

National Parties as Multilevel Organizations in the EU. A Comparative Case Study of Flanders, Denmark and the Netherlands

GILLES PITTOORS 

Research Group GASPAR, Department of Political Science, Ghent University, Ghent, 9000, Belgium

Abstract

This article scrutinizes national political parties' organizational linkages with the European level. Such linkages not only provide parties with information from the European level, but also provide the EU with a source of democratic legitimacy. By applying an inductive research design and qualitatively reconstructing the organizational linkages of 15 parties in Flanders, the Netherlands and Denmark, this article shows that not only national parties' concrete organizational practices, but also their underlying strategies for engaging the European level differ notably. Importantly, parties' multilevel organizational strategies differentiate between an 'internal' dimension (linkages with their 'own' EU-level agents) and an 'external' dimension (linkages with their Europarty). Building on these case studies, the article presents an original typology of multilevel party organization in an EU context, providing researchers with an empirically grounded and ideal-typical benchmark for understanding the organization and behaviour of national parties in the EU.

Keywords: European Union; political parties; party organization; federalism; Europeanization

Introduction

Although an increasing number of political decisions are taken at the European Union (EU) level, national politics remain the prime arenas for democratic debate. This deprives the EU of a key source of democratic legitimacy (Beetham and Lord, 2014), while showing how parties are increasingly 'ruling the void' (Mair, 2013). National political parties can provide a solution to both challenges by organizationally linking the national and European levels (Detterbeck, 2012; Hix, 1998; Thorlakson, 2009). Without linkages with the European level in terms of communication and exchange, national political parties are blindly navigating a highly complex multilevel political system, and thus cannot hope to meaningfully impact EU decision-making. In turn, without party organizations providing the connection with citizens, uploading national preferences to the EU, and downloading the European dimension to national debates, the EU lacks a key source of democratic legitimacy.

Organizationally linking the national and European levels is thus a crucial part of national parties' role in the EU – much like in any multilevel system (Fabre, 2010; Thorlakson, 2017) – and this article aims to capture and understand how parties fulfil this function. By approaching this question from an original 'vertical integration' perspective and inductively constructing a novel typology for multilevel party organization in the EU, this article contributes both theoretically and empirically to our understanding of parties as multilevel organizations and, more specifically, as political bridges between the domestic and European levels.

Although much of the research in this area focused on the question of control of national parties over their EU-level agents (Hix, 2002; Mühlböck, 2017; Raunio, 2000), these linkages can serve a much broader purpose, from exchanging information across levels to legislative coordination and socialization (Pittoors, 2020). Therefore, this article approaches the question from the perspective of the “vertical integration” of political parties (Thorlakson, 2011), and focuses on their linkages with the European level, which should be seen as part of a wider multilevel organizational strategy. Furthermore, while the literature predominantly emphasizes EU-wide trends, this article shifts the focus to variation, arguing that capturing this variation requires an integrated view on parties’ broader multilevel organizational strategies.

Building on in-depth and comparative case studies of 15 parties in three different polities (Denmark, the Netherlands and Flanders), this article substantiates how national parties’ concrete organizational practices vary. However, ‘an article can neither do justice to the enormous organizational variation of European political parties nor to the considerable institutional variation of parliamentary systems’ (Müller, 2000, p. 310). Therefore, I focus on highlighting the most notable patterns across parties. Importantly, parties differentiate between an ‘internal’ dimension (linkages with their ‘own’ EU-level agents) and an ‘external’ dimension (linkages with the Europarty), which converge into an overall organizational strategy. Accordingly, the article uses these case studies as empirical foundations to distinguish four ideal types of multilevel party organization in an EU context: Federation, Integration, Consolidation and Separation – or the ‘FICS’ model.

The article is divided into five sections. The first section presents the study’s conceptual and analytical framework, introducing the organigram of a party in the EU and the notion of ‘vertical integration’. The second section addresses design, data and case selection. The third section offers an overview of the case studies, while the fourth section goes deeper into the identification of ideal types. The final section concludes by reflecting on explanatory factors, and calling for more (comparative) analysis of national parties’ linkages with the European level.

I. Parties in the EU: Conceptual and Analytical Framework

The relation between political parties and the EU is complex, not in the least because they are historically tied up with domestic political systems, while increasingly faced with a European multilevel system that limits their policy options and requires political attention (Hix and Lord, 1997). It should come as no surprise that scholars approached this complex relationship from different perspectives. As this article is particularly interested in the organizational aspect of this relationship, it builds primarily on two strands of literature: one addressing the organizational Europeanization of national parties, another dealing with the organization of parties in multilevel or federal polities.

For one, the literature on party organizational Europeanization studied how European integration alters the power structures within national parties top-down (Poguntke *et al.*, 2007). Yet, their main conclusion was that party organizations did not go through any fundamental alterations, even questioning whether observed changes were directly linked to European integration (Aylott *et al.*, 2013). Alternatively, studies focusing on the more bottom-up relation between national parties and the EU predominantly use a principal-agent perspective to assess how national parties control the voting behaviour

of their Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and ministers in the Council (Hanley, 2008; Hix, 2002; Mühlböck, 2017; Raunio, 2000). Again, however, these studies conclude that parties generally invest little in controlling their EU-level agents.

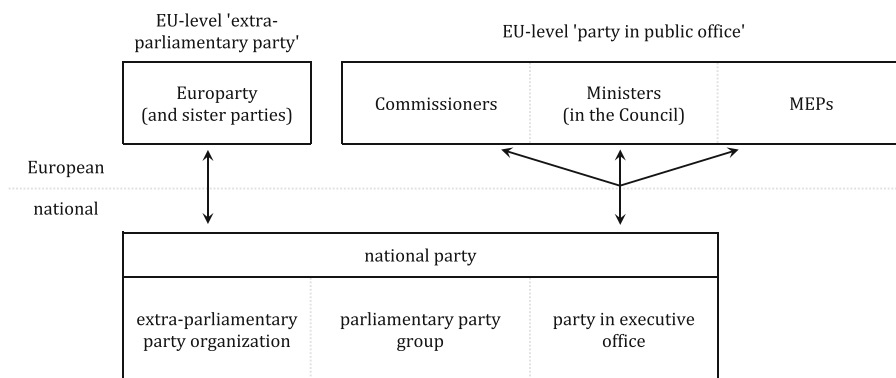
However, while these studies generated important insights, they ‘do not provide an analysis of the fine-grained coordination mechanisms’ that shape cross-level interaction (Senninger and Bischof, 2017, p. 158). Moreover, what we know too little about still are how parties *differ* regarding their concrete organizational practices linking the European and national levels. That parties do not fundamentally alter their organization does not mean that they do not organize their interaction (uploading/downloading) with the EU level *in a particular way*. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that, in addition to the struggle over control and autonomy (Mühlböck, 2012), parties are also interested in other types of relationship, such as cross-level information exchange (Pittoors, 2020).

To capture this variation in practice and purpose, this article turns to the existing literature on comparative federalism. Indeed, the ‘linking of activities ... at two different levels’ (Deschouwer, 2006, p. 299) is a key topic in the federal party literature, where it is referred to as the vertical integration of parties. While some conjoin the notions of vertical integration and autonomy (Verge and Gómez, 2011), it is important to disentangle them. As Thorlakson argues, while autonomy refers to the ‘capacity to act without constraint or interference’, integration is concerned with ‘organizational, co-operative and resource linkages’ (Thorlakson, 2011, pp. 717–18). While both might obviously be related, equating them is theoretically necessary (Detterbeck, 2012, p. 66), nor empirically supported (Thorlakson, 2011, p. 718).

Of course, federalism cannot be straightforwardly applied to the EU (Hix, 2008; Thorlakson, 2017). Therefore, this article adapts the concept of vertical integration to the EU context so as to signify the various formal and informal channels of communication and exchange through which processes of cross-level interaction and decision-making occur between the national and European levels of a party.

To make these two levels more concrete, Figure 1 presents an organigram of a party in the EU based on the original version presented by Hix and Lord (1997). It focuses on the

Figure 1: Organigram of a Party in the EU



main partisan actors at the European level and distinguishes between an extra-parliamentary party organization and a party in public office. A ‘party in the EU’ is thus as much the different faces of the party at the domestic level, as their counterparts at the EU level. As such, the vertical integration of political parties in the EU context revolves around the cross-level interactive dynamics in this multilevel partisan structure, which can take different shapes in different parties. Moreover, this approach also assumes that parties can use cross-level linkages for a variety of purposes. Some parties might insist on the strict control of their MEPs, but others might be more interested in exchanging information about EU legislation, while yet others might not want to invest in European linkages at all.

I posit that the *purposes* a party attributes to these linkages and its *practices* in organizing them together constitute a party’s multilevel organizational strategy. The questions this article aims to answer is then: what exactly are these practices and purposes, and how can we capture a party’s organizational strategy?

The literature does not elaborate much on how parties use and organize their cross-level linkages differently. As mentioned above, most of the literature focuses on general trends, but does not so much account for variation, particularly not within the same political system. Yet, there is no escaping the fact that there is a ‘myriad of complex factors (both internal and external to the party) that come together ... in particular contexts’ to determine a party’s organization (Gauja, 2017, p. 6). Therefore, following Detterbeck’s (2012, p. 68) qualitative approach, this article does not attempt to ‘attribute causality to isolated independent variables’, but rather aims to understand the multilevel organization of parties ‘in their configurative context’ (see below).

In short, this article argues that the study of national parties’ linking of the domestic and European levels should consider the different ways in which the dynamics of exchange and interaction between the national and European levels are strategically organized and given shape. The organigram of a party in the EU as presented in Figure 1 and the (adapted) notion of ‘vertical integration’ provide a starting point for developing such an approach. The next section goes deeper into its operationalization, whereas the rich empirical data gathered from case studies allow us to identify ideal-typical categories.

II. Design, Data, and Method

Due to its mainly exploratory character, the study applies an inductive research design that aims to build rather than test hypotheses. The research is executed in three steps. First, the real-life linkage practices of individual parties are qualitatively reconstructed through thick-descriptive accounts. The main findings are included in this article; the full descriptions can be found in Pittoors (2021). Second, the different cases are qualitatively compared. Finally, in an effort to ‘order the complex chaos of empirical reality into more comprehensible and manageable forms’ (Jackson, 2011, p. 113), the study constructs distinct ideal types of multilevel party organization based on these comparisons. In doing so, it contributes to the literature by introducing an original analytical framework to study multilevel party organization, and providing researchers with a useful benchmark that is rooted in empirical reality.

Case Selection

Fifteen Danish, Dutch and Flemish parties are studied in total (see Appendix S1 for a full list). With individual parties as our unit of analysis, these political systems were selected to ensure maximal diversity among similar cases (Seawright and Gerring, 2008). These national political systems are the prime ‘configurative context’ the study aims to consider. Although it is beyond the scope of the article to comprehensively explicate it for each individual party, it is important to keep some key characteristics of each polity in mind.

On the one hand, Denmark, the Netherlands and Flanders are similar in many ways: small, wealthy, North-Western European polities with comparable party systems. On the other hand, they differ significantly in terms of their relationship with the EU. Whereas both Flanders (as Belgium’s largest sub-national unit) and the Netherlands have been founding members of the EU, Denmark’s historical relationship with European integration has been more strained (Borring Olesen, 2015). Moreover, whereas in Flanders the EU is a political non-issue (Hoon and Pittoors, 2021), in the Netherlands it is on the rise but still downplayed by its major parties (Otjes, 2021) and in Denmark it is often a politically relevant issue, if only because its parliament actively follows up on European affairs, forcing parties to publicly take a stance on European issues (Aylott *et al.*, 2013).

Within each of these polities, five parties were selected. As only a limited number of parties per system can be studied in-depth, I chose to focus on parties from the five main EP groups (EPP, S&D, ALDE (now RE), Greens/EFA, and ECR) given their central role in European cooperation and policy-making. This selection strategy all but excludes extremist parties and niche parties that made the EU their core business, while still providing a good diversity on party-level elements such as ideology, size, age, or government participation.

Elite Interviews and Reconstruction of Organizational Practices

To reconstruct linkage practices between parties’ domestic and European levels, the analysis relies on 64 semi-structured interviews with party elites at both levels, supported by a review of party statutes and, crucially, respondent validation. The interviews and respondent validation process took place between March 2017 and December 2019. Apart from the Danish People’s Party, four respondents per national party were interviewed, and one person for each Europarty (see Appendix S1 for an overview).

In addition to people with a bird’s eye view on the party, such as general secretaries, respondents comprise EU specialists – that is, ‘a heterogeneous group of actors ... characterized by the fact that a considerable part of their political activity is related to the process or substance of European governance’ (Poguntke *et al.*, 2007, p. 11). This involves MEPs, their assistants and staff, as well as national profiles such as MPs with a European portfolio, international/European secretaries and experts on EU affairs. Ministerial advisors were also interviewed, which often have a unique position. While qualitative interviews hold risks of respondent bias, the body of respondents reflects different faces and factions within each party, which arguably balances out respondents’ bias – a counter-measure further strengthened through respondent validation. Because it was agreed that anonymity would be ensured, their names, party affiliations or nationalities are not disclosed.

With the view on qualitative reconstruction, data gathering targeted several different aspects of parties' organization. These interviews were semi-structured, meaning they resemble more of an open conversation than a closed set of question (Hermanowicz, 2002). Accordingly, the interview data was not used to give quantified values to each indicator, but instead were used as a basis for the reconstruction of real-life practices. Generally, the interviews explored the linkage arrangements in place, how they work in practice, their effectiveness and purpose. More specifically, respondents were probed about concrete empirical indicators that capture the cross-level interactive dynamics explicated above, focusing on channels and processes of exchange and communication (see Appendix S1 for a list of indicators). Particular attention was given to the use and importance of informal contacts (for example direct phone calls between MPs and MEPs), and the extent to which these support/replace more formalized linkages. Moreover, with a particular view on parties' overall strategies, respondents were also asked about their motivations and underlying reasons for structuring linkages the way they do (see Appendix S1 for an example questionnaire).

III. Case Studies of Flemish, Dutch, and Danish Parties

The thick case descriptions uncover a range of different purposes parties attribute to their organizational linkages with the European level, going from the control of agents and narrow maintenance of party cohesion across levels, over building alliances with likeminded parties, organizing a Europe-wide coordinated approach, providing the national party with relevant information, to, quite simply, no purpose at all. For instance, while representatives of Danish liberal party Venstre say 'it's very, very important not to speak with two tongues' (respondent 51), the Danish People's Party reports that 'there is no purpose of having any particular links ... with our [EP] group' (respondent 55).

In addition, parties' concrete linkage practices also take different shapes, with some imposing strict coordination procedures, while others prefer to work through looser processes of socialization. For example, whereas the Flemish-nationalist N-VA maintained that 'all structures needed to be uniform, with single points of contact' (respondent 20), the Dutch liberal party VVD reported that 'usually it is enough to just phone or text someone' (respondent 32). An overview of each party's results on the different indicators can be found in Appendix S1.

Strikingly, however, these different purposes and forms of multilevel linkages are not mutually exclusive. Rather, respondents clearly distinguish between organizational ties with Europarties, which are typically external to national party organizations, and linkages with the party's own agents (MEPs, ministers, and, to a lesser extent, Commissioners), which are more of an internal party affair. Indeed, respondents notably differentiated between the *internal and external dimensions* of their multilevel organizational practices and strategies. For instance, the Dutch PvdA reports that, when it comes to internal linkages, 'we do it informally between the EP delegation and the parliamentary group; there is in fact very little formal deliberation' (respondent 26), but when it comes to external linkages, it 'is involved in all kinds of ways in the PES and a lot of different people can participate' (respondent 28).

Concurrently, comparison across cases shows that there is a fundamental divide between parties regarding the institutionalization of internal linkages, and their commitment

to external linkages. On the one hand, some parties rely exclusively on informal contacts with 'Brussels', whereas others put in place formalized coordination structures. On the other hand, a number of parties primarily engage with the Europarty on an opt-out basis (they do not participate unless they do), while others take a more pro-active opt-in approach (they participate unless they do not). These fundamental divides form the basis of the identification of the ideal types in the next section, but first the remainder of this section goes deeper into how all this plays out in real life.

Internal Linkages: Leaders, Intermediaries and Informalities

Party leader's meetings ideally link parties' activities across levels, as they convene regularly and bring together the broad elite and various sections of the party. In all parties covered by this analysis, MEPs have a standing invitation to join the national parliamentary group meeting (some are also invited for parliamentary debates), while most party statutes foresee in MEP membership of the board, either *ex officio* or through elections – only the Dutch SGP explicitly forbids overlapping membership. In addition, governing bodies also involve at least some ministers, and most party boards include the party's international secretary (if it has one).

However, this picture only tells half the story. In practice, most leadership meetings pay significantly more attention to domestic than European affairs, and MEP absenteeism is common. While some consider it their duty to 'put an extra effort into being present [because] if [they] want to be heard and engaged, [they] need to be there in person' (respondent 42), others take a more resigned attitude: 'After a while, if you notice they don't really pay attention, you stop trying' (respondent 2). This points out the limitations of leadership meetings' role as cross-level coordination platforms, as they predominantly address domestic politics, to the detriment of time spent on the EU: 'Europe is only a very small part of what we are doing', it is 'the end of the line', discussed 'in the margins' or 'in the 'misc.' section at the end' (different respondents).

There are, however, exceptions. The EP delegations of the Danish DKF and Flemish CD&V dutifully attend their national group meetings, while both the Danish SD and the Flemish N-VA have developed elaborate systems of formal reporting by their ministers and all parliamentary groups, including the EP delegation, to the party board: 'these reports need to be prepared, discussed, and approved' (respondent 18). As such, the leadership is kept in the know about what is going on at the European level. Still, these are exceptions, and overall leadership meetings are hardly effective platforms for cross-level linkage.

Yet, these are of course rather formalized formats. Some parties created additional (semi-)formal intermediary structures with the specific aim of managing and organizing cross-level activities. Although there is a tremendous amount of variation in the concrete nature of these structures among parties, they generally fall into two classes: liaison officers serving as intermediaries between levels (for example 'European secretaries'), and working groups committed to international and European affairs.

Not all parties have liaison officers in place, and among those who do, the formalization and nomenclature of this role varies: some deploy (part-time) volunteers, while others hire full-time secretaries or assign this task to parliamentary assistants. Regardless, liaison officers generally provide a buffer between the national and European level, pooling

relevant information and becoming one-stop-shops for people on both levels: 'To ensure clarity and common understanding about what is going on' (respondent 24). For example, Denmark's Venstre has middlemen in place in both the EP delegation and the national group, constantly exchanging EU-related information for strategic insertion in political debates. Importantly, not having a liaison officer does not imply that parties do not follow up on European affairs. The Flemish N-VA, for instance, does not have such a person, but has instead, as mentioned above, established a practice of strict reporting directly to the board and leadership. Both practices imply a certain degree of institutionalization of cross-level linkage.

Working groups also vary wildly. For some, working groups are inclusive fora for debate on EU affairs. The Danish and Flemish Greens, for example, have very active EU working groups that were set up with the explicit purpose of directly involving members in policy development. In many other parties, however, these working groups are ceremonial talking shops or expert groups. For example, the Dutch PvdA has a member-driven EU working group whose 'influence is minimal' (respondent 27), whereas the Flemish CD&V incorporated their EU working group into CEDER, the party's in-house think tank. While such an expert-driven (as opposed to member-driven) working group might exert more influence, it is still a long shot from serving as an effective multilevel coordination platform. Some parties, such as the SGP or DF, outright abandoned the idea of formalizing internal discussion of European affairs in any way.

Finally, (semi-)formal linkages are often supported by much more frequent informal contacts, which provide a sub-structure for more formalized contacts: 'the more we take part in the formal events, the more we get to know each other, and that's the whole idea of participating in these events ... because that's where you establish the contacts you need to be effective at work' (respondent 51). Some parties even rely exclusively on informal contacts, personal relations, and ad hoc interactions. These 'weaker' linkages are not necessarily 'bad' linkages, but they are vulnerable: take away a key figure and the whole linkage structure collapses. For example, prior to the 2019 EP elections, Denmark's DF coordinated intensely across levels, revolving around MEP Morten Messerschmidt, a high-profile politician also in the domestic arena and close confidant of party leader Dahl. However, since Messerschmidt's transfer from the EP to the Danish national parliament, these linkages between Copenhagen and Brussels have almost completely broken down: 'there is no purpose of having any particular links, or ... coordination with our [EP] group' (respondent 55).

In sum, parties thus vary considerably in the way they organize their internal linkage structures with the European level, not only in the way the leadership follows up on European affairs, but also in the use of intermediary structures such as liaison officers and working groups, as well as in the extent to which they rely on informal contacts.

Yet, although most parties created cocktails of different linkage practices, it is possible to distinguish between parties who have invested more in an institutionalization of cross-level linkages, and parties where these linkages remain predominantly ad hoc. The Dutch green and liberal parties serve as an interesting case in point. While GL's informal contacts serve to *support* formal linkages, VVD's ad hoc contacts between informal intermediaries have largely *replaced* formal linkages. As such, GL's linkages are more robust than those of VVD: in case of a personal fallout, the latter's linkages would need to be rebuilt from scratch, whereas the former's structures would persist and

maintain a degree of cross-level linkage. This can reasonably be said to be a fundamental difference between the organizational strategy of these two parties, and is illustrative for a broader divide observable in other cases.

External Linkages: Events, Friends and Manifestos

To what extent do parties engage with their transnational network – that is, their Europarty and sister parties? For one, most parties have someone following up on their Europarty, although the nature of that function varies notably. In some parties, such as the greens, the Dutch PvdA, and Flemish CD&V, an international secretary acts as a facilitator for broad party involvement; ‘to track all the agendas and to see where we have to be, when we have to be there, what we have to say, and when it is time for us to put our foot down’ (respondent 16). Other parties instead delegate this to a board member, often in combination with several other tasks. For example, the Danish SD’s party secretary took over from their last international secretary, who resigned in 2019 and was not replaced. Naturally, in those cases, following up on the Europarty is a second-order task.

In addition, there is also significant variation in parties’ participation in Europarty events. While in some parties the international secretary takes full responsibility for Europarty events – ‘we have an international secretary ... [who] combines it all’ (respondent 30) – other parties elect their Europarty delegates, which are ‘given a formal mandate’ at a national party conference (respondent 2). Moreover, while some see Europarty events as prime moments for party leaders to network directly with their peers, others see them more as forums for the exchange of best practices or even substantive policy debates, which are extensively prepped internally. As such, most parties routinely participate in Europarty events, but in different constellations: specialists led by the international secretary, elected delegates, the party leadership, or a combination of these.

Parties vary also regarding the use of Europarty manifestos and position papers. Whereas some (mostly green and Flemish) parties actually use them as sources of inspiration or even benchmarks for their own positions – ‘when writing our manifesto, we take care that it is a harmonious whole’ (respondent 59) – other (mostly Danish and Dutch) parties largely ignore Europarty manifestos: ‘We just put it aside, because ... [the national programme] is a lot closer aligned with the political reality we are dealing with’ (respondent 27).

However, it is important to keep in mind that larger Europarties, such as PES and EPP, have much more resources available than smaller ones, such as the EFA, to organize events or prepare manifestos. It naturally follows that not all parties need elaborate ‘external’ linkages. For example, the Dutch SGP has no single secretary to keep tabs in their international activities, and although this occasionally causes confusion – for example, two officials sitting on the same plane to the same meeting but not knowing it of each other – their Europarty organizes so few meetings that it seems pointless for someone to follow-up full-time.

It is then unsurprising that these parties invest notably less in linkages with Europarties, although one must also consider that their membership of unobtrusive Europarties could be a deliberate choice. This was the case, for instance, for the Flemish N-VA, which explicitly prefers narrow manifestos: ‘EFA used to have a large manifesto, addressing all kinds of issues, but differences [with our domestic positions] are just too

big, so we wanted them to focus only on what unites us' (respondent 65). Moreover, the party deliberately joined the ECR group in the EP because 'we were given the guarantee that we could pursue our own positions and not be forced by group pressure to go in one direction or another' (respondent 17).

Importantly, for some parties the whole point of being a Europarty member is to get access to a broad network of foreign parties and their leaders: 'We need European friends, not some European party' (respondent 32). Of course, when part of one of the major Europarties, this is made a lot easier (and formal) because they offer ready-made platforms. The EPP, for example, facilitates the semi-formal 'Rhineland Group' meetings of the Dutch, Flemish (not Belgian), German and Luxembourgish Christian-democratic leaders. For the SGP, N-VA, and DF, these ready-made platforms are either much weaker or entirely absent, making contacts with sister parties an informal or at best semi-formal affair, often reliant on the personal networks of party leaders or MEPs – as witnessed in the nascent but hesitant attempts of the radical right to get organized at the European level (McDonnell and Werner, 2019).

In sum, there is clear variation in parties' external linkages, not only in the extent to which they participate in their transnational network, but also in how they keep track of what is going on there. While a few parties have hardly any external linkages, and some go "all the way" – an international secretary, extensive participation in and preparation for all events – many 'strategically prioritize ... instead of trying to be everywhere' (respondent 48).

Yet, again a more fundamental difference in strategy can be observed underneath all this variation: between parties primarily 'opting in' and those primarily 'opting out' of being part of a transnational network. Take, for instance, the Danish and Dutch liberal parties. Both have a similar approach to the ALDE party: use it to find allies across Europe; do not get carried away about a federal Europe. Yet, while Venstre adopts 'safe distance' strategy, participating only in bigger events such as the ALDE congress, spending limited resources on preparing it, and focusing strongly on direct contacts at leadership level, VVD tries to proactively steer ALDE in its preferred direction by thoroughly preparing and participating in ALDE party meetings. Put differently, while Venstre primarily opts *out*, and only engages when strategically useful, VVD primarily opts *in*, and only ignores those elements it considers redundant. It is reasonable to argue that this is a fundamental difference between the strategy of these two parties, and illustrative for a broader divide among cases.

IV. Identifying Ideal Types of Party Organization in the EU: The 'FICS' Model

As the overview above shows, national parties vary notably in how they organize their linkages with the European level. In addition to highlighting how parties differentiate between internal and external linkages, the case studies also uncover a fundamental divide between parties on both dimensions. Internally, they reveal a distinction between parties whose linkage practices have institutionalized, and parties whose linkages are more ad hoc and interpersonal. Externally, there is a notable divergence between fundamental opt-in and opt-out approaches. At first sight, no immediate cross-case patterns emerge, neither based on country nor political family nor anything else – it seems to be a 'free for all' situation.

The challenge then is to integrate this observed variation into a more intelligible framework. With this goal in mind and based on the results of the case studies, the article ‘idealized’ this two-dimensional variation, leading to the identification of four distinct ideal types of multilevel organization – Federation, Integration, Consolidation and Separation. Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of each of these types, and the remainder of this section goes deeper into the individual categories.

Federation

Federated parties have an opt-in approach to external linkages, emphasizing the importance of building broad European coalitions, while relying on more interpersonal internal contacts, not minding their ministers and MEPs having high degrees of autonomy in forging alliances and compromises. As such, national and European activities are effectively decoupled: the federated party pursues domestic and European political goals simultaneously but independently, with only ad hoc connections between levels on issues that would cross over from one political arena to another.

Pro-European and intrinsically convinced of the merits of building pan-European friendships, these parties feel in sync with their broader political family; for example CDA: ‘We are Christian-democrats through and through, and there is no better way to translate this to the EU than through the EPP’ (respondent 23). Yet, many also acknowledge the limited political relevance of the EU in the domestic arena: ‘The party ... directs resources to those issues that are politically useful – and preferably immediately so – to the detriment of EU issues which usually aren’t’ (respondent 11).

While for some this underscores a transnational awareness, as parties invest in external linkages despite domestic political irrelevance, for others it reflects how the EU is a possibly divisive issue that party leaders prefer to contain. As such, while the decoupling strategy could be the inevitable result of the EU’s persistent second-order status, it could also serve the purpose of maintaining that status, with an eye on defusing European issues that could otherwise be serious pains for the party: ‘There is some serious steering going on. We’re not exactly waiting for [a Europarty] position that does not suit our own’ (respondent 30).

These varying purposes reflect different motivations for parties to pursue a federated strategy: normative and/or pragmatic transnationalism, domestic political irrelevance, or

Table 1: Ideal-Typical Categories – The ‘FICS’ Model

	<i>Internal linkages</i>	<i>External linkages</i>	<i>Strategic focus</i>	<i>Cases</i>
Federation	Ad hoc	Opt-in	Transnational alliances; decoupling of levels	PvdA, sp.a, VVD, OVLD, CDA
Integration	Institutionalized	Opt-in	Coordinated action; synergy between levels	CD&V, Groen, GL, SF
Consolidation	Institutionalized	Opt-out	Coherence; dominance of national over European	N-VA, Venstre, DKF, SD
Separation	Ad hoc	Opt-out	Opportunism; rejection of European political level	SGP, DF

internal division. These different motivations often coexist. For instance, the Dutch PvdA on the one hand claims that its ‘commitment to co-operation is not just because we think highly of international solidarity, but also because ... you really need that European co-operation to reach social-democratic goals’ (respondent 27), yet on the other hand acknowledges that ‘it is possible [for MEPs to diverge from the national party line] because the Dutch media does not give a lot of attention to the EU, and the EP is mentally very far from The Hague’ (respondent 26).

Regardless, in practice federated parties share a general approach on how to organizationally deal with the European level: their strategic focus is to build alliances with other parties across Europe, which they can leverage into policy influence at the European level. Aware that this requires their EU-level agents to have some degree of autonomy, they decouple their European activities from their domestic activities, which are connected mainly through interpersonal contacts between the party’s elites and EU specialists.

Integration

Integrated parties pursue far-reaching collaboration within their transnational network, but also internally aim for systematic interaction across levels. As such, they incorporate a European dimension in most aspects of their domestic political activities. What crucially sets these parties apart is that they actively play the multilevel game, aiming to bank on the synergy that comes with being active on multiple levels. As such, often investing heavily in intermediary structures, integrated parties aim at maximising the exchange of information across levels – a synergy they consider also pays off domestically: ‘When we include the European angle ... then sometimes we can come out in [national] media on European subjects that we would not have been able to [otherwise]’ (respondent 58).

The idea of linkage as something mutually useful thus stands out, also in terms of their interaction with Europarties, to which they look for leadership and inspiration on Europe-wide issues. For instance, representatives of the Flemish CD&V indicate that due to their long-term participation in the EPP they ‘have been able to punch above [their] weight for decades and even still today’ (respondent 14), as exemplified by the capture of the office of European Council President by Van Rompuy. Similarly, many green parties consider coordination action as ‘the best way to communicate the green message in Europe’ (respondent 3), but also see domestic advantages to EGP membership:

Instead of starting from square one, we can get policy drafts and all the briefs and what-not from the European greens and that saves us a lot of work ... it is really beneficial to have a close partnership with the European greens in terms of resources spent. (respondent 59)

These parties share a strong pro-EU stance. Indeed, more so than the average federated party, integrated parties are convinced transnationalists: ‘We want to produce solutions to the challenges of society. ... But you can only do that if you act in a European context’ (respondent 16). This strategic focus on cross-level synergy is broadly shared among integrated parties – even amounting to ‘an important part of our self-image’ (respondent 59) – and forms the bedrock of their organizational approach that stresses coordinated action both internally and externally.

Consolidation

Consolidated parties' core concern is maintaining cross-level coherence, for which institutionalized linkages are considered crucial: 'There cannot be a big difference between the politics made [domestically] and those made by the ... delegation in the EP' (respondent 41). These parties create robust systems of feedback, for example with ministers reporting directly to the party leadership about Council meetings, or MEPs submitting regular reports to the party board, outlining their activities and events in the EP: '[we want] to make sure that there is no contradiction between positions taken by the party and the MEPs', who cannot all 'strategically go take a leak' whenever there is an EP vote on sensitive topics (respondent 19).

In addition to systematically following up on their EU-level agents, consolidated parties also safeguard independence from external ties: 'There is absolutely no interest ... to have a pan-European ... party' (respondent 48). As the case of the N-VA's ECR membership has shown above, some consolidated parties choose their European allegiances with the specific aim of being part of a European network while largely retaining their independence.

Put differently, driven by concerns for cross-level coherence, these parties commit to a dominance of domestic over European affairs: 'Not a single MEP really represents the 'European interest' ... we primarily represent our national constituency' (respondent 17). This can be motivated by historical experiences, as is the case for the Flemish N-VA whose predecessor collapsed over internal strife, but equally by domestic contextual pressures, as is the case for most Danish parties. Indeed, because Europe is a regular topic of political debate and subject to a powerful parliamentary committee, the Danish parties are acutely aware of their vulnerability to cross-level contradictions: 'parties are definitely looking into what our MEPs are voting, and if they catch up on something they will pass it on to journalists ... because it is always a good press story if you can say there is a split in the party' (respondent 46).

As such, consolidated parties have a clear strategic focus on cross-level coherence, in which they emphasize the greater importance of domestic over European affairs. Put differently, if a European compromise would threaten their domestic position, the compromise draws the short straw, and strong coordination mechanisms (ideally) ensure that their EU-level agents fall in line.

Separation

Separated parties isolate their domestic from their European activities, as there are hardly any institutionalized structures in place to systematically follow up on European affairs. MEPs effectively have 'a very high degree of autonomy, almost 100 per cent' (respondent 36), and there are only weak organizational ties with their transnational network, where they take a clear 'opt out' approach – up to the point of not being a Europarty member at all, such as the DF. Their focus lies squarely with domestic politics. As one MEP put it: 'when you are [at a party meeting], you are on the *national* agenda; when you go to a group meeting, it's a *national* group meeting' (respondent 53). EU specialists are a semi-autonomous group within the party, like satellites connected only by occasional calls in times of distress: 'On the very big and important topics there is coordination, but this

only happens in extraordinarily sensitive cases, cases that are very sensitive for our electorate' (respondent 53).

This approach attests to a shared understanding of 'Europe' as a domestic political issue rather than as a political level of governance. It is essentially not about the dominance of the domestic over the European, as with consolidated parties, nor about the decoupling of two acknowledged governance levels, as with federated parties. Rather, it is about the rejection of the EU as a genuine political level. For instance, the case of the DF has shown above that, apart from the personal connection between former MEP Messerschmidt and party leader Dahl, the EP delegation is of very little relevance to the national party. Nor are these parties enthusiastic about Europarties. The DF considers being a Europarty member 'a bit strange and unnatural' (respondent 53), while the SGP considers the ECPM 'a movement more than a party' (respondent 35).

As such, one can reasonably assume that a separated organization expresses, if not an actively sceptical view of European integration, then at least one depicting it primarily as an international organization. Indeed, these parties do not merely prioritize national interests over European ones, but explicitly reject the EU as a political level, striving for an EU that 'would no longer be a superstate, but a European community of strong nation-states' (respondent 34). In practice, their strategy is opportunistic: multilevel linkages emerge purely ad hoc when an opportunity for domestic gain presents itself.

Conclusion

This article assessed parties' organizational linkages between the national and European levels, developing a novel approach that considers these links as part of a wider multilevel organizational strategy. Building on in-depth case studies of 15 parties in three different political systems (Denmark, the Netherlands and Flanders), it showed not only that national parties' concrete organizational practices vary, but also that their broader strategies for engaging the European level differ notably. As such, this article provides important contributions to our understanding of national parties as political bridges with Europe.

On the one hand, the article called for a broader understanding of national parties' linkages with the European level and presented a novel framework for assessing the roles and strategies of national parties as multilevel organizations in the EU. Going beyond the literature's focus on general trends across Europe and building on both the Europeanization and federalism literatures, it posited that parties' multilevel linkages can not only take different shapes but also serve different purposes, such as the struggle over control and autonomy, or straightforward information exchange. Accordingly, adapting the notion of vertical integration used in the comparative federalism literature for application to the EU, it provided a novel framework for the study of the different ways in which interaction between the national and European levels of political parties is given shape.

On the other hand, the article applied an inductive research design that aims to supplement the primary theoretical model with qualitative empirical data. This resulted in the identification of four ideal-types of multilevel party organization in an EU context: Federation, Integration, Consolidation and Separation. This 'FICS' model aptly captures individual parties' organizational practices, as well as their strategic outlook on engaging with the EU, thereby providing researchers with an original and grounded ideal-typical benchmark for understanding the organization and behaviour of national parties in the

EU's multilevel political system. Indeed, its qualitative empirical foundation allows the model to be used to make sense of real-life party behaviour.

In short, this article thus adapts the concept of vertical integration for application to the EU context, develops a novel analytical framework based on this concept, and constructs an original typology that builds on 15 qualitative and in-depth case studies. It hence provides researchers analysing how national parties organize and behave in the EU's multilevel system with useful new tools to study an otherwise highly complex and idiosyncratic topic, as well as an analytical foundation for new hypotheses.

However, parties were categorized based on snapshot analyses of their contemporary linkage practices, and it is not unthinkable for parties to change categories if (contextual) factors change. Although the qualitative depth of the FICS model means it can reasonably be assumed it is temporally robust, the question remains what these determining factors are. Answering that question in full goes beyond the scope of this article, yet some working hypotheses can nonetheless be formulated.

First, *ideological family* can be considered a key explanatory factor. For one, the two most outspoken EU-critical parties (DF, SGP) both have a 'separated' organization, the greens are all 'integrated' parties, while most traditional parties are either 'federated' or 'consolidated'. In the tradition of Duverger (1954) and Panebianco (1988), we can thus assume that parties' linkages with the European level are at least partly driven by their origins, history, and ideology. For instance, one could hypothesize that traditional parties are simultaneously bound to the national political contexts in which they originated and share a long history of European cooperation, hence trying to shield national politics from European influence, while still engaging with the EU level – leading to a 'federated' organization.

Also the observation that green parties across all three polities pursue an integration strategy stands out. Although their own explanation that cross-level integration comes natural to them given the cross-border nature of their core issues does not seem unreasonable, one could equally approach this observation from the perspective of cost-efficiency in small- to medium-sized parties: the useful labour done by the EU-funded EP group takes work off the hands of their national counterparts.

Second, also *territorial factors* seem to be at play. Particularly, within the group of traditional parties, the Danish parties heavily lean towards consolidation strategies. Building on the existing literature, one could hypothesize about the role of domestic EU politicization, parliamentary scrutiny of European affairs or even the physical distance from Brussels (Berezin and Díez-Medrano, 2008; Ladrech, 2012; Mühlböck, 2017). For instance, the strong oversight of European affairs by the Danish parliament, following decades of tense debate over European integration (Borring Olesen, 2015), could certainly be an important factor in explaining why many Danish parties are so focused on cross-level coherence, especially when combined with the appreciation that Copenhagen's sheer distance from Brussels diminishes the effectiveness of informal linkages.

Still, deeper systematic comparative analysis should expand on these working hypotheses, and particularly consider the interaction of various explanatory factors. Institutional factors should be balanced with party- and even individual-level elements to provide for comprehensive explanations of how parties organizationally address the EU. Indeed, although the individual level might prove particularly challenging to include, elements such

as seniority or leadership style have been shown to be crucial in explaining party organization (Gauja, 2017).

Furthermore, given its exploratory and qualitative nature, the scope of this study was necessarily limited. Its case selection focused on North-Western Europe, which means that some domestic factors, such as socio-economic and cultural differences, could not be accounted for. Moreover, future research should not only expand the number of case studies towards Southern and Eastern Europe, but also consider including temporal variation in order to confront our findings with new evidence and further increase our understanding of (the evolution of) party behaviour in the EU.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the editor and reviewers for their constructive feedback and dedication to bringing this article into publication, as well as everyone who has provided invaluable comments on earlier drafts. Special thanks go to colleagues from the Research Group GASPAR, in particular prof. Bram Wauters and dr. Benjamin de Vet, colleagues from the University of Groningen, in particular prof. Benjamin Leruth and prof. Léonie de Jonge, as well as the participants of the 2021 Conference of the SGEU and the 2021 IPSA World Congress, in particular prof. Amie Kreppel and prof. John Erik Fossum. I would also like to thank the Flanders Research Fund (FWO) for funding my field work in Denmark.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Correspondence:

Gilles Pittoors, Research Group GASPAR, Ghent University, Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 41, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

email: gilles.pittoors@ugent.be

References

- Aylott, N., Blomgren, M. and Bergman, T. (2013) *Political Parties in Multi-level Politics: The Nordic Countries Compared* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Beetham, D. and Lord, C. (2014) *Legitimacy and the European Union* (London: Routledge).
- Berezin, M. and Díez-Medrano, J. (2008) 'Distance Matters: Place, Political Legitimacy and Popular Support for European Integration'. *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 1–32.
- Borring Olesen, T. (2015) 'Denmark in Europe 1973–2015: Processes of Europeanization and "Denmarkization"'. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 312–29.
- Deschouwer, K. (2006) 'Political Parties as Multi-Level Organizations'. In Katz, R.S. and Crotte, W. (eds) *Handbook of Party Politics* (London: Sage), pp. 291–300.
- Detterbeck, K. (2012) *Multi-level Party Politics in Western Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan).
- Duverger, M. (1954) *Political Parties: Their Activity and Organization in the Modern State*. (London: Methuen & Company Limited).
- Fabre, E. (2010) 'Measuring Party Organization: the Vertical Dimension of the Multi-level Organization of State-Wide Parties in Spain and the UK'. *Party Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 343–63.
- Gauja, A. (2017) *Party Reform. The Causes, Challenges and Consequences of Organizational Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

- Hanley, D. (2008) *Beyond the Nation State. Parties in the Era of European Integration* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Hermanowicz, J.C. (2002) 'The Great Interview: 25 Strategies for Studying People in Bed'. *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 479–99.
- Hix, S. (1998) 'The Study of the European Union II: The 'New Governance' Agenda and its Rival'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 38–65.
- Hix, S. (2002) 'Parliamentary Behavior with Two Principals: Preferences, Parties and Voting in the European Parliament'. *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 688–98.
- Hix, S. (2008) 'Towards a Partisan Theory of EU Politics'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 8, pp. 1254–65.
- Hix, S. and Lord, C. (1997) *Political Parties in the European Union* (London: Macmillan).
- Hoon, L. and Pittoors, G. (2021) 'The Europeanization of Belgian Parties: Both near and far?' In Caluwaerts, D. and Reuchamps, M. (eds) *Belgian Exceptionalism: Belgian Politics between Realism and Surrealism* (London: Routledge), pp. 185–99.
- Jackson, P.T. (2011) *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge).
- Ladrech, R. (2012) 'Party Change and Europeanisation: Elements of an Integrated Approach'. *West European Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 574–88.
- Mair, P. (2013) *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso).
- McDonnell, D., and Werner, A. (2019) *International Populism. The Radical Right In The European Parliament*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Mühlböck, M. (2012) 'National versus European: Party Control over Members of the European Parliament'. *West European Politics*, Vol. 35, No. April 2015, pp. 607–31.
- Mühlböck, M. (2017) *Voting Unity of National Parties in Bicameral EU Decision-Making: Speaking with One Voice?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Müller, W.C. (2000) 'Political Parties in Parliamentary Democracies: Making Delegation and Accountability Work'. *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 37, pp. 309–33.
- Otjes, S. (2021) 'The EU Elephant: Europe in the 2021 Dutch General Elections'. *Intereconomics*, Vol. 56, No. 2, pp. 70–5.
- Panbianco, A. (1988) *Political Parties: Organisation and Power*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Pittoors, G. (2020) 'Living Apart Together? The Organization of Political Parties beyond the Nation-State: The Flemish Case'. *Politics and Governance*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 50–60.
- Pittoors, G. (2021) 'Going Above and Beyond? A Comparative Case Study of the Multilevel Organisation of National Political Parties in the EU Polity'. *University of Groningen Thesis*.
- Poguntke, T., Aylott, N., Carter, E., Ladrech, R. and Luther, K.R. (2007) *The Europeanization of National Political Parties. Power and Organizational Adaptation* (New York: Routledge).
- Raunio, T. (2000) 'Losing Independence or Finally Gaining Recognition? Contacts Between MEPs and National Parties'. *Party Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 211–23.
- Seawright, J. and Gerring, J. (2008) 'Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options'. *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 2, pp. 294–308.
- Senninger, R. and Bischof, D. (2017) 'Working in Unison: Political Parties and Policy Issue Transfer in the Multilevel Space'. *European Union Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 140–62.
- Thorlakson, L. (2009) 'Patterns of Party Integration, Influence and Autonomy in Seven Federations'. *Party Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 157–77.

- Thorlakson, L. (2011) 'Measuring Vertical Integration in Parties with Multi-Level Systems Data'. *Party Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 5, pp. 713–34.
- Thorlakson, L. (2017) 'Representation in the EU: Multi-level Challenges and New Perspectives from Comparative Federalism'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 24, No. 4, pp. 544–61.
- Verge, T. and Gómez, R. (2011) 'Factionalism in Multi-Level Contexts: When Party Organization Becomes a Device'. *Party Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 5, pp. 667–85.

Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix S1. Supporting information