

Optimising the Bond Between the Committee of the Regions and the European Parliament



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Abstract

This document contains a theoretical analysis emphasising the relevance of the European Committee of the Regions for EU decision-makers and ultimately the quality of the legislative outcome. It is argued that the functioning of the Committee of the Regions can be enhanced by increasing awareness of its consultative opinions among the parties and politicians of the European Parliament. To facilitate this, a communication strategy is outlined which aims to issue voice through the members of the European Parliament.

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1 Introduction

The theoretical analysis outlined in this document is written as an extension to a study conducted by Jacobs et al. (2020)¹ and questions how the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) could enhance its influence on the legislative outcome. The advise that will be outlined concerning the devising of a communication strategy with respect to the European Parliament (EP), is founded on the premise that political interest groups, as well as political actors, compete for power over the legislative outcome. It is assumed that political actors, such as (members of) the CoR and the EP, are able to independently establish strategic relationships based on mutual interests, but are restricted in this by boundaries in the form of, for instance, ideology and territorial and functional interests. Moreover, it is theorised that through actions such as proactivity and coordination, the CoR gains attention of EP-parties and MEPs and is ultimately able to affect the legislative outcome. Given this theory and underlying assumptions, the analysis may be interpreted from the perspective of the multi-level governance literature [see for instance Bache et al. (2016)], yet this is not an angle explicitly pursued in this document.

The main advise the analysis presents is the recommendation for the CoR to issue voice in EP-debates through EP-parties and MEPs. To do this, the analysis introduces a three-pillar communication strategy based on: the regional and sub-national policy-domains deemed salient by parties in the EP, the regional and sub-national policy-domains deemed salient by the electorate, as well as the priorities and preferences parties and the electorate have in these policy-domains, and the focal points and activities of the CoR. In addition to emphasising the importance of the three pillars, the analysis attempts to guide further research by highlighting aspects of the communication strategy that may desire further scrutiny. The main findings constitute that the CoR is relevant to both the EP and the electorate but that its potential is not yet reached. When combining this findings with the preliminary results of Jacobs et al. (2020), indication is found for the activities of the CoR to best match the policy- priorities and preferences of EP-parties situated on the middle-left of the political spectrum.

The analysis will start with section two briefly assessing the institutions of the CoR. The third section discusses the bond between the CoR and the EP, and uses the Cooperative Agreement (2014) between both institutions as foundation for the proposed communication strategy. Section four analyses the electoral policy- preferences and priorities, and the recent activity of the CoR. Section five concludes the analysis by providing a summary of the advise. The main implication of this advise is the need for the members of the CoR to agree on an allocation of effort across EP-parties and MEPs that optimises the influence the CoR receives from addressing specific EP-parties and MEPs, while

¹Because the theoretical context and policy advise are somewhat underdeveloped in Jacobs et al. (2020), but the methodological approach [see also (Slapin & Proksch, 2008)] praised to be novel by an anonymous marker, this stage of the project is used to place the analysis of Jacobs et al. in the appropriate literature to mature the advise initiated in the latter document.

accounting for the internal friction such a politically biased approach would create among the members of the CoR. Presumably the most feasible manner to implement this, is to informally extend the dialogues between both institutions entrenched in the Cooperative Agreement, for instance by encouraging the members of the CoR's commissions to emphasise the significance of their consultative opinion in their relationships with *specific* MEPs. That are those MEPs with influence on the for the policy relevant EP-committee and those MEPs affiliated to parties expected to best match the opinion of the CoR, as identified by the communication strategy.

2 The Functioning of the CoR

This section will first outline the political reasons for the establishment of the CoR, after which the institutions of the CoR and the limitations to these institutions will be discussed. The section will conclude with a brief analysis of the ability of the CoR to affect the legislative outcome. The boundaries identified in the latter subsection will form the basis of the communication strategy outlined in section three.

2.1 Establishment

The Maastricht Treaty established the consultative committee: The European Committee of the Regions (CoR), which comprises democratically elected representatives from both local- and regional level government authorities, such as provinces, municipalities and cities. To understand the creation of the CoR, and the subsequent empowerment of regional and sub-national governments to express their voice in the EU's legislative process, it is important to place the CoR within the wider framework of the Maastricht Treaty. The latter marked member states' commitment to augment European cooperation beyond primarily economic interests into an enhanced social and political bond. Consequently, the power base of Brussels was set to increase. The resulting autonomy loss of nation-states was most prominently felt in federal member-states, such as Germany and Belgium, where relatively autonomous but in the EU solely nationally represented governmental units faced vast shrinkages of their power base (Loughlin, 1996). It is therefore not surprising that it were primarily those governments that most strongly advocated the establishment of the CoR (Piattoni, 2012). Simultaneously, were incumbent European institutions inclined to support the creation of the CoR to strengthen their own legitimacy at this time of accelerated integration (Christiansen, 1996). One of the major objectives of the CoR, therefore became to reduce the gap between Brussels and the electorate and thus the democratic deficit of the EU (Carroll, 2011). As such, the CoR is often deemed to be gatekeeper of the principle of subsidiarity, which dictates that decisions within the European Union should be taken at

the closest practical level to the citizen². Moreover, European integration, as for instance embodied in the creation of the European Single Market, increased the need to calibrate regional and sub-national policies (Piattoni, 2012). This Europeanisation at a regional and sub-national level urged to create a platform at which regional and sub-national governments could ventilate concerns and formally participate in the European bureaucratic framework (Domorenok, 2009). Finally, given the large share of EU-policies to be implemented by these sub-national governments, such as the Structural Funds and Framework Programmes, and the governmental expertise present in these authorities, it was deemed natural to incorporate local- and regional governmental authorities into the EU apparatus (Christiansen, 1996). Yet, the prerogative of the CoR remained merely consultative, reflecting the largely symbolic intention behind the creation of the CoR and the reluctance of the European Commission, Council of the European Union (Council) and European Parliament to forego autonomy.

2.2 Institutions

Nowadays the CoR comprises 329 regional and local representatives from all 27 member-states (European Committee of the Regions, 2020b). Its objective is to involve regional and sub-national government authorities into the EU decision-making process, by means of consulting the European Commission, Council and European Parliament. Moreover, it can appeal to the European Court of Justice if it believes the principle of subsidiarity is infringed. Consultative opinions can be requested by either of the three bodies the CoR advises or can be issued on the CoR's own initiative but are primarily issued in the second stage of the ordinary legislative-procedure when the European Commission formally proposed a policy (Hönnige & Panke, 2016).

All members of the CoR hold a dual position; one in the region or locality where they are democratically elected and one within the assembly of the CoR for which they are appointed by their member-states' national government. The latter procedure differs across member-states but is characterised by indirect democracy and the fact that the Council must approve member-states' nominated candidates (Decoster et al., 2019). Representatives and an equal number of alternate members are appointed for (renewable) terms of 5 years and gather in Brussels five to six times a year in plenary sessions at which political priorities are set and consultative opinions are adopted by means of majority vote. Plenary sessions are chaired by a president, which is elected by the members of the CoR for a period of 2.5 years, and opinions are written by the rapporteur of one of the six commissions of the CoR³. Each committee member participates in

²See: Article 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and Protocol (No 2) on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

³Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX); Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget (COTER); Commission for Economic Policy (ECON); Commission for Environment, Climate Change and Energy (ENVE); Commission for Natural Resources (NAT); Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC).

one or two commissions and commissions draft common positions to vote upon during plenary sessions. Local and regional delegates are roughly equally represented and the rotating of the presidency accounts for this geographic divide hence the 2.5 years term. Moreover, positions within the CoR are distributed such that balance remains in party-ties, gender and nationality. Between January 2015 and December 2019 the CoR adopted 342 opinions and resolutions, and presented these in concisely written bullet points of about ten pages per opinion. Each opinion begins with a summary of the main advise outlined in the remainder of the document⁴.

2.3 Limitations

The mandate of the CoR grants its members formal access to all (political) actors involved in the policy-domains relevant to the CoR. This equips the CoR with an advantage over competing interest groups, but also allows individual committee members to approach political actors independently. A power particularly useful when members disagree with the priorities of the CoR or deem the functioning of the CoR to be ineffective. The latter power could fragment the CoR and exposes a fundamental institutional problem, namely the friction between European and regional or national interest representation; as for instance expressed in the organisation of committee members into national delegations (European Committee of the Regions, 2020c), the observation that national delegations form the major collective actors in the CoR (Hönnige & Kaiser, 2003) and the close link between national delegations and the national and regional offices present in Brussels⁵. Moreover, a second form of friction emerges from the organisation around nation-states; because committee members become relatively approachable for national private interests. These private-sector views might relatively easily influence the political views of committee members and cause the CoR to mix territorial with functional interest representation (Trobiani, 2016), a trend conceivably set to increase with the EU's progressive inclusion of civil society (Hönnige & Kaiser, 2003) and further facilitated by the affiliation of the members of the CoR to political groups [see also Hönnige & Kaiser (2003) and Domorenok (2009)].

In addition to the competing interests to impartially advise European decision-makers and to represent the interest of one's locality, region or member-state, limitations relate to the heterogeneity in resources and competencies among committee members, the small administrative capacity of the CoR and the differences in cohesion and administrative capacity across political groups [see for instance: Hönnige & Kaiser (2003), McCarthy (1997), Farrows & McCarthy (1997) and Domorenok (2009)]. Moreover, Hooghe and Marks emphasise the need to focus on regional and cohesion policy for the CoR to be taken serious

⁴Responses of the European Commission to each of the CoR's plenary sessions are available at: <https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Pages/Opinions.aspx>

⁵In the Netherlands for instance, multiple committee members have a chair in the board of the Dutch regional office in Brussels; *Huis van de Nederlandse Provincies*. See: <https://www.nl-prov.eu/regional-offices/huis-van-de-nederlandse-provincies/?lang=en>

by other EU-institutions (Hooghe & Marks, 2001, p.82). In fact, many of the consultative opinions of the CoR are hardly noticed (Hönnige & Panke, 2016). A survey conducted by the latter authors among MEPs and members of the permanent representations, for instance elicits that 63% of the respondents were typically *not* or *hardly* informed about the content of the CoR’s consultative opinions relevant to their policy-domains. This lack of awareness is explained by the passive nature of the CoR and the Council and European Parliament being constrained in their capacity to prepare debates while many interest groups seek to influence their stances (Hönnige & Panke, 2016). Moreover, the part-time nature of committee membership and the limited (theoretical) expertise of committee members about the topics they consult, put the CoR in a further disadvantaged position compared to interest groups hiring full-time working experts that can publish position papers and recommendations quicker (Farrows & McCarthy, 1997). In fact, many competing interest groups carry a regional character⁶, causing some to be sceptical about the added value the CoR provides (Trobbiani, 2016).

2.4 Feasibility

The limitations to the institutional design of the CoR make it ill-suited to act as a collective interest group. Instead, and given its institutions and symbolic purpose of establishment, the CoR is expected to be most effective when members focus on issuing policy-advice, thereby drawing upon their experience with regional and sub-national policies. However, the members of the CoR might be unsuited to give impartial advice, because legislative outcomes have tangible consequences for the geographies they directly represent and to which they are politically accountable hence for their own position. This impartiality implies that members might be inclined to act independently in self-organised national or otherwise specified delegations whenever their views diverge from the advice they expect the CoR to deliver. This phenomenon undermines the appearance of the CoR as being an assembly of experts and might cause Council and European Parliament to devalue the consultative opinions of the CoR. Anticipating such occurrences, the CoR adopted a code of conduct requiring its members to be independent in their duties, to act in the general interest of the European Union and the European public, and to avoid any situation liable to give rise to a conflict of interest (European Committee of the Regions, 2019). Although, the introduction of such regulations is to be encouraged, and practices such as chairmanship in national offices being defensible based on the exercise of public duties as outlined in the same document, the line between good governance and what may classify as impartiality might be fine in practice. It remains therefore for further research to identify, to what extent the members of the CoR represent the general interest and whether or to what extent members are biased

⁶For instance; the Association of European Regions for Products of Origin (AREPO), the European Regions Research and Innovation Network (ERRIN), the Assembly of European Regions (AER) and the Council of European Municipal and Regions (CEMR).

towards the agenda of the geography they directly represent, their member-state or political group.

Apart from enforcing the code of conduct to limit internal friction to increase coherence in the voices of the members of the CoR, the CoR could limit its focus to policy-domains characterised by relatively homogeneous policy-preferences, such that members can more easily act in one common voice and make the CoR gain in status of being an assembly of impartial experts. Hönnige & Kaiser (2003) give an indication of what these policy-domains could be, by examining the degree of conflict within the commissions of the CoR and conclude that the CoR debates least intensely in the domains of: *trans-European networks, transport, information society, employment, economic policy, single-market, industry, SME, education, vocational training, culture, youth, sport and citizens' rights*. An intermediate level of conflict was found around the domains of: *regional policy, structural funds, economic and social cohesion and cross-border and inter-regional cooperation*. While most conflict centred around the domains of: *agriculture, rural development, fishery, spatial planning, urban issues, energy and environmental and institutional affairs*.

However, solely focusing on policy domains characterised by relatively homogeneous sub-national policy preferences, would forego a substantial and salient range of policy domains. The CoR should therefore not abstain from addressing these but when deciding to work on these, increase its efforts to ensure coherence in the voices of its members. Existing mechanism that exploit the CoR's position as a platform to foster regional and sub-national policy dialogues could facilitate this, but are beyond the scope of this study to analyse. Examples of such mechanisms are: the interregional groups and networks created within the CoR, the studies and impact analyses it undertakes, the online courses it hosts, its openness to policy input as for instance embodied in its open consultations, the *Summit of Regions and Cities* it organises, the *European Week of Regions and Cities* and the *European Public Communication Conference*.

In addition, Hönnige & Panke (2016) highlight that the Council and European Parliament become more aware of the consultative opinions of the CoR whenever the CoR proactively promotes these. Such promotion can for instance be embodied in the organisation of: seminars, hearings, conferences, informal meetings, or participation in these, as well as the circulation of additional information (Hönnige & Panke, 2016). To be most effective, the CoR should connect with decision-makers as often and deeply as possible to best highlight the significance of its position. Moreover, active involvement during the white paper phase has proven to steer the European Commission's policy-proposals in the direction of the by the CoR preferred outcome [see for instance, Neshkova (2010) and Panke et al. (2015)]. Early stage involvement further supports the CoR in publishing opinions sooner such that the Council and European Parliament can more easily account for these when preparing debates. Early publications might also receive more references and thus visibility. Furthermore, the quality, innovativeness and reader friendliness of consultative opinions are expected to increase the motivation of MEPs to read these and a pledge to actively guide the implementation of the by the CoR proposed policy-features might enhance

the feasibility of the CoR’s policy-proposals (Hönnige & Panke, 2016). Because pro-activity is capacity intense and the resources of the CoR are rather constrained, Hönnige & Panke (2016) advised the CoR to become more selective in the policies it issues an opinion on. Figure 1 shows that the yearly number of opinions issued, did not structurally change following the advise in 2016, indicating that some space might still exist for the CoR to further optimise its efforts.

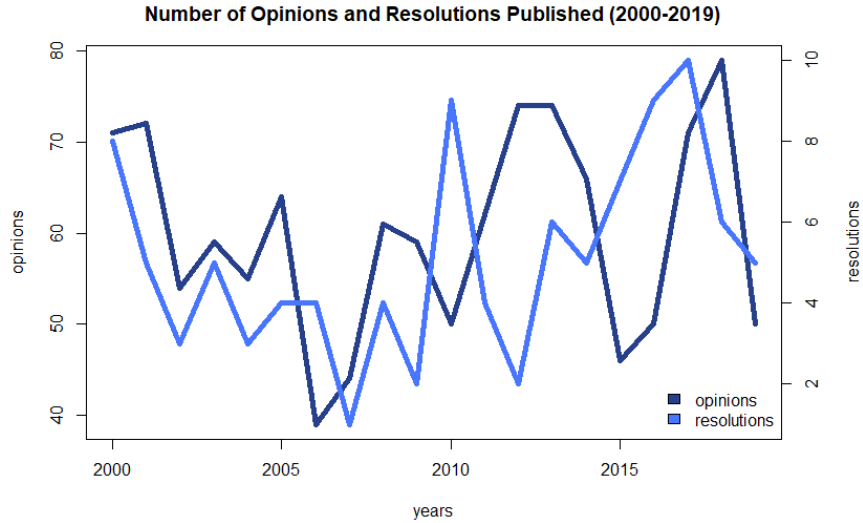


Figure 1: Opinions and Resolutions Published

3 Optimising the Relationship with the EP

The previous section illustrated that formal involvement in the legislative process does not by definition equate to awareness of the consultative opinions of the CoR among decision-makers. A brief analysis of the ability of the CoR to affect the legislative outcome has been provided, culminating in possible strategies to enhance coherence and proactivity. This section will elaborate on these strategies, by applying these to the bond between the CoR and the European Parliament. Furthermore, a communication strategy will be outlined that aims to optimise the relationship between the CoR and the EP. Section four will augment this strategy by introducing two additional aspects.

3.1 The Bond with the EP

Due to the prerogative of the CoR to “merely” consult the European Commission, Council and European Parliament, and the absence of any obligation of the

latter institutions to act upon nor read its consultative opinions, the influence of the CoR is a function of its proximity to- and relationship with these institutions (Decoster et al., 2019). Moreover, given that the positions of the diplomats in the Council are primarily determined by the instructions they receive from national ministers, and the European Commission generally being only involved in the pre-legislative process, it is most strategic for the CoR to strive influencing the legislative outcome by means of collaboration with the European Parliament (Domorenok, 2009). Yet, following the Maastricht Treaty which established the CoR and granted the European Parliament the co-decision procedure, rivalry dominated the relationship between both institution until it became generally believed that the CoR would not evolve into the second legislative chamber the EP feared it would (Loughlin, 1996). Eventually, the political space arose to build upon the institutional similarities between both assemblies: *citizen representation, political group affiliation and the objective to reduce the democratic deficit of the EU* (Decoster et al., 2019), which in 2014 accumulated into the initiation of a cooperative agreement between both institutions⁷. This agreement significantly increased the interaction between the Bureau of the CoR and Conference of Commission Chairs of the EP, between the Commissions of the CoR and the Committees of the EP, between the rapporteurs of the CoR and the EP, and between the secretariats of both institutions. Examples of this closer cooperation are an increase in attendance at the counter party's events, the mutual operation of the European Parliament Research Service (EPRS) and an increase in the number of (informal) meetings at which, for instance potential amendments and opinions are exchanged (Decoster et al., 2019). In addition, the latter authors advise the members of the CoR to invite MEPs more often to undertake fieldtrips collectively.

3.2 Issuing Voice Through MEPs

The willingness of the EP to cooperate more closely with the CoR seems at odds with the typically low level of awareness MEPs have of the latter's consultative opinions. On the one hand, this might be explained by the increase in legitimacy the EP consolidates from showcasing its motivation to notice the opinions of the CoR. On the other hand, given the rivalry between both institutions, the EP might strategically benefit from the increased interaction between both institutions by steering the consultative opinions of the CoR to better reflect the agenda of the EP. This argument is first of all supported by the unequal bargaining power between both institutions, as for instance expressed by the need of the CoR to affect the legislative outcome by means of the EP and the credible threat the EP can make related to the annual budget of the CoR. Second, the Cooperative Agreement increases the dependency of the CoR on the EP, for instance by transferring parts of its staff to the research services of the

⁷A similar agreement was concluded simultaneously with the other consultative assembly of the EU: The European Economic and Social Committee. A report on the implementation of the agreement can be found at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/113724/Report%20Impl%20Coop%20Agreement%20EP%20CoR%202016.pdf>

EP and holding its plenary sessions on the premises of the EP (Decoster et al., 2019). It would require more research to conclude whether or to what extent the Cooperative Agreement has been an attempt to absorb the influence of the CoR, but the CoR should in its approach to the EP be aware of the latter’s possibly hidden motivations, to avoid its bonding unfold into an unfortunate marriage. One avenue to embody this, is to be critical about a potential expansion of the Cooperative Agreement into the dimension of closer cooperation but to focus potential expansions on manners to increase awareness of CoR’s consultative opinions among MEPs. The EP might also be susceptible to such a subtle alteration in focal point, given its repeated emphasis on the need to raise awareness for the consultative opinions of the CoR (European Parliament, 2017).

Affecting the legislative outcome by means of informing MEPs is expected to be most successful when the policy-domains the CoR devotes most scrutiny to coincide with the policy-domains the EP deems regional and sub-national government authorities’ insights to add most value. Jacobs et al. (2020) made a first attempt to identifying these policy-domains by modelling EP-parties’ positional similarity on regional affairs. Using data from the 2019 EP-elections, the authors found the general political left- right wing divide to be present in the context of regional affairs, with left-wing parties emphasising policies in the domains of: *environment, climate, cohesion, emancipation* and *unemployment*, and right-wing parties emphasizing policies in the domains of: *tourism, migration, security* and *language*. Policy-domains that were generally deemed salient and broadly supported within the EP related to: *agriculture, investment, the economy, transport, health, social policy* and *the principle of subsidiarity*. Yet, it should be noted that the Poisson model the authors used, solely identified the similarity in word frequency of the sections of parties’ manifestos on regional affairs, which is different from the content of these sections. *Alternatively phrased*, the authors identified significant differences in the frequency with which certain parties discussed certain policy-domains in a regional and sub-national context but did not formally investigate the compatibility of the views parties expressed on these policy-domains. The authors refrained from conducting such a compatibility test due to their limited sample size hence lack of observations within each part of the political spectrum, but did illustrate that substantial variation might occur within party-groups, considering the substantial number of parties they sampled but dropped for analysis because the manifestos did not contain any reference to regional affairs⁸. Moreover, the parties that did write about regional affairs generally did so sparsely, indicating that party-groups do not organise (heavily) around regional affairs.

Combining the features of the Cooperative Agreement with the findings of Jacobs et al. (2020), it might be concluded that close cooperation between the EP and the CoR is possible as long as it takes place on a managerial level and in the

⁸Note that not writing about regional affairs is not the same as not having a stance on regional affairs nor being disinterested in regional affairs.

form of an enhanced dialogue between both institutions, but that any formal agreement on political priorities is unlikely. The latter because Jacobs et al. (2020) showed the EP to be divided about the importance of- and priorities in regional affairs and thus presumably the position of the CoR. This implies that instead of striving to revise the existing structures of the Cooperative Agreement to raise awareness for the consultative opinions, the CoR might be better off by actively approaching EP-parties that are likely to be interested in the *specific* consultations of the CoR, and by ventilating through EP(-committee) members of the respective parties its voice into EP-debates. For this to be effective, it is critical that the CoR is aware of what party to speak through, for what policy-domain or policy-issue. Jacobs et al. (2020) laid the foundation for this identification process and released the R-code of their statistical analysis such that it can easily be extended on.

An alternative methodological approach to identify the policy-domains parties deem salient in a regional and sub-national context, would be to use the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES)⁹ and its findings on questions explicitly relating to sub-national or regional policy-domains, such as cohesion and regional policies. An advantage of this approach is that CHES directly reports on the degree of saliency parties attach to policy-domains and the degree of within-party conflict on policy-domains. However, the policy-domains CHES enquires on seldomly centre around regional and sub-national issues and are prespecified by the surveyors, as such CHES is expected to capture relatively few of the relevant sub-national policy-domains. This limitation can partly be mitigated by considering a wider array of surveys, including but not limited to: the European Manifesto Study, the Manifesto Project and the Regional Manifesto Project. Yet, such an approach is expected to remain methodologically inferior to those considering party manifestos, speeches or any other output directly relatable to party positions, because it continues to rely on a pre-set range of policy-domains to enquire on, and thus an assumption on the policy-domains to be relevant in a regional and sub-national context. Nevertheless, the approach could form an important robustness check.

Despite the identification of policy-domains that are deemed salient by EP-parties in a regional and sub-national context, and the compatibility of parties' priorities and preferences in these policy-domains, requiring further research, the remainder of this analysis explores two hitherto disregarded aspects of a communication strategy with the EP: the identification of policy-domains deemed salient by the electorate in a regional and sub-national context and the identification of policy-domains receiving most of the attention of the CoR. Identifying the preferences and priorities of the electorate is helpful because it ultimately is the electorate to which EP-parties are accountable hence to whose stance EP-parties are expected to adapt their priorities and preferences. Identifying the recent focal points of the CoR, in turn is helpful because the CoR should assure

⁹The Chapel Hill Expert Survey estimates (national) party positions on a range of policy-domains, by surveying (national) political experts on the stances these parties take in the respective policy-domains.

the policy-domains it issues consultative opinions on, match the policy-domains EP-parties value consultative opinions on, for the opinions to be used in the preparation of parliamentary debates or the drafting of amendments.

4 Two Other Aspects

This section highlights two hitherto disregarded aspects of a communication strategy with the EP: the policy- preferences and priorities of the electorate and the focal points of the CoR. These aspects complement the identification of current EP-party preferences and priorities by forecasting how current preferences and priorities will evolve over time, and by assuring that the consultative opinions of the CoR remain relevant. It will be shown that the policy-domains the electorate deems salient in a regional and sub-national context overlap with the policy-domains EP-parties deem relevant in a regional and sub-national context, as identified in the previous section. Moreover, regional and sub-national policy-domains are expected to increase in saliency in the EU-context over time. Lastly, the CoR is advised to emphasise its relationships with EP-parties situated on the middle-left of the political spectrum and likely wishes to emphasise different policy-domains in its relationship with different EP-parties.

4.1 Trends in Public Opinion

The literature on the formation of policy-preferences is vast and the process in which policy-preferences are formed complex (Druckman & Lupia, 2000)¹⁰. Therefore, it is behind the scope of this analysis to delve into the process of preference formation, instead the analysis will use the findings of the literature on the instability of electoral policy preferences (Druckman, 2004) and the influence electoral policy-preferences exert on the policy preferences of EP-parties (Spoon & Klüver, 2014) and the composition of the EP (Emanuele et al., 2019), to explain that potential bonds between the CoR and EP-parties are expected to be unstable in the long-term. That is, in the long-term policy- preferences and priorities are expected to shift within parties and the power of parties, as measured by the number of seats the party holds in both the national and European Parliament, to vary. Therefore, it is important for the CoR to devote attention to the identification of trends in public opinion, to forecast what policy-domains gain in saliency and to anticipate what parties are subsequently expected to become more powerful. It is in those policy-domains the CoR should endeavour to gain expertise and those parties it should build stronger connections with, wishes the CoR to continue delivering valuable consultative opinions that receive much attention.

Thus far, EP-elections have generally been regarded as being of a second order. That is, these are deemed less salient than national elections and are heavily

¹⁰Two-way causality is for instance found between the policy- preferences and priorities of respectively the electorate and political parties (Iversen, 1994).

influenced by national political affairs (Johnston, 2020). However, this trend might be set to subside, as De Wilde et al. (2016) for instance find the European Union to increasingly politicise. A development De Wilde et al. ascribe to the growing saliency of the EU, the polarisation of opinions, as for instance expressed by the rise of populism, and the expansion of actors and audiences involved in EU policies. The EP-elections of 2019 corroborate this finding by giving further rise to polarisation (Servent, 2019), as for instance embodied by the decline in the support for the traditional left- and right-wing parties, and an increase in the support for the Greens and the populist radical right (Wiebrecht & Downes, 2019). The latter authors ascribe the decline in the support for traditional parties to a widespread anti-incumbent effect, fuelled by electoral alienation from the complexity of the EU, and a decline in confidence in mainstream politicians to better this situation. Moreover, the 2019-increase in voter turnout is consistent with the growing saliency of the EU.

On a sub-national level, the *Eurobarometer of end 2019*¹¹, indicates that most of the electorate is strongly attached to their own city, town, village or region, whereas only weakly attached to the European Union. Moreover, most voters are not aware of the existence of the CoR; in the Netherlands 86% of the respondents indicated never to have heard of the CoR. Simultaneously do respondents indicate that local and regional politicians are best placed to explain the impact of European policies on citizens' day-to-day life (European Commission, 2018a) and that cities, towns and villages should do more for the environment (European Commission, 2020). When again using the most recent (*Standard*) *Eurobarometer*, the three most salient policy-domains to be addressed at a European level can be gauged: *immigration*, *the state of public finances* and *climate change*. In all three of these policy-domains the consultative opinions of the CoR could potentially be of value. For instance, 90% of respondents indicates that local and regional authorities have an important role to play in the integration of immigrants (European Commission, 2018b), much government spending takes place at a sub-national level (Hooghe et al., 2016)¹² and the support for all layers of government to undertake actions to address climate change is high (European Commission, 2019).

Despite more research being required to the identification of trends in public opinion, for instance by identifying patterns in (national) election outcomes, (national) election polls, (national) election studies and (national) political debates, this subsection uncovered that over time, EU-institutions and thus the CoR and the EP, are expected to grow in relevance, as expressed by the increasing politicisation of the EU. Moreover, it was argued that sub-national governance and sub-national policy-domains are deemed salient by the electorate, but that familiarity with and therefore attachment to the CoR is low. It was further argued that the policy-domains the electorate seems to deem salient,

¹¹For primary data see: <https://www.gesis.org/eurobarometer-data-service/search-data-access/data-access>

¹²For the dataset *Regional Authority Index* see: <http://garymarks.web.unc.edu/data/regional-authority/>

exhibit overlap with the policy-domains EP-parties refer to in a regional context [see for instance Jacobs et al. (2020)]. Given these policy-domains and the process of polarisation to which the EP is subject, the CoR might consider emphasising its relations with pro-EU and possibly green-orientated parties to strengthen its voice in EP-debates.

Finally, two arguments might be made against increasing efforts to bind with extremist or anti-EU parties. First, such parties typically gain votes in reaction to political events (Noury & Roland, 2020) but might lack the ideational strength to capture large vote shares for long periods of time and may thus be characterised by a relatively unstable power base. Moreover, these parties typically only weakly match the priorities of the European Commission¹³ which reduces the likelihood these parties' legislative proposals are adopted or these parties enter government coalitions. Second, and more important, because member-states' governments defecto select the members of the CoR, it might be that a bias exists towards the selection of less extreme politicians. It might therefore be that the CoR is less politicised and of a more uniform political colour than the EP, which makes the focus on a subset of EP-parties more natural. Yet, more research would be required to draw this conclusion.

4.2 Focal Points of the CoR

To measure in what policy-domains the CoR is most actively involved, figure 2 plots the frequency with which the CoR published consultative opinions in each policy-domain, for the years 2017 to 2019. The categorisation of opinions is arbitrary to the extent that it was to the disclosure of the author to categorise opinions. It must therefore be acknowledged that the height of the bars might not be accurate. However, combining the findings of figure 2 with the names of CoR's commissions as outlined in footnote 3 and the policy-domains emphasised in the impact reports of the CoR¹⁴, it is concluded that figure 2 is representative for the activity of the CoR. Figure 2 illustrates that most consultative opinions have recently been written in the domains of *climate*, *environment* and (*regional*) *economic development*. With domains as *agriculture*, *social policy* and the *macro-economy* receiving less but consistent attention.

Based on the recent activity of the CoR, the priorities of the CoR seem to best match those of parties situated on the middle-left of the political spectrum (Jacobs et al., 2020). The CoR is therefore advised to direct most of its effort to strengthen relationships with EP-parties, to parties belonging to the latter category, while taking into consideration the institutional limitations outlined in sections 2.3 and 2.4. That is, the members of the CoR should find an allocation of effort across EP-parties and MEPs that optimises the influence the CoR receives from addressing specific EP-parties and MEPs, while accounting for the internal friction such a politically biased approach would create among the

¹³The priorities of the European Commission for the 2019 – 2024 period are available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024_en

¹⁴See for instance: European Committee of the Regions (2020a).

members of the CoR. The observation that the policy-domains the CoR is most active on, are categorised by Hönnige & Kaiser (2003) as subject to intermediate levels of conflict (see section 2.4), corroborates the feasibility of the approach, but also highlights that the approach might be most feasible when pursued separately per policy-domain or policy-issue. Finally, the overlap between the activity of the CoR and the electoral priorities and preferences as outlined in section 4.1, further indicates the relevance of the operations of the CoR¹⁵.

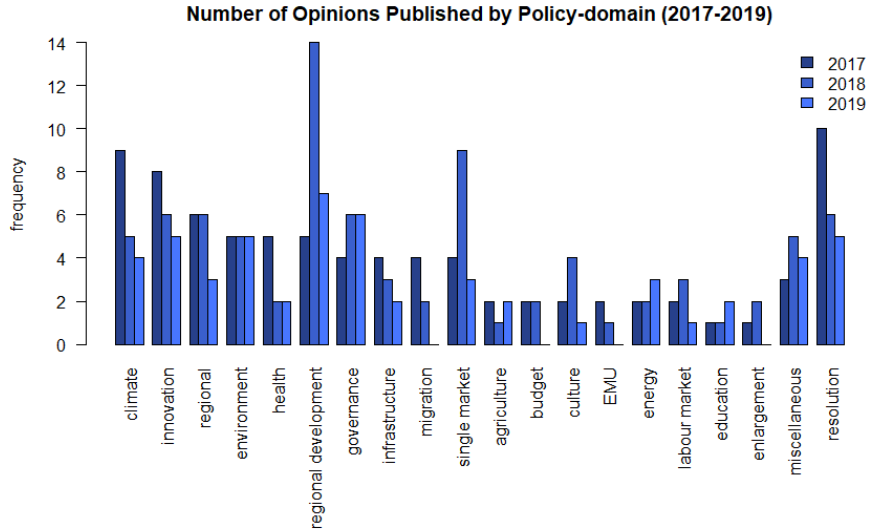


Figure 2: Activity of the CoR

5 Conclusion

The CoR is best positioned to affect the legislative outcome when it advises decision-makers based on committee members' experience with regional and sub-national policy-domains. When advising on policy issues characterised by relatively heterogeneous internal policy-preferences, the CoR best extends its efforts to ensure coherence in the voices of its members. Mechanisms that foster policy-dialogues between members are expected to be an efficient manner to facilitate this, yet further research on the effectiveness of particular mechanisms may be desired. The importance of a proactive attitude in the promotion of consultative opinions is highlighted throughout the analysis, however combining this advise with the constrained capacity of the CoR, the latter might wish to set stricter priorities in the distribution of effort across opinions or policy-domains.

¹⁵See also the CoR's impact reports available at: <https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Pages/Opinions.aspx>

Moreover, it is argued to be most strategic for the CoR to aim influencing the legislative outcome by issuing voice through MEPs. Increasing awareness of the CoR's consultative opinions among specific MEPs will be key in this strategy. Jacobs et al. (2020) laid the foundation to the identification of suitable MEPs for every policy-domain, by matching EP-parties with policy-priorities, and provide some indication for EP-parties situating on the middle-left of the political spectrum to best match the operations of the CoR. Yet, this study is still in its infancy hence can be much improved upon, for instance by examining national patterns or introducing a larger sample.

In addition, the analysis has emphasised the importance of monitoring trends in policy- preferences and priorities of the electorate and the activity of the CoR, to forecast how current electoral preferences and priorities will evolve over time, what implications this will have for the distribution of power within the EP, and how the CoR could assure it remains relevant in the long-term. Being aware of these developments will firstly support the CoR in the timely revision of its “map” matching parties and MEPs with policy- preferences and priorities, and incentivises the CoR to strengthen relationships accordingly. Second, the anticipation of change will incentivise the CoR to deliberately acquire expertise in regional and sub-national policy-issues set to become high-profile, which strengthens the ability to deliver the right advice to the right MEP at the right time, and enables the CoR to more actively steer the legislative process without requiring a formal increase in competences. The establishment of for instance a (digital) platform at which regional and sub-national government authorities could flag developments in the electorate's policy- priorities and preferences, endorse flagged developments and share insights on appropriate policy responses, might be a promising mechanism to: monitor trends in public opinion concerning local and regional affairs, make policy-proposals to the European Commission and proactively represent local and regional governments. Developments in national or pan-European policy- preferences and priorities directly affecting the EP, are expected to be best monitored by existing external surveys and studies.

The main challenge the addressing of specific MEPs imposes, is the need for the members of the CoR to agree on an allocation of effort across EP-parties and MEPs that optimises the influence the CoR receives from investing in its relationships with specific EP-parties and MEPS, while accounting for the internal friction such a politically biased approach might create among the members of the CoR. Presumably the most feasible manner to implement this, is to informally extend the dialogues between the CoR and the EP entrenched in the Cooperative Agreement, by encouraging for instance the members of CoR's commissions to emphasise the significance of their consultative opinions in their relationships with relevant MEPs. That are those MEPs with influence in the for the policy relevant EP-committee, and those affiliated to parties expected to best match the opinion of the CoR, as identified by the communication strategy.

Unhighlighted aspects of the communication strategy that may desire further research relate to: The matching of actors within the CoR to the initiations of policy-proposals and policy-amendments within each policy-domain. The ac-

tions, preferences and priorities of national and regional offices in Brussels as well as similar interest groups. The literature on collective lobbying [see for instance Klüver (2011)] and the literature on party positions [see for instance Proksch & Slapin (2010)]. The coherence in the political views of the members of the CoR and the role political-parties and political-groups have in the relationship between members of the CoR and the EP.

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Policy-incubator Projects

The *European Institute* allows students to work on an applied research project related to a public policy challenge in lieu of a dissertation. The challenges these projects feature are suggested by external policy professionals and the projects in which these challenges are addressed constitute two parts: A *policy advocacy brief* of approximately 3000 words which is written in groups of three to four students, and a *comprehensive policy report* of approximately 7000 words which is written individually. The analysis provided by this document pertains to the latter category. Other projects of the 2020-series relate to: the support for the EU the *Europe for Citizens Programme* creates, the implementation strategy of the *European Green Deal*, and the EU's public diplomacy strategy with respect to China.

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