



The EU-Quarter as a political place: Investigating fluid assemblages in EU policy making

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Abstract

We focus on the European Quarter in Brussels as a political place and the spatial context of European Union (EU) policy making. In addition to the EU institutions, the political place consists of a political agglomeration of various kinds of actors, from EU bureaucrats and politicians to a variety of stakeholders and lobbyists from all over the EU, who are permanently present in the Brussels neighbourhood. We present, firstly, the EU Quarter as a fixed setting for policy making with a relatively constant physical, locational and functional shape, and a specific sense of place as the EU bubble. Secondly, we emphasise the fragmentation and fluidity that portray it as a place divided into various political assemblages that make the place an assemblage of assemblages consisting of smaller and constantly evolving sub-processes. Thirdly, we aim to demonstrate the mobile and geographically distributed nature of EU policy making, and thus the dispersal of the political places where it takes place. This generates mobility of different kinds, which include not only the circulation of political ideas and people between different sites of the EU political system, but also the monthly migration of the Parliament and related lobbyists to Strasbourg. We believe that these three aspects of political place help the understanding of the situated but simultaneously spatially dispersed and mobile nature of EU policy making, and the study of the political places in other urban contexts.

Keywords

Political place, EU policy, Brussels, political assemblages, fluid space

Introduction

The geopolitical role of Brussels as the EU's capital city, with the European Parliament, European Commission and Council of the European Union at its heart, has reshaped central parts of the city's built environment and image during recent decades. In addition to the shiny buildings of the EU institutions, the European Quarter (EQ) has attracted offices of thousands of lobbyists and interest groups.

It is estimated that Brussels is – after Washington – the second most important place for lobbying

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activities worldwide, with up to 30,000 lobbyists, and furthermore that about 75% of European legislation is influenced by lobbying (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2016a; Traynor, 2014). The EQ is therefore an extraordinarily important agglomeration of political power with a powerful global reach (Corcoran and Fahy, 2009; Kuus, 2011).

Our aim is to contribute to the emerging approach to political place (Clark and Jones, 2013; Kuus, 2011; Palmer, 2014) by studying what kind of spatial context the EQ actually constitutes. Although there is a long research tradition on space and power, the complex relationship between policy and place still requires further scrutiny (Clark and Jones, 2013; Ethington and McDaniel, 2007). Studies on political places have shown that, in order to better understand the spatiality of policy making, the routines, bureaucratic coordination, social interaction and materiality must be taken into consideration. The EQ serves as an excellent case for this kind of study. The formal bureaucratic apparatus of the EU is well known, but the unofficial sphere of political activity is still rather opaque to the public and sometimes seen as an obscure zone of 'shadowy agitators'. We do not limit our scrutiny to the formal EU institutions and procedures but go beyond them to the political worlds of lobbyists and other stakeholders.

The spatiality of the decision making in Brussels is typically related to a bubble metaphor (Brussels Bubble or the EU Bubble), an imaginary political 'island' occupied by Eurocrats, politicians and various kinds of lobbyists. The metaphor is used in various contexts, ranging from lobby-critical blogs (e.g. Inside the Brussels' Bubble (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2016b) and reports (Burley et al., 2010) to scholarly articles (Busby, 2013; Georgakakis, 2011). Although the material and functional assemblage of policy making creates an identifiable political place in the EQ, and people working in the EQ usually share the bubble image, we believe that it is too simplistic to treat it solely as an enclosed, fixed and uniform milieu, as the bubble image suggests. Our main argument is that the actual policy making is carried out by issue-specific and fluid political sub-assemblages that interact within the small geographical area around the major institutions of the EU in Brussels. Furthermore, these assemblages are

connected to countless other places and interests in Europe and beyond, making the EQ a distributed place (Cidell, 2015) characterised by the mobility of people, information and artefacts.

As previous research on political places in Brussels has focused on specific topics such as foreign policy or energy policy (Kuus, 2014; Palmer, 2014), those examples do not provide an easy way to transfer a methodological approach for detecting the complexity of the political environment of the EU. Because the aim of this study is to give a broader picture of the spatiality of a political place we do not concentrate on a single political sector. The research is based on 23 interviews carried out between 2013–2016 with actors from ENGOs (five), the financial lobby (one), regional representatives (two), industrial associations from different economic sectors (five), Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (one), assistants to MEPs (five) and officials from various departments of the Commission (four). We have selected interviewees from among different kinds of interest groups and EU officials since they play an important role in stakeholder relations. Commission administrators and MEP assistants have been selected because they are in close contact with interest groups, which makes them key informants regarding lobbying practices and networks. The interviews were analysed by putting special emphasis on interviewees' personal experiences, social networks and sites of political interaction. We have also utilised a wide variety of written sources from EU documents and scholarly publications, as well as stakeholder websites and media reports.

We approach the empirical data from two complementary perspectives, which also structure the article's narrative. First, after the conceptual discussion in the next section, we show how the material and functional assembling of political actors and institutions in a distinct location makes the EQ an identifiable place within Brussels and generates a 'bubble sense of place' (Agnew, 2011). Second, in the rest of the paper we focus on the situated political processes and portray the political place as an assemblage of assemblages (Bender, 2009). Our intention is to display how the political place called the EQ is occupied by numerous hybrid and fluid political assemblages, which burst the bubble by countless

relations reaching to other places and making the political place a fragmented, distributed and mobile spatial formation.

Contextuality of policy making

There is an increasing interest in the mobility and contextuality of policies (Cochrane and Ward, 2012; McCann and Ward, 2012; Peck, 2011; Prince, 2012). It is argued that although policies move between places, the ways they are translated and materialised is a contextual matter. Policies are made by networks of actors, which means that they can go beyond the official political institutions, including the numerous non-governmental lobbies such as business organisations, think-tanks, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), etc., which all actively try to influence the policy-making process. In other words, a political landscape is not a passive context but a constitutive part of policy making.

If we are to better understand the constitutive role of local contexts in policy making, we ‘must analyse the arrangements of artefacts, practices, language and bodies – and these arrangements integrally involve the material environment in which they are assembled’ (Barry, 2001; Kuus, 2011). There is a body of scholarly work on lobbying in the EU context (Brandt and Svendsen, 2016; Van Schendelen, 2013), but it does not pay specific attention to the spatiality of policy making. Political geographers, instead, have focused on political behaviour in Brussels, especially in relation to the local context, and have deployed the geographical concept of place (Clark and Jones, 2013; Kuus, 2011; Palmer, 2014).

According to Agnew’s (2011) widely shared definition, place has three overlapping elements. First, there is a distinct location, where an activity is located and which is in relation to other sites and systems. Second, a place consists of a set of locales clustered within the particular location, creating the physical and social setting for everyday life. Third, situated life-worlds create a sense of place, an identification to a place as a unique community, landscape or moral order. In our research, we see the EQ as a political place assembled around the EU institutions, which consists of an interlinked set of political sites that serve as arenas for EU policy making. All

this creates a certain sense of a political place, which has its distinctive place identity and image that the EU-related political actors in Brussels identify with (cf. Clark and Jones, 2013).

However, with regard to Agnew’s (2011) conceptualisation it is important to remember that places should not be seen as isolated entities. They are relationally interlinked sites shaped by local and broader economic, political and cultural relations (Massey, 2005). Furthermore, places are not static but evolve in time, and mobility is an important aspect for shaping places and peoples’ understanding of them. This also includes the exchange of information and political ideas, which are always developed in specific local settings and distributed through situated communication networks. From this perspective, the EQ is an especially revealing example because it is an evolving political agglomeration, shaped by pan-European power relations and the mobility of institutions, actors, policies and ideas. More importantly, it is the major node of EU knowledge production and policy design, which brings together actors, knowledge and images from all over Europe within a small area. Simultaneously, policies and regulations ‘made in and out of Brussels’ have effects throughout the EU and beyond.

When studying Brussels as a political place, Kuus (2011, 2014) has shown that power relations are not only operationalised in sheltered, exclusive meeting rooms but in a much broader local process including various aspects of everyday life. Health clubs, residences, hotels and occasions such as business lunches constitute an essential part of EU policy making. Clark and Jones (2013) suggest that the dense social networks and a European sense of place at the local ‘Brussels’ level create a consensual political atmosphere, which makes policy makers more inclined to think in a ‘European way’ than they would do back at home. In Palmer’s (2014) study on biofuel and land-use, it was revealed that Brussels’ discursive practices narrow the vision of policy makers by excluding critical perspectives. He calls for greater attention to the interactions of discourse and place in order to better understand the distinct mechanisms shaping, managing and settling political controversy. These studies concentrate on the contextuality of specific policies and, whilst the place itself is taken into consideration,

it is not the central field of interest. Therefore, only a partial picture of what a political place such as the EQ is about is available. In this paper, we aim to portray a broader picture of a political place and conceptualise its complexity.

A bubble metaphor came up frequently in the interviews and textual materials. At first sight, therefore, Sloterdijk's (2008) conception of space as a foam-like bubbly formation might seem a promising approach to conceptualise the complex political spatiality of the EQ. We believe that the concept of the bubble gives a far too enclosed impression of political practices, however. It does not provide us with appropriate means to understand the thoroughly mobile and dispersed character of the EU policy-making processes. In this research the bubble metaphor is detached from Sloterdijk's conception, and deployed as it came up in the empirical material. It related to interviewees' identities suggesting that the EQ possesses a strong 'bubble sense of place'. It refers to the experience and identification of actors within EU policy making and lobbying circles on the one hand, and to the exclusive and critical image of the Brusselians or the EU-critics, on the other.

The network concept could help to approach mobility and distributed agency, but network spatiality refers to stable and static relationships between the interconnected constituents (e.g. Law, 2002) and does not offer the best possible means to explore the evolving and fluid character of EU policy-making processes. We find the notion of assemblage to be the most suitable concept for illuminating the fragmented, distributed and constantly evolving spatiality of EU policy making. It also emphasises the analysis of materiality and acknowledgement of more-than-human aspects in political practices. The studies of Kuus (2014) on political place, for instance, have been criticised of forgetting material aspects as a means through which political agency is achieved and transmitted (Dittmer, 2015; also Amilhat-Szary, 2015). However, we do not go very deeply into the mundane particulars of how material artefacts influence and interact with daily policy-making practices but portray a broader depiction of situated policy making within socio-material and situated assemblages. Our intention is not to study how material things interact with and affect policies

and political agency (Dittmer, 2015) but to analyse and conceptualise how material entities and political processes intertwine and constitute a political place with complex political landscapes.

Assemblage is a widely used concept in the social sciences with variable meaning (see Anderson et al., 2012; Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; Jacobs, 2012; Woods, 2016). Assemblage typically refers to the processes of putting actors and things together in order to create more-or-less coherent systems that consist of hybrid components, including both human actors and material artefacts, documents, symbols and other elements. They are evolving, yet fragile collectives without a distinct centre or clear boundaries, and their capacity is distributed among their constituents. Despite its relative popularity within the social sciences, there are only a few studies examining places using the concept of assemblage (e.g. Dovey, 2010).

In his research on rural places, Woods (2016) proposes an assemblage approach referring to DeLanda's (2006) four assemblage qualities: material and expressive elements, territorialisation and de-territorialisation, application of expressive media and 'relations of exterior'. Although there are distinct territorial properties of the EQ as a political place, we put more emphasis on the fluid spatiality of the place's sub-assemblages for which territoriality is an occasional condition. Bender (2009) conceptualises a city as an 'assemblage of assemblages'. Citing DeLanda (2006), he describes cities as assemblages of people, networks, buildings, infrastructures and other such elements that are drawn together forming, for instance, a neighbourhood or a crowd at a street festival or a financial centre such as Wall Street in New York City (Bender, 2009: 316).

Hence, a political place is seen as an 'assemblage of assemblages' consisting of various sub-processes of EU policy making in Brussels. The practical policy making takes place within variegated sub-assemblages bundling actors, interests, images and physical spaces around distinct political issues and operating quite independently from each other. This means that the larger scale assemblage of the EQ has a territorial form in functional, experiential and also definitional terms, but when sub-assemblages of actual political processes are examined, the territorial form is merely

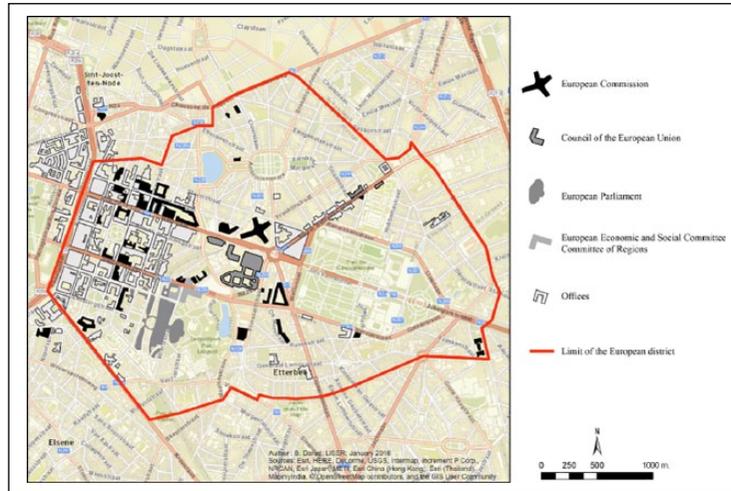


Figure 1. Map of the European Quarter in Brussels.

a transient state of evolving assemblages. Their dispersed and mobile components are tied together by an interest in common issues, and it is only occasionally that various stakeholders gather together in a meeting or a conference and thereby occupy a common physical space. This kind of spatiality is best described by the concept of fluid space, referring to a spatial composition of elements that does not maintain a fixed territorial shape or fixed pattern, but which gradually changes, and at the same time maintains its constancy (Mol and Law, 1994). Furthermore, assemblages are linked to numerous actors, sites and regions beyond the locality of the EQ, which makes it a distributed place (Cidell, 2015). EU policy making depends on mobility and the exchange of information, documents and people between EU institutions, member states and stakeholders (Bulmer et al., 2007).

Assembling the European Quarter

The EQ, a relatively small neighbourhood in Brussels, is the distinct location where most of the policy design and decision-making practices of the EU are concentrated (see Figure 1). It is the site where the major EU buildings are located, including such landmarks as the Parliament, as well as the headquarters of the Commission and the Council.

These locales are made for EU politics, and policy making is directly and inevitably connected to these buildings at some stage: proposals, documents and decrees are designed and written there, ministerial meetings and summits take place in them and, finally, official decisions are taken within these buildings. Although the political process stretches to other proximate and distant places, the EU buildings form a kind of a prism, and all information and various political aspirations have to flow through them in order to have an effect on EU policies. ‘Being placed in Brussels, we need the information to come to us’, as an official at the Commission puts it.

The key EU institutions form bounded and fixed territorial spaces of their own. On a daily basis, each institution operates relatively autonomously, creating its own assemblages within the larger political place with their distinct cross-cutting scalar networks, specific political procedures and shared behavioural codes (Busby, 2013; Clark and Jones, 2013). The EU buildings are well-defined and controlled territories with security checks and identity controls. The Parliament buildings, for instance, are the world of MEPs and their personnel. The Commission – consisting of around 23,000 civil servants – is divided into 33 relatively independent Directorate-Generals (DGs); departments that have their own political obligations as well as distinct,

physical office spaces. Over 80% of their office space is located in the EQ (710,000 m² in 2007) but due to a growing number of officials the Commission has had to locate some of its premises in the Beaulieu area (80,000 m² in 2007) and the Rue de Genève/Da Vinci area (56,500 m² in 2007) (EU Commission, 2007). Contacts between the EU institutions themselves are also dense, and the DGs, for instance, collaborate intensively (more below).

However, the political territory of EU institutions is also occupied on a daily basis by thousands of accredited lobbyists and invited visitors. The lobbyists tend to exercise their influence throughout all of the key institutions. Thus, they have to be present inside and move in-between all of them. A common purpose and the division of labour has assembled key EU institutions together in the EQ, which has attracted numerous economic, regional, environmental and other interest groups to locate their offices in the neighbourhood. The sheer amount of non-EU office space in the EQ (Figure 1) indicates that a significant share of lobby organisations have their facilities there. All the interviewees repeated a similar argument about the necessity of being physically present in Brussels (also Palmer, 2014). Continuous social relationships and informal knowledge exchange through social networks are essential elements of the EU policy-making process.

...we talk a lot in Brussels that it is all about the networks that you have. For example, if you know people from the Commission then of course you have a better chance of getting information.... Even if you don't have personal relationships, it is not a big step to send an email or call and say we would like to meet over this issue and do you have time (Policy advisor to a forest owner association).

A physical presence facilitates the creation of personal social contacts and thus makes the communication direct, economical and uncomplicated. This concerns not only the relations with EU officials, but also associations among lobbyists, because they exchange different kinds of information through their various formal and informal coalitions. These connections help interest groups to share the latest news and forward privileged information (Chalmers, 2013). Interviewees repeatedly highlighted the complexity of

the EU's political processes and, in the same breath, they stressed the inadequacy of one person or organisation to deal with it. The solution is specialisation and collaboration. Each actor is specialised in specific topics; an MEP's assistant might especially follow transport issues, the head of a regional office cohesion policy, a Commission official may focus on certain policy sectors and countries, and so forth. Collaboration with actors with similar interests supplements the specialised expertise and increases the networks that acquire information.

The locales of the political place are not restricted to official EU institutions and the offices of interest groups, but also include various types of commercial spaces in the neighbourhood. They serve the people working in the EQ, as well as numerous temporary visitors. Given the sheer size of the political agglomeration, the nearby local service provisions seem very modest. There is a small cluster of cafes, fast-food places, bars, restaurants and hotels in the area around Place Luxembourg, but taking into consideration the number of people working in the EQ plus the large number of daily visitors, these service facilities seem almost insufficient. Partly, this is a misimpression, since there are large cafeterias and canteens within the EU facilities, also designed for socialising and meeting. When Commission officials are asked for a meeting, for instance, they often prefer a café within their office buildings as the meeting place. Especially, those interviewees working in the Parliament expressed an unwillingness to leave the building for informal meetings. According to one MEP's assistant, a typical meeting with a lobbyist lasts about half an hour and takes place in a café inside the Parliament building. Due to the fact that all serious stakeholders are given permanent access authorisation,¹ these meetings are easy to arrange.

I would meet a lobby person in the Parliament building. They are registered. You get an email: 'Do you have time for a coffee now'. Then you come down. Going outside the building is too far and inefficient (Assistant to an MEP I).

Although most of the interaction between EU institutions and stakeholders seems to take place within the EU institutions, the commercial spaces nonetheless play a role in EU political processes.

Many interviewees also mentioned the bars with 'happy hours' surrounding the Place Luxembourg in front of the Parliament buildings (Figure 1). The importance of these more unofficial meetings seems to vary according to different interviewees. For a head of a regional office, having a dinner or beer with 'friends', as he called them, are important ways of getting foreknowledge or acquiring background information on issues under preparation. These meetings take place in bars and restaurants close to EU institutions, and the friends can be people from other regional offices or EU institutions. He also mentioned the happy hour bars, though they were seen as places where trainees go, while senior ranks preferred 'upscale bars'. A former lobbyist from the financial sector, however, highlighted the roles of bars at the Place Luxembourg and their Thursday happy hours as a potential hotspot for EU lobbying. His main target was the Parliament, and Thursdays were deemed important because this was the day when basically all the staff of the MEPs were present for after-hours, end-of-week socialising. However, an assistant to an MEP gives a quite different picture of these happy hours and ostentatiously referred to a clear break between work and free time. Lobbying during non-work-related social events was referred to as a 'no go', which would definitely lead to exclusion of such a clumsy, obtrusive person from the network.

The assemblage of the political locales in the EQ forms a functional setting of everyday life for Brussels-based politicians, officials and lobbyists, and possesses a specific sense of place, a unique social milieu that the actors identify with. Place identity can be seen either as the identity of people within the place or identity of the place itself (Paasi, 2003). The EQ does not have an administrative status, but it overlaps with four municipalities of the city of Brussels. Nevertheless, the EQ possesses a distinct identity and stands out from other Brussels neighbourhoods. The image of the neighbourhood is '...currently rather negative: cold, mono-functional, technocratic, ghetto or a failed integration of the European Quarter in Brussels' (European Quarter Fund, 2016), according to an agency promoting this part of town. Its place-making project includes the delimitation of the area on the map, creating symbols

such as a logo or a slogan, and the promotion of cultural assets and special events.

As already mentioned, the EQ's place identity is strongly tied to the bubble metaphor, which is widely used when both the physical area of the EQ and the community linked to the EU policy-making processes are referred to. This image of an enclosed system, almost island-like, in which policies are designed and decided, and that occurs somehow apart from the 'real world' where these policies have tangible effects, is not only an outsider's view of the 'Eurocrat elite' but it is an image that the interviewees identify with also.

It is a bubble because it is not really Belgium, the institutions.... Even though we live in this bubble it is Belgium out there, which means that things work very differently. It's a very international mix.... All my Belgian friends prefer to stay away, they don't want to, it is a linguistic thing because they are French speakers and the bubble is mainly English speaking (Assistant to an MEP I).

The EU bubble is seen as an international community, the members of which share a common language, jargon and behavioural codes, as well as knowledge of ways, procedures and institutions of policy making in the EU. In order to socialise within the EU bubble and be influential, one has to embody the place-specific way of behaving and thinking, which means in the EU Parliament, for example, a consensual and European habitus (Busby, 2013). Furthermore, the bubble is seen as a separate place detached from Belgium and Brussels. The bubble is experienced as a special configuration with its own culture, and where the local residents of Brussels are considered to be foreign bodies and have subordinate roles, unless they are somehow involved in EU policy making.

A divided and fluid place

A closer look at the political processes uncovers a political landscape that consists of numerous and relatively autonomous sub-processes with their own targets, actors and timelines. These various fluid political assemblages are usually formed by specific political topics as well as the actors, spaces

and artefacts they link with. Each of the respective issues and their sub-issues are simultaneously a concern of different EU bodies, thus attracting distinct kinds of institutional combinations. Sub-processes usually follow established EU procedures, and the composition of concerned or active actors varies over time, depending on the stage of the process; that is, whether the policies are prepared in the Commission, whether issues are settled in the Council, or whether decisions are about to be taken in Parliament. Most lobbyists emphasise the need to be vigilant and become active very early on in order to be influential. ‘Those who actually write the documents are the most important people to know’ (Regional marketing and policy advisor). Therefore, the Commission is seen as the most important target since it is the institution that designs the contents of policies.

These assemblages are communities with blurry boundaries. Each issue at hand creates its own and relatively independent assemblage, consisting typically of particular EU officials in charge as well as business actors, environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) and others who have an interest in that issue even though their aspirations may not be compatible. These hybrid assemblages are relatively constant and independent from other such assemblages.

...we are more or less on a regular basis, we meet or we interact with, I would not say everybody, but you know in Brussels, it’s a small place and you end up knowing all of the people that treat the same issues (Official of an association for waste energy producers).

Each political issue is coordinated by a certain DG, which makes it and its office spaces the focal points of a policy-specific assemblage. Renewable energy policy serves as an example of how the assemblages form and operate. This field of politics is coordinated by DG Energy but the process involves several other DGs that are responsible for related issues. Hence, the Commission establishes internal inter-service groups, with representatives from all the involved DGs, in order to enable efficient communication and negotiations between the different units. This formal procedure also includes public hearings that aim to generate knowledge

about stakeholder views and the data they have produced.

...we organised a public consultation last year online. A questionnaire online which was open to everyone. We had 160 contributions.... That’s the formal consultation. Of course we have daily contact. We go to conferences, people come to us also to have informal chats about what we are doing now. Be in contact with stakeholders to really understand the concerns, the technical issues, the political issues and it’s not only the private sector, also the public sector (DG Energy official).

Many concerned actors in Brussels simultaneously both utilise the opportunities provided by the EU institutions and develop further strategies to increase their influence. Renewable energy policy consists of various sub-issues, such as wind, solar and bioenergy, which generate political assemblages of their own. The key actors of the bioenergy assemblage, for instance, include the bioenergy producers’ association, the European Biomass Association, (Association Européenne pour la Biomasse, AEBIOM), pulp and paper companies, forest owners’ associations, NGOs, as well as national and regional governments from countries where bioenergy is an important issue. The assemblage as a whole does not have a common goal because the various actors often have opposed interests (Rytteri and Kortelainen, 2015). More interesting in our case is the glue that holds this assemblage together, creating cooperation as well as confrontation between the different actors.

Although the assemblage does not have a fixed form, it is not a virtual community either. It is a relational combination of tangible human actors, material entities and physical spaces, operating within a rather small area of Brussels. Typically, the stakeholders have their fixed offices scattered within the EQ or elsewhere in Brussels, and they are in frequent contact with EU officials and the other stakeholders. These contacts are maintained through telecommunication networks or by face-to-face meetings.

Sometimes the assemblages materialise, as stakeholders leave their offices and gather in the same physical space in a conference or workshop. Conferences happen to be important for lobbying because they were mentioned by almost all the interviewees. Typically, a

stakeholder organisation may organise a conference on a topical issue, inviting key officials from the Commission, for instance, and also other interest groups to participate. These are occasions when the assemblage may temporarily have a more territorial and tangible form as various stakeholders are gathered in a conference within the same physical space. A permanent presence in Brussels enables the organisation of, and participation in, such conferences.

Another fragmenting aspect relates to territorial interests and all tendencies following from nationally or regionally bound political assemblages. Although the EQ is a transnational place, national boundaries are relevant in various ways. It should not be forgotten that much of the policy making in the EU is designed to safeguard national and regional interests of governments and businesses. Thus, the relationships between domestic actors tend to become strong in Brussels. The EU is a partnership of 28 member states and about 250 regions, and all of them have their representatives and offices in Brussels (see Hein, 2015). Often, lobbying happens through national channels because making contact is easier with domestic stakeholders. ‘I am still cautious with everyone. So I use those contacts which I have made already at home’ (Assistant to an MEP II). Furthermore, a good deal of the after-work social life appears to take place among people from the same country as well.

‘There are sub-group bubbles within the bubble. They are national; everyone pretends to be sooo international, but on the other hand you hang out often with your nationals’ (Assistant to an MEP I).

These national links indicate that political assemblages also reach to other places, making the EQ a multi-sited and mobile place.

Distributed and mobile place

The EQ as a political place is a major node of an extensive network of places and actors all over Europe, who actively contribute to the formation of EU policies. From this perspective the EQ is a distributed political place (Cidell, 2015), which includes locally embedded functions and identities, as well as international flows and networks spanning across

the European space at the same time. As stated above, the entire EU system is a huge hub of policy mobility facilitating the reciprocal transport of political ideas, aspirations, regulations and actors between EU institutions and the rest of the EU.

Agnew (2011) reminds us that mobility is an elemental aspect of places and their making. Consequently, the EQ is also shaped by different kinds of policy-related mobility: political assemblages do not consist only of the locally bound locales, people and practices, but also of information that circulates and entities and actors linking the site with other places. As a consequence, things and agents absent from the EQ can become active parts in the formation of the political place.

Political mobility takes place simultaneously at multiple scales. The EU institutions themselves are partly dispersed across Brussels, and the Commission especially has its offices in different parts of town. As mentioned above, the premises are primarily clustered together in three different areas: EQ (19,000 employees in 2007), the Beaulieu area (2000 employees in 2007) and the Rue de Genève/Da Vinci area (1250 employees in 2007) (EU Commission, 2007: 4). Beaulieu is situated about 5 km away from the EQ and concentrates five departments of the Commission (DGs Regional Policy, Climate Action, Environment, Connect and Mobility and Transport). In spite of this decentralised location, the interviewees working there did not see the absolute distance as a problem. The offices are well connected by transport systems, and the relative distance of Beaulieu does not differ that much from distances within the EQ. Logistics and mobility have been amongst the most important criteria in the choice of location for Commission buildings. Despite their absolute distance, these locales are not separate enclaves, but, because they are connected to the EQ by efficient transport connections, they are relationally bound parts of the same distributed political place. This also concerns lobbyists having their offices in other parts of Brussels.

If you have a car or use the metro you get everywhere rather quickly, if you have a good connection that’s fine... It takes me much less time to travel. So I have a meeting in the afternoon and I’ll be there in five minutes and I’ll be back in five minutes so that’s good

rather than being 45 minutes on a train (Legal adviser to a renewable energy association).

A central aspect generating dispersal and mobility at a larger geographical scale is that the EU has established a capital city concept that is polycentric (Hein, 2009). This dates back to the early history of the European institutions: since the early 1950s, there have been several plans and candidate cities with respect to the EU capital. Instead of one capital city, the political functions were divided between the three cities of Strasbourg, Luxembourg and Brussels. With the Edinburgh decision of 1992 (Hein, 2009) this stop-gap solution was made permanent. Both Luxembourg and Strasbourg have EU neighbourhoods of their own, and the predominantly administrative Kirchberg neighbourhood in Luxembourg hosts several institutions of the Parliament, the Commission, the European Investment Bank and EU courts, numbering over 3700 employees (EU Commission, 2007).

Furthermore, 26 decentralised EU agencies have been established since 1990 all over EU member states, ranging from the European Chemical Agency (Helsinki) to the European Food Safety Agency (Parma) or the European Central Bank (Frankfurt) to Europol (The Hague) (Hein, 2009). The Commission also has offices in member states with employees who have certain responsibilities as regards the preparation of EU policies. It is inevitable that these interconnected EU satellites generate significant mobility.

Another form of dispersion is related to the scalar territoriality of the EU policy processes. The policy design and decision-making system is based on the strong role of the sovereign member states and the continuous flows of information and actors between the EU institutions and national capitals (Bulmer et al., 2007). It generates a constant traffic of ministers and governmental officials between member states and the EQ. To discuss relevant topics the Council brings together the responsible ministers and delegations from all member states to the EQ frequently. More fixed, national and sub-national representations – to facilitate movement of information both to and from the EU institutions – have also been established because of territorial interests (Hein, 2015).

A crucial aspect concerning the work and place configuration of various actors in the EQ is the mobile character of the Parliament. A typical weekly rhythm for MEPs includes travelling back and forth between their home countries and Brussels. Most of them arrive in Brussels (or Strasbourg) on Mondays at lunchtime and typically leave on Thursdays at lunchtime (Busby, 2013: 145). Furthermore, the polycentricity of the EU capital has created a monthly to and fro migration cycle for Parliament, which makes the MEPs, their assistants, translators and lobbyists a community of political nomads. MEPs spend most of their time in Brussels as a ‘home base’, but the official site of the EU Parliament is located in Strasbourg. Monthly four-day plenary sessions are held there. Accordingly, a significant, parliament-related, share of the EQ moves to Strasbourg every month when these sessions are scheduled. Thus, about 5500 people and 2500 plastic trunks full of documents travel 450 km monthly by train, aircraft and truck (Mendick, 2014).

Plenary weeks consist of a ritualistic cycle of events and MEPs’ and assistants’ movements follow regular rhythms in this Alsatian city. Most arrive at Monday lunchtime and head directly to the Louise Weiss complex where they work long hours and attend evening events within the vast complex and its restaurants, or eat at a few nearby places people recommend. They sleep in hotels recommended by the MEP’s own travel office, booked months if not years in advance. At Thursday lunchtime, cars and chartered coaches return them to the airport and station. Their interaction with the city is spatially limited and with its citizens minimal, meaning MEPs practice European politics in exclusive spaces (Busby, 2014: 106–107).

Thus, lobbyists can follow the MEPs and stay all – or some of the four days – in the Parliament building, where the target person’s assistants are present. Depending on the questions at hand the number and composition of the lobbyists vary. Lobbying usually takes place during coffee and lunch breaks, which leads to the gathering of distinct sub-assemblages simultaneously in a common space. The potential time lapse for lobbying in Strasbourg is strictly ordered, as everything is subject to the hectic rhythm and tight schedule of the Parliament’s work

programme. In this way Strasbourg as a political place is less appreciated by the people being approached there.

Strasbourg once a month is strange, because all lobbyists are there as well. Well, in this one week they have all MEPs together and the lobbying people are the same as in Brussels, they just travel. It might be efficient for the lobbyists, but for the MEPs and their assistants it is very stressful, even without the lobbying (Assistant to an MEP II).

All in all, it seems that the short time slots during the breaks from the sessions and within the bounded and small spaces of the Strasbourg Parliament building's lobbies and cafeterias make these occasions extremely dense concentrations of informational exchange and policy making. In other words, the Strasbourg Parliament building becomes a hotspot, a vigorous political place where the political assemblages, possessing differing interests and aspirations originating from variegated sectors and regions, become tangible in a strictly bounded space and time.

Conclusions

Our aim has been to examine the EQ as a context for policy making by treating it as a political place that is not a passive frame for that activity but an active part of it. We have highlighted three aspects of a political place.

1. The empirical study showed that the physical features and political practices within and around the closely located political locales have created a certain sense of place frequently referred to as the EU bubble. Interviewees identify themselves with the bubble as a territorial and social island that is separated from the rest of Brussels and Belgium.
2. The political institutions and processes fragment the place into overlapping but relatively independent assemblages. There is a more or less unchanging context for the EQ consisting of physical (built environment) and functional (e.g. public and private services and transport systems) elements, which are linked to each other in different ways by each assemblage. The actual political activity combines bureaucrats, lobbyists and regional representatives into fluid assemblages. Furthermore, national and regional interests, as well as networks, create assemblages of their own and draw blurry national boundaries within the political place. Thus, fluid assemblages construct their own evolving spaces within the political place, linking selected elements of the material environment to themselves and occupying some parts of it.
3. A political place is not a separate bubble but constituted by local and extra-local mobility, actors and processes. Political relations stretch beyond the local setting, making the political place a multi-sited system of locales. The EU Quarter and its political assemblages stretch through innumerable ties to other places around Europe (and beyond), thus creating various kinds of mobility. This is due to the EU having assigned capital status not only to Brussels, but also to Luxembourg and Strasbourg, as well as siting various EU institutions in other parts of Europe. Hence, the political assemblages gather actors in Brussels that are tied to different places and distinct actors as well.

Our research aims to contribute to the emerging literature on political places, and the results enable us to draw two related conclusions. The first concerns the studies focusing on the political place within the EU policy-making process. Earlier studies have concentrated on Brussels when exploring EU policies in their local context (Clark and Jones, 2013; Kuus, 2011; Palmer, 2014). We argue, however, that these studies have given a coherent but, in the end, partial picture of the policy and place relationship linked to EU policy making, which is a more dispersed and mobile process circulating back and forth through a chain of political places from Brussels via state capitals to the regions and their centres. In order to understand the relational locality of EU policy making, it would be important to extend the

scope of these studies and focus on places that represent different positionalities in the scalar and spatial divisions of labour of the EU. Of course, Brussels is a pivotal place in the making of EU policies, but it is far from being the only or dominant place of power and influence. Furthermore, externalities with their own centres of power and lobbies may have a more or less direct effect on European politics as well. The financial sector, with London, Paris and Luxembourg as both global and European centres (and their specific bubbles and practices, etc.) serve as good examples.

This leads us to the second conclusion, which is more conceptual and methodological. We argue that similar characteristics exist in any politically important urban place, from world cities to regional centres. We believe that the conceptual approach and the three aspects of political place described above help in the study of policies in their urban contexts. It is obvious that all political places have similar spatial characteristics, although in most cases on a smaller scale and in a less clear form than in Brussels. In a national capital, for instance, a parliament, ministries and various interest groups create political agglomerations that are fragmented into numerous political assemblages and linked to various directions and destinations that generate mobility of people, goods and information. We hope that our study inspires researchers to study the urban contexts of policy making in other political places and across different spatial scales and geographical regions.

We have found the assemblage concept very useful, especially in catching the fluid spatiality of a political place with its fragmented, distributed and mobile qualities. It also enables the role of materiality and artefacts in situated policy-making acts to be taken seriously. Critiques of the political place approach have especially called for a closer look at the constitutive role of materiality in political practices (Dittmer, 2015). *Our intention has not been to study the political practices or outcomes per se*, but to attempt to portray a broader picture of the complex spatiality of the political place and open up some avenues for *further* research. Nevertheless, during the interviews in EU facilities it became clearly evident for us that material constructions and artefacts play important roles in the acts of policy

making. The EU buildings, for instance, are not simply forums for meetings, and cafeterias do not simply surround interaction, but they actively take part in policy making. The enclosed buildings, accompanied by strictly regulated and controlled access procedures, enable some actors and objectives to enter them and affect policy making more easily than some others. The cafeterias with their hectic and noisy atmosphere, in addition to the busy schedules of EU policy makers, force lobbyists to be focused, exact and brief in their articulation in order to have an effect. These and countless other such socio-material aspects and arrangements call for a more in-depth enquiry for which the assemblage concept provides a useful approach (see also Müller, 2015; Weisser, 2014).

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Note

1. The role of lobbying in EU politics has caused a lot of critical discussion. As a result of serious corruption scandals in the Parliament and Commission, a voluntary Transparency Register was launched in 2011 to make EU decision making more open. The number of registered lobbyists has been steadily growing, and in June 2016 there were almost 9500 entries in the register. An interest group has to be registered in order to get accreditation for access to the Parliament premises (Transparency Register, 2016).

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