

*SOCIAL IDENTITIES*

**NEGLECTED MIDDLE MEN? GATEKEEPERS IN HOMELAND POLITICS.**

**CASE: FLEMISH NATIONALISTS' RECEPTIVITY TO THE PLIGHT OF TURKEY'S KURDS.**

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**ABSTRACT**

Studies of transnational political activism or Diaspora politics have tended to disregard the importance of political gatekeepers in the pursuit of immigrants' and refugees' political change back home. Furthermore, when attention has been given to the crucial role of gatekeepers for politically engaged migrants to negotiate their ways into host-country politics, it has often been confined just to resumes of those involved and the activities undertaken. Rarely has research engaged with questioning political gatekeepers themselves about their personal beliefs underlying their commitments to the cause. Nor has research often looked into how certain alignments and cooperative relationships between transnational political actors and their gatekeepers in receiving countries came into being, and how such genealogies might lend insight into the transnational advocacy networks and the particular types of activities that transnational political actors have developed. This paper aims to help fill this lacuna, by providing original and unique insights into the genealogy of Flemish nationalists' support for Turkey's Kurdish nationalist movement, and thus also to testify to how investigations into political gatekeepers can improve our understanding of the ways in which transnationalism materializes.

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## Introduction

Diasporas influence international images, focus attention on issues of identity, and are able to affect foreign policy decision making (Barth & Shain, 2003). Diaspora political elites are often strongly engaged with the political situation of the homeland, for which access to political gatekeepers is a *sine qua non*. Political gatekeepers are defined here as individuals and collective bodies (political parties, labor unions, NGOs) inside receiving states that enable those active in the pursuit of homeland political change to access the political terrains where they might affect the receiving countries' policies towards the homeland. Gatekeepers' roles should not be underestimated, as they not only enable access to the host-societies' political power structures, but also help to shape the collective organization of migrants and refugees by providing organizational models and related resources (Soysal 1994).

Despite the manifest importance of political gatekeepers, however, studies of transnational political activism have often disregarded their role in the pursuit of political change back home. When attention has been devoted to the gatekeepers, it has generally remained confined either to listings of the actors involved and the types of activities undertaken (Emanuelsson, 2005; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2001; Grojean, 2008) or to more abstract generalizations about the assumed significance of the relations between the integration policies and citizenship regimes of the receiving states and the absence or presence of homeland political activism (Nell, 2004; Koopmans et al. 2005). Although there has been some interesting research done from an agency-oriented perspective that treats as more meaningful the concrete transnational practices in respect of transnationalism's *how* (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2001; 2003a & 2003b), this research did not provide satisfactory explanations as to *why* certain political gatekeepers support the demands and efforts of transnational political activists.

Of course it could be argued that host-country politicians as political gatekeepers may have the electoral support they can obtain by addressing the concerns of certain (ethnic) constituents as their primary incentive. This consideration cannot apply, however, in cases with small and electorally insignificant ethnic minorities. This makes the case at

hand, that of the Kurds in Belgium, which makes it all the more interesting, since the Kurds in Belgium number only an estimated 40,000 (of which less than half live in the Flemish speaking North of the country, the focus of this paper). Representing around a half of one percent of the total electorate, therefore, these citizens of Kurdish descent play no significant role in the electoral strategies of the country's political parties. On the contrary, almost all the politicians interviewed in the research presented here testified that their political engagements for the plight of the Kurds have never been politically rewarded, either by Kurdish or by Belgian voters. Kurdish transnational political actors have been able to translate their demands into Flemish politics, that is, *despite* their lack of electoral value.

Of concern here are those gatekeepers that are addressed through lobbying. Lobby work involves forms of transnational political practices and indirect homeland politics with which transnational active migrants and refugees work (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003b). With regards to the lobby work of transnational political actors, Østergaard-Nielsen was one of the first to investigate how some groups manage to negotiate their way into the host-country political establishment when others remain outside of it (2003b). Her research, nevertheless, still focused primarily on the agents of transnational political activism, that is the Diaspora elites (providing insight into their strengths and weaknesses), and only secondarily on the importance of gatekeepers. More thorough investigations into the host-country political gatekeepers' relations with transnational political actors have increased our understanding of 'negotiating ways in' (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003b). This type of inquiry attests to the importance of the personal as well as ideological beliefs of gatekeepers and their organizational embeddedness – but it can do more than that. Interesting but often overlooked are the particular ways in which alignments and cooperative relationships between transnational political actors and their host-country gatekeepers come into being. These so-called 'organizational genealogies' tell us more about the particularities of the transnational political practices employed by specific groups and how they develop. These genealogies of cooperation reveal that exchanges between local political gatekeepers and transnational political activists are learning processes that generate specific types of initiatives, and they improve our understanding of the particular transnational advocacy networks that come into being through transnational activism. Clearly there is thus something to be gained from a more in-depth inquiry of political gatekeepers. Until now, research has rarely

engaged directly with the personal beliefs, viewpoints and experiences of political mediators that underlie their commitments to what are ultimately 'other people's causes'. This is in contrast to the increasing volume of research inquiring into the variety of reasons for the ongoing commitments of immigrants and (political) refugees to their country of origin (Alinia, 2005; Argun, 2003; Westwood & Phizacklea, 2000). That the neglected middle men of political gatekeeping deserve more attention in studies of transnationalism is precisely what this paper intends to demonstrate, by means of an inquiry into the genealogy of Belgium's Flemish nationalists' support for and organizational cooperation with Turkey's Kurdish nationalist movement.

The outline of the paper is as follows. To begin with, brief sketches are made of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey and the Flemish nationalist movement in Belgium, depicting their main political actors, ideas and goals. Thereafter, the paper engages with a narration of the latter's interest in and involvement with the transnational political activism of (Turkish) Kurds in Europe. Particular attention will be devoted to the genealogy of the support for the plight of the Kurds as a 'people' as narrated by political personalities who have been key figures in the creation of a political space for discussion of Turkey's Kurdish question in Belgian and also European politics.

The material for this paper was gathered through semi-structured interviews with (former) Flemish politicians who have long been involved with Turkey's Kurdish question as well as through additional archival research both into political initiatives in the Belgian and European Parliaments, and at the Kurdish Institute of Brussels. All quotations are from the author's personal communication with the individuals concerned, unless otherwise indicated.

## **Turkey's Kurdish nationalist movement**

The origins of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey date back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the establishment of the modern Turkish nation-state in the 1920s (see Taspinar, 2005; McDowall, 1996). The nationalist-secularist republic fashioned from the rump Ottoman Empire was immediately faced with a legitimacy crisis in its

Kurdish inhabited region, which tended to be more conservative (religious), had a long history of quasi-autonomy and nationalist aspirations of its own. Indeed, plans for an Anatolian Kurdistan in the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres dealing with the Allied dissolution of the Empire were only abandoned when the treaty was annulled following the success of the Turkish nationalists under Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk). The 1920s and 1930s saw several Kurdish rebellions in the southeast of Turkey, which were all crushed, ushering in a period of severe military repression with deportations and resettlement as the region fell under direct rule from Ankara and martial law (Taspinar, 2005). Meanwhile, the new republic's instalment of the Turkish language and introduction of systems of national education and military service served as instruments for the 'Turkification' (assimilation) of its Kurdish inhabitants.

From the 1950s onwards, the Kurdish question in Turkey was perceived in terms of 'backward social forces' that were 'rebellious against a modern state power that promised progress and prosperity', and thus regarded in terms of a 'resistance of the past against the present'. This rejection of 'modern state power that promised progress and prosperity' would thus be debated as a problem of regional underdevelopment, with the solution consequently seen to lie in economical integration (Yeğen, 2011:69). The ethnic dimension denied, Turkish officials sought to prevent any collective public expression of Kurdishness, which led eventually even to a denial of the very existence of Kurds as a separate ethnic entity (Watts, 2006; Barkey & Fuller, 1998). With the public use of the Kurdish language of the majority of Turkey's Kurds, *Kurmanji*, seriously confined, even the standardization of the language was developed mainly by Kurdish intellectuals living in exile in Europe (Kreyenbroek, 1991).

It took until the end of the 1960s for Kurds to organize themselves again. In the 'Eastern Meetings', assembled leftist and Kurdish political activists sought to expose and explain the economic backwardness of the Kurdish southeast. The organization of Kurdish political formations grew especially from dissident involvement in the revolutionary Left of Turkey during the 1970s, from which originated the 1978 founded Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (Jongerden & Akkaya, 2011). The maintenance of the feudal system due to the collaboration of (Kurdish) landlords with the central state in return for block votes was regarded as a major factor holding the region back.

The successive military coups of 1971 and 1980 had a devastating effect on these political formations and their militants, many of whom were imprisoned, killed or fled to Europe. The PKK, however, had relocated to neighbouring Syria, leaving it one of the few leftist or Kurdish organizations to survive the 1980 coup. Consequently, it was able to reorganize inside Turkey and build a support basis there for the armed struggle it regarded as the only way to achieve political and socio-economical change in the Kurdish southeast, as well as in the country as a whole (Jongerden & Akkaya, 2011).

In 1984, the PKK instigated an armed insurgency against the Turkish state, which responded by placing the Kurdish inhabited provinces of Turkey under the rule of a state of emergency law, equivalent in some parts of the Southeast to military occupation. Systemic human rights violations during this period extended, for example, to regular extra-judicial killings. Nevertheless, the PKK insurgency proved successful as the guerrilla force took effective control of large tracts of land, forcing the state to respond with a new counter-insurgency strategy. This included the establishment of a state-armed local militia system ('village guards') combined with a cleansing of the countryside that involved the wholesale eviction of a million people, perhaps more (Jongerden, 2007).

From the early days of the war, a great number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and others seeking safety and ways to sustain their livelihoods escaped to the big Kurdish cities and migrated to the western Turkish metropolises. Many went to Europe, including political asylum seekers. This induced an acceleration of the urbanization and internationalization of the Kurdish population, which in turn contributed to an increase in Kurdish political activism and the emergence of a Kurdish civil society and public sphere (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2011; Watts, 2006; Gambetti, 2008). By the beginning of the 1990s, the PKK had become a mass movement (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2011; Romano, 2006), enjoying popular and growing support among Kurds in Turkey and Europe, where it became the main political player overseeing a significant number of associations (Grojean, 2008). The PKK thus became the primary reference point for Kurdish national activism, offering a new, alternative set of national symbols to those of the Turkish state (Bozarslan, 2000).

From 1990 onwards, Kurdish political activists sought parliamentary political representation in Turkey through their own political party, the People's Labour Party

(HEP). Construed as a threat to the national integrity of the country, however, the HEP and successive pro-Kurdish parties were allowed to function only for short periods of time until being closed down. Although these parties failed to pass the nationwide ten percent threshold necessary for representation in the Ankara parliament, they did provide the Kurdish nationalist movement with a new set of public advocates. Legal political activism was extremely dangerous, however, with high risks for those involved of imprisonment, torture or death – for example, over a hundred members of the pro-Kurdish parties were murdered between 1991 and 2001 (Watts, 2006).

By the end of the 1990s, the Kurdish parties were increasingly winning office in municipal elections, but the PKK had suffered serious military setbacks in the face of the tough counter-insurgency measures undertaken by the Turkish state, ultimately leading to the capture of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, and the consequent withdrawal of most of its guerilla units across the border into Iraqi Kurdistan territory. The PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire in 1999, which has held (with breaks) since, resulting in a sharp decrease of the number of casualties and an end to the environment of insecurity. This was reinforced during the early 2000s by a number of liberalizing reforms undertaken in order for Turkey to be accepted as candidate for EU membership.

With the positive political developments in the 2000s, Kurdish nationalists generally were most concerned to establish the political legitimacy of their demands, which include finding a way to settle the armed conflict and allow the political integration of the PKK (Casier, 2010b). Indeed, and despite apparently fatal blows – including being listed by the EU (and US) as an international terrorist organization with the ‘War on Terror’ in the wake of 9/11 – the PKK did manage to maintain a significant influence in Kurdish civil society.

Having long foregone the initial (PKK) aim of complete independence, the Kurdish nationalist movement has continued to seek recognition of the Kurdish nation in the Turkish constitution, to strive for Kurdish cultural rights and increased political autonomy in the Southeast. Kurdish activists in Europe generally have supported these goals and maintained intense exchanges with Turkey-based Kurdish activists and members of the main Kurdish party. Despite the recent gains, major restrictions stayed still in place – such as the use of languages other than Turkish in state arenas (see Casier, 2010a) – while Kurdish social and political life in general has remained under suspicion,

with numerous court cases against Kurdish activists, journalists and politicians (on charges of separatism and/or support of a terrorist organization).

### **The Flemish nationalist movement**

The Flemish nationalist movement dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, some time after the foundation of the Belgian state in 1830. Similarly to Turkey, where Turkish became the language of the state and key to social and political integration, Belgium's independence (from the Netherlands) was followed by the establishment of French as the official language, leaving the Dutch speaking population in a position of economic and social subordination (Hossay, 1996; Reynebeau, 1995). Political power in Belgium was thus concentrated in a French speaking political and economic elite (Oosterlynck, 2007), and Flanders and Wallonia as ethno-linguistic regions or communities had not yet emerged (Murphy 1988).

The development of the Flemish 'nation' was the fruit of the Flemish movement (Reynebeau, 1995: 119). It was thought that the nation found its expression through language, and in order to safeguard this, the relation between state, language and nation needed official recognition. The demand of Flemish nationalists was thus that nation and state should coincide, with language considered to enable the expression of the 'national character'. Faced with the necessity of learning French if ever they wished to climb up the social ladder, the professionals of the lower middle classes were particularly attracted to the Flemish movement.

Growing in numbers but without access to the political and economic power, it was in the interest of these people to find ways that would consolidate their position as a channel between the top and the bottom layers of society. They were people with few material means but significant cultural capital, of which 'mastery' of the common language was one of the most important. Dutch (or Flemish) thus came to represent the boundary between the powerful and the powerless, operating as a means to define and empower this middle group. The Flemish movement (similarly to Kurdish intellectuals in the Kurdish nationalist movement) concentrated on the standardization of ordinary language. Over time, an idea grew of the Flemish as a people who had been left behind economically and therefore unable to develop culturally and become 'civilized' – again, like the perception of the Kurds and the Turkish Southeast .

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Flemish nationalism was present in three political parties, and a new economic elite was developing that was sensitive to the connection made by the Flemish movement of the idea of the 'backwardness' of the nation's language to the underdevelopment of the region. This was particularly pertinent given the growing economic disparity between the French speaking north of the country, and the Dutch speaking south (Hossay, 1996). The demands of the nationalist movement increased as regional 'self-governance' was demanded. When World War I came, part of the Flemish nationalist movement collaborated with the Germans, and another, socialist part with the Belgian army against Germany, expecting their participation to be rewarded by the recognition of their demands. Central therein was the demand to recognize the equality of Flanders and Wallonia. At the end of the war, however, King Albert prevented Flemish nationalists from entering the government and obstructed the Dutchification of the universities and the army. Consequently, the soldiers killed in the First World War (70% of them Flemish) became martyrs, and this symbol of the suffering of the Flemish a founding myth of the Flemish nationalist movement (Wils, 2009). Not dissimilarly, the Kurdish nationalist movement would also continue to remind Turkey of the fact that Kurdish regiments fought for liberation from the Western powers alongside Mustafa Kemal, who was never to deliver upon his promise of political recognition (Yeğen, 2011).

Following the First World War the Flemish movement became more pluralistic and started to attach greater importance to pacifism and internationalism. As a result, it was also able to attract some support from communist dissidents from within the workers movement of that time, providing a channel to mobilize workers against the bourgeois upper classes (Reynebeau, 1995). Flemish nationalism thus became integrated into a broader ideological movement following WWI, one that considered its enemy to be not only 'Frenchness' but also the power-complex of the bourgeoisie, capitalism, the church, the royal family and the Belgian state, lending a sense of aversion to the state and giving hopes for a radical revolution. The extreme left could consider Flemish nationalism as a progressive movement with a revolutionary potential, since, at that time, very little was expected from the state legislative (parliamentary) process. Again, the historical parallel with the Kurdish situation in southeast Turkey is manifest.

These local developments coincided with an international call by US President Wilson for the right of each people to self-rule with the dream of a new international order of 'peoples', coexisting in a peaceful new Europe, which could serve as a surrogate for a Soviet-style social revolution. During the interwar period all manner of cultural, social and professional Flemish organizations came into being. In the 1930s, some of these came under the influence of social-nationalism and collaborated with the German occupiers in WW II, bringing the Flemish nationalist movement into great discredit in the decades following the war. It had revived by the late 1950s, however, when the Flemish economy was enjoying a period of steady growth.

As the radical wing of the Flemish movement was marginalized because of the wartime collaboration, it was the moderates who would take the lead in the Flemish struggle for self-rule (Oosterlynck, 2007). In 1954, people from within this part of the Flemish movement founded the People's Union Party (*Volksunie*, VU), which became the sole alternative to the main traditional parties (Christian-Democrat, Liberal and Socialist). The People's Union addressed social and ecological problems and was able to attract social groups that felt excluded from the economic growth: small-holders and farm workers, miners and youth. Flemish nationalism became attractive to people on the left once more, and the party further developed the idea of federalism and regional autonomy.

From 1970 to 1993, under pressure from a growing call for autonomy, the Belgian state would gradually evolve into a full-fledged federal state, delegating ever more power to the regions and thus 'hollowing out its center' (Hooghe, 2004). In 1977, following an important compromise over the future of the country's federalization (known as '*Egmontpact*'), the most radical wing of the People's Union party split off, establishing itself in 1978 as the Flemish Bloc (*Vlaams Blok*, VB, changing to Flemish Concern, *Vlaams Belang*, in 2004). This new party advocated for fully-fledged Flemish independence with an extreme rightist agenda, The People's Union party was to fall victim to another right-left divide in 2002, with conservatives forming the New Flemish Alliance (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*, N-VA) and the social-liberals forming Spirit. Recently the latter changed its name into SLP and now merged with the Green party, but the former continues to operate, espousing the secession of Flanders from Belgium.

The Flemish nationalist movement today continues to be split in terms of its nationalist goals, between that part which seeks consolidation of its current autonomous position within the borders of Belgium (SLP and Christian democrat CD&V), and that which demands separation (NV-A and Vlaams Belang).

## **The Flemish-Kurdish nexus**

### ***Narrating the origins of a long-lasting relationship***

In reconstructing the relationship between Flemish and Kurdish nationalists, focus falls first on the political personality of one of the founding fathers of the federalist idea in Flanders, Flemish nationalist politician Maurits Coppieters. Generally recognized as one of the main ideological leaders on the left of the Flemish movement, Coppieters was a fierce advocate of federalism and self-governance for the Flemish community in Belgium.

Federalism was thought most appropriate for the democratization of society, as it was thought to bring governing authority closer to the citizens, who were thus enabled to control it. Federalism and pluralism were written into the People's Union party program from 1967. Coppieters also developed a particular interest in the peace movement, for example contesting the nuclear arms race and the trade in weapons more generally (Dedeurwaerder, 2009). Situated on the left of the movement, and conscious of the movement's dark past of collaboration with Nazi Germany, Coppieters was wary of instrumentalizing a discriminatory nationalist language, and explicitly promoted the pluralist character of the party (which stood in contrast with the extreme-rightist and racist Flemish Bloc (VB), from which all Flemish political parties have sought to distance themselves).

We take up the story in 1979 when, following a decade and a half as Flemish representative in the Chamber and Senate, Coppieters becomes the first People's Union member to be elected to the European Parliament. During his short period as an MEP, he draws attention to and support for the idea of a 'Europe of peoples', taking initiatives on behalf of the Basques, Bretons and Corsicans. Coppieters instigates a closer political cooperation between the autonomist and federalist parties in the European Parliament, which in June 1979 sign the European Charter of Peoples without a State

(Dedeurwaerder, 2009). Putting his faith in people's nationalism as a leading principle that needs to be integrated and valorized in international politics, Coppieters rejects what he called 'pretentious' and 'harmful' 'state nationalism'. Cooperation for European integration is seen as safeguarding the future of Flanders, as well as other regions and their peoples. Coppieters considers federalism as the means to achieve a 'democracy of peoples' and regards ethnicities, language regions and economic regions as constitutive elements of a Europe that would allow a 'human-size' democracy (De Beul & De Beul, 2009: 162). Coppieters argues that 'being a people's nationalist also means being one for others', thereby showing solidarity with people's struggles for self-determination worldwide (ibid: 163). In the plenary of the European Parliament, he argues:

Millions of Europeans of our Member-States are not represented here in their own identity. We federalists believe in a strong supranational power, if and upon the condition that the Member-States allow the clear distinction of regions and lend an identity to the peoples. Certain peoples are not only denied a proper identity but in some Member-States they find themselves even considered suspects (Coppieters cited in Vanhaelewyn, 2009).<sup>2</sup>

The 1981 establishment of the European Free Alliance (EFA) in the European Parliament, which marks the beginning of a growing political space for regionalist politics at the European level, is considered the heritage of Coppieters and his followers' dedication to the federalist dream in relation to the project of European integration (De Winter & Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro, 2002). It is the inspiration and idealism of Coppieters that is later to find expression in the engagements of Flemish nationalist politicians with the Kurdish cause, both in national and international politics. And it is in this strong internationalism of the Flemish nationalist movement that the rationale for its commitment to the plight of the Kurds is embedded.

### ***The political is personal? The political mediators' beliefs and party commitments***

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Dutch/Flemish by the author.

This is the core of being a nationalist: one cannot be a nationalist without being an inter-nationalist. And of course, the carrier of this is the respect for every people. Every people has a right to self-rule (Willy Kuijpers, 20 July 2009).

During the period when the People's Union Party emerged – the decade between the mid-60s and mid-70s – political parties sprung up in defense of a threatened language, culture or region all around Europe (Bouveroux & Huyse, 2009: 146-147). Some of these parties arose from a growing frustration at the enduring neglect or economic decay of their region, such as the Basque country and Galicia in Spain, or Scotland and Wales in the United Kingdom. Others, such as Spanish Catalonia or Northern Italy were no longer willing to share the gains they had achieved with the poorer parts of the country. A number of these parties would engage with violence as a means to achieve change, whereas others sought to attack the national state through the ballot box (Bouveroux & Huyse, 2009: 146). What all of these movements shared was a yearning for greater independence, a sense of being trapped and locked into the states of which they were unwilling parts (ibid, 2009).

The People's Union was in contact with these regionalist and nationalist parties, even ahead of the formalization of these contacts in the European Free Alliance. Many of the politicians that would later visit the Kurdish regions and develop an interest in the Kurdish cause had started off as youngsters by joining delegations to the Basque country in the 1970s. As former President of the People's Union and Flemish Minister of Culture Bert Anciaux recalls:

My involvement with the Kurds grew from my involvement with the Basques. I must have been 14 years old the first time I went to the Basque country [i.e. in 1973-4]. That was together with Willy Kuijpers. Later on I went back many times by myself. That was during the struggle against the dictatorship [i.e. Franco's], when it was accessible. And, how shall I say, it was hard to deny that, to put it simply, 95 percent of the people in Basque country had a serious problem with Spain's state-nationalism (Bert Anciaux, 23 October 2009).

Bart Staes, former People's Union politician and current member for the Flemish Green party in the European Parliament, explains:

There was a journal called *Werkgroep Arbeid* that later turned into *Meervoud*. In these journals there was coverage of minorities. I got in touch with that journal through my teachers at high school who were People's Union-sympathizers [in the early/mid-

1970s]. Later on I joined the People's Union and got to know people like Willy Kuijpers, Maurits Coppieters, Karel Van Reeth and Jaak Vandemeulebroecke. The involvement with human rights and the rights of minorities developed from a sense of injustice (Bart Staes, 3 May 2007).

The source of inspiration for many Flemish nationalist at that time, *Werkgroep Arbeid* was the journal of the Flemish nationalist movement's leftist wing. The international coverage of this journal focused attention on (local) national minority issues as well as on liberation movements in other parts of the world, such as those of South Africa and Palestine or in Central and South America. This was the period of incipient post-colonialism, a time of great activity in local consciousness and political identity formation. There was a rejection of the vestiges of the old imperial system which was related to demands for liberation not only of but also within states, including in the imperialist centers themselves. Thus the sense of common cause and the affiliation of radically different nationalist groups with wildly diverging experiences, such as emerged in the Flemish/Kurdish case.

Reviewing the position of the Flemish nationalists as it has developed over the past four decades, Jan Loones summarizes the commitment within the People's Union thus:

As people's nationalists, within the People's Union and currently within the New Flemish Alliance [N-VA], we have always paid attention to all peoples living in comparable circumstances and struggling for their own identity, a thing that also needs to result into the state structures. That is why we sympathize with other communities in the world that strive for the same goals. This is valid for the Kurds, Palestinians, Catalans, Basques, etc. Within the People's Union this was strengthened because it was a party that incorporated this internationalism. We are nationalists, but we've always been democratic and open [minded] nationalists. As Luyten [former party ideologue and follower of Coppieters] said, "Flanders cannot turn inwards into itself" (Jan Loones, 15 August 2009).

Like their inspiration, Coppieters, the succeeding generation(s) of Flemish nationalist politicians of all persuasions, left and right, have continued to insist upon the need to distinguish between the 'people's nationalism' they adhere to and what is defined as 'state nationalism'. State nationalism as the ideal of a unitary state is perceived as something backward and outdated that has created nothing but ill effect with its insistence on the credo of one nation, one culture and one language. As Kuijpers notes,

'We should not deny that, just like any ideology, nationalism is at its most unacceptably extreme within a democracy.' The sense of prudence is related back to a strong belief in federalism and the project of the European Union as an umbrella for the regions and guarantor of a peaceful co-existence. It is even the belief of some that it is due to the Flemish nationalist movement that the concept of a federalist state – as an alternative to the unitary state – has spread across Europe and into the Kurdish nationalist movement. In Kuijpers' words, 'We have taught those peoples the meaning of federalism.'

### ***From encounter to institutionalization***

The engagement of Flemish politicians with the Kurdish question originated in the tense 1960s. Willy Kuijpers – later to be elected to the Belgian Chamber of Representatives of the People and European Parliament – was active as a militant for the People's Union party youth branch, *Volksuniejongeren* (VUJO) when, in 1967, he met the Kurdish political refugee Dr. Ismet Sheriff Vanly. Later to become an advocate of the PKK struggle against the Turkish state, at that time Vanly was supporting the political struggle of Mollah Mustafa Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraq, the KDP. Maurits Coppieters invited Vanly to Flanders. Recalling his first meeting with Sheriff Vanly, Kuijpers argues:

We understood each other right away, as from within his philosophy Sheriff Vanly understood federalism and understood that it is possible for one language group to cooperate across the borders [as the Flemish and Dutch intellectuals and linguists did at the time], without being one and the same state (Willy Kuijpers, 20 July 2009).

It was through Vanly that Kuijpers made contact with the Kurds in Iraq. After Kuijpers had been elected to the Belgian Parliament and as a member of the Commission for Foreign Affairs he made several visits to the Iraq of the Baath regime in the 1970s. 'When we were there and travelling through the country, we found Iraq to be some kind of Switzerland of the Middle East', Kuijpers recalled, surprised to discover the presence of many ethnic and religious minorities living within the borders of the country. At that time, the Kurdish political opposition in Iraq enjoyed the support of the Soviet Union in the Cold War against the West and its Middle Eastern allies (i.e. Saddam Huseyin's Baath regime, which was supported against Iran). In 1979, however, the Soviet support was

withdrawn and Kurdish political activists and intellectuals were expelled from the Lumumba University of Moscow, where they had been studying. A new generation of the Kurdish opposition living in exile in Austria turned to Kuijpers. 'The question was whether I couldn't do anything for these students,' he explains.

The students need for help came just at the time that the Flemish nationalist movement managed to secure its first government minister, Van Elslande Minister for Dutch Culture, a Flemish nationalist from the then Christian People's Party (*Christelijke Volkspartij, CVP*), now the Christian Democrat & Flemish Party, (*Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams, CD&V*). The newly inaugurated minister granted twelve scholarships to the Kurdish students and Kuijpers – with the help of other members of the local People's Union branch – was able to get the students enrolled into higher education institutions. A student house was set-up and which was to serve as a political secretariat for the Kurds in exile.

We thought, let's put all these scholarships together in order to get things running. These students will get along with one another and we can start up a secretariat. Some People's Union families had put their holiday-savings together and so we could furnish the place. We were so confident that things would progress from that point on!

But they did not. Not only did the students' educational levels appear to be far from sufficient in order to succeed at the enrolled courses, what was worse, the twelve were split over party and ideological lines and constantly fighting over the political direction that the Kurdish movement needed to take. Although united in the KSSE, the Kurdish Student Union in Europe and the dream of a secretariat for the Kurds and Kurdistan in the heart of Europe was short-lived.

It was in 1978, during the existence of the KSSE, that TEKOSER (the Kurdish Workers and Students Association in Belgium) was set up. The name 'TEKOSER' was the Kurdish acronym for the Kurdish Workers and Student Association, and also a Kurdish word meaning 'militant'. Established in Brussels, by that time the de facto capital of the (then) EEC as well as of Belgium, TEKOSER was initiated by Kurdish political refugees from Turkey. Among these were Derwich Ferho, a nineteen year-old who had arrived the previous year having fled the city of Midyat (in southeast Turkey) where he had been engaged in the Midyat Revolutionary Cultural Hearth Association (*Devrimci Kultur Ocağı Derneği*). Frustrated with the immobility of the KSSE, the internal ideological strife and

the KSSE orientation to Iraqi Kurdistan – disregarding, he thought, the other parts of Kurdistan – Ferho had sought a new group of companions.

TEKOSER gathered a small group of seven Kurdish individuals, among whom were sympathizers of the Turkish Communist Party (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi*, TKP), Socialist Workers' Party of Turkey (*Türkiye Sosyalist İsci Partisi*, TSİP), the Revolutionary Cultural Associations of the East (*Devrimci Doğu Kültür Derneği*, DDKD) and the Turkish pro-Kurdish parties Liberation (*Ala Rizgarî*) and Freedom Path (*Rîya Azadî*). Ferho had sought cooperation amongst sympathizers and militants of different revolutionary leftist parties already present in Belgium, such as the Turkish Workers Party (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, TIP), *Dev Yol*, *Dev Sol* and the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party (*Devrimci Halk Kurtuluş Partisi*, DHKP). However, as Ferho recalls difficulties arose time and again over the Kurdish issue, with Ferho and his companions considered Kurdistans and thus, as he recalls, 'separatist' and a 'cause of division within the working class' (Derwich Ferho, 17 March 2010). This ideological dispute among the European Kurdish Diaspora reflected similar divisions inside Turkey, where the Kurdistans eventually broke-away from the revolutionary left in order to address the particularities of the situation in the Southeast (see Jongerden & Akkaya, 2011).

During the first years of TEKOSER a strong relationship developed between Derwich Ferho, and the People's Union Party. Kuijpers actively supported Ferho and introduced him into the networks of the Flemish nationalist movement of that time. Having been taught Dutch by pro-Flemish teachers and being in touch with the leftist Flemish nationalist youth active in the journal *Werkgroep Arbeid/Meervoud* (see above), Ferho also started to actively relate the beliefs of the Kurds with those of the Flemish in Belgium,

In 1989, TEKOSER became the Kurdish Institute of Brussels, in order to develop a more respectable image and in parallel with the in 1983 established Kurdish Institute of Paris. When Hugo Schiltz was elected onto the Flemish Executive (predecessor of the Flemish Parliament), he facilitated the necessary subsidies for the Kurdish Institute. With the consequent growth of the Institute attracting the attention of Flemish nationalist politicians, the Kurdish question gained visibility in public and political life, both in Flanders and in Belgium as a whole.

## ***See it and believe: the mobilizing role of delegations***

Drawing from his experiences with diplomatic delegations to the Middle East, and with the help of Derwich Ferho and his contacts inside Turkey and the European Kurdish Diaspora, Kuijpers initiated several political ‘delegations’ to Turkey. As Kuijpers explains, ‘I’ve always believed strongly in seeing things before believing them’. By means of the delegations Kuijpers actively sought to convert other Flemish nationalist and non-nationalist politicians into ‘believers’ if not ‘advocates’ of the Kurdish cause:

We asked people to come along. People that we thought would be sensitive to this kind of issue. What was the result? These people saw what was happening over there and as a consequence the motions for resolutions in parliament that would formerly only enjoy the support of the People’s Union were being signed by these people (Willy Kuijpers, 20 July 2009).

It was not only the delegation members who were led to support parliamentary resolutions as they, in turn, succeeded in convincing other politicians within their own parties on the merits of the Kurdish cause in Turkey. Thus did political support grow in Belgium during the 1980s and the 1990s. Ferho describes the importance of the delegations thus:

If we Kurds address the outside world and try to expose our problems, okay, yes, people believe it. However, if the same problem is exposed by the people actually living here, active within politics, academia, associational life, than it is even more credible. (Derwich Ferho, 17 March 2010).

That the delegations made indelible impressions on their members is not surprising. In the 1980s Turkey’s politics and civil society were still suffering heavily from the consequence of the 1980 military coup. Hundreds of thousands political prisoners were incarcerated, with leftist and Kurdish activists in particular targeted. Turkey’s Kurdish question came to prominence as the escalating armed conflict in the Southeast led to increased state repression and serious human rights violations. Delegations attended trials of political activists and conducted fact-finding missions to assess the human rights violations in the region, as well as gave humanitarian assistance for the war refugees in the country.

With the Kurdish-inhabited provinces of the country under a de facto military occupation, the delegations sometimes faced major obstacles when leaving the city for the 'war zone'. Kuijpers recalls the difficulties experienced when seeking to access the provinces under emergency law with the aid convoy:

I had a serious row with Kozakcioğlu, who was the military governor of the Kurdish provinces. He would not allow us to enter with our trucks full of humanitarian aid. We were blocked for days on end. I went to see Kozakcioğlu, who knew French very well. He said, '*Vous aimez les Kurds? Amenez-les!* [You love the Kurds? Take them with you, then!].'

Ferho argues, 'One need not be very theoretical, no. If you've had certain experiences once, twice, three times maybe, this makes you a different person.' Telling, in this sense, are the recollections of former Christian People's Party (CVP) MP Hugo Van Rompaey of his first delegation trip:

Everything moved me there. We've talked with so many people. Victims of torture were giving testimony of their sufferings and we visited the burned villages. That is the problem of diplomats and many of our politicians. They haven't got any affinity with what is happening on the ground. They move by plane from one capital to the next and never get to see the people it is really about. We talked to an eighteen year-old girl who had just been released from custody. It was a difficult encounter for me as I had a daughter at exactly the same age. Her wrists were full of scars but she wanted to talk to us about what had happened to her. We stood there listening, with tears in our eyes (Hugo Van Rompaey, 7 August 2009).

Jan Loones, member of the Flemish nationalist People's Union (currently N-VA) recalls his memories of another delegation in the late 1990s:

When we were received in the village of Mizizah... I can still feel the hands of Derwich Ferho's mother holding mine. I was drawn into the house. I was the only politician in the group then. What I recall very well was a little piece of paper that she put into my hands I've kept since. Later on I had the text on the paper translated. It contained all the names of the Ferho family that had left Turkey for Europe and should not return to Turkey because they were under threat. That is the cruelest thing that a mother can overcome when you have to tell your sons not to return because they'd be under serious threat. That memory will stay with me all my life and of course it was deepened when they faced that drama, when both Derwich Ferho's parents were brutally murdered. I've interpellated the Flemish Parliament on that matter. (Jan Loones, 15 August 2009).

The personal recollections of politicians testify to the lasting commitments that have often followed from participation in delegations. As Loones continues:

The result [of taking part in the delegation] was that I left as a sympathizing observer and I returned as a Kurdish militant. Of course, the weapons of a member of parliament are asking questions, interpellations. Besides that, I've also tried to take the experiences of that delegation to the People's Union Party and to steer not just the standpoints of individual party members but the party position itself. In the party's presidency I've had a resolution voted that brought it to take a strong stand on the Kurdish issue, which was the party's support for the construction of a nation [nation-state]. Later on, this party position evolved and we've come to argue that we will be supportive of whatever the Kurds themselves would like to achieve.

Taking part in the delegations has a mobilizing effect on the participating politicians and reaffirms earlier commitments. Evidence of this is the instigation and timing of resolutions passed by and questions put to the Belgian Parliament regarding the plight of the Kurds: these were instigated primarily by delegation participants after visits to the region. In Christmas 1990, for example, a delegation to the Kurdish Southeast was initiated jointly by the Kurdish Institute of Brussels and Willy Kuijpers, and joined by the parliamentarians Hugo Van Rompaey (CVP), Jef Sleenckx (Socialist Party, SP) and Hugo Van Dienderen (AGALEV, forerunner to the Flemish Green party, *Groen!*). This visit was followed first by a parliamentary resolution from the three participating MPs in March 1991 – 'Concerning the problem of the Kurds and other ethnic minorities in Turkey' – and then, later that same month, by a resolution from Willy Kuijpers – 'Concerning the right to exist of Kurds in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and the Soviet-Union' (both resolutions were successful). Hugo Van Rompaey would write two more resolutions in March and July 1993 – the first on 'the oppression of the Kurds in Turkey', and the second on 'the advancement of the peace process and the restoration of human rights in the southeast of Turkey' (again, both accepted).<sup>3</sup> Earlier that year, in February 1993, Hugo Van Dienderen and Jef Sleenckx joined to formerly question the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Willy Claes about a hunger strike of over 700 Kurds in Brussels in solidarity with the sufferings lived in Turkey; in June 1996, Van Dienderen interpellated the Minister of Interior Affairs Johan Vandelanotte a second time over hunger striking Kurds in order to demand what kind of actions the Belgian government would be taking with regards to

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.dekamer.be>

Turkey; and in November 1996, he interpellated the Minister of Justice, Stefaan De Clerck concerning raids in several Kurdish associations and the Kurdish satellite TV stations in Denderleeuw, condemning the Belgian authorities for acting on Turkey's request (a charge denied).

Formal questions (interpellations) and resolutions like these were regularly submitted to the two Chambers of the Belgian Parliament (Representatives and Senate) from the 1980s through the 1990s and into the 2000s, mostly by delegation participants. Taken as a whole, they reflect not only the concerns in Brussels with events in Turkey, but also, as discussed below, the internal dynamics vis à vis this issue within Belgian politics and those of Europe; they bear also on the perception of the PKK as a terrorist organization, and provide a window to events in Turkey.

When another hunger strike was launched in the spring of 1998, this time by Kurdish asylum seekers facing possible expulsion, Hugo Van Rompaey demonstrated his solidarity by joining the hunger strikers. Jef Smeets, meanwhile, threatened the Minister of Interior Affairs of his own party with blocking parliamentary decisions in which his vote was needed to achieve a majority if the expulsion decision were not redrawn (the decision was ultimately withdrawn and the Kurdish refugees stayed). And while the delegations were primarily organized at the level of formal Flemish politics, they also involved members of civil society organizations, such as unionists and human rights activists.

In 1996, at a time when an increasing number of political asylum seekers were arriving following the increased intensity of the armed conflict, the support network originating from the delegations was widened with a campaign called 'Coordination Stop the War against the Kurdish People', which was signed by members of 150 associations. The Coordination called upon Turkey to respect human and people's rights and to seek a political solution to the armed conflict, and upon Europe to cease all arms sales to Turkey. This campaign was later to evolve into an 'interparliamentary working group for the Kurds', meeting on a monthly basis at the premises of the Belgian Senate to discuss the evolution of the Turkey's Kurdish issue and the situation of the Kurds in Kurdistan as a whole, and to develop different forms of political action (see Casier, 2011). Indeed, just as the Kurdish Institute of Brussels became the concrete embodiment of the political engagements of Kurdish and Flemish activists and politicians, the interparliamentary

working group can also be considered as an organizational outcome of the learning process of the activists in both movements, demonstrating the development of a more formalized system of transnational advocacy that continues to exist.

Parallel to the demand made for the Turkish state to seek a political solution was a recognition among Flemish activists of the political fight for social justice in which the PKK was engaged. To this end, parliamentary questions were tabled which elicited from government ministers a linkage of the PKK with 'terrorism'. In March 1998, for example, in response to an interpellation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Derycke by Alfons Borginon (People's Party, VU-ID, a splinter group from the VU) concerning 'the Kurdish problem', the minister stated that the European authorities condemned the terrorism by the PKK and considered it a terrorist organization. This question and answer clearly exposes the primary ideological fault line within Belgian politics on this issue – with the Flemish nationalists aligned with the Kurdish nationalists being opposed by the Belgian government embodying the Belgian state, which was structurally aligned with the Turkish government embodying the Turkish state. The nationalists were concerned primarily with the socio-political problem (and its humanitarian consequences), the governments with state security (and violent threats posed to it).

The development of interest as revealed by the political activity in Belgium linked to the parliamentary delegations may be instructive. Essentially, this can be understood as showing the commitment of Flemish nationalists to the Turkish Kurdish cause, the range of interest and actions, and how the focus of interest changed as the substantive concerns were framed by theory and experience. The very direct effect of personal commitment is evidenced by the results of the July 1991 delegation of Willy Kuijpers to Diyarbakir. Kuijpers was attending the funeral march for the murdered HEP politician Vedat Aydın, when it transformed into a protest demonstration, which was met in turn by heavy repression and violence by the security forces and military present. It was a young journalist-student in the delegation who managed to catch the event on videotape, which was then smuggled out of the country and broadcast in the main news program on Belgian national television.

The actions undertaken by the politicians during the 90s were really quite wide ranging. In addition to the delegations to Turkey, parliamentary interpellations, resolutions and proposals for resolutions, and Coordination Stop the War campaign, there was a

delegation to Iraqi Kurdistan that incorporated a visit to the PKK mountain guerilla camp (December 2002), and there were press conferences and parliamentary calls for resolution proposals. These functioned as publicity and consciousness-raising events, both highlighting a number of specific events and giving public voice to a relatively radical perception of issues, such as the idea that Turkey was in the wrong and that direct action in support of the Kurds should be taken, for example with a call for a weapons embargo and a tourism boycott of Turkey (March 1994).

In respect of the development of the Turkish Kurdish public discourse in Belgium, we observe an identifiable trend, with first a definition of interest, followed by a focused commitment, and then a pinpointing of single issues. To begin with, the concern of the Flemish nationalists tended to be rather general, not oriented to the specific question of the Kurds in Turkey. Thus the first three relevant resolutions concerned 'the Kurds' (September 1989), and then 'the Kurds and other ethnic minorities in Turkey' and 'the Kurds in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and the Soviet Union' (both March 1991, referred to above). An exclusive concentration on the Turkish situation developed thereafter, and the language became more engaged.

As the spotlight focused more specifically on Turkish Kurdish issue, so did the vocabulary of the (primarily Flemish) Kurdish sympathizers in Belgium changed. Words like 'right to exist' (March 1991) and 'protection' (March 1992) became the much more strident 'oppression' (March 1993) and, at around the time when PKK military power was at its peak, 'Turkish Kurdistan' (May 1993). This latter constituted the most Kurdist language employed in (proposed) resolutions, insofar as it referred to the area in question as a part of Kurdistan, not Turkey (c.f. other phrases used, such as 'the Kurdish people in Turkey', or 'the Southeast').

Finally, following general concern and then focused interest, specific issues were identified. These included human rights (July 1993), imprisonment of MPs (January 1995), refugees (March 1998), and the death penalty sentence for captured PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan (June 2000). The subject of the death penalty related also to the wider perspective of Europe, since Turkey's maintenance of capital punishment on its statute book at that time was problematic for its bid for EU membership candidacy. Indeed, a resolution and a proposal on Turkey's accession/candidature process for the EU were presented around this time (in November 2002 and December 2003).

## ***From the regional politics of Flanders into the 'Europe of the regions'***

The Flemish-Kurdish nexus that originated in the 1960s and 1970s and evolved into the 1980s and 1990s directly affected the attention given to the Kurdish issue in the European Parliament. It was through Ferho's contacts in the People's Union that the first Kurdish initiatives towards the European Parliament were undertaken. In February 1982, a total of eight different European based Kurdish organizations<sup>4</sup> were brought together by Ferho in order to make a first visit to MEPs in Strasbourg. They wrote a joint information file on 'The Situation of the Kurds in Turkey Today' outlining the suffering of the Kurds and other political activists before and after the 1980 coup and subsequent military government. The group demanded the abolition of torture and the death penalty, an independent commission for Kurdistan, that the Kurdish problem to be debated in the European Parliament and the United Nations, and that all economic and military aid to Turkey be halted (File, Strasbourg, 15<sup>th</sup> February 1982). This first visit was accommodated by Herman Verheirstraeten, assistant to Jaak Vandemeulebroecke, in 1980 one of the first Flemish nationalists to be elected to the newly installed executive European Parliament.

In the European Parliament, the European Free Alliance group (EFA) developed out of the initiatives of Coppieters and gathered small regionalist and nationalist political parties of different member states. This became an important point of entry for the Turkish Kurdistans. Jaak Vandemeulebroecke, follower of Coppieters, recalls how the Kurdish support from within the EFA faction came into being:

I was the president of the European Free Alliance, the EFA, which declared its solidarity with all the peoples within Europe and to all who belonged to minorities. [...] First, we stated that there should be solidarity within the European Union, but when I got to know Derwich he tried to convince me of the fact that many other peoples face the same difficulties and that is how he and Willy Kuijpers [by now an MEP] got me involved with the Kurdish problem. At that time we had just a small group of twelve parliament

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<sup>4</sup> Viz. the Progressive Democratic Labour Organization of Kurdistan (KKDK), Kurdish Cultural Organization (KOC-KAK), Federation of Kurdish Labour Organizations in West-Germany (KOMKAR), Kurdish People's House (*Mala Gelê Kurd*), Federation of Students and Workers of Kurdistan in France (YXXKF), Organization of Kurdish Student Movements (AKSA), and Progressive Kurdish Student Association in Sweden (KXPK), along with TEKOSER.

members in the EU, but the advantage was that they all came from different member states or actually minority states within these, the Basques, the Catalans, the Occitans, the Bretons, and so forth. We told every one of them that there should be solidarity and thus that if one of us submitted a resolution everyone should sign and support it. What is more, everyone was responsible to, within his own member state and (national) minority to defend this issue. Thus the Catalans, for example, would feel compelled to pay attention to the Kurdish issue when arguing for their region or within Spain. And thus the issue also returned to the level of the member states and solidarity could increase within Europe. What we did was to assign everyone to find supporters for particular causes amongst their member states' parliamentarians. In that way we were able to multiply the support for certain causes. That was our strategy (Jaak Vandemeulebroecke, 18 September 2009).

These political strategies resulted in dozens of motions for resolutions that in particular sought to condemn Turkey for its violations of the human rights and the rights of its Kurdish minority from the 1980s onwards (Casier, 2011). Support for the plight of the Kurds, as well the concerns over Turkey's human rights violations in general, would also develop within other parliamentary groups, such as the United Left/Nordic Green Left.

The delegations, resolutions and formal submission of questions in the European and (sub)national parliaments along with other activities by politicians engaged with the (Turkish) Kurdish issue would continue to remain an important part of the transnational political activities in this area and leverage support for the Kurdish nationalist movement. Ferho evaluates these political initiatives as follows:

If the political world here is a little more critical, well, that is not making it any easier for the other side [Turkey]. When we talked about the Kurds in the past, how many politicians were willing to listen? Now we have got many more friends in politics. (Derwich Ferho, 17 March 2010).

Flemish politics has long been receptive to the Kurdish cause, but the success of this transnational advocacy network has depended strongly upon the personal commitments of individual politicians and Kurdish activists. Therefore, and notwithstanding the institutional developments described, the future transmission of these engagements is never guaranteed but in continual need of re-enactment.

## Conclusion

This paper has aimed to address a lacuna in the literature on transnationalism and Diaspora politics, the importance and role of political gatekeepers in transnational political activism. Research rarely engages with the gatekeepers' viewpoints and beliefs underlying their commitment to 'others' causes', nor paid sufficient attention to the 'learning processes' that develop from the alignments and cooperative relationships between transnational political actors and gatekeepers in the receiving states and how these may account for the particular kinds of activities instigated by transnational political actors, as well as the institutionalization processes that might unfold. Equally lacking has been the insight that studies of political gatekeepers could provide into transnational advocacy networks.

This genealogy of the relationship between members of the Kurdish nationalist movement and the Flemish nationalist movement has intended to show how various Belgian (and European) activities in support of the Kurds originated and developed. Firstly, in this case, delegations have clearly been one of the most effective activities to increase gatekeepers' commitment to the Kurdish nationalist cause, as can be read from the activities undertaken by politicians after having participated in the visits. For these individuals, the political became much more personal. Secondly, the reconstruction of the Flemish-Kurdish nexus provides insight into the significance of ideological beliefs and the determining roles of committed individuals promoting these. These make comprehensible the ongoing support for an apparently distant cause like that of the (Turkish) Kurds among Flemish nationalist politicians in Flanders, and the regionalists and nationalist parties in the European Parliament more generally, irrespective of voter support. It proves that it was and is primarily the strong sense of identification and solidarity with the plight of the rights of peoples that was called to attention and created the fertile ground upon which Kurds' transnational political activism could be built. And it helps to show also how the Kurdish nationalist discourse has developed in Belgium (and the European Union). The extent to which the Flemish nationalist parties have also nurtured the dream of federalism and regional political autonomy for the Kurds within the Kurdish nationalist movement, as some gatekeepers would like to believe, is a question for future research. What is clear though is that it is importantly due to political

gatekeepers that Kurdish activism in Flanders was able to institutionalize, contribute to a European-wide axis of transnational activities, and become permanently sustained.

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