



KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT  
**LEUVEN**

**Politicians and civil servants in network settings:  
Insights from two Flemish cases**

Joris VOETS

SBW seminar  
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Leuven



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**Background information**

Two in-depth case studies

Data:  
52 semi-structured interviews (27+25)  
Written sources  
Site visits

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Politicians in networks: key players, back-benchers (cowardness?) and meta-governors

Politicians: set implicit or explicit boundaries

Networks = playgrounds for civil servants

Civil servants: between formal mandates and autonomous action (e.g. making a RUP vs. asking actors to collaborate)

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- Coalition-building  
(e.g. woods vs. agriculture)
- Tandems, trio's, ... (personal relations matter)  
(e.g. governor and provincial civil servant)
- Civil servants try to engage politicians, rather than strategically isolating or simply overlooking them

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Blurring political and administrative roles

Label 'politician' and 'civil servant' derived from their position in the formal-legalistic framework should be linked to their background or other affiliations.

- party affiliation
- cabinet periods (mobility)

Political parties or partisanship act as an important integrating factor used to coordinate policies across tiers, but also to link the political and administrative realm.

Risk: distrust between pol. and civ. serv. with different political affiliations (e.g. VLM vs. B&G, provincial executive vs. civil servant)

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Administrative localism

*"[INTERVIEWER: So this has bureaucratic support at the Flemish level?] At the bureaucratic level, yes. Why? Because we that play a role are all from Ghent, and because we feel it is a fantastic project, and innovative. [INTERVIEWER: So a Ghent factor?] That's it" (quote 181).*

*"This is linked to a commitment that doesn't stop at four or five o'clock. [...] [INTERVIEWER: So in a negative formulation: it would never work as a mere bureaucratic dossier?] Exactly, then the result would have never been the same" (quote 182).*

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**A local regime?**

*"It is also an East-Flemish network: some professors, local civil servants, cabinet members, etc., and that is becoming quite a club" (quote 96).*

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**Meta-governance?**

*"It has been preceded by bureaucratic thinking, but without the political support, something like that would have never been created, I am 100 percent sure of that. Because just dropping such a green project in a focus area, that seriously changes the spatial structure, has not been done very frequently. If there would not have been that political force, it would have never worked" (quote 189).*

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**Informal networking**

*"You constantly have contacts, also informally. We are not that far apart: you meet now and then on the train, or at someone's home; that is not all that formal. But perhaps it would be better sometimes to make it more formal, because it sometimes only stays limited to those, with respect, who prepare policy. At a certain stage, you have to bring it to the decision-making table, but that is not all that structured and planned. You have to join the right people" (quote 80).*

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## Skills

Key players ≠ network super heroes with special powers

Strength: combine institutional positions with personal skills and a drive to achieve success; they are (mainly) men with a mission.

Skill: being able to navigate through the pea-soup that the amalgamation of policies, interests, actors, relations, tiers, and contingencies is for an outsider (but also for a number of network members).

Skill: dealing with high levels of complexity and uncertainty

Skill: matching administrative rigour with political sensitivity

Skill: being patient and resilient

These key players = the intergovernmental champions' league

≠ Weberian bureaucrats

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## Drivers

Main drivers for politicians and civil servants in networks:

- Ownership; mission-driven endeavours
- The 'fun factor': getting a kick out of trying to accomplish successful policy-making in the network
- Networks as a personal learning environment

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## Challenges

Politicians threatened by civil servants in networks?

*"What also frequently happens, out of political frustration: one starts an area-based project, and an alderman or provincial council member thinks: 'go ahead, because I know that the decision is only final when the minister signs it'. That aspect is frequently overlooked in planning processes. For instance with the delineation of Aalst, the provincial executive at some point says 'no, basta', and then everyone, after four years of working, thinks: 'what now?' It is often assumed that everybody that stays silent also agrees. But it is not like an inter-cabinet meeting or a council of ministers: if it passes there, it is over, like minister Aelvoet and her quns" (quote 91).*

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## Challenges/issues

- Bias towards visible roles of civil servants?
- Meta-governance?
- Primacy of politicians?
- Networks = different settings for politico-administrative interactions
- Network world linked to regular government?

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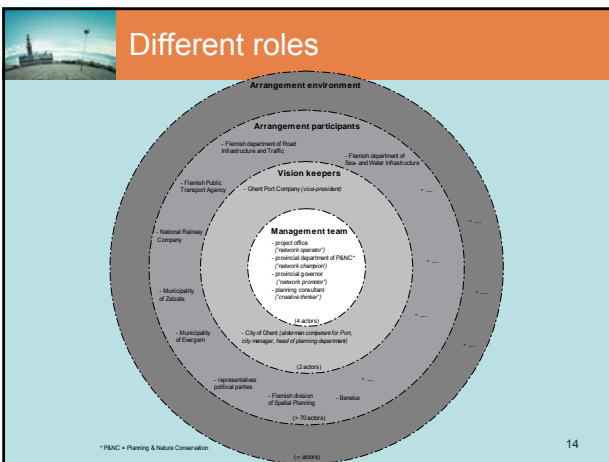
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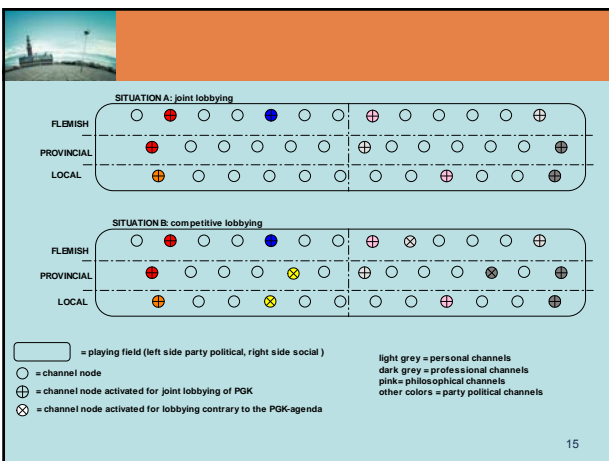
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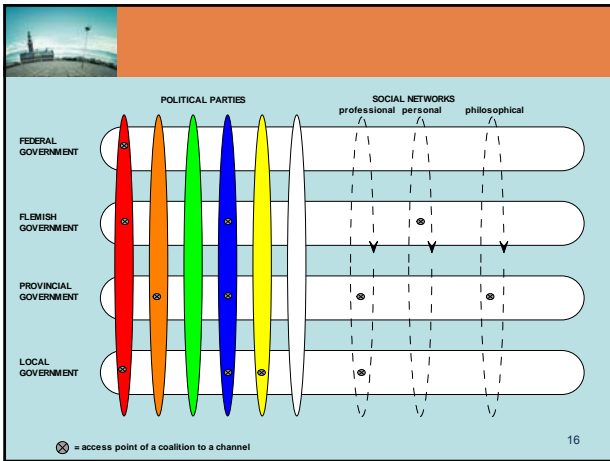
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