

## **Judith Sijstermans**

### **Research Context**

My PhD studies transnational collaboration between stateless nationalist and regionalist parties (SNRPs) in Europe. Relationships between domestic political parties in Europe are encouraged by European Parliament party groups (in the case of SNRPs, the European Free Alliance group). Collaboration also occurs outside of Brussels. For example, SNRP politicians make formal ‘diplomatic’ trips to one another’s regions, attend informal events abroad (for example marches), and follow one another virtually (on Facebook and Twitter). Despite the breadth and stability of these relationships, there is little systematic research on transnational party collaboration.

Regionalist and nationalist politicians see relationships with other parties as providing a “path to be followed” and “a source of inspiration and solidarity.” Given these claims, my research asks: Do SNRPs impact one another’s policy and strategy decision making processes? If so, how? If not, why not? This idea of ‘impact’ on party decisions is operationalized through the theoretical framework of “learning.” Through interviews with political party elites, I explore the extent to which parties can/do learn, as well as the barriers and conduits to learning between parties.

### **Summary of Fieldwork**

Given its focus on transnational relationships, my research depends on being able to gather data from a number of parties across Western Europe. It is important to study parties of varied sizes, institutional arrangements, and cultural contexts. In my PhD, I study 5 political parties in 4 different regions (Scotland, Brittany, Catalonia, Friesland), as well as Brussels based staff of the European Free Alliance. During the period funded by UACES, I conducted 4 fieldwork trips—to Brittany, Brussels, Catalonia, and Poland. This resulted in a total of 26 semi-structured interviews with members of political parties (predominantly from parties’ executive boards) and staff of the European Free Alliance. It also facilitated the connection of campaigning materials from each region. I also conducted 3 days of participant observation at the European Free Alliance General Assembly in Poland which allowed for an understanding of relationships between different actors in the SNRP network.

### **Results and Reflection on Fieldwork**

There is a high cost to doing de-centred and transnational research. For example, travel to Brittany (peripheral to Paris) from Edinburgh (peripheral to London) required many connections. Further, my interviews in Brittany required traveling to 5 different cities in 5 days. The EFA General Assembly was difficult to reach as well, due to the organisations’ commitment to gather in its different constituent regions, which can be far afield. The participant observation conducted there was invaluable for meeting members of parties, understanding the functioning of the European party, and observing relationships across the network. It was only with the UACES funding that I could add this additional fieldwork trip onto my project. As such, the support was crucial to enabling research into Europe’s decentred, informal and transnational relationships.

The research conducted will contribute to a paper presented at the ECPR conference in autumn 2017 on the connection between networks and policy learning, as well as an in-progress article on the Frisian National Party’s role in European networks.