



# IN COMMAND BUT NOWHERE TO GO?

## PARLIAMENTARY PARTY GROUP LEADERS' ROLE ORIENTATIONS IN PARTITOCRATIC BELGIUM

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### **Abstract**

Parliamentary party group leaders take centre stage in contemporary parliaments. To this day, however, their functioning remains rather understudied. Drawing on the parliamentary role literature, and using a series of in-depth interviews with (current and former) PPG leaders, this paper examines the self-reported role orientations of PPG leaders in Belgium. Unlike commonly-assumed theoretical dispositions on 'position roles', and despite Belgian PPG leaders' limited formal authority as intermediaries between the central party elite and backbenchers, we do find role variation among PPG leaders. We more specifically find that PPG leaders, following a 'logic of appropriateness' and divergent personal motivations, differ on two dimensions (an external focus vs. an internal focus and a focus on top-down versus bottom-up liaison) leading to four distinct PPG leadership role types. As such, this study has important implications for parliamentary role research (and their conceptions of leadership roles) and should encourage scholars to focus also on frontbench roles.

**Keywords:** Parliamentary party groups, parliamentary party group leaders, legislatures, parliamentary roles, Belgium

## 1. Introduction

Parliamentary party group leaders (PPG leaders) are central players in modern parliaments. They manage their parties' legislative branches, oversee group members' activities and coordinate intra-party deliberation. They take the floor in important debates and bargain over legislative agendas. In the literature, PPG leaders' core task is often boiled down to ensuring the party's collective accountability to the electorate by safeguarding group unity and enforcing discipline (Cox & McCubbins, 1993; Strøm & Müller, 2009). To this end, they control a number of incentives that reward cooperative legislators and punish those who defect (Bailer, 2017; Bowler, Farrell, & Katz, 1999; Kam, 2009).

Quite surprisingly, research on PPG leaders is limited. Insights into the daily functioning of these influential actors, going beyond a discussion of their access to disciplinary tools, would nonetheless be highly relevant. Particularly in Western Europe, PPG leaders have the ability to influence the behaviour of members of parliament (MPs) in case of preference heterogeneity (Müller, 2000; Saalfeld & Strøm, 2014). Research on their *modus operandi* would further open 'the black box of group member-leader interactions' (Bailer, 2017, p. 13) and provide insights on intra-party decision-making in parliament, which typically takes place 'behind closed doors' (Heidar & Koole, 2000).

Drawing on parliamentary role literature (Andeweg, 2014; Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012; Müller & Saalfeld, 1997) this paper presents an in-depth study of PPG leaders' own role orientations. We focus on Belgium, where PPG leaders act as important intermediaries between the party's backbenchers and central party elite (De Winter, 1992; Pilet & Wauters, 2014). Adopting an inductive approach (e.g. Searing, 1994), the aim of the paper is (1) to provide a detailed account of the self-reported role attitudes (and to some extent also the behaviours) of Belgian PPG leaders and (2) to investigate to what extent there is role variation. A series of in-depth interviews with (current and former) PPG leaders in the federal and Flemish parliament provide us with rich data on their self-perceived priorities, time allocation, personal goals and motivations and strategies for resolving intra-party disagreement.

Contradictory to commonly-accepted theoretical assumptions on leadership roles (see below) and despite their limited formal authority in the Belgian 'partitocracy' due to the dominance of extra-parliamentary party elites (De Winter & Dumont, 2006), we do observe role variation among PPG leaders on two concrete dimensions: (1) respondents that adopt a clear external focus versus those who focus mostly on the internal PPG management and (2) respondents that mostly value top-down liaison (communicating party leadership decisions to backbenchers) versus those who prioritize bottom-up liaison. Based on these dimensions we identify four PPG leader role types. As leadership (or position) roles are traditionally considered to be heavily constrained by institutional norms, leaving little leeway for individual interpretation (Searing, 1994; Strøm, 1997), this has important implications for parliamentary role research, and should encourage scholars to focus also on frontbench roles.

The paper starts with a review of the literature on PPG leadership. Afterwards, we discuss contemporary approaches on parliamentary roles and formulate our critique on their (rigid) assumptions regarding leadership roles. We then discuss the interview data and report our main findings on the role orientations (and behaviours) of PPG leaders in Belgium.

## 2. PPGs and their leaders

Parliamentary party groups (PPG) are critical components of legislative organization (Heidar & Koole, 2000, p. 1; Saalfeld & Strøm, 2014, p. 372). Usually composed MPs with the same party affiliation<sup>1</sup>, PPGs promote stability, decisional efficiency and allow individual MPs to influence policy through preference aggregation (Laver, 1999; Saalfeld & Strøm, 2014). They furthermore enable ‘responsible party government’ by assuring that MPs act cohesively and in correspondence to the policy proposals for which they were mandated by the voter (Aldrich, 1995; Heidar, 2013; Mair, 2008). Although they vary in terms of staffing, resources and size (see: Heidar, 2000, 2013; Heidar & Koole, 2000; Schüttemeyer, 2001), PPGs typically rely on a division of labour (Brady & Bullock, 1985; Saalfeld & Strøm, 2014) by assigning their members to committees and internal policy-related working groups (Damgaard, 1995) and delegating the development of detailed proposals to policy experts. As delegation might invoke agency loss (e.g. Lupia, 2003), PPGs also typically organize along hierarchical lines. At the top of the pecking order, they are headed by a single PPG leader, who is sometimes assisted by a level of middle-management, like ‘whips’ (Norton, 2003) or working group chairs (Patzelt, 2003; Schüttemeyer, 2001), with the purpose of facilitating coordination and control (Heidar & Koole, 2000; Saalfeld & Strøm, 2014).

PPG leaders bear a number of responsibilities that are essential for the day-to-day organization of parliament. Together with their direct staff and a potential second leadership tier (see above) they ensure the PPG’s smooth functioning. They lead discussions on party strategies and policy proposals in the PPG meeting (or legislative *caucus*) and cut the ‘Gordian knot’ in case of disagreement. Beyond the internal organization of the party group, PPG leaders maintain contacts with other parliamentary (party) leaders and co-decide on the legislative agenda within the assemblies’ governing bodies. When important topical and mediatized debates or bills are tabled, PPG leaders are expected to take the floor and elucidate the party position. Perhaps most importantly, however, PPG leaders’ personal reputations hinge upon their capacity to safeguard party unity (Bailer, Schulz, & Selb, 2009, p. 356; Laver, 1999, p. 12). Legislators (may) serve multiple and potentially competing principals (Carey, 2007) and consequently might have rational incentives to behave in ways that lead to collectively inefficient outcomes (e.g. by only representing the interests of their constituency) (Aldrich, 1995; Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1991). In order to solve these ‘collective action problems’, which are inherent to the tension between legislators’ aim to get re-elected (Mayhew, 1974) and government by majority rule, parties need leaders that internalize the party’s collective interest and keep tabs on group members’ behaviour

(Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1991; Strøm & Müller, 2009). By virtue of their institutional position, these leaders allegedly possess a number of selective incentives (see below) that reward cooperative behaviour and discourage shirking (Bowler et al., 1999; Cox & McCubbins, 1993).

Legislative party leadership has received some scholarly attention in the US Congressional literature (see: Strahan, 2011). Mostly drawing on rational choice theory, scholars focused on whether party leaders even influence legislative decisions at all (e.g. Krehbiel, 1998), if so, how (e.g. Cox & McCubbins, 2005) and what conditions strengthen legislative party leaders' ability to impact policies (Aldrich & Rohde, 2000; Cooper & Brady, 1981).<sup>3</sup> In Western Europe's parliamentary democracies, where parties' influence on decision-making is practically uncontested, research on PPG leaders is surprisingly scarce and often solely concentrates on their use of disciplinary instruments. As ideological agreement or voluntary loyalty might not suffice in order to induce the near perfect accounts of party group unity recorded in European legislatures (Depauw & Martin, 2009; Sieberer, 2006; Van Vonna et al., 2014) external pressures like rewards or sanctions (e.g. speaking time, promotions, staff support, media access) might incentivize MPs to toe the party line (Bowler et al., 1999). While some plead that PPG leaders rarely resort to the actual employment of such measures, as the perceived threat of their sheer existence might already do the trick (e.g. Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011), others argue that PPG leaders do use their 'carrots and sticks' (e.g. Bailer et al., 2009; Kam, 2009). In a recent study on five European parliaments, Bailer (2017) finds that PPG leaders do sometimes use disciplinary tools (i.e. additional speaking time, committee seats, travel and office benefits), particularly when they lack control over (ex-ante) candidate selection procedures.<sup>2</sup>

The predominant focus on PPG leaders' use of sanctions has, however, caused scholars to neglect the many other duties PPG leaders fulfil (see above). Moreover, rational choice theory, on which many (US Congressional) studies are based, generally uses simplifying assumptions of political reality, which generate too parsimonious accounts of how party leaders maintain unity in the wake of preference homogeneity (Saalfeld & Strøm, 2014). In reality, for instance, PPG leaders might be reluctant to impose sanctions because it might damage their reputation within the party group (Laver, 1999). Moreover, backbenchers' preferences are not necessarily fixed or exogenous to the policy-making process but could well be shaped by persuasion, deliberation and new substantial insights (Strahan, 2011). Lastly, as PPGs are not free-floating structures but are part of a larger, more complex party organization (e.g. Katz & Mair, 1993), backbenchers - but also PPG leaders - might be subjected to the pressures and wishes of extra-parliamentary party organizations (see below).

The above-mentioned reasons call for a broader, in-depth study on PPG leaders' functioning in parliament. For decades, how legislators (both in the front and backbenches) fill in their mandates, and why they do so in a specific way, has been the focal point of the literature on parliamentary roles.

### 3. Parliamentary roles and the rigidity of 'position roles'

Grounded in sociology, roles connect individuals to a particular position within a specific social context (in this case legislatures) and to the norms of conduct that are associated with them (Andeweg, 2014; Biddle, 1986; Müller & Saalfeld, 1997). They reflect 'an individual's perception of what is generally expected of her as a holder of her current institutional position' (Andeweg, 2012, p. 66). In its simplest form, legislative roles are 'comprehensive patterns of attitudes and/or behaviour shared by MPs' (Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012).<sup>3</sup> The study of legislative roles has a long-standing and rich research tradition (e.g. Fenno, 1978; Wahlke et al., 1962) but gradually fell out of favour in the 1980s due to conceptual confusion, inconclusive results and the emergence of rational choice perspectives on political behaviour (Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012; Searing, 1994). The emergence of neo-institutionalist approaches, however, which stress the importance of both institutional constraints (e.g. sociological approaches) and individual preferences (e.g. economical approaches) (March & Olsen, 1989), ushered in a role revival.<sup>4</sup> Two contributions in particular have been notably successful in applying neo-institutionalism to the role concept.

In his seminal book '*Westminster's world. Understanding political roles*', Donald Searing (1994) presents a *motivational approach* for studying legislative roles, which he later applies to parliamentary life in the British House of Commons. Searing mixes 'rules, roles and reasons' by recognizing that roles are embedded in institutional contexts, while simultaneously treating role players as purposive actors with a free will: politicians are not locked up in social cages of conformity, nor do they operate within an institutional vacuum. According to Searing, roles are shaped by (1) *formal rules*, which are written down in the organization's constitutional code, (2) *informal norms*, i.e. the expectations towards certain positions that are not specified in the formal scheme and (3) *individual motivations*: rational career goals and (most importantly) psychological incentives (e.g. a sense of duty or competence, achievement) (Searing, 1994, pp. 19-20). These motivations are not fixed but can be redefined as role players adapt to their institutional environments (Searing, 1994, p. 483).

A well-known contribution is Searing's distinction between 'position roles' and 'preference roles'. The former refer to leadership functions in parliament (e.g. whips) that require the performance of many specific duties and are therefore, according to Searing, almost completely constrained by (in)formal norms. The latter are connected to positions with fewer responsibilities (i.e. backbenchers) and leave more freedom for individual role choice. In fact, preference roles lend themselves better to applying the motivational approach since they allow more interplay between individual motivations and the institutional context.

Although he sees merit in a number of Searing's basic insights, Kaare Strøm (1997, p. 158) contends that 'besides all charming idiosyncrasies, legislators are goal-seeking men or women'. In an attempt to shift closer to rational choice theory, he presents a '*strategic approach*', in which he views roles as

'behavioural strategies conditioned by the institutional framework in which parliamentarians operate' (Strøm, 1997, p. 157). Roles are 'game plans' or 'endogenous prescriptions as to how actors may most successfully and efficiently act to maximize the likelihood of whatever outcomes they favour' (Strøm, 1997, p. 158). Which role (or strategy) seems fit is determined by four exogenous, goal-related preferences: reselection, re-election, party office and legislative office. As strategies are repeated day after day they become routines: systematic patterns of behaviour. A core aspect of these routines is the allocation of one's scarce resources (e.g. time, media access, voting power). Different goals may lead to different strategies and different ways of allocating resources. MPs whose sole ambition is to get re-nominated and re-elected will, guided by the electoral system and candidate selection rules (i.e. the institutions that constrain and enable), adapt their behaviour to please party leaders if selection processes are centralised, or local party branches if selection processes are decentralised. Correspondingly, MPs who seek higher party office will devote more time and effort to the desires of party leaders and peers, even if that includes fulfilling unrewarding tasks with low electoral payoff.

Both authors provide valuable analytical frameworks for reconstructing parliamentary roles. While Searing advocates 'thick description' and sees preferences (rational and psychological) as potentially endogenous to the role-taking process, Strøm promotes analytical parsimony by focusing on roles as strategic behaviour determined by exclusively exogenous, rational goals. Both authors, however, direct their insights almost exclusively on backbenchers, and appear to neglect that frontbenchers, like PPG leaders, have some leeway in shaping their role. In their view there seems to be one way to fill in this mandate, since these 'position roles' are to a great extent determined by institutions. This becomes apparent by the fact that Searing (sub)categorizes multiple backbench roles (e.g. ministerial aspirants, policy advocates, constituency members) while his categories for 'position roles' all coincide with their respective position (e.g. 'whips', 'ministers'). Consequently, Searing's critique that scholars in the 1960s viewed roles too much as 'group facts' and neglected the considerable individual variety in roles across similar institutional contexts (Searing, 1994, p. 25) might also hold for his own interpretation of leadership roles. Strøm (1997) too sees little freedom for rationally-induced strategies for MPs holding leadership positions as he claims that institutions are the rules that constrain reason, whereby position roles (i.e. 'fully institutionally determined strategies') and preference roles (i.e. 'institutionally unconstrained strategies') are the polar points on a 'continuum of constraint'.

We disagree with this rigid conceptualization, and believe that MPs who occupy a formal leadership position might have some leeway in defining their roles. Applied to PPG leaders, it is perfectly plausible that those who belong to governing parties act differently than their colleagues who belong to opposition parties; that leaders of small PPGs act differently than those of large PPGs; or that group leaders approaching the end of their political careers conceive their roles differently than someone who is new to the job. As such, by investigating to what extent one can observe role variation among PPG leaders we will test the widely-accepted underlying assumptions on 'position roles'.

## 4. Research design: case-selection and data

The aims of this paper are to (1) provide a detailed account of the role orientations (and self-reported behaviours) of PPG leaders as important but understudied actors and (2) to test current rather rigid assumptions on ‘position roles’ by examining the degree to which PPG leaders showcase role variation within the same institutional environment. For this purpose, and given that reconstructing roles is time and labour-consuming, we design this study as a single-country study.

### 4.1. The Belgian case

We focus on Belgium, where the position of PPG leader, unlike in other countries, does not coincide with that of the overall party leader (e.g. Westminster democracies, the Netherlands) nor with the presidency of the extra-parliamentary party organization (EPO) (e.g. Spain, Germany) (Helms, 2000; Pilet & Cross, 2014).<sup>5</sup> Instead, Belgian parties’ indisputable political leaders are the EPO chairmen (Pilet & Wauters, 2014). These powerful actors have an important say in the selection of PPG leaders (in the federal and regional parliaments) who thereafter function as a ‘linking pin’ between the central party leaders and the party’s backbenchers (De Winter, 1992). Because of the dominance of EPO leaders over PPGs (De Winter & Dumont, 2006) and due to PPG leaders’ limited intra-party authority compared to other countries, Belgium could be seen as a least-likely case with regards to the expected leeway PPG leaders experience in defining their own role. However, their specific intermediate intra-party position also confronts them with a classic ‘competing principal problem’ (e.g. Carey, 2007). On the one hand, they can act as a representative of the central party elite, communicating the decisions of the latter to the MPs and ensuring their implementation in parliament. On the other hand, they can also inform the party elite about issues at stake at the level of the party group and defend backbenchers’ wishes and policy preferences at higher party echelons. This in itself is a topic worth investigating as it might provide MPs, who are generally seen as weak political actors in the Belgian ‘*partitocracy*’ (De Winter & Dumont, 2006), an alternative route towards policy influence, outside of the parliamentary arena.

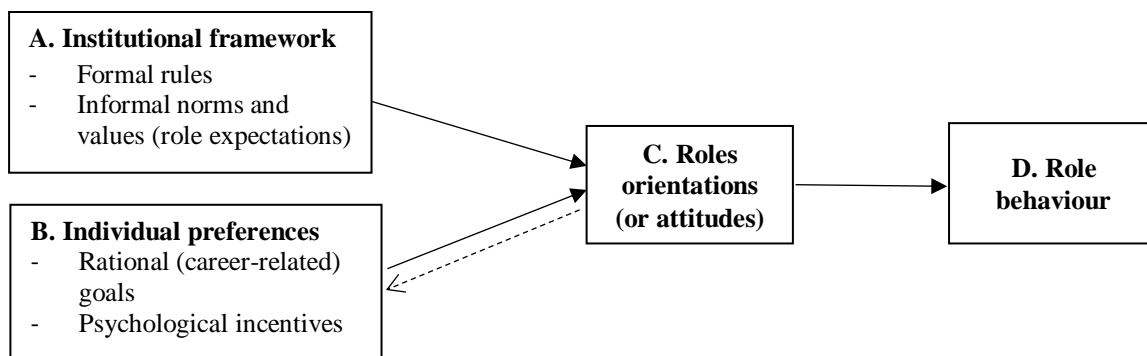
### 4.2. Elite interview data and case-selection

Searing argues that ‘the best way to understand the roles of politicians is to understand them as they do’, (1994, p. 10). We adhere to his motivational approach and use an inductive qualitative approach based on elite-interviews in order to investigate the roles of PPG leaders. Unlike Searing, however, who states that the very role itself consists of a motivational core (preferences) and secondary components (attitudes and behaviours), in this project we more distinctly try to disentangle the key components (i.e. *role attitudes*), causes (i.e. *(in)formal rules, preferences*) and consequences (i.e. *role behaviour*) of roles, for reasons of analysis and conceptual clarity (e.g. *Figure 1*).

For the broader research project, we in fact reconstructed the institutional framework by examining the *formal rules* surrounding PPG leadership (in the parliamentary house rules and party statutes) and by

interviewing political actors in the close environments of PPG leaders (N=35) (e.g. MPs, party presidents, senior PPG and EPO staff members) about their informal *role expectations*.<sup>6</sup> This paper, however, focuses mostly on the perspective of PPG leaders themselves, and on their self-conceived role attitudes and personal goals and preferences. Where relevant we also report role behaviour (although this will be further elaborated upon in future versions of this paper).

**Figure 1.** *Analytical framework*



In total, 29 in-depth elite interviews with (current and former) PPG leaders in the Belgian federal House of representatives and Flemish regional parliament have been conducted.<sup>7</sup> As party- and individual-level characteristics might influence role orientations (e.g. Best & Vogel, 2012) and PPG leaders' functioning more specifically (Bailer et al., 2009), we selected PPG leaders from all six Flemish parties in the federal and Flemish parliament and pursued a maximum of heterogeneity within each party based on government status, PPG size and respondents political experience. In order to obtain this within party variance, we did not only interview current PPG leaders but also went back to earlier legislative terms.<sup>8</sup> In order to reduce the risk of hindsight bias and enhance the data validity (Berry, 2002), the interviews were well-prepared by systematically searching media outlets and incorporating questions about actual events during one's term as PPG leader (e.g. important policy decisions, intra-party disagreements, government crises). Moreover, the interviews with other PPG and EPO actors (who were selected in a second phase based on the selection of PPG leaders) did not only serve as a means to detect role expectations, but also allowed us to triangulate findings from the PPG leader interviews.

The interview questionnaires contained both closed and open-ended questions that, often using similar question wordings as Searing (1994, p. 484) gauged respondents' priorities in parliament, the intrinsic aspect of being a PPG leader they found most satisfactory (and why they wanted to become it in the first place), their self-reported time allocation and their main personal goals and ambitions. Moreover, the interviews provided rich information on the internal management of the PPG organization, and on how PPG leaders deal with preference heterogeneity within the party group and with potential disagreement between the PPG and the central party headquarters.



**Table 1. Overview of interview respondents' (PPG leaders) characteristics<sup>9</sup>**

Party	Total N	Government status		Political experience*		PPG size (seats)		
		Majority	Opposition	Inexperienced	Experienced	Small (<10)	Medium (10-20)	Large >20
Liberals (VLD)	5	4	1	2	3	0	1	4
Socialists (SPA)	5	2	3	2	3	0	4	1
Ecologists (Groen)	5	2	3	3	2	2	3	0
Christian democr. (CD&V)	5	2	3	2	3	2	1	2
Regionalists (NVA)	5	4	1	3	2	2	1	2
Right-wing populists (VB)	4	0	4	2	2	2	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>

\*Population data reveals that PPG leaders' prior parliamentary experience is on average 2 legislative terms. Respondents who became PPG leader in their first or second term as MPs are labelled as 'inexperienced'. The others (or those with ministerial experience) as 'experienced'.

## 5. Research results

### 5.1. The global picture: PPG leaders top priorities in parliament

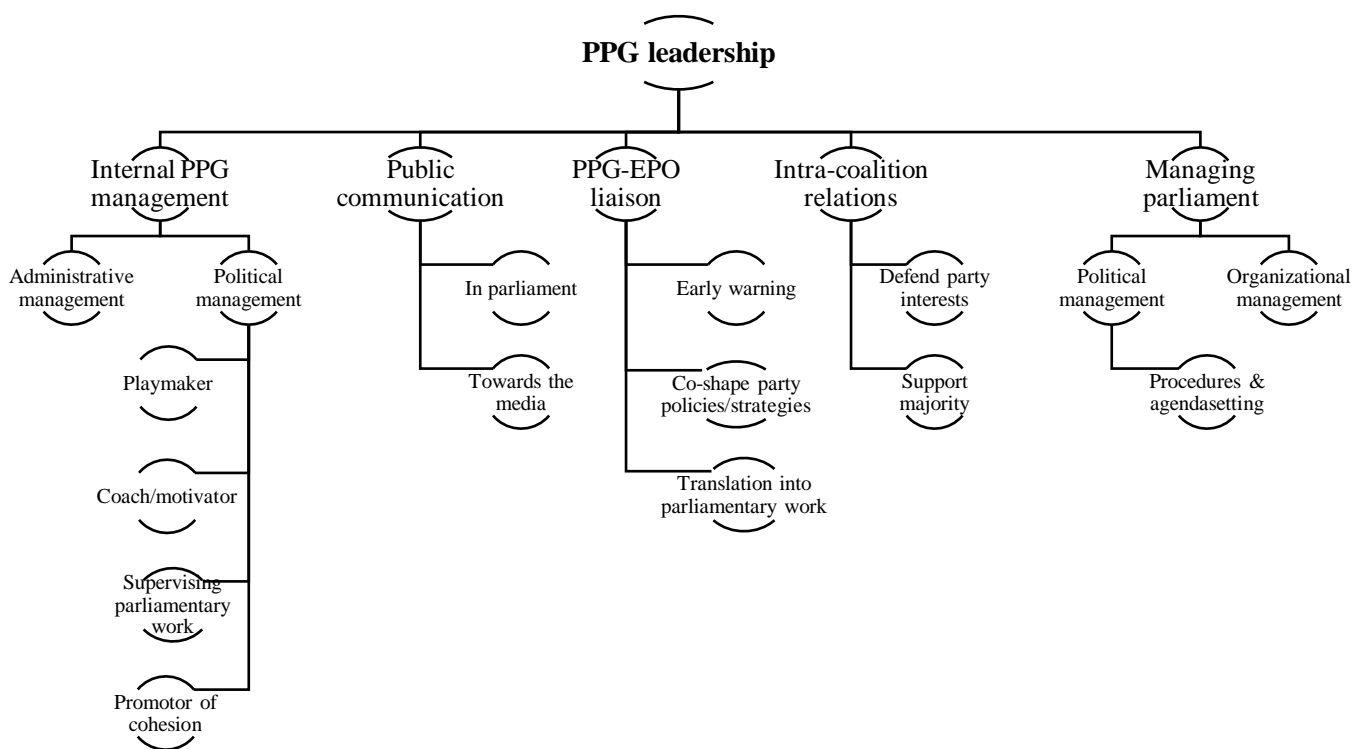
Before looking at to what extent there is role variation among PPG leaders, we take a closer look at the overall tasks they fulfil in Belgium. When asked about their personal top three priorities as a PPG leader (i.e. an open question asked at the very beginning of the interview), respondents recited a broad array of responsibilities that go far beyond '*ensuring that everyone pushes the right button during votes*' (PPG leader 16). These duties can be appropriated to five broad categories, each with its own subtasks and subdivisions (see Figure 2). We additionally asked respondents to indicate on a scale from 1 to 10 how important a number of tasks were for them personally (1= not important, 10=really important) and how much time they allocated to these tasks (1= almost no time, 10 = a lot of time) (see Table 2).<sup>10</sup>

PPG leaders are, firstly, in charge of the *internal management* of the PPG organization. While this also includes administrative tasks (HR-management, controlling the PPG budget), most PPG leaders (26 of 29 respondents) refer to its political management as one of their top priorities. PPG leaders are '*playmakers*'. They outline a proper division of labour at the beginning of the term (by allocating committee seats and specific policy portfolio's to MPs) and assure that everyone complies with these initial agreements in order to avoid internal tensions. One third of the PPG leaders spontaneously mention that they regularly need to resolve what one respondent called 'border conflicts': i.e. when MPs

try to ‘expand their territory’ by intervening on someone else’s field of specialisation or when it’s unclear within whose ‘competence’ a new topic falls:

“Sometimes, three to four MPs are already waiting at my office door by the time I get back from our weekly PPG meeting. Most of the times their question is: ‘a new policy issue arose within our committee, which one of us gets to work on it?’ Of course I understand them, they all want a place in the limelight, but it requires a lot of people management and, to be honest, I underestimated how much of my time it would cost” (Respondent 17).

**Figure 2. PPG leaders’ responsibilities (in Belgium)**



Also the complex task of fairly distributing speaking time and opportunities for self-promotion (particularly oral questions in the weekly plenary ‘question time’ are popular) needs considerable attention in order to keep everyone satisfied and let everyone score once in a while. Relatedly, PPG leaders need to assure that the PPG is a strong collective entity by using every MPs’ (different) capacities in the best possible way.

“*MP X* is not someone who I will send to an emotional debate with a minister in order to loudly and wildly gesticulating make a point... No, she is someone who has the talent to, almost academically, make a concise and critical assessment of integration policies. *MP Y* on the other hand comes up with great one-liners at the right time. He is someone who I take to general plenary debates in order to generate media attention (Respondent 3).

Particularly the more experienced PPG leaders stress their tasks *coaches*. They feel it is their duty to mentor newly elected MPs and to encourage PPG leaders to take new initiatives and provide them with (staff) support where needed. PPG leaders furthermore *coordinate and supervise* the PPGs' parliamentary activities: they determine the PPG's strategies, lead discussions on policy positions in the weekly PPG meeting, they monitor external communication and try to maintain 'the helicopter view' over everyone's specialized policy work. Particularly in majority parties, this often implies '*tempering the diligence and ambitions of MPs*' (Respondent 1) in order not to bring government members into difficulties. Lastly, PPG leaders promote both *political and interpersonal cohesion*. They do so predominantly proactively, by ensuring that everybody feels relevant and knows their role within the PPG (avoiding 'border conflicts') and by organizing working groups and (one-on-one) meetings where policies are discussed and developed. Parliamentary sanctions or rewards are rarely used.<sup>11</sup> Respondents either claim that '*there is not much they can do besides escalating the matter to the party president who decides over MP's renomination*' (Respondent 26) or argue that sanctioning would cause them to '*lose their authority and position as a coach within the group*' (Respondent 28). Instead, PPG leaders' role in reaching party agreement (i.e. by convincing MPs using rational arguments or taking their specific concerns into account) and party loyalty (i.e. by convincing MPs not to 'let their colleagues down') seems much larger.

"In case of disagreement, my advice is always: 'follow the group'. And will always try to convince MPs that are likely to defect by providing them reasons why that is also beneficial for them. And then I don't mean: 'watch out for your job' and stuff like that. No, I am talking about substantial and political-strategic arguments, like: how their voting behaviour might be misused by political adversaries. Or: 'you are putting your colleagues under pressure. Because you are voting against, and they're not. You are the good guy while they come out badly'" (Respondent 9).

One populist right-wing PPG leader even admitted exploiting a feeling of 'it is us against everyone else' in order to cultivate within-group loyalty.

"Our party group has always been quite cohesive. And that was not so much my merit, but was due to external pressures. When the whole world is always against you, and we've always cultivated that feeling, well yes, then you obtain strong internal cohesion [...]. Group pressure was decisive: you are either with us, or you're not" (Respondent 13).

PPG leaders evidently also mentioned tasks that are more external and go beyond the political management of the PPG. As the PPG's *primus inter pares*, they are the most important spokesperson in the media and during parliamentary debates that concern general governmental policies (e.g. the budget, state of the union). Also when specific dossiers become topical, they might replace backbenchers in order to give more weight to the party message (see below). Table 2 shows that this is the task that PPG leaders on average prioritise most and many respondents claimed that a large share of their time goes to preparing debates and constantly trying to remain informed about the latest political developments.

**Table 2. Respondents priorities and time allocation (N=29)**

	Importance (1-10)		Time allocation (1-10)	
	Average	SD	Average	SD
<i>Ensuring a good division of labour</i>	<b>7,72</b>	1,69	<b>5,62</b>	2,04
<i>Lead discussions on PPG positions</i>	<b>7,76</b>	1,24	<b>5,61</b>	1,47
<i>Coach PPG members</i>	6,07	2,23	4,50	2,24
<i>Coach PPG Staff</i>	5,90	2,37	3,68	1,70
<i>Monitor committee work</i>	5,66	1,82	4,57	2,13
<i>Ensure unity</i>	<b>8,32</b>	1,16	4,93	2,32
<i>Top down liaison (EPO to PPG)</i>	6,38	2,47	3,93	1,84
<i>Bottom-up liaison (PPG to EPO)</i>	6,32	2,13	3,79	1,75
<i>Codecide on parliamentary agenda</i>	7,25	1,78	4,57	1,73
<i>Having frequent contacts with MPs from other parties</i>	6,07	2,23	4,54	2,10
<i>Having frequent contacts with party's own ministers (if in majority)</i>	<b>8,07</b>	1,03	<b>5,47</b>	1,55
<i>Having frequent contacts with ministers from other parties</i>	4,25	2,46	2,75	1,73
<i>Publicly defend party positions as the PPG's political frontrunner</i>	<b>8,86</b>	0,85	<b>7,46</b>	1,55

Most respondents (20 out of 29) somehow also bring up their liaising tasks between the PPG and EPO as one of their *top priorities*. During formal and informal meetings with the party elite, many feel it is their duty to inform them about the preferences of backbenchers, which often is intended as an ‘early warning’ to party leaders (and government ministers) that they need to take into account their (possible) objections. Here, PPG leaders are furthermore in the position to co-shape party positions and strategies, and later ensure that they are translated into parliamentary initiatives. A similar dynamic is found in PPG leaders intra-coalition contacts (most notably with PPG leaders from other governing parties): here they try to defend the interests of their party (group) while simultaneously loyally defending compromises in PPG meetings by explaining why certain concessions had to be made, in order to reel in certain preferred policies.

“I often played that card. I would go to meetings with coalition partners and say: “I am very sorry, but I cannot convince *PPG member X* of that. You know him too, right?” (Respondent 29)

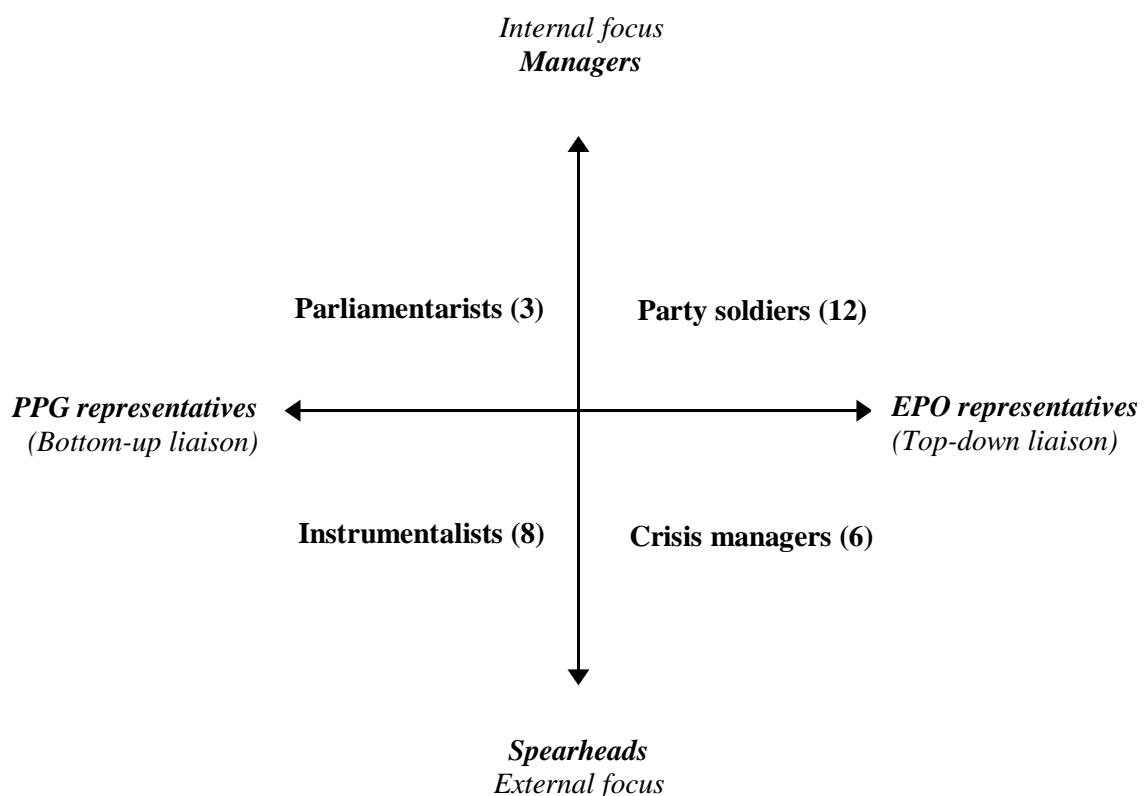
“Take for instance the recent government agreement on the budget. A lot of our party’s demands are actually incorporated in there, but then of course there are also those 1 or 2 aspects on which we had to concede. If you don’t watch out, your PPG members will only keep fixate on those two aspects, and feel as if we aren’t weighing on policy-making enough. That is something that you always have to counter, and it requires a lot of energy” (Respondent 27).

Lastly, PPG leaders are also member of parliament's governing bodies (e.g. the Conference of Group Chairmen) where they decide over organizational matters and the political agenda. Particularly the latter is important, both for opposition (in order to get interpellations or topical debates on the agenda) and for majority PPG leaders (in order to try and block potentially detrimental debates).

## 5.2. Assimilation or variation? Towards a typology of PPG leader roles

During the interviews became apparent that there is indeed considerable variation among PPG leaders' role orientations. Although some formal responsibilities allow for limited individual interpretation (e.g. representing the PPG in the Conference of Group chairman), many respondents themselves (27 out of 29) acknowledged that the way they fill in their mandate probably differs from the way others did. Whereas some attribute this to individuals' competence and skills (e.g. eloquence, being a policy generalist, political weight, personal commitment), it most of the time reflects a different *logic of appropriateness* (e.g. Andeweg, 2012; March & Olsen, 1989; Searing, 1994) in the heads of the respondents either due to varying party-level pressures (different expectations due to a parties' size, government status, organizational culture or electoral prospects) or diverging personal goals (particularly progressive ambitions (e.g. Schlesinger, 1966) or the absence thereof seem important).

**Figure 2: PPG leader role types**



In all cases, these differences somehow relate to two dimensions that can be displayed as two continuums that refer to inbuilt dilemma's in the daily functioning of PPG leaders. The first is PPG leaders primarily adopting an *external focus* (i.e. respondents who see themselves mainly as the PPG's political figureheads) versus those with a distinct *internal focus* (PPG leaders as team players, coaches and managers). The second dimension refers to the intra-party position of PPG leaders: while some mainly see themselves as representatives of the PPG in the EPO's decision-making bodies, others adopt a more top-down-oriented focus aimed at transferring central party leaders' directives to the backbenchers. Indeed, when clustering interviewees based on their own reports of their daily functioning, we find four PPG leader role-types (and potential subsequent sub-roles) that run along these two dimensions (see Figure 3). It should, however, be noted that these are ideal types and that within each category further diversifications can be observed (see below).

### ***5.2.1. Party soldiers***

'Party soldiers' adopt a clear internal focus and stress their loyalty to the central party leadership. They make up the largest category among the interview respondents (12 out of 29). Party soldiers tend to prioritize their work behind the scenes. They feel it is their duty to ensure that the PPG is a strong, well-organized collective entity where a collegial atmosphere between PPG members – who all want a place in the limelight – is prevalent. They therefore prioritize their duties as playmakers (fairly dividing PPG resources and opportunities for self-promotion), coaches to (new) backbenchers, inspirators and motivators. They stress the importance of transferring their political insights and knowledge on parliamentary procedures to backbenchers, of helping them with the policy-related issues they encounter, finding the right communicative strategy, building and extending their networks, and seeking new opportunities for parliamentary initiatives. In terms of behaviour, this implies spending a lot of time in parliament and sustaining direct and accessible contacts with backbenchers:

“It first and foremost means: being approachable. When they [PPG members] call, you pick up your phone. Never close your office door. When they have concerns or questions and email you, make sure to reply within a couple of hours. So that they feel important. Organize meetings in order to work things out. Just offer a ‘listening ear’ and never make them feel as if the things they struggle with are unimportant. Because they are all egos, you see” (Respondent 2).

Good PPG leaders, in their view, are empathic, altruistic, know the capacities and desires of backbenchers, spend a lot of their time on ‘people management’ and are able to proactively detect and resolve problems within the PPG. Most importantly, he or she is not someone who absorbs all public attention but is happy with a more supportive role, even if it implies having to fulfil personally unrewarding tasks with low electoral pay-off (as opposed to others (see below) they value ‘internal legitimacy over external legitimacy’). They do not solely seek personal exposure, but find most job satisfaction in seeing fellow PPG members grow, having a good (trust) relationship with all MPs and

developing a PPG with a strong collective reputation (not being dependent only on the interventions and work of a handful of protagonists).

“Last week, *MP X* got a lot of good press on *topic Y*. Not that I am that vain or anything but it was mainly because of a communicative strategy I developed for him. Of course, that is also my job, I am a team player and I am glad for him, but what’s in it for me? Afterwards I sometimes think: damn, maybe I should try to be in the newspapers a bit more. I would like to get re-elected too, you know” (Respondent 17).

Still, party soldiers tend to accept their place in the ‘back office’, partly because they can reside to the formal moments on which they are expected to take the floor (e.g. during budgetary debates) but mostly because they do not need the exposure as much as backbenchers do, as they tend to be experienced, well-known politicians. Intensively socialized within the diverse party echelons, party soldiers particularly value top-down liaison (by transferring policy decisions or party strategies as determined by the party leadership or central executive committee) to backbenchers (although, when present at the PPG meeting, they also expect the party president to do this). It is in fact often why they believe they were selected: not only because of the support of fellow PPG members for their candidacy but also because of their loyalty to the party leadership (one respondent described himself as a ‘safe choice’ for the party elite as they believed that he would not cause any trouble). Still, most respondents argue that official party positions are deliberated upon quite openly in the central party executive (where also PPG delegates are present) and that it afterwards comes down to transparently briefing these decisions in the PPG meeting by setting out all arguments and providing the ‘pros and cons’ of alternatives. Party soldiers’ apprehension that top-down liaison is important seems to stem more from the fact that all respondents in this category belong to majority parties, and that they see themselves as important go-betweens between the executive and parliament. Delicate government compromises and package deals (implying concessions for all parties) have to be guided through the legislative process and ideological hardliners in the party group have to be convinced. Moreover, they often have to put the brakes on backbenchers’ policy-related ambitions because coalition partners oppose them. Still, it is not all a one-way street. As they are highly preoccupied with supporting backbenchers and understand that proactive involvement is key in governmental policy-making through their years of political experience, they try to make sure that backbenchers can at least express their concerns by inviting central party elites or ministers to PPG meetings, or by providing other opportunities.

A sensible minister understands that, ultimately, the PPG members have to pass their legislation through parliament. They should not show up when the final compromise has already been made because, of course, then they will encounter critiques. As a PPG leader, you have to ensure that ministers involve PPG members already at an early stage, so they can give their input and see for themselves how an initial proposal evolves towards a final compromise. We therefore organized a lot of meetings with ministers and their staff for which backbenchers were invited. Half of them never showed up, but when they had critiques afterwards at least I could say: I am very sorry, but then you should have raised your concerns earlier, during the meeting (Respondent 29).

As mentioned, interviewees identified as party soldiers are mostly highly experienced politicians that belong to larger government parties. They are found in all parties under study except in the green and extreme-right party.

### ***5.2.2. Parliamentarists***

'Parliamentarists' constitute the second and smallest category among the interviewed PPG leaders (3 out of 29). Very similar to the category above, parliamentarists are first and foremost preoccupied with the internal management of the PPG and state that they spend a lot of time in guiding backbenchers and supporting them in their parliamentary work. They too see themselves as team players that do not feel the need to claim all public attention.

“A good PPG leader is someone who can coach a group and puts a strong team out there on the pitch. He should also be able to translate the party message to a broader public, although he should not be the one who always takes centre stage. Instead, he should let others ‘score’ as well. Without it being obvious that he is the one who always gives the ‘assists’. So a certain degree of discretion. The team above all else” (Respondent 28).

The main difference between 'party soldiers' and 'parliamentarists' is that the latter more distinctly than the former feel that it is their duty to articulate the overall position of the PPG (or individual PPG members) both in intra-party meetings and when addressing the broader public. Two of the three respondents in this category admit that the fact that their party was in opposition probably gave them more opportunities to expound the PPG's positions. The third respondent, belonging to a government party, stated he favoured expressing the PPGs' view because of sense that a degree of 'dualism' between the executive and the legislative branch would be desirable (not only for the party group but also for the party as a whole):

As a PPG leader, it is your tasks to point out to the party's minister: 'Look, we also have a PPG, consisting of people who have opinions and visions. You have to communicate with them'. Providing that link is extremely important. [...]. Afterwards, in parliament, you are of course expected to defend government decisions. But simultaneously, you are also the one that can take it a step further. As a PPG leader, you are not actually in government, you don't have to identify entirely with them. You should be dare to distance yourself a bit from their decisions and give a sharper profile to the PPG by stressing your own demands and accents, of course without taking it too far. Doing so, is not only in the interest of the PPG but in the interest of the entire party, as governmental policies are coalition compromises (Respondent 22).

As mentioned, the few 'parliamentarists' can be found both in opposition and government parties. They again are elder, experienced politicians (with one clear exception). Two of them belong to the green party, one to the liberal party.



### 5.2.1. Instrumentalists

The third role type that can be identified are the ‘instrumentalists’. Respondents that fall in this category (8 out of 29 respondents) tend to see their position as leader of the PPG as something that is ‘instrumental’ to achieving their personal goals and ambitions. Within this group, a further distinction can be made based on PPG leaders’ political experience and the objectives they pursue. A first subgroup are ‘status protectors’ (5 respondents). These respondents are seasoned politicians that do not necessarily have progressive career ambitions but do tend to use their PPG leadership as a personal power base, or a means that allows them to gain public visibility and (still) exert influence in intra-party decision-making. ‘Status protectors’ often actively lobbied (or ‘pushed through’ as one respondent puts it) in order to be become PPG leader as they ‘*did not want to be demoted directly to a normal MP*’ (Respondent 10) after being a minister or party president or because they ‘*felt like they were wasting away in the backbenches*’ (Respondent 23). PPG leadership confirms their status within the party, provides them a public forum and puts them (back) in the party’s decision-making cockpit. A second subgroup, labelled ‘prodigies’ (3 respondents), refers to younger, less experienced but talented politicians that were selected as a PPG leader by the party leadership with the explicit intention of providing them with a ‘launching platform’. Holding the office of PPG leader allows them to gain public visibility and to learn how to cope with political responsibility.

“A basic expectation, for a young PPG leader like me, was: ‘Go forth and multiply.’ Become well-know, if possible also popular, ensure that you get votes at the next general elections, and – I don’t know – maybe become a minister afterwards” (Respondent 1).

Unlike the previous two role types, instrumentalists have a more distinct external focus. In their view, a good PPG leader is foremost a frontrunner and a good debater. Someone who eloquently transfers the party message in parliament and towards the media. They tend to find the internal management of the PPG (coaching MPs, providing a fair division of labour, resolving internal conflicts) of secondary importance or even state that it ‘*requires a lot of your time, but distracts you from the essence: being a spokesperson, preparing debates, going to television appearances, doing parliamentary interventions*’ (Respondent 13).

They enjoy ‘*being in the picture*’ (Respondent 23) and like that – as opposed to backbenchers, who (need to) specialize in a specific policy field – they can intervene in a broad spectrum of topics in parliament. While also instrumental for their personal fame and status, they believe that the PPG leader (instead of other PPG members) should take the floor when an issue becomes a hot topic in order to give more political weight to the PPG message. Convinced that the media (increasingly) focus on key figures within the PPG, they argue that this is electorally interesting for the party as well. This opposes the idea of PPG leaders as playmakers and during the interviews, several accounts have been raised of intra-PPG tensions and frustrations among backbenchers, who prepare their cases and build up expertise on highly

specialized policy issues, but do not get the opportunity to take the floor and generate personal media attention as soon as the issue becomes topical.

Instrumentalists (and particularly ‘status protectors’) tend to use their position as PPG leaders to influence overall party policies and strategies. They contend that they mostly see it as their task to promote the views and interest of the PPG in the central party decision-making bodies, although also their own policy views matter (one PPG leader in this category stated that he was not ‘a mail carrier’ and that backbenchers with personal wishes or grievances should not hide behind the PPG leader but contact the party elite themselves). While ‘prodigies’ seem more inclined to practice top-down liaison and act as a central party representative in the PPG because of their dependence of the party elite for their future careers, several (elder) respondents in the ‘status protector’ category state that the party president should come to the PPG meeting personally in order to defend difficult party decisions as it would cause them to lose their authority within the group.

“When the party president wants to bring a difficult message to the PPG members, he should do it himself. I don’t do that, because then I lose my authority within the group. The PPG should be behind me at all times. They should feel as if I am defending their interests in the central party executive committee. And not have the impression that I am only a puppet of the party executive that pushes through all the party decisions that they don’t want to defend themselves in the PPG. That really wouldn’t be a good idea” (Respondent 13).

Instrumentalists can be found in all parties under study. While they most often belong to opposition parties, two respondents in this category belonged to government parties.

### ***5.2.2. Crisis managers***

‘Crisis managers’ make up a last distinct category among PPG leaders (6 out of 29 respondents). The main common ground among respondents in this category is that they belong to parties that suffered large electoral losses in the foregoing elections (and often ended up in opposition). In all cases, these electoral defeats have been the harbinger for internal party renewal. New party presidents with renewed policy agendas and political strategies were appointed in order to turn the electoral tide. On their turn, these party presidents appointed relatively unknown politicians as new PPG leaders who, together with him or her, are expected to embody the new political course of the party. As a result, the PPG leaders that fall into this category all stress their loyalty to the new party presidents and mainly prioritize top-down liaison: they feel that is their duty to convince the other MPs of the new programmatic or political-strategic course the party is heading and try to support the party leader in his endeavours. Practically all of them state that this is not always easy as those renewed party policies and strategies might invoke opposition among the party’s elder, more experienced MPs.

“A clear expectation was for me to make the clear change of course as outlined by the party leader. Both in terms of style and policies. Not always the hard bickering, not focusing solely on socio-economic topics.

Working on a new image, one that people wouldn't directly ascribe to our party. And embodying that image. Actively challenge people to address new topics. And remain loyal to the renewed party strategies as set out by the new party leader and the people that supported them" (Respondent 3).

"While our party president is trying to set out a new programmatic course, there is always that one person in the PPG of whom you're never sure what he will say during plenary meetings [...]. That is why... where it often used to be the PPG meeting that decided on which position to take in parliament, I will now escalate the discussion more quickly to the central party executive committee. It is easier to push things through when you're backed by the entire central party elite. I do not always use that as leverage, but sometimes I do" (Respondent 11).

In order to 'embody the new party message', PPG leaders that fall in the category of 'crisis managers' appear to adopt a clear external focus. A good PPG leader is a good communicator, who does not act primarily out of self-interest but convincingly tries to translate the renewed party policies to a broader audience in a comprehensible way. More than 'instrumentalists', however, 'crisis managers' are also preoccupied with the internal management of the party as a priority. They face greater disunity (see above) and state that they put a lot of effort in convincing fellow PPG members and avoiding that dissidence reaches the outside world, given the already precarious situation the party finds itself in.

## **6. Discussion**

PPG leaders are understudied but important actors that, particularly in Western European parliaments, have an impact on the internal functioning of party groups (and thus parliaments at large) and on the behaviour of individual MPs. Following an inductive approach and using data from in-depth elite interviews with 29 (current and former) PPG leaders in the Belgian federal and Flemish parliament, this paper presented an explanatory study of the role orientations of these influential actors. Besides giving a general overview of their own conceptions of what their job in parliament entails (going beyond their access and use of sanctions in order to keep PPG members in line), we tried to uncover role variation.

In contradiction to commonly-assumed (and overly-simplifying) prepositions on parliamentary leadership (or 'position') roles, and despite their limited formal authority in Belgium as intermediates between the powerful central party elite and the party's backbenchers, we did find that PPG leaders do conceive of their main duties and responsibilities differently. While some PPG leaders adopt a clear external focus aimed at translating party policies to a broader (parliamentary and public) audience, others are content with their place behind the scenes as managers and playmakers. Moreover, while some primarily see it as their duty to convince fellow PPG members of central party elite decisions (often in majority parties or in times of electoral adversity) others see it as their duty to more actively try to co-shape central party policies by defending the interests and policy positions of the PPG (members). Based on these two dimensions, we developed a typology of four ideal-type PPG leader roles ('party soldiers', 'instrumentalists', 'parliamentarists' and 'crisis managers') and delineated how

PPG leaders in each of these groups conceive of their roles differently. We described their respective personal priorities in parliament as well as the underlying motivations that lie at the basis of their role orientations.

This study has important implications for parliamentary role research, which – driven by seminal influential analytical approaches (Searing, 1994; Strøm, 1997) – has long assumed that MPs occupying leadership positions in parliament have limited leeway in defining their roles (given that ‘position roles’ are heavily constrained by institutional pressures). As such, it should encourage scholars to not only examine backbench roles but also investigate frontbench roles given the potential impact of their functioning on parliamentary decision-making. Future research should examine the roles of PPG leaders in different political settings and further try to disentangle the causes of diverging PPG leader roles more in detail (e.g. under what circumstances do PPG leaders play a certain role; what happens when role expectations (of MPs, party leaders) conflict with a PPG leaders’ personal goals). Moreover it could also investigate the consequences of PPG leaders’ role orientations. How (and to what extent) are different role attitudes translated into characteristic role behaviour? What are the implications of PPG leaders’ adopting certain roles for the internal organisation of PPGs and the parliamentary work of PPG members?

## **7. Footnotes**

1. They might also consist of MPs that belong to different parties but wish to collaborate in the parliamentary arena, save when they do so for exclusively for technical reasons (e.g. obtaining more financial support) (Heidar & Koole, 2000)
2. Many studies, however, do not analyse the actual use of disciplinary measures but take their existence as a given, and concentrate directly on the moderating effects of institutional variables on party unity (e.g. Carey, 2007, p. 13; Coman, 2015; Sieberer, 2006).
3. Some see roles as ‘interrelated goals, attitudes and behaviours (Searing, 1994, p. 369), others only as regularised patterns of behaviour (Strøm, 1997, p. 155). Andeweg (2014, p. 269) proposes to make a clear distinction between role attitudes (or orientations) and role behaviour. The former are ‘an individual’s perception of what is generally expected of her as a holder of her current institutional position’ (Andeweg, 2012, p. 66) which might (or not) be translated into characteristic and observable behaviour.
4. See however, Andeweg (2014) on this topic.
5. In the mentioned countries that go by the rules of dualism, PPG leaders often are the parties’ electoral and political frontrunner, unless the party leader becomes a government minister and is obliged to resign from parliament.
6. These research findings will be reported elsewhere.
7. The interviews were conducted between May 2017 and May 2018 and lasted on average 70 minutes (the shortest took 35 minutes, the longest almost three hours). All interviews were tape-recorded, fully transcribed and subsequently coded using the NVivo-software package in order to structure the textual data and delineate (inductively-derived) role types. Following a similar approach to other studies (Navarro, 2012, p. 208), we went back to the individual transcripts in a second stage, in order to match interview partners to the role patterns.

8. We mainly did this so that in every party (except VB) we would have both majority and opposition PPG leaders. In practice, we therefore had to go back until the 1999-2003/4 period. A single respondent was a PPG leader in the legislative term before that (1995-1999).
9. In order to guarantee respondents' anonymity, we do not report individual characteristics per PPG leader. In several occasions, due to the fact that respondents were PPG leaders multiple times or over a long period of time, PPG leaders in fact fit into multiple columns of this table (e.g. having chaired both a small and a larger PPG). In that case, the values attributed in the table then reflect on what period the interviews primarily focused.
10. We opted for a relative scale from 1 to 10 in order to grasp time allocation instead of absolute categories (e.g. every day, once a week) in order to see more easily whether role attitudes (i.e. perceived importance) are also translated in role behaviour (i.e. time allocation).
11. Although some PPG leaders did admit having withheld staff support, speaking time and opportunities for self-promotion (mainly plenary questions during PM question time) when MPs made bold public statements.

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