

# Listen to us!

Regional and local Public Affairs  
in the Dutch and European political arena

Edward L. Figee

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Regional and local Public Affairs  
in the Dutch and European political arena

## DISSERTATION

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**Edward Leopold Figeo**

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This dissertation has been approved by:

**Supervisor:** prof. dr. M.D.T. de Jong

**Co-supervisors:** dr. P.C.J. Linders en dr. J.F. Gosselt.

### **Graduation committee:**

#### **Supervisor:**

Prof. dr. M.D.T. de Jong

#### **Co-supervisors:**

Dr. P.C.J. Linders

Dr. J.F. Gosselt

#### **Members:**

Prof. dr. Th.A.J. Toonen (chair)

Prof. dr. M.P.C.M. van Schendelen

Prof. dr. B. Hessel

Prof. dr. A. Timmermans

Prof. dr. S.A.H. Denters

Prof. dr. W.E. Ebbers

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## PERSONAL PROLOGUE

For me personally, the idea to write this dissertation was born at an unusual moment. I was about to retire in 2011 after some thirty-five years of having been involved in regional and local interests, but always having operated in different jobs in the national political arena of The Hague, and in the European political arena in Brussels. After a period of regional journalism, I started in The Hague as a parliamentarian journalist for regional newspapers, especially in the east of the Netherlands. This was the beginning of a steadily growing network: I was geographically limited but not thematically, and had to maintain a network all over the national political arena (parliament, senate, and ministries), concerning issues that were or could somehow be connected with the east of the Netherlands, including European (Euregional) issues. From 1988 until 1995, I worked as an embedded journalist in The Hague and Brussels for the weekly of the old (over a century) Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), also to restyle and re-edit this magazine. Seven years later, I started a new job, also in The Hague and Brussels, but now as an advisor on communication strategy for the administration of the municipality of Enschede in the east of the Netherlands, to assist in the profiling of this city that was socially tormented by a long, dark industrial history and that had been recovering since the seventies. From 2000 until my retirement in 2011, I mostly worked in The Hague, as a lobbyist (and later on as an advisor in provincial Public Affairs) for the administrations and the Commissioners of the King of the provinces Gelderland and Overijssel in the east of the Netherlands, along the border with Germany. During that time, I also got involved in Euregional cooperation, sometimes referred to as “mini Europe”. In the meantime, I participated as a senior advisor on communication strategy for the International Cooperation Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG International) in short-mission projects to restore local government administrations in (post-war) countries worldwide, mostly in close cooperation with the EU.

There was one essential linking pin between the mentioned jobs and activities: the role of local and regional governmental administrations in relation to citizens and to the national government.

Prof. dr. M.D.T. de Jong, chair of the Department of Communication Science of the University of Twente, and dr. P.C.J. Linders, former lecturer at this department and now business developer and lector at Polytechnic College Surinam in Paramaribo, made me aware of the rarity of my career: There are not many men and women who have worked a lifetime in “decentralized atmospheres”, on local and regional interests, and who view these interests from different points of view (i.e., free journalism, embedded journalism, and PA). In their eyes, I was “interesting” because I had the opportunity to study the daily practice of local and regional interest representation, and as such, could connect that area with Communication Science.

In this dissertation, the role of the east of the Netherlands in my career is present but not directive, because Dutch decentralized government is characterized by a huge amount of diversities, which reduces the chance of creating blueprints to zero. The east of the Netherlands as well as other regions have been our starting point for analyzing how decentralized administrations try to influence national and European political decision-making by using PA (preferably called “lobby”) which was, and to a certain extent still is, a new policy discipline for national and decentralized authorities to guard own interests at other political levels. On the wings of this new discipline, regional and local administrations are constantly looking for ways to drop their interests in the political arenas<sup>1</sup> of The Hague and Brussels – sometimes together in a functional or thematic way, sometimes separately – in order to get financial and/or legislative attention and support from “the top of the bill”. In the Brussels arena, this can be very difficult, because the professional has to deal with dominating interstate interests and with many other regions that sometimes have permanent, full-staffed offices and networks, or with semi-governmental organizations of other member states; compared to other regional offices, the Dutch regional staffing in Brussels is experienced as modest. In the national arena, it may even be more difficult than in the European political arena, because at the national political level, regional interests are usually not “sexy” enough to create a political (electorally attractive) profile, unless a regional problem gets a national scope. It seems that the devolution (i.e., the transfer of tasks and powers from the national level to regional and local levels) in order to reduce distances between policy and citizens, does not play any role of importance.

Nevertheless, regional and local PA consultants have found their way in the busy lobby spots of The Hague and Brussels. MPs and MEPs are comfortable with this, because these consultants are bringing in information that saves time for the MPs’ and MEPs’ assistants (of course, presupposing the information is reliable). The consultant knows that: Intentional false or manipulative information means the end of the story and doors will be closed forever.

Regional and local PA policy may be compared with politics; sometimes forced to take curvy roads, to produce messages loudly or to keep the mouth shut, but continuously focused. In evaluations of PA operations, it may be difficult to trace the process and to identify the exact moment when the process turned to the advantage of the client. Or not. Sometimes, PA activities look like clumped amoebas, looking for a form that fits the surroundings of that moment best, or like the potter (e.g., the policymaker in the home organization or the PA professional) who is forming the clay on his kick wheel to create something new and beautiful that he<sup>1</sup> can sell to keep his pottery running.

To continue this metaphor, before he starts his work, he asks a marketing specialist about the market or he conducts research himself. What is the market for pottery like at the moment? What pottery is sold best, and how should he position his new product in his corporate identity? He may have to change his product to make it more suitable. He kicks his wheel again and puts his hands around the wet clay, making the model more and more suitable, looking for forms and for colors in harmony with the reputation of his pottery. Perhaps, he decides to choose another model, to innovate his pottery program, to find the niche in the market, creating a new dimension in his work or refreshing his reputation, but he knows what he wants and he keeps his focus, because he is an experienced, well-known potter and he knows what makes his work appreciated. He wants to maintain this, of course, but on top of this, he hopes to tempt his circle of clients and to win new clients as well.

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<sup>1</sup> *The male words are used here, but whenever a male word is used, it refers to males and females.*

This metaphor of creativity applies to regional and local PA: in instruments, in competences, in the development of policy, and in the processes to influence political decision-making.

Launching pottery is marketing communication. That is not the subject of this dissertation, but sending regional and local governments' PA messages to political arenas at the national and European level is also communication, and connected with societal questions because regional and local authorities are connected with society and supposed to be close to citizens' interests.

PA instruments, as explained in this dissertation, are useless when the men and women who work with these instruments do not exactly know how to use them, and when (or not) – we mean competences.

A potter who does not exactly know how to get the best clay and how to handle this clay on his kick wheel, and who is not able to persuade others of *the story* behind his product line does not stand a chance.

This is what Stephen Denning wrote in his book *The Springboard* (2011): how *storytelling* may help to change organizations. In my case, I entered the offices of regional and local administrations when there was generally little knowledge of PA. I sometimes felt like a missionary, introducing relevant keywords and key themes, creating sense-making for PA, explaining PA and also transmitting PA, not only into a policy of smart techniques but also into an organic process to get colleagues involved in "the PA game", to play with an open ear to what's happening on the shop floor, inside and outside the home organization, which is a worldwide value of great importance as experienced in my years working for VNG International, but neither a subject of this dissertation that is directed to Dutch regional and local PA<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> An example of worldwide processes of political influence is the essay *The Geopolitics of Emotion* by Dominique Moïsi (2009) with the subtitle "How cultures of fear, humiliation, and hope are reshaping the world". In this essay, Moïsi described how emotions can move people and populations, as a result of radical events on the world stage, mentally and physically, because they feel threatened in their identities. People cling to safety and security, like their own country and region. This can be an explanation for uprising regionalism, as described by Buruma (2012).

Storytelling is also what Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe (2010) described in their book *Practical Wisdom* with a subtitle that may look quite normal – "The Right Way to Do The Right Thing" – but that refers to a wide pattern of experiences in practical wisdom by judges, teachers, and physicians at crucial moments. Schwartz and Sharpe drew their vision from Aristotle: not acting according to the law that is written, but according to the spirit of the law (Politica VII-14). This is what regional and local PA consultants are generally doing for their governments: They are trying to find a way to achieve the right thing.

In terms of PA, one should say: Influencing a process of political decision-making acquires, besides the regular means, practical wisdom to persuade "the other side of the table" to support the process of influencing, for instance to create a better position for all relevant stakeholders, including society, i.e., citizens' interests. It was my promoter who referred to Schwartz and Sharpe after a long conversation about PA essentials, and the connection between science and daily practice in PA.

In my PA lectures, students ask for stories about how PA professionals act in order to get attention for their missions in the political arenas of The Hague and Brussels, according to the analyses Linders and De Lange (2003) described in their dissertation *Public Affairs and Constructions of Reality*. They generally act as follows: The client invests in PA to get his interests on the agendas of the political arenas in The Hague and Brussels. The story the consultant is telling in the arenas "to get the job done", is a construct of his clients' interests. At the right moment, the consultant takes his client into the arenas because nobody else is better able to tell the story of the current file than the client himself. The consultant guards the process with precision and professionalism, because he is the diplomat who handled some PA preparations on behalf of his client. Together with the home organization, he builds the architecture of the process, and assists his client when moving around all kinds of political cliffs. At the end, a victory may come. Sooner or later. The consultant steps aside; the victory is for his client.

However, who failed in the process, totally or partly, probably did not do something wrong, because politics is unpredictable. Nevertheless, evaluations have to make clear what happened in the process, as tough lessons for a next time. PA is people's business. This dissertation aims to create a scientific perspective of regional and local PA in the Netherlands.

## INTRODUCTION

There is no satisfactory translation of “Public Affairs” into Dutch language. The Dutch author Thomas Rosenboom enriched Dutch literature in 1999 with the novel “Publieke werken” (in translation comparable to “public affairs”). Behind the title, a wonderful story is hidden about the lives of two rebellious cousins – a poor violin maker living in the old city center of Amsterdam, and a pharmacist living in a small rural village in the northeast of the country. The story is placed in the roaring switch of the 19th to the 20th century, which was a period of societal change. Both men fought for a new place in society, but failed miserably. The Amsterdam violin maker thought about selling his charming house for a huge amount of money to a building company that was involved in a giant renewing of the city center, including the building of a hotel. The pharmacist wanted to help poor people in and around the village, by offering them a way out to a new life in the United States of America. Both men did not understand that the world surrounding them was changing. They were continuously constructing a reality that was clashing with the time they were living in. At the end of the day, they disappeared dramatically from the stage. “Publieke werken” can be read as a timeless example of how focusing on realizing ideas may fail when there is no satisfactory connection with the surrounding world. Both the violin maker and the pharmacist did not seem to know external forces influenced their interests and how to deal with that.

Public Affairs (PA) – the focus of this dissertation – is an instrument for organizations to create connections with their surrounding, administrative world. In this dissertation, we explore PA from the perspective of specific organizations, namely regional and local governments, and we study how these governments are operating in the national and European political arena to achieve their goals by means of PA. In order to address all relevant actors and processes, this approach demanded studies into (1) the arena characteristics concerning regional and local issues; (2) the way that regional and local governments are organizing PA inside the office; (3) and outside the office; and (4) the competences that PA professionals, representing regional and local authorities in the political arenas, should be equipped with.

In this first chapter, the concept of PA is defined as well as the instruments that it encompasses. Second, an overview is presented of regionalism, both from a European and Dutch perspective. Third, regionalism and its effects on decentralized governments and regional and local PA are discussed. This leads to the fourth section, in which the focus and contents of this dissertation are explained, followed by a chapter overview.

## 1.1. PA – WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT WORKS

PA can be defined as “a strategic management discipline, directed to the political, administrative realm the organization is functioning in or will function in” (Linders & De Lange, 2003). For organizations, including their employees, this means that they have to (re)consider their position regarding the realm they are or will possibly be involved in, and to (re)consider their position regarding relationships with other stakeholders. McGrath, Moss, and Harris (2010) concluded that dynamics in societal, economic, and political playing fields make it difficult to define PA. However, this may be “a sign of healthy and vibrant disciplinary evolution”, McGrath et al. (2010), continued, warning at the same time “that such fluidity can and does at times threaten to undermine the status and position of PA within what are often contested organizational hierarchies”. According to McGrath et al. (2010), PA should therefore be seen as: “[...] the strategic process of anticipating in political decision making, in changes in society and in the public opinion which are influencing the functioning of the own organization” (p. 336), but still as “a policy of trial and error” (p. 338).

### 1.1.1. PA instruments

Initially, PA was mentioned as lobby (Van Schendelen, 2013). However, lobby is the “outside”, visible activity of PA management (Groenendijk, Hazekamp & Mastenbroek, 1997; Van Schendelen, 2013). Van Schendelen, Wittenberg and Wittenberg (1989) stated that the PA professional who does not know “the art of lobbying” is doomed to fail. Lobby and PA are often seen as synonyms. However, this is not the case: Lobby is just a PA tool, to be used when all homework has been done, i.e., after data have been collected or stakeholder analyses have been made (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997), in order to know exactly when to start a lobby in the political arenas (Van Schendelen, 2013; Luikenaar & Venetië, 2006). Furthermore, lobby is referred to as “trade in information” (Wittenberg & Wittenberg, 1989; Sachs, 2011), and sometimes used in intertwinement with spin-doctoring, which can be seen as trade in information as well. It is emphasized that spin-doctoring, also as old as mankind (Deen, 2012), is trade in information plus smart temptation and persuasion. Still, the border between PA and spin-doctoring is considered to be foggy (Kok & Van der Maas, 2006; Sachs, 2011), and PA is characterized by more than merely lobby. Tools such as issues management, network management, and reputation management are also modeling PA nowadays (Van Schendelen, 2013; Van Venetië & Luikenaar, 2006).

Just like PA, issues management has been defined many times. Jacques (2002) described how issues and crisis (issues sometimes resulting in crises) are connected in many of those definitions, and called these two words Siamese twins. The PA tool network management is not only about “wining and dining”, but has become an essential activity in PA operations in which social networks are mixed with digital networks (Borgatti & Cross, 2003; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003). These networks can be black boxes, with their own rites and rituals, based on professional disciplines, and belonging to the characteristics of that specific network (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001). Network management is more often the hidden part of management, because openness about personal networks creates vulnerabilities and PA is all about informal policy. In reputation management, a message sent by an organization should be in harmony with the behavior, communication, and symbolism of that organization as well as the person who is acting in favor of that organization (Linders & De Lange, 2003). Finally, stakeholder analyses deliver an answer to the question of whom the PA professional should contact at which moment (Van Schendelen, 2013).

Such analyses are indispensable in PA operations, because they deliver vital data to acquire support, and may function as a sounding board (Fletcher, Guthrie, & Steane, 2003; Mitchell et al., 1997; Savage, Nix, Whitehead, & Blair, 1991). More specifically, stakeholder management means the transfer of these analyses into specific activities (Freeman, 1984; Savage et al., 1991). Mitchell et al. (1997) referred to making an inventory of all players who might already be connected with a PA message or could be connected in the (near) future. Not only is information needed concerning name, addresses, and so on, but also concerning the policy of those players, in order to fine-tune design policy and to get them and keep them “on board” (Fletcher et al., 2003). Furthermore, insight is needed in the arguments of the stakeholders and the reasons behind these arguments. “From footprint to fingerprint”, as Harris and Fleisher (2011, p. 322) summarized this process. Initially, constructing a stakeholder network may be a digital activity, but in order to get to know the persons “behind”, meetings should be organized (Hooge, Van der Sluis, & Vijlder, 2004), complemented with periodical evaluations with and without these stakeholders (Mitchell et al., 1997). In sum, maintaining the relation with stakeholders must be a dynamic activity and not a blueprint (Hooge et al., 2004; Van Schendelen, 2012).

### 1.1.2. Emergence of PA in the Netherlands

Public Affairs (PA) is a word combination that is rooted in the Anglo-American tradition (Pedler, 2005; Groenendijk et al., 1997). This tradition is known as the Anglo-American Model. It differs from the European tradition, which is known as the Rhineland Model, but both are seen as versions of capitalism (Bakker, Evers, Hovens, Snelder & Weggeman; 2005). Bakker et al. (2005) concluded that the Rhineland Model, where stakeholders’ interests are leading, is more connected with the European community tradition, the power of collectiveness and solidarity, an active role of the state, and a long-term mentality. The Anglo-American Model is based on thinking in shareholder value, and more connected with individual success, the lowest possible extent of interferences by the state, and short-term profits (Bakker et al., 2005). Since the financial crisis in Europe, criticism directed towards the Anglo-American Model has increased (Bennink, 2009), which marks the comeback of the Rhineland Model in Europe.

In the Netherlands, PA entered around the sixties of the former century; first in the private sector, and around the eighties in the public sector. In the sixties,

Europe was gripped by societal turbulence, like the May 1968 Revolt in Paris, the Prague Springtime, and sharp protest demonstrations against the Vietnam war, which were experienced as protests of the young generation “to break up encrusted social, political, cultural and economic structures” and instigated a shift in the thinking of what a democracy should be like (Schulz-Forberg, 2009: 30). As a consequence, the relationship citizen-government changed, also in the Netherlands (Aerts & De Goede, 2013). It was the start of a period of societal turbulence during which the old, traditional connections between interest groups and their (religiously, politically oriented) supporting “pillars” were cut, that were previously embodied in countless, sharply separated associations. Van Doorn (2009) noted how the citizen found himself “in a foggy process of trustful denominationalism into suggested spirituality, related to political parties, who, stimulated and supported by media, try desperately to gain the citizen, i.e., the voter, back”.

Wijnberg (2013) and Bardoel, Vos, Van Vree and Wijfjes (2015) analyzed the changing democracy in the Netherlands, and mentioned the major changes in mass media. Wijnberg, supported by Aerts and De Goede (2013), described how media influences penetrated processes of democratic decision-making, which created other mechanisms for interest groups to draw attention. Bardoel et al. (2015), characterized the changing culture in Dutch journalism as revolutionary, because of the digitalization of information. More specifically, the realm that Linders and De Lange (2003) and McGrath (2006, 2010) referred to in their definitions of PA is permanently influenced by (new) media at all levels (Aslander & Witteveen, 2016).

From a political point of view, Bekker (2012) concluded that activities of political parties in social (media) networks may be more effective for political influence. However, it is hard to establish the extent to which the Internet influences PA (Scott, 2012). Van Drimmelen (2014) suggested that PA cannot function without new media, especially when support must be organized in a short time. The influence of new media on PA is a non-contentious issue, but Van Drimmelen admits that the power of this influence is limited to assumptions and suggestions. Aslander and Witteveen (2016) underlined Van Doorn’s (2009) observations of how vertical, top-down approaches in private and political domains left the stage to make place for “a new spirit of time of horizontal

approaches”, due to digital accessibility of information for anyone who is interested. Houppermans (2011) researched this aspect in law-making in the Netherlands and concluded: “[Digital] interactivity and scientific argumentation are two sides of the medal which may create in an early stage a more effective and fruitful policy! . . . Give space to optimal the quality of the preparation of policy and invest in these quality!” (p. 324). The exclamation points were added by Houppermans, to be seen as an advice to the public sector when considering implementation of PA.

Societal changes, disappearing “pillars”, and upcoming horizontalism forced more and more interest groups to take care of themselves, and to develop their own policy to draw attention to their interests. Groenendijk (1997) stated that Public Relations (PR), which was usually sufficient for maintaining (also political) relations and a common instrument to work with (Botan & Hazleton, 2006), did not help any longer when relations got disturbed. More was necessary: PA was born, nevertheless in a complementary relationship with PR, because PA operations that are not supported by a PR policy of the home organization will be problematic (Davidson, 2015).

## 1.2. REGIONALISM

Since the end of the Cold War, regionalism has become a worldwide concept (Fawcett, 2004), “as a policy and project whereby states and non-states actors cooperate and coordinate strategy with a given region” (p. 433). From Fawcett’s point of view, the EU can be an example of worldwide regionalism (p. 435). Fawcett continued to relate this form of regionalism with regionalization, which is political charged, “to refer to regional, as opposed to global, responses to conflicts that have themselves often become regionalized: where inter- and intra-state wars spill over borders and affect and draw in neighbouring countries and actors, attracting the attention of the international community” (p. 433). This regionalism is not the focus of our study, but by placing regionalism and regionalization into a broad, historical perspective, Fawcett concluded that “still regionalism, both as a demonstration of shared identity, and collective action, is now well established globally. . . . A stable regional system is not a sufficient condition for regionalism, but it helps. International cooperation and support are

also important, states can learn from the aid and experience of others. In these and other areas outlined here, the lessons of the past continue to prove instructive” (p. 446).

Fawcett’s statements lead to the observation that the term “region” is fluid. Elsewhere in the world (i.e., United States of America, Japan, China, India), a regional social-economic network is growing between big agglomerations, which is of great meaning to the national economy (Clinton, 2011). Such regions generate the question of the extent to which the national government is still able to find the right approach for solving urban problems in those regions (Barber, 2013), also in The Netherlands (Van der Lans, 2013). Those areas can be as big as the Benelux and the neighboring German region (“Bundesland”) Nordrhein Westfalen, which are under German constitution and known as the North Sea Corridor (ECOSOC/ 299-CESE 1380/2011). Comparable cross-border developments are visible in the EU between Vienna in Austria and Bratislava in Slovakia, between France and Spain (Basque area and Catalonia), and between Copenhagen in Denmark and Malmö in Sweden. Similar developments are visible at the national level, for example in Poland (Warsaw-Gdansk-Katovice) and in the United Kingdom (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland).

### 1.2.1. Regionalism in Europe

In this context, Verhofstadt (2009) emphasized the importance of – in his words – horizontal economic empowerment, because it protects regionally oriented economic developments, which are important for the national economy: “. . . to be short: what Europe should avoid is a vertical approach of problems . . . the dangerous aspects of a vertical approach is that supporting old, bad managed companies, keeps old structures alive. This is a huge wastage of our limited sources. The advantage of a horizontal approach is, that this approach is a resolute investment in time coming” (p. 97). His words illustrate the change in the eighties of the former century when regional EU policy changed from geopolitical, economic support to weak sectors and weak regions into mainly only economically oriented support to strong sectors, separate from regional aspects<sup>ii</sup>, also characterized as “new regionalism” (Boogers, 2013; Frisken & Norris, 2001; Wheeler, 2002). Regions may choose to join this approach. Menasse (2013) concluded, referring to the rise of new regionalism: “The ongoing loss of possibilities of national parliaments [within the decision-making process of the

EU] stimulates the growth of influence of regional parliaments . . . this means that small, connected democratic governments at regional and local level are getting chances they never had before in their history”.

Stepping away from Fawcett’s perceptions and observations of regionalism within the EU, another, more “reduced”, spectrum of regionalism is noticeable, namely regionalism within the member states, closer to the citizen. In line with the aforementioned statement of Buruma is the manifest “For Europe!” of Verhofstadt and Cohn-Bendit (2012). They warn to be careful not to lose regional identity as a result of uninhibited Europeanism, because regional identity may be helpful to empower Europe: “Regional identity means the belonging to an ethnic, religious or linguistic community. This is giving people an anchor, a beacon, a possibility to take a hold to be able to survive in a period of uncertainty. The credo of nationality starts with thoughts about collective identity which should work out to every individual equally, but this is not the case. The only thing we have to do in our lives, is to discover the identity of your group you possibly belong to” (p. 57–58).

Regarding European regionalism, Hospers (2004) researched three European regions (Sardinia, Ruhrgebiet and Öresund), thereby focusing on the regional economic change in the nineties into forms of regional, sectoral cluster economy, and at the same time pointing at the importance of local and regional history. He concluded that regionalism should be guided by the state to prevent regions that are looking for policies to stimulate their economy from copying successes of other regions, and “departing from their traditions”. In 2007, Hospers translated and summarized Dutch regionalism in the following five key notes: the people, the living environment, [regional] facilities, the geographical situation, and safety, thereby referring to the region of Twente, in the east of the Netherlands, that tried to get a formal provincial status during the eighties of the former century, but did not succeed.

### 1.2.2. Regionalism in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, comparable, but also “undefined”, “non-registered” regions are coming up, such as the “green” ring of 100.000+ cities including neighboring “green” regions (roughly, the so-called Brabant city row, the region Arnhem-Nijmegen, Twente region including cross-border Euregio, and Zwolle region)

around the Randstad, the urban west of the Netherlands and considered to be the economic heart of the country<sup>iii</sup>. Regionalism in the Netherlands is finding its own ways: Young political parties that are functioning at the national political level nowadays are originally rooted in southern regions (Aerts & De Goede, 2013), as a result of the traditional pillar structure in this part of the country (Van Doorn, 2009).

A striking illustration of growing regional consciousness is the four-paged interview with Putters (Social and Cultural Planning Office; Volkskrant Magazine, 1<sup>st</sup> of June, 2013) when answering the question what he would do if he would get the opportunity to manage the Netherlands for 24 hours. He referred to the need to empower the growing influence that regional and local governments have, which is frustrated by the national government that keeps the reins “by means of all kinds of small regulation and control”. The explanation for this attitude is that “the national level is losing power to the European level and also losing power to local and regional governments”. Putters emphasized the importance of regionally oriented governance, which is, in his opinion, underdeveloped in the Netherlands, because the word “region” is ambiguous.

On the one hand, region refers to roots and identity, but on the other hand, it has no constitutional anchoring like municipalities and provinces do. Nevertheless, region received a status of authority in Dutch (decentralized) governance (Seinstra & Sietsma, 2012). In the Dutch language, region is associated with the countryside (the north, east, and south of the country), as “shadow” of the urbanized western parts of the country, that was emancipated after building (regional) railways and the first motorways in the 19th century (Van der Woud, 2006). The urban west is still experienced by other parts of the country as opposition for regional, “non-western” ambitions. But within the region, comparable oppositions are noticeable: Urban ambitions of a city in the region are clashing with the countryside. The often used term “city region”, meaning cooperation between the city and its surrounding countryside municipalities, may be a *contradictio in terminis*.

The Netherlands has geographical regions (i.e., areas with a more or less social-cultural connection) that are seldomly fully congruent with administrative provincial borders. Some “regional” provinces say to be regions on their own

(e.g., Friesland and Zeeland), some are not because they are split up in regions (e.g., Overijssel and Gelderland), and some are hardly “regional” anymore because of urbanization (e.g., the two “Hollands”); administrative borders between provinces are “historical relicts” (Fiege, 2011; Seinstra & Sietsma, 2012).

Besides these national regions, there are cross-border regions, namely “Euregional” cooperations of municipalities at both sides of the national borders with Belgium and Germany. Despite judicial problems as a result of “double nationality”, ongoing enthusiasm and idealism of the Euregional employees, based on European goals, push these regions forward, making use of European regional Interreg program funding Perkmann, 2002; (Van der Giessen, 2014; Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur, 2008, 2010). In the EU, approximately 100 million citizens are crossing the national border every day because of living or because of a job, because they live in one of 70 formal Euregions that are mostly dominated by “un-European” bureaucratic blocks (Kamerbrief, sts. Financiën, 9 januari 2009, BCPP 2008/2455).

Furthermore, there are thematic regions, concentrated on fire prevention, security, health care (40 regions), employment (35 regions), youth care (approximately 40 regions), and transport, as a result of the transfer of national tasks and powers from the national level to the municipal and provincial level. In internal governmental negotiations, the goal is to make these regions congruent, by decreasing bureaucratic overload (Kamerbrief minister BZK, 1 maart 2012, 0000138147). The G4 (cooperation between Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht) and the G32 (cooperation between 100.000+ cities) can be considered in a comparable frame, as can P10 (cooperation between municipalities in the countryside) and cooperation between municipalities at the shores along the big rivers because of high-water levels. Some regions that had lost their administrative character because of change in legislation (e.g., Twente, Stadsregio Arnhem-Nijmegen, Eindhoven) decided to continue the spirit of the cooperation and to continue the cooperation in other policy fields.

### 1.2.3. Regional identity

There are regions in the Netherlands (mostly a cluster of cooperating municipalities and cooperating provinces) that frame themselves in the national and European arenas by place-branding and place-making as instrumental

components of regional identity, for example Zeeland in the south-west of the country (Van Keken, 2011; De Ruiters, 2011). Van den Brink<sup>abc</sup> (2011, 2012) stated that “regional identity is [a coherent and logic result of] land, historical developments and the current situation”. Herengreen (2002) characterized regional identity by defining the complexity of this theme: “Regional identity is not visible in touchable objects and structures. Regional identity is hidden in stories, in which those objects and structures are connected in one way or another with the region itself. Regional identity is an attribute of living culture . . . people may accept ‘worldwide living’ if they may keep their autonomy and if it is possible for them to retire in established, trustful surroundings”. According to Herengreen (2002) it is impossible to define regional identity with normative and objective data. He refers to “moments of condensation . . . in a changeable cloud of interactive notions (stories, images), [creating] a canonical landscape [with] a new selection of stories and images, not returning in the original landscape”. In a lecture dedicated to the late Dutch writer Kousbroek, Buruma (2012) emphasized that struggle about identity has replaced the class struggle. Identity has become the new struggle about “collective interests of groups of citizens, to be ethnic, religious, sexual or cultural visible from the majority, threatened to evaporate in a crucible.” He referred to identity politics, in which “the past becomes a dogma about which debate and discussion have become impossible”.

Buruma’s observations underline the importance of regional identity as the “inside view” of a region that connects citizens who sometimes have been living in a region for many generations (Hospers, 2013). Identity may influence regional support for eye-catching projects that frame the “outside view” of the region (De Ruiters, 2011). As an example, in the nineties of the former century, the building of the Betuwe railway line – a high potential for Dutch (and European) economy by connecting Rotterdam Harbor with Germany (Ruhr area) and even further with Middle- and East-Europe – crossed the vulnerable, wet Betuwe river landscape. Here, the framing of opposing environmental organizations was a permanent noise of trains, destroying day-to-day regional life of thousands of villagers, threatening damage to the Betuwe fruit orchards, ruining incomes and regional economy, and ruining the national pride of thousands of blossom trees visited by countless Dutch and foreign tourists every springtime. The national government adapted the resistance and invested in all kinds of noise-reducing innovations, but did not skip the railway for national and European economic reasons. One of the

MPs tried to turn the environmental framing by suggesting another frame: Because of the connection with Middle- and East-Europe, he suggested to rename this important railway connection from Betuwe railway line into the Dubček railway line. In his statement, this MP referred to President Vaclav Havel of the Czechoslovakia Republic, who, shortly after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, had pleaded for a railway to connect his country with Rotterdam Harbor. Havel repeated his plea some years later during a fieldtrip to Duisburg, Germany, saying (in the words of the Dutch MP): “For Eastern Europe, Rotterdam Harbor symbolizes the world economy and at the end of the day for us also, our legitimated fulfilment of wealth” (UCV 16–22nd of November, 1993, p. 19–23). The framing did not succeed, because neither the infrastructure minister nor the parliament adopted the suggestion of this MP.

The aforementioned place-branding and place-making as done in Zeeland (Van Keken, 2011) to frame regional identity (De Ruiter, 2011) are not always helpful to develop regional and local empowerment; they can stimulate unintentional opposite developments and hamper economic development. Firstly, the question is, as suggested by Hospers (2007, 2011), may regional and local governments be characterized as brands (Van Riel, 2011)? In the Netherlands, the provinces as regional governmental authorities are more and more considered to be redundant, despite their growing contribution to “green branded” policy at the regional level (Peters, 2010; Figeo, 2011), a connection with Hospers’ question. At this aspect, there is not much difference between the private and public sector: Brands should be in focus permanently, also governmental brands, despite elections. In the public sector, the problem is that every four years, other politicians may enter the political arenas.

Secondly, according to Hospers (2012, 2013), attaching (too) much importance to regional branding and to regional identity will create fear for change which “may widen the eyes, but it is narrowing the view”. Hospers referred to remote, economically shrinking regional areas, with possible explorative potentials “to become areas for pioneering and innovation”. Aslander and Witteveen (2016), stating comparable opinions about this issue, supported Hospers. Besides these aspects, Hospers furthermore warned that conflicts between regional and national or European interests, as mentioned, may contribute to diminishing regionalism in the long run, because national and European interests weigh more generally (Hospers, 2007).

### 1.3. REGIONALISM AND DECENTRALIZED GOVERNMENTS

In the seventies, regionalism became instrumentally workable with the founding of the European Funds for Regional Development by the European Council in 1972 in Paris and in 1973 in Copenhagen (Werts, 2008), at request of the UK, Ireland, and Italy in order to offer less rich member states possibilities for the development of poor regions. Regional and local governments now received a “coat hanger” that created an opening to connect regional and local interests with European agendas. This development could get a boost in 1985 (Milano), when the European Council decided to adopt the Single European Act to create free space for the internal market, including regions. However, because the UK (with Thatcher as Euro-skeptical prime minister) voted against, the big profits of this policy came seven years later, in 1992 (Edinburgh): John Major was the new prime minister and now, the UK voted in favor of this policy. Werts characterized those moments as milestones in the history of the EU. Cohesion had become the new word to characterize the connection between EU member states. In the same year (Maastricht Treaty 1992), the Committee of the Regions was founded.

After the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, agreeing to closer cooperation in the EU by the introduction of three new “departments” (i.e., judicial and internal affairs; juridical and police cooperation in criminal cases; and communal foreign and security policy), furthermore agreeing to introduce the euro, and finally agreeing to the founding of the Committee of the Regions, the relation between the EU member states intensified.

Marks, Hooghe and Black (1996) described how from that moment on, multi-level governance was going to grow as a result of the intensified European cooperation. In processes of decision-making, more than one government can be involved, namely European, national, regional, and local governments; each government with its own rites, rituals, and marks. In the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, the three “departments” disappeared, but multi-governance became the main leading principle, empowering cooperation and resistance at the same time.

On the 17th and 18th of June, 2009, the Committee of the Regions put in black and white in a White book (Const-IV-020, 80th session) how multi-level

governance should be related to the “old” principle of subsidiarity: “The execution of multi-level governance is built upon the agreement according the principle of subsidiarity, that avoids decision-making at one governmental level and guarantees policy-making and policy-execution at the most involved governmental level. Agreeing with the principle of subsidiarity and multi-level governance are inseparable: subsidiarity means the tasks and powers of different government levels and multi-level governance emphasizes the interaction between those levels” (p. 7).

Also, in European circles, the term “region” is not defined, but because of its general “understanding”, cooperating Dutch provinces present themselves as “regions” in European political arenas (pour besoin de la cause), such as Gelderland and Overijssel that present themselves as the East of the Netherlands, and the three northern provinces that present themselves as SNN, which means Association of Cooperating Northern Provinces. However, southern provinces are “living apart together” in European political arenas. But the German Bundesländer Nordrhein-Westfalen and Niedersachsen, cooperation partners of the eastern and northern provinces in the Netherlands but in population density and surface comparable with the Netherlands as a whole, are also seen as regions in the European perspective .

Related to this dissertation, regionalism is the process of creating space and place as stated by Van Rompuy (2012) and by Hospers (2004: 180-182), who emphasized space and place for regional and local governments. They concluded that space should be organized first (without prominent and dominant political and economic prospective statements), for social-cultural, social-economic, and cultural-historic relationships, and after that, place. In short, first space, then place. In order to arrange this, regional and local governments entered the national and European political arena and deployed PA on the wings of “old” and “new” regionalism (Van Houdt, 2011; Boogers, 2013). The question is how decentralized governments that are not used to PA manage this.

### 1.3.1. PA at the regional and local level

Rising regionalism in the EU may be seen as the most important incentive for regional and local PA, because regional and local governments had to introduce PA and PA tools (lobby, issues management, networking, reputation management)

which were common in the private sector, but were still rather unknown at the regional and local level in the public sector (Van Riel, 2011). Also, the EU, knowing the importance of regionalism to stay connected with citizens – despite intermediary frameworks (Rebel, Figuee, & Linders, 2014, 2015) – continually forces regional and local governments to do their homework in order to create connections with European interests (Van Schendelen, 2013). In regional and local PA, decentralized governments meet the citizen, being the “background” stakeholder in regional and local PA operations. Furthermore, decentralized governmental organizations are prominently linked with societal questions, and civilian interests are like a veil covering regional and local PA.

However, it is a problem for Dutch regional and local PA that Dutch regions are more and more separated from the European Structural Funds, because the economic development, compared to delayed regional developments in Middle- and East-European EU countries, was more or less finished. And in the Netherlands, poor regions do not exist anymore. But Dutch regions may still participate in specific EU-program funding, such as the Urban program for sustainable urban development, and Interreg for (trans-)regional cross-border, Euregional development. However, financial participations are decreasing. Nevertheless, these participations are most of the time still visible for the citizen, who sees big announcements along the roads with the famous text: “This project has been made possible by . . .”. Even though these texts probably do not stay in the citizen’s mind, the role and meaning of regions in the European context may be bigger than regional governments think, as analyzed by Van Houdt (2011).

To turn the tide, some regions in the EU succeed to focus on economic activities in order to push themselves forward, generating economic power. Van Houdt (2012) mentioned some Dutch examples of regional cluster economies, such as Eindhoven and Twente as regions for technological innovations, the so-called Food Valley for innovations in life sciences around the universities of Nijmegen and Wageningen in the East of the Netherlands, and Energy Valley in the north for energetic innovations. He concluded that cluster economy may be the lifebuoy for regions that are looking for other chances after the European policy change from support for weak regions to support for strong sectors (Porter, 2000, 2003; Boogers, 2013). In 2008, the European Committee founded the European Cluster Policy Group to develop recommendations for the

Committee and for the member states on how to better support the development of more world-class clusters in the EU (Commission Decision 2008/824/EC).

Furthermore, local and regional awareness is growing. Europa Decentraal stated that European policy, usually developed in close cooperation with “national capitals” (i.e., national governments) is more directed to the improvement of regional economic structures; regions, willing to cluster strong economic activities, may realize ambitions with European support, because “Brussels” is looking for a direct dialogue with regions, separate from the national capitals (Bridge, 2016). Van Gijzel, mayor of Eindhoven at that moment, said in an interview (Volkskrant, 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2013, p.10-11): “Not The Hague, but Brussels is our new capital!” He pleaded for decentralized cooperation and got a warm, applauding support from other big-city mayors and from the Commissioner of the King in “his” province, Noord-Brabant. Earlier, his words were underlined by Van der Vaart, who stated that Dutch decentralized authorities were too silent in the European arena, too modest, and “should speak louder with more empowerment” (Figgie, 2008).

Nowadays, regional and local governments are getting a stronger administrative, political, and social profile than they had before, because of the ongoing processes of devolution (Haeder & Yackee, 2015), which may feed the famous adage that “all politics is local”. There is no governmental official, no mayor, no minister, no councilor, no representative without this adage in mind permanently. It may symbolize the common opinion that in the poll station, the voter thinks about the situation he or she is living in on that very moment (Coops & Rijnja, 2001). Voters think of persons and of their passion to solve the day-to-day problems they are confronted with (Te Velde, 2002: 12-13). Citizens are looking for an eye and an ear for their problems. And exactly these are (in the background) fundamental keywords and key terms in PA, as emphasized by Harris and Fleisher (2011) and by McGrath (2006). In the Netherlands, devolution already started in the seventies and eighties of the former century, to reduce distance between citizen and policy (Minzberg, 1979). The transmission of tasks and powers, via liberalization and privatization to private agencies and companies, forced PA professionals to knock on many more doors to draw attention to the interests they were representing, and more than they had to do before. In the words of Van Schendelen (2013) in a meeting concerning the presentation of his book: “One cup of coffee has become at least fifteen cups of coffee”.

## 1.4. THIS DISSERTATION

In this dissertation, this growth of “the cups of coffee” is considered a question of communication, because decentralized governments and their administrations, daily involved in finding solutions for societal problems, had to introduce PA to a shop floor where PA was mostly unknown. On a more general level, communication has become leading in situations where organizations are forced to reconsider their way of working, and where interests are being placed along changing societal perspectives (Van Doorn, 2009). Usually, traditional approaches of day-to-day work at the decentralized level have to be changed in order to create support for regional and local PA. But how are decentralized governments implementing PA messages into the national and European political arenas?

In PA operations, the sender of PA messages (i.e., the decentralized government in this research) has to find effective communication channels to get the message “landed” in the arenas. But the sending side may be multi-faced (i.e., a single municipality or province, or cooperating decentralized administrations). Second, the message itself may be univocal because of wide varieties in decentralized interests, which may be combined in a compromise. Third, the receiving side may be multi-faced as well, depending on political circumstances in the national and/or European arena (Rebel et al., 2014, 2015). As a consequence, communication is leading in a broad spectrum of (instrumental) varieties; each instrument – PA, PR, spin-doctoring, management of issues, networking, reputation management – needs to be precisely tuned, according to what the PA professional needs at that very moment to create the right communication (Kok & Van der Maas, 2006). In the words of Redeker (1999): “Communication is the creation of common understanding”. For decentralized governments that are developing PA operations in order to draw attention to their interests, this means that they receive signals from society, “translate” those signals into policy issues, (if necessary) put the issues into PA messages, and transfer the messages to the national and European political arena. Then, in the arenas, the decentralized government tries to gain support for the PA messages. But before they do, the home organization has to internalize PA, in order to be able to develop PA messages that can be brought into the national and European arena. Competences should help the PA professional in his day-to-day arena work to get support for the message.

### 1.4.1 Research aims

Since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty and the 2007 Lisbon Treaty of the EU, European PA has become a topic in academic research, but most of these studies (196 studies in total) are rooted in the UK and in Germany (Bunea & Baumgartner, 2014). These studies mainly focused on lobby venues, decision-makers, and the lobby strategy of these decision-makers (41%); 12% of the studies focused on policy influence; and only 4% focused on “how interest groups mobilise at EU level and maintain their organisations’ support” (Bunea & Baumgartner, 2014, p. 1421). In those last-mentioned studies, it is difficult to find a focus on differences between national and European arenas, because most of the studies focused on casuistry and hardly on PA policy. Furthermore, because of the increasing number of decentralized governments entering the European arena, these government were more often forced to pioneer and to design their PA gradually by casuistry (Van Schendelen, 2013; Van Venetië & Luikenaar, 2006). Nevertheless, the single-case studies disseminated arena information, however mostly only in the context of corporate PA in the private sector (e.g., Barron & Hultén, 2014; Bernhagen & Mitchell, 2009) and state lobbying (e.g., James, 2010; Steunenberg, 2007).

Our research aims to add an analysis about the way decentralized governments (municipalities and provinces in the Netherlands) are managing their interests in order to draw attention to these interests and to keep that attention, for example by founding a (permanent) foothold in the national and European arena. In the Netherlands, municipalities and provinces have their own associations with national and European offices, but these associations are only involved in general municipal and provincial interests. Our research focuses on interests of individual (sometimes thematically cooperating) municipalities and provinces that are not covered by the associations. As a consequence, this research is fourfold.

Firstly, considering the aforementioned aspects of regional and local PA, it may be clear so far that regional and local PA have to deal with two political players: the national and the European political arena. How are the arenas interacting and interfering in regional and local PA processes? To which extent are the arenas susceptible for regional and local interests? Researching regional and local PA related to the arenas may explain how properties and determinants of the arenas are managed at the regional and local level. In PA, regional and local governments and governmental administrations primarily focus on the national and European

arena, as a source of funding for regional projects and legislation. From this point of view, European regional and local PA does not differ much from regional and local PA in the national political arena and from regional and local PA in other European regions, because, in general, the engine for the processes in regional and local PA is mostly identical, i.e., drawing and keeping attention. The difference may be the extent of arena susceptibility for regional issues, especially the extent to which MPs and MEPs will consider those issues. To which extent determine regionalism and connected regional distinguishing marks attention in the arenas? Which role do eventually interactions between the national and European arena play? Are there any administrative (i.e., institutional, organizational, and political) obstacles that decentralized governments have to overcome in their arena-directed PA policy?

Secondly, the municipal and provincial home organization, as a back office for the outdoor PA professional (being the front office), has to embed PA, i.e., internal organizational aspects of regional and local PA. It may be clear that the relevant department management and the PA professional in the political arenas have to fulfil a role to influence the attitude of the home organization towards PA. The main goal here is to get PA accepted by relevant colleagues in order to send the PA message into the arenas successfully, in fulfilling the assignment of his political board. Practicing regional and local PA in the political arenas is impossible without close cooperation with the home organization that should be, in one way or another, sensitive for PA. Weick (2009<sup>a</sup>: 301-302) refers to this aspect of sense-making with the metaphor of a jazz combo that improvises on a well-known theme, but – in a certain harmony between the musicians – is looking for the best musical approach by trial and error. To carry this metaphor forward, the following questions may come up. Who is leading this process in the home organization? Who are the other “musicians”? How does sense-making towards PA start in a decentralized administrative organization? How – eventually – to look for cooperation with external partners in the region in order to empower a PA message, or would it be better to act alone? How to develop a PA message when the home organization is not ready to accept PA yet? And what is the position of the PA professional? Nearby the top management or on the shop floor? Or both?

Thirdly, besides the internal organization of PA, the municipal and provincial home organization has to organize PA operations in the national and European political arena, i.e., the external organizational aspects of regional and local PA. Outside the home organization, the outlined PA policy will be confronted with arena characteristics. The home organization will be challenged to find an answer to administrative (i.e., institutional, organizational, political) barriers in the arenas, which means the presence of specific (arena) knowledge. Furthermore, the home organization should find out if cooperation with regional partners (e.g., neighboring municipalities or neighboring provinces) could strengthen the position in the arenas (or not). How to find cooperation to forward PA messages without losing the focus regarding the own interests? How to create a position in the political arenas? Is there any difference between cooperation at the national level concerning PA and at the European level? Is it possible to operate alone? To which extent is it necessary to connect regional folkloristic characteristics and regional economic topics? What role can the citizen play, as probably the most important stakeholder in regional and local PA at national and European levels?

Fourthly, the PA professional is the day-to-day link between the home organization and the political arenas, as foothold for his municipal and provincial home organization, collecting information relevant for running PA operations and for the preparation of home organization policy as well, in order to create connections with political agendas in the political arenas. Houppermans (2011) answered the question of how preparation of policy affects the results of policy with the conclusion that “investment in the very beginning of policy-preparation favors policy-effects”. Thus, the professional must be able to act like that and to score on targets (Van Schendelen, 2013), to also keep going in times of (sometimes unexpected) political turbulence (when an immediate action or decision, probably irreversible, may be needed). At such moments, he has to trust his experience and intuition, defined by Polanyi (1966) as recognition, as tacit dimension, hidden in the sometimes deepest layers of the (professional’s) memory, even as a gene from long forgotten ancestors, suddenly coming up at that specific moment. But what is it that makes him a good PA professional? Education? Type? Character? A combination? And if so, what combination? Is it a combination of professionalism, passion, and authenticity? Should he be like a politician?

## 1.5 CHAPTER-OVERVIEW

### **Chapter 2 – *How to gain ground in the national and European political arena?***

This chapter analyses how the national and European political arena are related to regional and local interests. Regional and local authorities are striving for influence in both arenas. The primary task of a PA practitioner working for a regional government is placing regional interests on national and European political agendas. However, since regional PA is a rather young discipline, opposite to PA in the private sector and in national government, much is unknown about the way regional PA practitioners are operating in the national and European political arenas, and how these arenas are receiving the subnational PA practitioners. In the study described in the second chapter, 41 Dutch PA practitioners and PA receivers were interviewed about their opinions on and experiences with regional PA in both arenas: What are the relevant characteristics of these arenas for regional PA activities, and how are regional PA practitioners managing arena characteristics?

### **Chapter 3 – *Internal organization of PA in Dutch regional and local governments***

Before regional or local PA initiatives can be developed in the political arenas, the home organization should have accepted PA and should be familiar with it. This is necessary, because the PA professional in the arenas (i.e., the front office of the home organization) must be certain that he will get support from the home organization (i.e., the back office). So effectiveness in these arenas requires an optimal arrangement of PA activities in the subnational organization. Based on in-depth interviews with prolific PA professionals and practitioners<sup>iv</sup> in the Netherlands, the third chapter provides an overview of initiatives that subnational government organizations have to develop in their own organization after their “discovery” of how useful PA may be, but before the moment they enter the arenas.

### **Chapter 4 – *On the battlefield: external organization of PA in Dutch regional and local governments***

This chapter creates insight in the way regional and local governments are organizing PA operations in the national and European political arena, i.e., the external organization of PA. Decentralized governments have to respond to increasing regionalism within the EU and to the fact that EU legislation is

affecting decentralized authorities more and more directly. Furthermore, they have to respond to regional and local issues differently in both arenas. The chapter describes how regional and local governments found the response in cooperation at the regional and local level, and how responding to the need for cooperation interferes with responding to different grades of regionalism in both arenas at the same time and with own interests.

#### **Chapter 5 and chapter 6 – Profiling the PA Professional**

Chapters 5 and 6 analyze PA as a profession, from different points of view. Chapter 5 describes a study that explores the demographics of Dutch PA professionals, the competences that are deemed important, and their self-evaluation of these competences. Moreover, the effects of educational background and years of experience are taken into account. In chapter 6, PA competences are explored qualitatively. The chapter categorizes these competences into knowledge, skills, and attitude, and gives a more detailed insight in the competences that PA professionals ought to have in general, and specifically for being “on the spot” in the national and European political arena, for informing the home organization, and finally for modeling PA operations.

#### **Chapter 7 – Discussion**

The final chapter describes the main findings of all studies conducted, followed by the theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations and further research, and the final conclusion. The main findings are described in the order of the chapters: starting with “gaining ground” by regional and local governments in the national and political arenas, via the internal and external organization of PA in the home organization, and ending with PA competences and PA as profession. Regarding the theoretical contributions, chapter 7 describes how the results of the studies in chapters 2–6 contributed to theoretical findings of other authors in the field of PA. The section “practical implications” describes the possible consequences for PA professionals in their day-to-day work, as stated in the findings of our studies. The section “limitations and further research” points at aspects in research methods and at current, present-day events that possibly influence the results of our studies. The final conclusion describes the common denominators in our five studies.

## REGIONAL AND LOCAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS ACTIVITIES IN THE NETHERLANDS: HOW TO GAIN GROUND IN THE NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN POLITICAL ARENA

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

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The role of regional or subnational authorities<sup>1</sup> is undeniably increasing in Europe. Due to increasing regionalism<sup>2</sup> efforts within EU member states and due to the fact that EU legislation is affecting subnational authorities more and more directly, these authorities are not only striving for influence in the national arena, but in the European arena as well. This article focuses on the Dutch case of subnational Public Affairs (PA), in particular how subnational authorities gain ground in the national and European arena, in order to draw attention for their regional interests. For the private sector in The Netherlands – a relatively small country with an age-old external orientation – PA pointed out to be a useful instrument in order to create a relationship with society. Influenced by positive results in the private sector, local, regional, and central authorities took over this policy aiming to improve their connections with civilians and finding their way to the European levels (Barents, 2008; Van Schendelen, 2013).

Such policy change may be explained by the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Baumgartner, Breunig, Green-Pedersen, Jones, Mortensen, Nuytemans, & Walgrave, 2009), stating that long periods of policymaking stability and policy continuity may be disrupted by short but intense periods of instability and change. Indeed, after turbulent years including for example the Paris 1968 Revolt, the Vietnam-war, rising media-influence (television), and the Prague Springtime, in the mainstream of awakening civilian awareness, relationships between civilians and constitutional authorities changed. A generally expressed need of the younger generations “to break up encrusted social, political, cultural and economic structures instigated a shift in the thinking of what a democracy should be like” (Schulz-Forberg, 2009: 30). Citizens became more and more assertive about their interests and were asking for more influence in decision-making at all political and administrative levels (Aerts & De Goede, 2013: 23-107). Consequently, subnational governments had to redefine their positions and become more or less as assertive as their awakened citizens.

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1 *In The Netherlands, municipalities and provinces are subnational governments, anchored in the Constitution. Regions are (constitutionally) not defined. Municipal and provincial cooperation is functional and generally considered ‘regional’ cooperation; in some cases strengthened by social-cultural and historic-cultural relationships.*

2 *Regionalism is the creation of political, administrative and constitutional space for societies with social-cultural, social-economic and historic-cultural relationships (Van Rompuy, 2012).*

They started looking for possibilities to place subnational interests on the agendas in the national and European arenas (Derksen, 1996: 75-85; Engels & Fraanje, 2013: 80-89), and creating coalitions and cooperation that seemed usual and advantageous at the European level (Barron & Hultén, 2014). From an EU perspective, it was important to involve every level of the decision-making process in policy implementation, as legitimacy, effectiveness and visibility of the EU are guaranteed by the contributions of all actors (Assembly of European Regions, 2010; James, 2010). When studying the agenda of the European Council between 1975 and 2010, Alexandra, Carammia and Timmermans (2012: 81, 84) found “strong evidence” for the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory. Looking at European Council, “as main venue for setting the agenda on high politics” [...], mirroring “national executives” they are mentioning the Single European Act (1986) as a starting-point of regional funding in the EU (Werts, 2008), and as a starting-point for regional governments to look for possibilities to enter the European arena as well.

### 2.1.1 Europe of regions

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

With the Maastricht treaty, the European cooperation got closer and warmer, at all levels. Indeed, research (Marks, Hooghe & Black, 1996) proved that multi-level governance developed because of the new intergovernmental structures in the European cooperation. This means that in all kinds of governmental decision-making, more government levels could be involved at the same time: European,

national, regional (provincial) and local (municipal), based on subsidiarity, i.e. the “closest” government is involved (Hooghe, 2001; Jordan, 2001). The Committee of the Regions, busy to strengthen its position in the Brussels arena, started to consider itself as “the national guard of subsidiarity” (Barents, 2008: 427), as it tried to create a strong position for regions, but not with permanent fruitful results. According to Hamedinger and Wolffhardt (2010), Europe is mattering the cities but not (that much) the other way around; referring to a “revolving research agenda” (p. 227-236).

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

### 2.1.2 Subnational public affairs

Initially, subnational public affairs was rather incidental, for example when a regional issue becomes of national importance (e.g., regional disasters). In these cases, Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), primarily loyal to their faction (Vollaard, Van der Harst & Voerman, 2015: 99-183), strengthened their political position within the arenas by exploiting their regional roots; as such roots may increase receptiveness. However, at the same time, increasing devolution (i.e. transmission of national tasks and powers to subnational levels) was uploading subnational governments, and they started to appoint civil servants or hire consultancies to not only “guard” subnational interests, but also influence national and European agendas to strengthen subnational positions in the execution of national and European policy targets.

Furthermore, bigger cities started to appoint representatives in Brussels and the national arena, and municipal and provincial interest organisations founded offices in the arenas as well. The magnitude of this process is illustrated by the fact that regional officials from one country sometimes outnumber their peers in the national PR (Tatham & Thau, 2014: 16 -17).

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

A recent literature review of 196 scientific European PA studies (Bunea & Baumgartner, 2014) shows that academic interest in European PA has increased since 1992 (Maastricht Treaty) and 2007 (Lisbon Treaty), and that most studies originate from the UK and Germany. In general, all studies can be divided into lobbying stages. In the European PA literature so far, the focus has primarily been on access to lobbying venues and decision makers, as well as lobbying strategies (41%) and on the exercise of policy influence (12%). Very few studies (4%) explored “how interest groups mobilise at EU level and maintain their organisations’ support” (Bunea & Baumgartner, 2014:1421).

Furthermore, very few comparative studies exist that concentrate on the similarities and differences between arenas, while more and more subnational authorities evidently have to deal with that circumstance. Bunea and Baumgartner's literature review (2014) also shows that most studies are single-case studies, related to one particular policy-area (for example agriculture). Finally, throughout the years, case experiences about PA in a European context have been published to disseminate all kinds of arena-connected information. Although also informative for subnational authorities, these studies primarily focus on corporate lobbying (e.g., Barron & Hultén, 2014; Bernhagen & Mitchell, 2009) and state lobbying (e.g., James, 2010; Steunenbergh, 2007). However, due to the unique role, characteristics and increasing importance of subnational authorities, a scientific analysis is needed of the way subnational authorities are managing their interests in the national and European arena by means of multiple PA activities.

Focusing on PA, the aim and focus of this study is threefold. To assess the interactional process between subnational authorities and receivers of their PA activities in an explorative sense, we explicitly choose the point of view of all three relevant actor groups involved: officials working for subnational authorities, officials working in the national and/or European arena, and the messengers (i.e. PA professionals and PA practitioners). This approach enables us to get insight in the way subnational PA professionals and PA practitioners manage arena properties and arena determinants, and to answer questions including: how do subnational governments prepare PA operations in the arenas; how do they position and characterise themselves in order to gain attention; and how do they manage interactional arena connections? Regarding the arena(s), valuable knowledge can be gained about whether administrative and political arena receptiveness and dynamics differ, while the role and features of the PA practitioner will be discussed as well. In sum, based on the above, the following research question is proposed:

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

## 2.2 METHODOLOGY

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

### 2.2.1 Respondents

The subnational 'scenery' in The Netherlands consists of 390 municipalities (approximately 170.000 civil servants) and 12 provinces (approx. 12.000 civil servants), each with own governments, councils, and administrative organisations. Cooperating municipalities and cooperating provinces are considered 'regions,' sometimes with own councils, staffed by members of the participating municipal and provincial councils. These regions, which in the Netherlands are not constitutionally anchored, are mostly focusing on particular themes (e.g., regional healthcare, infrastructure, spatial planning). In the Dutch context MP's and MEP's are elected on national electoral lists, regional roots are of complementarian importance when it comes to their position on these lists. Regarding the potential participants for this study, a distinction is made between PA practitioners and PA professionals. PA practitioners are persons practising PA, not as a profession, but as subnational officials politicians who are temporarily entrusted with PA activities. PA professionals are persons practising PA as their profession, sometimes as a subnational civil servant, sometimes as a consultant. In other words: every professional is a practitioner but not every practitioner is a professional. By means of snowball sampling (Noy, 2008: 340), 41 respondents were recruited consisting of 24 full-time (public and private) Dutch subnational PA practitioners (mayors, aldermen, city clerks, civil servants connected with PA

activities, Commissioners of the King (provinces), and Deputies (provinces)), and 17 subnational PA professionals (municipal/provincial as officials and in the private sector as consultants, in The Hague as well in Brussels), MPs, MEPs and (former) members of the central government, familiar with subnational administrations). The interviews were not focused on comparing municipal and provincial PA practitioners (officials and politicians), or otherwise. Approximately 25% had executed several PA functions in their career, for instance starting as mayor, the Commissioner of the King, then M(E)P, minister, or vice versa. Some respondents also were or had been a member of a local or regional council. This creates an overview of 93 functions: 32 local, 26 provincial, 23 national, and 12 European. The average age of the respondents was 40-60 years (34 male, 7 female). The number of inhabitants of the municipalities the respondents represented varied from 35,000 to 100,000+. The provinces (or regions) they represented were situated all over The Netherlands.

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

### 2.2.2 The interviews

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

### 2.2.3 Coding and analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Following the cross-sectional code and retrieve principle based on Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss (2008), a qualitative analysis of the interviews by four coders, who were extensively trained, was organised to uncover the main topics and categories mentioned by the respondents across the entire data set. Every time a respondent uttered a statement (small or big), a key phrase was formulated to catch the

thoughts, opinions, or experiences of respondents regarding the national (Dutch) arena, the European (Brussels) arena, and the municipal or provincial office. This resulted in an initial amount of 1003 key phrases.

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

The next step involved the selection of key phrases that pertained to the landscape of the national and European arena. All key phrases were categorised using four codes: the national/European arena, the subnational home organisation (internal), the subnational home organisation (external), and PA competencies. Two independent coders reached a Cohen’s kappa of .72. This step resulted in 390 key phrases about the national and European arena.

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

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

## 2.3 RESULTS

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

### 2.3.1 Susceptibility of the national and European arena

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

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

According to most respondents, due to centralism, national issues are prioritised in the national arena,, both in ministries (administrative) and in parliament (politics) . At the national level, there is a lack of empathy for "daily life" in subnational administrations due to a lack of knowledge about regional issues. The low-ranked position of regional interests is caused by a national focus of most parliamentarians. This frustrates subnational policies for acquiring national

attention for their regional interests. Another factor mentioned is the switch at the national and European level from a traditional regional policy of support for weak regions towards a more business-orientated sector-approach that focuses on the rate of return on investments. A countryside mayor says:

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

The regional focus in the national arena may be poor, but there is an advantageous aspect, according to respondents: because of this anaemic focus, local and regional authorities are forced to cooperate when it comes to weighty regional (mostly economic) aspects, by means of linking municipal and provincial agendas with national agendas. Furthermore, subnational administrations are driven together because of the dominance of "The Netherlands Ltd Company", which outflanks regional aspects, on-going austerities, the general attitude of "withdrawing" tendencies at central governmental level, and finally the disappearance of the opinion "that the government fits all". Knowing that they are on their own and looking for other possibilities to ask attention for their interests, subnational administrations are becoming allies willy-nilly.

According to the respondents, subnational interests are also under pressure at the European level, because of an increasing dominance of national interests. This means that the European arena can be classified as a fighting arena for subnational interests as well. Respondents are referring to a misapprehension at the national level that the current Dutch sub nationalisation of national tasks and powers to municipalities and provinces (mainly in youth care, in care for the elderly, and in regional employment) will strengthen the position of subnational governments in the European arena, because this national policy of sub nationalisation is not "an European affair". The influence of Dutch subnational governments in the European arena is basically smaller than in the national arena, another respondent is concluding, because the European arena involves 500 million people and the national arena approximately 17 million. Dutch subnational PA in the European arena is primarily directed to collecting knowledge about this arena, according to this respondent, because this knowledge is inadequate at the subnational level. In general, in the European arena, the regional focus may be bigger than in the national arena, because most member states (not The Netherlands) are regionally

orientated, and delegate regionally orientated parliamentarians. That is why Dutch subnational PA is still, according to this respondent, mostly limited to the relevant directorates-general (“ministries”) of the EU. In the words of a countryside mayor:

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

### 2.3.2 Interactions between the national and European arena

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

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

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

This respondent is referring to common experiences at the national level, indicating that the influence of European legislature is diminishing (“undermining”) national powers and even sovereignty. In the respondents’ answers, this is a returning aspect of arena interactions. According to them,

the position of the national arena is threatened from two sides: from the European arena getting more influence on national agendas, and from the increasing presence of regions in the European arena, bringing in regional competition. This means, according to respondents, that despite openness in the European arena to regional affairs, the subnational PA professional and PA practitioner must bring everything into play there, to get attention for subnational interests.

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

Further, as an MP’s assistant mentioned, the distance between “The Hague” and “Brussels” is influencing the practitioners’ daily work:

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

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

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

### 2.3.3 Arena processes at the national and European level

After the switch from support for weak regions to support for strong sectors, the regional focus in the national arena moved from “a distribution of justice” to a model of “cost-benefit analysis”. The common threat in the national arena, according to respondents, is a permanent lack of consistency, which causes an unquiet course in regional policies at national level. This can have disorientating effects in the PA policy of subnational governments in the national arena, according to respondents. Respondents complained about “a total disparity” between the Randstad (the urban west of The Netherlands), which is considered the economic heart of the country, and other regions in the country. Cooperation at the subnational level could neutralise this disparity, but does not occur sufficiently, with the result that “the national level does not believe that subnational cooperation can help solve problems”, as an NGO president said, who referred to the economic Randstad focus at the national level. The regions are not seen as “players”; they are unknown. Respondents emphasized another obstacle that frustrates processes in the national arena: a lack of regional knowledge that is leading to legislation “with execution-problems at the local level”. This means that legislation, relevant for subnational governments, is developed without sufficient subnational “coat hangers”.

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

*I learned from Schuman and Monnet that we're building a European community, based on regions, and not on sovereign states. That's why we invested in regional policy. But that has become romanticism today!*

*[...] Today, the EU Structural Funds [...] are to change into innovation funds, [...] creating investments based on criteria and no longer on regions.*

### 2.3.4 Regional differences

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 2.3.5 PA processes at the subnational level

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

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

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

Networking “in order to transfer information” is possible by means of organising work visits and field trips, “especially for relevant department civil servants who are writing accounts and reports for their minister”. The approach of “The Netherlands Ltd Company” may have disadvantages for regional nuances, but the other side of the coin is that showing strong aspects during work visits and field trips can create new networks at the national level, by asking questions such as: Where do regional interests [...] overlap or conflict with national and European themes?

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

A mayor and former deputy said: “Visibility is crucial for the entrance of subnational governments in the national and European arena”. Another mayor and former alderman said: “Subnational governments [municipalities and provinces] do not understand that an upscaling of the administrative system [municipalities and provinces merging into bigger administrative ‘units’] is a powerful contribution to their position in the national and European arena, and the role they can play there”. In the words of a Commissioner of the King about PA policy at the subnational level:

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

### **2.3.6 (Euro)parliamentarian affinity with subnational interests**

According to the respondents, a general view regarding electoral and political possibilities for regional issues does not exist, neither in the European Parliament nor in the national parliament (Second Chamber), or senate (the First Chamber). Only when the political situation changes in such a way that a regional issue can support individual parliamentarians, or that an MP can identify him- or herself with a region, there is willingness to pay attention to subnational interests.

Depending on the PA file, it may be advisable to intervene in the senate; senators (meetings of the senate are one time a week) can be representatives of relevant societal partners in subnational PA-processes. But the fruitfulness of PA at this stage may be doubtful. A MP, later on countryside mayor, stated:

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

Another MP with regional roots mentioned:

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

And a countryside mayor said:

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

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

Even though the situation is different in the European arena, the effects are similar to those in the national arena. According to a Brussels provincial PA manager, “the Dutch MEPs are first and foremost a member of a political party [faction], and secondly an MEP on behalf of their region, [and] they do not have any relation with the national political arena in The Netherlands... Because of the non-existence of a connection with the national political arena, Dutch MEPs are, also for their own political party, invisible with the result that chances are lost and agenda-setting [for regional subjects] is hardly happening”. So, foremostly, via the political party, MEP’s are connected with the national ‘home front’; this is more relevant to them than regional roots. A Commissioner of the King concluded:

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

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

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

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

## 2.4 DISCUSSION

In this qualitative study, Dutch PA practitioners and PA receivers were interviewed about their opinion and their experience with subnational PA in both the national and the European arena. More specifically, we were interested in the relevant arena characteristics for subnational PA, and in the way subnational PA practitioners manage arena properties. In sum, looking at the results of the interviews, negative experiences in both arenas seem to dominate.

### 2.4.1 Arena-attitude

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

dominating subnational PA and putting other regions in a secondary position; in the United Kingdom regions like Scotland and Wales are opposing London-dominance and in Spain regions like Catalonia are opposing Madrid.

The European arena attitude was also mentioned as an obstacle for subnational governments. Here, the reason is that member states assign more importance to their national interests than to regional interests, because of increasing globalisation effects and dominating European foreign policy. Nevertheless, because of a relatively positive European attitude towards regional development as such, subnational PA operations in that arena are considered useful. Since the arena attitude, coloured by tendencies of centralism and political considerations of national origin, highly determines the success of subnational PA operations, the PA practitioners need all hands on deck to create positive results for subnational governments. Since regional policies in both the European and the national arena changed from "support for weak regions" into "support for top sectors" (especially for top-sector regions), subnational PA now has a strong business-like character that does not seem to differ much from PA in the private sector. Subnational governments should therefore intensify their capacity to cooperate as much as the private sector is already doing. The times of merely focusing on "small" subnational interests are over (Boogers et al., 2015).

### 2.4.2 Cooperation and networking

The second element consists of the level of cooperation and networking between subnational governments. Because of hesitations regarding subnational cooperation (as cooperation may undermine own interests), subnational cooperation has not yet fully developed. However, the more intense a cooperation is, the more effective subnational PA operations can be. This is common sense in the circle of PA practitioners. Municipal and provincial governments in The Netherlands are cooperating in all kinds of subjects, more than ever before, but this cooperation is predominantly focused on cost reductions. Furthermore, many of these cooperation activities concern so-called "functional regions" (i.e. thematic municipal cooperation in fire departments, safety, infrastructure, health care). Structures of such functional collaborations are only of local value and hardly exist when the same subnational governments are asking the national and European arenas to pay attention at their needs. For such operations, explicit political cooperation is required. However, this is currently not highly developed

at the subnational level. The roots of this non-cooperation attitude remain unclear. Every subnational politician and official administrator seems to have a basic willingness to cooperate, especially on infrastructure and (environmental) planning, but full subnational cooperation (which means that some “favourite” own interests should be reconsidered or even postponed), is considered something different, and frustrates the advantages of cooperation. At the provincial level, comparable developments are visible. In order to get more body in the European arena, Dutch provinces decided to jointly create unconstitutional forms of cooperation by representing themselves as (undefined) “regions” (e.g., the provinces in the north and the east of The Netherlands). Still, these are a minor factor in relation to the neighbouring German Bundesländer which are constitutionally defined in the German Constitution of 1949. The result of this situation is fragmented Dutch subnational PA at both the municipal and the provincial level.

### 2.4.3 Administrative elements

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

### 2.4.4 Final remarks

Based on the above, the question to discuss is: What does this mean for subnational PA in general and for the PA practitioner specifically? The subnational PA practitioner, in any case, must be a “fighter” in the national arena as well in the European arena. It must be noted that compared to the national arena, the

European arena is considered to be more receptive to subnational interests. However, this receptiveness is especially present when it concerns “poor” regions in Middle- and South-Eastern Europe or regions that contain top sectors. Such regions are viewed as more close to the people, which increases the visibility of Europe, which is in accordance with the more recent focus of the EU on social policy (Berkel et al., 1998). But Dutch MEPs, elected because of their political colour and not because of regional roots, are generally not mentioned as willing partner players in this subnational game. Besides all this, the PA practitioner simultaneously has to fight “at home” where any form of cooperation must be arranged to uplift the PA messages in order to contribute to the desired visibility.

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

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

considerations. Since the national arena (“The Hague”) has a limited receptiveness to subnational interests (except in cases of regional misery), and because the “Brussels” antennas for subnational interests are outflanked by national interests and member-state interests, the subnational governments have no other choice than to give substantial national and European weight to their interests, as much as they can, and preferably in close cooperation.

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

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## THE HOME FRONT: INTERNAL ORGANIZATION OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS IN DUTCH SUBNATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

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**Abstract:** Dutch subnational governments such as municipalities and provinces are increasingly compelled to express their interests in the national and European political arenas. Effectiveness in these arenas requires an optimal arrangement of public-affairs (PA) activities in the subnational organization. Based on 41 in-depth interviews with prolific PA professionals and practitioners in the Netherlands, this article provides an overview of initiatives that subnational government organizations have to develop in their own organization after their “discovery” of how useful PA may be, but before the moment they enter the arenas. According to the participants, the creation of individual, collective, and regional commitment regarding PA is the first initiative. Subsequently, conditional and instrumental terms should be fulfilled, so PA will be used as a tool to model PA messages. Concluding from the interviews, human aspects and internal cooperation determine the sense making of PA in a subnational organization, but a lack of arena knowledge frustrates this process.

## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the US, Public Affairs (PA) has been well known for a long time, as processes of influence by interest groups (Dahl, 1956; Schattschneider, 1960; Truman, 1951; Xifra, 2015). In the Netherlands, PA entered the private sector around the 1960s and the public sector around the 1980s. As the Public Relations (PR) function turned out not to be sufficient for preventing and controlling conflicts with interest groups (Groenendijk, Hazekamp, & Mastenbroek, 1997), more was needed to keep relations with interest groups going in case of disagreements. PA proved to be a helpful instrument and since then, next to the private sector, the public sector has also embraced PA (Groenendijk et al., 1997). However, PA has mostly been practiced by the central government (Van Schendelen, Bennis, & Pauw, 1990), and hardly by subnational governments that are part of the larger system of government. In the Netherlands, subnational governments include municipalities (local government) and provinces (provincial government), with a constitutionally anchored autonomy, but with a financial connection to the central government. Together, these are defined as “decentralized unitary state”. The mayor and the Commissioner of the King are appointed chairmen of the municipal council and the provincial council, respectively (Engels & Fraanje, 2013). Although these subnational governments initially hardly embedded PA in their organizations, subnational authorities (including municipalities and provinces) saw themselves forced to think about the introduction of PA due to several governmental and societal changes. In this article, after addressing these influential changes, we focus on how subnational governments in the Netherlands organize themselves internally, in order to create external success in both the national and the European arena.

### 3.1.1 Governmental and societal changes leading to subnational PA

The emergence of the European Union (EU) stimulated subnational PA, which was originally dedicated to steel and later on to agricultural interests (Pedler, 2005) and focused on rural regions. In 1986, the adoption of Single European Act, meant to create space for the internal market (including the regions), stimulated multi-level governance. Consequently, following the theory of multi-level governance, European integration has instigated “a policy creating process in which authority and policy-making influence are shared across multiple levels of government – subnational, national and supranational” (Mastenbroek, Zwaan

& Liefferink, 2013; Van Houdt, 2012). In this new reality, the influence on decision-making on the EU level is being shared between national government and subnational governments, and the subnational government would be able to influence the EU decision-making process independent from the national government (Van Houdt, 2015). More specifically, when interests of the subnational actors and the government are different, it is crucial for subnational government to collect information about the background and intentions of European regulation (Mastenbroek et al., 2013). As a result of the growing European Union and the emergence of subnational representations in the European arena, the public sector became more open to PA (Pedler, 2005). In the early years of the EU, lobbying had not particularly been considered a PA instrument yet, but it became a common activity in the European arena to raise European attention for (mostly agricultural) national and regional interests (Pedler, 2005). However, to Dutch subnational governmental administrations, PA is still relatively new (Van Schendelen, 2013).

Furthermore, the ongoing process of devolution (i.e., transmission of national tasks and powers from the national level towards subnational levels, intensified in the eighties and since then permanently activated) was and is still influencing tasks and powers of subnational governments. More and more, the policy of the Dutch government is aimed at reducing national intervening while extending regional coordination (Mastenbroek et al., 2013). As a consequence, the responsibility for the execution of both European and national regulations becomes a matter of subnational authorities. For the time being, the apotheosis of this process is the 2015 devolution package deal in the government agreement Building Bridges (2012), which transfers the reduction of unemployment, care for the elderly, and youth care to the municipal level. This approach is characterized by the keyword “participation”, introduced by the Dutch King in his first speech on September 17, 2013. In a parallel and comparative process, the Dutch provinces, in cooperation with municipal governments, have received more responsibilities throughout the years for social-economic and “green” development of regions, such as the execution of “green” European directives; rural and urban planning; and landscape and nature conservation. This long-term process of devolution is leading subnational authorities to more responsibility for the day-to-day running of society, with consequences for the internal municipal and provincial organization (Building Bridges, 2012; Potters & Sloof, 1996; Sorensen 1998).

Finally, since the 1970s, the confrontation with citizens has become more substantial (Van de Donk, 2014). Citizens' increasingly louder knock at the doors of national and subnational governments has become apparent. Citizen participation has become an almost magic word and a synonym for the creation of possibilities to reduce the distance to the subnational and national government under the well-known adage "think globally, act locally." In 1982, American politician Thomas Phillip O'Neill (1912–1994) said "All politics is local", giving vent to a general sense that subnational politics may be determinant for civilian involvement in politics (Barber, 2013).

### 3.1.2 Subnational PA and the home front

In this triangular wave of societal, governmental and European changes, the subnational public sector has started to look for managerial instruments to get attention for its interests in national and European political arenas (Van Schendelen, 2013), knowing that PA activities such as lobbying create influence (Helland, 2008; McGrath, 2007; Vining, Shapiro, & Borges, 2005). In general, a (financial) need and governmental attention to a particular problem at hand motivate subnational governments to decide to lobby (Loftis & Kettler, 2015; Richte, Samphantharak & Timmons, 2009; Vining et al., 2005). Regarding the aspect of devolution, Van de Donk (2014) describes how subnational governments are arguing with the central government that is considered a centralistic-oriented power that remains the financial guard and holds financial reins.

Subnational governments understand the power of the political environment in which they operate, externalize actions to influence that same environment, and tend to retain a lobbyist in an attempt to influence national and European policy (Loftis & Kettler, 2015). Furthermore, the other subnational governments are increasingly becoming actors to pay attention to as well. As some regions are more successful in acquiring governmental attention and funding, cooperation at a subnational level is needed to neutralize this disparity (Figuee, Gosselt, Linders, & De Jong, 2016<sup>b</sup>). However, this does not occur sufficiently, with the result that the national level does not believe that subnational cooperation can help solve problems, and that regions are not seen as "players": they are unknown.

Because of the many ongoing developments in the national and the European political arena, PA is permanently in development as well and therefore a subject of academic debate (Derksen, 2015; Davidson, 2015; McGrath, Moss, & Harris, 2010; Van Schendelen, 2013). Toth (as cited in Botan, 2006) describes how definitions of PA are pointing to "the building of relationships in the public policy arena" (p. 500), while referring to Grunig and Repper (1992), who stated that "Public Affairs applies to communication with government officials and other actors in the public policy arena" (p. 117–157). This demands internal managerial arrangements. Groenendijk et al. (1997) refer to the definitions of the PA manager, the Issue Management Specialist/Director, the Government Relations Manager, and the Lobbyist, as formulated by the Public Relations Society of America in 1983 (Groenendijk et al., 1997). In general, PA is considered a managerial discipline meant to influence processes of decision-making in the public sector. As Linders & De Lange (2003) note: "PA is a strategic management discipline, directed to the political, administrative realm the organization is functioning in or will function in" (p. 17). For subnational governments, this means reconsidering their position regarding issues and themes they are or will possibly be involved in, and regarding relationships with public stakeholders, such as other subnational governments, private stakeholders, and the national and European arena. In this reconsideration, subnational governments have to think about possible organizational changes in order to arrange future PA operations; not by immediately embracing running issues and themes, but by primarily internalizing these issues and themes in processes of sensemaking in order to create support (Weick, 2009), and by considering how municipal or provincial influence may be effectuated in the national and European political arena (Van Schendelen, 2013). This may require civil servants and politicians who are willing to review their connections to the national and European arena, and their day-to-day work. It may even change the relationship of the home organization with private and (other) public stakeholders in- and outside the region, as well as the relationship with the national and European arena.

This is leading to the research question:

*RQ: Regarding Public Affairs, what do Dutch subnational governments have to initially arrange internally, in order to create external success in the national and European arena later on?*

## 3.2 METHOD

To find an answer to the research question, it is necessary to get insight in how municipalities and provinces prepare their organizations for the embedding of PA. To this end, qualitative interviews were held with actors who are involved in subnational decision- and policymaking and familiar with PA operations. We asked them to reflect on their experiences with PA in subnational circumstances.

### 3.2.1 Participants

Forty-one participants were selected by snowball sampling (Noy, 2008: 340), based on the extent to which their career is marked by political, administrative, and official functions in national and subnational government organizations, but always related to the interests of subnational government organizations. A distinction was made between PA practitioners and PA professionals. PA practitioners are persons practicing PA; not as a profession, but as a subnational official politician who is temporarily entrusted with PA activities. PA professionals are persons practicing PA as their profession; sometimes as a subnational civil servant, sometimes as a consultant. In other words, every PA professional is a PA practitioner, but not every PA practitioner is a PA professional. The 41 respondents were recruited consisting of 24 full-time (public and private) Dutch subnational PA practitioners (mayors, aldermen, city clerks and civil servants connected with PA activities, Commissioners of the King (provinces), and Deputies (provinces)) and 17 subnational PA professionals (municipal/provincial officials and consultants in the private sector, in The Hague and in Brussels, MPs, MEPs and (former) members of the central government who are familiar with subnational administrations). The interviews were not focused on comparing municipal and provincial PA practitioners (officials and politicians). After the 41 interviews, the data showed signs of saturation.

The participants were predominantly male (34 male; 7 female) and the average age of participants was approximately between 40 and 60 years. Throughout their career, the majority of participants had worked in (sometimes many) different administrative, governmental, and official functions related to subnational PA activities: 32 local, 26 provincial, 23 national, and 12 European functions; covering 93 functions in total. Some participants had started as a mayor in a municipality, sometimes became Commissioner of the King afterwards, or minister, or state

secretary, or MP/MEP, or vice versa. Others had also been a member of a local or regional<sup>3</sup> and provincial council. Regarding the municipal level and the number of inhabitants, small municipalities were represented as well as big cities (ranging from 35.000 to more than 100.000 inhabitants). The provinces (or regions) that the participants represented were situated all over the country.

Absolute anonymity was guaranteed because of the sensitivity of the topics in the interviews and the openness of the interviewees.

### 3.2.2 The interviews

The main focus in the interviews covered four overall themes: (1) susceptibility of the national and European arena for subnational PA operations, (2) subnational government administrations' embedding of PA in their organizations before entering the arenas, (3) subnational government administrations' organization of PA operations when entering the arenas, and (4) competences of the subnational PA professional.

Most interviews lasted an hour and a half on average. Due to the promised secrecy, the participants talked uninhibitedly; not one question remained unanswered. The answers mostly covered more than the question was aimed at: Some interviews were no longer a "simple" Q&A operation, but a narrative that related to separate items in the approach to be discussed. Probably due to the fact that almost all participants (had) occupied more than one governmental or administrative function at local, provincial (and regional), national, and/or European level, a broad spectrum of statements was created within the four themes.

The language in the interviews was Dutch. Due to planning and logistics, the interviews were held in municipal and provincial offices, at home, in Brussels, and in the International Press Centre of the House of Parliament in The Hague. The location was determined by wishes to speak in freedom and in secrecy, without any unrest or interference.

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<sup>3</sup> *In the Netherlands, cooperating municipalities and cooperating provinces are considered to be regional forms of subnational cooperation, sometimes with a regional council, which is however not constitutionally anchored and not democratically legitimated. Members of these (occasional) councils are also members of a municipal or provincial council, and thus democratically legitimated, but, as said, not in their regions.*

### 3.2.3 Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. As a first step in the analysis, the first researcher captured the essence of every essential statement in a key phrase, no matter how extensive the statement was. This resulted in a total number of 1003 key phrases.

As a second step, three independent coders checked all 1003 key phrases by comparing these to the original interviews in order to assess their correctness and exhaustiveness. On average, 76% of the key phrases were confirmed without changes in this process. After discussing differences between the original key phrases and the interpretations of the independent coders, some of the key phrases were reformulated by changing a single word, some were reformulated by changing parts of the key phrase, and some new key phrases were added, which resulted in a total number of 1050 key phrases.

The third step in the analysis involved the selection of key phrases that concerned the internal embedding of PA. Two independent coders divided all 1050 key phrases in the four main categories covered by the interviews. The coders reached a Cohen's kappa of .72. Differences in their coding were discussed, after which consensus was reached about the best categorization. This procedure resulted in 173 key phrases that concerned the internal organization of PA, the focus of this article<sup>4</sup>.

The author and a coder were familiar with uncovering the issues as noted by the participants, and their analysis of the 173 key phrases was a process based on Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Each key phrase was printed on a small piece of paper. Discussions started by repeatedly taking one printed key phrase from the pile of all 173 key phrases. When the discussions and debates indicated that key phrases were linked to a possible new aspect of the internal organization of PA, another pile was made. After several days of discussions and debates, the pile with 173 key phrases had been split up in five piles. Each pile illustrated an aspect of internal PA organization, namely: (1) the attitude of

subnational politicians and civil servants towards PA; (2) PA "at home" (i.e., the way the subnational organization embeds PA in order to be able to create PA messages and to manage PA operations in the arenas later on); (3) the preparation of PA operations in order to gain a foothold in the arenas; (4) the creation of the PA message (i.e., giving content to the PA message by focusing, prioritizing, and fine-tuning); and (5) the professionals and practitioners in the subnational organization.

In a second round with a second coder who was also familiar with this subject, the separation between the five piles did not seem focused enough. After new debates, the five piles were integrated into three piles. The three final piles were translated into the following codes: (1) PA acceptance, which is the administrative and official acceptance of subnational PA in the organization and of the region as well, including the persons involved (politicians and officials) in order to be able to organize and manage PA operations in the national and European arena later on (28 key phrases); (2) PA embedding, which is preparing PA in the organization in order to enter the national and European arenas later on (116 key phrases); and (3) Message creation, which is the way the organization creates PA messages in order to prepare itself for the national and European arenas by using relevant knowledge, information, focusing, prioritizing, visioning, and fine-tuning (29 key phrases). The three codes were submitted to the regime of Cohen's kappa with .61 as result.

## 3.3 RESULTS

Because of their broad spectrum of functions, the participants created a varied insight in how their organizations had to change and which steps they had to take to accept PA and to embrace PA as a new managerial discipline. In the interviews, the participants explained how PA was introduced in the organization, and described their experiences with PA Acceptance, PA Embedding, and Message creation as antechambers to subnational PA. In our Results, we present those utterances that illustrate the majority's opinions best or that provide more insight in the underlying process.

<sup>4</sup> The other three approaches in the interviews (i.e., arena susceptibility, external organizational aspects of subnational PA, and competences) are part of separate studies.

### 3.3.1 PA Acceptance

Individual and collective acceptance of PA determine the quality of subnational PA operations in the national and European arena. A municipal PA advisor in the European arena said that “local government officials should be enthusiastic [about PA]”. Even in small, countryside municipalities, mostly (also) at a psychological distance from the European arena, PA “can flourish when the official is enthusiastic about it”. The official and the political management of a subnational government should “educate” relevant colleagues: “The town clerk and the mayor are the persons who have to advertise the necessity for an own PA policy in the municipal organization.”

Municipal and provincial politicians prefer to be personally in charge of PA operations, besides the PA professional who is playing a supporting role and serving the political board. Politicians admit that they like to keep the reins, as a mayor and a city clerk said. “Municipal PA policy should be organized in such a way that no separate civil servant is needed and the local government politicians can do the PA work by themselves, thanks to the [well-coordinated] informational feeding from the subnational organization.”

Individual acceptance creates collective acceptance, and collective acceptance creates commitment, professionals said. “European subnational PA policy can only function in the subnational organization if there is political and official commitment.” But creating commitment is a long way to go, as a mayor explained, because “PA is not linked with the daily habitat of civil servants. . . the home organization should be willing to invest in PA [and] should accept and understand the importance of PA in the national and European arenas”. This is influential in case of subnational (i.e., regional) cooperation where PA is generally not a current theme, not even in a European context. Subnational cooperation occurs occasionally, based on the consideration that this creates a stronger position in the national and European arena.

“The national and European arenas are lacking in the regions”, a municipal politician said. “The European arena is experienced in regions as far away and besides this [pointing at regional presence in Brussels], there is too little manpower”, a regional official said. According to a Commissioner of the King, “for regions, the European arena is generally a menacing stranger who determines what will happen”.

### 3.3.2 PA Embedding

To get PA embedded in the home organization, participants pointed at the selection of “the right persons” and at the necessity “to have a collective PA agenda with people who are able to carry out this agenda”.

PA should be spread out in order to make PA-related arena information accessible for any other relevant colleague, including the management. “Administrative and official commitment in the subnational organization to European subnational PA demands the appointment of civil servants entrusted with ‘European affairs’ for judicial affairs, for European subsidy policy, and for financial, judicial, and policy effects of European policy in subnational interests.”

*Knowledge* about political and administrative procedures, processes, habits, and traditions of the national and European arenas, knowledge about the ambitions of the subnational organization, and knowledge about the region create continuity in PA operations. The general message is: Knowledge must be there and if not, then knowledge should be “organized”. An MEP suggested to intensify periodical meetings concentrated on arena knowledge, like some knowledge institutes are already doing, “to stimulate subnational PA in the national and European arena”. A city clerk said: “Having outposts in the European arena is essential”. But a G4 consultant<sup>5</sup> said: “The subnational representatives in the European arena are understaffed”.

“Pooling experienced, official capacity on call”, “testing regional knowledge of persons with political ambitions”, and “adding a national and a European paragraph in the administration of decision-making” were other suggestions for upgrading the knowledge level. Although plenty facilities are available for acquiring arena knowledge, the experience is that “it is hard for subnational politicians to get any idea about how to win in the European arena”, according to a mayor. “Subnational governments are not aware of the threats and the chances as well, coming from Europe. . . . Municipalities are lacking knowledge and consciousness about what ‘Europe’ can mean for them.”

<sup>5</sup> G4 means “the four big cities” (100.000+) in the Netherlands: Amsterdam, Utrecht, The Hague, and Rotterdam. In some files, they cooperate in the national and European arena.

For provinces, the situation is hard as well. A subnational PA professional in Brussels referred to the interplay role that provinces could fulfill between the European arena and the national arena, concerning the process of devolution. But provinces are not succeeding: "Involvement, the ambition level, prioritizing, and expertise by experience determine whether provinces are able to deliver the right information to the European arena [but] the Dutch provinces have not developed intensively enough yet to be able to deliver information to the European arena that is needed in the home country to get decentralized national policy on the European agenda".

Subnational governments are involved in a growing number of policy issues, as a result of devolution which requires *permanent cooperation* inside and outside the home organization. PA should be organized "collectively and well equipped", a mayor said. "If the subnational PA professional and the [local or regional] politician agree that a specific file should get more attention, this agreement should be brought to the relevant civil servant, [also] at the level of the daily, official shop floor. . . . The direct sharing of information in the subnational organization is essential for the organization of PA."

Cooperation between the PA professionals in the arena(s) and the municipal and provincial home organization in order to fine-tune PA messages and to avoid misunderstandings is essential, professionals said. "The PA professional in the national arena should get relevant signals from colleagues in the European arena in time . . . The subnational government should give its civil servants the time, and the management the opportunity to determine what files could be of any importance in the national arena and why."

*The position of the PA professional* in the subnational organization ("close to the administrative [governmental] Board" and "close to the top of the subnational organization") is a determining factor of the embedding process, because of information-sharing. The subnational PA professional is the one who is permanently "on the road" in the arenas, who is the physical label of the subnational organization, and who networks, collects information, and checks the extent of support. Participants described the position of the PA professional as vulnerable. The professional is the ("lonesome") liaison officer, equipped and entrusted to deliver information, preferable in direct communication lines with

the (top) management of the organization, which is decisive for the embedding process. The professional arranges this by himself or with the help of the management, which requires well-organized internal support. "The lobby desk [as back office] of the province supports the lobbyist as a secretariat, supports the lobbyist in his issue management, entrusts PA to the lobbyist, and accepts that the lobbyist keeps in contact with the Board without any intervention. . . . PA activities are not to be institutionalized too much, to avoid that 'a nation of [autonomous] islands' is growing [in the subnational organization]."

Participants said not to have a satisfying answer to the question to which extent the professional may be held *accountable*, due to sometimes uncertain (political) circumstances. Two private PA professionals said: "The subnational PA professional can be held accountable for the capability to create commitments and to develop support for files . . . , but not for [possible] results of PA activities, because political circumstances can be very unpredictable."

A Commissioner of the King stated that the accountability of the PA professional should be in the hands of the politicians, because the professional has a foothold in political arenas, is connected with public interests, is permanently working in a political atmosphere, and must be able to negotiate when political situations suddenly change. "The subnational PA professional with an own network is a subnational diplomat; he is operating on behalf of a democratic government he has to be accountable to."

PA operations demand permanent coordination in the triangle of (1) the Board, (2) the PA professional in the arenas, and (3) private and (other) public stakeholders, in order to guard relationships and at the same time keep an eye on own interests, which is essential for embedding. Clear appointments about roles and functions are needed. A city clerk characterized the triangular coordination with the words: "The organization of [subnational] PA should not only be directed to 'get something' but also to 'bring something'. . . . [which means that] the local government determines the priorities, the official departments execute these priorities, and the PA professional goes to the arena with these priorities".

"Operations [in the arenas] without sufficient *support* [from the subnational organization and stakeholders] is an identification mark of Dutch PA. . . .

National and European PA does not stand a chance without support in the subnational organization”, a mayor said. Subnational governments mix up lobby and PA, which causes confusion in the embedding process, which in turn causes confusion in the gaining of support. “Some provinces do not use the word ‘PA’ but the words ‘lobby function’ instead, [because] lobbying as a PA instrument can be specified, but PA as policy cannot.”

Internal networking (as one of the main daily activities) of the PA professional with relevant subnational colleagues to involve them in PA operations contributes to embedding. “The subnational PA professional working for a [subnational] collective should invite the communication advisors of the collective partners to participate in his PA operations.”

“Subnational governments sometimes fail in their PA, because they do not prepare their operations *in the national arena* well enough”, a deputy experienced. PA operations should be sharply prepared (“at home”). The quality of these preparations contributes to embedding and to the quality of the message. “Regional members of Parliament are willing to push regional interests within their political parties in the House of Parliament when the region is able to substantiate its interests”, a private regional PA practitioner said.

Regarding *the European arena*, the process of embedding is mainly driven by money, which might be the cause of rising competition between municipalities and provinces. “[Because of money-grubbing] subnational presence in the European arena is justified mostly by arguments of competition.”

A Commissioner of the King who regularly visited the European arena said: “The European arena is a money machine for subnational governments. . . . Because the Dutch presence in the European arena is totally focused on funding and not on Europe, subnational cohesion is lacking. . . . Subnational governments are not aware that they should place their projects in European perspective and in European contexts”.

### 3.3.3. Message creation

The better PA is embedded, the better the message can be created, and the more powerful the message, the higher the chance that the PA operation around

this message will be successful, participants said. The PA message is the vehicle which only thrives if PA is accepted and embedded, and furthermore, if the organization is prepared enough to keep this vehicle running. Participants mentioned dossier knowledge and focus as “engines” in this vehicle.

*Dossier knowledge* is acquired to compare the content of the current PA dossier with relevant arena information and with relevant persons in the arenas, in order to find out if sufficient support can be collected. Provincial and municipal participants referred to the necessity “to think pro-actively even during current PA operations”. When political changes are coming up in the national arena, it must be possible to reorganize PA messages. Another possibility is to couple PA messages (“linking pins”), if those messages are “congruent enough”, as a private manager of a subnational NGO said. “It would be good for the organization of subnational PA if lack of commitment can be banned by putting PA messages only in the hands of the fixed triangle: administrative expert, politician, and PA professional [and] if PA professionals of the same subnational organization [cooperate and] fine-tune their activities in the national and European arena with each other by exchanging information.”

An essential element in the fine-tuning of PA messages is keeping an eye on what the subnational organization has in mind in the long run. “Without vision and without an agenda linked with that vision, it is impossible to develop subnational PA policy”, a deputy said, who was supported by a municipal PA professional: “The success of subnational PA is dependent on vision about the future”.

Having more than one issue makes the messenger fade away and “waters” the messages, as some mayors and provincial and municipal PA professionals said. “By continually focusing on one interest, subnational interests can ‘touch’ the national and European arena. . . . Regions are stuck in disagreement when they do not choose one collective theme and do not make use of their potential and power. . . . In subnational PA, the focus should be directed to functional accounts more than to administrative and political accounts.”

But the needed “clear goal” is predominantly where and how to find funding for projects. And although some provincial and municipal political participants are

warning about the effects of this dominant monomania, the show must go on. "In the realization of subnational projects, money is more dominating than vision." . . . "Regional PA in the national and European arena is focusing most of its time to the question which region is finding the best finance method with the best arguments." According to a regional managerial official, regions have to fight for their position, because regional financial interests have to weigh up against the (financial) position of the Netherlands as an EU member state; regional funding may become a consolation prize. The reason that subnational PA has become a fight for money is, according to a provincial PA professional, "quite simple: The fragmentation in the execution of subnational by the 'stress of too many choices to make'".

### 3.4 DISCUSSION

The main findings of this study can be summarized in the following observations.

Starting a process of embedding does not stand a chance without individual, collective and regional acceptance of PA: Individual acknowledgement of the merits of PA may educate (relevant, regional) others to come to individual PA acceptance as well. This creates collective acceptance, also within regional cooperation. Acceptance creates embedding, and embedding creates support for substantial PA messages. The PA professional is the permanent "linking information pin" between the arenas and the (top of the) home organization. But politicians prefer to keep the reins in PA operations, because at the end of the day, the politician is the one who has to account for successes or failures in PA operations to the municipal or provincial council. Acceptance also means absorbing changes "from abroad", leaving old approaches, or at least reconsidering them (Weick, 2009).

Via acceptance and embedding, PA messages become substantial, in (political) weight as well as in (regional) support in order to keep in touch with the arenas. This means creation of *continuity*. Participants mention the availability of meeting points in the region and in the arenas. "A vision of the future", mentioned as an "engine" to keep PA messages going, remains meaningless when it is not connected to issues in the national and European arena. Also, Evers and Tennekes

(2016) illustrate the importance of continuity in their research on Europeanization in spatial planning by directing to the mix of national and European legislation and local traditions, and the necessity to connect European, national, and local (regional) interests.

Dossier and arena knowledge play the ultimate role in acceptance and embedding, in order to involve private and (other) public stakeholders in the region and to involve the home organization itself. Involved stakeholders, officials, and politicians may propagate current PA messages as well. Periodical pooling and the creation of expert pools ("on demand") improve dossier and arena knowledge in the subnational organization. When those "poolers" know about PA, they are more capable of organizing effective "broadcasting" of relevant PA messages.

Developing "substantial" PA messages as an outcome of acceptance and embedding demands *cooperation*, which is a leading component in the internal organization of subnational PA. Although this article mainly focuses on the internal organization of PA, cooperation with both private and public regional partners is important as well<sup>6</sup>. Cooperation is the binding agent both inside the municipal and provincial home organization and outside in contacts with private and (other) public stakeholders, to connect them with PA messages and to bind common interests before entering the arenas, in order to come to "substantial" PA messages.

#### 3.4.1 Final conclusion

Returning to the research question (*Regarding Public Affairs, what do Dutch subnational governments have to initially arrange internally, in order to create external success in the national and European arena later on?*) and reflecting on the answers of participants, moments of sensemaking are visible. Weick (2009) described this as follows: ". . . people adapt to the life of continuous learning that they implanted in the first place to cope with the loss of boundaries" (p. 221). Weick labeled this as "moments of commitment" (p. 27). He compared the process of sensemaking to

<sup>6</sup> Cooperation with partners outside the region, e.g., with neighboring subnational governments at the other side of the national border (Euregional cooperation) and also elsewhere in the EU (transregional cooperation), is subject of a separate study, as explained in Footnote 3.

improvisational jazz, including failures as a result of improvisations; “only the echo of the composer’s soul remains” (p. 301–302). He referred to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), who said that “a one percent success rate is supported by mistakes made 99 percent of the time” (p. 232), and to Gioia (1988), who described “moments of rare beauty intermixed with technical mistakes and aimless passages” (p. 66).

This is what the results show as well: Subnational governmental organizations, talking about “fighting” to draw attention to their interests, apply PA to find out by trial and error what the most appropriate approaches are, in order to enter the national and European arena later on. Paraphrasing Weick’s words (2009): An organizational process of sensemaking creates familiarity with PA (at relevant levels in the organization), with which societal (i.e., citizens’) interests could be connected to subnational governmental interests:

“Sense-making rather than decision-making may be the more central organizational issue” (p. 4). Sense-making creates new commitment: “What we need to understand are those events that give direction and meaning to the stream of organizational moments” (Weick<sup>a</sup>, 2009: 27–28).

### **3.4.2 Limitations and suggestions for future research**

In this study, the focus was on the embedding of PA in a general sense. Other aspects were banned out as much as possible, and only accepted when the connection to the internal process of embedding was pointed out by participants as inseparable. However, the diversity in the aspects that participants brought in points out that the internal process of organization of PA (i.e., the process in the subnational organization and in the region) is hard to separate from influences coming from the arenas (“outside”). For example, although the interviewees did not focus on the effects of processes of devolution on the embedding of PA, decentralization might affect how PA is arranged in the organization, because devolution is seen by the national government as an instrument to come “closer” to the citizen via subnational governments (Building Bridges, 2012). In future research, it is recommendable to find out what role the process of devolution plays in the preparation of PA policy at the subnational level to enter the national arena.

Second, because our sample of respondents consisted of both PA practitioners and PA professionals, it is suggested for further research to study whether differences exist in the way that subnational PA practitioners (i.e., nonprofessionals) who are temporary entrusted with PA accounts and PA professionals process PA messages. Also, in our study, PA operations and issues have not been linked to illustrate to which extent subnational governments are successful in their PA. This article only focused on the process of embedding PA at the subnational level, without issue casuistry. Future studies could try to connect the embedding of PA with actual organizational outcomes.

## ON THE BATTLEFIELD: HOW DUTCH SUBNATIONAL GOVERNMENTS (TOGETHER) ORGANIZE PUBLIC AFFAIRS IN THE NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN POLITICAL ARENAS

*Submitted for publication*

**Abstract:** Due to increasing regionalism efforts within EU member states and to the fact that EU legislation is affecting subnational authorities more and more directly, these authorities are not only striving for influence in the national arena, but in the European arena as well. This article describes how subnational governments in the Netherlands organize Public Affairs in both arenas. Qualitative interviews with 17 PA professionals and 24 PA practitioners show that subnational cooperation is of ultimate importance for creating a favorable position in these arenas and that reputation-management and preservation and strengthening of subnational positions in the national and European arenas are high scorers.

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Subnational governments such as municipalities and provinces are increasingly compelled to express their interests in the national and European arenas. Initially, when the European Regional Development Fund began in 1975 (Werts, 2008, p: 117-119), the European arena was fore mostly directed to subnational themes as a way of promoting poor regions in the EU (Barlow, 1995). In subsequent years, the regional component within European policy grew, which led to a doubling of the budget at the end of the 1980s (Werts, 2008: 311) and to the founding of the Committee of the Regions (CoR) after the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. In a way, this development drew subnational governments into the European arena (Dekker & Van Kempen, 2004; Salet et al., 2015<sup>ab</sup>; Thierstein, 2015). Furthermore, during these years, the devolution of tasks and powers in the Netherlands from the national governmental level to subnational governmental levels increased (Building Bridges, 2012). At the municipal level, cooperation with other municipalities in the national and European arenas aimed to improve the execution of these transferred tasks and powers and to reduce costs (Bel & Warner, 2014) and subnational cooperation intensified (Seinstra & Sietsma, 2012).

### 4.1.1 Subnational cooperation

Subnational cooperation consists of two forms: occasional (individual, thematic) and collective (associational). Collective municipal cooperation is exemplified by the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), founded in 1912. Provinces – since the 16<sup>th</sup> century used to operate in an autonomous way – followed in 1986 by forming the Association of Provincial Authorities (IPO). Both organizations operate in the national and European arenas<sup>i</sup> to draw attention to general municipal and provincial interests, e.g., legislation and project funding. This study focuses on non-collective subnational cooperation.

### 4.1.2 Individual subnational cooperation

Individual municipal and provincial interests – those not covered by VNG and IPO – are represented by individually operating subnational authorities in the arenas, sometimes in cooperation with other subnational authorities (also elsewhere in the EU) with comparable individual interests; this cooperation should be considered occasional and thematic. A recent form of individual functional cooperation among municipalities is the P10, an association, originally,

of ten rural municipalities that has since grown to eleven. They advocate and lobby in the national and European arenas, frequently opposing neighboring urban developments (De Rooij, 2002; Salet, et al., 2015<sup>ab</sup>; Thierstein, 2015). Another example is the G4 which refers to the network created by the four largest cities of the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht), founded in 1994 on the wings of Big Cities Policy (Dekker & Van Kempen, 2004) and initiated by the national government to develop answers to growing urban and societal problems of citizen participation (Matthews, Limb & Taylor, 1999). The G4 has an office in Brussels and is also (individually) participating in Eurocities, a thematic-oriented network of approximately 170 cities and partner cities in 35 European countries. This network was founded in 1986 for large cities in particular, illustrating an up-and-coming form of urban empowerment (Barber, 2013; Nears, 2015; Vink, 2015). In the wake of the G4-cooperation, the G32 was founded – through iterations – as a network of medium-sized cities; its name is used informally because more cities have joined the collaboration (in 2016, 36 cities) as a result of the Big Cities Policy initiated by the central government at the end of the 1990s (Dekker & Van Kempen, 2004; Haeley, 2015). Another approach is Platform 31, a network-and-knowledge center for small and large cities, villages, and regions to exchange knowledge and strengthen the position of subnational interests at the national level (Ebbekink et al. 2015; Keating, 1999; Olwig, 2007; Stein & Schultz, 2015; Van Kempen, Zwiers, Bolt & Van Ham, 2015; ). Finally, since 1995, after serious high-water problems, approximately eighty municipalities situated along the large rivers of the Netherlands founded the Association of Netherlands River-municipalities (NVR) as a network to discuss their common interests in protecting themselves against rising water levels (Meierink, 2004; Roth, Warner & Winnubst, 2006).

#### 4.1.3 Subnational PA-operations in the European arena

To assist municipalities, provinces, and regional water authorities<sup>v</sup> in representing their individual interests in the European arena, Europe Decentral was founded in 2002 by the Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations and the aforementioned associations, including the association for water authorities. The main goal of Europe Decentral is to offer arena-wide knowledge for subnational PA-operations in the European arena (Bridge, 2016). Next to this, already in 1951, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) was founded in order *‘to influence European policy and legislation and to provide a forum for debate’*

(<http://www.ccre.org>). This council was followed in 1985 by the Assembly of European Regions (AER) in order *‘to establish the principle of subsidiarity [...], to promote regional interests [...], to embody and to reflect the regional dimension in Europe [...] and to ensure that regions remain a driving force for political, economic and social development [...]’* (<http://www.aer.eu>; Hooghe & Marks, 1996). In addition to these channels through which local and regional thematic information flows into the national and European arenas, subnational governments develop their own collective initiatives. For example, the House of the Dutch Provinces in Europe (HNP) houses the North Netherlands Alliance (SNN), the East Netherlands Provinces, the Randstad Region (i.e., the urban west of The Netherlands) and the South Netherlands Provinces (Kiers, 2014).

The aforementioned forms of subnational cooperation aim to be helpful in influencing processes of decision making in the national and European arenas, as far as it is relevant for subnational governments (Van Schendelen, 2013: 33-70; Marks et al., 1996). The question remains, however, how individual municipalities and provinces will pursue thematic cooperation in these arenas by means of public affairs activities.

#### 4.1.4 ‘From the 2000+ PA Model to Public Affairs 2.0’

In his 2000+ PA Model, Fleisher (2001) offered seven descriptions of the practice of corporate PA. First, he characterized PA as *“an ongoing year-round process both internally and externally.”* Second, he concluded that stakeholder-management is a tool closely connected to PA. Third, Fleisher observed how lobbying, as a form of stakeholder-management, is one of the most important PA tools. Fourth, grassroots approaches are common and important in PA and should be incorporated. Fifth, Fleisher described the ongoing digitalization of information, which is influencing and possibly intensifying the disciplinary relationship between PA and PR and other communication disciplines. Because of this development, Fleisher described in his sixth bullet-point the necessity of maintaining flexibility in PA. He ends his list with the conclusion that PA should have a place at the table where decisions are made.

Ten years later, he revisited his 2000+ PA Model (Fleisher, 2012). He sharpened his opinions and concluded that PA was not yet a common tool. Stakeholder management, still recognized as a tool closely connected with PA, seems

insufficiently developed to improve the quality of PA. Lobbying, one of the most important PA tools in stakeholder management, is not sufficiently supported by research that can guide this type of management. Fleisher continued with the observation that while grassroots approaches may be common in PA, the use of new media, particularly in new grassroots channels penetrating the smallest corners of society, is insufficiently implemented in corporate PA. He stated that as a result of new media, intervening in PA operations at any point in the process and exploiting the multi-disciplined character of PA (because of the varied PA toolkit and close relationship with PR (Davidson, 2015)) will be more necessary than during the previous decade. Furthermore, he sees a growing internationalization of corporate PA, demanding competences that can operate in multi-cultural circumstances. Finally, he concluded that while traditional media may still be helpful to PA, new media, because of its short-term effects, may change PA operations entirely. According to Fleisher, PA is becoming a multi-media discipline, focusing more than ever on intelligence. Nevertheless, the presence of corporate PA at decision-making tables is still uncommon. Juxtaposing Fleisher's observations alongside Dutch subnational governments – municipalities and provinces – operating in national and European arenas, the question will not only be how they manage their interests in these arenas but also how they manage their organizations. This leads to the following research question:

*RQ: How are Dutch subnational governments using PA in the national and European arenas to draw attention to their interests?*

## 4.2 METHOD

Answering this research question requires insight into how individual subnational governments are modeling their organizations to implement PA operations in the national and European arenas and how these governments are managing their presence in these arenas. A qualitative research interview program was developed to answer this question: 41 men and women – all familiar with subnational PA and recruited by snowball sampling (Noy, 2008: 340) – have been interviewed.

### 4.2.1 Participants

The 41 respondents (24 PA practitioners<sup>iii</sup>; 17 PA professionals; 34 male; age between approximately 40-60) are or were working in all levels of subnational governmental affairs. They included public and private subnational PA professionals and PA practitioners, such as mayors, aldermen, city clerks, and subnational civil servants connected with PA activities at the municipal and provincial levels. Furthermore, Commissioners of the King (provinces), Deputies (provinces), and Members of (the European) Parliament also participated. Some had been members of the national government as ministers or state secretaries.

Most of the participants had worked in one or more of the aforementioned functions during their careers. For example, they may have begun their careers as mayors, then moved on to serve as Commissioners of the King, then become M(E)Ps, and then ministers; others may have proceeded in the other direction. Some of the respondents were or had also been members of a local or provincial council, of the Committee of the Regions, or of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe.

Using this approach, a varied spectrum of 93 functions (32 local, 26 provincial, 23 national, 12 European) became visible, at all levels where subnational PA is executed and explored. The number of inhabitants of the municipalities, linked with the interviewed persons, varied: six mayors 50,000-; one mayor 50,000+/100,000-; two mayors 100,000+; three city clerks 100,000+; four municipal PA professionals 100,000+. The provinces (regions), linked with interviewed persons, are situated all over the country.

### 4.2.2 The interviews

Before the interviews began, it was made clear that absolute anonymity was guaranteed. All information could be used; the interviewer was not allowed to link names with the information provided. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim; they were only used for this research.

Four themes dominated the interviews: (1) how susceptible the national and European arenas are to subnational PA; (2) the extent to which subnational governments accept and embed PA in their organizations before entering the arenas ('internal'); (3) how subnational governmental organizations implement

PA in the arenas ('external'); and (4) the competences of the PA professional and PA practitioner.

Each interview took approximately one hour-and-a-half on average. The interviewees were conducted mostly in quiet, private rooms of municipal and provincial offices, in one of the meeting rooms of the House of Parliament (such as the International Press Centre) or in private and public offices in The Hague and in Brussels; some were even conducted at home. Probably because of the diversity of the functions the interviewees fulfilled or were still fulfilling, a varied spectrum of data was acquired.

### 4.2.3 Analyses

First, all statements and issues mentioned by the 41 interviewees were collected by the first researcher in 1003 key phrases. Using this process, even the smallest remark of an interviewee was captured.

Second, three outside coders, intensively instructed about the focuses of the interviews, collected all key phrases selected by the author from the interviews; they reconsidered the 1003 key phrases. After debates and discussions, some key phrases had to be re-edited by changing a single word or re-formulated by changing more words. Sometimes new key phrases had to be added, sometimes key phrases had to be split up (in the case of two messages in one statement), or skipped, but 75.6% of the key phrases remained unchanged. This process led to a new corpus of 1050 key phrases.

The third step was the coding of the new corpus of 1050 key phrases using the four interview themes, as mentioned above. This step in the coding process resulted in 390 key phrases related to the susceptibility of the arenas, 173 key phrases related to the internal organization of subnational PA, 377 key phrases related to external organizational aspects of subnational PA in the arenas and 110 key phrases related to the competences of PA practitioners. Submitting this process to the Kappa-regime produced a result of 0.72.

For the coding of the 377 key phrases related to the external aspects of subnational PA<sub>iv</sub>, the principles of the Grounded Theory, as described by Corbin & Strauss (2008), were followed. Every key phrase was written separately on a sheet of paper. Selecting one key phrase repeatedly prompted a debate between the first researcher and one of the coders about the content of this key phrase as related to the research question. The outcomes were classified into eight codes: (1) *European arena*: aspects of European origin influencing subnational PA; (2) *national arena*: organizational, social-economic, situational and instrumental elements of national origin influencing the working process of subnational governmental organizations in the national arena; (3) *regional arena*: importance of regional profiling (promotional activities, imaging, regional character and consciousness, cultural traditions, history, regional leadership) for the purpose of subnational PA in the national and European arenas; (4) *administrative aspects*: administrative considerations influencing subnational PA; (5) *knowledge of the European and national arenas*: the necessity of acquiring content- and arena-related knowledge by subnational governmental organizations for PA operations in the national and European arenas; (6) *economic aspects*: how economic aspects influence subnational PA in the national and European arenas, related to money machinery, doing business, cooperation, and 'company-thinking' at the central and subnational administrative and political levels; (7) *human dimension*: how aspects of human scale and human interest influence subnational PA; (8) *professional dimension*: role and function of the PA professional and the PA practitioner in the national and European arenas. These codes were submitted to the Cohen's kappa-regime with a result of 0.61.

## 4.3 RESULTS

In this article, the European and national arenas are leaders in subnational PA; no respondent doubted the need for subnational cooperation in these arenas to empower subnational PA. However, according to the respondents' statements, cooperation in the region – here characterized as the regional arena – plays a decisive role. Subnational cooperation in the three arenas is influenced by administrative and economic factors, the level of knowledge concerning the national and European arenas, and finally, human and professional dimensions.

### 4.3.1 European arena

Respondents distinguished two pillars supporting a subnational presence in the European arena: (delegated) subnational officials and politicians and mutual subnational relations.

**Subnational officials and politicians.** Individual factors arise at the moment that subnational governmental organizations delegate ‘Europeans by nature’. However, this does not describe every delegated civil servant or politician, as provincial PA professionals in Brussels reported. Secondly, among politicians, there is an added (political) factor because they know that *“being active in the European arena [...] does not help to strengthen the personal political position [...]”*. Respondents argue that in order to overcome unwanted effects of these individual factors cooperation at the subnational level is essential.

**Mutual subnational relations.** Subnational Dutch presence in the European arena is “characterized by fragmentation”, a deputy said. But cooperation is not taken for granted. *“The cooperation among the twelve provinces is under pressure in the national and European arenas because of separate provincial self-interests; if proposals of the European Commission are related to financing, subnational governments cannot come to an agreement because of different subnational opinions about the way the funding should be divided.”* Continuous exchange of arena-related information as a result of permanent presence in the arena may reduce fragmentation and the dominance of self-interest, respondents noted. Mayors and city-clerks said that *“For PA operations in the European arena it is essential to have footholds there [...] with our own civil servants, [where] regions in the European arena may connect with each other on relevant common policy themes [...] to join interests.”* In the Committee of the Regions, considered by subnational governments to be a European subnational foothold: *“[...] municipalities and provinces are cooperating intensely [there] because of common subnational interests.”*

### 4.3.2 National arena

Respondents argue that since the transition to a new regional policy, i.e., no longer supporting poor regions but supporting strong – regional – sectors by clustering economic activities, subnational governments have been forced to review their regional policies and to broaden subnational cooperation. Cooperation in the region became necessary *“to present – preferably at the level*

*of the day-to-day, administrative shop-floor of ministries – agreed dossiers only, [because] by implementing communality in subnational interests the attention in the national arena to these interests will grow, including subnational influence, in such a way that the national arena is looking for a connection with the region.”* More respondents argued that subnational cooperation will be more effective, according to a Commissioner of the King, with *“cooperation between the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG) and the Association of Provincial Authorities (IPO) according to the model in the private sector between VNO/NCW/MKB”*. However, ‘closing the ranks’ does not occur, at least not sufficiently. Fragmentation and subnational disagreements remain, and subnational potency cannot develop: *“Subnational governments cannot create sufficient countervailing power towards the central government, they have no other choice than to fight for their interests.”* The creation of a permanent foothold near the House of Parliament, seeking out connections with stakeholders and collecting relevant political arena-related knowledge will help to overcome obstacles. Respondents mentioned following conditions for PA in the national arena.

**Subnational communality (1)** would be helpful but is lacking. In the words of a political assistant in the House of Parliament, *“Subnational lobbies in the national arena are not functioning sufficiently because a lack of unity in the region is hampering regional politicians from investing in subnational PA [...] general subnational lobbies in the national arena are structured at a low level, whereupon the national arena is pitting one region against another.”* Provincial PA professionals and PA practitioners analyze the situation at the provincial level as follows: *“Provincial PA in the national arena is fragmented by a lack of common sense [...] as a result of provincial disagreements the national arena is feeling free in cases of provincial interests [...] if the provinces in the inner circles of their association could create more distance from their sentiments, they would be better equipped to define their common interests in the national arena.”*

Provincial and municipal PA professionals, and also Commissioners of the King, emphasized the importance of **creating networks (2)** with private and (other) public stakeholders to empower the subnational position in the national arena: *“Cooperation with the private sector and with [public] societal partners<sup>vii</sup> can help subnational governments to develop capacities ... for subnational PA it is good to know that the solution for a problem is not a matter of action for one government; cooperation with relevant societal partners is necessary ... it is essential for subnational PA to know*

that every relevant stakeholder is at the same time a lobbyist as well [...] stakeholders could be helpful in the development of a vision about the future... [they are] "moving around in the region [in the meantime] "strengthening the position of the region in the national arena." A private regional PA professional said that "Strong and powerful cooperation at the regional level with private, societal partners is hardly to disturb by others." The first reason is that private, societal partners are mostly focused on one theme, which makes their cooperation stronger and less segmented than cooperation with public partners, who have more than one focus. The second reason is that "especially at the local level, field-players find each other 'mostly in a minute'." The third reason is that "for a private societal partner, cooperation with subnational governments is an instrument to reduce costs." Networking creates visibility, which is contributing to subnational countervailing power. "Subnational governments should have networks, should be creative, should look beyond their official borders and should look for cooperation with the private sector and educational institutes, like universities and other knowledge institutes [...] thanks to the 'neighborhood' and 'global village' it is possible to develop worldwide regional networks with regional 'ambassadors'."

**No disagreements with stakeholders (3).** Subnational disagreement is "messing up subnational lobbying [...] others can divide and rule ...speaking with one voice [and] formulating clearly common goals, if need be 'agreeing to disagree', or discussing disagreements with partners in time, as early as possible." However, subnational governments fear being forced to offer only 'watered' common issues. Sharing of knowledge can be helpful but "coordination is a keystone." A regional official pleads for the founding of "a regular location for periodical meetings with stakeholders in order to share interests, to exchange information, to prevent misunderstandings and frictions and to stimulate regional warmth."

**Servicing stakeholders (4)** by focusing attention on their interests creates relationships: "[...] A lobby that is also directed to the solution of somebody else's problems is appealing to concerns and creates a common interest." City clerks (100,000+) and municipal and provincial PA professionals said that "Cooperation between subnational governments is successful by defining a common problem in which other subnational governments recognize themselves [and] by including their individual interests in cooperation." PA professionals point at the fruitfulness of fieldtrips, workshops, conferences, and visits to educational institutes, which, at the same

time, contribute to stakeholder-empowerment. They add that the human dimension in such situations is highly influential because "success depends on the personality of the subnational politician and on regional leadership; [and] looking for strategic alliances in PA dossiers is only possible after researching positive common issues, without asking immediately 'what's in for me?'"

**Subnational cross-border cooperation (5)** with Belgian and German subnational governments in so-called 'euregions', stimulated and supported by the EU and offering program funding, is a growing force in subnational empowerment, respondents stated. However, official representation in the European arena is still missing "because they do not belong to common interests of the twelve (Dutch) provinces", as a provincial PA professional stationed in Brussels stated. The Netherlands has eight euregions (approx. 6.300.000 inhabitants): four with Germany, three with Belgium and one with Germany and Belgium (Euregio Maas-Rijn in Limburg). An 'external orientation' may be a natural element in Dutch (subnational) politics because of the small scale of the country, but daily experience paints another picture. "The longer the distance to the national border, the more forced cross-border cooperation is [...] not the administrative and official borders but geopolitical borders are normative for cross-border cooperation", a regional official manager said. "It is also important to involve the private sector in cross-border cooperation, because it can help avoid the threat of 'getting trapped in minor details'." PA professionals, political assistants and regional office managers emphasized a broad diversity of "crucial" dependencies that determine cross-border cooperation, such as "involved persons and their networks, idealism, vision, knowledge of languages, the number of inhabitants living around the borders, lack of political and administrative commitment, constitutional disharmony, mutual willingness to prevent the cooperation from becoming accidental, and the persistence of real cross-border problems." Despite all objections, cross-border cooperation is seen by PA professionals and by PA practitioners as an expanding contribution to regional empowerment in the national and also in the European arena. In the national arena, "cross-border cooperation can be used as an instrument to put our own issues on the agenda of the national arena," and in the European arena it can be useful to pursue transregional cooperation, empowering one's 'own' region and creating "common agendas." A Commissioner of the King stated that "thematic cross-border cooperation is important because worldwide competition between regions is increasing."

**Dominance of the 'Randstad'**<sup>viii</sup> (6), mentioned by all non-Randstad PA professionals, could lead other regions to greater cooperation, but this is not happening. Non-Randstad regions do not *"formulate common agendas and themes, not even with the Randstad itself"*, nor do they look *"for cooperation with similar regions elsewhere in the EU."* In addition to this, urbanization is not only limited to Randstad-connected areas, as a 100,000+ mayor expressed, *"urban areas are also in the north, the south and the east of The Netherlands."* Randstad PA professionals said *"The essentials of Randstad-PA are in this order: cooperation by the sublimation of the 'holy duty' to create common interests, leadership and (political and administrative) key players adjusting victories to each other, knowing what they want to prioritize, and knowing that great success for a colleague is also good for 'neighboring' colleagues [...] new media are supporting and facilitating the exchange of information quite well, but personal conversations and meetings remain the most important."* They expressed their astonishment that *"non-Randstad PA is mostly re-active."*

### 4.3.3 Regional arena

Regarding regional profiling, respondents referred to the historical and socio-cultural imaging of a region, which may stimulate attention to regional issues in the European and national arenas and stimulate regional consciousness. However, respondents showed ambivalence. On the one hand, regions know that profiling can be helpful in coloring PA operations. On the other hand, respondents said, it was important to be careful when using these distinguishing marks because of the danger of creating an image of *"dusty, old fashioned folklore, a not-in-my-back-yard attitude, 'closed windows' [...] hampering the advertising of strong regional points [and] creating distances in the national and European arena."*

Not only are the opposing interests of rural and urban areas components of regional profiling, but, as respondents noticed, there are also differences between municipalities and provinces. *"Municipalities engaged in regional cooperation generate identity and natural togetherness better than provinces do"*. The reason is that one province can encompass more than one region (cooperating municipalities) and must accommodate regional differences. *"In the national and European arena provinces are not very successful in the promotion of realized results by their own efforts"*, a Commissioner of the King admitted. *"Not having a regional mentality or regional identity are obstacles in provincial PA but so is provincial image building [...] when subnational governments cannot develop a marketing-strategy for one common interest, it is impossible to create a sustainable long run regional profile."*

The usefulness of *"regional branding"* remains mainstream, as a municipal PA professional said, but ambivalence concerning regional profiling causes *"growing regional inequality, [...] disturbing the subnational PA of the region as a whole."*

### 4.3.4 Administrative aspects

Large municipalities and cooperating provinces (in the Netherlands, provinces never merged until recently) empower subnational PA. Respondents, working for *"too small"* municipalities (i.e., less than 50,000 inh.), nevertheless considered merging to be the ultimate solution for empowerment in the European and national arena. Thematic subnational cooperation is preferable because *"ongoing processes of municipal up-scaling can split up subnational governments as a result of strong cultural differences; thematic cooperation by a cross-over of official and administrative borders is a new form of regionalism and is more pragmatic."*

Similar to their use of themes, regions (i.e., cooperating municipalities or provinces) are looking for connections with regions elsewhere (in the home country and in the EU) to empower themselves and to collect relevant knowledge. Subnational thematic governance could possibly reach stakeholders (including citizens, as interviewees stated) on the same theme(s) better than governance based on administrative entities such as merged municipalities and provinces. *"Thematic governance is good for regional representation of interests [...] for the organization of subnational PA it can be important to stimulate the brainpower of stakeholders."*

### 4.3.5 Knowledge of the national and European arenas

Sharing national and European arena-knowledge is a recurrent issue, considered to be indispensable in PA-operations. *"Municipalities have mostly no idea what is going to be developed in the European arena related to regional policy."*

This is why it is essential, as subnational PA professionals said, *"that subnational governments dispense their knowledge, experience and insights [...] development of knowledge creates understanding and support, and gives power to a way of thinking in European perspectives."*

Cooperation is essential to attacking the problem of knowledge-shortage, which may become disastrous *"because of the outreach of European legislation."*

City-clerks, pointing especially to small municipalities mostly forced to operate from the sidelines (“they cannot continue avoiding cooperation”), mentioned that “subnational governments should make better use of the knowledge in society, in knowledge-institutes, and in the private sector to develop their PA.” Benchmarking with private and public stakeholders, networking in the national and European arena, cross-border cooperation and thematic cooperation are repeatedly emphasized as ways of overcoming knowledge-shortage.

### 4.3.6 Economic aspects

Respondents refer openly and clearly to the money-driven focus in subnational PA, which aims to finance job-generating projects and to finance transferred national tasks and powers. “Municipalities consider their province also as a money-machine, but it should be better when they look for cooperation with us”, a Commissioner of the King said. The money-driven focus stimulates interregional competition, which frustrates subnational cooperation in the national arena and in the European arena as well. “PA changed from ‘quiet activities in the corridors of power’ into a fast, hard, money-driven business-activity [...] is directed to accounting and book-keeping [and to] ‘catch as catch can’ [...] mostly money is leading above everything [...] and [...] is more important than solidarity [...] subnational presence in the European arena is not directed to citizens but is directed to do business ... not only regional and/or provincial profiling and promotion are determining the organizing of subnational PA, but so is reciprocity, i.e., ‘getting something out’ and ‘bringing something in’.”

This, money-focus, especially in non-Randstad regions, may be understandable, as respondents explained, because regions outside the Randstad are suffering more from central budget regulations than subnational authorities inside the Randstad, which at the national level is seen as the “main ‘revenue model’ for ‘the Netherlands Company’.” Provincial PA-professionals and a MEP, referring to the sale of energy-shares by provinces<sup>viii</sup>, said that these “rich provinces do not succeed to make clear which stimulating role they can play in the national economy.” PA-professionals and a mayor referred to the new regional policy to stimulate regional cluster-economies: “Regions housing an internationally known, innovative company can generate a cluster of related companies [...] together with relevant partners, regions should show the national arena what they can offer ‘the Netherlands Company’”

### 4.3.7 Human dimension

Subnational PA is the people’s business, respondents explained. In the words of a MEP, public and provincial PA-professionals and a Commissioner of the King, “[...] in politics abstractions are never leading: people are leading, because of the adage ‘all politics is local’.” An European subnational civil servant warned “after the introduction of themes in regional European policy the EU has become more invisible for the citizen.”

The citizen is a “stakeholder” and “his well-being” should be served, as municipal PA professionals and PA practitioners stated. “Considering citizens as stakeholders is stimulating subnational PA [...] policy and must be explainable always and also at the same time to every citizen [...] satisfaction of the citizen is the main goal.” However, this goal is dubious, as a Commissioner of the King stated: “The ongoing devolution [transfer of national tasks and powers to the subnational level] is leading subnational governments into the devolution paradox because policy comes close to the citizen now, but at the same time the municipal scale is turning out to be insufficient.”

To bridge this distance, communication with citizens should be a “core-business [but] officials of societal institutions are clashing in policy because the communication with the citizen is obviously not yet well enough organized... officials of societal, non-governmental institutions more often do not have any idea how they have to communicate with citizens who do not knock at governmental doors for their interests because of regional feelings but rather because of local or regional problems they experience at that very moment.” The government’s reputation is dependent on the extent to which it can pay attention to those problems without “wrongly chosen words.” Citizens feel themselves “victims of governmental dedication to efficiency, although they understand the government is not able to create customized policy but the government does not explain [...]; in citizens’ minds, regional warmth and feelings of ‘we versus them’ can come up as soon as the national arena is injuring their interests.”

Respondents admit that more often subnational politicians became involved in PA-policy ‘by accident’: after elections they received a portfolio that required them to run PA-operations and forced them to take the reins of their predecessors and make the best of it. “Subnational politicians, with body and soul involved in their work, are heavy opponents or team mates, [but] sometimes subnational politicians are

*‘amateur-politicians’ without relevant knowledge, subordinating national interests to subnational interests.”*

Some respondents referred to so-called new media as helpful in bridging the aforementioned distances. However, a provincial PA-professional said *“due to more outspoken and assertive attitudes of citizens combined with the rise of social media, Members of Parliament lost respect ...new media can be helpful but the final decision is always made by people.”*

#### 4.3.8 Professional dimension

The label of the PA-professional is *“liaison-officer”*, as stated by a Commissioner of the King. He is the visible foothold of his home-organization, accessible but maintaining some secrecy; but, *“essentially he is a public facilitator.”*

*“The subnational PA-professional in the European and national arena should spend half of his time on the forging of relations between governmental officials and private and public stakeholders.”* He must also address colleagues from other regions. *“He cannot become redundant because regional politicians have to travel around in their own region above all.”* The professional is a five-legged sheep, familiar with media, bringing information into the arena, following ‘broadcasted’ information (*“following the tracks”*), networking, communicating with other partners in PA-operations, living more backstage and less publicly – but most of the time with secrets – and constantly guarding the relation of his municipal or provincial home-organization and the arena he is working in.

In summarizing words of provincial PA-professionals, *“[he has] a positive attitude and [he knows how] to play games with his own rituals, sometimes in cooperation with his stakeholders but sometimes not, nevertheless he has to manage his relations not only externally but also internally, never losing the goals of his mission, and knowing himself to be accountable for each of his partners.”*

## 4.4 DISCUSSION

Returning to the research question and returning to Fleisher’s observations (2001, 2012) on corporate PA, it may become clear that Dutch subnational PA in the national and European arenas is aligning, in essence, with corporate PA

Fleisher (2012) described. The results of this research show that reputation-management (Fertik, 2015; Moss, McGrath, Tonge & Harris, 2012) and preservation and strengthening of subnational positions in the national and European arenas are high scorers, new media less so. Subnational PA in the national and European arena means ‘fighting’, as respondents said, but not only there: fighting also takes place ‘at home’ against shortcomings and failures of the home-organization and in the arenas to be accepted and valued. In answering the research question more specifically, the results will be discussed and commented upon below.

In the *European arena*, subnational cooperation is undermined by municipal scale-differences and by a lack of arena-knowledge, or at least by an inadequate sharing of arena-knowledge elsewhere at the subnational level. Another aspect of this dimension is the everlasting presence of the national arena, which is not only thematic but also constitutionally linked with subnational governments. A lack of subnational ‘Europeans’ is the second reason that subnational cooperation in the European arena is undermined. The subnational PA-practitioner (a politician, civil servant, or Commissioner of the King) should preferably be an ‘European’, but he knows that ‘European affairs’ is not a popular theme to trigger politics (electorally). Nevertheless, practitioners must go to Brussels, assisted by their subnational PA-professionals, for whom the European dimension of their work is part of a day-to-day attitude. If there is no ‘europeanism’ in the hearts and minds of the civil servants who are entrusted by their municipal or provincial organizations (which is the case in small municipal organizations), developing PA with a European dimension can become difficult – not only individually but also in cooperation with other public and private partners. Regarding organizational factors, municipalities and provinces are represented individually and collectively by their own offices in the European arena and also collectively, in the Committee of the Regions, in order to merge general regional interests. The Committee illustrates the susceptibility of the EU to subnational interests, as anchored in EU-treaties. Provinces (sometimes in occasional cooperation with other provinces) operate on their own in the European arena because of a diversity of interests (not covered by their formal collectiveness). However, municipalities, particularly cities, are mostly thematically united in the European arena; this is giving them a strong position.

In the *national arena*, subnational cooperation is different. The national arena is less open to subnational interests than the European arena. Municipalities and provinces are 'living apart together', which means they try to deny their official and formal borders to achieve cooperation, if necessary, while keeping their own interests sharply in mind. 'Denying borders' in thematic cooperation is also seen as an escape from the processes of municipal up-scaling. Cooperation with stakeholders is not well developed. Instead, fieldtrips – 'in the country' and in the arena as well – are organized to improve networks and to create political entrances. Much is done at the subnational level to avoid disagreements, even when it leads to weak compromises. A major controversy in subnational cooperation is the confrontation between the urban west of the Netherlands, seen at the national level as the main engine of the national economy, and non-Randstad regions; cooperation is lacking.

In the *regional arena*, subnational governments, seeking out regional profiling, move in an ambiguous way between two playing-fields – the folkloristic and the thematic – by creating cluster-economies. Municipalities, cooperating in themes and creating thematic regions, mix both approaches. Provinces, which, because of their history are more used to operating as self-contained entities, cooperate as well – in a thematic way – but less intensively than municipalities do.

Regarding *administrative aspects*, respondents mention the resistance against municipal up-scaling and the time-consuming processes of decision-making as possible obstacles to structural cooperation, not only with other public partners, like neighboring municipalities, but also with private partners. Comparing democratic, political processes of decision-making at the subnational governmental level with top-down, business-like processes of decision-making in the private sector may be attractive but is not realistic.

The level of knowledge is alarming: the smaller the scale of a municipality, the more difficult it is to collect needed *arena-knowledge*. Provinces are, in general, large enough to possess that knowledge. At the European level, the lack – at the municipal level – of (relevant) European arena-knowledge is dramatic. The solution for obtaining this crucial arena-knowledge is cooperation, preferably thematic

In the *human dimension*, it becomes clear that subnational PA is the people's business: at the end of the day, the results of subnational PA-operations should benefit civilians, and the PA-work itself depends on the people 'doing the PA-job' – professionals and practitioners. Complicating factors, which create distance from civilians, are the thematic approaches in both arenas and the need for subnational cooperation. This removes PA-issues from the daily experience of civilians, also known as the devolution-paradox.

Finally, in the *professional dimension*, it is noted that the PA-professional/practitioner is the ultimate label of the municipal or provincial organization he or she is representing in the national or European arena. He or she is a liaison-officer, a five-legged sheep, a poker-faced chess-player; he or she is 'good' in all circumstances and available according to the 'formula 365/24/7'. His or her main task is collecting relevant information, sharing this information with relevant (public and private) colleagues and with the municipal and provincial home-office, and looking for fruitful connections between subnational, national and European agendas; everything is to be done by ongoing networking. Constantelos (2010), describing 'interest group strategies in federal systems' and connecting his findings with the European Union, is summarizing this process by saying "*lobbying depends also on who controls the different government levels [...]. It's the personal relationship that could swing the deal*" (p. 477).

#### 4.4.1 Suggestions for future research

The focus of this article was directed at the external organizational aspects of Dutch subnational PA in the national and European arena. Because of (rising) debates on renewing European cooperation after Brexit and on forms of federalism, the question may arise as to what extent these aspects are influencing the results of subnational PA. To obtain insight into these results, separate case-studies are needed. A second question may be how subnational PA is organized – externally – in other member-states and to what extent subnational PA-approaches are comparable. Related to this question is the relation of subnational PA in other EU member-states to the national constitutional system and to the label 'Europe of the Regions'. Another question in the context of this article may be to what extent subnational PA in the European arena is subordinate to the Anglo-American tradition, the Rhineland tradition and Central- and East-European traditions. Subnational PA-professionals and PA-practitioners

coming from these traditions are metaphorically flying in different aircrafts but directed to the same destination(s) viz. strengthening subnational interests. More research is required to illuminate the effects of those traditions on subnational PA interventions in the European arena.

#### 4.4.2 Conclusion

In the Netherlands, subnational cooperation in the national and in the European arenas is far from unified. Provincial cooperation is more frustrated by fragmentation than is municipal cooperation. At the municipal level, small municipalities are suffering from shortages in arena-knowledge. However, if municipal or provincial authorities do cooperate, this cooperation is thematic and occasional, which improves the sharing of arena-knowledge and sets municipal up-scaling (i.e., merging) aside. Sometimes cooperating municipalities and provinces point to regional cultural profiling in PA-operations, but because of their fear of 'dusty folklore' and because of upcoming economic considerations resulting from changes in regional policy, regional profiling becomes economic profiling. The citizen is considered to be the main stakeholder, but in general the presence of the citizen is lacking. The PA-professional plays the central role in subnational PA, thus creating continuity.

## PROFILING THE PUBLIC-AFFAIRS PROFESSIONAL: THE IMPORTANCE AND SELF-EVALUATION OF PA-COMPETENCES

*Submitted for publication*

Abstract: Public Affairs (PA) is a young discipline; in development, but growing in popularity. Still, much is unknown about the people who perform PA activities and the competences that are needed. Therefore, this study explored the demographics of Dutch PA professionals, the competences that are deemed important, and their self-evaluation of these competences. Moreover, the effects of educational background and years of experience were taken into account. In total, 293 PA professionals participated in an online questionnaire. The results show that the professionals consider themselves authentic and involved PA practitioners, and that the social component is of utmost importance in their daily work: A combination of strategic and social skills seems to increase the perceived receptiveness. Further, knowing your home organization as well as the arenas you are going to enter is essential, but at the same time, it appears that other knowledge is lacking and needs improvement.

## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

Public Affairs (PA) can be defined as “the strategic process of anticipating in political decision making, in changes in society and in the public opinion which are influencing the functioning of the own organization” (McGrath, 2006, 2010). Linders and De Lange (2003) define PA as follows: “PA is the management tool that refers to the strategy and policy of projects and organizations in their interacting contexts and future situations regarding to politics and administrations”. Following these definitions, the PA professional is sometimes a messenger, sometimes a manager, and sometimes a mix of both. It seems that the PA professional must have a flexible mind and fine-tuned antennas to try to find its way in the day-to-day PA work. In this study, the focus is on these PA professionals. More specifically, by means of a quantitative approach, this study addresses the most prominent competence skills needed by a PA professional in order to be successful in their job, and the self-evaluation of these professionals regarding their own competences. Furthermore, the demographical profile of PA professionals is studied. This paper aims to provide more insight into the profile of the PA professional.

Historically, compared to the US where PA is rooted (Marcus & Kaufman, 1988; Marx, 1990; McGrath, 2006; Moss et al.; 2012; Post, Murray, Dickie & Mahon, 1982; Thot, 1986), in the Netherlands, PA is still a rather young discipline (Linders & De Lange, 2003). Around the sixties and seventies of the former century, PA was introduced in the private sector (Groenendijk, Hazekamp & Mastenbroek, 1997). The public sector, influenced by experiences in the private sector and confronted with growing local and regional (urban) awareness at the same time (Barber, 2013; Porter, 2003; Seinstra & Sietsma, 2012), followed in the years after (Van Schendelen, 2013). Looking for new tools to improve their connections with the national and European political arenas and with civilians who were becoming more aware of their position in society, governmental authorities found their way to the European levels as a result of the Lisbon (2007) and Maastricht (1992) EU treaties (Barents, 2008; Van Doorn, 2009; Van Schendelen, 2013). Today, PA has become a common discipline in Europe in both the public and private sector (Harsanyi & Schmidt, 2012; Haug & Koppang, 1997; Köppl & Wippersberg, 2014; Millar & Köppl, 2014<sup>ab</sup>; Schepers, 2013; Schilliger & Seele, 2015).

Conceptually, PA is closely related to Public Relations (PR), with the clear distinction, however, that PR concerns all relationships of organizations with their environment, including relationships within the own organization, whereas PA focuses specifically on public-policy issues and governmental relations, in some cases even concentrated on one person (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Harris & Moss, 2001<sup>ab</sup>). Furthermore, where PR is managing relations (Groenendijk et al., 1997), PA is managing messages within that relational atmosphere (Linders & De Lange, 2003). In the domain of PR, Sha (2011), Todd (2014), and Swart (2014) conducted studies into the necessary PR competences, which provide helpful guidance on defining PA competences.

Sha (2011) found that the knowledge, skills, and attitude (i.e., professional competencies) for the PR practice center on (1) general business skills (diversity considerations, decision-making abilities, leadership, organizational skills, problem-solving skills, consensus-building, consulting skills, negotiating skills, business literacy skills, and strategic planning); (2) media relations (identifying audiences, training organizational spokespersons to work with media, pitching stories, writing and distributing press releases in traditional and online ways, monitoring media coverage, coordinating publicity, measuring media-engagement efforts, crisis-communication management and the use of information technology and new media channels, and ethics and legal issues); and (3) theoretical knowledge (the application of historical knowledge of the field of public relations, as well as the application of communication models and theories to work projects).

Second, Todd (2014) studied transfers of PR knowledge from PR supervisors to Millennial entry-level practitioners, focused on entry-level job skills and professional characteristics, and delivered several starting points for further defining PA competences. In this study, competences include (1) communication skills (being able to write, deal with recent communication technologies, oral communication skills, research skills, and knowledge of how the business world operates); and (2) professional characteristics (attitudes, behaviors and interactions among people in the work environment including, for example, ethics and critical thinking, proficient job skills).

Finally, Swart (2014) interviewed South-African PR students in order to know the effects of “an assessment of work-integrated learning for PR in an open distance-learning context”, and concluded that work-integrated learning contributes to the development of PR competences, such as writing skills, event management, communication planning, and research.

Describing the developments in PA and offering prescriptions for practicing PA, Fleisher (2012) mentioned seven competence-related prescriptions about PA in the first decade of the 21st century. The PA professional: “(1) manages PA as an ongoing, year-round process both internally and externally; (2) cultivates and harvests the capability to build, develop, and maintain enduring stakeholder relationships; (3) influences stakeholders using refined information (i.e., intelligence); (4) recognizes the importance of managing the grassroots; (5) communicates in an integrated manner; (6) continuously aligns its values and strategy with the publics’ interests; (7) improves its external relations using the accepted facets of contemporary management practice” (pp. 4-9). For the second decade, Fleisher sees a PA professional who: “(8) builds, cultivates, and mobilizes the appropriate alliances and partnerships from amongst all of its networks; (9) understands the responsibilities of being a global citizen and applies their understanding locally; (10) masters the evolving communication channels provided by digital and social media” (pp. 9-11).

When combining the findings of the PR studies of Sha (2011), Todd (2014), and Swart (2014) with Fleisher’s (2012) ten prescriptions, we see how PR competences seem to parallel PA competences. The PA professional is a multi-tasking man or woman who works like a five-legged sheep in a discipline that is described by McGrath (2006) and Moss (2012) as diffuse. But at the same time, this discipline connects the PA professional with the top of the home organization and with the internal and external colleagues, which involves the PA professional in all kinds of (sometimes crucial) episodes of decision-making (De Lange, 2000). This means that PA professionals should possess qualified competences in all relevant competence domains, including knowledge, skills, and attitude. Next to the competences that are needed, De Lange (2000) focused on the demographical profile of the PA professional. Regarding social class, he concluded that “to the extent that level of education, work position and income are still the most important indices of social class, [the PA professional] shows clear signs of

being elite” (p. 28). Furthermore, the level of graduation is relatively high, and salaries fall in the higher income categories (De Lange, 2000). Regarding the work position of PA, De Lange notes that more than half of the researched PA professionals were located within the communication department, “nevertheless, two thirds of the respondents found that PA is a separate professional field [...] therefore, a further emancipation of the profession is to be expected”.

To determine how the practice of PA has evolved, in this study, we combined the competences found in PR literature with the PA prescriptions as formulated by Fleisher (2012) into a new set of PA competences. Subsequently, PA professionals working in the field were asked to rank these competences on importance, and to indicate their own score on each of these competences. Furthermore, the demographical profile of the PA professional was under investigation. In sum, this study addresses the following research question:

*RQ: What is the profile of the Dutch PA professional, what are the competences deemed to be important, and how do the professionals evaluate their competences themselves?*

## 5.2 METHOD

To get insight in the importance and self-evaluation of PA competences, an online, anonymous survey (see annex p. 124-137) was administered and distributed among 1057 respondents in the period of February–March 2014. All respondents were approached via LinkedIn by digital filtering on functions in communications, in PR and (not: or) in PA. The rough response was 434. After technical cleaning (eliminating respondents who left the survey prematurely), 293 respondents remained. The survey was built upon three pillars: (1) the demography of the PA professional; (2) the demography of the home organization inserting PA; and (3) the competences of the PA professional.

### 5.2.1 Demographics

Regarding the demography of the PA professional, questions were asked about age, gender, religion, political preferences, membership of a political party, political activities and ambitions, income (based on a five-day workweek), education, the number of years that the respondent has been working or worked in PA, the average number of hours a week spent on PA, the period the PA professional has been working for the current employer, and how the professional entered into PA. Also, all respondents were asked to define the type of education that would fit PA professionals best.

### 5.2.2 The home organization

Regarding the home organization, respondents were questioned about their sector status (PA consultancy, public or private sector, non-profit sector); the number of years the home organization has existed as it is today; the number of employees in the home organization; the budget of the home organization; the organizational position of the PA professional; the total number of PA employees within the organization; the name of the department where the PA professional is based; and the separate PA budget.

### 5.2.3 Competences

The PA competences in this research are based on specific needs and activities in daily PA work of experienced professionals, and seen as tools to do the daily PA job, as mentioned by De Lange (2000), McGrath (2006), Fleisher (2012), Tench et al. (2013), and Van Schendelen (2013). The competences were split up in three main competences, namely knowledge, skills, and attitude, and refined in 34 distinctions. All competences were to be answered on seven-point Likert-type scales regarding both importance ("How important is this competence to you?"; very unimportant – rather unimportant – unimportant – neutral – little important – important – very important) and own score ("How well do you perform regarding this competence?"; very weakly – rather weakly – weakly – just sufficiently – rather well – well – very well).

Knowledge competences were characterized by nine distinctions: (1) knowledge about national and international societal developments; (2) knowledge about processes in decision-making in the public sector on the national level; (3) similar on the regional level; (4) similar on the local level; (5) similar on the EU level;

furthermore (6) professional knowledge; (7) knowledge about "new media"; (8) knowledge about media logic, i.e., how media (journalists) "handle" their subjects; and finally (9) knowledge about the opinions that exist about PA in the home organization.

Skills competences were characterized by 15 distinctions: (1) developing expertise in long-term (strategic) and in (2) short-term (tactic) activities; (3) developing social expertise, i.e., the attitude to contact people; (4) networking, meaning the attitude to connect people and to maintain connections; (5) having empathy; (6) being able to acquire support for current PA files; (7) having power to persuade; (8) being able to bear sole responsibility, e.g., in moments of unexpected circumstances; (9) being pragmatic; (10) having skills in oral and written language; (11) being able to analyze data; (12) developing seniority; (13) being able to influence media; (14) guiding constructive negotiating (win-win); and (15) guiding competitive negotiating (win-lose).

Attitude competences were characterized by 10 distinctions: (1) reliability, e.g., behaving conform the charter of the national PA association; (2) adaptability, i.e., flexibility; (3) authenticity; (4) personal involvement with PA files; (5) a critical attitude which means taking nothing for granted; (6) withstanding stress; (7) loyalty toward the interests of the home organization; (8) reputation management by customer- or civilian-oriented behavior; (9) acceptance of irregular working hours; and (10) integrity in PA operations.

Finally, as this study aims to provide a complete list of competences for PA professionals, after scoring all competences, the respondents were asked to mention any competences that they had missed in the questionnaire.

## 5.3 RESULTS

### 5.3.1 Demographics

In general, the Dutch PA professional is male (67.9%), on average 46.9 years old (min. 22 years and max. 75 years, SD=11.1), with a gross yearly income of 75.000 euro (based on a five-day workweek). Of all questioned professionals, 14.7% is religious and of this group, most are Roman Catholic (53.5%), followed by

Protestant (20.9%). Most professionals have 15 years of experience, which is mostly also the period that the professional has been working for the same private or public employer. Of all questioned professionals, 56.4 % entered into PA by accident; 22% decided to become a PA consultant right after their education; 10.3% entered into PA after a job elsewhere in the home organization (e.g., as communication advisor); 5.5% entered into PA after a suggestion of others; 3.7% were asked by their management; and 2.1% entered into PA after organizational restructuring.

Regarding educational level, most respondents attended university (72.7%), followed by higher vocational education (24.6%), which can be clustered into: Communication Sciences and Journalism – 30.7%; Politics & Administration (i.e., political sciences, law, economy, public administration, European studies, international relations – 61.3%); Human Sciences (i.e., literature, history, theology, philosophy, arts, pedagogy, psychology, sociology, social welfare, social geography – 29.8%) and other (medicine, mathematics, agriculture, town planning, engineering – 10.5%). More answers were possible; some of the respondents completed more than one educational program.

Regarding political orientation: most of the PA professionals are left-liberal oriented in their political opinions (76.8%); 50% is member of a political party, and more than half of these party members (53%) is more or less also politically active, sometimes as a board member or as an assistant in times of election campaigns (e.g., distributing flyers and brochures). Some of them are longing for a job as mayor, as Member of Parliament, or as senator.

### 5.3.2 The home organization

In total, 39.6% of the respondents is working as an independent consultant or as a consultant working for a consultancy company in PA, 18.4% for the public sector and 40.6% for the private sector, including PA professionals working for former governmental companies that privatized governmental tasks; those professionals now marked their former public PA activities as “private”. Moreover, employees of private PA consultancies are working for both sectors, public and private.

In the public sector, respondents (more than one answer was possible) are working for municipalities (15.4%), provinces (8.9%), national government (15.4%), governmental agencies (8.2%), national non-profit organizations (26.3%), and for international non-profit organizations (6.1%). Others (15%) are working for branch organizations, healthcare (i.e., hospitals), water-supply organizations, educational institutes, organizations for municipal and provincial cooperation, and media. Here, the aforementioned mix of public and former public (now private) PA activities becomes visible again, as is the diversity in the labeling of PA functions. In the private sector, PA professionals are mostly located in the communication department or elsewhere in the organization as “department manager”, as member of a management team, as member of a project team, as assistant of the chairman (in advice committees), or as member of the “Department Strategy”. In the public sector, there are no separate PA departments.

In the private sector, independent or employed respondents are coming from all sides (more answers were possible): energy (18.1%), financial sector (18%), high-tech (10.6%), life sciences & health (16.4%), traffic & transport (13.3%), chemical industry (5.5%), creative industry (7.2%), agriculture (6.5%), food (4.4%), beverages (1.4%), logistics (6.1%), tobacco (2.4%), housing (4.8%), real estate (1.4%), tourism (6%), water supply (1%), environmental organizations (3%), and branch organizations (7%). They are located as member of the Supervisory Board (0.4%), member of the Board (3.5%), as advisor for the Board (7.8%), but mostly as member of a management team, as advisor for a management team, in subject-linked departments, in communication departments, in the staff department “Strategy & Communication”, the department “Business Development”, the department “Corporate Affairs & Governmental Affairs”, “Relations Management”, “Department Representing of Interests”, “Department Strategy”, “Europe Staff”, “Marketing Communications & Sales”, “Department Spokesmen”, or operating as management assistant, but always labeled with PA. Of these respondents, 14.3% is working for a PA consultancy that is also active in other sectors. Because of the widespread organizational position of PA, it was not possible to classify the budget for PA accurately: either it is booked separately or partly separately (39.9%), or not (60.1%) and possibly quartered in “neighboring” departments.

### 5.3.3 Competences

#### KNOWLEDGE

Table 1 shows the importance and self-evaluation scores regarding the knowledge competences.

*Table 1: Importance and self-evaluation regarding the knowledge competences.*

Competence	Importance			Self-evaluation		
	M [95% C.I.]	SD	N	M [95% C.I.]	SD	N
<i>The world</i>	6.41 [6.32-6.50]	.771	290	5.76 [5.66-5.86]	.834	290
<i>The Hague</i>	6.44 [6.34-6.54]	.855	290	5.48 [5.34-5.61]	1.169	290
<i>Province</i>	4.76 [4.58-4.94]	1.572	290	4.17 [3.98-4.36]	1.627	290
<i>Municipality</i>	4.96 [4.77-5.14]	1.628	290	4.69 [4.49-4.88]	1.692	291
<i>Brussels</i>	5.84 [5.71-5.98]	1.176	289	4.32 [4.13-4.51]	1.638	290
<i>The profession</i>	6.30 [6.20-6.40]	.850	286	5.61 [5.49-5.74]	1.079	284
<i>New media</i>	5.79 [5.66-5.91]	1.089	290	5.30 [5.15-5.45]	1.315	291
<i>Media logic</i>	6.11 [6.00-6.23]	.985	291	5.52 [5.37-5.66]	1.230	291
<i>Home organization</i>	6.62 [6.53-6.90]	.703	289	6.40 [6.30-6.50]	.838	287

*Note: measured on 7 point scales (1=very unimportant; 7=very important)*

When comparing the importance scores with the self-evaluation scores, the PA professionals scored all knowledge competences higher on importance than their own scores; only importance of the municipal knowledge was scored on the same level as the own score.

Regarding importance, the PA professionals qualified knowledge about the home organization and the national political arena as the most important. Knowledge about “the world”, professional knowledge, and knowledge concerning media logic were scored one step lower, but still above knowledge concerning the European political arena and knowledge about new media, which were scored two steps lower. Knowledge about the region (provincial knowledge) and municipal knowledge received the lowest scorers regarding importance.

Regarding self-evaluation, the professionals scored their knowledge about the home organization highest of all. A step lower were knowledge of “the world”, professional knowledge, and knowledge concerning media logic, as were knowledge about the national political arena and new media. Knowledge about the municipality, the region (provinces), and the EU received the lowest scores on self-evaluation.

#### SKILLS

Table 2 shows the importance and self-evaluation scores regarding the skills competences.

*Table 2: Importance and self-evaluation regarding the skills competences.*

Competence	Importance			Self-evaluation		
	M [95% C.I.]	SD	N	M [95% C.I.]	SD	N
<i>Strategic expertise</i>	6.47 [6.39-6.55]	.707	290	6.09 [5.99-6.18]	.829	290
<i>Tactic expertise</i>	6.24 [6.15-6.32]	.773	289	5.83 [5.72-5.93]	.878	288
<i>Social expertise</i>	6.61 [6.53-6.68]	.663	290	6.24 [6.14-6.33]	.825	290
<i>Networking</i>	6.50 [6.42-6.58]	.731	290	5.92 [5.80-6.04]	1.027	291
<i>Empathy</i>	6.39 [6.30-6.48]	.789	288	6.16 [6.06-6.26]	.855	288
<i>Acquiring support</i>	6.47 [6.39-6.55]	.691	283	5.80 [5.70-5.91]	.916	280
<i>Power to persuade</i>	6.36 [6.27-6.45]	.753	287	5.81 [5.71-5.91]	.895	289
<i>Sole responsibility</i>	5.99 [5.87-6.10]	.961	289	5.89 [5.77-6.02]	1.064	287
<i>Pragmatism</i>	6.10 [6.00-6.19]	.837	284	6.05 [5.94-6.16]	.940	284
<i>Oral and written language</i>	6.26 [6.17-6.36]	.823	291	6.14 [6.04-6.25]	.892	290
<i>Analyzing the data</i>	6.44 [6.35-6.52]	.724	289	6.16 [6.06-6.25]	.826	288
<i>Seniority</i>	5.69 [5.56-5.83]	1.128	288	5.58 [5.46-5.71]	1.074	287
<i>Influencing media</i>	5.88 [5.76-6.00]	1.045	281	5.30 [5.16-5.43]	1.141	281
<i>Constructive negotiating</i>	6.16 [6.06-6.25]	.881	286	5.64 [5.53-5.76]	.982	287
<i>Competitive negotiating</i>	5.29 [5.14-5.44]	1.276	287	4.92 [4.78-5.07]	1.240	290

*Note: measured on 7 point scales (1=very unimportant; 7=very important)*

On importance, the PA professionals scored 11 of the 15 skills competences higher than their own score. The four exceptions were: sole responsibility, pragmatism, oral and written language, and seniority; results are overlapping.

Regarding importance, strategic expertise, social expertise, networking, empathy, acquiring support, power to persuade, and analyzing data were considered the most important competences. Tactic expertise, pragmatism, skills in oral and written language, and constructive negotiating also scored high, but nevertheless one step lower. Sole responsibility, seniority, and influencing media scored lower, and competitive negotiating was qualified as least important.

Regarding the self-evaluation of the skills competences, strategic expertise, social expertise, empathy, and analyzing data remain “top scorer”, but are now accompanied by pragmatism and skills in oral and written language. Tactic expertise, networking, acquiring support, power to persuade, and sole responsibility scored one step lower on self-evaluation. Seniority and constructive negotiating received lower scores, and competitive negotiating and influencing media scored the lowest.

#### ATTITUDE

Table 3 shows the importance and self-evaluation scores regarding the attitude competences.

**Table 3:** Importance and self-evaluation regarding the attitude competences.

Competence	Importance			Self-evaluation		
	M [95% C.I.]	SD	N	M [95% C.I.]	SD	N
Reliability	6.45 [6.35-6.56]	.904	286	6.45 [6.36-6.54]	.765	286
Adaptability	6.31 [6.22-6.39]	.752	285	5.98 [5.88-6.09]	.899	284
Authenticity	5.88 [5.75-6.02]	1.186	285	6.14 [6.03-6.24]	.899	285
Personal involvement	5.41 [5.27-5.55]	1.217	285	5.69 [5.57-5.81]	1.027	284
Critical attitude	6.14 [6.03-6.24]	.905	287	5.99 [5.88-6.09]	.927	285
Withstanding stress	6.03 [5.92-6.14]	.934	285	5.69 [5.57-5.81]	1.043	285
Loyalty	5.48 [5.34-5.62]	1.215	285	5.27 [5.13-5.42]	1.263	282
Reputation management	6.07 [5.97-6.17]	.870	287	5.76 [5.64-5.87]	.972	285
Irregular working hours	5.96 [5.82-6.10]	1.195	287	6.06 [5.92-6.19]	1.141	286
Integrity	6.45 [6.34-6.55]	.884	286	6.51 [6.42-6.59]	.733	287

**Note:** measured on 7 point scales (1=very unimportant; 7=very important)

Regarding the comparisons between importance and self-evaluation in attitude-competences, the attitude competences reliability, critical attitude, loyalty, irregular working hours and integrity overlap in scores. Further, adaptability, withstanding stress and reputation-management PA professionals score higher on importance than on self-evaluation. However, on authenticity and personal involvement the own score is higher than the score on importance.

The professionals qualified reliability and integrity in PA operations as the most important attitude competences. Adaptability, critical attitude, withstanding stress, reputation management and working irregular working hours are scored a step lower. Authenticity is also scored lower. Personal involvement and loyalty scored lowest on importance.

Regarding the self-evaluation of the attitude competences, reliability and integrity received the highest scores (in overlap with importance). A step lower were adaptability, authenticity, critical attitude, and working irregular working hours. Then, personal involvement, withstanding stress, and reputation management scored lower, and loyalty received the lowest score on self-evaluation.

#### 5.3.4 Correlations between the competences and years of experience

The next step was exploring whether the scores on importance and self-evaluation correlate with years of experience in the field. Table 4 (importance and experience) and Table 5 (self-evaluation and experience) show the results of this analysis.

**Table 4:** Correlations between the importance of competences and years of experience.

Knowledge	Pearson	Sig	Skills	Pearson	Sig	Attitude	Pearson	Sig
<b>The world</b>	-0.05	0.44	Strategic expertise	-.083	.16	Reliability	.09	.14
<b>The Hague</b>	-0.07	0.27	Tactic expertise	.010	.88	Adaptability	.05	.39
<b>Province</b>	0.05	0.40	Social expertise	-.10	.10	Authenticity	.04	.48
<b>Municipality</b>	0.07	0.23	Networking	-.15	.01	Involvement	.09	.14
<b>Brussels</b>	-0.03	0.57	Empathy	.02	.75	Critical attitude	.01	.89
<b>The profession</b>	-0.02	0.75	Acquiring support	-.06	.30	Stress	.05	.42
<b>New media</b>	-0.04	0.54	Power to persuade	-.14	.02	Loyalty	.01	.89
<b>Media logic</b>	-0.06	0.30	Sole responsibility	.11	.05	Reputation	-.04	.48
<b>Home organization</b>	-0.09	0.14	Pragmatism	.07	.26	Working hours	.02	.75
			Oral + written language	.06	.34	Integrity	.13	.03
			Analyzing data	.02	.79			
			Seniority	.11	.06			
			Influencing media	-.00	.95			
			Constructive negotiating	.07	.25			
			Competitive negotiating	.10	.11			

Significant, but weak correlations were found between years of experience and three skills competences (networking, power to persuade, and sole responsibility), and integrity.

**Table 5:** Correlations between the self-evaluation of competences and years of experience.

Knowledge	Pears.	Sig	Skills	Pears.	Sig	Attitude	Pears.	Sig
<b>The world</b>	.06	.31	Strategic expertise	-.01	.88	Reliability	.06	.35
<b>The Hague</b>	.22	.00	Tactic expertise	.11	.07	Adaptability	.14	.02
<b>Province</b>	.15	.01	Social expertise	-.00	.96	Authenticity	.12	.05
<b>Municipality</b>	.16	.01	Networking	.06	.34	Involvement	.10	.10
<b>Brussels</b>	.03	.64	Empathy	.08	.19	Critical attitude	.12	.05
<b>The profession</b>	.16	.01	Acquiring support	.07	.26	Stress	.19	.00
<b>New media</b>	-.05	.36	Power to persuade	.15	.01	Loyalty	-.01	.89
<b>Media logic</b>	.10	.11	Sole responsibility	.17	.00	Reputation	.03	.64
<b>Home organization</b>	.04	.52	Pragmatism	.11	.06	Working hours	.11	.06
			Oral + written language	.12	.04	Integrity	.08	.17
			Analyzing data	.08	.20			
			Seniority	.38	.00			
			Influencing media	.10	.11			
			Constructive negotiating	.13	.02			
			Competitive negotiating	.16	.01			

More significant correlations were found between the self-evaluation of the professionals and their years of experience. Years of experience correlates with having knowledge of the national arena ("The Hague"), provinces, and municipalities, and the profession itself. Furthermore, the skills power to persuade, sole responsibility, oral and written language, seniority, constructive negotiating, and competitive negotiating correlate with experience. Finally, being able to adapt, to be authentic, to have a critical attitude, and to withstand stress correlate with experience.

### 5.3.5 The effect of type of education on the importance and self-evaluation of competences

Whether the competence scores are dependent on education type was investigated by means of a Bonferroni MANOVA analysis, in which type of education was split up into four groups: Communication sciences and journalism; Politics & Administration (i.e., political sciences, law, economy, public administration, European studies, international relations; Human Sciences (i.e., literature, history, theology, philosophy, arts, pedagogy, psychology, sociology, social welfare, social geography); and other (medicine, mathematics, agriculture, town planning, engineering). Table 6 (importance and education type) and Table 7 (self-evaluation and education type) show the results of this analysis.

*Table 6: Importance of competences per education type.*

Competence	Communication and journalism		Politics and Administration		Human sciences		Other	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<b>KNOWLEDGE:</b>								
Province	5.24a	1.52	4.46a	1.67	4.58	1.53	4.94	1.24
"Brussels"	5.49ab	1.22	6.09a	0.89	5.95b	1.41	5.40	1.12
The profession	6.30	0.74	6.43a	0.79	6.36	0.96	5.63a	1.09
New media	6.02a	0.91	5.70	1.10	5.90	0.98	5.31a	1.45
Home organization	6.60	0.83	6.69a	0.57	6.68	0.70	6.19a	1.05
<b>SKILLS:</b>								
Influencing media	6.25a	0.82	5.73	1.00	6.00	0.97	5.33a	1.11

*Note: measured on 7 point scales (1=very unimportant; 7=very important)*

In general, PA professionals with a communication and/or journalism background assign more weight to knowledge of the province and new-media technologies and the skill to influence media, whereas professionals with a more political background especially value European and professional knowledge, as well as knowing the home organization.

*Table 7: Self-evaluation of competences per education type.*

Competence	Communication and journalism		Politics and Administration		Human sciences		Other	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<b>Knowledge:</b>								
"The Hague"	4.84ab	1.39	5.79a	0.93	5.58b	1.15	5.13	1.41
"Brussels"	3.40a	1.64	4.86a	1.50	4.13	1.62	4.33	1.68
Media logic	5.93a	1.10	5.40	1.27	5.55	1.26	4.63a	1.31
<b>Skills:</b>								
Acquiring support	5.63a	0.94	6.01a	0.81	5.68	1.00	5.69	1.35
Power to persuade	5.62a	0.89	5.99a	0.82	5.75	0.84	5.63	1.31

*Note: measured on 7 point scales (1=very unimportant; 7=very important)*

Regarding their self-evaluation, PA professionals with a communication and/or journalism background consider themselves to have less knowledge of both the national and European arena, but they believe to have more knowledge when it comes to media logic. Furthermore, the professionals with a more political background feel that they are better capable to acquire support and persuade others.

### 5.3.6 Recommended educational preparation

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked to indicate their recommended educational preparation for PA professionals regarding both the educational level and field of study. A university level was recommended by 40.1% of the respondents, and education on comparable levels (such as vocational education) was recommended by 43.2%. Further, most respondents preferred an educational background in politics and administration (62.1%) to communication and journalism (15.4%) or human sciences (12.6%).

## 5.4 DISCUSSION

In this study, the evolvement of the PA discipline was investigated in three ways: (1) the demographics of PA professionals working in the field; (2) the competences that are needed in order to be successful; and (3) the evaluation of the professionals regarding their own competences.

### 5.4.1 Demographics of the PA professional and the home organization

In his study on the profile of the PA professional, De Lange (2000) concluded that the professional was to be characterized as a middle-aged, highly educated, left-liberal oriented man with a background in communication, PR, or journalism, and functioning in high positions. Furthermore, before they entered the PA profession, more than one-third of the respondents had been working in the field of communication, PR, or journalism. Now, almost two decades later, the profile of the PA professional seems to have changed. Indicatively, more women entered the profession, the average gross salary climbed as well as the left-liberal orientation, and the level of education is still very high. For PA professionals, a (more) multi-disciplined, high-level education (e.g., university) is recommended but not necessary; respondents of our research refer to “the School of life” as well, and to processes of “learning by doing”, in the long run leading to practical wisdom. Most professionals are working as an independent consultant or as a consultant working for a consultancy company in PA, followed by the private sector and then the public sector.

### 5.4.2 The competences of the PA professional

Sha (2011), Fleisher (2012), Todd (2014), and Swart (2014) have been helpful to get insight in the essential PA competences. Sha (2011) centered the competences on general business, media relations, and theoretical knowledge, Swart (2014) mentioned writing skills, event management, communication planning, and research, and Todd (2014) focused on communication skills and professional characteristics. Furthermore, Fleisher (2012) introduced, in retrospect and in perspective, 10 prescriptions of PA competences. These studies showed a resemblance in PR and PA competences without neglecting disciplinary differences between both disciplines, created insight in PA competences, and converged them into competences on knowledge, skills, and attitude.

In this study, the professionals qualified knowledge about the home organization and the national political level as more important than all other knowledge competences. Skills that were experienced as most important concern the more “social” skills, including social expertise, networking, empathy, acquiring support, and the power to persuade. Other skills deemed important include strategic expertise and analyzing data. Finally, the professionals qualified reliability and integrity in PA operations as the most important attitude competences.

Regarding their self-evaluation, in line with the assigned importance, the professionals scored their knowledge of the home organization highest of all. Skills that are mastered best (and also scored highest on importance) concern strategic and social expertise, empathy, and analyzing data. Furthermore, pragmatism and oral and written language are mastered well. Finally, the professionals positively evaluated their attitude competences regarding reliability and integrity (competences that were qualified as most important as well).

When comparing the importance scores with the self-evaluation scores, the PA professionals scored all knowledge competences higher on importance than their own scores; only importance of the municipal knowledge was scored on the same level as the own score. The same goes for almost all skills competences (except sole responsibility, pragmatism, oral and written language, and seniority). Regarding the attitude competences, a more diffuse pattern becomes clear: reliability, critical attitude, loyalty, irregular working hours, and integrity overlap, but PA professionals scored the attitude competences adaptability, withstanding stress, and reputation management higher on importance than on self-evaluation. Moreover, for authenticity and personal involvement, the own score was higher than the importance score.

Combining the above, the conclusion may be that the professionals consider themselves authentic and involved PA practitioners, and in their daily work, the social component is of utmost importance: A combination of strategic and social skills seems to increase the perceived receptiveness. Further, knowing your home organization as well as the arenas you are going to enter is essential, but at the same time, it appears that other knowledge is lacking and needs improvement. The results on the self-evaluation may be indicative for the conclusion that the

PA professional (1) should upgrade the local, regional, and European knowledge, (2) is mostly focused on social expertise, probably to avoid competition regarding the low score on the skills competence “competitive negotiating”, and (3) is relying on reliability, integrity, authenticity, and personal involvement. When we compare these outcomes with Sha (2011), Fleisher (2012), Todd (2014), and Swart (2014), we see that different to PR, the PA professionals put a stronger emphasis on the social skills. We now see some parallels here with the competence-related prescriptions about PA described by Fleisher (2012), as these prescriptions also tend to focus on social expertise competences needed to build stakeholder relationships by using refined information.

#### **5.4.3 Years of experience and type of education**

Years of experience is related to the assigned importance of four competences, namely networking, power to persuade, sole responsibility, and integrity. Furthermore, as expected, years of experience especially correlates with the self-evaluation of several competences, namely having knowledge of the national arena (“The Hague”), provinces, and municipalities, and the profession itself. The skills power to persuade, sole responsibility, oral and written language, seniority, constructive negotiating, and competitive negotiating also correlate with experience. Finally, being able to adapt, to be authentic, to have a critical attitude, and to withstand stress correlate with experience. From this, it can be concluded that more experience is especially beneficial in terms of gaining authority and knowledge advancement, which possibly bridges the gap to overcome the knowledge shortage as mentioned earlier.

Regarding the differences between education types, we see that professionals with a communication and/or journalism background assign more weight to knowledge of the province and new-media technologies and to the skill influencing media while they consider themselves to have less knowledge of both the national and European arena, but believe to have more knowledge when it comes to media logic. The professionals with a more political background feel that they are better capable to acquire support and persuade others while they especially value European and professional knowledge, as well as knowing the home organization.

#### **5.4.4 Conclusion**

To conclude, PA can be considered a multi-disciplined activity indeed (Linders & De Lange, 2003), which requires professionals who are sufficiently equipped with especially social skills and who can be regarded as reliable and integer. PA professionals therewith put greater emphasis on the importance (and self-evaluation) of social competences compared to the PR discipline.

## Annex: enquête Public Affairs

## VRAGENLIJST

*Welkom in de vragenlijst over public affairs, of wel, zoals het in het handvest van de Beroeps Vereniging voor Public Affairs (2007) staat, 'het strategische proces van inspelen op politieke besluitvorming en op veranderingen in de maatschappij en in de publieke opinie, die van invloed zijn op het functioneren van de eigen organisatie'.*

**A – UW PERSOONLIJKE ACHTERGRONDEN:**

*De volgende vragen beogen inzicht te verwerven in de achtergronden van de mensen die PA(-gerelateerd) werk doen en die in dit werk bijdragen aan de PA-procesarchitectuur.*

1. **Wat is uw geslacht?**  
man/vrouw
2. **Wat is uw leeftijd?**  
..... jaar
3. **Bent u praktiserend godsdienstig?**  
ja/nee
4. **Indien, ja, wat is uw godsdienst?**  
Ik ben:
  - Boeddhist
  - Gereformeerd
  - Hindoestaan
  - Moslim
  - Nederlands Hervormd
  - Rooms-Katholiek
  - Anders, nl. ....

5. **Wat is uw politieke voorkeur**  
(hoeft dus niet per se de partij te zijn waarop u gestemd heeft)?
  - CDA
  - CU
  - D66
  - Groen Links
  - Ouderenpartij 50+
  - PvdA
  - PvdD
  - PVV
  - SGP
  - SP
  - VVD
  - Anders, nl. ....
6. **Bent u lid van een politieke partij?**  
ja/nee
7. **Bent u actief in die politieke partij?**  
ja/nee
8. **Indien u actief bent, wilt u dan aangeven waaruit uw activiteiten bestaan?**  
(indien u niet actief bent in een politieke partij kunt doorgaan met de volgende vraag):
  - 8.1 **Ik flyer of bemens zo nu en dan een stand van mijn partij**  
ja/nee
  - 8.2 **Ik ben volksvertegenwoordiger:**
    - Ja, op lokaal niveau in mijn eigen gemeente
    - Ja, op lokaal niveau in een andere gemeente
    - Ja, op provinciaal niveau in mijn eigen provincie
    - Ja, op provinciaal niveau in een andere provincie
    - Nee

**8.3 Ik bekleed een bestuursfunctie:**

- Ja, op lokaal niveau
- Ja, op provinciaal niveau
- Ja, op landelijk niveau
- Ja, op Europees niveau
- Nee

**8.4 Ik ben extern lid van een raads- of statencommissie**

Ja/nee

**8.5 Ik koester politieke ambities op het landelijk niveau**

- Ja, namelijk .....
- Nee

**9. In welke categorie valt uw inkomen?**

(het bruto bedrag per jaar, uitgaande van vijf dagen in de week):

- minder dan € 30.000, -
- € 30.000, - - € 39.999, -
- € 40.000, - - € 49.999, -
- € 50.000, - - € 59.999, -
- € 60.000, - - € 69.999, -
- € 70.000, - - € 79.999, -
- € 80.000, - - € 89.999, -
- € 90.000, - - € 99.999, -
- € 100.000, - - € 109.999, -
- € 110.000, - - en meer

**10. Wat is uw hoogst afgeronde opleiding?**

- Lager beroepsonderwijs
- Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs
- Voortgezet onderwijs
- Hoger beroepsonderwijs
- Universiteit
- Universiteit gepromoveerd
- Anders, namelijk .....

**11. Welke studierichting(en) of opleidingen volgde u op het HBO en/of de universiteit?**

(meerdere antwoorden mogelijk)

- Bestuurskunde
- Betawetenschappen
- Bouwkunde
- Communicatie
- Economie & Bedrijfskunde
- Filosofie
- Geneeskunde & Farmacie
- Geschiedenis
- Godsdienstwetenschappen
- ICT-opleidingen
- Kunst- & cultuur, grafische opleidingen
- Landbouwkundige opleidingen
- Letteren
- Onderwijskunde, pedagogiek
- Planologie
- Politicologie
- Psychologie
- Rechten
- Sociologie
- Techniek
- Zorg en welzijn
- Anders, namelijk .....

**12. Hoe lang bent u werkzaam in PA?** (In geval u niet meer werkzaam bent in PA wegens pensionering, verandering van baan of anderszins, maar deze enquête wel ontvangen heeft en mee wilt doen, wilt u dan aangeven hoe lang u in totaal in PA werkzaam bent geweest)

..... jaar

**13. Hoeveel uur – gemiddeld – per week besteedt/bestedde u in uw werk/functie aan PA?**

..... uur per week

**14. Hoeveel jaar bent u werkzaam bij uw huidige werkgever?**

(in geval van meerdere werkgevers, zoals bij PA-adviesbureaus, noemt u degene aan wie u de meeste tijd besteedt op het moment van het invullen van deze vragenlijst; zzp'ers in PA kunnen deze vraag overslaan)

..... jaar

**15. Hoe bent u in het PA-werk terechtgekomen?**

- Bewuste keuze na studie e/o opleiding
- Na reorganisatie(s)
- Gaandeweg erin 'gerold'
- Doelbewuste wens van het (ambtelijk) management
- Door anderen op dit werk attent gemaakt
- Anders, namelijk .....

**16. Bent u lid van een of meerdere beroepsverenigingen of van andere verenigingen die zich bezig houden met PA?**

(meerdere antwoorden mogelijk)

- BVPA
- Logeion
- Koning Willem I
- Koning Willem II
- Koning Willem III
- Koning Willem IV
- Europese (beroeps-)verenigingen, ja/nee, namelijk .....
- Anders, namelijk .....
- Niet van toepassing

**17. Hoe belangrijk zijn de volgende media voor uw PA-werk?**

	<i>schaal 1-7: helemaal niet belangrijk versus heel erg belangrijk</i>
Dagbladen: NL / buit.	
Radio: NL / buit.	
Televisie: NL / buit.	
Opiniebladen: NL / buit	
Internet	
Email	
Instant-messaging	
Twitter	
Facebook	
LinkedIn	
Ander, namelijk .....	

**18. Hoeveel uur per dag besteedt u in totaal aan deze media voor de uitoefening van het PA-werk?**

..... uur per dag

**B – PA-COMPETENTIES:**  
 de hieronder beschreven en gegroepede competenties beogen inzicht te verwerven in de kwaliteiten die voor het uitoefenen van PA-activiteiten van belang zijn.  
 We vragen u deze competenties – ook naar uzelf - kritisch te bezien en vervolgens met een eerlijke waardering in te vullen op twee niveaus, namelijk de mate waarin een competentie van belang is voor de uitoefening van het PA-werk en de mate waarin u zelf vindt over die competentie te beschikken.

<b>KENNIS</b>	<i>Mate van belang (1-7) Totaal niet belangrijk versus heel erg belangrijk</i>	<i>Hoe scoort uzelf (1-7) Zeer zwak versus heel goed.</i>
<b>19.1 Kennis van ‘de wereld’:</b> feiten kennen van en inzicht hebben in maatschappelijke vraagstukken en trends		
<b>19.2 Kennis van de Haagse arena’s:</b> feiten kennen van en inzicht hebben in het tot stand komen van beleid op landelijk niveau		
<b>19.3 Kennis van de provinciale arena’s:</b> feiten kennen van en inzicht hebben in het tot stand komen van beleid op provinciaal niveau		
<b>19.4 Kennis van de gemeentelijke arena’s:</b> feiten kennen van en inzicht hebben in het tot stand komen van beleid op gemeentelijk niveau		
<b>19.5 Kennis van de Brusselse arena’s:</b> feiten kennen van en inzicht hebben in Europese regelgeving, de Europese politiek, de werking van het Europees bestuur en de doorwerking daarvan in nationaal, provinciaal en gemeentelijk beleid.		

<b>KENNIS</b>	<i>Mate van belang (1-7) Totaal niet belangrijk versus heel erg belangrijk</i>	<i>Hoe scoort uzelf (1-7) Zeer zwak versus heel goed.</i>
<b>19.6 Kennis van het vak:</b> inzicht hebben in het instrumentarium van PA		
<b>19.7 Kennis van nieuwe media:</b> inzicht hebben in de werking van ‘social media’, zoals twitter en facebook		
<b>19.8 Kennis van de journalistiek en de media-logica:</b> feiten kennen en over inzicht beschikken inzake de wijze waarop media hun issues kiezen		
<b>19.9 Kennis van de eigen organisatie:</b> precies weten waar de organisatie in essentie voor staat		

<b>VAARDIGHEDEN</b>	<i>Mate van belang (1-7) Totaal niet belangrijk versus heel erg belangrijk</i>	<i>Hoe scoort uzelf (1-7) Zeer zwak versus heel goed.</i>
<b>20.1 Strategisch bewustzijn:</b> permanent rekening houden met het lange termijn einddoel – de missie- van de eigen organisatie		
<b>20.2 Tactisch bewustzijn:</b> elke tussenstap naar het einddoel van de organisatie vooraf overwegen		
<b>20.3 Sociale vaardigheid:</b> vermogen tot het omgaan met mensen		
<b>20.4 Netwerkvaardigheid:</b> vermogen tot het onderhouden van contacten en het aanbrengen van verbindingen daarin		

<b>VAARDIGHEDEN</b>	<i>Mate van belang (1-7) Totaal niet belangrijk versus heel erg belangrijk</i>	<i>Hoe scoort uzelf (1-7) Zeer zwak versus heel goed.</i>
<b>20.5 Vermogen tot empathie:</b> in staat zijn zich te verplaatsen in de ander		
<b>20.6 Draagvlakopbouw:</b> vermogen tot het verwerven van steun		
<b>20.7 Overtuigingskracht:</b> vermogen de ander mee te krijgen in de boodschap van uw opdrachtgever		
<b>20.8 Mediavaardigheid:</b> vermogen tot het beïnvloeden van media		
<b>20.9 Vermogen tot het nemen van eigen verantwoordelijkheid:</b> onder onvoorziene omstandigheden PA-activiteiten kunnen ontplooiën zonder directe rugdekking van de organisatie		
<b>20.10 Pragmatische instelling:</b> vermogen te opereren naar bevind van zaken		
<b>20.11 Taalvaardigheid:</b> in woord en geschrift zich vaardig kunnen uitdrukken		
<b>20.12 Analytisch zijn:</b> situaties snel kunnen doorzien		
<b>20.13 Senioriteit:</b> over gezag en overwicht beschikken		
<b>20.14 Constructief onderhandelen:</b> vermogen tot het bereiken van win-win situaties		
<b>20.15 Competitief onderhandelen:</b> vermogen tot het bereiken van het maximale		

<b>GEDRAG</b>	<i>Mate van belang (1-7) Totaal niet belangrijk versus heel erg belangrijk</i>	<i>Hoe scoort uzelf (1-7) Zeer zwak versus heel goed.</i>
<b>21.1 Betrouwbaarheid:</b> een man een man, een woord een woord		
<b>21.2 Adaptief vermogen:</b> vermogen tot flexibel reageren op zich wijzigende omstandigheden		
<b>21.3 Authenticiteit:</b> trouw blijven aan de eigen persoonlijkheid		
<b>21.4 Persoonlijke betrokkenheid:</b> het vermogen waarmee de professional zich met zijn of haar taak verbinden kan		
<b>21.5 Kritische instelling:</b> niets klakkeloos voor waar aannemen		
<b>21.6 Bestand zijn tegen spanning:</b> bij opeenvolgende spanningen het overzicht weten te behouden		
<b>21.7 Dienstbaarheid:</b> ondergeschikt zijn aan de belangen van directie of bestuur		
<b>21.8 Reputatiemanagement:</b> een positief beeld kunnen verwerven door middel van ondermeer klantgericht gedrag, zichtbaarheid en sensitiviteit		
<b>21.9 Acceptatie onregelmatige werktijden:</b> permanente bereidheid tot werken 'buiten kantooruren'		
<b>21.10 Ethiek:</b> integer, eerlijk en betrouwbaar kunnen handelen		

**21.11 Heeft u competenties gemist, zo ja welke?**

.....

**22. Welke opleidingseisen zou u minimaal willen stellen aan PA-professionals?**

- Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs
- Voortgezet onderwijs
- Hoger beroepsonderwijs  
richting .....
- Universitair onderwijs  
richting .....
- Anders nl .....

**C – DE THUISORGANISATIE: Deze vragen hebben tot doel inzicht te krijgen in de plaats en de positie die PA in uw organisatie inneemt**

**C1 – enkele feiten over uw organisatie**

**23. Hoe bent u op dit moment werkzaam? (meerdere antwoorden mogelijk)**

- Als zelfstandig PA-professional
- Als zelfstandig PA-professional, tijdelijk elders gedetacheerd
- Voor een PA-adviesbureau
- Voor een PA-adviesbureau, tijdelijk elders gedetacheerd
- Als werknemer voor een organisatie (overheid)
- Als werknemer voor een organisatie (bedrijfsleven)

**24. Voor welke sectoren werkt u? (meerdere antwoorden mogelijk)**

<i>Bedrijfsleven</i>	<i>Overheid, NGO of semi-overheid</i>
<input type="radio"/> Chemie <input type="radio"/> Creatieve industrie <input type="radio"/> Energie <input type="radio"/> High-tech <input type="radio"/> Land- en tuinbouw <input type="radio"/> Levensmiddelen <input type="radio"/> Life sciences & Health <input type="radio"/> Logistiek	<input type="radio"/> Gemeente <input type="radio"/> Provincie <input type="radio"/> Rijk <input type="radio"/> ZBO <input type="radio"/> Non-profit organisatie (nationaal) <input type="radio"/> Non-profit organisatie (internationaal) <input type="radio"/> Anders, namelijk ..... <input type="radio"/> Niet van toepassing

<i>Bedrijfsleven</i>	<i>Overheid, NGO of semi-overheid</i>
<input type="radio"/> Metaal <input type="radio"/> Tabaksector <input type="radio"/> Utiliteitsbouw <input type="radio"/> Vervoer & Transport <input type="radio"/> Waterbouw <input type="radio"/> Wegenbouw <input type="radio"/> Wijnen, bier en sterke drank <input type="radio"/> Woningbouw <input type="radio"/> Anders, namelijk ..... <input type="radio"/> Niet van toepassing	

**25. Waar is het hoofdkantoor van uw organisatie gevestigd?**

- Europa
- Azië
- Noord-Amerika
- Zuid-Amerika
- Australië
- Afrika
- Midden-Oosten
- Niet van toepassing

**26. Hoe lang bestaat uw organisatie in de huidige vorm?**

..... jaar

**27. Hoeveel werknemers telt uw organisatie?**

- 1-50
- 50-100
- 100-250
- 250-500
- 500-750
- 750-1000
- meer dan 1000 werknemers

**28. Kunt u een schatting geven van de omvang van uw organisatie in financieel opzicht?**

- Begroting (overheid) € .....
- Omzet (bedrijfsleven) € .....
- Weet ik niet
- Wil ik niet zeggen

*C2 – Positionering van PA, intern (zelfstandig opererende PA-professionals hoeven deze vragen alleen in te vullen indien zij door hun opdrachtgever tijdelijk in de organisatie zijn ondergebracht; zo niet, dan overslaan en verder gaan onder D)*

**29. Waar is uw functie gepositioneerd?**

<i>Bedrijfsleven</i>	<i>Overheid</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="radio"/> Raad van Commissarissen (Supervisory Board)</li><li><input type="radio"/> Raad van Bestuur (Board)</li><li><input type="radio"/> Als professional RvB</li><li><input type="radio"/> Directie</li><li><input type="radio"/> Als professional directie</li><li><input type="radio"/> Beleidsafdeling .....</li><li><input type="radio"/> Extern consultant</li><li><input type="radio"/> Anders, namelijk</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="radio"/> Nabij bewindspersoon</li><li><input type="radio"/> Nabij Commissaris van de Koning</li><li><input type="radio"/> Nabij College van B&amp;W</li><li><input type="radio"/> Nabij gemeentesecretaris</li><li><input type="radio"/> Afdeling communicatie</li><li><input type="radio"/> Anders, namelijk .....</li></ul>

**30. Is er een aparte afdeling PA?**

- ja
- nee

**31. Hoeveel medewerkers heeft de afdeling PA?**

..... werknemers

**32. Als PA elders in de organisatie is ondergebracht, wat is dan de benaming van de afdeling die zich bezig houdt met PA?**

- Afdeling communicatie
- Directiestaf
- Staf Raad van Bestuur
- Anders, namelijk .....

**33. Hoeveel personen houden zich full-time/part-time met PA bezig?**

full-time ..... personen

part-time ..... personen

**34. Is er een separaat budget voor PA?**

ja / nee

**35. Zo ja, hoe groot is dat budget?**

€ .....

- Toelichting (desgewenst) .....
- Wil ik niet zeggen

## DUTCH PUBLIC AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS IN THE NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN POLITICAL ARENA: A SMART MIX OF SKILLS, ATTITUDE, AND KNOWLEDGE COMPETENCES

*Submitted for publication*

**Abstract:** Although the profession of Public Affairs (PA) is increasingly important for organizations, relatively little is known about the range of competences PA professionals need. This article presents a qualitative study among 41 experienced Dutch PA professionals and practitioners, who were interviewed about the competences needed in regional and local PA. The results show that a combination of skills-related, attitudinal, and knowledge-related competences is needed. Skills-related competences involve two broad domains: politics and communication. Attitudinal competences comprise the almost paradoxical qualities of authentic professionalism and flexibility. Knowledge-related competences comprise political and communicative knowledge. These competences are used in a delicate process of “swapping,” depending on the situation of the very moment and the PA file at hand. Every competence may be of decisive importance. The PA professional is a “silent” diplomat.

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

Public Affairs (PA) is gaining ground in the public sector in the Netherlands. Traditionally, governmental organizations would find themselves on the receiving end of PA activities, but nowadays many governmental organizations recognize that PA activities can be a useful means for them to promote their interests and get things done. In particular, regions and municipalities realize that PA can help them to reach the national and European political arenas and draw attention to regional and local issues and interests. PA is a managerial tool that can be used to influence processes of political decision-making in the national and European arena (Marx, 1990; Van Schendelen, 2013: 15-24, 60).

The PA profession these decentralized governmental bodies are entering is hard to demarcate (Harris & Moss, 2001<sup>ab</sup>; Schuler, 2002). In general terms, PA may be described as “a strategic management discipline, directed to the political, administrative realm the organization is functioning in or is going to function in” (Linders & De Lange, 2003: 17). According to McGrath, Moss, and Harris (2010) and Van Schendelen (2013: 15-24), the problems of demarcating PA can be attributed to ongoing dynamics in society, which are continuously “modelling” the public and private sector (Van de Donk, 2014).

Earlier research shows that the effective use of PA by decentralized governments involves many challenges, such as preparing the home organization for the use of PA (chapter 3), forging regional and public-private collaborations (chapter 4), and accessing the complex, highly competitive, and not always susceptible national and European political arenas (chapter 2). Considering that PA professionals have to act on various stages with highly relevant but often vaguely demarcated objectives, it is no wonder that questions arise about the expertise of PA professionals. What are the competences PA professionals must bring to the job?

In an earlier study in this dissertation (chapter 5) we addressed this question using a survey among PA professionals. The results showed a wide variety among PA professionals, both in educational background and in competences, and a long list of competences PA professionals must develop. In this article, we take a qualitative approach to answer the question more in detail, while focusing on

the context of local and regional PA. We interviewed prolific and seasoned PA professionals and practitioners, who all had participated in the domain of regional and local PA in various roles, about the competences that are crucial for the PA professional.

### 6.1.1 Earlier Research into PA and PR Competences

Earlier research provides some clues for an inventory of PA competences. Fleisher (2007) argued for the need of a Public Affairs Body of Knowledge, and put the identification, description, and measurement of PA competences high on the academic research agenda. Still, most of the work on professional competences involves the adjacent public relations (PR) discipline.

Sha (2011) described a large-scale survey among PR practitioners focusing on their daily practices, and distinguished the following competences:

- Research, planning, implementation, and evaluation of PR programs
- PR ethics & legal issues
- Application of communication models and theories to PR work projects
- Incorporation of business literacy skills into PR duties
- Management skills and issues
- Crisis communication management
- Media relations
- Use of information technology & new media channels
- Application of historical knowledge of the field of PR to work projects
- Use of advanced communication skills

Three things stand out when considering this listing from a PA perspective. First, the PR profession seems to be defined as a typical and traditional communication discipline, whereas PA professionals often operate at the crossroads of communication and governance/politics (Fiege, Gosselt, Linders, & De Jong, 2016<sup>ab</sup>; see chapter 4). Second, the strategic aspects of the daily work of PA professionals, manoeuvring between their home organization and various political arenas, do not seem to be satisfactorily covered by these competences. Third, competences seem to be defined as academic sub domains rather than as requirements of the professionals.

Flynn (2014) conducted a literature review of PR competences, broadening the gamut proposed by Sha (2011), and directing the PR competencies even more in the direction of more or less general academic competences:

- ICT (information and communication technology) competency
- Cultural competence
- Communication skills
- Ethics
- Strategic planning/ Strategizing
- Business acumen
- Analytic/ Evaluation/ Measurement competency
- Leadership
- Crisis management
- Relationship management/building competency

Davidson (2015), studying PA in the context of PR scholarship and referring to De Lange & Linders (2006), argued that PA “has been observed as higher status strategic work and that specialists are more than mere technicians but professionals who wield influence in shaping internal and external realities for an organization” (p. 615). PR and PA should be separated, Davidson concluded, also referring to the ongoing debate concerning the definition of PA, which “may be still in a state of flux” (p. 615).

Gregory (2008) conducted qualitative research into the competences of senior communication professionals in the private and public sector. Her results seem to reflect the strategic and political competences needed in PA practice more than the aforementioned studies. She found the following ten core competences for professionals in the public sector:

- Understanding the bigger picture
- Consulting and involving
- Managing under pressure
- Upholding the reputation of the service
- Presenting and communicating
- Taking action
- Building strong relationships

- Formulating strategies and concepts
- Persuading and influencing
- Creating and innovating

Although formulated in rather general terms, these competences appear to incorporate both the strategic and the hands-on work involved in PA practice. However, the competences are only implicitly related to knowledge, attitudes, and skills of the PA professional.

More specifically, McGrath (2006) conducted extensive research into the personal competences for what he is calling “the ideal lobbyist.” According to this study, a lobbyist should be a good listener and observant. He also mentions courtesy, relationship skills, honesty and integrity/credibility as important personal traits. It should be noted that this study was limited to one aspect of PA (lobbying) and one competence domain (personal characteristics).

A comprehensive study into PA competences so far was by Figuee, Gosselt, Linders and De Jong (2016; see chapter 5), who conducted a survey among Dutch PA professionals about relevant competences. They distinguished knowledge, attitude, and skills-related competences, and operationalized each in many different aspects (see Table 1). The results showed that all competences were considered to be important or very important by the PA professionals. Interestingly, the PA professionals often were more critical of their own qualities than of the importance of the competences. Overall, the study showed that there are many competences involved in the PA profession. It is hard to differentiate the crucial from the less important competences. That is why we complement these findings with a qualitative study into the PA competences spontaneously mentioned by prolific PA professionals and practitioners.

Table 1. Competences distinguished Figuee et al., 2016

Competence cluster	Sub categories
<b>Knowledge</b>	Knowledge about national and international societal developments; Knowledge about processes in decision-making in the public sector on the national / regional / local / EU level; Professional knowledge; Knowledge about new media; Knowledge about media logics; Knowledge about the opinions in the home organization about PA
<b>Attitude</b>	Reliability; Adaptability; Authenticity; Personal involvement with PA files; Critical attitude; Withstanding stress; Loyalty toward the interests of the home organization; Reputation management by customer- or civilian-oriented behavior; Acceptance of irregular working hours; Integrity
<b>Skills</b>	Expertise in long-term (strategic) and short-term (tactic) activities; Social expertise; Networking; Empathy; Ability to acquire support for current PA files; Persuasive power; Ability to bear sole responsibility; Pragmatism; Oral and written language skills; Ability to analyze data; Seniority; Ability to influence media; Constructive (win-win) and competitive (win-lose) negotiation skills

## 6.2 METHOD

To answer the research question, a series of interviews were held with seasoned PA professionals and practitioners working for and in governmental organizations, with ample experience on the local, regional, national, and European levels. These interviews served multiple purposes. In addition to the competences reported in this article, they also addressed the workings of the national and European arena, the relationship to the home organization, and the external collaborations required for PA (Figuee, Gosselt, Linders & De Jong, 2016<sup>ab</sup>).

### 6.2.1 Participants

The recruitment of prolific PA professionals and practitioners involved snowball sampling, described by Noy (2008: 340) as “effective in the research of organic social networks.” In total, 41 participants were interviewed. The group consisted of 17 PA professionals and 24 PA practitioners. The 17 PA professionals worked in the public sector (e.g., highly placed officials entrusted with PA accounts), or in the private sector (e.g., stand-alone PA consultants, or employees of PA agencies or companies with substantial links to local or regional governments). The 24 PA practitioners worked for municipalities and provinces, like mayors, aldermen, city clerks, local or provincial civil servants temporarily or indirectly connected with PA (municipals and provinces), Commissioners of the King (provinces), Deputies (provinces), Members of Parliament (with outspoken regional roots), and Members of the European Parliament (also with outspoken regional roots).

Most of the PA practitioners had occupied more than two of the mentioned functions, often for many years. They started for instance a career as alderman, mayor, then Commissioner of the King, then M(E)P, then minister or state secretary, or the other way round. Some of the interviewed persons – of local and regional authorities – were or had been also member of a local or regional council. Summing up all functions, in figures: 32 functions at the municipal level (also regional in case of municipal cooperation), 26 functions at the provincial level (also regional in case of provincial cooperation), 23 functions at the national level, and 12 functions at the European level, altogether 93 functions. The age of the interviewees ranged between 40 and 60 years; 34 of the 41 interviewees were male.

### 6.2.2 Interview Protocols

The interview protocols had an open-ended nature, and gave the participants the opportunity to elaborate on their professional experiences. Each interview started with questions about the political and administrative landscape of the national and European arena. Then questions followed about the home organization, related to internal and external aspects of organizing PA, and about competences of the PA professional and the PA practitioner. In all three parts of the interviews participants talked a lot about PA competences.

The interviews were held in a location chosen by the participants: mostly in municipal offices, provincial offices, company offices, offices of the Dutch House of Parliament, the national press-office, or elsewhere in The Hague or Brussels. As many of the participants had prolific positions in society, and the topics discussed could involve political sensitivity, absolute confidentiality and anonymity was guaranteed to them. In all interviews participants felt sufficiently safe to talk very openly about their views and experiences. All interviews lasted about 90 minutes, and were audio recorded (with the participants’ permission). The interviews with the last participants started to show repeating elements in the data.

### 6.2.3 Coding and Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The first step in the analysis was that the first author derived key phrases from the interview transcripts. This led to a total of 1003 key phrases. These key phrases were then checked against the interview transcripts by three independent coders. Of the 1.003 key phrases, 75.6% were confirmed without any changes. The remaining key phrases needed discussion, and eventually some of them were (partially) reformulated, some were split into different key phrases, and some key phrases were added. The result was a total of 1050 key phrases.

The next step involved the identification of competence-related key phrases. Two independent coders categorized all 1050 key phrases using the four main categories (national and European arena, home organization, external collaboration, and competences). They reached a Cohen’s kappa of .72. This resulted in a total of 110 key phrases that related to PA competences. A closer inspection of the interviews showed that interviewees in fact referred to several competences at the same time in single words. We decided to separate them, which led to a total of 457 competence statements.

The 457 competence statements were first categorized into knowledge, skills, and attitudinal competences. Then, using principles of Grounded Theory, specific sub categories emerged. This resulted in six categories of competences. Two coders independently coded a random sample of 113 competence statements, and reached a Cohen’s kappa of .76. After reaching agreement about initially different codings and adjusting the code descriptions, the first author coded the remaining competence statements.

Skills-related competences were defined as the technical and strategic abilities PA professionals need in their work. Two sub categories emerged here: political skills (abilities to develop long-term and short-term PA operations), and communicative skills (abilities to effectively compose PA messages and manage interactions and relationships). Attitudinal competencies were defined as dispositional characteristics PA professionals need in their work. Two sub categories emerged: authentic professionalism and flexibility. Knowledge-related competences were defined as the factual knowledge and understanding PA professionals need in their work. Two sub categories of knowledge-related competences emerged from our data: political knowledge (about the functioning of political arenas), and communicative knowledge (about (new) media and media logics, and PA as a discipline).

## 6.3 RESULTS

Table 2 gives an overview of the distribution of the 457 competence statements over the three competence clusters and the six sub categories. Based on these figures some interesting observations can be made. First, skills-related competences appeared to be most frequently mentioned (242 key phrases), followed by attitudinal competences (130 key phrases), and knowledge-related competences (85 key phrases). Second, within the knowledge cluster, political competences play a dominant role, whereas communicative competences outnumber the political competences in the skills cluster. We will qualitatively discuss the results per competence cluster below.

**Table 2.** Distribution of key phrases (N=457) over competence clusters and sub categories

Competence cluster	Sub categories
<b>Skills (242)</b>	Political (85)
	Communicative (157)
<b>Attitude (130)</b>	Authentic professionalism (71)
	Flexibility (59)
<b>Knowledge (65)</b>	Political (45)
	Communicative (20)

### 6.3.1 Skills-related competences

Within the important cluster of skills-related competences, a distinction could be made between political and communicative skills.

Regarding political skills participants first and foremost mentioned a general political sensitivity (“political antenna and political intuition”) PA professionals need. This was specified in divergent ways. PA professionals should be able to “think pro-actively, conceptually, and out-of-the-box” to develop political pressure at the right moments. They must be “analytic and strategic, able to negotiate, and distinguish headlines from sidelines.” They can “think on abstract levels,” and position themselves in the role of “permanent advisor,” for instance by creating reciprocity in the national and European arena (“bringing in something and getting back something”), and activating their regional and local contacts by “being creative and original.” In the words of one of the participants:

*It is essential that the PA professional can judge and review PA files, in order to look for stakeholders who may be helpful to develop political processes of influencing.*

Political skills are especially important at “peak moments in the political arenas,” when messages come together. This refers to a specific PA competence, namely, “being in control of continuity by matching and merging PA messages.” At such moments only professionals who have the overview will recognize relevant cross-connections, “either putting them in the spotlight, or keeping them in the shadow.” The PA professional is not a politician, but should have similar competences.

*The PA professional must be able to look beyond the issues of the day, [...] putting PA issues in a short-list in order to start initiatives at the right moment with the right information, knowing that the shortest distance between two points is not always a straight line, [...] recognizing iterative processes [...] Balancing issues and interests is more than knowing facts and figures [...] It is the ability to create continuity.*

Regarding communicative skills, many different aspects were mentioned. The most prominent competences involved the handling of large amounts of (complex) information, crafting messages, building and maintaining relationships, and connecting people:

*The PA professional is a connector of relations and a collector of information, a “liaison-officer”, and a multiform networker, contacting people easily and maintaining relations, boosting relevant initiatives, keeping formal affairs informal, with the ability to listen.*

Some participants explicitly connected the information handling and the relationship building with each other. In their view, connecting means “being a sparring partner by serving politicians and civil servants, and by sharing thoughts, opinions and insights.” PA professionals may to some extent be “guiding” their political and administrative contacts, providing them with information about the political arenas. As one participant said:

*In PA operations, the PA professional is the linking pin, controlling not only external but also internal relationships, adaptive for others’ specifications and interests, conscious of political and regional surroundings, [...] finding the right tone of voice [...], and willing to share information, also in the home organization with relevant colleagues at relevant policy levels.*

Regional and local PA professionals must have specific antennas to maintain cooperation with external parties, despite the weight of their home organization’s interests and despite the burden of possibly opposite interests of cooperation partners:

*They must be able to accept and respect opposite opinions of stakeholders and nevertheless maintain the relationship [...] informing their partners in PA operations about the goals of their operations, or explaining why they cannot participate in an operation.*

Regarding networking skills, participants mentioned many different characteristics, referring to “a highly developed social ability, to be accepted at all levels, at the pantry and the coffee-corner as well in the boardroom, gaining respect and authority.” The professional is, in the words of a participant:

*...creating entrances to the regional private sector [...] in governmental, societal and educational institutes, in the national and European arenas, [...] they should be easily accessible [...], open for cooperation, [...] They are multi-language speaking, [...] love*

*to be amongst the people [...] are able to get along with many persons [...], from time to time a storyteller, but never telling too long stories [...].*

Negotiating is an important aspect in PA. Participants mentioned various communicative skills that make the difference in negotiations. One participant summarized these as follows:

*He/she must be able to look for solutions, but also – if necessary – be persuasive, and be able to frame [...] He/she has the ability to build bridges and maintain them, to selectively inform, to know the difference between being right and proving right [...], including the difference between lying and not telling the whole truth.*

Besides the abovementioned competences participants made clear that the job of a PA professional is all about communication. A broad range of general communicative skills were mentioned. As one of the participants put it, the PA professional should be:

*[...] a rapid reader [...], a reliable reporter in oral and written language [...], a people’s person, male or female, more listening than talking to people, also to ‘ordinary’ people [...] having the power to adapt other interests to a certain extent, looking for support in finding solutions [...] for the regional or local PA professional him/herself and for the decentralized governments he/she is representing in the national and European arena [...] it is important to be a soundboard, to recognize people’s interests and opinions, even when these opinions are oppositional. [...] At the end of the day the PA professional should be held accountable for his/her ability to gain support for PA files. That’s it.*

### 6.3.2 Attitudinal competences

Regarding attitudinal competences, two almost paradoxical clusters emerged from the interviews. On the one hand participants underlined the importance of authentic professionalism (“being who you are”); on the other hand, they stressed the crucial role of flexibility, since circumstances may change any moment in PA.

With respect to authentic professionalism, almost all participants mentioned loyalty to the home organization and reliability on facts and figures as important characteristics of PA professionals:

*They should be open and honest about his home organization and its interests, [...] but at the same time be prudent, discrete, and self-assured, [...] faithful to their message despite objections from others, [...] and always keep their promises.”*  
*When a promise nevertheless cannot be kept, “tell it, explain it, be honest, [...] it is of ultimate importance to safeguard your reputation.*

Within the political arenas, PA professionals should be able to show independence towards their political surroundings, and safeguard their personal integrity and honesty.

*He/she should be open and honest about personal political opinions, without having personal political goals and ambitions.*

Within their home organization, PA professionals must be comfortable with their informal position, and willing to work on relationships of mutual respect with officials and colleagues:

*Respecting the position, knowledge, and skills of the officials and colleagues is empowering the position of the PA professional in the home organization. [...] He facilitates them [with arena information].*

In line with this informal position, PA professionals should be prepared to play a role in the background. At the end of the day, they should be willing to set the stage for the officials, without taking credit for their achievements.

*They should not have the urge to personal profiling, by making themselves important and manoeuvring themselves in the spotlight; they should not overshadow officials.*

Still, PA professionals must not be afraid to behave “glamorously from time to time.” After all, they are the representatives of their home organization in the political arenas, committed to draw attention for the interests of their home organization. They should be known in relevant circles, and for that reason be “extravert.”

Finally, PA professionals should have a genuine interest in people and in socializing, and have a warm and honest personality:

*They should like people, [...] show societal engagement, [...] be sensitive, [...] authentic, [...] accessible [...] dare to show uncertainty, [...] be a pleasant, open and friendly person to talk with, [...] no arrogance.*

With respect to flexibility, participants often referred to sudden situational changes in the political dynamics that PA operations are confronted with. Remarkable is the wide range of characteristics participants mentioned to express the importance of flexibility, without abandoning “who you are.” Participants mentioned:

*Being empathetic and resilient, withstanding stress, having patience, being able to use their antennas for compromising and to operate with speed, but remaining friendly under all circumstances.*

*At peak moments the PA professional should love to develop short-term PA activities in no time [...] He/she should be a crisis manager.*

Being flexible also refers to the ability to maintain a constructive and positive mood and modus operandi under all circumstances. PA professionals must be able to “accept and endure, and to stay involved in the case, accepting [possible] consequences.” From a political perspective, being flexible also means “give and take.” In all situations, PA professionals must “know how to behave, be decent and modest, and keep their sense of humor.”

*The PA professional should be able to avoid problems, know when to keep his/her mouth shut, should not behave like a know-all, be clever, be informal at formal moments, not over-focused [...] accept to not always taste the honor after victory.*

Participants mentioned other manifestations of flexibility as well. PA professionals should be neutral, and careful with quick judgments, should work hard at irregular working hours, and, depending on situation and subject-matter, avoid “going where the path may lead, [which means] borderless thinking, up to do fieldwork... positioning yourself in such a way that personal political affiliations are meaningless.”

*The PA professional is permanently present in the political arenas, adapting his/her political surroundings but not allowing him/herself to become cocooned, [...] remaining friends despite opposite interests, being able to adjudge the victory to opposite colleagues [...] The PA professional should have 'female characteristics,' like multi-tasking, and being fast in switching between subjects.*

### 6.3.3 Knowledge-related competences

Participants considered political knowledge and communicative knowledge not as synonyms, but emphasized that in their daily work both knowledge domains are mixed up: Functioning in the political arenas is impossible without both knowledge-related competences. Participants said: "Having affinity with regional affairs is having professional knowledge," like institutional knowledge about political arenas, about the media, and also about the home organization (considered to be an arena as well) is for granted, participants argued. "The embedding of PA as policy in the home organization is essential." Being "behind the curtains" as co-author in political resolutions, arena knowledge is required in all imaginable aspects, like reading legislative texts, knowing the processes of law-making, and knowing that the House of Parliament cannot function without reliable information.

*The PA professional must have real interest in political decision-making", [should] "follow sent PA messages all day in the national and European arena, [...and...] internalize mutual connections of political institutions, in the national arena and in the European arena as well [...] Studying European law is discovering that European law-making has its own dynamics. That is why the regional or local PA professional should know the day-to-day practice of working in the European arena.*

Participants mentioned various specific elements regarding knowledge-related competences, especially when decentralized governments work on PA files with societal partners (e.g., hospitals, companies, or educational institutes). In such collaborations, regional or local PA professionals may expect their "societal" colleagues to have comparable knowledge at their disposal. Participants "mirrored" decentralized PA competences with PA competences of societal partners. PA professionals of societal partners should have the political and institutional knowledge as well; otherwise fruitful collaboration is impossible.

When the region is situated along the border with Germany and/or Belgium, PA professionals need to know the Euregional facts and figures, and the characteristics of the German and/or Belgian political arenas in Berlin and Brussels as well, and connect this knowledge with their knowledge about the Dutch national and European arena.

*Having knowledge about (regional) history, about political processes, about regional projects is essential for regional and local PA. He/she must know the economic facts and figures at the regional level [...which means that...] the PA professional knows how to manage relevant issues for his/her PA operations.*

PA professionals should have all-round knowledge of politics and administration, "even of behavioral rites and rituals in the national arena." Some participants plead that some practical political experience can be very helpful. After all, they should be able to do their work in the political arenas on their own, without the assistance colleagues may offer each other in the home organization.

*He/she should be top-notch, the best we have, even better than we [politicians] are, [...] He/she is not a specialist but a curious generalist with a large orientation also in opposite disagreeing circles, [preferable be] "an alpha person, [...] at least addicted to politics.*

## 6.4 DISCUSSION

In this study, we used the qualitative approach of interviews to investigate the competences required of PA professionals. Our research focused specifically on regional and local PA, which is gaining importance in the governance of municipalities, regions, and provinces in the Netherlands.

Based on our interviews, six clusters of competences emerged. In the skills-related competences, we distinguished between political skills and communicative skills. Political skills encompassed all abilities necessary to develop PA strategies and tactics. Many of these skills related to intuition and creative, analytic and synthetic thinking. Communicative skills covered all abilities that are necessary to get messages across (including framing), to interact effectively, and to build

constructive relationships. In the attitudinal competences, we distinguished between dispositions relating to authentic professionalism and dispositions relating to flexibility. There is a potential tension between the two attitudinal competences (being who you are and at the same time being flexible). Authentic professionalism refers to loyalty with the home organization, honesty and openness, suitability for the very specific PA role (characterized by having much influence in a largely informal job with vague boundaries, often not in the spotlight), and a genuine interest in people. Flexibility refers to the ability to handle quickly changing environments and circumstances, and to keep a positive and constructive mood and approach irrespective of the circumstances. In the knowledge-related competences we distinguished between political and communicative knowledge (just like in the skills-related cluster). Political knowledge involves the way the political arenas work; communicative knowledge refers to knowledge about media logics and knowledge about PA as a professional discipline.

As such, our findings confirm the multifaceted nature of PA competences, as found in the survey-based study of Figuee et al. (2016, see chapter 5). More than that analytical approach, and the approaches of other studies in the PR and communication domains (Flynn, 2014; Gregory, 2008; Sha, 2011), however, our study shows that the various competences are often strongly related to each other. This is the case within the six clusters we distinguished, but also between different clusters. To give some examples: Political and communicative knowledge are strongly interwoven; political skills generally require political knowledge; and many of the communicative skills are strongly connected to the attitudinal competences of authentic professionalism and flexibility. This further complicates the overall picture: Not only do PA professionals have to master a wide variety of competences, but these competences also seem to be interconnected. Based on our interviews with PA practitioners and professionals, the competences seem to be far removed from the academic domains that seem to underlie earlier studies (Flynn, 2014; Sha, 2011).

Another important observation is that the field of PA is basically rooted in the academic fields of political science and communication science. Both in the skills-related and in the knowledge-related competences, the two domains are strongly represented. This appears to be a major difference with the related

discipline of PR, which is predominantly defined as a communication discipline. Many of the differences between earlier studies into PR competences (Flynn, 2014, Sha, 2011) and our findings may be attributed to this overall difference in disciplinary backgrounds between the two disciplines.

A third observation is that skills appear to be more important than knowledge in the PA profession. This is not to say that knowledge is not important. It is clear that many of the skills described require basic knowledge. For instance, a political antenna without sufficient arena knowledge would add up to little more than a gut feeling or fortune-telling qualities. But our research makes it more than clear that – on top of the required knowledge competences – skills deserve a lot of attention.

A final observation involves the prominent role of attitudinal competences. Like earlier research by McGrath (2006) suggests, the personality and disposition of the PA professional are very important. Due to the vague boundaries of the PA discipline, the predominant social aspects of the work, and the dynamics of the context in which the PA professional has to operate, the personal and professional attitudes of the PA professional play an important role. In the attitudinal-competences domain, it remains to be seen to what extent the required competences can be learned in professional or academic education, or can be traced back to general personality traits of people.

Our findings have several implications for academic PA education. First, it seems recommendable to develop multidisciplinary PA programs, which at the very least incorporate both the fields of political science and communication science. Programs that are rooted in only one of the two disciplines will almost by definition overlook crucial aspects of the discipline. Second, it is important that the attention for knowledge-related competences – which traditionally gets much emphasis in academic educational programs – is sufficiently complemented with attention for skills-related and attitudinal competences. Third, given the complexity and versatility of the PA profession, it seems plausible that the real expertise comes with experience in practice. Therefore it seems desirable to complement basic academic education with initiatives of continuous education, intervention, and exchange.

Of course some important limitations of our research must be taken into account. First, our findings are based on the opinions of prolific PA professionals and practitioners. There is no external proof that their views on relevant competences are the real critical success factors for PA professionals. However, we saw quite some convergence in the narratives of the participants, even though they used different formulations. Second, the participants were not triggered to reflect on specific competences, but mentioned the various competences spontaneously. This may be a weakness of the research, as participants may have accidentally forgotten to mention certain competences, but can also be seen as a strength, as the participants were not guided to name any competences. In this respect, the design of our study complements the earlier survey-based study by Figee et al. (2016, see chapter 5). Finally, it should be noted that the numbers of times competence clusters were mentioned may only be somewhat indicative of their weight; our findings should primarily be seen as qualitative results.

In all, our study shows that the PA professional should be a person of many talents. (Subnational) PA is qualified diplomacy, preferable not visible, but certainly serving and always “on the spot,” requiring a broad spectrum of interrelated competences in skills, attitude and knowledge. In that order.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The insights that our five empirical studies offer regarding regional and local PA can be summarized by the key terms “fighting” and “cooperation”. Fighting is needed to get support for PA operations, not only in the national and European political arena, but also in the municipal and provincial home organization as well as in the region, where PA is not yet fully common and sometimes still needs to be introduced. This makes the home organization an arena as well as well as the own region. Cooperation is the second key term; both inside and outside the home organization. Within the office, relevant colleagues and departments need to be involved in PA operations, but also outside the office in order to obtain support for PA operations. In this final chapter, the most prominent findings of the studies conducted will be summarized first. Second, the theoretical contributions will be discussed, followed by the practical contributions. Then, the limitations of the studies will be outlined, and this chapter ends with some final conclusions regarding regional and local PA.

## 7.1. MAIN FINDINGS

In this section, the headlines of the results will be discussed concerning the national and European political arena (chapter 2), the internal and external organization of PA in the home organization (chapters 3 and 4), and the professional profiling of PA (chapters 5 and 6).

### 7.1.1. Chapter 2: How to gain ground in the national and European arena

How decentralized governments gain ground in the national and European arena to draw attention for their interests is a story of “fighting” against arena characteristics. In the national arena, regional and local governments have to fight against centralization tendencies, because the national government wants to keep financial reigns. Furthermore, decentralized governments have to fight against a dominant non-regional attitude in the national political arena. High-profiled regions, such as the Randstad, may break through this to a certain extent. Moreover, at the national level, attention for regional issues is mostly only given in cases of social misery or disasters. Furthermore, policy at national level is often influenced by European legislation, including regional policy, which may be connected with European program funding. Compared to the national political arena, the European arena is more susceptible to regional issues. But here, PA professionals and PA practitioners have to fight against dominance of national interests and of other member states. Since regional policy at the European level focuses on “strong sectors” instead of “weak regions”, regional and local PA have a money-driven attitude that is comparable to PA in the private sector.

To overcome these arena characteristics, regional and local governments are looking for cooperation opportunities, but because they are afraid to undermine their own interests, regional and local cooperation tends to be underdeveloped in the arenas. In the national arena, this cooperation is based on cost reduction or on specific themes. In the European arena, there is more institutional cooperation (e.g., in the Committee of the Regions), but also occasional (institutional) cooperation, as provinces are doing. However, prioritization of own interests remains dominant, which in the end undermines regional and local cooperation.

### 7.1.2. Chapter 3: The home front: internal organization of PA

Before entering the national and European political arena, PA should be accepted in the municipal and provincial home organization as an instrument to build PA messages in order to get attention in these arenas. The PA professional, supported by the political and administrative board of the home organization (i.e., the municipal, regional, and provincial administrations and offices), has to reduce internal ignorance concerning PA in order to create acceptance of PA on the shop floor, and has to expand this acceptance to the (relevant) collectivities (i.e., mostly departments) in the home organization. Consequently, individual acceptance creates collective acceptance in the organization. Collective acceptance then stimulates regional acceptance by involving (future) stakeholders as supporting participants in PA operations. Conversely, collective acceptance also stimulates internal support for the decentralized government as political owner of the PA operation. This is a step-by-step process of sense-making, necessary to develop future PA operations in the national and European arena. Furthermore, continuity is an absolute condition of keeping PA operations running. Continuity can be achieved by connecting regional and local issues with national and European issues, but this demands (1) a vision regarding the future of the home organization, and (2) cooperation inside the home organization and eventually also cooperation with neighboring relevant private or public regional partners, in order to empower the weight of regional and local PA messages in the arenas with their support. Continuity as characterized here, leads to improvement of the knowledge in the home organization regarding decision-making processes and procedures in the political arenas.

### 7.1.3. Chapter 4: On the battlefield: how decentral PA is organized in the national and European arena

When regional and local governments decide to enter the national and European political arena, PA operations should be organized and questions of how to respond to arena characteristics should be answered. Cooperation is the key term here. Despite regional and local cooperation in the national and European political arena, which is considered to be indispensable to gain a position, the following undermine cooperation at the regional and local level, including cooperation with regional and local stakeholders: (1) dominance of mostly money-driven own interests, (2) municipal and regional scale differences, (3) competition and opposition between municipalities and between provinces,

and finally (4) the aforementioned lack of (European) arena knowledge. When decentral cooperation is materialized nevertheless in the European arena, this cooperation is mostly thematic and/or occasional. And if cooperation is hampered, arena knowledge, generally experienced as a missing link in decentral PA at the European level, cannot be shared. “Europeans in body and soul” amongst regional and local PA representatives in the European arena are considered to be important for regional and local PA. PA professionals working in the European arena can mostly be regarded as “European in body and soul”, but they know that the European Union is not an attractive theme in regional and local elections to strengthen political positions, which may reduce their enthusiasm to participate in European PA dossiers.

In the national arena, which is less susceptible to regional issues than the European arena (see chapter 2), regional and local cooperation is different to a certain extent. Cooperation in the European arena is to be characterized as catch-as-catch-can, because of regional and local money-driven attitudes. In the national arena, which is experienced as more nearby, regional and local cooperation is based on living apart together, and characterized as “denying administrative borders”. But then (in the view of the aforementioned prioritization of own interests), the question of how to create differentiation may become relevant: to focus on interests by social-cultural, folkloristic characteristics or by regional thematic cooperation, or both? The approach of denying administrative borders especially offers municipalities an escape from debates about municipal merging and upscaling.

#### 7.1.4. Chapters 5 and 6: Professional profiling

In the last studies in this dissertation, the professional profiling of PA was investigated by exploring the demographics of the PA professional, the competences they should possess, and the self-evaluation of PA professionals concerning these competences.

Skills-related, attitudinal, and knowledge-related competences are seen as the main qualities of PA professionals, and in this order. PA professionals consider themselves authentic and involved PA practitioners, and the social component is of utmost importance in their daily work: A combination of strategic and social skills seems to increase the perceived receptiveness to their dossiers. Further,

knowing your home organization as well as the arenas that you will enter is essential, but at the same time, it appears that other knowledge is lacking and needs improvement. Although in general, a left-liberal attitude includes a pro-Europe attitude in the Netherlands, it may be surprising that the left-liberal orientation of more than three-quarters of the PA professionals does not include highly developed EU knowledge, which is considered a PA competence. PA professionals are mainly focused on the national political arena and on the home organization. Further, in the category of skill competences, PA professionals are focused on social expertise. Finally, reliability and integrity are considered to be the main attitude competences.

In day-to-day work in the political arenas and also in the home organization (including the regional arena where stakeholders may be interested in local and provincial interests), PA professionals swap and mix their competences permanently. PA professionals are operating like politicians. However, the PA professional should remain “behind the curtains, not in the spotlights”. The PA professional is a modest person, living “in the shadow of power”, knowing the roads to take in order to support his regional and local politicians and his colleagues in the home organization, involving them at the right moment, and keeping cool heads. In other words, regional and local PA demand diplomacy and preferably invisibility, accessibility, and presence “on the spot”, 24 hours a day and seven days a week.

## 7.2. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The main question of this research was how PA could be used in regional and local administrations with a focus on the national and European political arena. As stated in the Introduction chapter, since PA has become a topic in academic research, most studies have been directed to lobby venues, to decision-makers and the lobby strategy of these decision-makers, and to policy influence. Very few focused on “how interest groups mobilize at EU level and maintain their organizations’ support” (Bunea & Baumgartner, 2014: 1421). Further, McGrath (2008) stated how continuous change in societal and political playing fields is forcing PA professionals to adapt to that change, which may frustrate the defining of PA on the one hand, but may sharpen professional capabilities to communicate

PA messages on the floor of the political arenas on the other hand. In a very general sense, this dissertation adds to theory in three distinctive ways: (1) the role and functioning of PA in another social order; (2) the importance of cooperation in PA dossiers; and (3) the identification of PA competences.

### 7.2.1. Another social order

In his analyses, Van Doorn (2009) described how, in the decades after the Second World War, religious and sociopolitical barriers slowly became dismantled; the old, familiar, religiously oriented, paternalistic pillars of “own” institutions, each guarding and defending the interests of their members and “feeding” the political arenas, lost connections with their societal roots. Van Doorn pointed at Ortega Y Gasset’s (Ed. 2015) predicting observations, written in the thirties of the 20th century, about how men are going to strive for keeping own interests and overcoming alienating, political dominances. The findings as described in the empirical chapters in this dissertation (especially chapters 2, 3, and 4) are in line with the societal analyses as mentioned by Van Doorn, regarding the rise and organization of regional and local PA. More specifically, this social disorder, as noticed by Van Doorn (2009), created space for regional and local governments to take over and to carry “set-free” civilian interests that were no longer guarded by the traditional societal pillars. This takeover may underline Baumgartner’s Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (1993; 2009), because the ongoing devolution of national tasks and powers to decentral level in the seventies and eighties put regional and local governments in the position to claim attention not only for own decentralized governmental and administrative interests, but also for societal interests at the regional and local level: Another social “order” was created.

At the European level, the diversity in the constitutional frameworks of the EU member states and frustrating PA processes at the regional, Euregional, and local level underline Habermas’ (2012) essay on this aspect that stated that as long as these frameworks are still causing frictions, cooperation will stagnate. This is also in line with the analyses of McLeod (1999) and McLeod and Goodwin (1999), who described how constitutional, administrative, and organizational aspects may dominate PA operations. Despite these challenges, decentralized cooperation – in regional and local circles considered to be of ultimate importance to gain ground in the European political arena – is growing to a certain extent. And there is no choice, probably because of the growing weight of social components in

European policy, as pointed out by Berkel in 1998, and also in Dutch policy where processes of devolution load decentralized governments with tasks and powers connected with social care.

### 7.2.2. Cooperation

As a first step, the municipal and provincial home organization has to embed PA, i.e., internal organizational aspects of regional and local PA. It may be clear that the relevant department management and the PA professional in the political arenas have to fulfil a role to influence the attitude of the home organization towards PA. The main goal here is to get PA accepted by relevant colleagues in order to send the PA message into the arenas successfully, in fulfilling the assignment of the political board. Second, next to the internal organization of PA, the home organization has to organize PA operations in the national and European political arena, i.e., the external organizational aspects of regional and local PA. The home organization should explore if cooperation with regional partners (e.g., neighboring municipalities or neighboring provinces) could strengthen the position in the arenas. Because of hesitations regarding subnational cooperation (as cooperation may undermine own interests), subnational cooperation has not fully developed yet. However, the more intense a cooperation is, the more effective subnational PA operations can be. This is common sense in the circle of PA practitioners. Municipal and provincial governments in the Netherlands are cooperating in all kinds of subjects, more than ever before, but this cooperation is predominantly focused on cost reductions. Furthermore, many of these cooperation activities concern so-called “functional regions” (i.e., thematic municipal cooperation in fire departments, safety, infrastructure, health care). Structures of such functional collaborations are only of local value and hardly exist when the same subnational governments are asking the national and European arenas to pay attention to their needs. For such operations, explicit political cooperation is required. However, this is currently not highly developed at the subnational level. The roots of this non-cooperation attitude remain unclear.

Our findings underline the observations of Seinstra and Sietsma (2012) and of Kiers (2014) that show how, outside the municipal and provincial offices, decentralized governments and administrations indeed have to strengthen their position by cooperation, i.e., in the region and in the national and European

political arenas, besides the collective, institutional cooperation they already have because of their national associations VNG and IPO. To come to decentralized cooperation besides the municipal and provincial associations, money-driven considerations are dominating, not only linked with EU programming, as pointed out in this dissertation, but also linked to cost reduction, underlining the analyses of Bel and Warner (2014). Municipal and provincial cooperation, as found in this dissertation, is mostly functional and/or thematic, in line with multi-level governance (e.g., Marks, Hooghe & Black, 1996; Hooghe & Marks, 1996), where common, mutual interests are stimulating instruments (Figuee, Gosselt, Linders & De Jong, 2016<sup>ab</sup>). The studies presented in this dissertation underline the rise of thematically clustered cooperation at the regional and local level, as also described by Ebbekink, Hoogerbrugge, Lagendijk, and Kerkhof (2015). To illustrate, clusters were recognized in spatial policy, environmental policy, river management, landscape management, and city policy.

### 7.2.3. PA competences

Because regional and local politicians are mostly electorally anchored in their region of municipality, they are obliged to spend most of their time “at home”. Appointed or hired PA professionals are delegated to the national and European arena to replace and represent them. In some cases, politicians and other officials go to the arenas as PA practitioners, mostly assisted by the professional. In the arenas, the regional and local PA professional, still seen as newcomer in the field of PA which is traditionally dominated by the private sector, has to improve and sharpen the needed PA competences permanently, but they are needed in the municipal and provincial home organization as well. Based on the results described in chapters 4 and 5, the conclusion may be that the PA professional (1) should upgrade the local, regional, and European knowledge, (2) is mostly focused on social expertise, probably to avoid competition regarding the low score on the skills competence “competitive negotiating”, and (3) is relying on reliability, integrity, authenticity, and personal involvement. When we compare these outcomes with Sha (2011), Fleisher (2012), Todd (2014), and Swart (2014), we see that different to PR, the PA professionals put a stronger emphasis on the social skills. At the same time, the findings of the final chapters of this dissertation underline that PA remains “diffuse”, as characterized by McGrath (2010), and “in a flux”, as stated by Davidson (2015). There is no standstill. Fleisher pointed out in 2003 and 2007 how competences are modeling the PA professional, probably

(in the words of Van Doorn, 2009) becoming “a fox that knows a lot about many things, instead of a hedgehog knowing everything about one thing”. Or, to translate this quotation into the words of Moss et al. (2012): “PA is politics”.

## 7.3. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: HOW IMPROVING KNOWLEDGE LEVEL HELPS COOPERATION AND NETWORKING

Regarding gaining ground by decentralized authorities in the national and European arena, one aspect has become dominant in this research: For the PA professional, improvement of knowledge related to the local, regional, and European arenas is necessary. According to this result, arena knowledge concerning the national level is well developed, but, as pointed out in the first chapters, knowledge about procedures and processes at the decentralized governmental level has become important as well. The growing importance of the relation between the European Union and decentralized authorities also demands European arena knowledge, which is, according to this research, not well developed among PA professionals. Furthermore, also in the home organization, arena knowledge concerning the national and European level demands improvement.

Regarding the ongoing process of sense-making in the provincial and municipal home organization, and regarding the gaps in arena knowledge, it may be important to introduce static and dynamic political and administrative meetings in the provincial and municipal home organization, in order to manage PA processes (“at home” as well in the arenas) and to evaluate those processes. Static meeting implies periodical meetings to guard running PA operations. Dynamic meeting implies meetings only on demand, when “something is rotten in the state of Denmark”. Static and dynamic meetings may offer (1) possibilities to gradually improve the level of arena knowledge in the home organization; and (2) may give insight in the extent to which internal (in the organization) and external (in the region with neighboring private and/or public stakeholders) cooperation is successful. Furthermore, the meetings contribute to the quality of the PA message, because “the building” of the message demands internal cooperation, and also contributes to the process of sense-making towards PA, as observed by Weick (2009).

Regional and local cooperation in the national and European political arena is characterized by lip service, but in day-to-day PA work, this cooperation is occasional and thematic, and because of this, fragmented and limited to one issue. The main cause is dominance of own (municipal or provincial) interests. This research did not deliver a solution to this problem. But regarding the lack of regional knowledge in the circles of MPs and MEPs, regarding the lack of arena knowledge in the home organization, and finally regarding regional and local cooperation, it may be important to continue organizing (static and dynamic) field trips or presentations in the national and European political arena, preferably in cooperation with (regional, public, and private) stakeholders.

Finally, overseeing the competences of the decentral PA professional and the position of decentralized governments in the national and European political arenas, it is recommendable to empower the profile of the PA professional by developing an institutional, educational, legitimate certification of PA qualities.

#### 7.4. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The following remarks have to be made regarding the limitations of our research and perspectives on further research. Firstly, four of our five studies were based on one qualitative data set: gaining ground in the arena, internal and external aspects of the organization of PA in the provincial and municipal home organization, and PA competences at the regional and local level. Based on analyses of the respondents' remarks regarding the organizational aspects of PA in the home organization, we distinguished internal cooperation (i.e., within the home organization and within the region) and external cooperation (i.e., with public and private partners outside the region) to improve the effect of PA operations in the national and European political arena. Also, these respondents shed light on the competences of the PA professional. However, many of the results presented in this dissertation are based on this particular group of respondents, and subjectivity could have disturbed the results.

Second, we researched regional and local PA processes without focusing on specific PA dossiers; so there is not any casuistry in our research. The reason was that we primarily wanted to get clear what processes may play a role in the

defining of PA at the regional and local level. But it may be recommendable in further research to couple the defined processes with particular PA dossiers and also with the ongoing devolution of national tasks and powers to regional and local governments, in order to answer the question of whether there is any causality between the found processes, PA dossiers, and the devolution.

Third, all five studies were conducted shortly before the Brexit and before the presidential elections in the USA. The question may be to what extent the found processes, (possibly including the not researched causality) may change after announced suggestions – in the European Commission and in the European Parliament – to reconsider EU processes of decision-making, shortly after Brexit. Influences of the USA presidential elections in the economic relations between the EU, the UK, and the USA are unknown at this very moment, but important to include in further research. This further research may also include influences regarding the Anglo-American Model and the (continental) Rhineland Model as Middle- and Eastern European traditions in decentral PA.

#### 7.5. FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

To finalize, regarding this dissertation, some final conclusions can be drawn. First, the results as described in the empirical chapters, especially concerning the internal and external organization of regional and local PA, are not linked that much with regionalism in general or regional identity. Respondents, especially the ones with regional roots, admitted to be regionally inspired, but emphasized that regionalism seldomly carries decisive weight in PA operations. This does not mean that regional characteristics are worthless and useless. When these characteristics contribute to regional and/or local empowerment, regional and local values are beyond every doubt. Regional and local PA means doing money-driven business at the national and European level, focusing on regional and local results, and, preferably, coupled with national and European agendas. Because of this approach, regional and local PA as public activity is getting a private character as well.

Second, regarding the regional, national, and European political arena, some common denominators become recognizable: (1) the continuous fighting of the regional and local PA professional; (2) the power of regional and local PA that is determined by the power of regional and local cooperation – institutional and/or occasional; and (3) the improvement of arena knowledge at the European, regional, and local level. Regarding the home organization, the common denominator is the acceptance of PA on the shop floor: The higher developed this acceptance is, the sharper “the weapons” will be, such as regional and local cooperation and the level of arena knowledge. Continuing the metaphor: These weapons should be well-maintained and should be kept sharp, knowing that the PA professional continuously has to fight for regional and local interests, as stated in this research. Finally, regarding the PA professional and his competences, the common denominator is the conclusion that the more experienced and educated, the more advantaged he is. Characterizing the regional and local PA professional as fighter and at the same time as “silent diplomat” implicates flexibility, also mentioned in the attitude competences, besides faithfulness. Faithfulness and flexibility may create tension at the same time. Handling the competences is seen as more important than education.

To conclude, the quality of decentralized representation in the national and European arena depends on support from public and private stakeholders and on support from the home organization. The position of the PA professional and the PA practitioner in the arenas is of crucial meaning as visible labels “on the spot”, entrusted to draw attention to regional and local interests, and to look for eventual similarities in other regional and local PA operations in order to create cooperation. In day-to-day work, the PA professional has to show that he has two faces: the face of the fighter and the face of the diplomat, willing to cooperate, and never forgetting that PA is a people business.

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## ENDNOTES

- i** (p. 12) 'Arena' here refers to the national and European political 'playing-field', i.e. the conglomeration of governmental and administrative institutions at the national and European levels. 'Arena' is commonly used, but 'agora' is actually a more appropriate word because not only are the physical aspects of the place included in the concept (the 'arena' as 'theatre'), so are the organic aspects. The concept refers to a place where politicians can meet each other to have conversations, debates and discussions, i.e., an 'agora'.
- ii** (p. 23) In the late 1980s and early 1990s (influenced by the EU-membership of eastern European countries) an opinion-change was developed in the European arena based on regional policy: the geopolitical, traditional EU-programming support for weak regions was removed to make room for a thematic, sector-based approach, also with regional (i.e. geopolitical) aspects (Judt, 2015, p. 38-40)
- iii** (p. 24) The urban west of The Netherlands, the so-called Randstad (approx. 7 mln. inhabitants), includes Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht and surrounding small municipalities. It is modelling 'The Green Heart' of pastures, meadows, green fields and vulnerable waterways, in a landscape, concerning surface comparable to London and Paris. This part of the country is seen by the national government as the main engine of the national economy, about which non-Randstad respondents are complaining.
- iv** (p. 37) PA professionals are practicing PA professionally in the private sector and in the public sector. PA practitioners are also practicing PA but not professionally: they can be local or regional officials or politicians who are temporarily entrusted with PA activities, eventually assisted by a PA professional. In short, all professionals are practitioners but not all practitioners are professionals.
- v** (p. 84) Regional Water Authorities (RWA), the oldest subnational democracies of 'water-country' in the Netherlands, are dedicated to one thematic focus: water management. Municipalities and provinces, on which this article focuses, cover a wide spectrum of issues, including – but not limited to – certain aspects of water management. RWAs are not included in this research.
- vi** (p. 91) VNO/NCW/MKB is a close cooperation (based on PA) among business groups of companies operating in the national and in the European arena.
- vii** (p. 92) 'Societal partners' are 'private partners with societal links,' as respondents explained, like hospitals, educational institutes. Cooperation between private and public partners is less fragmented than in formalized public-private-partnership constructions: in the funding and financing of building projects in these partnerships, public fragmentation ('who pays the bill?') can disturb the project (Judt, 2015, p. 311).
- viii** (p. 97) This respondent is referring to the decision by provinces and municipalities at the beginning of this century to sell their shares in energy producing companies; energy production used to be a governmental task but was privatised. This was an operation involving billions of euros for those subnational governments: e.g. Amsterdam received 400 mln. euro and the province of Noord-Brabant 3.8 bln. euro. The money is used for investments and savings deposits (CBS webmagazine, 4 juli 2012).

# SAMENVATTING (SUMMARY IN DUTCH)

## HOOFDSTUK 1 – INLEIDING

Public Affairs (PA) – de focus van dit proefschrift – is een instrument voor organisaties om verbindingen te creëren met hun omgeving. In dit proefschrift wordt PA verkend vanuit het perspectief van specifieke organisaties, namelijk decentrale overheden zoals gemeenten en provincies, waarbij we kijken hoe deze overheden hun doelen trachten te bereiken in zowel de nationale (Den Haag) als de Europese arena (Brussel) door gebruik te maken van PA. Dikwijls worden PA en Public Relations (PR) als verwante disciplines beschouwd: waar in PR-operaties de focus gericht is op alle relaties die een organisatie zowel intern als extern heeft te onderhouden, zijn PA-operaties specifiek gericht op relaties van en met overheden (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Harris & Moss, 2001<sup>ab</sup>). Waar PR vooral relaties stuurt (Groenendijk, Hazekamp, & Mastenbroek, 1997), stuurt PA vooral boodschappen (Linders & De Lange, 2003). In dit proefschrift zijn de definities die Linders en De Lange (2003) en McGrath, Moss en Harris (2010) geformuleerd hebben om PA te duiden, richtinggevend. Probleem is, zoals McGrath beschrijft en zoals eerder door Harris en Moss (2001<sup>ab</sup>) verwoord, dat PA zich moeilijk definiëren laat omdat het onderhevig kan zijn aan soms plotselinge veranderingen in de politieke arena's en aan veranderingen in de samenleving, die bovendien vaak in elkaars verlengde liggen (Van Doorn, 2009). McGrath karakteriseert het vermogen van PA in deze bewegingen mee te gaan als gezonde dynamiek, wat een kenmerk van PA is maar het definiëren bemoeilijkt.

PA is lange tijd voor de centrale overheid en voor decentrale overheden in Nederland een vrij onbekend beleidsinstrument geweest. PA stamt uit de Anglo-Amerikaanse traditie (Post, Murray, Dickie, & Mahon, 1982; Thot, 1986; Marcus & Kaufmann, 1988; Marx, 1990; McGrath, 2006; Moss, McGrath, Tonge & Harris 2012) en woei pas na de Tweede Wereldoorlog over naar Europa, waar het zich eerst in de private sector nestelde en later – aanvankelijk onder het begrip lobby – in de publieke sector een positie verwierf (Groenendijk et al., 1997: 496; Linders & De Lange, 2003).

Belangrijke maatschappelijke veranderingen waardoor decentrale overheden gaandeweg voor 'lobby' ontvankelijk werden, voltrokken zich in de jaren zestig

van de vorige eeuw. Van Doorn (2009) beschrijft hoe rond die jaren – en eigenlijk al eerder – de zuilenstructuur die de Nederlandse samenleving kenmerkte, begon te kraken onder druk van allerlei maatschappelijke en politieke turbulentie. Traditionele verbanden, gebaseerd op godsdienstige en maatschappelijke verwantschap, brokkelden onomkeerbaar af met als gevolg dat allerlei groepsbelangen die eertijds door de zuilen werden behartigd, meer en meer door de groepen zelf behartigd moesten worden. Groenendijk (1997) beschrijft hoe PR, tot dan een met succes beproefd middel om relaties tussen overheden en het bedrijfsleven in stand te houden, niet meer voldeed. Er was meer nodig: belangengroepen wilden worden gehoord en zochten naar mogelijkheden om invloed op politieke besluitvorming uit te oefenen, zowel in de nationale politieke arena, als in de Europese politieke arena. Zo ontstond bij overheden een voedingsbodemp voor PA. Weliswaar werd dat in den beginne nog niet als zodanig benoemd – beleid om de gewenste invloed vorm en inhoud te geven werd betiteld als 'lobby' – maar naarmate de tijd vorderde en de wijze van lobbyen voor en door overheden professionaliseerde, burgerde het begrip PA van lieverlee in (Luikenaar & Venetië, 2006; Van Schendelen, 2013) en werden PA-instrumenten zoals netwerken, issue management, reputatiemanagement en stakeholder management meer gangbare begrippen, ook op decentraal niveau. Dit proces werd versterkt door het voortgaande decentralisatiebeleid van de rijksoverheid, dat tot doel heeft taken die tot dan toe door de nationale overheid werden uitgevoerd, effectiever door gemeentelijke of provinciale overheden te laten uitvoeren. Het regeerakkoord van het tweede kabinet Rutte (Building Bridges, 2012) stipuleert dit proces met grote nadruk om waar mogelijk beleid (met name zorg en economie) dichter bij de burger te brengen.

### Regionalisme en regionalisering

Naast deze ontwikkelingen op nationaal niveau voltrekt zich op Europees niveau een ander proces dat het ontstaan van een voedingsbodemp voor regionale en lokale PA helpt verklaren: het proces van regionalisme en regionalisering. Niet alleen wereldwijd verwerven regionalisme en regionalisering een positie (Barber, 2013; Clinton, 2011; Fawcett, 2004), maar ook op Europese schaal (Werts, 2008), waar allerlei interregionale, euregionale en transregionale vormen van samenwerking ontstonden, zoals in Nederland langs de grenzen met België en Duitsland, waar ondanks conflicterende juridische en staatsrechtelijke systemen soms al jarenlang bloeiende vormen van samenwerking een bestendig karakter kregen (Van der Giessen, 2014). Toen in 1986 de Single European Act

werd aanvaard en daarmee de interne markt ook voor regio's een feit werd, raakten decentrale overheden direct betrokken bij de gevolgen van Europese besluitvorming (Mastenbroek, Zwaan, & Liefferink, 2013). Lobby – met name de landbouwlobby – groeide uit tot een algemeen bekend begrip maar werd pas later een instrument voor het uitoefenen van PA (Pedler, 2005; Van Schendelen, 2013).

'Regio' mag dan staatsrechtelijk een ongedefinieerd begrip zijn, desondanks ontstonden in Nederland tal van sociaalgeografische en functionele vormen van regionale (gemeentelijke en provinciale) samenwerking, ook politiek (Aerts & De Goede, 2013; Seinstra & Sietsma, 2012), die van zich laten horen. Regio's manifesteren zich door een permanent zoeken naar wegen om uiting te geven aan hun wensen, soms gebruikmakend van regionale identiteit (Herngreen, 2002; De Ruiter, 2011; Van den Brink, 2011, 2012; Van Keken, 2011). Decentrale overheden benoemen eigen PA-professionals om in de nationale en in de Europese politieke arena decentrale belangen in de gaten te houden. Decentrale samenwerking in de politieke arena's kent twee vormen: collectieve samenwerking via de Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten en het InterProvinciaal Overleg, die niet tot dit onderzoek behoorde, en individuele, thematische gelegenheids-samenwerking, die wel deel uitmaakt van dit onderzoek.

### **Regionalisme en Public Affairs**

Regionalisme en regionale/lokale PA zijn een Siamese tweeling. Hospers (2004, 2007, 2012, 2013) beschrijft niet alleen regionalisering binnen de EU maar beschrijft ook minutieus hoe Nederlandse regio's – soms als (tijdelijk) samenwerkende gemeenten, soms als (tijdelijk) samenwerkende provincies – zich bewust zijn geworden van hun positie, temeer omdat de EU, ondanks verstoringen door intermediaire kaders (Rebel & Linders, 2014), regionale profileringsdrift gebruikt om Europees beleid voor burgers zichtbaar te maken. Van Rompuy (2012) schetst hoe in het Europa, dat hij beschouwt als een verzameling van identiteiten, eerst ruimte voor die identiteiten behoort te worden geschapen en dan plaats moet worden gezocht waarin identiteit tot haar recht kan komen. Buruma (2012) beschrijft in een lezing hoe de aloude klassenstrijd plaatsgemaakt heeft voor een strijd tussen identiteiten, ook regionale. Het begrip 'regio' kreeg betekenis (Figuee, 2011; Seinstra & Sietsma, 2012), zoals mag blijken uit het antwoord van de nieuwe president van het Sociaal en Cultureel Plan Bureau (2013), die in een interview, gevraagd naar wat hij zou doen als hij Nederland 24 uur mocht

besturen, een warm pleidooi voor het regionalisme afstak door te verwijzen naar de rol die regionale en lokale overheden in de samenleving kunnen vervullen.

Het bovenstaande mag beschouwd worden als de zichtbare 'buitenkant' van regionalisering, wat de vraag oproept in hoeverre regionalisering ook een 'binnenkant' heeft, ofwel een organische inbedding in de hearts and minds van burgers, om wie het begonnen is. Wijnberg (2013) en Wessels en Bosch (2012) constateren vormen van twijfel, van euroscepticisme, omdat burgers wel horen van 'de buitenkant' van Europese investeringen maar er in hun directe omgeving weinig van zeggen te merken. Wat mogelijk tot vergroting van deze twijfel heeft geleid, is het 'nieuwe regionalisme' zoals beschreven door Frisken en Norris (2001), Wheeler (2002) en Boogers (2013), waarin de EU de aloude steun voor zwakke regio's met behulp van de structuurfondsen omgevormd heeft tot steun aan sterke sectoren. Dit is een nieuwe kans voor regio's om aan te haken (Menasse, 2013), maar vergt volgens Verhofstadt en Cohn-Bendit (2012) wel onderhoud en permanente aandacht, om voor de burger de verbinding met regionalisme niet alleen zichtbaar maar ook voelbaar te maken.

### **Dit proefschrift**

Het hierboven beschreven proces van regionalisering en de hiermee samenhangende decentrale behoefte aan PA is wetenschappelijk nog onontgonnen. Bunea en Baumgartner (2014) beschrijven hoe alleen in het Verenigd Koninkrijk en in Duitsland onderzoek gedaan is maar dan hoofdzakelijk naar 'lobbying', in het bijzonder naar de wijze waarop een lobbystrategie ontwikkeld wordt om politieke besluitvorming te beïnvloeden. Nauwelijks is nog gezocht naar het antwoord op de vraag hoe belangengroepen in de publieke sector hun belangenbehartiging organiseren op Europees niveau en hoe ze zich van steun voorzien; het meeste onderzoek is casuïstisch van aard en dan veelal binnen de private sector (Barron & Hultén, 2014; Bernhagen & Mitchell, 2009; James, 2010; Steunenbergh, 2007). Dit proefschrift beoogt een bijdrage te leveren aan de opvulling van deze leemte door te analyseren hoe decentrale overheden – gemeenten en provincies – hun belangen onder de aandacht van de nationale en Europese politieke arena proberen te brengen, individueel en in samenwerking met derden. Decentrale overheden hebben wel hun eigen koepelorganisaties (VNG en IPO), maar deze koepels behartigen alleen generieke decentrale belangen.

Daarnaast beoogt dit proefschrift inzicht te bieden in de competenties van de PA-professional die voor decentrale overheden in de politieke arena's actief is. De vraag die zich aandient, is hoe de decentrale PA-professional daarin zijn of haar weg vindt. De definities die Linders en De Lange (2003) en McGrath (2010) van PA geven, impliceren dat de PA-professional soms boodschapper, soms (tegelijk) manager is, althans over sturende capaciteiten moet beschikken om PA-operaties in goede banen te leiden en te houden. Dat vereist flexibiliteit en politieke sensibiliteit om te weten wanneer welke actie moet worden ondernomen. De vraag die wordt opgeroepen, is hoe het profiel van de professional eruitziet, met inbegrip van de competenties die hem in staat stellen PA-operaties uit te voeren, zoals het vermogen relaties met zijn omgeving aan te gaan en die te onderhouden.

De onderzoeksvraag van het proefschrift is vierledig: (1) Hoe ontvankelijk zijn de nationale en Europese politieke arena voor decentrale belangen en hoe gaan decentrale overheden met verschillen tussen deze arena's om; (2) Op welke wijze hebben de gemeentelijke en provinciale thuisorganisatie PA geaccepteerd en vervolgens ingebed; (3) Op welke wijze bereiden deze organisaties zich vervolgens voor op hun entree in de nationale en Europese politieke arena's; en (4) Over welke competenties beschikken PA-professionals die door decentrale overheden naar de arena's worden gestuurd om decentrale belangen te behartigen? Deze vier vragen zijn vanuit communicatiewetenschappelijk perspectief onder de loep genomen, waarbij ten eerste (soms op de achtergrond en soms op de voorgrond) richtinggevend bleken te zijn geweest de observaties van Van Doorn (2009) inzake de positie van decentrale overheden in de samenleving, ten tweede de observaties van Weick (2009<sup>ab</sup>) en Denning (2011) inzake de veranderingsgezindheid van organisaties voor nieuw beleid, zoals PA, en ten derde de observaties van McGrath (2006, 2007, 2008), McGrath, Moss en Harris (2010), Fleisher (2001, 2007, 2010, 2012), Van Schendelen, Bennis en Pauw, (1990), Van Schendelen (2012, 2013) en Linders en De Lange (2003) inzake PA als professie.

## Methodologie

Om antwoord te geven op de vier vragen is kwalitatief en kwantitatief onderzoek gedaan. De resultaten van het kwalitatieve onderzoek staan in de hoofdstukken 2, 3, 4 en 6; de resultaten van het kwantitatieve onderzoek, dat gericht was op de vraag hoe PA-professionals zichzelf waarderen in PA-competenties, staan in hoofdstuk 5.

Ten behoeve van het kwalitatieve onderzoek zijn 41 diepte-interviews gehouden met 24 provinciale en gemeentelijke PA-beoefenaars en 17 PA-professionals<sup>1</sup>. De geïnterviewden is absolute geheimhouding beloofd; de interviews zijn gehouden op locaties (in gemeente- en provinciehuizen, in de Tweede Kamer, de senaat, in EU-gebouwen, etc.) waar zij vrijuit konden spreken. De antwoorden van de 41 geïnterviewden wortelden in 93 functies (32 lokaal, 26 provinciaal, 23 nationaal en 12 Europees), omdat sommigen bijvoorbeeld na (langdurige) raads- of statenlidmaatschappen naar de Haagse of Europese politieke arena verhuisden, lid van het kabinet werden of burgemeester, wethouder, gedeputeerde of Commissaris van de Koning, dan wel een andere weg hadden afgelegd. De interviews kenden vier thema's: (1) kenmerken van de nationale en Europese politieke arena's in relatie tot decentrale belangen; (2) de interne en (3) de externe organisatie van PA in de gemeentelijke of provinciale thuisorganisatie; en tenslotte (4) de competenties van de PA-professional. Alle interviews zijn getranscribeerd en de belangrijkste statements zijn in 1003 kernzinnen ondergebracht en gecodeerd volgens de beginselen van Grounded Theory (Corbin & Straus, 2008), wat leidde tot een toename met 47 kernzinnen. Uit het nieuwe aantal van 1050 kernzinnen zijn 390 kernzinnen gedestilleerd over het arenathema (hoofdstuk 2); 173 kernzinnen over de interne organisatie van PA (hoofdstuk 3); 377 kernzinnen over de externe organisatie van decentrale PA (hoofdstuk 4) en tenslotte 110 kernzinnen over competenties (hoofdstuk 6). De codering van de vier geselecteerde thema's leverde een Cohen's kappa op van 0.72.

Ten behoeve van het kwantitatieve onderzoek naar PA-competenties (hoofdstuk 5) is in de periode februari-maart 2014 via LinkedIn onder 1057 respondenten die in hun functieprofiel de drie duidingen communicatie, PR en PA hadden staan, een questionnaire verspreid. De ruwe response was 434. Na het verwijderen van respondenten die de vragenlijst ten dele hadden ingevuld, bleven er 293 respondenten over die alle vragen hadden beantwoord. De vragenlijst kent drie domeinen. Het eerste domein is de demografie van de PA-professional:

<sup>1</sup> PA-beoefenaars, zoals decentrale bestuurders en politici, kunnen tijdelijk in de nationale en Europese politieke aanwezig zijn om PA-operaties te (helpen) uitvoeren; de professionals oefenen PA als professie uit. Met andere woorden: iedere professional is ook beoefenaar, maar omgekeerd niet.

leeftijd, geslacht, godsdienst, politieke voorkeur, lidmaatschap van een politieke partij, politieke activiteiten, opleiding, werkervaring in PA plus het aandeel van PA in de totale werktijd, hoe lang hij bij deze werkgever in dienst was, inkomen en hoe betrokkene in PA werkzaam was gekomen. Het tweede domein is de thuisorganisatie: aard en omvang (waaronder aantal werknemers), de functie van betrokkene (privaat en/of publiek), de naam van de afdeling waar PA is ondergebracht, het PA-budget en het aantal mensen dat met PA belast is. Het derde domein betreft PA-competenties, ontleend aan Sha (2010), Todd (2014), Swart (2014) en Fleisher (2001; 2012): (1) kennis omtrent samenleving, kennis omtrent lokale, regionale, nationale en Europese besluitvorming, vakkennis, mediakennis en kennis inzake de thuisorganisatie; (2) vaardigheden, met name strategie en tactiek; sociale expertise; netwerken; empathie; steunverwerving; overtuigingskracht; eigen verantwoordelijkheid; pragmatiek; mondelinge en schriftelijke uitdrukkingsvaardigheid; analysering; senioriteit; beïnvloeden media; constructief en competitief onderhandelen; en (3) attitude, met name betrouwbaarheid; adaptief vermogen; authenticiteit; persoonlijke betrokkenheid; kritische instelling; stressbestendigheid; loyaliteit; reputatiemanagement; acceptatie onregelmatige werktijden; en integriteit.

## HOOFDSTUK 2 – REGIONALE EN LOKALE PA-ACTIVITEITEN IN NEDERLAND: HOE VERWERVEN DECENTRALE OVERHEDEN VASTE GROND ONDER DE VOETEN IN DE NATIONALE EN EUROPESE POLITIEKE ARENA?

Dit hoofdstuk behandelt het antwoord op de eerste onderzoeksvraag: Hoe ontvankelijk zijn de nationale en Europese politieke arena voor decentrale belangen en hoe gaan decentrale overheden met verschillen tussen deze arena's om? Het antwoord op deze vraag wordt in dit hoofdstuk geplaatst tegen de achtergrond van ingrijpende maatschappelijke veranderingen die zich vanaf de jaren zestig van de vorige eeuw begonnen af te tekenen. Essentie van die veranderingen was de groeiende vraag van de samenleving invloed te kunnen uitoefenen op politieke besluitvorming, zowel in de nationale als in de Europese politieke arena. Dit leidde er onder meer toe dat decentrale overheden tot die arena's toegang zochten om aandacht te verwerven voor hun belangen in het beantwoorden van de vragen die zich vanuit de samenleving aandienen. Arena-

ontvankelijkheid en hoe decentrale overheden daarmee omgaan, kende drie hoofdlijnen: (1) de ontvankelijkheid voor decentrale thema's en de mogelijkheid om aansluiting te vinden bij nationale en Europese agenda's, (2) de in dit verband relevante arenaprocessen, en tenslotte (3) arenaprocedures. Uit de 390 kernzinnen rond dit thema tekenden zich zes aspecten af: (1) arenaontvankelijkheid voor decentrale onderwerpen; (2) interacties tussen de nationale en Europese arena die van invloed zijn op die aandacht; (3) arenaprocessen; (4) effecten van regionale verschillen in de politieke arena's; (5) PA processen op decentraal niveau; en tenslotte (6) de affiniteit van Kamerleden en Europarlementariërs met decentrale onderwerpen. De codering van deze verfijning leverde een Cohen's kappa op van 0.68.

### Resultaten

De ontvankelijkheid in de politieke arena's voor decentrale thema's wordt als minimaal beschouwd, tenzij er sprake is van rampen en catastrofes die van nationale betekenis zijn. In de nationale politieke en bestuurlijke arena – Tweede Kamer en departementen – domineren centralisme en de belangen van wat gezien wordt als "de BV Nederland". Decentrale overheden voelen zich daardoor tot samenwerking gedwongen, ook als zij dat om welke reden dan ook niet prefereren, bijvoorbeeld uit vrees voor het ondergesneeuwd raken van eigen belangen. In de Europese arena is het beeld minder negatief, getuige de EU-programmafinanciering. Toch blijven nationale belangen en belangen van lidstaten domineren, wat de regionale ontvankelijkheid op Europees niveau kan frustreren.

Decentrale overheden die in de Europese arena gehoor gevonden hebben, proberen dit in de nationale arena uit te spelen. Maar daar is weinig animo zich voor decentrale belangen in te spannen die onder Europese vlag tot bloei kunnen komen, omdat op nationaal niveau de wens leeft om aan de EU verloren terrein terug te winnen. Decentrale samenwerking zou kunnen helpen om deze arena-interactie te weerstaan. Samenwerking op decentraal niveau is er wel maar dat het zowel in de nationale politieke als in de Europese politieke arena in onvoldoende mate lukt tot een decentrale vuist te komen, wordt geweten aan de dominantie van het (financiële) gemeentelijke of provinciale eigenbelang.

Het arenaproces dat decentrale overheden parten speelt, is dat het aloude beleid van 'verdelende rechtvaardigheid' zowel op nationaal als op Europees

niveau is vervangen door sectoraal beleid waar regio's zich bij kunnen aansluiten. Nu is echter de frustratie dat door de dominante aandacht van de nationale politieke en bestuurlijke arena voor de Randstad, beschouwd als vliegwiel van de landelijke economie en daarom gezien als gezicht van "de BV Nederland", decentrale overheden buiten de Randstad zich aan de zijlijn geplaatst weten. Door het ontbreken van voldoende decentrale samenwerking waardoor tegenwicht zou kunnen ontstaan, blijft de situatie zoals die is en ziet de nationale politieke arena decentrale overheden niet snel als 'meespeler'. In de Europese arena worden de lange administratieve procedures die moeten worden doorlopen om van de eerder geconstateerde ontvankelijkheid voor regionale thema's te kunnen profiteren, als last ervaren die 'met liefde' moet worden getorst. Met name buitenrandstedelijke regio's langs de grens met Duitsland en België richten zich vaker dan voorheen op EU-financiering met betrekking tot grensoverschrijdende samenwerking, gebruikmakend van regionale ontvankelijkheid op Europese schaal en hiermee samenhangende programmafinanciering.

Affiniteit van Kamerleden en Europarlementariërs met regionale onderwerpen is er niet of nauwelijks. Bereidheid is er, maar electorale overwegingen plus de fractiediscipline in de politieke arena's reduceren die bereidheid veelal tot lippen-dienst. Nederlandse Europarlementariërs zijn in tegenstelling tot veel andere leden van het Europees Parlement niet regionaal verkozen en beschouwen Nederlandse decentrale belangen daarom dikwijls als bijzaak, eraan voorbijgaand dat regionalisme in de EU een groeifactor is.

Voorts staan in de Europese arena constitutionele verschillen per lidstaat de positie van decentrale overheden in de weg. De gedecentraliseerde eenheidsstaat die Nederland is, suggereert regionale mogelijkheden maar op de werkvloer in de arena's is het een gevecht om effectief tot politieke besluitvorming te kunnen doordringen. Dat heeft Nederland gemeen met Frankrijk, Zweden en een aantal Midden- en Oost-Europese staten. Andere lidstaten, zoals Duitsland, Oostenrijk, Spanje en Polen, hebben een meer geregionaliseerde staatsvorm, waardoor die landen een voorsprong hebben.

De eindconclusie is dat het uitoefenen van regionale en lokale PA, zowel in de nationale politieke arena als in de Europese politieke arena, een vechtersmentaliteit vereist. Om op decentraal niveau aansluiting te kunnen vinden bij

nationale en Europese politieke agenda's is samenwerking vereist van een zodanig karakter dat dit het gemeentelijke en provinciale eigenbelang overstijgt. Hoewel decentrale overheden met name in de Europese politieke arena door te participeren in EU-programmafinanciering voet aan de grond kunnen krijgen, blijft de algemene eindconclusie dat nationale belangen in beide arena's domineren en decentrale belangen verdringen.

### HOOFDSTUK 3 – HET THUISFRONT: INTERNE ORGANISATIE VAN PA IN DECENTRALE OVERHEIDSORGANISATIES

Om met behulp van PA toegang tot de nationale en Europese politieke arena te krijgen, zagen decentrale overheden zich genoodzaakt hun organisaties ontvankelijk te maken voor PA. De in het vorige hoofdstuk geduide maatschappelijke veranderingen dwongen decentrale overheden in zekere zin daartoe; dit wordt versterkt door voortgaande decentralisatieprocessen waarin taken van de nationale overheid in handen van decentrale overheden worden gelegd. In dit hoofdstuk staat het antwoord op de tweede onderzoeksvraag centraal: Op welke wijze hebben de gemeentelijke en provinciale thuisorganisatie PA geaccepteerd en vervolgens organisatorisch ingebed? Uit de 173 kernzinnen in de interviews rond de onderzoeksvraag tekenden zich de volgende drie aspecten af: (1) de aanvaarding van PA; (2) de inbedding van PA; en (3) het ontwerpen van de PA-boodschap. De codering leidde tot een Cohen's kappa van 0.61.

#### Resultaten

Bij de aanvaarding van PA wordt onderscheid gemaakt tussen individuele en collectieve aanvaarding. Individuele aanvaarding schept collectieve aanvaarding, want als ambtenaren en bestuurders zelf enthousiast zijn over PA en de mogelijke effecten ervan, slepen zij weifelaars mee. Collectieve aanvaarding schept collectieve verplichting wat vervolgens interne samenwerking aanwakkert, want samenwerking is nodig om PA wortel te laten schieten in de organisatie. Terugkerend probleem in de thuisorganisatie is echter het ontbreken van het besef dat de nationale en Europese arena ertoe doen, wat gecombineerd met een tekort aan arenakennis, de weg naar de aanvaarding van PA lang maakt. PA maakt geen deel uit van de dagelijkse leefwereld binnen de thuisorganisatie. PA in relatie tot de Europese arena maakt de afstand tot PA nog groter. Bestuurders die zeggen

dichtbij PA te staan, geven te kennen het PA-werk het liefst zelf te doen. Het mooiste zou zijn, zeggen zij, als er geen aparte professional nodig is maar de ambtelijke dossierhouder en de bestuurder of politicus het zelf kunnen, wat bovendien helpt om de geringe kennis in de nationale en Europese politieke arena over regio's te vergroten.

Bij de inbedding van PA, komt het vooral aan op de personen (professional en beoefenaar) die specifiek met PA-gerelateerd werk zijn belast. Dan valt op dat (1) de arenakennis; (2) het vermogen tot samenwerking; (3) de positionering van PA alsmede van de PA-professional in de organisatie; en (4) het vermogen tot het verwerven van steun in de omringende regio bepalend zijn, echter wel steeds in een mengvorm. Arenakennis in de organisatie kan worden vergroot door gebruik te maken van de kennis die de PA-professional vanuit Den Haag en/of Brussel binnenbrengt, of door op bepaalde dossiers experts in te huren. Sommigen pleiten voor tijdelijke functieruil. Het aanbrengen van een aparte Haagse of Europese paragraaf in besluitvorming kan ook helpen PA te laten 'indalen'.

Hoe beter PA organisatorisch is ingebed, hoe krachtiger de PA-boodschap worden kan. Geïnterviewden noemen dossierkennis, flexibiliteit en focus als belangrijke elementen. Die zijn nodig omdat door plotselinge veranderingen in het politieke krachtenveld een PA-operatie moet kunnen worden bijgestuurd zonder dat de focus op het onderwerp verloren gaat. De positionering van de PA-professional is hoe dan ook dichtbij de ambtelijke en politieke leiding van de organisatie waar hij of zij vrij moet kunnen binnenlopen als dat noodzakelijk is om gevraagde arena-informatie te kunnen bespreken. De ambtelijke en politieke leiding blijft eindverantwoordelijk voor het wel of niet slagen van de operatie; de PA-professional kan niet worden aangerekend door onverwachte politieke machinaties soms met lege handen te staan. De PA-professional is in regionale en lokale PA de *front-office* in de arena, die steun moet ontvangen van zijn *back-office*, de gemeentelijke en provinciale thuisorganisatie, die zijn opdrachtgever is en prioriteiten bepaalt. Tot de interne organisatie van PA wordt ook samenwerking met private of publieke stakeholders in de regio gerekend, waarin de PA-professional met zijn arenakennis een belangrijke rol vervullen kan voor het verwerven van draagvlak voor PA-operaties in de Haagse en Brusselse politieke arena's. Geïnterviewden wijzen hier op het grote belang van netwerken en op het onderhouden van relaties, onder andere met de communicatieadviseurs van

potentiële samenwerkingspartners in de regio, wat bevorderlijk is voor de continuïteit, evenals voor de arenakennis in de organisatie. Tussen de ambtelijke leiding, de politieke leiding en de PA-professional moet eensgezindheid zijn over de koers. De rode draad in deze eensgezindheid moet een ambtelijk en politiek gedeelde visie op de toekomst zijn met een agenda die aangeeft hoe en met wie die toekomst te bereiken is. Gemeentelijke en provinciale samenwerking in regionale en lokale PA loopt vast door meningsverschillen waarna compromissen moeten worden gesloten, fragmentatie optreedt, focus vervaagt, PA boodschappen verwateren, en de andere kant van de tafel, namelijk de ambtelijke en politieke beslissers in de Haags en Europese arena, vrij spel krijgt in het bewaken van het nationale belang en in het vasthouden aan het aloude centralisme (in Den Haag) en het bewaken van nationale en lidstatelijke belangen (in Brussel).

De conclusie van het onderzoek is dat de PA-professional bij de aanvaarding van PA door de organisatie en vervolgens bij het inbedden van PA de permanente verbindende schakel is, namelijk de boodschapper tussen de nationale en Europese politieke arena enerzijds en de ambtelijke en politieke leiding van de organisatie anderzijds, vanuit de wetenschap dat de politieke leiding eindverantwoordelijk blijft. De thuisorganisatie moet in het aanvaarden en inbedden van PA leren zoveel flexibiliteit op te brengen dat dit beleid waardoor werkgewoonten en relaties binnen en buiten de organisatie met publieke en private samenwerkingspartners in de eigen regio kunnen veranderen, toch kan 'landen'. Tweede conclusie is dat continuïteit een belangrijk voorwaarde is om PA 'draaiende' te houden. Die continuïteit is te voeden door het formuleren van een visie op de toekomst. Derde conclusie is dat samenwerking in de organisatie in hoofdzaak bepalend is voor het welslagen van de aanvaarding en inbedding van PA. Dat die samenwerking zich zal kunnen en moeten uitstrekken tot buiten de thuisorganisatie, met omringende private en publieke partners, is evident en wordt ook tot de interne organisatie van PA gerekend. Samenwerking is het cement in regionale en lokale PA.

## HOOFDSTUK 4 – OP HET SLAGVELD: HOE DECENTRALE OVERHEDEN PA ORGANISEREN IN DE NATIONALE EN EUROPESE POLITIEKE ARENA

In de vorige hoofdstukken is al naar voren gekomen, dat decentrale overheden in hun wens tot belangenbehartiging genoodzaakt zijn samen te werken. Zij vinden elkaar op thema's, zoals hoogwater en krimp, of op functionele aspecten, zoals de grote en middelgrote steden doen die eigen samenwerkingsverbanden hebben gesmeed waarin meerdere thema's aan de orde zijn. Deze samenwerkingsverbanden manifesteren zich zowel in de nationale als in de Europese politieke arena. Daarnaast bestaan er op Europees niveau tal van geïnstitutionaliseerde vormen van samenwerking zoals de in 1951 opgerichte Raad voor Europese Gemeenten en Regio's en de Assemblee van Europese Regio's (1985). Nederland speelt daarop in met onder meer het Huis van de Nederlandse Provincies in Brussel. De derde onderzoeksvraag – Op welke wijze bereiden decentrale overheden zich vervolgens voor op hun entree in de nationale en Europese politieke arena's? – wordt in dit hoofdstuk beantwoord. De 377 kernzinnen die uit het totaal aantal kernzinnen, geselecteerd zijn om de derde onderzoeksvraag te kunnen beantwoorden, zijn verdeeld over acht aspecten: (1) de Europese arena; (2) de nationale arena; (3) de regionale arena; (4) bestuurlijke aspecten; (5) arenakennis; (6) economische aspecten; (7) de menselijke maat; (8) PA als professie. De Cohen's kappa bedroeg 0.61.

### Resultaten

Met betrekking tot regionale en lokale PA in de Europese arena zijn er twee aspecten die dominant bleken. Het eerste is de persoon van de professional of de beoefenaar die naar de arena wordt uitgezonden en die bij voorkeur 'Europeaan van nature' moet zijn. Echter regionale en lokale politici en bestuurders die als PA-beoefenaar in de Europese arena actief willen zijn en 'Europeaan van nature' zijn, weten dat 'Europa' geen geliefd thema is bij provinciale of gemeentelijke verkiezingen. Het tweede is de onderlinge relatie 'in het veld' tussen professionals (en beoefenaars) en opdrachtgevers, zowel 'van eigen huis' als van elders. Samenwerking wordt als onontbeerlijk gezien voor decentrale overheden in de Europese politieke arena, maar die hapert als gevolg van schaalverschillen en een tekort aan Europese arenakennis.

Met betrekking tot de nationale arena wordt gewezen op de noodzaak regionale en lokale eenheid te scheppen, meningsverschillen met stakeholders te allen tijde te voorkomen en afspraken met hen te coördineren. Decentrale overheden zouden meer dienstbaar aan stakeholders moeten zijn omdat het een band scheidt. Werk maken van grensoverschrijdende samenwerking met decentrale overheden aan de andere kant van de grens met België en Duitsland voegt gewicht toe aan regionale en lokale PA boodschappen. Dominantie van de Randstad moet niet voetstoots worden geaccepteerd. Samenwerking – ook met stakeholders – is het sleutelwoord voor de externe organisatie van PA in de nationale politieke arena. Administratieve grenzen dienen in regionale en lokale samenwerkingsverbanden gerespecteerd en tegelijk ontkend te worden want het streven moet erop gericht zijn verwaterde compromissen te voorkomen. Regionale en lokale samenwerking van buiten Randstedelijke regio's met de Randstad lijkt er niet in te zitten.

Wat de regionale arena betreft, blijkt er in decentrale gelederen ambivalentie te bestaan. Enerzijds zal regionale profilering zowel in de nationale als in de Europese politieke arena kunnen bijdragen aan het gewicht van PA operaties, anderzijds moet voorkomen worden dat folkloristische stoffigheid de boventoon voeren gaat. Daarnaast moeten competitie en concurrentie worden voorkomen, ook tussen gemeenten en provincies onderling die in de arena's opereren. In de regionale arena wordt gemeentelijke en provinciale samenwerking bemoeilijkt door de vraag in welke mate en in welke hoedanigheid aan regionale profilering vorm en inhoud gegeven kan worden. Soms worden beiden aspecten vermengd.

Bestuurlijk-organisatorische aspecten en de externe organisatie van PA spitsen zich toe op de schaal van gemeenten: hoe groter een gemeente is, hoe beter geëquipeerd voor het uitvoeren van PA operaties in de nationale en Europese politieke arena. Kleine gemeenten – met minder dan 50.000 inwoners – voelen weinig voor herindelen en geven daarom de voorkeur aan grens ontkennende, thematische samenwerking, zowel in de nationale als in de Europese politieke arena. De vergelijking met de private sector dringt zich op maar die wordt

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2 *Hierbij dient volledigheidshalve te worden opgemerkt dat de overheid tal van taken verzelfstandigt en privatiseert en in de markt onderbrengt. Ook deze nieuwe ondernemingen, veelal ten onrechte beschouwd als non-profit organisaties, behoren echter ook tot de private sector gerekend te worden omdat de overheid daarop geen of nauwelijks nog invloed heeft.*

vanwege de top-down benadering die de private sector doorgaans eigen is, niet als realistisch beschouwd voor de publieke sector waar benadering precies andersom is, namelijk 'van onderop'.

Arenakennis is in de externe organisatie van PA een terugkerend thema. Hoe kleiner de gemeente, hoe moeilijker het is over de juiste arenakennis te beschikken. Vormen moeten worden gevonden om kennis te kunnen delen; hoe beter de samenwerking tussen decentrale overheden en stakeholders is, hoe effectiever arenakennis kan worden gedeeld. Arenakennis is te verwerven in samenwerking, zowel met publieke als met private stakeholders, wat wordt gezien als het middel bij uitstek om de arenakennis te vergroten. Bovendien vergroot het kennis over samenwerkingspartners. Ook hier wordt vanwege het Europese aspect gewezen op het belang van grensoverschrijdende samenwerking.

Dat het bij het spreken over economische aspecten het hebben van een money-driven attitude in regionale en lokale PA de hoofdrol speelt, wordt algemeen erkend, ondanks dat het (interregionale) competitie aanwakkert en de zozeer verlangde en bepleite decentrale samenwerking frustriert. Die attitude valt niet te voorkomen door de – althans in de ogen van andere regio's – voortdurende bevoordeling van de Randstad door de nationale politieke arena. Decentrale overheden in buitenrandstedelijke regio's zeggen hier onder te lijden. Buiten Randstedelijke regio's met een wereldwijd bekend bedrijf proberen een voor-sprong te genereren, evenals regio's met een clustereconomie. Financieel-economische overwegingen spelen een zwaarwegende rol die de noodzaak tot samenwerking kan bemoeilijken, zowel in de nationale als in de Europese politieke arena.

De menselijke maat in regionale en lokale PA wordt als richtinggevend beschouwd. Gewezen wordt op de rol van de burger als *stakeholder* in regionale en lokale PA en voorts op het decentralisatieproces dat beleid dicht bij de burger brengen wil. Nieuwe media zouden een rol kunnen spelen om afstand tussen burger en beleid van decentrale overheden te verkleinen, maar daarvan alle heil verwachten, zal niets opleveren omdat het uiteindelijk toch mensen zijn die de besluiten nemen.

De PA-professional is vooral verbindingsofficier en is het etiket van de decentrale overheid die zich in de nationale en Europese politieke arena wil laten zien en horen. Hij moet de relaties van zijn decentrale overheid in de arena bewaken en in staat zijn zijn decentrale politici en bestuurders te vervangen, want die kunnen niet dagelijks in die arena's zijn omdat hun voornaamste politieke taak in de regio ligt. De professional is een schaap met vijf poten, die de sporen van heen-en-weer bewegende PA-gerelateerde informatie op de voet volgt, die netwerkt, ook met collega's van andere opdrachtgevers, die zich achter de schermen bevindt en niet in de schijnwerpers en die de visie op de toekomst van zijn thuisorganisatie niet uit het oog verliest.

## HOOFDSTUK 5 – PROFIEL VAN DE PA-PROFESSIONAL: EEN STUDIE NAAR DE DEMOGRAFIE VAN DE PA-PROFESSIONAL EN NAAR PA-COMPETENTIES, ZOWEL IN BELANG ALS IN ZELFEVALUATIE

Het kwantitatieve deel van het onderzoek naar decentrale PA spitst zich toe op de vierde onderzoeksvraag: Over welke competenties beschikken PA-professionals die door decentrale overheden naar de arena's worden gestuurd om decentrale belangen te behartigen? Aan deze vraag gaan andere vragen vooraf: Wat is het profiel van de Nederlandse PA-professional, welke zijn de competenties die als belangrijk worden beschouwd en hoe beoordelen deze professionals hun eigen functioneren in het licht van deze competenties?

Fleisher ontwikkelde in 2007 de Public Affairs Body of Knowledge (PA BOK) waarin hij zeven aspecten noemde die PA competenties duiden: *"Define the knowledge underlying the PA profession; describe and provide pointers to methods, knowledge and skills that are important for PA-professionals; promote the advancement, understanding and recognition of the PA profession among stakeholders who interact with the PA community; facilitate professional development for PA practitioners at various stages in their careers, as well as people who come to PA from other backgrounds/disciplines; provide the basis for future curriculum development; provide support for professional development and any future certification schemes; [en tenslotte] promote integration and connection with related disciplines."* In het domein van Public Relations, categoriseerde Sha (2010) PR-competenties naar kennis, vaardigheden en attitude in zakelijkheid, in mediarelaties en in theoretische kennis, zowel

vakinhoudelijk als dossiers betreffend. Todd (2014) onderzocht welke PR competenties de hoofdrol spelen wanneer PR *supervisors* nieuwkomers in PR opleiden, en benoemde mondelinge en schriftelijke communicatieve vaardigheden en professionele karakteristieken (houding, gedrag, ethiek, kritisch denken). Swart (2014) vroeg PR-studenten die ook al een baan in PR hadden, naar hun vaardigheden bij PR-onderwijs op afstand. Swart noteerde: schrijfvaardigheid, *eventmanagement*, communicatieplanning en onderzoek.

## Resultaten

De PA-professional is meestal een man, midden veertig (net) gepasseerd, links-liberaal, academisch opgeleid (vnl. communicatie, journalistiek, Politics & Administration, Human Sciences), salaris ruim twee keer modaal, gemiddeld vijftien jaar ervaring bij dezelfde werkgever en bij toeval in PA werkzaam. Hij zou een functie in de politiek of in het openbaar bestuur niet gauw afslaan. Hij vindt een studie of opleiding in Politics & Administration het best bij PA-werk passen. Dit spoort met het profiel dat De Lange in 2000 van de PA-professional gaf en die concludeerde dat opleiding, positie in de organisatie en inkomen het profiel van de PA-professional bepalen.

De PA-professional werkt doorgaans voor een adviesbureau waar hij zowel voor bedrijven (nagenoeg alle sectoren, vooral energiesector en financiële instellingen) als voor overheden (gemeente, provincie, rijksoverheid) of daarmee (voorheen) verbonden organisaties werkt. De naamgeving van de afdeling waar PA is ondergebracht, is uitermate divers. Aparte PA-budgetten zijn er niet of nauwelijks, zowel in de private als in de publieke sector omdat PA-kosten dikwijls elders in de organisatie zijn ondergebracht en daar worden begroot.

PA-professionals geven het belang van alle kenniscompetenties hogere scores dan zichzelf op deze competenties, behalve kennis over de gemeentelijke arena; die scoorde zowel in belang als in de zelfevaluatie laag. Kennis over de thuisorganisatie scoorde in belang en in de zelfevaluatie het hoogst. Elf van de vijftien vaardigheidscompetenties scoorden op belang hoger dan de eigen score; dat gold niet voor eigen verantwoordelijkheid, pragmatiek, mondelinge en schriftelijke vaardigheid en senioriteit. De laagste eigen scores betroffen senioriteit, constructief en competitief onderhandelen en het beïnvloeden van media. Met betrekking tot de attitudecompetenties worden betrouwbaarheid en integriteit als het belangrijkste beschouwd. De eigen score op authenticiteit

en persoonlijke betrokkenheid was hoger dan de score op belang Betrouwbaarheid, kritische instelling, acceptatie van onregelmatige werktijden en integriteit scoorden op belang en in de zelfevaluatie op hetzelfde niveau.

Tussen de competenties in kennis, vaardigheid en attitude enerzijds en ervaring anderzijds zijn op het punt van belang correlaties vastgesteld: in de vaardigheidscompetenties op netwerken, overtuigingskracht en eigen verantwoordelijkheid, en in de attitudecompetentie op integriteit. Op het punt van de zelfevaluatie zijn correlaties met ervaring vastgesteld op de kenniscompetenties 'Den Haag', provincies, gemeenten en het vak zelf. De vaardigheidscompetenties gaven in de zelfevaluatie correlaties met jaren van ervaring te zien op overtuigingskracht, eigen verantwoordelijkheid, mondelinge en schriftelijke vaardigheid, senioriteit, en constructief en competitief onderhandelen. In de attitudecompetenties zijn op het punt van de zelfevaluatie correlaties met ervaring gevonden op authenticiteit, kritische instelling en stressbestendigheid.

Op het aspect opleidingsniveau (gesplitst in vier: Communication Science, Politics & Administration, Human Sciences, en 'anders') doen zich eveneens correlaties voor. In kenniscompetenties correleerden PA-professionals die in CS opgeleid zijn, op belang met provinciale kennis en mediakennis, en in vaardigheidscompetenties op mediabeïnvloeding. PA-professionals die Politics & Administration studeerden correleerden wat belang betreft met Europese kennis en vakkennis in de vaardigheidscompetenties. In de zelfevaluatie ontstaat een ander beeld. PA-professionals met een CS achtergrond vinden zich tekort schieten in kennis over de nationale en Europese politieke arena maar menen meer kennis te hebben over de media. PA-professionals met een Politics & Administration achtergrond vinden zichzelf beter in het verwerven van steun en in overtuigingskracht.

De PA-professional beschouwt zichzelf als authentiek en betrokken, betrouwbaar en integer; hij is zich ervan bewust dat de sociale component in PA van uitermate groot belang is, vooral ook als competenties op de thuisorganisatie (zijn *back-office*) en op de nationale en Europese politieke arena gericht zijn. Gemeentelijke, provinciale en Europese (politiek-bestuurlijke) kennis behoeven echter verbetering. De gevonden correlaties in ogeschouw nemend, mag voorts worden geconcludeerd dat het verwerven van gezag en het vergroten van kennis, tekortkomingen zoals te kennen gegeven in de zelfevaluatie, kunnen verkleinen.

## HOOFDSTUK 6 – REGIONALE EN LOKALE PA IN DE NATIONALE EN EUROPESE POLITIEKE ARENA: EEN PERMANENTE UITRUIL VAN COMPETENTIES IN VAARDIGHEDEN, ATTITUDE EN KENNIS – MAAR WEL IN DEZE VOLGORDE

De onderzoeksvraag, die in dit hoofdstuk wordt beantwoord, luidt: Over welke competenties beschikken PA-professionals die door decentrale overheden naar de arena's worden gestuurd om decentrale belangen te behartigen? PA en PR, zoals geduid door Davidson (2015), zijn verwant en kunnen moeilijk los van elkaar functioneren, maar dienen wel los van elkaar te worden beschouwd: beide disciplines bewegen zich zowel binnen als buiten de organisatie en zijn gericht op relaties. Maar waar PR zich voornamelijk richt op het onderhouden van interne en externe relatienetwerken van de thuisorganisatie, en een overwegend media-gericht karakter draagt zoals beschreven door Flynn (2014) en Sha (2010), is PA gericht op het zenden en aansturen van boodschappen van de thuisorganisatie naar politieke arena's en omgekeerd, veelal via hetzelfde relatienetwerk (Linders & De Lange, 2003; McGrath, 2010; Davidson, 2015).

De 110 kernzinnen en 347 competentie gerelateerde kernwoorden<sup>3</sup> konden worden verdeeld over drie groepen competenties: vaardigheid, attitude en kennis, met respectievelijk 242, 130 en 85 kernzinnen en kernwoorden. Vervolgens is elk van de drie groepen competentie onderverdeeld in twee competentieclusters. De competenties met betrekking tot vaardigheden (242) konden worden verdeeld in het cluster communicatieve vaardigheden (157) en in het cluster politieke vaardigheden (85). Tot communicatieve vaardigheden behoren: contact zoeken; netwerken; steun weten te verwerven; eigen verantwoordelijkheid kunnen dragen; pragmatisch zijn; mondelinge en schriftelijke taalvaardigheid; senioriteit; overtuigingskracht; adaptief vermogen. Tot politieke vaardigheden behoren: strategisch en tactisch kunnen handelen, c.q. over lange en korte termijn; analytisch zijn; constructief en competitief kunnen onderhandelen; media kunnen beïnvloeden.

De competenties met betrekking tot attitude (130) konden worden verdeeld in het cluster 'trouw' (71) en het cluster 'flexibiliteit' (59).

Het competentiecluster 'trouw' omvat: betrouwbaarheid; integriteit; loyaliteit naar de thuisorganisatie; kritische instelling. Het cluster 'flexibiliteit' omvat: prettig in de omgang zijn; stressbestendigheid; acceptatie van onregelmatige werktijden; persoonlijke betrokkenheid; reputatiemanagement.

De kennis-competenties (85) konden worden verdeeld in het cluster 'politiek' (65) en in het cluster 'professionaliteit' (20). Het cluster 'politiek' omvat: kennis van samenlevingsvraagstukken; regionale sociaal-culturele en cultuurhistorische kennis; procesmatige en procedurele gemeentelijke, provinciale, nationale en Europese arenakennis; kennis over de thuisorganisatie. Tot het cluster 'professionaliteit' wordt gerekend: mediakennis en kennis over medialogica; vakkennis.

Deze verdeling in drie competentiegroepen en vervolgens in zes competentieclusters leverde een Cohen's kappa van 0.76 op.

### Resultaten

Opmerkelijk lijkt dat, geïnterviewden gevraagd naar competenties, vooral vaardigheidscompetenties noemden, gevolgd door attitude- en tenslotte kennis-competenties. Onderverdeeld naar clusters noemden de respondenten in de vaardigheidscompetenties communicatieve vaardigheden als de meest zwaarwegende, maar koppelden deze vaardigheden ook met politieke vaardigheden, wat in lijn is met Gregory (2008) en Fleisher (2003, 2007) die het vermogen tot het verbinden van competenties op momenten dat een PA-operatie dat vereist, een competentie op zichzelf vinden. Communicatieve vaardigheden kunnen worden samengevat met wat geïnterviewden duiden als 'how to focus' en politieke vaardigheden als 'to keep focus'.

In de attitude competenties leek de meeste waardering uit te gaan naar het cluster 'trouw'; het onderscheid met het cluster 'flexibiliteit' kan echter spanning oproepen. Want hoever reikt trouw als flexibiliteit wordt vereist op momenten van hectiek? Fleisher (2003, 2007), Sha (2010) en Gregory (2008) geven geen antwoord. Mogelijk dat in de competenties van "de ideale lobbyist" zoals beschreven door McGrath (2006) een antwoord besloten ligt; daarin liggen grenzen aan flexibiliteit besloten (betrouwbaarheid, integriteit). Geïnterviewden zeggen dat de PA-professional onder alle omstandigheden het hoofd koel moet kunnen houden: hij mag wel emoties tonen, maar zich er niet door laten leiden.

<sup>3</sup> De geïnterviewden benoemden competenties behalve in zinnen, veelal ook in trefwoorden.

Met betrekking tot de kenniscompetenties waarin de tweedeling 'politiek' en 'professionaliteit' was gemaakt, blijkt dat respondenten die tweedeling toch niet zo scherp trekken. Met andere woorden: de PA-professional die door zijn thuisorganisatie met regionale en lokale PA-boodschappen naar de nationale en Europese politieke arena's op pad gestuurd wordt, wordt wat zijn professionaliteit betreft gewaardeerd naar zijn politieke kennis, zoals in het betreffende kennis competentiecluster geduid. Arenakennis is vakkennis. Hij moet voorts voldoen aan de componenten zoals benoemd in het attitudecluster 'trouw' en aan communicatieve vaardigheden zoals benoemd in het eerste cluster vaardigheids-competenties. Opmerkelijk mag ook zijn dat algemeen als kenmerkend beschouwde PA-instrumenten -- issue management, stakeholders analyses en arena-analyses (Van Schendelen, 2013) -- nauwelijks werden genoemd.

Terugblikkend op de beschrijvingen van Sha (2010), Fleisher (2003, 2007), Gregory (2008), Griffin en Dunn (2004) en McGrath (2010) ten aanzien van PA-competenties, wordt convergentie zichtbaar met de kernwoorden en kernzinnen van de 41 geïnterviewden, maar ook divergentie. De geïnterviewden onderschrijven Fleishers duidingen in zijn PA BOK waarin hij het belang aangeeft om PA als beleid in de thuisorganisatie uit te dragen zodat draagvlak verworven worden kan. Echter, geen parallel is gevonden met Fleishers opmerking in 2007 om PA aan een stelsel van certificering te onderwerpen. Voorts noemde geen van de 41 geïnterviewden de nieuwe media, zoals door Fleisher benoemd als nieuw instrument in PA, om de kwaliteit van PA interventies te verbeteren. Integendeel, herhaalde malen wordt gewezen op de noodzaak dat de PA-professional aanwezig is, tussen de coulissen werkt, veelal onzichtbaar, en media, met inbegrip van nieuwe media, op afstand houdt. Geïnterviewden geven te kennen dat het werk van de PA-professional en de hiermee verbonden competenties zich vergelijken laat met het werk dat politici doen, wat echter meteen ook laat zien waar het verschil met PR-competenties zit. PR en PA kunnen beiden kenmerken van 'politiek' vertonen, maar PR is doorgaans de zichtbare buitenkant en PA doorgaans de onzichtbare binnenkant -- in de schaduw van de macht, buiten de schijnwerpers -- van operaties die tot doel hebben politieke besluitvorming te beïnvloeden. Een PA-professional met politieke ervaring, bij voorkeur ook in een lokale of provinciale politieke arena, heeft een voordeel, zeggen geïnterviewden, vooral in geval van verschillen van inzicht met (potentiële) samenwerkingspartners.

## HOOFDSTUK 7 – DISCUSSIE

Het inzicht dat de vijf studies in regionale en lokale PA bieden, is getekend door diversiteit: in de arena's, intern en extern in de thuisorganisatie en in competenties. In deze diversiteit tekenen zich twee aspecten af: regionale en lokale PA vereist 'vechten' om in de nationale en Europese politieke arena voet aan de grond te krijgen en vereist samenwerking. Die samenwerking geldt 'intern' in de thuisorganisatie zelf en in de omringende regio met private en publieke stakeholders, en ook 'extern' met private en publieke stakeholders elders in het land, of in de EU. Doel is om het gewicht van de PA-boodschap die in de nationale en Europese politieke arena moet worden uitgezet, te verzwaren. 'Vechten' en samenwerking zijn nodig omdat is gebleken dat in de nationale politieke arena een neiging tot centralisme bestaat om financieel de touwtjes in handen te houden. Daarnaast heerst er een non-regionale attitude tenzij zich in een regio situaties voordoen die nationale betekenis kunnen gaan krijgen. Regio's met een sterk profiel, zoals de Randstad (in de nationale politieke algemeen beschouwd als motor van de 'BV Nederland') kunnen het stramien van centralisme en non-regionalisme doorbreken.

De Europese politieke arena is weliswaar meer toegankelijk voor regionale thema's maar daar moeten decentrale overheden opboksen tegen nationale en lidstatelijke belangen en concurreren met andere regio's binnen de EU. De verschuiving in de EU programma-financiering van steun aan economisch zwakke regio's naar economisch sterke sectoren heeft regionale en lokale PA een money-driven attitude gegeven die vergelijkbaar is met private PA. Decentrale samenwerking zou het 'gevecht' minder ongelijk kunnen maken maar omdat in samenwerkingsverbanden het financieel-economische eigenbelang, prioriteit geniet, komt die samenwerking onvoldoende uit de verf.

Om PA in de gemeentelijke en provinciale thuisorganisatie wortel te laten schieten, zodat PA-boodschappen effectief kunnen worden 'uitgezonden', is continuïteit vereist. Om de voor PA-boodschappen relevante afdelingen in de thuisorganisatie 'mee' te krijgen is zending en missie nodig in de vorm van *sense-making*, maar het resultaat dat hiermee kan worden bereikt, verdient continu onderhoud. De gewenste continuïteit kan worden bereikt door in de organisatie een gemeenschappelijke 'visie op de toekomst' te formuleren waarvoor draagvlak

moet worden gevonden, en voorts door samenwerking binnen de muren van de thuisorganisatie tot stand te brengen. Samenwerking met omringende, naburige private en publieke stakeholders waardoor betrokkenheid ontstaat, kan de verlangde continuïteit helpen bevorderen. Bovendien leidt het tot het delen van arenakennis waaraan een tekort bestaat.

Op 'het slagveld' in de nationale en Europese politieke arena blijkt dat ook daar samenwerking het sleutelwoord is om tot bevredigende resultaten te komen. Dominantie van individueel, financieel eigenbelang van decentrale overheden stimuleert onderlinge concurrentie wat de alom bepleite samenwerking bemoeilijkt. Voorts blijken schaalverschillen tussen individuele gemeenten onderling en individuele provincies onderling een rol te spelen wat samenwerking in zeker opzicht zou kunnen stimuleren, maar ook hier wegen eigen prioriteiten dikwijls zwaarder. Tenslotte betalen individuele decentrale overheden die de nationale en Europese politieke arena binnentreden, een tol voor een tekort aan arenakennis. 'Europeanen' in eigen ambtelijke en bestuurlijke gelederen zouden een deel van het kennistekort kunnen opvullen. Politici en bestuurders die zich 'Europeaan' voelen, beseffen dat dit geen *hot item* is in lokale en provinciale verkiezingen en profileren zich hiermee meestal niet voldoende. Ten aanzien van regionale profilering lopen de meningen uiteen: folklorisme scoort niet; profilering wordt gezocht op economisch vlak waarvoor samenwerking nodig is, wat doorgaans onvoldoende van de grond komt.

### Theoretisch georiënteerde gezichtspunten

Het onderzoek leverde diverse theoretisch georiënteerde gezichtspunten op. Ten eerste laat PA zich moeilijk definiëren omdat het voortdurend meebeweegt met veranderingen in de samenleving en in de politiek – nationaal en Europees. McGrath (2012) ziet hierin juist de kracht van PA. Fricties met de definities die ten grondslag aan dit onderzoek lagen (Linders & De Lange, 2003); McGrath, 2010), zijn niet gevonden. Op nationaal niveau heeft regionale en lokale PA positie verworven, zodat decentrale overheden in zekere zin kunnen bijdragen aan een nieuw maatschappelijk evenwicht (Baumgartner, Jones & Mortensen, 1993; Baumgartner et al., 2009). Op Europees niveau heeft regionale en lokale PA ook positie verworven, zij het een andere, want hier zijn de staatsrechtelijke, constitutionele en culturele verschillen tussen lidstaten die regionale en lokale PA sturen. Decentrale grensoverschrijdende samenwerking – Europa in het klein – ontwikkelt zich ondanks genoemde verschillen gestaag (Van der Giessen, 2014).

Ten tweede blijken de vaardigheids-, attitude- en kenniscompetenties grotendeels te sporen met de bevindingen van Fleisher (3002, 2007), Gregory (2008), Sha (2010), Todd (2014), en Swart (2014). Hetzelfde geldt voor het organiseren van PA in de thuisorganisatie dat een afspiegeling is van de bevindingen van Weick (2001, 2009). Tenslotte kregen de verschillen in PR- en PA-competenties profiel op grond van Davidsons bevindingen (2015).

Ten derde wordt de veronderstelling dat regionale en lokale PA leunt op regionalisme niet volledig ondersteund. Regionale profilering speelt wel een rol, zoals in regio's waar economische potentie van nationale allure is ontstaan door clustering, maar in bescheiden mate. Regionale en lokale PA draagt hetzelfde karakter als private PA vanwege een money-driven attitude.

### Praktische implicaties

De praktische implicaties die de resultaten van het onderzoek te zien geven, spitsen zich in het algemeen ten eerste toe op de noodzaak gemeentelijke, provinciale en Europese arenakennis te vergroten, zowel binnen de organisatie als daarbuiten wanneer het op samenwerking aan komt in PA-operaties. Aangedrongen wordt op het organiseren van periodieke besprekingen, telkens met alle betrokken collegae en samenwerkingspartners. De stimulans die van deze ontmoetingen kan uitgaan is driedelig: het bevordert het uitwisselen van arenakennis, het draagt bij aan de kwaliteit van de uit te zenden PA-boodschap(en) en het voedt het proces van sense-making dat voor de acceptatie en inbedding van PA zo belangrijk gebleken is waardoor samenwerking binnen de organisatie kan worden aangewakkerd.

Ten tweede blijkt dat decentrale samenwerking een absolute noodzaak is. Het kent diverse verschijningsvormen: institutioneel in het Comité van de Regio's en in VNG en IPO, en incidenteel op functionele en thematische basis, vaak ook gebaseerd op de overweging dat interventies in de nationale en Europese politieke arena door samenwerking minder kosten. Gebleken is dat thematische samenwerking, bij voorkeur regionaal gebundeld en 'grensontkennend', effectief kan zijn wat spoort met eerder gedaan onderzoek (Marks, Hooghe, & Black, 1996; Fiege, Gosselt, Linders & De Jong, 2016), ook op mondiale schaal (Barber, 2013). Dat decentrale samenwerking echter stroef verloopt, is een gevolg van het eigenbelang dat decentrale overheden prioriteren.

### **Beperkingen van het onderzoek**

Het onderzoek kende enkele beperkingen, die tegelijk aanzet kunnen zijn tot vervolgonderzoek. De eerste beperking is dat vier van de vijf studies gebaseerd zijn op een kwalitatieve dataset wat subjectiviteit in zich kan bergen. De tweede beperking is dat regionale en lokale PA bestudeerd is zonder casuïstiek. De reden is dat eerst processen in kaart moeten zijn gebracht voordat casuïstiek aan de orde komt. Casuïstiek vervolgonderzoek zou helderheid kunnen brengen. De derde – actuele – beperking staat in relatie tot de zeer recente gebeurtenissen in de EU, met name Brexit, en in de Amerikaanse presidentsverkiezingen. Nu in 'Brussel' onder meer de vraag wordt opgeworpen wat meer of anders moet worden gedaan om Europees beleid dichter bij de burger te krijgen, zou dat tot gevolg kunnen hebben dat de ontvankelijkheid in de Europese politieke arena voor regionale en lokale belangen kan toenemen. De Amerikaanse presidentsverkiezingen hebben de vraag actueel gemaakt hoe beleid *überhaupt* 'dichter bij de mensen' te krijgen is. Ook het antwoord op deze vraag kan van invloed zijn op decentrale en lokale PA. Verschillen tussen het Anglo-Amerikaanse Model en het Rijnlands Model zouden hierbij betrokken kunnen worden. Ook dit pleit voor (casuïstiek) vervolgonderzoek.

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