Pragmatic nationalism in Europe: the N-VA and the new Flemish approach to Europe

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Résumé :

Since the 1990s, Europe has been depicted as the most privileged political arena for ethno-regionalist parties to enhance regional autonomy. Along with the advent of the principle of subsidiarity, Europe seemed to dissolve sovereignty enabling regional actors to prosper in a context where regional independence could eventually be reached.

In spite of these powerful political ambitions, with hindsight, we have finally realized that Europe can only provide the 'elements of usage' for ethno-regionalist parties to deploy a pragmatic strategy intended to strengthen their legitimacy to govern at the regional level.

Based upon a pragmatic notion of nationalism and on a concept of usage of Europe, in this paper, we will demonstrate how the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (the N-VA) in Flanders has been able to use Europe since 2005 to regain political legitimacy to govern.

1. Introduction: *Pragmatic nationalism* in Europe, the N-VA and the new Flemish approach to Europe

Since the 1990s, Europe has been depicted as the most privileged political arena for ethno-regionalist parties[1] to enhance regional autonomy[2]. Along with the advent of the principle of subsidiarity, Europe seemed to dissolve sovereignty enabling ethno-regionalist parties to prosper in a context where regional independence could eventually be reached.

For this 'party family', irrespectively of nuanced definitions that can be found in the literature[3], the European venue was used to bypass[4] national fora of governance on the attempt to solve thorny political issues[5] based on antagonistic views on regional versus national nationalisms which also opposed different visions of the state's structure and competences. For these political actors, the denial of exclusive claims on the part of the state nationalism and the assertion of national rights of self-determination for a community that they recognize as a 'nation'[6] were the main arguments for the European venue. Regional nationalism[7] in Europe has always been triggered against the dominance of a national form of belonging – the 'national nationalism' – and in the 21st century this remains the case.

Back in the 1990s, Europe was expected to deliver regional autonomy which was deeply rooted in the belief in the right of 'nation-regions' to govern autonomously and which was strongly inspired by the transformation of the nation-state and the end of sovereignty[8]. These were the days of regional heyday and ethno-regionalist parties across Western Europe were in fact among the most ardent defenders of a 'Europe of the Regions' overwhelmed with the extra-political space granted by the

Maastricht Treaty, namely at the Council of Ministers (article 146).

With the institutionalization of the Committee of the Regions, subsidiarity became bound to the European polity project and today it is undeniable that Europe has provided one of the stimuli for bottom-up[9] regionalism[10] emboldening regions[11], and more specifically, ethno-regionalist political actors within those regions to assert for their territorial autonomy by opening quasi-embassies[12], enabling even some of them to get into para-diplomatic activities[13].

Moreover, the establishment of the European Free Alliance-Democratic Party of the Peoples of Europe (EFA-DPPE) at the European Parliament in 1981[14] and its participation in the Greens-EFA political group since 1999 brought high political expectations that soon would prove to be 'flawed'[15]. The 2004 European enlargement and many unitary state reforms towards devolutionary trends of administrative and political competences had made traditional center-periphery cleavage[16] less salient in European politics which, by the same token, had weakened the organizational strength of the EFA[17] at the European level. By the end of the 1990s, for ethno-regionalist parties, the European institutional opportunity structure[18] was about to shrink as much as to dictate the end of the naïve hype of the Europe of the Regions[19].

In the 21st century, in spite of a harsh European experience, regionalism in Europe is finally 'back on track' and ethno-regionalist parties have overcome the European disillusion with a strong sense of reality. In fact, ethno-regionalist parties have finally realized that Europe can only provide the 'elements of usage'[20] to deploy a pragmatic nationalist strategy intended to increase their political legitimacy, first, at the regional level.

Europe has not delivered (and will never deliver) independence. Therefore, regional gains of political power in Europe, which refers to an increased capacity to govern autonomously, requires a deeper regional resonance which is obtained by the means of 'political legitimacy': the grounds on which regional governments may demand obedience from their citizens[21]. Looking through the lens of European experience, ethno-regionalist political parties have learned to use Europe as a source of political leverage, choosing carefully what they consider to be the most appropriate European resources to use to bargain relations in network for better patterns of regional governance[22]. By doing so, formal and informal channels of regional interest representation in Europe have been tightened-up across levels of governance. Moreover, vertical and horizontal cooperation between national and regional actors have been reasserted and regional politics of nationalism have been framed by civic forms of nationalism.

As a consequence of this new consciousness, Europe is now used to secure and endure regional positions in power and the European venue is no longer dictated by demands of straightforward concessions of political autonomy. In the 21st century, regional nationalist strategy in Europe has become more strategic in the sense that the overall usage of the region's resources is also set in place to achieve long-term political goals. Additionally, it has also become more pragmatic in the sense that the European venue follows a strategy which will enable ethno-regionalist parties to solve internal political grievances more effectively[23] by the means of political cooperation which is deeply sustained by a strong sense of 'regional patriotism'.

Because most of these political actors are confronted with a limited political space to act, both at the national and the European level, mainly due to their minority positions in power and to the

loss of the center-periphery cleavage in Europe, ethno-regionalist parties will now 'use' Europe to expand their small trench of power in order to deliver sensitive economic regional policies which will positively affect their legitimacy to govern to the eyes of their regional citizens. For these regional political actors, the European challenge consists of finding the most effective articulation of regional and European resources which will provide them with the best conditions to govern and which, in turn, will help them to reinforce regional confidence in their capacity to govern.

Based upon a pragmatic notion of nationalism and on a sociological concept of 'usage' of the European Union, this article will demonstrate how the democratic ethno-regionalist party in Flanders, the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), has been able to 'use' Europe to regain political legitimacy to govern.

We will prove that the N-VA has used Europe to enlarge their political authority by suggesting, for the first time, the establishment of a Flemish regional office in Europe in 2005. This regional office called Vleva has enabled them to expand their access to power by governing *in* network with all regional political parties and forums linking scattered political and economic Flemish actors across levels of governance.

We will also demonstrate that they have been politically imaginative, by taking advantage of their pro-European Belgian dogma and shared *lack of Belgitude*[24], a sort of a 'regional patriotism', which has also rescued Flemish nationalism from an ethnic understanding and from political isolation in Europe.

We will then conclude that the N-VA has been acting *pragmatically* using Europe as a source of legitimacy on the attempt to (re)gain Flemish public acceptance by showing signs of efficient decision-making and effective alternative governance arrangements for Flanders.

2. Times of *pragmatic nationalism*: Europeanization from a sociological perspective and the 'usage' of Europe

2.1. Europeanization within the limits of our empirical research: a rational-sociological account of learning

The concept of Europeanization has become a leading concept in the field of European studies[25]. Essentially the term Europeanization is used to signify the 'transformation of a variable' at the national level which adapts to a European model, logic or constraint[26]. Europeanization has gained widespread currency amongst scholars as a newly fashionable term to denote a variety of changes within European politics and international relations[27]. Yet its purpose and utility is deeply contested, leading to a number of conceptual approaches and typologies which explains why the scope of Europeanization as a research agenda has been very broad[28].

As a term applied in social sciences, it can range over history, culture, politics, society and economics. Between 1981 and 2000, the term has been applied within four broad categories: as an historical process; as a matter of cultural diffusion; as a process of institutional adaptation; and as the adaptation of policy and policy process.

One could distinguish studies of Europeanization according to the object which is supposed to go through the process of adaptation and this can vary from politics, to polity, policies and political

parties. Looking into the literature, Gary Marks[29] and Sidney Torrow[30] have examined a possible reallocation of the political struggle – *politics* – towards the European level, whereas Tanja Borzel[31] has analyzed the evolving constellation of political institutions – *the polity* – and Claudio Radaelli[32] has focused on the transformation of *public policies*.

When it comes to the Europeanization of ethno-regionalist political parties, Peter Lynch[33] and Lieven De Winter[34] were those few scholars who have written on it, using a top-down approach and limiting their analysis to the impact of the constitution of the Democratic Party of Peoples of Europe/ European Free Alliance (DPPE-EFA) at the European Parliament on ethno-regionalist attitudes and political preferences[35].

On the opposite side of these exiguous theoretical approaches, the question is raised as to whether the scope of research agendas is so broad that the concept of Europeanization is stretched beyond the limit of what is acceptable in the social sciences. This means that the implications of sloppy conceptual frameworks should not be overlooked. Therefore, the first step is to make the concept of Europeanization amenable to our empirical analysis and then connect it to one possible explanation.

If Europeanization can be understood as the reshaping of politics in the domestic arena in ways that reflect policies, practices and preferences advanced through the European system of governance[36], Europeanization within the limits of our empirical research could be defined as the reshaping of the N-VA regional modes of governance through the 'usage' of the European Union which reflects a renewed political practice and preference in Europe, in other words, a new nationalist strategy.

Our research agenda is in some ways *ad hoc* because it combines elements of research dealing with politics, polity and policies as long as it tries to understand how one ethno-regionalist political actor – *political party* – has managed to reallocate a national political struggle – *politics* – to the European Union – *polity* –, using elements of this polity to transform patterns of regional governance through policy delivery – *policies*. According to our definition, it would be misleading to suggest that Europeanization has been widely used as a stand-alone conceptual framework. Instead relevant studies are often couched within longer-established meta-theoretical frames like new institutionalism; multi-level governance and policy networks with Europeanization as an epithet. As such, much of the literature on Europeanization is institutionalist by nature[37] and over time Europeanization research has been using nuanced and differentiated new institutionalist approaches to combine elements of multi-level governance and policy network.

Within the new institutionalist approach, a useful contrast is made between the respective arguments of rational choice and sociological variants of new institutionalism[38]. While the rational choice variant emphasizes a rational goal driven action, the latter emphasizes a more complex process of socialization through which actors transform their goals and preferences.

Additionally, there is a clear contrast between rationalist and sociological strands in parallel debates on the new institutionalism and policy networks, which generate contrasting hypotheses in relation to the nature and extent of the transformation of governance that has taken place. A rationalist account would assume power to be zero-sum and would expect regional actors to continue pursuing the same political goal and ascribe shifts toward multi-level governance through a redistribution of power resources and a restructuring of regional power[39]. By contrast a sociological perspective would

assume power to be positive-sum, and would expect regional actors to change their preferences and goals through socialization, and ascribe shifts toward multi-level governance through problem solving.

In both accounts, learning is seen to be a feature of change, but has a different meaning in each. According to Radaelli[40], the central distinction is between 'thin' and 'thick' forms of learning that are normally related to rational and sociological approaches, respectively. On the one hand, *thin learning* refers to the readjustment of regional actor strategies to allow them to achieve unchanged political goals in a new context or to get around the national obstacle by using a menu of new responses in various ingenious ways. On the other hand, *thick learning* involves a modification of actor's values and thus a reshaping of their preferences and goals[41].

The first position, linked to the Rhodes model of policy networks[42] is informed very much by rational choice underpinning as it regards networks as an opportunity for strategic interaction through a redistribution of power resources which would entail power restructuring.

The second position is closely associated to Beate Kholer-Koch and her collaborators[43] who have deepened the understanding of the multi-level governance concept, traditionally known from Hooghe and Marks's writings[44]. For Beate Kholer-Koch, *governance* refers to the growing importance of non-hierarchical forms of policy-making, such as dynamic network which involve public authorities as well as private actors across this multi-layered European structure. With her notion of *network governance*, she draws attention to the segmentation and changing role of the state and stresses that governing the European Union involves bringing together the relevant state and societal actors. Furthermore this *network governance* is characterized by an orientation towards problem-solving instead of individual utility-maximization.

As far as our research is concerned, we find evidence of a rational choice approach as much as elements of a sociological approach coupled with 'thin' and 'thick' learning. In fact, if it is true that the European venue has always been perceived as a rational driven action (rational choice) to solve a contentious political issue (sociological choice), it is also true that regional actors have learned to use Europe to strengthen their legitimacy to govern by improving their regional patterns of governance.

This renewed strategy has been accomplished through socialization and by a careful redistribution of regional power resources in Europe, using Europe as an additional resource. Strategic regional interaction with Europe has been improved because socialization with Europe has gained maturity through experience. The nationalist intent advanced by ethno-regionalist parties in Europe has not changed – thin learning – but the strategy deployed by these political actors in Europe has been transformed – thick learning: it has become *pragmatic*.

This double acknowledgement will allow us to apply the concept of 'usage' of Europe from a sociological perspective as a conceptual bridge between rational and sociological institutionalist accounts of Europeanization.

2.2. The concept of 'usage' of Europe and its logics

According to Sophie Jacquot and Cornelia Wolf[45] the word 'usage' has two dictionary definitions: the action of using something or the fact of being used. In this research, the term 'usage' will

be defined as the action of using the European Institutions for *discursive* and/or *political* purposes. By insisting on the term 'usage' we wish to cover the strategic interaction of regional rational actors – ethno-regionalist parties – with Europe. Therefore, we could define 'usage' as practices and political interactions which adjust and redefine themselves by seizing the European Union as a set of institutions for *discursive* purposes and/or for *political* purposes[46]. In the first case, Europe would be used as a discursive reference aiming at invoking a positive association which would enable ethno-regionalist parties to higher the political profile of their region. In the second case, European institutions would be seized to access political power, by accessing European fora of discussion and negotiation, which would ultimately enable ethno-regionalist parties to interfere into political deliberation that can affect them positively. In our research, we will be looking at Europe as a political space since the discursive usage of Europe is not relevant in our case study.

Besides this aspect of political interaction with Europe, the understanding of the concept of 'usage' can only be fully understood in relation to a regional nationalist purpose which can only be understood in face of a national context.

Finally, the 'usage' of Europe is not solely a function of the European Union perceived as a political opportunity structure[47] because these institutional structures can only serve to define a new external environment with which ethno-regionalists actor can interact[48]. Therefore, the 'usage' of Europe is also a function of regional resources that ethno-regionalist parties can mobilize but together these two sets of factors – regional resources and Europe – will determine a particularistic interaction with Europe which constitutes a 'usage'.

As far as the regional intention is concerned, in the 21st century ethno-regionalist political parties come to Europe to increase their political legitimacy. The term legitimacy derives from the term *legitimare* meaning to declare lawful, broadly means rightfulness which in practical terms could be translated into political reliability[49]. According to Robert Dahl[50], we can distinguish two kinds of political legitimacy – legitimacy as *influence* and legitimacy as *authority* which is determined by two distinctive conceptions of power: power as *influence* and power as *authority.*

Influence is distinguished from authority on the grounds that the former is based upon the regional ability to influence the decisions, whereas the latter involves the right to do so. In the first case, the regional actor's action is based upon a partial constitutional capacity to make decisions – *influencing logic* – whereas in the second case, the regional actor's action benefits from full constitutional capacity to make decisions – *positioning logic*. This means that the 'usage' of Europe would be pre-conditioned by regional constitutional settlement. In other words, ethno-regionalist actors coming from a region with a larger scope of competences would be better positioned to use Europe for gains of *authority* and those with a lower political profile would be limited to use Europe for gains of *influence.*

Based upon this dual general classification, the theoretical capacity of an ethno-regionalist party to exert political power in Europe would be framed, but arguments underlying the European venue wouldn't be revealed. In order to fill this information gap, we would need to add two elements to the analysis: non-constitutional regional resources and a full understanding of the national context where the nationalist battle takes place. Non-constitutional resources would enable us to portray the features of ethno-regionalist actors as much it would function as an added-value for these political actors to minimize their constitutional weaknesses and/or their minority position in power.

If it is true that constitutional regional competences pre-determine what kind of legitimacy ethno-regionalist political parties can expect from Europe, it is also true that a realistic vision of politics and an imaginative combination of regional constitutional and non-constitutional resources would allow ethno-regionalist parties to achieve their purpose more effectively. To that respect, regional non-constitutional resources would include information resources, economic resources, political resources and identity resources. Information resources would refer to formal (regional MEP's at the European Parliament, Regional Governmental representation to the European Union and regional participation at Council of Ministers) and informal (regional offices) fora of regional interest representation in Europe. Economic resources would consist of natural regional as much as the level of regional economic performance. Political resources would consist of a regional pro-European stance and European expertise. Identity resources would include a civic form of nationalism perceived as a rational form of regional belonging, a sort of a 'regional patriotism'.

We can conclude that ethno-regionalist capacity to use Europe for gains of political legitimacy is primarily a function of constitutional regional resources, but these can also be complemented by regional non-constitutional resources. Additionally, it is impossible to capture the arguments underlying the European venue unless political dynamics of national party competition over nationalist issue are fully addressed.

2.3. *Pragmatic nationalism*: definition and profile

Since we are dealing with a new term, *pragmatic nationalism*, and we are still looking for the most accurate and insightful adjectives which will help us to define political practices deployed by ethno-regionalist political parties in their 'usage' of Europe, we will first rely on the objectivity of a dictionary and then apply the elements of this unbiased definition to our empirical research. According to the Cambridge dictionary[51] one is considered to be *pragmatic* whenever someone manages to solve problems in a realistic way without obeying to fixed theories, ideas or rules.

In our research, to be *pragmatic* refers to the realistic ability of ethno-regionalist parties to solve a problem which is political in its immediate nature, nationalistic in its root and economic in its solution. To be realistic in this case implies accepting the limitations of a minority position in power and a limited access to regional resources whereas the solution requires an imaginative political action to guarantee a broader access. This can only be achieved through political cooperation with those who can still exert political power over them and with those who potentially will benefit from better patterns of regional governance. Whereas the first category of actors will allow ethno-regionalist actors to expand their limited access to regional resources, the second category of actors will provide them with the legitimacy they are looking for. Moreover, since we are also dealing with a political context with a sensitive nationalist issue at hand, this cooperative line of action can only be optimized if ethnic notions of regional nationalism are smoothed towards civic forms of regional nationalism so that ideological discrepancies between actors over nationalism can be minimized. When faced with this notion of *nationalism*, what becomes clear is that essentialist features that define an ethnic nationalism are therefore distrusted.

A *pragmatic nationalist* strategy in Europe is now shaped by practical circumstances which means that ethno-regionalist political actors will have to be politically imaginative by making their best deal out of their limited resources and politically cooperative in order to expand their access and control over constitutional and non-constitutional resources of the region. In that sense, *nationalism* in

Europe will reassert traditional aspects of modernist nationalism[52] as long as it can be perceived as a sociopolitical movement[53] driven by a regional political elite that uses Europe to reassert the political autonomy of their (regional) nation. Besides the more traditional aspects of modernist nationalism, this renewed regional nationalism in Europe is also based upon a civic notion of the regional nation which takes the form of 'a regional patriotism'[54], a sort of a rational quest for collective goods which will help ethno-regionalist actors to exert political cooperation from those who do not share the same political and nationalist interests.

3. The N-VA in Europe: *pragmatic* nationalists in action

The N-VA is a center-right Flemish democratic nationalist party that came into existence in 2001, mainly out of protest against the Lambermont[55] state reform, and as the most successful political faction – the *Vlaams Nationaal* headed by Geert Bourgeois – within the perished Volksunie[56] political party which has always fought for an alternative view to the traditional pillar-based Belgian parties.

For the N-VA, and following the ideological footsteps of the Volksunie, the political goal is clear: confederalism should be the intermediate institutional framework towards a greater political ambition – independence – whereas the most traditional Flemish political parties – the Christian Democrats (CD&V) and the Flemish Liberals (Open Vld) – and the less traditional ones – the Flemish Socialists (Sp.a) and Flemish Greens (Groen!) – are still standing for a federal solution for Belgium.

In February 2004 the N-VA finally came back to power, establishing a cartel with the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V). At the regional elections of June 2004 the cartel won and the CD&V regained power in Flanders along with the N-VA in a coalition. In 2004, the N-VA was finally 'back on track' but they were sharing this privileged position with the powerful CD&V, both at the federal and at the regional level. This means that, in spite of a favorable constitutional settlement, when the N-VA came back to power, they had just one seat at the Chamber, none at the Senate[57] and one minister only at the regional level with Geert Bourgeois as Flemish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Media and Tourism.

In 2004, political ambitions of old times were still there but the road was doomed to be long and lonely because of a minor position within Flemish political spectrum, partially loomed by the unpopular image of the extreme-right ethnic Flemish nationalists, the *Vlaams Belang* (former *Vlaams Block*[58]).

Besides this disadvantageous political context, Flanders was facing economic difficulties and for the N-VA, who has always stand for a civic pro-active economic nationalism[59], economy and well-functioning political authorities have always been of vital importance for a well-functioning regional state. For the N-VA, besides a state, political solution for Flanders had to go through renewed economic governance.

Flanders is in fact at 16 % above the average of European economic performance but it can no longer guarantee the future generation of Flemish prosperity because of its many economic weaknesses[60]. Flanders is internationally known for its precious stones and diamonds, for its strong chemical and pharmaceutical sectors as much as for transport equipment, machinery and electric equipment but Flanders has also a scattered and fragmented entrepreneurial tissue which lacks a regional common project among other weaknesses[61].

In Flanders, the primary sector is almost absent and the entrepreneurial activity is moderate. Flanders has the lowest Total Entrepreneurial Activity Rate (TEA)[62] in Europe which stands for the adult population which is currently setting up a business or running a young business. The employment rate in the age of 55-64 is also the lowest in Flanders compared to the best performing European regions[63] and the number of jobs among people aged 15-64 is relatively low (61,7 %). Flemish society is aging and the economic growth is becoming steady if not declining. In December 2009[64], 782 enterprises were declared bankrupt in Belgium, an increase of 8,9 % compared to December 2008 and, impressively enough, the largest increase was registered in Flanders (+ 15,9 %). All sectors were touched but the sector of industry (+ 20,1 %), construction (+ 16,1 %) and *Horeca* (hotels and restaurants sector, + 12,9 %) were those that suffered the most. Flemish international trade represents 80 % of Belgian international trade[65] but the value of Flemish imports overcomes the value of its exports[66], which makes it less valuable as far as sustained economic performance is concerned. Last but not least, Flemish natural resources are scarce and its cost line is very short. Belgian energy consumption relies mostly on petroleum (39,2 %) and nuclear energy (21,4 %) which doesn't make it a green economy[67]. On the positive side, Flanders has a low unemployment rate (3,9 % in 2008), a high labor productivity, a highly educated workforce, a strong commitment towards Research and Development and a deep concern for innovation sectors like construction, telecommunication, equipment, chemistry, computers, electronic appliances and research[68] but a lot remains to be done.

On the political side, Belgium is commonly perceived as a dysfunctional state[69] which justifies Flemish demands for further regionalization of major political competences like social security, justice and fiscal competences. Flanders has a privileged political status in the sense that it is a federated region – *deelstaat* – which means that both levels of governance work in partnership and are partners in theory[70].

Moreover, according to Article 68 of Belgian constitution[71], Flanders has competences over its international relations since 1993 which include a regional voice within Belgian representation to the European Union. Beyond theoretical articulation of political layers, lies a political *praxis* which is much more complex and tricky since few but substantial competences are exclusively retained at the federal level as it is the case for defence, justice, social security, fiscal and monetary policy[72]. The list of sub-national competencies is extensive and some federal and regional competences are in practice shared with a federal political predominance which plunge Belgium into many functional blockages and political discontent.

In Belgium, sovereignty is shared and not divided which means that a political consensus in Belgium and in Europe is always required in order to participate at the European Council of Ministers. For the Flemish representation, political coordination between levels is very hard to find and Europe is perceived as a kind of a saving element for the lack of common 'national nationalism'[73], for a certain *lack of Belgitude*, but Europe is also the clear compensation for the lack of Belgian functional governance. For 'Flemish diplomats', the political task consists of overcoming the Belgian obstacle[74], which is almost perceived as a 'burden'[75], and of using the European institutions as a tool to discipline Belgian administration and the means to emphasize a Flemish way of doing things[76].

For the N-VA[77], Belgian institutional coordination system is neither as fluid nor transparent as it

was supposed to be: consensus is very difficult to achieve within a national structure where Walloon and Flemish interests in Europe are so deeply biased. For Frieda Brepols[78], the only N-VA MEP at the European Parliament, Flanders needs more competences with a stronger Europe and no Belgian state in between. For the N-VA, Belgium is fading away and Flanders should retain full responsibility over its economic policies.

When it comes to Europe, Flemish parties have always been overtly Euro-enthusiastic. By far the most ardent enthusiasts of European integration are found among the Christian Democrats (CD&V) and especially by Luc Van den Brande, former Flemish-president of the 1990s, who has always played the European card to impose economic restrictions and provide a strong sense of political stability in Belgium. Flemish Liberals (Open Vld) have supported European integration for different reasons. They would rather focus on constitutional issues that could promote economic, administrative efficiency and individual liberty in Belgium. On their side, Flemish Socialists (Spa) have always been the least invested in the European project. They have always been a supportive partner of the CD&V in its European strategy but they have always preferred to keep a vision of a 'socially just' Europe that is compassionate to all workers. The Greens (Groen!) do not refer to a European project, but they make their link with other European Green parties very explicit[79] and the N-VA share the same political group at the European Parliament. On the extreme-right political spectrum, the *Vlaams Belang*, the Flemish far-right nationalist party, is the only euro-skeptic political party in Flanders that has always used Flemish ethnic nationalism as an element of cultural distinctiveness and that has always been critical of the European cultural policy perceived as a threat to Flemish *volk*.

In spite of Belgian pro-European outlook, regional politics in Belgium have always operated in a 'capacity gap' with respect to Europe where the lack of coordination between levels of governance made Flanders one of the worst students of the European class. In Flanders and in Belgium, Europe has become so obvious that it has always been taken for granted[80] and no coordinated Flemish strategy in Europe has ever been defined or implemented: Europe has always been presented in an erratic way[81].

In 2004, the N-VA was conscious of Flemish economic and political weaknesses but they were also determined to use Europe to implement a *pragmatic* strategy through political cooperation using the most charismatic and powerful Flemish political party within the coalition, the CD&V[82]. Together in July 2005, by the hands of Luc Van Den Brande (CD&V) and Geert Bourgeois (N-VA), the Flemish Government took the decision to set up a semi-private Flemish regional office, the Liaison Agency Flanders-Europe, called Vleva. For the N-VA, the ultimate goal was to use the privileged access to power in Europe using the political legitimacy of the CD&V[83] to discipline Flemish patterns of governance using Vleva as the institutional platform for a privileged dialogue between scattered political and economic actors in Flanders. The Belgian pro-European stance and a common share of *lack of Belgitude*, a kind of a Flemish patriotic sentiment against the lack of a national sentiment, would do the rest. Even the *Vlaams Belang* would participate because Vleva would be perceived as the missing instrument that would finally enable Flanders to govern autonomously, out of 'useless Belgium'[84].

Soon enough, only three years later, in 2008, the Flemish Government would establish a Commission on Efficient and Effective Government, as a think tank on government in the 2020 European perspective, and would formulate a number of ambitious economic objectives for Flemish decisive governance based on five European general targets[85]: Flemish European strategy initiated by the

N-VA was starting to deliver.

4. Conclusion: *Pragmatic* Flemish nationalists and the 'usage' Europe as a source of authority

Departing from a new institutionalist insight, we have been able to explore rational and sociological variants of the process of Europeanization of 'regional politics' captured as a bottom-up process and based upon the 'usage' of Europe. We have identified methodological and theoretical tools that have enabled us to demonstrate that ethno-regionalist parties have overcome the pessimistic experience of European regionalism of the 1990s by the means of a *nationalist pragmatic* attitude.

Ethno-regionalist parties in the 21st century come to Europe for gains of legitimacy, which is strongly wedded to constitutional and non-constitutional regional resources, coupled with the 'usage' of Europe for *political* or/and *discursive* purposes. In this research, the Europeanization of 'regional politics' has been perceived as a learning process which has induced ethno-regionalist parties, including the N-VA, towards a strategic rearrangement – thick learning – of the European venue without changing its civic understanding of (regional) nationalism also mobilized for gains of legitimacy perceived as authority – thin learning.

In spite of being poorly represented in Europe, both at the Council of Ministers and at the European Parliament, the N-VA has managed to combine Flemish European expertise; traditional pro-European Belgian stance with a strong sense of regional patriotism to launch, by the hands of the CD&V, the (un)expected Flemish regional office in Europe, Vleva. For the N-VA the main purpose was to link formal fora of regional interest representations in Europe and Flemish economic stakeholders for better forms of regional governance.

They have acted *pragmatically* using Flemish constitutional and non-constitutional resources in a perfect combination for a political 'usage' of European institutions through political cooperation. Europe has been used as the handy institutional platform to expand an exiguous trench of power as much as it has been used as an inspirational source to discipline regional patterns of economic governance through European policy mimicry[86].

Moreover, in Belgian federal elections of June 2010, Flemish citizens would finally recognize the political legitimacy of the N-VA to govern Belgium, partly due to the incapacity of others, namely the Open Vld and the CD&V, to find acceptable political solutions for the Belgian puzzle and partly as a sign of political confidence.

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Notes

1 See bibliography on ethno-regional parties in LYNCH (P.), *Minority Nationalism and European Integration*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1996; DE WINTER (L.), 'The impact of European Integration on Ethnoregionalist Parties', *Working Paper*, nº 195, Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials, Barcelona, 2001; JOLLY (S.), 'The Europhile Fringe? Regionalist Party Support for European Integration', *European Union Politics*, vol. 8, nº 1, 2007a, p. 109-130; JOLLY (S.), 'How the EU fuels Sub-national Regionalism', *Working Paper*, University of Chicago, 2007b; DE WINTER (L.) and TURSAN (H.)(ed.), *Regionalist Parties in Western Europe*, London, Routledge, 1998; STRMISKA (M.), 'A Study on Conceptualization of (ethno)regionalist parties', *Central European Studies Review*, Part. 2-3, vol. 4, 2002, http://www.cepsr.com/clanek.php?ID=40, retrieved on 7 March 2011.

2 According to Angela Bourne – in BOURNE (A. K.), 'The impact of European Integration on regional power', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 41, n° 4, 2003, p. 598 –, regional autonomy can be defined as a region's ability to influence decisions in its favor, or its ability to control or escape the control of political actors at the other levels. See also contribution from John Loughlin in LOUGHLIN (J.), 'Regional Autonomy and state paradigm shifts in Western Europe', *Regional and Federal Studies*, vol. 10, n° 2, 2000, p. 10.

3 There is no general accepted definition of ethno-regionalist parties and different scholars like Peter Lynch, Ferdinand Muller-Rommel, Lieven De Winter and Huri Tursan have tried to define them by emphasizing two aspects: regional territorial claims of these parties based on the ethnical aspects of regional nationalism. For a concise definition of the term, see contribution of DE WINTER (L.), 2001, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

4 JEFFERY (C.), 'Sub-National Mobilization and European Integration: Does it Make Any Difference?', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 38, nº 1, 2000, p. 1-23.

5 According to Lieven De Winter, ethno-regional parties distinguish themselves by claims for political reorganization of the existing nation-state power structures. See DE WINTER (L.), 2001, *op. cit.*, p. 4 and DE WINTER (L.) and TURSAN (H.)(ed.), 1998, *op. cit.*, p. 204-205. See also the contribution from Monserrat Guibernau and his notion of 'contentious nationalism' in GUIBERNAU (M.), *Nations without States: Political Communities in a Global Age*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1999, p. 33-66.

6 See definitions of 'patriotism', 'nationalism' and 'nation' in SMITH (A. D.), *Nationalism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001, p. 6 and p. 70.

7 This definition has been taken from Michael Keating in KEATING (M), 'Nations, Nationalism and the State', *Nations Against the State: new Politics of Nationalism in Quebec, Catalonia and Scotland*, New York, Palgrave, 1996, p. 18. The concept of regional nationalism can be labeled in many different ways, going from 'national quasi-states' to 'non state nations'; passing by 'national

regions' and 'stateless nations'.

8 See KEATING (M.), 2001, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

9 According to Michael Keating and to James Anderson, the term regionalism has two varied meanings. It can refer to the top-down imposition of administration or government on regional territory, or it may denote an active bottom-up identification with the region in social, cultural or political terms, a regionalist movement seeking more autonomy for a region or a regionalist-based nationalist movement which seeks a separate state; or indeed, it may refer to any combination of these. For further details see KEATING (M.), 'Europeanism and Regionalism', in JONES (B.) and KEATING (M.)(ed.), *The European Union and the Regions*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 1.

10 According to Karolewski, 'regionalism' can be defined as an ideology or policy that refers to the territorial, cultural or political identity of the region [KAROLEWSKI (I. P.), 'Regionalism, Nationalism and European Integration', in KAROLEWSKI (I. P.) and SUSZYCKI (A. M.), *Nationalism and European Integration. The Need for new Theoretical and Empirical Insights,* New York, The Continuum International Publishing, 2007, p. 12], which rests on political demands that may conflict with those of their national governments or/and even on ethnic or cultural cleavage. See definition of regionalism from Michael Keating in KEATING (M.), 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 1-22.

11 According to Angela Bourne – in *Bourne* (A. K.), *op. cit.*, 2003, p. 598 – a 'region' is narrowly defined as a territorial authority, situated directly below the central state level, which has its own elected political representation. A region may be more than a political space, as it can also be defined by its cultural identity: by a sense of belonging to one particular nation. In these cases, a region is more than a mere region: it is also a 'nation-region'. For further details, see KEATING (M.) and LOUGHLIN (J.)(ed.), *The Political Economy of Regionalism*, London, Frank Cass, 1997.

12 See HOOGHE (L.), 'Subnational Mobilisation in the European Union', *West European Politics*, vol. 18, n° 3, 1995, p. 175-198.

13 DUCHACEK (I.), *The territorial Dimension of Politics: Within, Among, and Across Nations,* London, Westview Press, 1986; SOLDATOS (P.), 'An explanatory framework for the Study of Federated States as Foreign-policy Actors', in MICHELMANN (H. J.) and SOLDATOS (P.), *Federalism and International Relations: The Role of Subnational Units*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990; ALDECOA (F.) and KEATING (M.), 'Introduction', *Regional and Federal studies*, vol. 9, n° 1, 1999, p. 4-8; PAQUIN (S.), 'Globalization, European Integration and the Rise of Neo-nationalism in Scotland', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 8, n° 1, 2002, p. 55-80 and PAQUIN (S.), *Paradiplomatie et relations internationales: théories des stratégies internationales des régions face à la mondialisation*, Brussels, Presses universitaires européennes, 2004.

14 See LYNCH (P.) and DE WINTER (L.), 'The Shrinking Political Space of Minority Nationalist Parties in an Enlarged Europe of the Regions', *Regional and Federal Studies*, vol. 18, n° 5, 2008, p. 583-606.

15 See contribution of NAGEL (K. J.), 'Transcending the National/ Asserting the National: how Stateless Nations like Scotland, Wales and Catalonia React to European Integration', *Australian Journal of politics and History*, vol. 50, n° 1, 2004, p. 59.

16 See traditional contribution from LIPSET (S.) and ROKKAN (S.), 'Cleavage Structures, party Systems, and Voter Alignments: an introduction', in LIPSET (S.) and ROKKAN (S.)(ed.), *Party Systems and Voters Alignments*, New York, Free Press, 1967, p. 1-64 and more recent contribution of BARTOLINI (S), *Restructuring Europe. Centre Formation, System Building and Political Structuring Between the Nation State and the European Union*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

17 See more details in LYNCH (P.) and DE WINTER (L.), *op. cit.*, 2008, p. 583-606.

18 MARKS (G.) and MCADAM (D.), 'Social Movements and the changing structure of political opportunity in the European Union', *West European Politics*, vol. 19, nº 2, 1996, p. 249-278.

19 ELIAS (A.),'From Euro-enthusiasm to Euro-skepticism? A Re-evaluation of minority Nationalist Party Attitudes Towards European Integration', *Regional and Federal Studies*, vol. 18, nº 5, 2008, p. 557-581 and HEPBURN (E.), 'The Rise and Fall of the Europe of the regions', *Regional and Federal Studies*, vol. 18, nº 5, 2008, p. 537-555.

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25 BACHE (I.), 'Europeanization and multi-level governance: empirical findings and conceptual challenges', *ARENA online Working Paper*, nº 16, 2008, in htpp://www.arena.uio.no, p. 2.

26 JACQUOT (S.) and WOLF (C.), *op. cit.*, 2003.

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31 BORZEL (T. A.), 'Europeanization and Territorial Institutional Change: Toward Cooperative Regionalism?', in COWLES (M. G.), CAPORASO (J.) and RISE (T.)(ed.), *Transforming Europe: Europeanization and Domestic Change*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 137-158.

32 RADAELLI (C. M.), 'The Europeanization of Public Policy', in FEATHERSTONE and RADAELLI (C. M.)(ed.), *op. cit.*, 2003

33 LYNCH (P.), *op. cit.*, 1996.

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35 For more contributions, see contributions from Angela Bourne and Margarida Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro in BOURNE (A. K.), *op. cit.*, 2003, p. 597-620 and DE WINTER (L.) and GOMEZ-REINO (C. M.), 'European Integration and Ethnoregionalist Parties', *Party Politics*, vol. 8, n° 4, 2002, p. 483-503.

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39 FEATHERSTONE (K.), *op. cit.*, 2003, p. 10.

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