



Brussels Studies

La revue scientifique pour les recherches sur Bruxelles
/ Het wetenschappelijk tijdschrift voor onderzoek over
Brussel / The Journal of Research on Brussels
Collection générale | 2008

Brussels as the capital of a Europe of the regions?

Regional offices as European policy actors

Bruxelles, capitale de l'Europe des régions ? Les bureaux régionaux, acteurs politiques européens

Brussel als hoofdstad van een Europa van de regio's? Regionale vertegenwoordigingen als Europese beleidsactoren

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/brussels/547>

DOI: 10.4000/brussels.547

ISSN: 2031-0293

Publisher

Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles

Electronic reference

Michel Huysseune and Theo Jans, « Brussels as the capital of a Europe of the regions? », *Brussels Studies* [Online], General collection, no 16, Online since 25 February 2008, connection on 04 July 2020.
URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/brussels/547> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/brussels.547>



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Abstract

Brussels has acquired international capital status for regional and local lobbying. The establishment of a representation to the EU in Brussels has become the standard for regions (and, to a lesser extent, local authorities) from EU Member States. The activities of these representations present a specific profile that partly distinguishes them from classic interest groups and lobbies. They were established for a variety of reasons, such as seeking funding, playing a political role at EU level, and raising the region's profile and connecting with networks and a supranational community in the proximity of the EU institutions. The offices' goals and activities have since converged and they now all seek to inform, network, lobby, liaise, and market for their regions. Regions with legislative powers concentrate more on influencing EU policies, which their preferential access to the European Council and Commission allows them to do so effectively. Because of the diversified range of functions that regional offices fulfil, they are relevant and useful to their home regions and likely to be permanent fixtures in Brussels.

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Michel Huyseune & M. Theo Jans

Brussels as the capital of a Europe of the regions?

Regional offices as European policy actors ¹

Regional representations have become a conspicuous presence in Brussels, well acknowledged as partners of the European policy community. The innovative nature of the international representation of sub-national authorities has drawn ample academic attention (see, e.g., Badiello, 1998; 2000; Goergen, 2004; Heichlinger, 1999; Huyseune & Jans, 2005; Jeffery, 1996; Marks et al., 2002; Nielsen & Salk, 1998; Smets, 1998). Currently (April 2007), 165 regions, 17 local or subregional authorities, 26 networks of local and regional authorities, and 18 other entities (mainly representations of regional private-sector entities) are accredited by the Brussels Capital Region, for a total of 226 accredited offices. This number only partially captures the presence of these offices in Brussels, since a number of them are not (yet) officially accredited by the region.

Irrespective of their exact number, it is clear that the establishment of a Brussels office has become the standard for European regions. Offices from EU Member States (and sometimes from non-Member States) have become a significant category of players in the Brussels-based supranational policy community. Brussels has acquired the status of international capital for regional and local lobbying. It begs the question why these regional representations, some with considerable resources, have been established although their formal recognition by and access to the EU institutions is limited. Paraphrasing Marks and others, this article seeks to clarify what sub-national offices think they are doing in Brussels and why, through an analysis of the origins, characteristics and practices of the regional representations in Brussels.

¹ The authors wish to thank Geert De Proost of the Representation of Brussels Capital Region to the EU and Karin Impens of the Brussels-Europe Liaison Office for the information that they have kindly provided and their comments on a first draft.

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This article is based on a research project on regional offices that was carried out on behalf of the Brussels Capital Region and the Brussels-Europe Liaison Office (BELO) by the Political Science Department and the Institute for European Studies of the Flemish-speaking Free University of Brussels (VUB). The research was conducted from May 2004 until February 2005 and included a survey (a written questionnaire submitted to all local and regional representations then present in Brussels) organized in June 2004² and interviews with officers of representations and regional network co-ordinators. Where possible, more recent information has been used to update this article.

History

The presence of representations of sub-national authorities dates from the mid-1980s, starting with the opening of the Birmingham office in 1984. The first arrivals were mainly regional and local authorities from Germany and the United Kingdom. In the case of the United Kingdom, local authorities, cities or counties with few competencies and means, came to Brussels looking for financial resources (Jeffery, 1996). The opening of representations from Great Britain, which is a country with a lobbying-oriented political culture, was part of a broader trend among interest groups to be present in Brussels to develop links with the European Union (Streeck & Schmitter, 1991). German regions, on the other hand, started to open representations in Brussels in response to the growing impact of European rules on their domestic powers. An informal collective representation of the German Länder in Brussels, the Beobachter der Länder bei der EU, has been present in Brussels since 1957, and was officialized in 1988 (Börzel, 2002, p. 61). However, individual Länder started setting up offices in Brussels in the second half of the 1980s. These offices were officially recognised by the German Federal Government in 1992 (Börzel, 2002, p. 77).

In those countries where regional authorities had legislative powers, the increasing influence of EU policy decisions on sub-national authorities and their activities was an important incentive to be present in Brussels (Badiello, 2000). Regional policy became an EU prerogative with the Single European Act (SEA 1987), while the SEA also broadened the EU's authority over policy areas that belonged to local and/or regional jurisdiction in some Member States, e.g., environment, social policy, R&D and industry. In addition, the reforms and expansion of the Structural Funds (Delors II report in 1988) attracted a number of regions (Catalonia, Basque Country, Brittany, Wales) to Brussels to influence the distribution of these funds (Schmitter, 1996, p. 138; Panebianco, 2000, p. 61). The Maastricht Treaty (1992) reinforced the regional dimension of European integration by introducing the principle of subsidiarity, providing for further increases in structural spending and the creation of the Cohesion Fund to support the most disadvantaged regions, and creating the Committee of the Regions (founded in 1994). It also opened up the possibility for regional ministers to represent the Member State in the Council of Ministers, an option since then

² A total of 123 (52.6%) of the 234 representations contacted responded to the survey. The respondents adequately represent the universe of all representations contacted in three relevant areas, namely, regions with legislative powers, offices from new Member States, and offices from territories entitled to Objective 1 funds (Huyseune & Jans, 2005).

adopted by four states, namely, Belgium, Germany, Austria and Spain³. A great many regional offices were therefore opened in Brussels, especially between 1992 and 1994 (Huyseune & Jans, 2005).

The influx of newcomers has never really ceased since then. Generally, regional authorities of countries where they have broad powers (Germany, Spain, Belgium, Austria when it joined the EU) were among the first to open offices in Brussels. They were soon followed by those of other Member States, and by now most sub-national authorities of the fifteen "old" Member States are represented in Brussels. Representations remain scarce for Luxembourg and some strongly centralized Member States, i.e., Portugal (no offices), Ireland and Greece, only. Local authorities are rarely directly present: only a small number of capitals and major cities have their own representation. Organizations such as Eurocities, however, provide collective representation of cities in Brussels, while some offices also host or incorporate agencies from lower-level authorities.

The attraction of the EU extends to sub-national authorities of the new Member States. Particularly in relation to the accession of ten new Member States in 2004, a large number of representations from local and regional authorities of the new Member States were set up in 2002 and 2003. The influx of these new representations is remarkable since in most of these countries the formation of a regional level of governance dates from after the communist era and regional authorities are still consolidating. Their presence nevertheless has been increasing steadily. Representations from Poland have been joined by those from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary in particular. In some cases (Latvia, Estonia, Cyprus, Romania, and Hungary) most regions and/or municipalities are as yet represented through a collective body only. In some cases, setting up such a representation is clearly an experiment. The first representations from new Member States (or other states) have a pioneering role that may lead to the opening of offices of other regions or local authorities not yet represented. Some experiments may fail: some representations present in 2004 (the Romanian province of Teleorman, the Georgian Autonomous Republic of Adjara) do not exist anymore. Recent years have overall nevertheless witnessed the consolidation of the presences of offices from new Member States and the establishment of representations from candidate Member States (Croatia) or from countries involved in the EU Neighbourhood Policy (Ukraine), while representations from Norwegian local and regional authorities and a collective representation of the Swiss cantons have a consolidated presence.

The process described above clearly seems to indicate that the trend is towards a generalized representation of regional authorities of Member States (and also the presence of those of candidate or aspiring candidate members and of Western European non-members) in Brussels, with a more limited and/or indirect representation of local authorities. It is to be noted that the prevailing model is public: in 2004 only 13.8% of the respondents were emanations of public-private partnerships; all the other offices were exclusively public initiatives (Huyseune & Jans, 2005).

³ Representatives of the Scottish and Welsh governments sometimes also participate in meetings of the Council of Ministers, but they only accompany the representative of the British government and thus do not act as representatives of the UK.

Why did regional offices come to Brussels?

An important initial driving force of the first (British) representations was clearly to develop and maximize their access to EU-funding sources. The growth of EU structural funds in the late 1980s and the development of funding opportunities in other policy areas (e.g., research, environment, transport, rural development, etc.) ran parallel with the increasing presence of regional offices seeking to tap into those funds. Although many of them came to Brussels to benefit from the available EU resources and to position their regions for future funding opportunities, many offices today downplay funding as a prime motive for their presence in Brussels. Regional administrations receiving large amounts of EU financial support tend to guide and steer their funding-related activities through specialized administrations in the home region rather than through their representation in Brussels. In fact, the mandates of many offices exclude significant involvement in the structural funds because the regional authorities are obliged by EU regulations to keep full control over these programmes. Cross-regional and/or network-based funding opportunities that require sustained interaction with EU institutions as well as with other regional partners continue to attract the offices' attention. Finding partners and mediating in the establishment of networks, which are actions that can lead to some form of EU financial support, is still a consideration today to maintain a Brussels office for the regions. Access to EU funds continues to be relevant, but the offices have both reoriented and broadened their *raison d'être* in Brussels beyond mere funding concerns.

Besides funding opportunities, changes in the EU's institutional structure seemed to herald the inclusion of a third tier of (regional) government in the EU policy process. The creation of the Committee of the Regions (COR), the inclusion of the subsidiarity principle in the Treaties and the provision that regional ministers could attend the Council of Ministers generated the impression that regions could become substantial players in the European policy process and provided an additional impetus to set up a permanent office in Brussels.

More than the institutional changes, the expansion of EU prerogatives, through subsequent treaty changes, into policy areas close to regional and local government concerns triggered increasing awareness in regional and local tiers of government that the EU mattered and could impact on their activities. The EU's apparent institutional openness (e.g., COR, subsidiarity) combined with the expanding scope of EU policy activity, pushed many regions to establish permanent offices in Brussels. Regions with substantial autonomy and legislative powers (e.g., German *Länder* and Spanish regions) initially came to Brussels to consolidate their autonomy and to fend off any curtailment of their regional powers through Council (and Member State) backed EU policies. Other regions had little powers to preserve and sought to influence EU policies to the benefit of their region. Many regions and local governments moved to Brussels to increase their political leverage in their national domestic contexts. The direct relationships and communication lines between regional authorities and the European Commission increased the know-how, information, and overall bargaining positions of regions vis-à-vis national authorities that no longer monopolized the contacts with European institutions.

The substantial number of regional offices in Brussels can also be partially explained by a genuine "spill-over" effect. When one or several regions of a country success-

fully create a permanent office or offices in Brussels, this stimulates or puts pressures on unrepresented regions to follow suit and organize an equivalent representation. The dynamic was particularly clear during the 2004 enlargement, when the presence of one office from a new Member State was soon followed by other regions' establishing their own representations. Their establishment in Brussels and in the vicinity of international organizations, an international press corps, and other representations may raise the profile of a region and can thus be part of a broader marketing and branding strategy.

Regional offices were drawn to Brussels for a number of different reasons: a search for funding opportunities, possibilities to lobby for regional interests, but also the growing pressure to be present in Brussels to expand or preserve regional powers in the home country. Whilst regional representations may have been drawn to Brussels to make use of a myriad of opportunities, their experience has often obliged them to redefine and even scale down their original ambitions. German regions initially intended their offices to be players in a Europe of the Regions. Regions were expected to become central and institutionalised players in European decision-making. These possibilities have not materialized, and these regions have therefore reduced their ambitions, although they still perceive their representations as the equivalent of an embassy and are amongst the most active in lobbying for the extension of the influence of regional authorities in Brussels. Spanish regions initially hoped to use their representations in a strategy whereby they would entertain direct relations with the EU, bypassing their national government. This strategy failed, and they were forced to refocus their actions on the European Union and organize a permanent co-operation with their national government. UK offices, which came with less political goals in mind, also changed their approach. Their original approach, essentially based on obtaining funding, became more policy-oriented over the years. A funding-driven policy was replaced by a search for more policy-driven funding, whereby policy orientations now take precedence over the exploitation of funding opportunities.

The main functions of regional offices in Brussels.

The main functions of offices as evidenced by our survey results can be summarized in four activity areas: information management, networking, liaison between local and regional authorities and the EU, and the influencing of EU policy. The cornerstone of their work concerns the gathering, processing and filtering of information on EU policy and institutional developments. The information stream produced by EU institutions is vast and overwhelming. Offices will scan the EU's current and planned measures to identify issues relevant for the home region. Effective signalling of relevant matters requires them to process and package the information in a meaningful way allowing the home region to determine its position on the matters at hand. Scanning and filtering measures in the EU policy and legislative pipeline is essential for them because it constitutes the first step towards a possible lobby strategy. The EU's transparency policy, which renders many policy documents directly accessible on the Europa website, has not done away with the office's role as an information channel. For regional authorities, having an outpost in Brussels is crucial, because it allows them to obtain, besides the official documents available on

official websites, crucial unofficial information on the subject. Moreover, the offices can monitor developments and debates closely and establish close ties with EU officials and policy actors. The issues or policy domains these offices are most interested in reflect in the first place the powers that typically belong to local and regional authorities: regional policy, social cohesion policy, R&D, agriculture, environment, transport, industrial, and energy policy (Badiello, 2000).

Gathering information is the starting point for the intervention of the regional offices, including for their other tasks, such as identifying funding opportunities, participating in trans-national networks, and influencing EU policy. At the same time, however, they also play an important role in providing the EU with information. Because of the small scale of their own administration, EU officials themselves seek information and expertise, and the regional offices (as “grass roots” or “civil society” representatives) are perceived to be valid and legitimate (public) sources of (regional) information and data. These offices are relevant partners for European Commission officials that enable the latter to develop programmes that meet the actual needs perceived at the grass-roots level.

Offices further liaise between the regions and the EU. The importance attributed in the literature on regional offices (Badiello, 2000; CEEG, 2002, p. 51; Jeffery, 1996, pp. 196-197) to this task is confirmed by our research. Liaising between the home region and the EU institutions is a crucial function for them. Staff members of representations frequently visit their home towns or regions. They are in close contact with officials in local and regional authorities, but also with a number of key economic, social and political actors from their respective territories. They communicate information concerning the EU to their home constituencies through a broad variety of means (website, newsletters, etc.). They are well-positioned to provide assistance to actors of the home region on EU projects and programmes: they may mobilize local expertise to contribute to EU policy development, assist in partner searches, or even give practical assistance concerning contact persons and procedures in the European Commission. The offices also act as contact points in Brussels for administrators, interest groups, and even private citizens from the home constituencies. In fact, they receive a considerable amount of visitors from the home region, on average 635 per year per office, since they appear more constituency-oriented and “user-friendly” than many other institutions in Brussels.

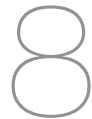
Regional offices are also strongly involved in networking and developing ties with other representations. According to our survey, they consider networking to be almost as important as gathering information. The importance attributed to networks reflects the value the European Commission attaches to collective and trans-national representatives of specific interests (Mazey & Richardson, 2001). Regions in Europe were involved in the creation of such networks around specific interests well before establishing representations in Brussels. Through their location in Brussels, however, offices are able to play an important role in sustaining and developing such policy networks. These networks share some features of trans-national lobbies and private interest groups, but are nevertheless more modest in their goals. They are more oriented towards exchanging information and disseminating best practices than towards exercising political pressure. Besides such interest-oriented networks, regional offices (and their supporting regional administrations) also develop specific trans-national partnerships with a limited number of other regions and organizations

in Brussels. Such partnerships often express the strategic choice of regional administrations to promote international co-operation. Sometimes, such partnerships lead to the creation of a collective inter-regional representation in Brussels. This is, for example, the case for the regions of Wielkopolska (Poland), Aquitaine (France), Emilia-Romagna (Italy), and Hessen (Germany): although each representation deploys its own particular activities and has its own office space within the building, the common location reflects a strategic choice for close co-operation and information exchange between these regions. The pooling of several offices in one common location is occurring increasingly with the arrival of new offices in Brussels, as it enables the newcomers to be integrated into the new policy environment more swiftly.

A fourth important activity area of regional offices concerns their attempt to influence the EU policies. Most of them claim that they seek to influence the EU policy process and thus engage in substantial lobbying efforts to that effect. An important distinction must be made here between the regions with legislative powers and the others. The Belgian, German, Austrian, and Spanish regions are in varying ways formally involved in the functioning of the Council of Ministers and/or are part of national co-ordination systems to determine the national position on certain EU matters. The strong domestic position of the legislative regions also translates into more direct access to the Council of Ministers and European Commission. The offices without such direct access to these decision-making bodies find it harder to have their voices heard directly at the bargaining table and need to resort to more persuasion based lobby tactics. The representations of regions without legislative powers thus act very much like other interest groups and lobbies when they seek to influence policies. They contribute to the policy process by producing position papers, seek to establish issue-coalitions and networks to increase their credibility and impact on EU policy-makers, and participate in the wide array of consultation formats organized by the European Commission on important policy issues (e.g., expert groups, white and green papers, surveys, panels, public hearings, and Commission-sponsored conferences). Offices also increasingly target (national) members of the European Parliament and national delegations in the European Parliament to get support for their lobbying efforts.

The Committee of the Regions (COR) offers regional entities their own institutional framework within the European Union, but regional offices are often sceptical about the impact that the COR, as a consultative body, has on policies. Although it is supposed to be the natural spokesperson of local and regional interests within the Union, they consider the COR to be an interlocutor of limited importance that does not warrant a lot of attention when they seek to influence policies. The COR is often seen as a vehicle through which the represented regions can capture the attention of European Commissioners or the Council Presidency rather than an institution with a decisive impact on EU policy outcomes.

The representations of Belgian Regions and Communities distinguish themselves by benefiting from a double involvement in the policy process. The Regions/Communities are fully entrenched in the national co-ordination system to determine the Belgian position in the Council of Ministers. When Regional/Community matters are at stake in the EU, regional ministers can be part or even lead the Belgian delegation to the Council of Ministers. Regional and Community representatives are also



embedded within the Belgian Permanent Representation (PERMREP/PR) to the EU. The fact that the Regional/Community representatives are part of the Belgian PR means that these representatives can attend the very important preparatory meetings of the Council (Committee of Permanent Representatives and the hundred-sixty working parties of the Council). The Belgian regional representatives are thus part and parcel of the Council policy process, which significantly reduces the need to develop more indirect lobby strategies, as the other representations must do.

The pivotal role of the national PERMREP/PR in EU policy-making has pushed many offices to establish closer ties with their respective national Permanent Representations. Whereas they were first perceived as competitors by the permanent representations, this is less true today, and more or less systematic forms of exchange of information, co-ordination, and/or policy planning have developed in the last few years. As co-ordination with the Permanent Representation often takes place collectively, the creation of regional office networks is encouraged. The creation and consolidation of these agreements between regional representations and their Permanent Representation demonstrates the offices' desire to enhance their influence where it matters, namely, at the Council bargaining table.

Brussels, Belgium, and regional offices

Brussels, as Europe's Capital, has also played an active role in the above-described process of development of regional offices, both as a facilitator and as a regional authority participating in decision-making directly.

As the host of the institutions of the European Union, the government of the Brussels-Capital Region founded the Brussels-Europe Liaison Office (BELO) in 1991. Its official aims are "the promotion of the image of Brussels as capital of Europe and seat of key European institutions while at the same time informing residents of the important role played by Europe in the well-being and prosperity of the Region." (Brussels-Europe Liaison Office, 2007a). Its mission includes resolving practical and administrative problems encountered by individuals and organizations settling in Brussels for activities related to the European (or other international) institutions. As such, it has played an important role in assisting offices in particular. Besides practical assistance for coping with local administrations, service providers etc, the BELO has provided important help concerning the status of these offices in Brussels. The regional offices, whether private entities or representatives of public authorities, have an unofficial status and can therefore be confronted with many complex administrative problems concerning their establishment in Brussels. To simplify these problems, the region created a Regional Certificate in 1994 (Brussels-Europe Liaison Office, 2007b). Whilst this certificate does not give these offices any official status, it does acknowledge that the office concerned is recognised as a representation of a sub-national authority by the Brussels-Capital Region, and in practice the certificate helps offices to smooth out administrative and logistic problems.

The Brussels Region, like the other Belgian regions and communities, has itself also felt the need to establish a representation to the EU (Representation of the Brussels-Capital Region to the EU, founded in 1994). Representations from Belgian sub-

national authorities differ from other ones by being physically integrated in the Belgian Permanent Representation. As such, they are strongly focused on the preparation of the Council meetings (in which Belgian regional ministers participate in matters under their jurisdiction).

Whilst the representations of Belgium's Regions and Communities co-operate with other offices and participate in the development of transnational regional networks, they nevertheless focus less on lobbying and regional marketing. The Flemish Community therefore felt it needed to open a separate representation, the Liaison Agency Flanders Europe (Vlewa in Dutch). The office is organized as a public-private partnership: its board includes representatives from the Flemish government and from Flemish civil society (with a strong presence of business organizations among the members of the partnership). Vlewa's main purposes are to ensure "a more positive Flemish presence at European policy level" and "better promotion of Flemish interests" (Liaison Agency Flanders Europe, 2007). Additionally, the agency "also has the task of informing Flemish companies and civil society and the Flemish authorities (regional and local) as effectively as possible about European dossiers and funding opportunities" (ibid). By setting up this office, the Flemish Community has opted for a strategy of giving its presence in the European policy field more public visibility, both in Flanders, in the eyes of its entrepreneurs and civil society, and in the eyes of other European players in Brussels.

The German-speaking Community (whose representative was only recently integrated into the PR) has a longer-established office representing it in Brussels. Mirroring the smaller scale of the community, its intervention is more limited. It focuses on networking with other offices in Brussels, on promoting awareness of the region, and additionally assists citizens from the community in EU-related matters. Since the office is not involved in lobbying, its relations with the EU institutions (except the COR) are relatively less important than those with other offices.

Concluding remarks

Brussels can indeed be considered the world capital of lobbying for local and regional authorities. The activities of their representations in Brussels, present, however, a specific profile that partly distinguishes them from classic interest groups and lobbies. The activities of regional representations in Brussels are broader and not focused solely on direct lobbying and interest representation. Regional offices were set up in Brussels for a variety of different reasons: some primarily sought funding, others were determined to play a significant political role at EU-level and some regions were primarily seeking a pied à terre to raise their profile and connect with networks and a supranational community in proximity of the EU institutions. Whatever the initial motives were to come to Brussels, today the offices have converged on a similar set of goals and activities. They have become much more uniform in that they all combine a broad range of activities and all seek to inform, network, lobby, liaise and market for their regions. The regions with legislative powers constitute a separate category that focuses primarily on influencing policies, given that their preferential access to the European Council of Ministers and Commission allows them to do so effectively. However, the activities of these regions' representations are also converging with the other offices' practices.

The diversified range of functions that regional offices fulfil is one of the reasons why they are likely to be permanent fixtures in Brussels. Their presence is not dependent on the availability of EU funds or the COR's political influence. The varied tasks that they perform make them relevant and useful to their home regions even if certain policy changes or the end of funding opportunities force the regional offices to reorient their foci.

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