation, digital agenda, support for small- and medium-sized businesses and carbon reduction) if the public and private sector finance 50% as well. Due to budget shortages as a result of austerity policies at national, regional and local levels, co-financing systems are under pressure.

Further, as a respondent mentioned, the distance between “The Hague” and “Brussels” is influencing the practitioners’ daily work:

Physical, emotional, and political distance from the European arena remains big for European subnational PA when the subnational PA in the national arena (“The Hague”) is not organised well.

In other words, if in the municipal and provincial home organisation PA policy is not organised and, as a result, not enough internalised, the European arena is “too far away” for developing Europe-oriented PA operations. In the words of a provincial civil servant, working in the national and in the European arena:

Increasingly, Europe determines the framework of administrative and societal rules.... Globalization is an upscaling process.... Both The Netherlands as a country and Dutch regions have to connect to European and global developments more and more, resulting in cross-border operations, introducing cross-border problems as well.

Arena processes at the national and European levels

After the switch from support for weak regions to support for strong sectors, the regional focus in the national arena moved from “a distribution of justice” to a model of “cost–benefit analysis”. The common threat in the national arena, according to respondents, is a permanent lack of consistency, which causes an unquiet atmosphere in regional policies at national level. This can have disorientating effects in the PA policy of subnational governments in the

national arena, according to respondents. Respondents complained about “a total disparity” between the Randstad (the urban west of The Netherlands), which is considered the economic heart of the country, and other regions in the country. Cooperation at the subnational level could neutralise this disparity, but does not occur sufficiently, with the result that “the national level does not believe that subnational cooperation can help solve problems”, as a respondent said, who referred to the economic Randstad focus at the national level. The regions are not seen as “players”: they are unknown. Respondents emphasised another obstacle that frustrates processes in the national arena: a lack of regional knowledge that is leading to legislation “with execution-problems at the local level”. This means that legislation, relevant for subnational governments, is developed without sufficient subnational “coat hangers”.

At the European level, the execution of regional policy is influenced by institutional aspects “with long-term administrative procedures, [to accept] with love”, according to a Brussels-orientated respondent, who referred to complex procedures for funding regional projects via the EU Structural Funds. Subnational governments are focused on these funding aspects. This creates a permanent need for regional information in this arena, but subnational governments (mostly not positioned strongly enough because of a lack of cooperation) are not equipped to satisfy this need adequately, according to respondents. In the words of a MEP:

I learned from Schuman and Monnet that we’re building a European community, based on regions, and not on sovereign states. That’s why we invested in regional policy. But that has become romanticism today! [...] Today, the EU Structural Funds [...] are to change into innovation funds, [...] creating investments based on criteria and no longer on regions.

Regional differences

Respondents also discussed which components of “regionalism” dominate subnational PA. They mentioned the dominance of the Randstad, which suppresses the interests of other regions in the north, the east and the south of the country. These regions have

to use all possible PA instruments to create countervailing power towards Randstad dominance. Traditional regional (e.g., social-cultural, cultural-historic) characteristics and (folkloristic) regional identities do not play an important role. As a consequence, subnational PA by other regions is “hard business” and money-driven, respondents said. The leading component in the Randstad dominance is the national arena-view of The Netherlands as a private company (“The Netherlands Ltd Company”). The interests of this “company” are concentrated in the Randstad; the Randstad has become the basic framework for regional policy developments in the national arena, which is, in the words of a countryside mayor “dominated by ‘players’ with hardly any regional roots [...] and if there are any, [they are] not practicing them”. A non-Randstad provincial civil servant referred to the ministries as places where “civil servants are dedicated to Randstad-interests”. However, according to a regional PA practitioner, “it is a misapprehension at the national level to presume that what is good for the Randstad, is also good for other regions”. A staff member of a non-Randstad Chamber of Commerce mentioned in this regard:

Files from outside the Randstad get less priority, [...] even when subnational governments offer financial participation in [for example] motor highways in their own region.... The “The Hague arena” keeps the doors closed.

However, there are other possibilities. To create countervailing power towards “the national culture of Randstad dominance”, it could be wise for regions outside of the Randstad to look for cooperation with neighbouring regions on the other side of the border or even with regions elsewhere in Europe. For example, municipalities and provinces along the national borders are already used to cooperating with their subnational German and Belgian neighbours on the other side of the border and therefore experience “Europe” day-to-day. According to some respondents, exactly these regions wake up interest from the European arena:

The European arena considers regions along the national borders as important regions. (Countryside mayor along the German border)

Therefore, cooperating Dutch cities and regions situated in the European corridor London-Bavaria-Genoa create a stronger position compared to other regions. (MEP)

According to the respondents, the main, ever-existing question is how to make subnational interests so weighty that they become “interesting” for the national arena. The better the arguments are and the louder the region is speaking, the more attention the national arena can have for other regions than merely the Randstad, they say. “Because of their peripheral geographical location, some remote regions (the north and the south) are able to appeal to ‘feelings of guilt’ in the hearts and minds of national policy makers”, a provincial PA professional said.

Some respondents considered regional characteristics helpful in drawing attention, as a non-Randstad provincial PA professional said: “The national arena is paying attention to subnational interests if these interests are ‘touching’, because with these kind of aspects, MPs can possibly do well in their arena politically.”

Finally, subnational interests are usually not important electorally in the national arena. Regional or non-regional MPs may see electoral advantages in embracing local (regional, rural) subjects of substantial character, which are usually far beyond their daily national political horizon. For instance, the national arena is only alarmed in the case of disasters. An example is the fireworks explosion in the Dutch town of Enschede in 2000, turning an old quarter (200 houses) into a ruin in no time (950 people wounded, 23 died). Other examples mentioned by the respondents include the regular earthquakes in the province of Groningen as a result of the extraction of natural gas leading to restoration programmes and the exceptional shrinkage of economic development in the south of The Netherlands. Regional interests become more valuable and urgent in such dramatic cases. The president of a Chamber of Commerce said:

To place regional interests on national agendas, disasters are more helpful than dialogues, strong [regional] personalities or PA events [such as breakfast, lunch or dinner network meetings].

PA processes at the subnational level

According to a PA practitioner, the concept of PA has not yet been established in subnational authorities, because PA used to be a policy instrument for the private sector. In the Dutch public sector, PA is (relatively) new. Nevertheless, three process elements were returned prominently in the answers of most respondents: cooperation, networking and looking for ways to bridge distances between subnational interests on the one hand and national and European interests on the other. The common aspects in these three process elements are, according to the respondents, “doing business” and staying away from elements in regionalism that are too folkloristic. A MEP said:

Subnational PA in the Brussels arena is doing business, retaining cultural diversity.

The experience of cooperation at the subnational level is “the creation of new insights and added value”, which “[...] makes the subnational message [at the central level] more interesting”. Cooperation can lead to new, unforeseen facts and figures, that influence “the other side of the table”, create new viewpoints and shape new understandings. A PA practitioner said: “The national arena can become more susceptible to regional subjects by the creation of mutual dependency”. Also, cross-border cooperation with subnational authorities in the neighbouring countries of Germany and Belgium “can be of great meaning in the national arena, especially when there are common interests”, as a PA practitioner said “For subnational PA operations outside the Randstad, recognition and visibility are more important than characterisation”. A Commissioner of the King commented warningly: “[But] to stimulate the attention in the national arena for subnational interests, it is important not to fall in too much regionalism”.

Networking “in order to transfer information” is possible by means of organising work visits and field trips, “especially for relevant department civil servants who are writing accounts and reports for their minister”. The approach of “The Netherlands Ltd Company” may have disadvantages for regional nuances, but the other side of the coin is that showing strong aspects during work visits and field trips

can create new networks at the national level, by asking questions such as: Where do regional interests [...] overlap or conflict with national and European themes?

“Subnational cooperation in the European arena is absolutely necessary”, a mayor said, “also with non-governmental partners”. Messages should be harmonised to overcome subnational disagreements. A fragmented subnational presence in the European arena is “full of disadvantage” and “not wise”, because the European arena is considering “The Netherlands as one region”. “All [Dutch] individual subnational PA professionals should have one [collective] office for everybody under one roof, and [they] must have a clear agenda”, a MEP and a Brussels provincial advisor concluded. “For the credibility of the EU, it is important that subnational governments connect themselves with Europe”, a MEP suggested. In successful connections, it is conceivable that “Dutch subnational governments can deliver a contribution to the realisations of European policy goals”, a Brussels PA practitioner said, because “the European Commission is not able to oversee all the needs of the EU, so [at the European level] the need for practical [regional] experience and [regional] professionalism is always there at this level”.

A mayor and former deputy said: “Visibility is crucial for the entrance of subnational governments in the national and European arena”. Another mayor and former alderman said:

Subnational governments [municipalities and provinces] do not understand that an upscaling of the administrative system [municipalities and provinces merging into bigger administrative ‘units’] is a powerful contribution to their position in the national and European arena, and the role they can play there.

In the words of a Commissioner of the King about PA policy at the subnational level:

The efforts that remote regions [...] have to make to draw attention (in the national arena) are great, compared to the efforts the urban west of The Netherlands has to make; here, [...] it was not necessary to develop subnational PA.

(Euro)parliamentarian affinity with subnational interests

According to the respondents, a general view regarding electoral and political possibilities for regional issues does not exist, neither in the European Parliament nor in the national parliament (Second Chamber) or senate (the First Chamber). Only when the political situation changes in such a way that a regional issue can support individual parliamentarians, or that a MP can identify him- or herself with a region, is there willingness to pay attention to subnational interests. Depending on the PA file, it may be advisable to intervene in the senate; senators (meetings of the senate are once a week) can be representatives of relevant societal partners in subnational PA processes. However, the fruitfulness of PA at this stage may be doubtful. A MP, later on countryside mayor, stated:

It is a misapprehension to presume that more regional MPs [i.e. Members of Parliament with regional roots] will lead to more attention for the own region.

Another MP with regional roots mentioned:

Regional MPs ought to forget their regional roots on behalf of the leader of their party in the House of Parliament.

In addition, a countryside mayor said:

Regional people who can become a political player in the national arena should look for a position close to the own political key players and be loyal to them.

Regionalism in the national arena may be characterised as unpopular. A PA practitioner referred to the influence of regional identity: "Regions with a powerful identity have a firm relationship with their own regional MPs [i.e. Members of Parliament with regional roots]".

Even though the situation is different in the European arena, the effects are similar to those in the national arena. According to a Brussels provincial PA manager:

The Dutch MEPs are first and foremost a member of a political party [faction], and secondly a MEP on behalf

of their region, [and] they do not have any relation with the national political arena in The Netherlands.... Because of the non-existence of a connection with the national political arena, Dutch MEPs are, also for their own political party, invisible with the result that chances are lost and agenda-setting [for regional subjects] is hardly happening.

So, foremost, via the political party, MEPs are connected with the national "home front"; this is more relevant to them than regional roots. A Commissioner of the King concluded:

Although Dutch MEPs look after their regional homework, Dutch regional themes are lost in the European arena of plural politics.

Respondents admitted that MPs and MEPs are paying lip service to regional issues, but these issues are hardly of any electoral meaning. If regional subjects can be of temporary advantage, then parliamentarians are willing to listen, but national electoral items are dominant. In the words of two MEPs with regional roots:

The governmental attitude is becoming an attitude of doing business.... The EU Structural Funds are tools for governors and officials and not for citizens.... So, if you say that subnational governments should be linked with the European arena, then I say: yes. This is better for the credibility of the EU. But do not transfer this to an individual voter somewhere in the countryside.

In the last years, agricultural interests are making place for industrial interests.... In former years, I have been president of different parliamentarian delegations of economic specialists.... and I've seen that even cities were talking about the creation of strong regions.... The European arena is the new place for strengthening regions.

Discussion

In this qualitative study, Dutch PA practitioners and PA receivers were interviewed about their opinion and their experience with subnational PA in both the national and the European arenas. More specifically, we were interested in the relevant arena characteristics for subnational PA, and in the way subnational

PA practitioners manage arena properties. In summary, looking at the results of the interviews, negative experiences in both arenas seem to dominate.

Arena attitude

The first negative element in subnational PA operations is the centralistic arena attitude at the national level. As a consequence, the openness to subnational interests is close to zero in the national arena. No national hands are outstretched to the subnational governments, except in dramatic situations (e.g., Enschede in 2000, after a fireworks catastrophe; Groningen in 2015, after earthquakes caused by natural gas extraction). The national arena is considered to be mainly focused on the urban west of The Netherlands ('Randstad'), positioning non-Randstad regions on the sidelines. From a European perspective, this process is not exceptional. In France, Paris, Lyon and Marseille are examples of economic key regions, dominating subnational PA and putting other regions in a secondary position; in the United Kingdom regions like Scotland and Wales are opposing London-dominance and in Spain regions like Catalonia are opposing Madrid.

The European arena attitude was also mentioned as an obstacle for subnational governments. Here, the reason is that member states assign more importance to their national interests than to regional interests, because of increasing globalisation effects and dominating European foreign policy. Nevertheless, because of a relatively positive European attitude towards regional development as such, subnational PA operations in that arena are considered useful. Since the arena attitude, coloured by tendencies of centralism and political considerations of national origin, highly determines the success of subnational PA operations, the PA practitioners need all hands on deck to create positive results for subnational governments. Since regional policies in both the European and the national arena changed from "support for weak regions" into "support for top sectors" (especially for top-sector regions), subnational PA now has a strong business-like character that does not seem to differ much from PA in the private sector. Subnational governments should therefore intensify their capacity to cooperate as much as the private

sector is already doing. The times of merely focusing on "small" subnational interests are over (Boogers et al., 2015).

Cooperation and networking

The second element consists of the level of cooperation and networking between subnational governments. Because of hesitations regarding subnational cooperation (as cooperation may undermine own interests), subnational cooperation has not yet fully developed. However, the more intense a cooperation is, the more effective subnational PA operations can be. This is common sense in the circle of PA practitioners. Municipal and provincial governments in The Netherlands are cooperating in all kinds of subjects, more than ever before, but this cooperation is predominantly focused on cost reductions. Furthermore, many of these cooperation activities concern so-called "functional regions" (i.e., thematic municipal cooperation in fire departments, safety, infrastructure and health care). Structures of such functional collaborations are only of local value and hardly exist when the same subnational governments are asking the national and European arenas to pay attention at their needs. For such operations, explicit political cooperation is required. However, this is currently not highly developed at the subnational level. The roots of this non-cooperation attitude remain unclear. Every subnational politician and official administrator seems to have a basic willingness to cooperate, especially on infrastructure and (environmental) planning, but full subnational cooperation (which means that some "favourite" own interests should be reconsidered or even postponed) is considered something different, and frustrates the advantages of cooperation. At the provincial level, comparable developments are visible. In order to get more body in the European arena, Dutch provinces decided to jointly create unconstitutional forms of cooperation by representing themselves as (undefined) "regions" (e.g., the provinces in the north and the east of The Netherlands). Still, these are a minor factor in relation to the neighbouring German *Bundesländer*, which are constitutionally defined in the German Constitution of 1949. The result of this situation is

fragmented Dutch subnational PA at both the municipal and the provincial levels.

Administrative elements

The third negative element is that, differing administrative elements are frustrating effective subnational PA. The EU is a union in which each member state keeps its own constituency, its own administrative and organisational structures and its own politics (Habermas, 2012; Holslag, 2014; Verhofstadt, 2009). According to MacLeod (1999) and MacLeod and Goodwin (1999), exactly these aspects of constituency, administrative and organisational structures and politics at the national level are playing a role at subnational levels as well. He describes “the value of considering the political structuration of scales such as ‘city’, ‘region’, [‘Britain’] or ‘Europe’”. This has consequences for the technique of implementing subnational PA operations in the Brussels arena. The subnational PA practitioner, entering the Brussels arena with Dutch legislation in his “backpack”, will be confronted not only with European constituencies, but also (in the case of transregional or interregional cooperation) with (regional) constituencies of other member states. Besides this, in an administrative sense, the concept of “region” is not defined, neither in Dutch legislation nor in European legislation.

Final remarks

Based on the above, the question to discuss is, What does this mean for subnational PA in general and for the PA practitioner specifically? The subnational PA practitioner, in any case, must be a “fighter” in the national arena as well in the European arena. It must be noted that compared to the national arena, the European arena is considered to be more receptive to subnational interests. However, this receptiveness is especially present when it concerns “poor” regions in Middle- and South-Eastern Europe or regions that contain top sectors. Such regions are viewed as more close to the people, which increases the visibility of Europe, which is in accordance with the more recent focus of the EU on social policy (Berkel et al., 1998). However, Dutch MEPs, elected because of their political colour and not because of regional roots, are generally not mentioned

as willing partner players in this subnational game. Besides all this, the PA practitioner simultaneously has to fight “at home”, where any form of cooperation must be arranged to uplift the PA messages in order to contribute to the desired visibility.

The subnational PA practitioner should have a powerful perseverance to find a place in the arenas, amongst other arena players. Regional roots (i.e., having regional orientated, political “arena friends”, such as MPs with regional roots) are not considered to be sufficient. Not one subnational PA practitioner was positive about the empathy of their “own” regional MPs: they are paying lip service because of their regional electorate. It is conceivable that these MPs will push and pull and do their utmost to place subnational interests on the agenda, but PA practitioners are usually “lonesome cowboys” in the galleries and corridors of the political arenas.

“Gaining ground” in the national and European arenas for subnational PA professionals and PA practitioners is a permanent quest in finding new balances between the message they have to bring in and the arena-connected obstacles they have to overcome (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Baumgartner et al. 1993). Concluding that the situation of subnational authorities is hopeless under current circumstances would be too far, and even untrue. The regular programmes in the EU Structural Funds, directed towards regions, are offering sufficient starting points and directives to strengthen money-driven regional potentials. However, it must be noted that the EU is only willing to finance if other (national, regional or local) investors are willing to finance as well and, in the Dutch context, in which regional is based on national redistribution, this means that national or provincial authorities have to cooperate as well. Therefore, to create substantial “long-life” success, subnational governments must look for cooperation at subnational levels. The final conclusion, therefore, is that subnational authorities can only successfully penetrate both arenas when they dare to overcome their “own small interests” and dare to end PA operations that merely follow their own considerations. Since the national arena (“The Hague”) has a limited receptiveness to subnational interests (except in cases of regional misery), and because the “Brussels” antennas for subnational

interests are outflanked by national interests and member state interests, the subnational governments have no other choice than to give substantial national and European weight to their interests, as much as they can, and preferably in close cooperation.

Regarding the representativeness of the results, the question arises as to what extent the Dutch situation is different from other EU countries. The Dutch situation is comparable with France and Sweden, being devolutionary states where municipalities and regions can play a dominant role in subnational PA. In more federated states, such as Austria, Belgium and Germany, and in regionalised devolutionary states, such as the Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom, regions can play an even more dominant role in subnational PA. Finally, in unitary states (Bulgaria, the Baltic States, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Luxemburg, Malta, Portugal, Rumania, Slovakia and Slovenia), the role of subnational governments is less dominant. Euro parliamentarians from federated and (regional) devolutionary member states are rooted electorally in regions because of national constitutional structures. In The Netherlands euro parliamentarians are rooted electorally primarily in their home country; they may have regional roots but regional loyalty is secondary. Here, regional interests are frequently served by lip service, as respondents in this article stress. In general, regional comparisons between member states, regarding subnational PA, may be diverse, but overall national interests remain dominant (Vollaard et al., 2015).

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Notes

1. In The Netherlands, municipalities and provinces are subnational governments, anchored in the Constitution. Regions are (constitutionally) not defined. Municipal and provincial cooperation is functional and generally considered to be “regional” cooperation, in some cases strengthened by social-cultural and historic-cultural relationships.
2. Regionalism is the creation of political, administrative and constitutional space for societies with social-cultural, social-economic and historic-cultural relationships (Van Rompuy, 2012).

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