In the 90’s, Europe used to be depicted as the most privileged political arena for regional nationalist political parties to access for “more” political power. Back at that time, the European institutions were rationally used as they were perceived as formal legal structures that could be used to legitimize their nationalist project. However, by the end of the 90’s, all regional nationalists fell into European disillusion due to the limits of a sovereign logic prevailing in Europe. In the 21st century, as soon as a new policy cycle started to emerge, optimistic regionalism was about to return as experienced regional nationalists realized that they could use the European Economic targets as legitimate arguments to deliver policies which would allow them to overcome the “national obstacle” in Europe as well as to induce regional citizens into their political plan so they would finally reach the legal threshold to endorse a new state reform. However, since they were rationally bounded (Simon 1954), in the sense that they were lacking the policy expertise to perform these goals, they have learned to rely on a policy narrative (Shabahan et al 2011; Jones and Beth 2010) embedded on a territorial economic argument to induce regional partners in government as well regional economic actors into an advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier & Jenkins 1999), using regional offices as a (new) cognitive structure to comply with their renewed political plan. Departing from an actor centered institutionalist approach (Mayntz and Sharp 1997), and looking into the Flemish nationalist case – the democratic nationalist political party, the N-VA, - the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that experienced regional nationalists in Europe have become emotional actors who have learned to rely on a patriotic economic argument – a collective identity framing - to comply with their renewed political plan.

Words: 298

Key words: regionalism; nationalist political parties; emotions; policy making; Europe.

Please, do not quote without permission; critical comments are welcome.
“Most of the time it is said that we are in Brussels and that we don’t need to have an institution in Brussels but Europe ignores us because Europe works on a national logic. Therefore, if Brussels does not come to us, we need to come to them. In Belgium, we have had a big fight for our language, but now we want more autonomy for our people, we want to have more responsibility upon our policies. This is the basis of our nationalism. If Europe does not come to us, we go to Europe.”

Frieda Brepoels,
N-VA MEP at the European Parliament
Brussels, February 2010

1. Introduction

In the 90’s, Europe used to be depicted as the most privileged political arena for regional nationalist political parties (Lynch 1996; De Winter and Tursan 1998; De Winter 2001; Jolly 2007) to access for “more” political power. This idealistic vision of Europe was deeply rooted in the right of “nation-regions” (Loughlin 1996; Keating and Loughlin 1997); “minority nationalisms” (Keating 1996: 18) or stateless nations (Keating 1995:2) to govern more autonomously (Loughlin 2000:10). Therefore, it is not surprising why regional nationalists across Western Europe were among the most ardent defenders of the “Europe of the Regions”, almost overwhelmed with the extra-political space granted by the Maastricht Treaty, at the Council of Ministers (Article 146 of the Maastricht Treaty). Additionally, with the institutionalization of the Committee of the Regions, the subsidiarity principle became bounded to the European polity project and today it is undeniable that Europe represented a renewed political hope, especially for those who were going through devolutionary processes, as it was the case of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in Scotland in the United Kingdom or of the Convergència i Unió (CiU) in Catalonia and even of the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV) in the Basque Country in Spain. For these nationalist political parties, Europe represented the opportunity to influence policy decisions beyond the control of national political actors (Bourne 2003:598).

In a slightly different manner, in federal political systems such as in Flanders, for regional nationalists such as for the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), previous Volksunie and for the Vlaams Belang, previous Vlaams Blok, Europe represented the compensation for a
dysfunctional Belgian federal political system. Irrespectively of distinctive forms of nationalism\(^1\), both Flemish Nationalists looked at Europe as an institutional scapegoat where they could recapture the competences that had been transferred to Europe as well as they could spread their message of political independence (Laible 2001 and 2008).

For this “party family” (De Winter and Cachafeiro 2002; Hepburn 2009), the European venue was a function of nationalism as Europe was displaying an extra-political space where they could govern more autonomously - beyond and apart from the national state (Keating and Hooghe 1996; Jeffery 2000) as well as where they could anchor their message of political independence, on the other. In fact, to the eyes of regional nationalists, irrespectively of national constitutional settlements or nationalist credo, Europe seemed to dissolve sovereignty (Keating and Mc. Garry 2001: 19) enabling regional nationalists to prosper in an institutional context where the right to self-determination could be enhanced by the means of a privileged access to the European policy process.

As a consequence of this illusive perception of Europe, the Europe was rationally inspired (Peters 2005: 51) as the European institutions were perceived as an aggregation of formal-legal structures that could be used as a means to prescribe, proscribe and permit a certain behavior in exchange of a personal utility (Ostrom 2005). In a complementary manner, the policy process was rationally inspired as a rational calculus of policy influence could be easily triggered by the means of a direct access to formal or informal channels of regional interest intermediation in Europe. Therefore, we could argue that between the mid 80’s and until the end of the 90’s, regional nationalists were policy “maximizers” who acted rationally, using the benefits of their constitutional settlements and their own limited political resources to influence policy decisions beyond the limits of national state authority (Bourne 2003).

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\(^1\) The N-VA stands for a civic form of Flemish nationalism whereas the Vlaams Belang stands for an ethnic form of Flemish nationalism.
Unfortunately, as soon as regional nationalists realized that Europe could not deliver a privileged access to political power, the European institutional opportunity structure (Marks and McAdam 1996) was about to shrink as much as to dictate the end of the naive hype of the “Europe of the Regions” (Elias 2008a and 2008b; Hepburn 2008). Indeed, whilst regional actors had been granted new access points to European decision-making processes, these were either not available to them - because the access was reserved to parties in regional governments - or the scope of influence that could be exercised was very limited due to the limits of a sovereign logic prevailing in Europe.

Whereas regional nationalists from federal states such as Belgium were deprived of their competences on the international fora due to a policy praxis, which was not fully recognizing the internal division of policy competences; regional nationalists from devolutionary unitary or decentralized states such as the United Kingdom or Spain were confined to the limits of their national constitutional settlements, because they had never been contemplated with international powers. In both cases, irrespectively of nuanced constitutional designs, all regional nationalists were confined to a de facto or a de jure minority position in Europe, due to the limits of an overwhelming sovereign logic prevailing in Europe. By the end of the 90’s, it became clear that in Europe, the access to political power was dictated and controlled by national governments, irrespectively of nuanced constitutional settlements. Furthermore, it became also obvious that the European strategy required a regional and national resonance as the access to political power could only be achieved through people’s consent as much as further concessions of policy competences could only be granted via national state reforms.

In the 21st century, as soon as a new European policy cycle started to emerge, optimistic regionalism was about to return as experienced regional nationalists realized that they could use the European Economic targets as legitimate arguments to deliver policies
which would allow them to argue for “more political power”, both in Europe and at the regional ground, as well as to induce regional citizens into their political plan so they would finally reach the legal threshold to endorse a new state reform.

However, since they were rationally bounded (Simon 1954), in the sense that they were lacking the policy expertise to perform these goals, they have learned to rely on a policy narrative (Shabahan et al 2011; Jones and Beth 2010) embedded on a territorial economic argument to induce regional partners in government as well regional economic actors into an advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier & Jenkins 1999), using regional offices as a (new) cognitive structure to comply with their renewed political plan. Therefore, more than an external shield in a difficult pathway towards political independence; experienced regional nationalists in government have learned to rescale Europe using regional offices as a pragmatic tool of economic governance to access the informational resource they need to comply with their renewed political plan.

In other words, as a consequence of this renewed perceptions of Europe, regional nationalists have become emotional actors who have learned to downplay nationalist ideology in Europe, using instead a patriotic economic argument to access the informational resource they need to comply with their renewed political plan. In other words, the ability to use a territorial economic argument has allowed them to overcome ideological discrepancies which were preventing them from complying with their renewed political plan. Additionally, regional offices have gained a new strategic economic value, as much as Europe is now perceived in a very pragmatic manner which comes very much in line with a functionalist approach to Europe (Mitrany 1965 and 1966).

Departing from an actor centered institutionalist approach (Mayntz and Sharp 1997), and looking into the Flemish nationalist case – the democratic nationalist political party, the N-VA, - the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that experienced regional nationalists have become much more pragmatic and selective on their usage of the European
institutions as well as they have become emotional actors who have learned to rely on the benefits of a patriotic economic argument, that is, on the benefits of identity, to comply with a renewed political plan.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: first, we wish to demonstrate that the “usage” of the European Institutions by regional nationalists has changed as it has become much more selective in terms of institutions to be used and restricted, in terms of the category of political actor that can benefit from the European venue for nationalist purposes. Second, we wish to demonstrate that as a consequence of a new policy context and renewed political preferences but limited capabilities, regional nationalists have become emotional actors who have learned to rely on a policy narrative (Shabahan et al. 2011; Jones and Beth 2010) embedded in a territorial economic argument – an identity argument to induce regional partners in government as well regional economic actors into an advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier & Jenkins 1999), using regional offices as a (new) cognitive structure to comply with their renewed political plan. For this category of political actors, nationalist purposes in Europe have been downplayed to functional needs but, on the other hand, the nationalist strategy has final gained a regional and national resonance.

In this paper, we will proceed in five moments: first, we will justify the methodological choices for this research; second, we will justify the choice for our theoretical approach; third, we will explain the arguments for evolutionary forms of nationalist mobilization in Europe. Fourth, we will move towards empirical evidences of the Flemish case study. Finally, in the last part of this paper, we will conclude our analysis and we will suggest further venues of research.
2. Methodology

If methodology refers to the methods and techniques used to acquire knowledge (Della Porta 2008:25), then choices of methods are above all determined by the nature of knowledge, that is, by an epistemological choice. Therefore, bearing in mind the nature of our research question, we have decided to apply a constructivist approach as far as our conclusions and hypotheses have not been determined by how the world is but how regional nationalists looked at it. According to this vision of doing science, the world is not just there to be discovered by empirical research. Knowledge is filtered through the theory the researcher elaborates to make sense of perceptions of the world, which means that in this research objectivity and subjectivity will be deeply intertwined.

When it comes to methods, our research has consisted of a qualitative research and a case study research. In that sense, we will be looking at meanings that can be retrieved from words as well as we will be looking at a case study which has caught our attention for displaying new empirical evidences in face of limited theoretical explanations found in the literature. In fact, the Flemish case caught our attention as we discovered that the Flemish government decided to set up the first Flemish regional office in 2005 when it was a common practice in the 90’s, though they never felt the need to do so before. Moreover, our curiosity was reinforced as we discovered that this newly born regional office was suggested by the Flemish nationalist political party in government since 2004, the N-VA. Therefore, it is based upon new empirical evidences that we believe that this case study could be portrayed as a paradigmatic case which assertions can eventually be transferred to other similar case studies.

When it comes to techniques, if a technique can be defined as a tool that any researcher can use, first, to collect data, and then to treat it, in this research, we have decided to apply “in-depth interviews” as far as data collection is concerned as well as a “thematic analysis” as far as data treatment is concerned. If on the one hand, we believe...
that in-depth interviews were the most appropriate technique to collect the data and meanings we were looking for; on the other hand, we believe that a “thematic analysis” has allowed us to treat data with accuracy without losing sight of meanings and interpretations.

A thematic analysis is a process, a way of working with data, which works from the raw data – the raw verbal data. Although this material must be interpreted, summarized and categorized, we will remain in touch with the raw material using short labels called “themes” to classify and make sense of the interviews. According to this technique, analysis entails classifying, comparing, weighting and combining material from the interviews (Rubin and Rubin 2005: 201) in order to extract “meanings”.

In spite of a qualitative and interpretative research, the trustworthiness and validity of our findings have been confirmed by a systematic rigor of fieldwork procedures achieved through triangulation, that is, by the consistency of findings, reliability of coding and patterns analysed (Shenton 2004). In addition, the reliability of our conclusions has been reinforced by a rigorous selection of the political actors to be interviewed and a conscious attempt to avoid bias in the part of the researcher.
3. Theoretical approach: an actor centered institutionalist approach

According to Sophie Jacquot and Cornelia Wolf, the term “usage” can be defined as “the act of using something to achieve certain goals” (2003: 3). By insisting on the term, we wish to cover changing rationalities employed by regional nationalists on a strategic interaction with the European Institutions to fulfill strategic political gains. Therefore, the “usage” of Europe could be defined as “political practices” guided by a certain rationality, which adjust and redefine themselves by seizing European institutions as a set of institutional opportunities to achieve certain political goals. In other words, we will have to identify the “meaning” of the European institutions to the eyes of regional nationalists and then look into the institutionalist school which will allow us to categorize and translate into scientific terms the meaning of the European Institutions “used” (Peters 2005). In fact, by the means of a rational or of a sociological logic of “usage” of the European institutions, we will then be able to understand the reasons of that particular choice of the European Institutions.

However, in order to qualify that rationality of behavior, we will have to look into regional nationalists “perceptions” of what Europe can deliver in terms of “political preferences” across time. Furthermore, we will have to investigate regional nationalists’ “capabilities” to achieve these goals. Since the combination of these three factors – perceptions, preferences and capabilities – will allow us to solve our puzzle, then, an actor-centered institutionalist approach developed by Renate Mayntz and Fritz Sharpf (1997) will provide us with the best theoretical tool to unravel distinctive “rationalities” in evolutionary “usages” of the European institutions.

According to this theoretical approach, policy making occurs in an institutional environment, which will be seized in a subjective way since policy making is produced by human factors that are not merely driven by natural impulses or by the compulsion of external factors. Instead, a strategic interaction with the European institutions is the
outcome – under external constraints – of intentional action. Intention, however are subjective phenomena. They depend on “perceptions” and “preferences” of the individuals involved (Scharpf 1997:20) which means that regional nationalists do not act on the basis of objective reality but on the basis of perceived European reality – perceptions - and of assumed cause-effect relations operating in the world they perceive - preferences. Finally, the real possibility to perform an intentional action will always be conditioned by the resources available to the agent who aims at a certain intentional action. Capabilities are critical to any explanation of a strategic interaction with the European institutions since, in the absence of action resources, the most enlightened perceptions and preferences will fail to make a practical difference. Here the term “capabilities” describe all action resources that allow an actor to fulfill their preferences (Scharpf 1997:40). These include personal properties like political or human capabilities like knowledge or policy expertise.

To conclude, an institution is always ill-defined concept since it will always require meaningful purposes located within the limits of subjective “perceptions” and “capabilities” of agents to perform their “preferences”, which is why we will have to put ourselves in regional nationalist’s shoes and look through their eyes in order to make sense of changing rationality of usage of the European Institutions, in other words, changing forms of nationalist mobilization in Europe.
4. Regional Nationalists and the “usage” of Europe

4.1. Regional nationalists and the “usage” of Europe in the 90’s

As we look back in perspective, regional nationalists of the 90’s could be depicted as inexperienced regional nationalists, either in government or in opposition, who thought that they could use the European institutions, either formal or informal institutional channels, to influence policy decisions beyond the “national obstacle”, that is, beyond national government’s (Keating and Hooghe 1996; Bourne 2003; Jeffery 2000) (see table 1 below).

Table 1: nationalist mobilization in Europe in the 90’s

Given the rise of regional assertiveness; it was not surprising that the speculation of a powerful image of the “Europe of the Regions” had grown rapidly where it was possible to imagine a federal Europe in which the “regions” would serve as some kind of a “third level” (Jeffery 1997 and 2000; Bullman 1997) of the European Government. The scheme has also been called the “sandwich thesis”, and seemed very attractive to minority nationalists (Nagel 2004: 59). Its realization would mean a growing cooperative relationship between the regions and Brussels, to the detriment of the central state, in what has been called the
“pincer” movement. This favorable context has led to the growing involvement of sub-national authorities in EU policy making and has rendered, in some way, the state centric conception of the Union obsolete while the notion of the “Europe of the Regions” was forging a “European federation” compounded of smaller, more natural units, namely nation-regions, gathered around a strong supranational core (Hooghe 1995:177).

As far as policy praxis was concerned, the emphasis was put on regional nationalist’s capability to plead for distinctive policies from national governments, as Europe displayed a new political sphere - a political opportunity structure (Marks and McAdam 1996) - to access policy decisions, which in turn, would allow them to argue for more political power. Therefore, regional nationalists who were standing as opposition parties - irrespectively of their national constitutional settlements - were confined to a formal representation at the European Parliament, by the means of an active participation within the EFA group. This was the case of the Scottish National Party (SNP) from Scotland, of the Plaid Cymru (PC) from Wales, of the Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG) from Galicia; the Esquerra Republicana from Catalonia (ERC) and of the Volksunie (predecessor of the N-VA) from Flanders. Some of them believed that Europe could reduce the cost of national independence, and proposed simply to join the list of member states; this was the case of the Scottish National Party. Others wanted to replace the existing Union with a federation of regions and small nations, abolishing the existing states; this was the case of the Welsh nationalist party Plaid Cymru, of the Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG) and of the Volksunie (VU).

In a very distinctive manner, regional nationalists in government who were deprived of international powers would rather rely on informal\(^2\) channels of regional interest intermediation to compensate the absence of a formal representation in Europe. These\(^2\) These informal channels are commonly known as regional offices. For further details see Hooghe, Liebset and Gary Marks 1996. “Europe with the Regions”: Channels of regional representation in the European Union”, in Publius: Journal of Federalism, 26 (1): 73-91.
informal channels have also been known as “regional offices” and they were the expression of a broader sub-national reaction to the European integration process (Hooghe 1995: 180; Hooghe and Marks 2001: 82; Moore 2008: 517). Additionally, the activities deployed by these regional offices have been known as para-diplomatic activities. They have been identified in the literature of the 90’s (Duchacek 1986; Michelmann and Soldatos 1990; Aldecoa and Keating 1999) and they were largely based upon the paradigmatic cases of the Basque Country and Catalonia in the late 80’s.

According to this literature, the decision to set up a regional office in Brussels was driven primarily by political and cultural considerations, although the economic dimension was certainly not absent (Lecours 2007: 119). The decision to open and maintain a regional office in Brussels was not simply a decision to extend a regional representation to an additional political arena, but the decision to do so autonomously and apart from the state (Marks et al 1996: 171). In these particular cases, para-diplomacy was a function of nationalism, which explains why they were perceived as a highly conflictual process domestically. The development of a region’s international presence constituted an additional opportunity to build, consolidate and promote a national identity. Additionally, the development of an international agency and the ability to create networks of para-diplomacy contributed to their own legitimization as international actors. In other words, they provided a scene from which nationhood could be proclaimed most forcefully and where regions could behave as nations and present themselves as such (Lecours 2007: 120).

However, as we reached the end of the 90’s, both categories of regional nationalists were already very critical of Europe. Whereas regional nationalists who were not endowed with international powers were compelled to leave all policy decisions on the hands of their national governments because a position in government was required to access the Council of Ministers (Bourne 2003: 598); regional nationalists who were endowed with international
powers were condemned to the same policy praxis because Europe did not recognize nuanced divisions of policy competences.

In conclusion, as we look into the institutionalist school, we could argue that in the 90’s, the “usage” of Europe was rationally inspired as the European institutions, either formal or informal structures, were used as a means to prescribe, proscribe and permit a certain behavior. Although rational choice theory is commonly discussed as if it were a single, integrated entity, a variety of different rational choice perspectives on institutions can be discerned which range from a rule based model to a principal agent model or even a game-theoretic model. As far as our research is concerned, we believe that a rule-based model is the model, which fits the best into regional nationalists’ perceptions of European institutions in the 90’s. This version of rational choice to institutions is usually associated with the work of Elinor Ostrom (2005) who conceives institutions as an aggregation of rules that political agents agree to follow in exchange of a personal benefit.

Therefore, irrespectively of their nationalist credo or constitutional settlement, regional nationalists were policy “maximizers” who acted in isolation, and away from the center, contending themselves with their own limited political capabilities using either formal or informal channels to access for more political power. Some of them were opposition political parties; others were political parties in government parties, but all of them have acted “rationally” as they were trying to maximize their political gains by the means of a rational “usage” of formal or informal channels of regional interest intermediation in Europe. A conflictual relationship with the center was highly valued as well as formal and informal channels of regional interest intermediation were indiscriminately mobilized, as nationalist mobilization in Europe was conceived as a function of nationalism.
4.2. Regional nationalists and the “usage” of Europe in the 21st century

In the 21st century, with the advent of the Lisbon Strategy and, more specifically, as soon as the European 2020 strategy was being prepared, experienced regional nationalists in government realized that they could use the benefits of regional economic resources in face of the European Economic targets to legitimate policy choices, both in Europe and at the regional ground, which in turn would allow to improve their political influence beyond the limits of the sovereign logic in Europe as well as to argue for more policy competences at the regional ground.

By the same token, the ability to deliver better regional policies, especially in times of economic crisis, would allow to improve their political legitimacy to govern until they finally reach the legal threshold to endorse a new state reform. For these regional nationalists, the political strategy would consist of using the added value of regional economic resources in face of the European Economic to legitimate their nationalist political plan, on the one hand, as well as to collect major gains of political power across multiple layers of governance (see table 2 below).

The idea would consist of using the reference of the European Economic Strategy to demonstrate that the region possesses the economic resources to meet the European Economic targets but that it could perform better economically, especially in times of economic crisis, if it could be fully responsible for its policies in both layers of governance.

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3 Wim Kok is the former Prime Minister of the Netherlands. He chaired the High Level Group on the Lisbon Strategy and wrote a report called *Facing the Challenge: The Lisbon Strategy for growth and employment* published by the European Commission in 2004. In this report he concluded that the Lisbon Strategy had failed in its goals due to a lack of determined political action and coordination. The report has called for a determined action to be taken urgently across five key policy areas and six economic targets, which have been translated into a new policy cycle in Europe entitled as “Europe 2020”. Although this new policy cycle has been theoretically launched in 2010, it was already set in practice in 2005.
Additionally, the ability to deliver policies that can be perceived as being “efficient” and “urgent” to the eyes of regional citizens as they are portrayed as carrying the solution for an effective governance, especially in times of economic crisis, would allow them to improve their political legitimacy to govern so they could finally reach the legal threshold - political legitimacy - to endorse a new state reform – political autonomy. If on the one hand, the European argument would provide the legitimate argument to sustain policy demands beyond national government’s intent; on the other hand, the context of economic crisis would be strategically relevant for its ability to generate an uncritical support for the policies of the group – here, defined as a regional territorial community - as long as they are perceived as being “useful” to the economic recovery of the regional patrie (Staub 1997:213).

Nevertheless, since they were rationally bounded (Simon 1957)\(^4\), in the sense that they were lacking the policy expertise required to achieve these renewed policy goals;

\(^4\) Herbert Simon coined the term in 1955 and used the metaphor of a pair of scissors where one blade is the “cognitive limitations” of actual humans, and the other the “structures of environment”. According to Simon,
regional nationalists in government have learned (Sabatier 1897) to rely on a policy narrative (Shabahan et al 2011; Jones and Beth 2010; Radaelli 2010) embedded in a territorial economic argument to induce regional economic actors as well as regional political partners in government into an advocacy coalition framework, using informal channels as renewed cognitive places for regional governments to articulate a policy strategy, both in Europe and at the regional ground as well as for national governments to comply with the European 2020 Strategy (see table 3 below).

**Table 3: an advocacy coalition framework (ACF)**

As we look into literature, an advocacy coalition framework stands for the North American version of a policy network developed by Paul Sabatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith (1993; 1999) which focuses on the structure and process through which joint policy-making is organized on governance. Moreover, according to an emerging literature (Jones & studying one blade is not enough: it takes both for the scissors to cut. Minds with limited time and other resources can be successful by exploiting structures of their environments. Human knowledge is limited and human rationality is bounded, and hence human action is based not on the immediate cognition of the real-world data and causal laws but on culturally shaped and socially constructed beliefs about the real world. This concept applies to our research as regional nationalists have learned to act within the limits of a bounded rationality using Europe as a cognitive bridge to make sense of an advocacy coalition framework in Europe.
McBeth 2010; Shanahan at al 2011) on policy narrative that has recently made a connection between policy narratives and ACF’s, a narrative can be defined as a story with a temporal sequence of events unfolding in a plot that is populated by symbols and meaningful arguments (Jones & Beth 2010:329) for the members of a group.

A policy narrative can be defined as a story with a temporal sequence of events unfolding a plot (Abell 2004) that is populated with symbols and archetypal characters that culminates in a moral to the story (Verweij, et al 2006). Policy narratives have the power to shape “belief” and to drag people into a certain behavior to comply with these believes (Boussaguet et al 2010; Radaelli 2010: 554). A policy narrative, understood here as both a particular category of communication and a method of cognitive organization, functions as a cognitive device of persuasion (Majone 1992) for individuals to sharpen the territorial appeal while leveling ideological differences.

As far as our research is concerned, regional nationalists political actors in government would rely on a policy narrative to convince regional partners in government – in case of a minority position in government – as well as regional economic actors that an regional office is absolutely essential to comply with the European 2020 strategy as it would be used as the best policy solution to clarify the best policy options to be implemented in both layers of governance. Therefore, a territorial identity bound would become the glue which would hold them together in policy cooperation. However, whenever perceived from a nationalist point of view, the contribution of an advocacy coalition framework goes way beyond an economic patriotic behavior since regional nationalists expect to use it to access the informational resources they needed to comply with their renewed nationalist political plan.

For these regional nationalists, the purpose is three-fold: first, to question policy competences that are still shared, either in theory or in practice, in Europe; second, to question policy competences that are still legally shared with national governments at the
Emotional Nationalists in Europe and the revealing power of identity

regional ground as well as to argue for new ones; third, to persuade the electorate that there are fundamental “flaws” with the national constitutional settlement that should be corrected and that they are trustworthy political actors who possess the best policy solutions to perform the economic recovery of their region or to make it prosper, especially in times of economic crisis.

However, the ability to achieve these policy goals rely on three critical resources: first, on the quality of the * informational resource*, that is, on the ability to make sense of an advocacy coalition framework, using regional offices as a new policy arenas where governmental and societal actors could meet; second, on *economic resources*, that is, on clear economic policy goals, that is, on the ability of regional economic actors to be organized around territorial economic interests – that is, as territorial policy communities (Rhodes 19965) and third, on *political resource*, that is, on a relative position in power to be able to translate their policy options to legitimize further concessions of policy competences.

Therefore, we could argue that changing “perceptions” of what Europe can deliver, in face of a new policy context, has forced them into a new political “preferences”, which in turn has guided them towards a cognitive usage of Informal channels of regional interest intermediation due to limited policy expertise – limited “capabilities”. Additionally, to the eyes of regional nationalists, the European venue has stopped carrying the banner of nationalism.

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5 The concept of “Territorial Policy Communities” has been forged by Michael Keating in 2008 as he felt the need to fill the void of theoretical concepts in public policy literature to describe the emergence of new policy systems of collective action which would gather sectorial or cross-sectorial policy communities organized around territorial interests. This concept is a complement to the concept of “policy community” defined by Rod Rhodes according to whom a “policy community” can be conceived as a tight policy network structure organized around sectorial or cross-sectorial interests. Michael Keating has kept the basic definition of policy community but he has added the territorial dimension to it in order to further precise this process of re-territorialization and space re-scaling of new collective policy systems to the sub-national, supra-national level and trans-national level. In our analysis, we will be focusing upon the emergence of a collective policy system located at the supra-national level, that is in Europe. For further details see: Keating, Michael, Cairney, Paul and Hepburn, Eve 2008. “Territorial policy communities and devolution in the United Kingdom, in *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 1(2), pp.1-16.
The “usage” of the European institutions has become much more selective, as informal channels of regional interest intermediation have become a pragmatic tool of economic governance which provides national and regional governments with the informational resource they need to clarify the best policy options to be implemented in Europe and at the regional ground. In other words, beyond traditional “information gathering” and “influencing roles” (Marks 2002 et al), regional offices have become an instrument of governance (Salamon 2002) for national and regional governments to comply with the European 2020 strategy (in articulation with Europe). Regional offices have become a functional tool of European governance where the European, national and regional levels of governance have become deeply intertwined.

On the other hand, as far as nationalist mobilization in Europe is concerned, in the 21st century, nationalist mobilization in Europe has undermined privileged constitutional rights, as the power to conduct international relations has become almost irrelevant. Instead, the division of competences between the regional and national levels of governance has gained a major salience. Additionally, a position in government has become absolutely essential – political resource - as well as clear economic goals – economic resources - and a regional presence – informational resource - in Europe have become the requirement for a successful European venue.

To conclude, we could argue that in the 21st century, the rationality of “usage” of Europe fits perfectly into a sociological institutionalist approach according to which regional offices facilitate the attainment of collective ends as they embody identity framings (Scott a 1995: 33; Hall 1996: 947; Fligstein 1997a and b) that provide stability and meaning to policy praxis.
4.3. Conclusion: nationalist mobilization in the 21st century: the long road from reason to emotion

In this section, we have demonstrated that changing “perceptions” of Europe can deliver in face of a new policy context have forced experienced regional nationalist to re-conceptualize the European venue to pursue renewed political “preferences” in face of limited “capabilities”. By the means of an actor centered institutionalist approach, we have demonstrated that nationalist mobilization in Europe has moved from a rational to a cognitive “usage” of the European institutions.

Whereas in the 90’s, formal or informal European institutions were perceived as formal-legal structures for regional nationalists to access for “more political power”; in the 21st century, a successful nationalist mobilization requires a position in government as much as regional offices have become cognitive structures to comply with a renewed political plan. Additionally, the policy process has become emotionally driven and consensually based. Finally, experienced regional nationalists have become emotional actors who have learned to rely on a patriotic economic argument, that is, on an identity argument, to overcome ideological discrepancies, which would have prevented them from complying with their renewed political preferences. For these regional nationalists, Europe is instrumentally used which comes very much in line with a functionalist approach to Europe.
5. The N-VA and the “usage” of Europe

The N-VA is a center-right Flemish democratic nationalist party that came into existence in 2001, mostly out of protest against a controversial state reform, the Lambermont state reform (Noppe and Wauters 2002). The N-VA is a civic nationalist political party which has a clear consciousness of Flemish cultural and linguistic distinctiveness but these elements are just part of a broadly defined civic identity. Now that the linguistic battle has been fully achieved in the sixties (Howell 2003:150), the Flemish sentiment is emotionally diluted, almost rational and highly pragmatic. The N-VA is a nationalist political party who believes in the political independence of Flanders though they believe that political independence should be delivered as a gradual process of evaporation through which Belgium would be hollowed from its competences until it disappears. This explains why the N-VA believes in “Political Darwinism” — as Bart de Wever likes to call it — as they expect to see Belgium evolving towards confederalism before political independence can eventually be reached. They still believe in an independent Flanders even if they argue that confederalism should be the best political solution for Belgium. For the time being, their main focus stresses the reinforcement of Flemish institutions within this process of “evaporation of Belgium” (La Libre 2010). For the N-VA, the political imbroglios of Brussels, on the one hand, and the clear division of competences between the federal and the regional levels, on the other hand, are now their main concerns.

As far as Europe is concerned, as the most predominant inheritor of the Volksunie (Wauters 2005; Van Haute and Pilet 2006), the N-VA has always been very supportive of the European integration process and has retained many of the ideas that the Volksunie defended for Europe. Their approach to Europe has always been institutionally and economically marked as they used to perceive the European institutions as a platform to advocate a more radical vision of Europe where regions ought to be endowed with sufficient

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6 In article from La Libre Belgique published on the 09/06/ 2010, “Le Drapeau Européen à la sauce N-VA”. 
powers at the European level to protect and promote regional interests (Laible 2001: 235; 2008). In that sense, the Volksunie looked at Europe as a political opportunity structure where they could legitimize the federalist plan they advocated for Belgium (Lynch 2001). While Belgium would continue to exist with Flanders as a powerful region, the Volksunie supported a “Europe of the Regions and the Peoples”, though the notion of “people” was rather imprecise and vague. Finally, the Volksunie has also participated actively at the European Parliament, within the European Free Alliance-Democratic Party of the Peoples of Europe (EFA-DPPE) (Laible 2008: 129; Lynch and De Winter 2008:583). For these regional nationalists, Europe was rationally used as they expected Flanders to be responsible for its policies in Europe, using their formal presence at the European Parliament as an opportunity structure to spread and legitimize their nationalist project for Flanders.

However, by the end of the 90’s, the N-VA became more critical of Europe as well as more irascible over Belgian dysfunctional political system. Today, the N-VA still portrays itself as the most pro-European political party in Flanders (N-VA European Manifesto 2009) but the political practice has become more assertive and meticulous. While back in the 90’s, it was possible to imagine a “Europe of the regions” where Flanders could play a distinctive role alongside Belgium within the European Institutions; in the 21st century, the N-VA has lost its faith in Europe and has become much more pragmatic on what Europe can effectively deliver.

Although the N-VA considers itself as the most pro-European Flemish political party, they have stopped hoping for the political recognition of regional authorities in Europe and have decided to come to Europe to deliver better policies which in turn would allow them legitimize their nationalist aspirations at the regional ground. In other words, they have realized that they could use the benefits of a new European policy cycle to justify a clear division of policy competences that are still shared in practice, in Europe, and legally shared at the regional ground, such as international competences, energy, environment and
research as well as to argue for further devolution of federal competences such as social security and fiscal competences.

For the N-VA, it was time to realize that “the European contribution to Flemish representation in Europe was rather limited”. If on the one hand, “regions” were not treated as equal partners in Europe; on the other hand, Flanders had always been undermined due to a sovereign logic prevailing in Europe as well as from Belgian unwillingness to divide competences.

For Matthias Diependaele, N-VA MP at the Flemish Parliament, it is clear that “Europe doesn’t seem to realize that some states have a division of powers on an exclusive basis and that Flanders is at the same level as the federal on some issues but the Council or the European Union nor any European institution take us into account”. To state it more clearly, for Frieda Brepoels, N-VA MEP: “even if at the beginning we dreamt with the European integration and we believed in a Europe of the Regions; today we know that it is impossible to put it into practice because Europe ignores us”. Additionally, for Frieda Brepoels (N-VA MEP), the problem also steams from Belgian stubbornness in not sharing competences with regional authorities at the Council of Ministers: “Belgian government simply doesn’t care. They don’t respect the division of competences; they don’t coordinate a national strategy bearing in mind the regional point of view. This is why we want an homogeneous devolution of competences, otherwise we will be fighting all the time for the competences that are in practical terms shared are semi-devolved but if Europe does not recognize us then we cannot work with Europe. So in that context, we need a state”.

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7 Interview with Frieda Brepoels, N-VA MEP at the European Parliament, Brussels, 02/02/2010.
8 Interview with Matthias Diependaele, N-VA Deputy at the Flemish Parliament, European Committee, Brussels, 04/02/2010.
9 Interview with Frieda Brepoels.
10 Ibidem.
As soon as they came into power in 2004, for the N-VA, the best political strategy has remained “Europe with the Regions” but Europe is now raised as the best substitute for a dysfunctional Belgian sovereign state, which prevents Flanders from being responsible for its policies. In fact, even if Flanders is a powerful deelstaat within Belgian federal state, which includes a formal representation to the European Union since 1993 (Delpérée 1994; Theo Jans and Stouthuysen 2007), political consensus is very difficult to achieve which means that in practice, substantial economic competences are exclusively retained at the federal level. Moreover, a cooperative relationship has been defined by the means of a complex institutional framework (Leton 2001) but the system is not fluid or transparent.

All Flemish political parties seem to agree on that assertion but the “usage” of Europe has been very limited and the extreme right nationalist party, Vlaams Belang, is very skeptical of Europe. In Flanders, Europe has become a national dogma but it has always been taken for granted (Deschouwer and Van Assche 2005). Flemish MEP’s have always worked on behalf of their personal agendas and Flemish economic stakeholders have always been excluded from the European project.

By the means of a renewed political plan, the N-VA wanted to demonstrate that Flanders possesses the economic resources to comply with the European economic strategy but that Flanders could perform better economically if it could be fully responsible for its policies, both in Europe and at the regional ground. To put it simply, the N-VA wanted to prove that they are trustworthy political actors who deserve to conduct the destiny of Flanders and that confederalism is the best political solution to get rid of the Belgian mess and to perform the economic recovery of Flanders, especially in times of economic crisis.

However, as a minor political party in government in 2004, the N-VA had to face two major obstacles: first, an exiguous trench of political power in government; and second, the absence of an informal channel of regional interest intermediation in Europe. Therefore, when the N-VA came into power, their main priorities were: first, to make sense of a Flemish
office in Europe to get “Flanders” into the policy cycle and second, to use the European economic targets as powerful guidelines to provide a sense of economic stability to expand their small trench of political power while policy priorities would be clarified in articulation with Flemish stakeholders in Europe.

Since this renewed political strategy could not be performed without the intervention of Flemish economic and social partners, the N-VA has proved to move successfully through Belgian political troubled waters using a territorial economic argument to convince Flemish political actors in government, namely the most charismatic Flemish political party the CD&V, that an advocacy coalition framework would be the best policy solution to clarify the best Flemish policy solutions to comply with the European Economic Strategy as much as to protect the Flemish interest in Europe and at the regional ground. As stated by the Flemish Government: “what we try to do is to overcome the “Belgian obstacle” in Europe but we also try to use the European institutions also as a tool to disciple our own administration and our own way of governing our region”\(^{11}\).

However, for the N-VA, Vleva is much more than that: it is an instrument which will allow them to clarify the best policy options for Flanders in Europe and at the regional level but it will also help them to argue for the clarification of competences in Europe as well as to justify further concessions of policy competences. As stated by the Deputy Chief of the Cabinet of Vice-Minister President of Flemish Government, Geert Bourgeois, N-VA: “Vleva is an intermediate element to make sure that the information goes top-down from the EU through Velva to the members of Vleva (federations, associations) as well as bottom-up in order to easier their access to the formal political level which is not always that clear and not always that well appreciated.”\(^{12}\) On the other hand, for Frieda Brepoels (N-VA MEP), “Vleva will help us to find solutions for Flanders at the policy level, yes. Europe has that unique

\(^{11}\) Interview with the General Representative of Flemish Government to the EU Belgian Permanent Representation to the European Union on the 22/01/2010 and on the 28/01/2010.

\(^{12}\) Interview with Lieven Tack, Deputy Chief of the Cabinet of Vice-Minister President of Flemish Government, Geert Bourgeois, N-VA on the 27/05/2010.
cooperation, it has helped to find solution for policies but once we are fully responsible for our policies, we will not need Europe anymore”.

In that sense, on the 22 of July 2005, the Flemish Government took the decision to set up the Liaison Agency Flanders-Europe called “Vleva” with 85% to 90% of the budget provided by the Flemish government along with 15% to 10% sponsored by Flemish enterprises and organizations. Luc Van Den Brande (CD&V) was invited to be the president; Frieda Brepoels (NV-A MEP) a member of the executive board and Geert Bourgeois (Flemish Vice-President, N-VA) was its political mentor. Vleva is a public-private partnership, which aims to represent the economic interests of Flemish social fabrics – *les forces vives de la société* – as well as to link divergent political actors and scattered economic Flemish stakeholders. Vleva has contributed to a new form of Flemish governance, where scattered Flemish political and economic actors, across layers of governance, have finally been duly articulated for concerns of economic efficiency. The result is a functional interdependence of public and private actors in policy-making, as the Flemish government would become increasingly dependent upon the co-operation and joint resource mobilization of policy actors in Europe.

For the first time since the beginning of the European adventure, the European strategy was cognitively inspired, economically driven and collectively performed. However, as part of the Flemish government and beyond a simplistic patriotic sentiment, the N-VA expected to use Vleva to be able to play the European card to argue for the clarification of policy competences in Europe as well as to argue for the homogenous devolution of major policy competences that are still legally shared such as research, energy, environment and

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13 More details in [http://en.vleva.eu/](http://en.vleva.eu/). Vleva has the following slogan: “Flanders & Europe: growing in Alliance”.
14 The invitation of Luc Van Den Brande was strategic for the establishment of the regional office. He was not invited because of its close relationship with Europe but because he was a symbol of political confidence in Flanders. The N-VA invited him in order to ease their task to convince members of the Flemish government to establish the regional office. These ideas have been stated by Leo Victor, the Managing Director of Flemish European Antenna, Vleva.
fiscal competences in Flanders. But since Velva is newly born institution with unclear policy goals and the N-VA is a minority political party in government, the N-VA has decided to use the European economic Strategy as the immediate solution to perform the economic recovery of Flanders. Their political purpose is to be perceived as trustworthy political actors to the eyes of regional citizens in order to expand their small trench of political power at the regional and federal levels of governance while policy targets are being further clarified.

However since the N-VA was a minority political party in government In 2005 and Vleva remained an institution in potential, they have decided to turn their attention to Flanders, using the contribution of Vleva to be perceived as trustworthy political actors who are actively engaged in performing the economic recovery of Flanders using the European economic targets as powerful guidelines to discipline Flemish governance. Their political purpose is to expand their small trench of political power at the regional and federal levels of governance while policy targets are being clarified. Since they have returned to political power, they have introduced the European theme into their party slogan: “needed in Flanders, useful in Europe”. At the European Elections of 2009, the title of their European manifesto has once more recaptured the major contribution of Europe to perform the economic recovery of Flanders: “More Flanders, stronger Europe and lesser crisis”.

For the time being, political legitimacy has been improved at the regional elections of 2009 with 13,15% of the votes and Geert Bourgeois has won the vice-presidency of Flanders as well as the visible face of the third version of the Flemish economic program called ViA, Flanders in Action (Flemish Government 2009) but the N-VA has remained a minority political party in government. At the federal elections of 2010, the European theme has reemerged with the slogan: “Needed in Flanders, useful in Europe”. Political legitimacy has been once more confirmed with 30% of the votes but they are waiting for policy targets to be clarified and for a favorable position at the regional and federal governments in order to be able to play the European card to support their political project for Flanders.
Nevertheless, endowed with 30% of the votes at the federal elections, Bart de Wever has managed to postpone Flemish government’s formation during 541 days using its political advantage to force all federal partners into the sixth state reform (the Butterfly Agreement).

With this new agreement (Belgian Government 2011), further economic and fiscal competences have been devolved to the regions and the BHV dossier has been solved, but Bart de Wever is far from being satisfied with the agreement reached. By the time of writing, the sixth Belgian Federal state reform has already been concluded, and Bart de Wever has become the bourguemestre of Antwerp, on the aftermath of the élections communales of October 2012. The popularity of Bart de Wever is still rising in Flanders as the results of these elections have confirmed with 40% of the votes. For the time being, the year 2014 is their political milestones as they expect to win the presidency of Flanders as well as to conquer a better position at the Federal government to get rid of the Belgian malaise.

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15 Di Rupo I is the current federal government of Belgium which has sworn in on the 6th of December 2011, after a record-breaking of 541 days of negotiations following federal elections of June 2010. The government includes social democrats (Spa/PS), Christian Democrats (CD&V/cdH) and Liberals (Open Vld/MR), respectively of the Dutch and French language group. The government notably excludes the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), the Flemish nationalist party that has achieved a plurality of votes and became the largest party in Belgium. Its absence, together with the unwillingness of the Open Vld to enter an eight-party coalition that included the green parties, failed to reach the majority from the Dutch language group.

16 The so-called “Vlinderakkoord” or “Butterfly Agreement” refers to formateur Di Rupo who always ties a butterfly knot.

6. Conclusion: emotional nationalists in Europe: a new legacy for all regional nationalists in Europe?

Now that we have concluded our journey of intellectual search, we could highlight the following conclusions: first, the European venue can only be considered by regional nationalists in government, irrespectively of their position in government, constitutional order or nationalist **credo**. Second, the political strategy is economically based; emotionally driven and collectively performed. Third, Europe can only be considered in a pragmatic way, using regional offices as a pragmatic tool of collective governance to perform renewed political preferences, no longer in Europe, but **through** Europe.

Based upon these arguments, we strongly believe that this intellectual reasoning could be exported to other relevant case studies such as the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV) and of the Convergència i Unió (CiU) who have recently won the elections of October 2012. On the other hand, it could also provide new relevant evidences for regional nationalist political parties who have recently lost the elections such as the Bloco Nacionalista Galego (BNG) in Galicia and Plaid Cymru (PC) in Wales who are failing to “fit” long-term constitutional goals with Europe due to a limited approach to Europe (Elias 2008a and 2008b; Hepburn 2008).

To conclude, we could argue that nationalist mobilization in Europe has definitely changed. It has become more much realistic and selective. If on the one hand, it can only be accessible to regional nationalists in government, irrespectively of their position in power; national constitutional settlement or nationalist **credo**; on the other hand, it will be limited to those who will be able to overcome the European disillusion with pragmatism. In other words, for those who will be able to forgo immediate nationalist satisfaction in Europe to collect major gains of political power, no longer in Europe, but **through** Europe.
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