

Flanders Ahead, Wallonia Behind (But Catching Up): Reconstructing Communities through Science, Technology, and Innovation Policymaking

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Abstract

Drawing on a documentary analysis of two socio-economic policy programs, one Flemish (“Vlaanderen In Actie”), the other Walloon (“Marshall Plans”), and a discourse analysis of how these programs are received in one Flemish and one Francophone quality newspaper, this paper illustrates how Flanders and Wallonia both seek to become top-performing knowledge-based economies (KBEs). The paper discerns a number of discursive repertoires, such as “Catching up,” which policy actors draw on to legitimize or question the transformation of Flanders and Wallonia into KBEs. The “Catching up” repertoire places Flanders resolutely ahead of Wallonia in the global race towards knowledge, excellence, and growth, but suggests that Wallonia may, in due course, *overtake* Flanders as a top competitive region. Given the expectations and/or fears that “Catching up” evokes among Flemish and Walloon policy actors, the repertoire serves these actors as a flexible discursive resource to make sense of, and shape, their collective futures, and thus their identities. The primary aim of the paper is to underline the simultaneity of, and the interplay between, globalizing forces and particularizing tendencies, as Flanders and Wallonia develop with a global KBE in nation- or region-specific ways.

Keywords: Flanders, Identity, Knowledge-based economy, Science and technology policy, Wallonia.

I. Introduction

What holds Belgium together as a nation? Or rather, what keeps it from falling apart into multiple cultural and regional entities? Lately, these questions have been the topic of much public debate in Belgium, due to new constitutional reforms, the country’s record-breaking 535 days without a federal government in 2010-2011, and the intensification of a militant Flemish nationalism, among other factors. Often, such issues are perceived in excessively positive or negative terms, depending on one’s regional affiliations, politics, and loyalties to the monarchy, Belgian beer, and the national football team. What is often missing in these debates is an appreciation of how various loyalties and identities come about and how these identities are collectively rehearsed and articulated.

Acknowledging the routine and communal character of identity construction, this article explores contemporary, ongoing articulations of collective identity in Belgium. It specifically considers how collective identities (whether “national,” “regional,” “subregional,” or of another kind) are crafted

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through *science, technology, and innovation (STI) policies* and through *mainstream media reporting on these policies*.

While STI seems unrelated to questions of statehood and nationalism, science and technology actively contribute to the formation of nationalist imaginaries (Anderson, 1991; Hecht 1998; Jasanoff & Kim 2009; Felt 2013). In Belgium specifically, STI have been, and continue to be, at the forefront of Flemish and Walloon regional development. Following constitutional reforms in the late 1970s, which relegated STI from the federal level to the regions and communities, Flemish policymakers mobilized STI as a lever for economic development and as a means of boosting Flemish self-awareness and pride. Flemish policymakers thereby asserted their region's political and cultural autonomy vis-à-vis Wallonia and the Belgian state at large.² In Wallonia, talk of a Walloon identity is contentious, yet "Wallonia" evidently exists, both constitutionally and in popular discourse (e.g. folkloric traditions). Furthermore, several Walloon politicians are convinced regionalists, including the present Minister of Economy, who is partly in charge of STI policy for the Walloon region.

Given the regionalization of an economically vital policy field like STI, as well as the potential "evaporation" of the Belgian state in the European Union (EU), we ask how "Flanders" and "Wallonia" are construed through STI government policies. We also consider how these STI policies are publicly received and circulated, as national identity must be cultivated in order to gain traction and influence (Hecht 1998: 12). To this end, we consider press reporting on Flemish and Walloon STI policies in one Flemish (Dutch-language) and one Francophone daily.

Our analysis thus builds on the recognition of the role of "institutions of power" (e.g. language, media, technologies) in articulating nationalism (Anderson 1991: 163). Following Billig (1995), we locate nationalism not only at the periphery of society (e.g. among Flemish nationalists who operate at the societal extremes), but also in the routine symbols and habits of discourse, as for instance when members of a community speak of "*the economy*," "*our nation*," "*our interests*," and so on, without specifying, or even *having* to specify who "we" are. Articulations of nationalism are thus often "banal," implicit, and embedded. Because they are continuously and collectively rehearsed, they construct a sense of "us," otherness, and belonging, thereby "flagging" the homeland without actually waving a flag (ibid: 11). By implication, nationalism, "autonomism," and regionalism are for us interrelated concepts, as each implies the transformation of the state in one way or another. Whether the transferring of power (political, economic or cultural) proceeds from the nation (i.e. Belgium) to the sub-entities (i.e. Flanders and Wallonia) or vice versa, is of secondary importance. What concerns us are the politics of identity and identity formation.

As we are interested in learning how STI policies engender a sense of collective identity that the media and other important policy actors (e.g. politicians, captains of industry, trade unions) can tap into

² Belgium officially consists of three regions (the Flemish region, the Walloon region, and the Brussels-Capital region) and three language communities (Dutch-speaking, French-speaking, and German-speaking). The northern, Dutch-speaking region of Flanders comprises the Dutch-speaking community, whereas the southern region of Wallonia is predominantly French-speaking, but also encompasses the German-speaking community in Eastern Wallonia. The Brussels-Capital region is an essentially French-speaking enclave within the Flemish region.

(Lenschow & Sprungk 2010), we take as entry points the present Flemish policy program Flanders in Action (Vlaanderen in Actie; VIA), and the two Walloon Marshall Plans (MPs).³ The former seeks to turn Flanders into a top-five economic region by 2020, in line with the European Union's 2000 Lisbon Strategy; the latter intend to revitalize the Walloon economy along the lines of innovation, entrepreneurship, and creativity. Importantly, both plans mobilize STI as strategic resources to serve an economic project.

As the two policy programs do not stand by themselves but incorporate various activities, actors, platforms, and initiatives (e.g. the Flemish Pact 2020 and the Walloon government's "future plan" Horizon 2022, to give but two examples), we will consider their multiple facets, as well as their history. For now, suffice it to say that the VIA and MP programs are administratively embedded in (new) regionalism. Contrary to regionalization (which also plays out in Belgium, as we have already seen), (new) regionalism is an official EU policy, which stimulates subnational governments to define their own regional needs and mobilize their own resources in cooperation with the national level of government and the EU. As a policy orientation, regionalism is strongly economic, as it emphasizes income, economic growth, and employment as "strategic levers" for regional economic development (Versmessen & Delmartino 1998: 286). Following Jeffrey and O'Sullivan (1994: 4), regionalism leaves room for "identity," albeit in a secular and pragmatic sense that does not amount to "an atavistic ethnic or cultural exclusiveness." Accordingly, Keating (1992: 56) contends that identity, when linked to regionalism, is always construed from a perspective of *doing business*.

From the perspective of this article, however, identity is always *political* (rather than merely economic), as without some kind of (forged) common commitment, policies cannot be developed, articulated, implemented, and sustained. Simply by virtue of their existence, the VIA and MP plans evoke a sense of territory, envision a particular society, and address particular societal groups in an effort to turn around, strengthen, or improve "the region." Thus, the programs construct a "we" and a "them," as well as a desired common future. As people, place, and region are not necessarily specified in the plans themselves, they may do so implicitly rather than outspokenly.

It is on these notes that a closer analysis of the VIA plan and the MPs is revealing. While both the VIA plan and the MPs emphasize the need of transforming Flanders and Wallonia into knowledge-based economies (KBEs) in order meet the demands of globalization, the plans adopt a different tone and stance. The Flemish plan repeatedly states the need of "Winning the future together"; that is, of involving all Flemings so as to transform Flanders into "a top region, not only in Europe, but in the world, particularly in the social and economic field" (VIA, 2006: 4). It also states that Flanders is *already* prosperous and *already* has many strengths, but that the welfare and prosperity of Flanders are "under threat" in a "challenging global economic environment" (2). The message is thus that Flanders is doing relatively well in the global economy, but that it must do *even better* if it is to maintain its competitive edge and its welfare.

³ The official names of these plans are *Plan Marshall pour la Wallonie* and *Plan Marshall 2.Vert.*

As the success of VIA is (partly) measured against the performances of “neighbouring countries” and “the growth economies of the east,” VIA posits Flanders as a distinct *nation* in the world with its own resources, talents, and commitments (3). This “nationalistic” reading of the plan is confirmed in the phrase, “We are creative, we are innovative and we are a *nation* of entrepreneurs” (emphasis added) (3).

By contrast, the MP is framed from the perspective of Walloon recovery and “redressement.” Although the term “Marshall Plan” evidently brings to mind the European Recovery Program for rebuilding Western Europe after World War II, *recovery* also refers to the period of prosperity before the World Wars, when Wallonia was one of the most economically advanced industrial regions in Europe. The MP suggests that Wallonia’s glorious past (“le passé glorieux”) can be rewon, if the Walloons deploy every tool they can muster and work together to “relaunch” the Walloon economy (3). To incite joint action, the MP urges the Walloons to become the architects of their own *fate*. This aspiration is clearly expressed in the opening sentence of the first MP plan: “The federalization [of Belgium; by which is meant the regionalization of policy and competences] bestows the Walloons with political autonomy, which renders them responsible for their own destiny.” At the same time, this statement reads as a call to independence, as the Walloons are *bestowed with* political autonomy (by the Flemings, who have repeatedly pushed for the dismantling of Belgium as a unitary state).

As the above excerpts from the Flemish and Walloon policy plans indicate, VIA and the MPs characterize a state of political and economic affairs, take position in relation to these affairs, and, most importantly, *envision a prosperous future* for the Flemish and Walloon region, respectively. The plans are thus driven by expectations, visions and values, as well as fears. They mobilize arguments, explanations, evaluations, descriptions and prescriptions, sometimes by drawing on tropes or stereotypes, anecdotes, and illustrations. As the plans also indicate, transforming Flanders and Wallonia into top KBE regions does not happen by itself. For instance, while the VIA plan describes Flemings as entrepreneurs, it also states that “we must dare to be entrepreneurial” (3). Similarly, the MP urges Walloon citizens to change their “état d’esprit” or mindset, if economic growth is to ensue (3). Thus, identity construction and transformation are in order both in Flanders and in Wallonia.

The above observations serve as starting points for our media analysis. As we want to know whether, and how, these particular conceptions of the nation/region are picked up in press reporting on STI policies, we ask the following interrelated questions: How are the Flemish (VIA) and Walloon STI policies (MPs) received in the Flemish and Francophone press? Do we discern in the press the same notions of identity as in the policy programs? Are these notions reproduced, problematized or transformed? If so, in what ways? What does this mean for Flemish and Walloon identity construction, and for the construction of “Belgium” at large?

Our analysis conceives of journalists and the press as potential policy agenda setters and opinion makers, as the press potentially reproduces and redefines political identities. As we will see, the Flemish and Francophone press speak out on issues of collective identity and also offer various policymakers a platform to express their views on regional economic development, STI, and the state. Thus, from our

perspective, policymaking is not only the prerogative of mandated policymakers, but of journalists and other opinion leaders (e.g. captains of industry) as well (Lenschow & Sprungk 2010).

To enable analysis, we draw on a range of literatures, including science and technology studies, discourse analysis, and media analyses. Our approach is interpretive and interactionist, as it assumes that realities (e.g. identities, nations, as well as practices and materialities) are socially constructed rather than exist as objective phenomenon that can be discovered through empirical testing (Fischer 2003: 118). Hence, we ask how identity is created, structured, maintained, or conversely deconstructed, resisted, and challenged. Our aim is thus not to uncover an objective reality behind identity, but to understand how identities are collectively made and remade on a continuous basis.

In what follows, we first present, discuss, and situate Flemish and Walloon STI policies in time and place, as a means of contextualizing the “nationalisms” inscribed in the VIA plan and MPs (part 2). Next, we present our methodological framework for discourse and media analysis, our data, and key findings (part 3). Upon drawing together these findings in part 4, we single out the storyline of “Catching up” as an important discursive backdrop against which processes of collective identity construction play out through STI policymaking and press reporting. The “Catching up” storyline places Flanders resolutely ahead of Wallonia in the global race towards knowledge, excellence, and growth, but suggests that Wallonia may, in due course, *overtake* Flanders as a top competitive region. Given the expectations and/or fears that “Catching up” evokes among Flemish and Walloon policy actors (including journalists, entrepreneurs, civil society organizations, etc.), the repertoire serves these actors as a flexible discursive resource to make sense of, and shape, their collective identities. We conclude by tying our findings into a broader discussion about the place of Belgium in Europe and the world, as “Belgium” is constantly (re)defined in terms of its constituent segments and overarching structures, including the KBE.

II. Winning the Future Together – Resurrecting the Region⁴

In this section we situate the Flemish VIA plan and the Walloon MPs in time and context. We pay particular attention to the nationalist imaginaries that are encoded in these plans and that surround them, partly by drawing connections with broader (historic) events and trends. For Flanders, this means going back to the launch of the so-called DIRV program, which the Flemish government launched in 1982 and which transformed Flanders into an autonomous innovation region. Contrary to Flanders, Wallonia lacks a constitutional, nation-specific technology project like DIRV that serves policy actors (and potential others) as a shared frame of reference. As we argue below, the MPs are precisely an attempt on behalf of the Walloon government to establish such a frame for Wallonia and the Walloons today.

⁴ Parts of this section are adapted from Van Oudheusden et al. (forthcoming).

Flanders in Action

On July 11, 2006, the then Flemish Prime Minister, Yves Leterme, and members of his government coalition launched the Flanders in Action (VIA) project, which they presented to the assembled press as a “social and economic action programme for the future of Flanders.” Leterme stressed that Flanders is doing well but not brilliant, as Flanders is ranked among the upper-middle income European regions, rather than among the top regions. It also faces huge challenges in the areas of demography (notably, an ageing population), globalization (maintaining a competitive edge), and sustainable development.⁵

As a way of dealing with these challenges, the Leterme government presented a range of policy measures called “VIA breakthroughs” in an attempt to make Flemings more entrepreneurial, render Flemish industries more productive, ensure mobility for all, tackle poverty, sustain economic development in an environmentally friendly manner, and streamline innovation, among others. The breakthrough projects were subsequently codified in the so-called Pact 2020, the name of which alludes to the 2020 EU Lisbon Agenda, and which all social partners (i.e. employers’ organizations and trade unions), as well as civil society organizations, officially ratified on January 20, 2009.⁶

The broad involvement of societal stakeholders is important to note, as from its inception, the VIA plan targeted the long term of policymaking, and thus sought to transcend successive Flemish coalition governments. In line with this reasoning of *governing beyond term*,⁷ and also with the aim of pragmatically adjusting policies when required, the government appointed an independent monitoring committee, which regularly monitors the plan’s progress.

Both the emphasis on the long term and the establishment of a politically independent monitoring committee underline the Flemish government’s intention of sustaining VIA for years to come, as political coalitions in Flanders (and Belgium more generally) are volatile.⁸ The long-term rationale of “Winning the future together” (i.e. with all stakeholders) equally indicates that VIA is distinctly oriented towards securing a *Flemish* future with, and for, the *Flemish* people. From the onset, the Flemish government and the social partners placed a strong emphasis on regional self-assertion and development. As mentioned earlier, the VIA plan even describes Flanders as a *nation*, which by the standards of international law it is not. In this respect, it is intriguing to note that the VIA plan does not contain

⁵ <http://www.vlaandereninactie.be/over/voorgeschiedenis>

⁶ The Pact 2020 succeeds the Pact of Vilvoorde, which was ratified by the Flemish government, the social partners, and environmental organizations on November 22, 2001. It is similar to the Pact of Vilvoorde in terms of scope and aims, and encodes the broad consultation method also found in VIA. Following these Pacts, numerous policy programs and platforms have emerged with the aim of complementing and strengthening the VIA project as a whole, such as Vlaanderen 2020, Accent op Talent, and Richting Morgen, among many others. As these programs are inscribed in, or closely linked to, VIA, we do not expound on them in this paper unless the data presented in section 3 warrant their mentioning

⁷ The precise Dutch term used in VIA documentation is “*legislatuuroverschrijdend*,” which can roughly be translated as *exceeding legislatures*.

⁸ What is meant by “the long term,” however, is open to flexible (and strategic) interpretation, as initially, the Flemish government set as target the year 2010. It subsequently changed this target to 2020 so as to match the European Union’s 2020 Lisbon Agenda. While the target year of 2020 still holds today, the year 2050 is also often provided as a reference on government websites; see e.g. <http://www.vlaandereninactie.be/en/about>

explicit references to Belgium or Wallonia; instead, it expresses the ambition of “again belong[ing] to the top regions of the world” (without specifying which regions Flanders should take inspiration from) (11).

While the professed ambition of becoming a top region may appear inconspicuous, it can equally be read as a *deliberate turning away* from Wallonia. This “strong” interpretation of the VIA objective becomes more compelling when we consider that, upon the plan’s presentation in 2006, Flemish politicians, as well as journalists and observers (e.g. academics), explicitly and repeatedly stressed that Flanders should *not* take Wallonia as an example, but draw inspiration from top-performing EU countries and regions like Finland and Catalonia.⁹ We turn to this point of interest again in section 3 of the paper.

To conclude our presentation of the VIA plan, we highlight one more element of VIA that helps us to better understand its significance in Flanders today. Although VIA sought (and seeks) to be an inclusive, mobilizing, and transformative project for the future of Flanders, it has generally not been met with broad support and enthusiasm. To date, VIA has received a lackluster response from the general public and from various public figures, including one of the government’s very own vice-ministers, who in 2011 (in an accidentally leaked email) claimed that “VIA is not a strong brand” because it fails to mobilize the broader Flemish public.¹⁰ Over the past years, several Flemish captains of industry, employers’ organizations, opposition politicians, journalists, and others, have made similar remarks, thereby discrediting the VIA initiative, as well as the Flemish government.¹¹

The misgivings about VIA and the many criticisms it has elicited raise doubts about the plan’s political and economic viability, as well as its potential of forging a common future for Flanders and the Flemings. Yet, the fact that VIA is publicly disputed rather than embraced does not signify an end to, or even a pause in, the ongoing process of Flemish identity formation. On the contrary, many criticisms of VIA appeal to Flanders’ recent past, and more specifically to a “we” experience that for many Flemings requires no further explanation.¹² It is here that we turn to the DIRV action, or “Derde Industriële Revolutie Vlaanderen” (Third Industrial Revolution of Flanders), which the first Flemish executive (the initial name for the Flemish government) initiated in 1982, shortly after the establishment of the Flemish and Walloon regions. As we will see, certain tenets of VIA (e.g. “the open entrepreneur,” “decisive governance,” “Flanders innovation centre”) were already inscribed in the DIRV campaign.

⁹ See e.g. De Standaard, 10.07.2006; 11.07.2006.

¹⁰ De Standaard, “Vlaanderen in aanvaring,” 19.02.2011.

¹¹ Several policy observers drew on the leaked email incident to ridicule VIA and the ministers associated with VIA. They did so by drawing on a typical Flemish expression, “The mayonnaise doesn’t stick,” which could be translated as “The chemistry is all wrong.” See e.g. Knack, “Mayonaise,” 22.02.2011; <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/mayonaise/article-opinion-19792.html>

¹² See the example provided by the Flemish entrepreneur Urbain Vandeurzen in an article in De Standaard in part 3 of this paper.

DIRV as founding myth

When the first Flemish executive came to power in the 1980s, it made attempts to boost Flemish economic self-awareness and position Flanders as an industrial, entrepreneurial and highly-technological region (Oosterlynck, 2006: 98). Whereas prior to World War II Wallonia had economically outperformed Flanders, the balance gradually shifted in the late 1950s, with the decline of Wallonia's "old" coal and iron industries. By the 1990s, Flanders had acquired an international reputation in auto assembly, pharmaceuticals, engineering, manufacturing of diamonds, food processing, chemicals, and brewing industries. Since then, large-scale investments in biotechnology, new materials, broadband technology, microelectronics and nanotechnology have been made with measurable economic gains, and government agencies and institutes erected to support "innovative technological research and development" (CCIP 2008: 27).

A determining figure in transforming Flanders into a new, invigorated economy after the economic crisis of the seventies was the then chair of the Flemish government, Gaston Geens. Geens launched DIRV, which stands for "Derde Industriële Revolutie Vlaanderen," literally Third Industrial Revolution Flanders.¹³ This program of action was officially launched in 1982 before an audience of 1500 entrepreneurs, scientists, politicians, and trade unionists. In an attempt to convince this audience of the need to reform the Flemish region economically and to establish its independence, Geens repeatedly spoke of DIRV as an offensive policy to create new products, production methods, and markets for industries of the future (see e.g.: Vlaamse Raad 1983a; 1983b). He further stressed that it was the government's task to stimulate innovation in new technologies, while entrepreneurs and industries designed concrete projects in tandem with research institutes, universities, and private companies. Oosterlynck, in his political-economic study of regionalism in Flanders, sums up these key threads of DIRV as follows:

The discourses surrounding the DIRV-action stressed the central role of the entrepreneur as the carrier of innovative potential. There was a strong focus on high technology industries and the role of the state was redefined as supplying the conditions for innovation to take place (Oosterlynck 2006: 98).

The effects of DIRV on innovation policy and practice are tangible, as the program lent support to various "basic" and "applied" technologies, including the highly promising and already emanating fields of biotechnology, new materials, and microelectronics. Equally important, DIRV delivered a decisive break with economic pessimism in Flanders. As again Oosterlynck (2006: 101) writes, although DIRV was an institutional policy effort, it was "primarily a campaign to raise awareness and promote new technologies and innovation." To spur attention, Geens established the so-called technology days (T-

¹³ Following Larosse (2001), the First Industrial Revolution refers to the changes that took place in agriculture, mining, manufacturing, etc. in the 18th century, and in which the region of Wallonia played a lead role on the European continent. The Second Industrial Revolution began around 1957, when the European Community was established. Thanks to its central geographical location, its highly educated, multilingual, and relatively cheap workforce, Flanders drew in multinational investments intended to supply the entire Community. However, the subsequent economic crisis threatened Flemish welfare, inciting a Third Industrial Revolution.

days) for each of the designated technologies, with the aim of mobilizing industrial and research support. A similar effort was made to attract domestic and foreign investors through the so-called project days or P-days, and an international fair by the name of Flanders Technology International, which drew in large crowds.

DIRV can hence be seen as a keystone not just in instigating contemporary innovation policy in Flanders, but also acknowledge its role in the construction of Flanders as an innovation region. As Paul Zeeuwts, a past chair of the government-funding agency IWT, has argued, “[n]obody, not even the staunchest critics of the DIRV action, dispute that it succeeded in breaking the economic pessimism of the Flemish population and business world and that it led to a renewed dynamism and courage.” René De Feyter, then head of the Flemish employer’s organization Vlaams Economisch Verbond and an important ally of Geens, argues that the most important realization of DIRV was raising awareness and inciting pride among Flemings, demonstrating that they could make things happen.¹⁴ It may hence be argued that the DIRV action constructed Flemish socio-economic policy and a Flemish national identity and polity, as through DIRV, the Flemish government presented “a clear image of itself to the general public, with an offensive policy of its own, distinct from both Walloon policy and national policy” (Goorden 2004: 8).

We do not further expound on the DIRV campaign in this paper. As we illustrate in section 3 of this paper, DIRV is, and remains, a key reference point in the development of STI policies, including VIA. Given its pervasiveness and the way it is reclaimed by policy actors today (not just journalists and entrepreneurs, but also Flemish science museums, for instance), it is not an exaggeration to say that DIRV serves as a constitutional moment and foundational myth for the development of a Flemish nationalist imagination.¹⁵

Wallonia’s resurrection

In Wallonia, there is no founding myth like DIRV on which policy actors (can) collectively draw. However, the long term history of the Walloon region plays an important role in the construction of an STI imaginary. Wallonia is often narrated with references to its glorious industrial past; that is, to the first industrial revolution, when Wallonia took an advance in coal mining and steel production (Quévint 1978). Along with England and other regions, Wallonia was one of the key economic players in the world for decades. However, World War II damages and the restructuring of the economy towards secondary and tertiary sectors put an end to the region’s growth and economic supremacy. Industrial decline hit Wallonia hard from the 1960s onwards, while Flanders modernized its economy and workforce, and drew in foreign investment. There are implicit and explicit references to Wallonia’s great past when the word “recovery” is used. Wallonia must recover from a long, deep crisis (illness) and catch up, even surpass the economic level of that past period.

¹⁴ “Het belangrijkste was de bewustwording. De trots ook, dat we hier in Vlaanderen iets konden realiseren” (Durnez & Vandeborne 2008).

¹⁵ This is not to argue that DIRV went uncontested, as the political left and various trade unions opposed Geens’s policy reforms (see: Van Oudheusden et al. forthcoming). The point is that DIRV successfully mobilized Flemings and gave rise to a collective sense of “Flemishness.”

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the government made remarkable attempts to raise Walloon economic self-consciousness, with the “Deal for the Future of Wallonia” (*Contrat d’Avenir pour la Wallonie*). It was the first future-oriented policy program to integrate various concerns on the social welfare and economic situation of Wallonia. The deal was prolonged until 2005; however, it consisted mostly of a political declaration, without means and operational goals and target. In 2005, a failed attempt to reform the federal state rekindled the political tensions related to the Flemish will of independence, and a controversy on the Walloon economic situation took place (Accaputo et al. 2006). Those are the reasons provided by the Walloon majority to justify the need of a Marshall Plan for Wallonia and to dictate general mobilization (L’Echo 11.07.2005).

The plan was presented in August 2005 as a large policy program to promote regional economic growth, entrepreneurship and job creation via innovation and university-industry partnerships. Initially called “priority actions’ plan for the Walloon future,” it followed and aggregated diverse other plans, while an intense effort was made for its promotion and its funding; the plan was quickly presented as the core of governmental action. Explicit in the plan is the will of policymakers to fully and strategically handle the regional-level political competences and resources. The program, mobilizing more than one billion for a period of four years (while the Region’s annual budget is approximately seven billion for 2013), has five axes and several specific operational targets: creating five competitiveness clusters (plus a sixth since 2009), stimulating economic activities’ creation, reducing business taxation, supporting research and innovation, and improving work training and employment rate.

The narrative purported in the Marshall Plan reads as follows: “industrial decline and (Flanders-incited) constitutional reforms, which are impalpable, external problems, *force* Wallonia to regain control of its own destiny; i.e. to become the architect of its own fate (to use the weighty term of actors on the terrain). Wallonia has to build a better future with every tool it can handle, enlisting every stakeholder within a mobilizing and inspiring, future-oriented project. The economic recovery should bear on innovation and industry-university partnership within a European Knowledge Society/Economy.”

The powerful metaphors that are “Marshall Plan” and “general mobilization” already tell a lot of the (represented) state of the region: it decrees a state of (war and) ruin. The next step of the narrative mobilizes multiple auto-stereotypes that need to be done away with; that is, certain bad habits or traits of Walloons that need to be remedied: a culture of strikes, unemployment, lack of entrepreneurship and a state-provider mentality. The rupture provided by the plan must lead to success and creativity as a new collective “*état d’esprit*” (state of mind).

III. Media and Discourse Analysis

As mentioned at the outset, this paper adopts a broad understanding of both nationalism and policymaking. In line with Anderson (1991) and Billig (1995), among others, we conceive of nationalism as the collective construction of identity at the heart of society and at the center of policymaking through everyday social rehearsals. By the same token, policymaking is not the prerogative of mandated policymakers, as journalists and other institutions of power also inform and craft policies, for instance by setting and framing political agendas (Kingdon 1995). The media, in particular, as bearers of meaning and opinion leaders, give credence to certain policies rather than to others. They also *give voice* to particular actors and open a space for debate and criticism. As such, they potentially transform and reshape collective identities rather than simply reproduce dominant meanings.¹⁶

Our broad conceptualizations enable us to locate nationalism and policymaking in a diversity of practices and discourses. However, for practical reasons and from a concern with ensuring the reliability and transparency of our findings and interpretations, we bound the (potentially limitless) reach of data to include press coverage of STI policies in two of Belgium's leading newspapers (see below). Rather than striving to provide an exhaustive and representative media analysis, we intentionally sample for heterogeneity. We hence look for variations *within* a delimited data set, such as contradictions and ambiguities and possible shifts or changes in text and talk, as well as alternative discourses (counter-discourses).

Data selection

Our selection draws on two newspapers that dominate the Flemish and Francophone market for "quality news," and which each belong to a different media group.¹⁷ De Standaard is a Flemish, historically pro-catholic newspaper. Until the 1990s, De Standaard was considered a Christian-Democratic paper, associated with the Christian-Democratic party. The newspaper is also historically pro-Flemish, as it was sympathetic towards the Flemish independence movement. Today, the paper is considered center-right.

La Libre Belgique is a Francophone daily. It is historically pro-catholic and pro-Belgium (as the title of the newspaper indicates). Due to its catholic roots and its circulation among the Francophone elites in Belgium, La Libre is sometimes described as the Francophone equivalent of De Standaard.¹⁸ Using the

¹⁶ On this account, we feel Billig can be criticized for too strongly insisting on the *reproduction* of nationalism through routine symbols, language, and the media, whereas nationalism is also contested and transformed through daily practices.

¹⁷ The Flemish and Francophone media in Belgium are concentrated into several media groups. Although print media, audiovisual media, and radio typically tailor to one linguistic community (i.e. the Dutch-language and the Francophone communities), the groups are national. De Standaard is owned by Corelio; La Libre Belgique by IPM.

¹⁸ The reason we liken Flemish to *Dutch-speaking*, but do not equate Francophone to *Walloon* has again to do with Belgian's complex institutional organization and multilayered system of government. Whereas Flanders comprises a territorially bound region (officially called the Flemish region), which is populated by Dutch-speaking Flemings in the so-designated Flemish community, the Walloon region was not merged with the French community of Belgium. The Walloon community, which is responsible for language, culture, and education, should hence be

Flemish media search engine Mediargus and the Francophone Press Banking (which are the equivalents of Lexis/Nexis in other parts of the world), we searched De Standaard and La Libre for articles on the VIA plan and the MPs. Our search covers a seven-year period, ranging from August 30, 2005, when the first MP was launched and publicly presented, to August 30, 2013. As the VIA plan was first made public on July 11, 2006, the chosen time period also covers press reporting on VIA (both in De Standaard and La Libre Belgique). Our search generated 102 articles in De Standaard and 175 in La Libre Belgique.¹⁹

Sensitizing concepts

To orient our analytical gaze and to develop our own “arts of combining” analytical tools and research questions (Keller 2005), we employ three sensitizing concepts (van den Hoonaard 1997) found in constructionist studies of discourse: *discourse*, *storyline*, and *interpretive repertoire*. Each of these concepts is briefly situated and explained below.

A *discourse* can be defined as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorisations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities” (Hajer 1995: 60). Following Phillips and Jorgensen (2002), discourses amount to the larger circulation of patterns of meaning in society; that is, they play out at the macro level of social order, as they construct people’s lived realities. Discourses do not stand by themselves, however; they are continuously (re)constructed *through* social action, social organization, and relations of power. They are also tied up with various materialities (e.g. physical substances, practical instantiations of ideas and concepts, technologies, etc.), which both constrain and enable their existence, adoption, and circulation.

In the study presented in this paper, the knowledge-based economy (KBE) constitutes a principal discourse, which shapes identities, social relations, and understandings of the contemporary world. To the extent that the KBE has been unequivocally advanced by global policy institutes such as the Organization for Economic Development, the G7/8, the International Monetary Fund, as well as the European Union, it is essentially a legitimation discourse urging countries and regions to foster innovation for the sake of economic and social growth. The underlying idea of the KBE is (seemingly endless) growth accumulation, as nations and regions innovate and compete to improve their economies and social welfare (Claisse & Delvenne 2011). We return to the KBE in the next section, as it structures the environment of STI policymaking that we are concerned with.

As we not only want to know which discourses circulate, but how they are *enacted and potentially transformed*, we draw on the discourse tradition of discursive psychology to analyze the communicative interplay between discourse (macro level) and the meaning production occurring in specific, situated

distinguished from the Walloon region, which is concerned with economic matters (and which comprises both the French-speaking population of Wallonia and the small German-speaking minority in the east of Belgium). As a consequence, “Flanders” denotes a distinct cultural community with a relatively well-defined territory, whereas “Wallonia” is a looser, less perceptible cultural and political entity.

¹⁹ For De Standaard, we used the search term “Vlaanderen in Actie.” For La Libre, we used the search query “Plan Marshall” AND “innov*” to avoid retrieving articles on the European recovery plan.

contexts (meso and micro levels). The notion of *interpretive repertoire* is of use here, as it links the ideological and historical formations with situated practices (Billig, 1991; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Following McKenzie (2005), a repertoire constitutes the interpretative codes (words, categories, metaphors, heuristics, etc.) that are available to members of an interpretive community. Repertoires hence offer people the means to understand and make sense of reality.

Repertoires can be linked to *storylines*. Storylines capture a discourse in a short-hand form using key metaphors and/or other rhetorical devices that figure in the discourse, such as tropes, stereotypes, and frames of reference. Hajer (2005: 301) contends that when carrying out a discourse analysis, “one quickly realises that in any field there are a couple of such stories, which fulfill an especially important role.” Like repertoires, the storylines provide ready-to-use interpretations to make sense of the world (Fischer 2003). They are flexible in that they allow actors to interpret individual cases differently, and define them in accordance with their own interests and needs. Accordingly, storylines are not confined to any one organization or government actor, but are shared by the national and local players involved, and by the academic community, professions, the media and others impacted on by the policy activity (Hewitt 2009).

In discourse theory, the difference between repertoires and storylines is not always clear, as both terms are used differently by different authors and some authors even use them interchangeably. For our purposes, however, we wish to draw the following distinction. Whereas repertoires accommodate a multitude of perspectives and appreciations (possibly concealing differences and differentiation), storylines *activate* particular interpretations and actions, for instance through the attribution of responsibilities and obligations. Thus, storylines draw out inconsistencies and oppositions between competing views, thereby urging actors to take position. The difference between the two concepts is illustrated in the next section, when we draw out competing appreciations of the repertoire of “Can do,” for instance.

In short, we conceive of discourse as the symbolic and material structuring of the world. Storylines and repertoires constitute the discourse by condensing it to one or a few of its key elements that make for easy interpretation and use. Metaphors, tropes, stereotypes, and other rhetorical figures and narrative elements serve as discursive building blocks that together constitute the larger patterns of meaning. Importantly, through discourse, different versions of selves and reality are built and rebuilt (Tuominen, Talja, & Savolainen, 2002: 273). In the following section, we ask which selves and which realities are constituted through Flemish and Francophone press reporting on STI policies.

IV. From “Can do” over “Rupture” to “Catching up”

As should be clear by now, both the VIA plan and the MPs subscribe to the KBE (as the KBE is presented in the EU’s Lisbon Agenda, among other foundational sources). For Flanders and Wallonia to *become* KBEs, however, a major changeover is deemed necessary. This explains why the Flemish and Walloon governments urge Flemish and Walloon policy and societal actors (administrations, captains of industry, entrepreneurs, scientists and academics, non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, citizens, and so on) to take the necessary decisions and measures to transform Flanders and Wallonia into KBEs.

By insisting on transformation and (continuous) adaption, the VIA plan and the MPs enact a *transition repertoire* that opens to a more prosperous communal future. Although this repertoire is not unique to Flanders and Wallonia, it is locally enacted and appropriated through region-specific discourses (e.g. “Flanders in action,” “Winning the future *together*”) and tools and practices, such as the “transition method,” which the Flemish government propagates as a means of mobilizing *all* Flemings without exclusion. Through transition, it is hoped that Flemings (and Walloons, through the MPs) will become more entrepreneurial, more creative, and more open towards the world (VIA: 2-4; MP: 3). Seen in these ways, “transition” implies continuous improvement and growth, as well as *hope* for a better future; i.e., a joint future that is prosperous, social, and sustainable.

We underline the importance of transition as it is inscribed in the VIA plan and the MPS, as it is only against the backdrop of KBE-oriented transformation that our data samples can properly be understood. As we illustrate below, Flemish and Walloon policy actors mobilize a range of repertoires and storylines that *position* Flanders and Wallonia in relation to other regions and countries, and to one another. This observation is not so surprising, as in a KBE constellation constant comparison takes place between national and regional economies. These comparisons may be explicit, as when national economies are ranked on a socio-economic performance scale, or implicit, as for instance when the Flemish Minister President posits that Flanders should only take inspiration from “top EU regions” (to which Wallonia does not belong, and therefore does not even warrant mentioning) (DS 11.07.2007). Interestingly, the comparisons can also be self-referential, as for instance when Flemish policy actors conjure up the Flemish DIRV campaign or Walloon actors invoke Wallonia’s glorious past (“le passé glorieux”). Our data suggest that these “pasts” tend to be communal rather than national (i.e. Flemish or Walloon rather than Belgian) when actors talk about VIA and/or the MPs. One of the points we hence wish to explore is *how* the KBE serves actors as a discursive resource to (re)construct their collective identities.

So how does “transition” play out in the newspapers De Standaard and La Libre Belgique? Across the examined time period, we find countless examples of how the transition repertoire is reproduced in De Standaard and La Libre Belgique. Often, change and transition are embraced and propagated, if not celebrated, through terms such as “building a new economy,” “Gazellesprong” (leaping to the future through the stimulation of entrepreneurship), and “putting Flanders on the map (again) through innovation.” In La Libre Belgique, actors recurrently speak of “La Wallonie qui gagne” and/or present Wallonia as an economic “miracle.”

However, various actors equally express doubts about transition and change, giving rise to dark images of “decline,” “stagnation,” “catastrophe,” and “urgency,” both in *De Standaard* and *La Libre Belgique*. Messages of hope and despair may also coincide. It is here that we single out the storyline of “Can do,” which emerges in *De Standaard* specifically.

Can do

“Can do” is a catchphrase deployed by policy actors (notably Flemish entrepreneurs) in *De Standaard*, typically in relation to the public presentation and implementation of VIA. It can be read as a message of hope and reassurance and as a call to action (Flanders can do better), as well as a message of despair (Flanders *cannot* do better). The following two excerpts illustrate how “Can do” is articulated through talk of Flemish entrepreneurialism and dynamism.

“I’ve been wanting to do business in Flanders for a long time now. But I don’t see opportunities. Too many rules and regulations. It’s also much too expensive. There is no ‘can do’ mentality. In the US, it takes 48 hours to start up a business. In Flanders, one feels discouraged even before having begun. There is not enough dynamism.”²⁰ – “Bescheidenheid brengt je hier nergens” (27.06.2012).

“Look at the DIRV action twenty years ago, the renowned Third Industrial Revolution Flanders. Back then, the Flemish government had a much smaller budget than today. But didn’t DIRV have an impact? Back then there was a conviction among Flemings that *Yes, we can*. That spirit no longer exists. It’s pointless to complain about the worsening of our economy.”²¹ – “Vlaamse economie ‘can do’” (09.10.2010).

The first excerpt is taken from an interview with a successful Flemish expat presently residing in New York, on the occasion of a “Flanders promotion trip” of the Flemish Minister President to the United States. By contrasting the Prime Minister’s presentation of Flanders as a “rich, assertive region” with the testimonies of “first-class” (“top” in Dutch) Flemish entrepreneurs in the US, the article questions the “can do mentality” of the Flemings. Flemings, it is suggested, are not entrepreneurial enough and Flanders as a whole lacks “dynamism.” The article raises doubts about “Flanders in Action” and the Prime Minister’s mission of promoting the VIA project and “Flanders” abroad.

In the second excerpt, taken from an interview with the former head of the Flemish employers’ organization VOKA, the tone is despairing, but arguably less so than in the first excerpt. The interviewee

²⁰ “Ik wil al lang business doen in Vlaanderen. Maar ik zie geen opportuniteiten. Veel te veel regeltjes. Veel te duur ook. De ‘can do’-mentaliteit ontbreekt. In de VS duurt het 48 uur om een zaak op te starten. Het kost ook twee keer niets. 1.050 dollar, om precies te zijn. In Vlaanderen ben je al ontmoedigd nog voor je begonnen bent. Er is veel te weinig dynamisme.”

²¹ “Kijk eens naar de Dirv-actie van twintig jaar geleden, de fameuze Derde Industriële Revolutie in Vlaanderen. Toen had de Vlaamse regering veel minder budget dan nu. Maar welke impact heeft Dirv niet gehad? Toen heerste in Vlaanderen een sfeer van *yes, we can*. Die sfeer is er nu niet meer. Jammeren over de teloorgang van onze economie zal niet helpen.”

recalls the DIRV campaign, arguing that it was once possible to create policy “impact” despite smaller policy budgets. As mentioned earlier, in Flanders, the 1982 DIRV action is generally conceived of as a highly successful technology-push policy that inspired and mobilized “the Flemings.” The interviewee appears to draw on DIRV as a means of reassuring the readers of *De Standaard* that change is possible (a message which resonates with the all too familiar phrase “Yes, we can”) and that “not everything is lost” (“niet alles is om zeep”), as stated in the article’s heading.

These examples suggest how “Can do” alludes to the possible, as it incorporates a message of reassurance and hope (which in turn can be read as an incitement to joint action). At the same time, “Can do” evokes a message of despair and doubt about whether change in Flanders is even possible, for instance because Flemings are not considered entrepreneurial enough. Depending on their aims and outlook, actors may choose to emphasize the first or second meaning or both.

Rupture

In line with the MP, most of the articles in *La Libre Belgique* endorse a discourse of rupture. Rupture implies a break with the past, but can the MP stimulate a changeover that puts Wallonia on the road to recovery? Also, what needs to be changed?

An interview with Michel Quévit (LLB 08.09.2005), a renowned academic in Wallonia and expert of innovation policies and regional development, renders this “rupture” repertoire explicit. In the interview, explicit references are made to Wallonia’s past, and specifically to the idea of industrial decline between the 1950s and the late 1980s. For Quévit, the recent past, since the 80s, is characterized by stagnation. When talking about a “harsh decline,” an implicit reference is made to a “glorious past”; that is, the time when Wallonia was at the forefront of industry before World War II. Once the “past” is presented, Quévit is invited by the interviewer to give his thoughts on the new Marshall Plan. The expert is enthusiastic about the MP because he believes it heralds a change in the way the Walloon government appreciates entrepreneurship. The present government embraces entrepreneurship as a motor for economic development.

However, although Quévit wants to believe in the Plan, he also raises concerns. Upon comparing Wallonia to other regions such as the US, he points out the problem of education and fundamental research that are not taken into account in the MP. This, in turn, is related to the idea of changing Walloon mentalities and the Walloon mindset.

“I want to believe in the Plan”. then, he tells that his concerns are stronger for what “stands on the side of the plan: education, and the cultural problem of mentalities”. That is to say? “We, in Wallonia, got used to be stuck in a logic of gain rather than responsibility. A culture defined by

“What can I get” rather than by “what do I bring”. It is related to a very harsh decline”²² – “Une histoire wallonne selon Quévit” (08.09.2005: 18).

Two years later, in another interview with the same journalist, Quévit is still skeptical about the rupture induced by the Marshall Plan.

“It is false to state that Wallonia didn’t do anything. But it made to few, to slow, and yet remain many things it does not do. I think mostly of learning, developing creativity. The PISA report is disturbing. Creativity must become a priority.”²³ (10.02.2007: 5).

For Quévit, as well as for other interviewees and columnists who draw on the rupture repertoire, the Marshall Plan does not suffice to deal with the problems of Wallonia, the reform should be deeper and tackle many more aspects related to cultural aspects, to a mindset (e.g. by integrating education inside the MP). The rupture discourses build on references to the past (the “glorious past” before World War II, and the “ugly past,” between the 1950s and present), and insist on the importance of ridding Walloons of certain attitudes and bad habits that affect the Walloon economy negatively and hinder the development of a creative, entrepreneurial society.

At with “Can do” in De Standaard, the skeptical discourses about rupture are tempered with more positive, or hopeful, overtones. In such instances, the MP is considered to be working well, as there is evidence to suggest that the region is moving forward. This new trend is recognized by international investors (such as Google and Microsoft, who have located businesses in Wallonia) and the region is even taken as an example for its dynamic program for innovation and entrepreneurship.

“Another good point for the fast developing Wallonia. It is one of the two invited regions (with California) at the World Investment Conference [...] This nice platform given to Wallonia is the result of the multiple actions implemented by the government to set a virtuous circle of development.”²⁴ (22.05.2008: 33).

Whereas the “Can do” and “Rupture” repertoires are more or less specific to De Standaard and La Libre in that they are essentially about Flanders and about Wallonia, other repertoires explicitly relate the two regions (and communities). Below, we single out two such inter-regional repertoires.

²² “Je veux croire au plan. D'ailleurs, il dit que ses inquiétudes sont plus lourdes pour ce qui est... "à côté du plan: l'éducation et le problème, culturel, des mentalités". C'est-à-dire? "On s'est habitué en Wallonie à ne plus savoir sortir d'une logique d'acquis plutôt que de responsabilité. Une culture du "qu'est-ce que je reçois?" plutôt que du "qu'est-ce que j'apporte"... C'est lié à un déclin qui fut très rude.”

²³ “Il est faux de dire que la Wallonie n’a rien fait. Mais elle a fait trop peu, pas assez vite, et il reste des choses qu’elle ne fait pas. Je pense surtout à l’apprentissage, au développement de la créativité. Le rapport Pisa est inquiétant. La créativité doit être une priorité.”

²⁴ “Encore un bon point pour la Wallonie en plein essor. Elle est l’une des deux régions invitées d’honneur (avec la Californie) de la conférence mondiale de l’investissement [...] Cette belle tribune offerte à la Wallonie est le résultat des diverses actions pour l’installer dans un cercle vertueux de développement.”

Wallonisation

When the VIA plan was launched and presented in 2006, Flemish politicians, as well as journalists, publicly stated that Flanders should *not* compare itself to Wallonia, but *only* to top EU nations and regions like Finland, the Scandinavian countries, Catalonia, Scotland, and the Netherlands. This is because at the time Wallonia was considered to be an economically underdeveloped region far behind Flanders; hence, the region went unmentioned in the VIA plan (DS 11.07.2007). However, in *De Standaard* this narrative changes towards the end of 2009, shortly after the Walloon government highlighted the positive results of the first MP on the Walloon economy.²⁵ A few months later, a Flemish economist and opinion leader by the name of Geert Noels wrote an editorial in *De Standaard* in which he warned of the “Wallonisation” of Flanders. By “Wallonisation,” Noels meant that Flanders risked becoming more like the Wallonia of old, because of rising unemployment levels and the growing role of the Flemish state in the economy. He also argued that Flemings dislike entrepreneurship and show a lack of initiative, whereas Wallonia today shows signs of economic revival and Walloons show ambition. Noels based his claims on a socio-economic study on Wallonia that he had conducted through his economic think tank Econopolis.

Noels’s warning did not go unnoticed. The term quickly gained traction in other Flemish media and in policymaking circles, as well as in certain Walloon media outlets. Although “Wallonisation” acquired an explicitly negative connotation and received much criticism (especially in Wallonia), Noels later claimed that he had not just meant to warn against “complacency” and “economic stagnation” in Flanders, but had also meant to praise Wallonia for its dynamism (DS 05.02.2010).

However one understands Noels’s motivations and use of “Wallonisation,” policy actors in Flanders drew on the term to call for less self-contentment on behalf of the Flemings and for (immediate) action on behalf of the Flemish government to re-launch the Flemish economy.²⁶ Thus, like “Can do,” “Wallonisation” served actors as a resource to spur collective action in Flanders (a possible difference being that “Wallonisation” reads more as a wake-up call than “Can do” does).

It is intriguing to note that through incidents like “Wallonisation,” Wallonia and the MPs re-emerge more explicitly in *De Standaard*’s reporting on VIA. Whereas prior to 2009 Wallonia was simply not mentioned in articles relating to VIA, we find fourteen explicit references to the MPs after the Wallonisation incident, as well as explicit comparisons between VIA and the MPs. Whether the incident actually sparked renewed attention for Wallonia and its socio-economic policies in *De Standaard*, is hard to say. “Wallonisation” does however appear to have unfolded with the repertoire of “Catching up,” to which we now turn.

²⁵ The MP was evaluated in 2009 by an independent Walloon economic and employment observatory, the Walloon Institute of Assessment, Forecasting and Statistics (IWEPS).

²⁶ For instance, a former rector of the University of Leuven asserted that “We [Flemings] do well, but I would prefer if we were less self-satisfied with ourselves... We can and must do much better” (DS 04.02.2010).

Catching up

The “Catching up” repertoire deserves explicit mention in this article, as it is mobilized by all actors on both sides of the linguistic border. The repertoire suggests that Wallonia will, in due time, outperform Flanders, due both to a slowdown in the growth of the Flemish economy and relatively higher growth performance in Wallonia. As such, it places Flanders resolutely ahead of Wallonia in the global race towards knowledge, excellence, and growth, but suggests that Wallonia may, in due course, *overtake* Flanders as a top competitive region. Given the expectations and/or fears that “Catching up” evokes among Flemish and Walloon policy actors (including journalists, entrepreneurs, civil society organizations, etc.), the repertoire serves these actors as a flexible discursive resource to make sense of, and shape, their collective identities.

Let us consider some examples of how the repertoire is deployed in *La Libre* (the example of “Wallonisation,” above, serves as one, significant, indication of how “Catching up” plays out in *De Standaard*).

“The Walloon Miracle? Not quite yet. Wallonia will overtake Flanders... in 2087. 75 years will be necessary for the Walloon GDP pro capita to surpass Flanders if nothing changes. However, the Walloon government has implemented good policies.”²⁷ (16.05.2013).

In this excerpt, skepticism and optimism storylines in the same article title: acknowledging the « catching up » but with a “realistic tone” + comparison Flanders – Wallonia: explicit, mixing proudness and shame (we are on the road of recovery but the way is still long)

“Let’s stop comparing Wallonia to Flanders. The goal of the Walloon recovery is not to reach Flanders’ level. The goal is full employment, turning back to prosperity; undertake the [political, economic, fiscal] autonomy that will be ours in the next few years.”²⁸ (ibid.)

Stop the comparison: interesting game between the journalist and the interviewee. Wallonia must recover for itself and not for Flanders or for Belgium. That contradicts the first sentence of the first MP in 2005 and its rationale (Wallonia has to find the path of growth, otherwise Flanders will ask for further constitutional reforms).

“Made of more than 99% of SMEs, Walloon economy had already stopped its decline and returned to growth before 2006. However, it is the “priority actions’ plan for the Walloon

²⁷ “Le Miracle Wallon ? Pas tout de suite. La Wallonie dépassera la Flandre... en 2087. Il faudra 75 ans pour que le PIB/habitant wallon dépasse celui de la Flandre si rien ne change. Pourtant, le gouvernement wallon a mis en œuvre de bonnes politiques.”

²⁸ “Arrêtons de mesurer la Wallonie à la Flandre. “Le but du redressement wallon n’est pas d’arriver au même niveau que la Flandre. Le but est le plein-emploi, le retour à la prospérité et d’assumer l’autonomie qui sera la nôtre dans les prochaines années.”

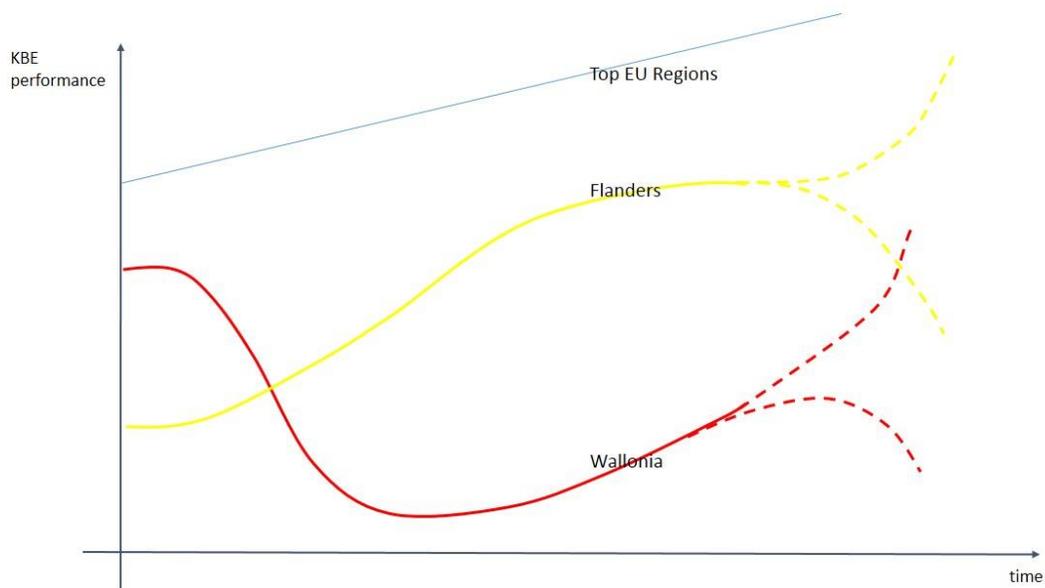
future,” better known as the “Marshall Plan,” which came into effect in January 2006, that gave the economy a big boost.”²⁹ (07.05.2009: 10).

“And the boss of the regional foreign trade agency underlines the innovation and partnership’s capacities that the Marshall Plan 2.green made possible. Ernst & Young praises its excellence. ‘Even in Flanders can you hear about it,’ says Herwig Joosten (E&Y). The Marshall Plan is doing better than Flanders in Action. ViA is too complex, and the basis for fiscal deduction in patenting activities isn’t broad enough.”³⁰ (06.06.2013: 31).

Drawing together observations

To render the above observations more concrete, we outline the rationale of the KBE and the discerned repertoires in a self-designed graph (see graph 1).

Graph 1. Performance of Flanders and Wallonia in the knowledge-based economy, projected over time.



The graph plots the performance of Flanders and Wallonia as KBE regions (vertical axis) over time (horizontal axis). The variable “KBE performance” encompasses the key features of the KBE, such as

²⁹ “Composée à plus de 99 % de petites et moyennes entreprises (PME), l’économie wallonne avait déjà arrêté son déclin et renoué avec la croissance bien avant 2006. Mais c’est le plan d’“actions prioritaires pour l’avenir wallon”, mieux connu sous le vocable “Plan Marshall” et entré en vigueur au 1er janvier 2006, qui lui a donné un fameux coup de fouet.”

³⁰ “Et le patron de l’Awex de souligner les capacités d’innovation et de partenariat ouvertes par le plan Marshall 2.vert. Celui dont, justement, Ernst & Young loue les qualités. “On en parle même en Flandre, dit Herwig Joosten (E&Y). Le plan Marshall marche mieux que Vlaanderen in Actie. ViA est trop complexe et la base de déduction fiscale pour octroi de brevet pas assez large.”

innovation, growth, and excellence. If we were to imagine a vertical line in the middle, this line would indicate the present moment (roughly speaking, 2005-2013) that separates the – or rather *a* – past, from possible futures. The curves on the right side of the separation line project possible futures for Flanders and Wallonia; that is, they indicate how Flanders and Wallonia *could* perform socio-economically in the years to come. It is here that we encounter the repertoires and storylines chosen for this section (e.g. “Can do,” “Rupture,” “Catching up”). Flemish and Walloon performance are measured against one another, as well as against the top EU regions, which at present outperform both Flanders and Wallonia (the slowly ascending line).

It is important to note that this graph is based on our interpretations of actors’ accounts in the newspapers that we analyzed, rather than reflect official figures and rankings. As such, the graph serves as a tool to better understand the research data and our readings of these data.

We conclude the section by again emphasizing that the discerned repertoires must be understood within a KBE narrative, which urges regions and countries to compare themselves with one another. At the same time, the KBE *enables* regions to position themselves relative to one another and to their own past. In Belgium specifically, the KBE opens a discursive space for “Catching up,” which projects a future in which Flanders is surpassed by Wallonia. To the extent that this scenario arouses fears, worries, hope, or excitement among policymakers, it serves them as a means of inciting collective action in ways that implicitly or explicitly (re)define “Flanders” and “Wallonia.”

V. Conclusion

This article explores Flemish and Walloon socio-economic policy plans (“Flanders in Action” and the Walloon “Marshall Plans”) and press reporting on those plans in a Flemish and a Francophone quality daily. The article suggests that policy actors in these newspapers draw on similar transition repertoires, including “Catching up,” to legitimize policies and actions. The “Catching up” repertoire places Flanders resolutely ahead of Wallonia in the global race towards the knowledge-based economy (KBE), but suggests that Wallonia may, in due course, *overtake* Flanders as a top competitive region. Given the expectations and/or fears that “Catching up” evokes among Flemish and Walloon policy actors, the repertoire serves these actors as a flexible discursive resource to make sense of, and shape, their collective identities in an interdependent KBE constellation.

By choosing a limited set of policy documents and press articles from just two (leading) newspapers, it may well be that we have distinguished only one policy/media discourse rather than a range of such discourses. We hence caution against classifying “Catching up” as a dominant STI-driven repertoire in Flanders and Wallonia, even if our findings suggest that “Catching up” is a pervasive discursive resource which various actors draw on time and again. The “Catching up” repertoire is noteworthy, however, because it reflects Wallonia’s repositioning in the world *as a (potential) KBE player*. This repositioning is reflected in De Standaard’s news coverage on VIA, as prior to 2009 (before the first evaluation of Wallonia’s first Marshall Plan), the newspaper hardly took interest in the MP and in Wallonia’s socio-economic performance. After 2009, we find explicit references to the MPs and explicit comparisons

between Flemish and Walloon socio-economic performance. We also note that “Catching up” is linked to other repertoires, such as “Wallonisation.” The latter repertoire has both a pejorative and a more positive connotation, depending on who is talking, to whom the message is addressed, and when it is invoked.

The paper is meant as a contribution to the growing literature in science and technology studies that explores the relationship between science and technology, governance, and nation building (Hecht 1998; Jasanoff & Kim 2009; Felt 2013). It is motivated by a need to empirically assess how states and regions “make themselves at ease” with the KBE imperatives of knowledge, innovation, and competition (Horst & Irwin, 2010). Rather than assuming that all countries simply go through the same modernization process (Schot & Rip, 2010: 14), the study underlines the simultaneity of, and the interplay between, globalizing forces and particularizing tendencies, as Flanders and Wallonia develop with a global KBE in nation- or region-specific ways. As such, the article calls into question renditions of the KBE as a homogenizing force that expunges all differences. Rather, the article suggests that the KBE enables local policymakers to redefine the identities of their communities in specific, situated ways. In the case of Belgium this means that whereas in earlier times Flemish and Walloon collective identities were reconfigured within the constellation of the Belgian nation-state, today such reconfigurations must also be understood in relation to the globalizing KBE context.

The study is equally a reflection on the meaning and place of collective identities in a complex, postmodern world driven by capital flows, knowledge, and technology. Whereas some authors contend that nationality in the traditional, state-linked sense has no place in the present global, interdependent constellation (Habermas 2012), others insist on the mutual incompatibility of collective identities (e.g. Flemish identity opposes Belgian identity). While there is some truth to each of these outlooks, we should not forget that identities are also multiple, malleable, and messy, as the chaotic complexity of lived reality contrasts with institutionally formulaic identities (Gubrium & Holstein 2001: 17). Consequently, nation-state integration and dis-integration may well play out simultaneously through the artful interweaving of nations (Belgium), regions (Flanders and Wallonia), and supranational institutions (e.g. “Europe”).

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VII. References

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