

# Instrument of Institutional Empowerment? An Explorative Study of the Local Council Chair in Flanders\*

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## Abstract

*Since 2007, Flemish local councils have been entitled to appoint their own chair, ending the mandatory combination of mayoralty and council chairmanship. The Flemish government initiated this reform to encourage the appointment of non-executive councillors as chairs, aiming to strengthen the council's overall position. Through an explorative study of five types of council chairs, our article examines whether and how chairs can empower the council and whether chairs without an executive office succeed better in doing so. Based on a new typology of the office, we consider the chair's role along three dimensions: (1) inside empowerment of the council, (2) partisanship and (3) outside empowerment of the office to the community. We find that while all types of chairs strive to empower the council within government, the non-executive chairs act less partisan and emerge as the council's spokesperson. These findings suggest that a non-executive chair offers more guarantees to advance the council's position.*

**Keywords:** council chair, local politics, local government, institutional reform, Flanders.

## 1 Introduction

Since 2007, Flemish local councils have been entitled to appoint their own council chair. As one of the most eye-catching reforms of the 2005 Local Government Act (*Gemeentedecreet*), the introduction of this new institution put an end to the automatic combination of council chairmanship and mayoralty. This twofold position consolidated substantial power in the hands of the mayor, being the leader of the executive under scrutiny and the head of the council at the same time. As such, the mayor's double hat contributed to the situation at that time whereby "[r]

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rather than the executive being subordinate to the municipal council, the real situation is the other way around: the municipal council follows the dictates of the executive” (Steen & Wille, 2005, p. 456). Although the disentanglement of both offices did not prohibit mayors and aldermen from being appointed as council chairs,<sup>1</sup> the Flemish government clearly wished to foster the appointment of non-executive councillors in order to strengthen the council vis-à-vis the executive board (i.e. the Board of Mayor and Aldermen – BMA). Indeed, the latter has been an explicit ambition of the Flemish government for some decades now (Verhelst, 2013; Verhelst et al., 2019; Vlaams Parlement, 2005).<sup>2</sup>

Despite the fact that the number of council chairs without an executive office – who we will call ‘non-executive chairs’ – has been steadily increasing ever since (Karsten et al., 2017), we still have little knowledge of whether this has also materialised in a stronger position of the council and its councillors within the local polity. Early assessments were published 10 years ago as part of a general evaluation of the new Local Government Act (Hennau & Ackaert, 2013; Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010; Olislagers et al., 2008, 2013).<sup>3</sup> These quantitative studies pointed to a positive but modest effect, depending on the dimension of council empowerment and the local political actor under study. However, bearing in mind the evident time effect of such reform, the researchers called for follow-up research to validate their findings (Olislagers et al., 2013). Furthermore, we still have little evidence of how council chairs exercise their office and how this can contribute to empowering the council more generally. Our article addresses this issue by presenting an exploratory analysis of the contemporary Office of the Local Council Chair in Flanders. We examine if and how council chairs empower the council and whether non-executive chairs succeed better at this.

Through a comparative case study, we assess five different types of council chair: a mayor, an alderman, an alderman-to-be,<sup>4</sup> a majority councillor and an opposition councillor. The analysis considers additional variance with regard to municipal size, sex<sup>5</sup> and the intraparty status of the chair. We compare the different council chairs along three theoretical dimensions of the office: (1) their role in the emancipation of the council and the councillors (inside empowerment), (2) their partisanship in the exercise of the office and (3) the representation of their office towards the community at large (outside empowerment). To interpret our findings, we combine these dimensions into a typology of ideal-typical chairs, which can also be used to categorise the office in other local government systems and political arenas. Consequently, this article furthers our understanding of this understudied institution, both theoretically and empirically.

In addition to this academic relevance, our article contributes to the current political debate on the future of the office of the council chair. The mandatory separation between an executive office and the council chairmanship might return to the political agenda after a failed attempt during the formation of the Flemish government in 2014 (Karsten et al., 2017). In the conclusion of the article, we propose some specific suggestions to institutionalise the office to this end and, accordingly, realise the ambitions that underpinned the reform.

The article continues with a brief contextual overview of the challenges and reforms of the local council in Flanders. Afterwards, we theorise the role of the

council chair, which leads to the proposition of a typology of council chairs. Section 4 sets out the data and research methods, before we analyse the different types of council chairs in Section 5. General conclusions and discussions are presented in the final part of the article.

## 2 The Context: Strengthening the Council Under Pressure

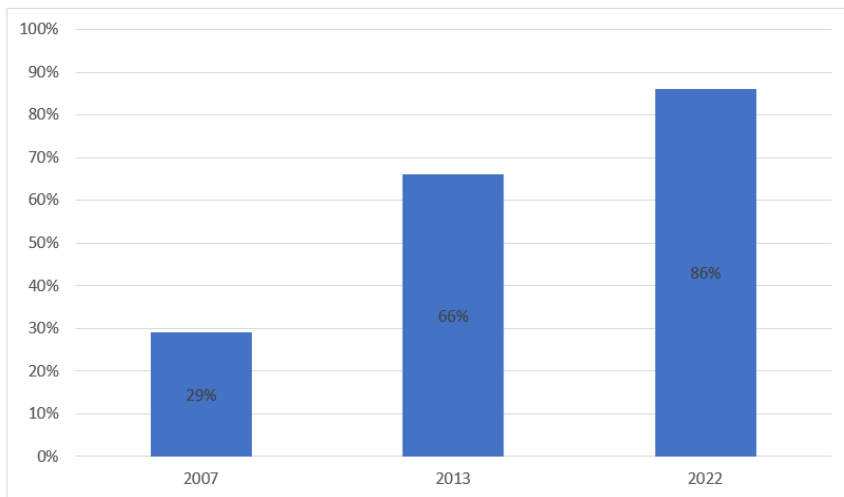
As its only directly elected institution, the council is formally considered the highest decision-making body of local government in Flanders (Steen & Wille, 2005; Verhelst, 2013; Verhelst et al., 2019). It serves as the arena for political debate and has a broad competence to regulate general policies and all matters of interest for the local community. To do so, the council passes regulations, imposes taxes and adopts a multiannual financial framework (*meerjarenplan*) (Reynaert & Dobbelaere, 2018). Councils can also establish committees to prepare council meetings in detail. Councillors form the direct link between citizens and the government within this system. They translate the needs and preferences of citizens into political action, define policy and scrutinise government (Verhelst et al., 2011). In other words, councillors are entrusted with the traditional role set of representation, legislation and control (Denters, 2005). To fulfil this role set, councillors have several instruments at their disposal, such as agenda-setting, debates, field visits and information and interpellation rights (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010).

However, local government works quite differently in practice (Steen & Wille, 2005; Verhelst et al., 2011, 2019). The real power is found to rest with the executive board and especially the mayor as the leading political figure of the municipality. While councillors are still laymen lacking sufficient stature and support, they ought to oversee the increasingly professionalised BMA and the administration. All this happens in a very demanding policy environment in terms of complexity and workload (e.g. when dealing with a myriad of inter-municipal co-operations, municipal companies and different types of network governance). The strong party discipline (*partitocracy*) and the dominance of the political majority over the opposition further limit the power and autonomy of the councillors and the council as a whole. These pressures add to the intrinsic challenge of the office in having to reconcile diverging demands as governor and representative (Tops & Zouridis, 2002). Meanwhile, a growing group of citizens no longer feel represented by the representative assembly and look for new ways to address their policy needs directly in the political arena (Wauters & Kern, 2020). It is hardly surprising that under these conditions, councils become somehow marginalised and councillors drop out before the end of the legislative term (see Van berlaer, 2021, for recent figures of Flemish local government).

The Flemish government acknowledged the growing marginalisation of the council. One of the explicit ambitions of the new Local Government Act issued in 2005, therefore, was to strengthen the position of the latter (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010; Vlaams Parlement, 2005).<sup>6</sup> Through the possibility of delegating competencies to the BMA, it was believed that councils could focus primarily on setting the

strategic goals of municipal policy. Some existing council instruments were formally codified, and extended reporting duties were imposed on the BMA and the leaders of the administration. A third remarkable element was the introduction of a separate council chair. Since 2007, any elected councillor having Belgian nationality was allowed to assume this position. Under the new rules, council chairs are appointed by a formal nomination document submitted at the start of the council term, which requires the signatures of an absolute majority of councillors (Warnez, 2019). Before, the mayor automatically presided over the council. As the most influential actor and political leader in local government (Steyvers, 2007), this system concentrated substantial power in the mayor's hands. Heading the executive under scrutiny while promoting the representative, legislative and oversight functions of the council is a potentially conflicting set of roles. Therefore, disentangling the mayoralty and the council chairmanship had a clear purpose. The Flemish government assumed that a non-executive chair would stimulate debate and facilitate the council's oversight role. At the same time, it would enhance the profile of the council as a separate institution, increase its independence from the BMA and clarify the distinction between policymaking and administration in municipal government. Mayors, in turn, would also profit from the reform, as having a non-executive chair would allow them to focus on defending their policy in the council (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010; Verbeek, 2014; Verhelst et al., 2019; Vlaams Parlement, 2005).<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 1**     *The Share of Non-Executive Council Chairs in Flanders*



Today, the picture of the Flemish council chair is mixed. On the one hand, appointing a non-executive councillor as chair has become a common practice. As Figure 1 demonstrates, this number has been on the rise consistently, going from 29% after the introduction in 2007 up to 86% in 2022. Only a minority of councils

are still presided over by mayors or aldermen nowadays (Karsten et al., 2017; Pinakes, 2022). On the other hand, the fact that the appointment of an executive council chair is still allowed suggests that the Flemish government was hesitant to strengthen the position of the council in an uncompromising fashion.<sup>8</sup> In the same line of thought, the Advisory Board for Internal Affairs already criticised the new institution back in 2005 for its lack of a clear profile, additional competencies and support (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010). In addition, it is striking that the non-executive council chairs are predominantly chosen from the party groups in the governing majority. At the start of the current legislative term, only one municipality appointed a chair from within the opposition ranks.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the chairmanship is usually part of the wider coalition negotiations, serving as a kind of bargaining chip in the distribution of executive offices among the ruling parties.

Underneath these figures lies a complex political reality. The increased use of the non-executive council chair could have been driven by the sincere belief in the necessity of the reform. Opposed to such a 'logic of appropriateness', a 'logic of consequence' would suggest that the practice mainly follows from goal-oriented calculations of the political parties (Cole & McAllister, 2015). In this vein, the chairmanship is deemed an additional office to distribute among the coalition parties in the government formation.<sup>10</sup> This might explain why, in the beginning, the non-executive chairmanship was more popular in municipalities ruled by coalitions. Equally, the reform was implemented to a larger extent by new mayors. Incumbent mayors who were used to preside over the council for many years were somewhat less eager to abandon their twofold role (Olislagers et al., 2008). Although these correlations with coalition government and government discontinuity have faded over time (Hennau & Ackaert, 2013) – hinting at a stronger internalisation of the non-executive office as such – awarding it to an opposition member still seems a bridge too far in most cases.

In the early days after the reform, general evaluations of the new Local Government Act did not suggest a drastic change in local government provoked by the non-executive council chair. Olislagers and Ackaert (2010) conducted a survey among mayors, aldermen and councillors two years after the reform's introduction. They found an acclaimed positive impact on council scrutiny but not on the quality of political debate and strategic policy development. Another survey established that local politicians from councils with a non-executive chair held slightly more positive views of the empowerment of their council, but the municipal CEOs did not perceive that effect (Olislagers et al., 2013). The association of Flemish municipalities (VVSG) interviewed several council chairs to assess their role in shaping the relationship between the council and the executive (Verbeek, 2014; Verbeek & Van Bouwel, 2010).<sup>11</sup> It seemed that the chairs had not always succeeded (yet) in strengthening the independence of the council. Many still relied heavily on the assistance of the BMA and the administration. Some non-executive chairs stated that by acting as neutral chairs, they at least tried to bridge the political gap between the governing majority and the opposition within the council. However, at the same time, they struggle to reconcile the neutrality of the office with party membership and actively contributing to the council debate. The pioneers also noticed ample room to increase the outside profile of the office. In the next section,

we theorise the Office of the Council Chair more profoundly in order to evaluate how chairs can empower the council in practice.

### 3 The Council Chair: Functions and Responsibilities

The parliamentary literature conceives chairmanship as one of the designated causes of a performant legislature, especially when it comes to the basic task of scrutinising government (Rockman, 1984; Saalfeld, 2000). Importantly, proper chairmanship involves a fundamentally non-political element: “In every polity there is a need to bridge divisions and to make decisions in procedural if not substantive matters in a neutral and undisputed way” (Jenny & Müller, 1995, p. 327). Across political systems, the chair relies on a wide range of possible functions to enable this task. They include agenda-setting, assigning legislative work to committees, choosing voting procedures, voting power, government formation, disciplinary powers to maintain order (for the purpose of time management and preventing improper behaviour), adjourning debates, convening parliamentary sessions, and internal administration (Jenny & Müller, 1995, pp. 331-335).

Functionally, Karsten et al. (2014) distinguish between the formal competencies (*functions*) of the office and the practical competencies that go along with it (*responsibilities*). Regarding the former, the Flemish Local Government Act sets out a few formal competencies of the council chair. Chairs convene the council (at least 10 times per year) and define the agenda of the meeting. This implies that they can determine the order of the topics, add items to the agenda and ensure that the agenda is communicated in a comprehensible and timely manner to the councillors. During the council meeting, chairs organise the session and the voting procedures and open, preside and close the debate. They also maintain public order, sign council documents and regulations and chair the public welfare council (Suykens, 2010; Warnez, 2019). Apart from these legal functions, council chairs may assume additional responsibilities, such as acting as spokespersons of the council and fostering the operation of the council as a whole (Warnez, 2019). In this regard, the Flemish government expected council chairs to stimulate debate and oversight activities, enhance the council's profile, increase its independence from the BMA and separate the roles in the policy cycle (e.g. allowing mayors and aldermen to defend their policies vis-à-vis the council as scrutiny agent). To fulfil these responsibilities, chairs can facilitate and stimulate the use of the regular council instruments (e.g. consultation, information, field visits, questions), establishment of council committees, communication from the BMA towards the council, and the agreement upon proper internal rules of procedure. The council's mandatory internal regulation stipulates how chairs approach their competencies and responsibilities in light of the council's operation. Nonetheless, these regulations are often considered as an instrument of the chair to regulate council business and, hence, may reflect, rather than guide, the chair's behaviour.

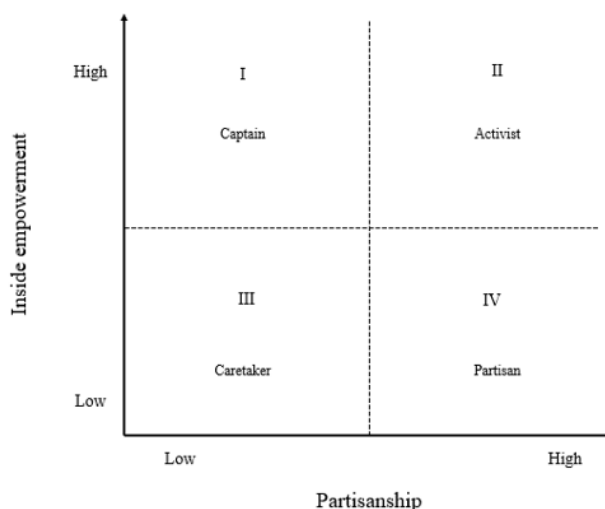


#### 4 Operationalisation of the Office: Dimensions and Typology

Our study aims to explore how council chairs fulfil these functions and responsibilities in practice. To structure our analysis, we draw on the work of Jenny and Müller (1995). These authors proposed two basic dimensions to typify the legislative assembly's chair. The first dimension refers to the power of the chair in terms of functions and responsibilities alongside their accountability towards the assembly. For the purpose of our research, we accommodate this role to the specific power to strengthen the council as an institution vis-à-vis the executive board and to support the councillors in their individual capacity. This 'inside empowerment' ranges on a continuum between the chair barely fulfilling the minimal legal functions to secure the operation of the council and the chair proactively taking extra measures to empower the council and improve its position in relation to the BMA.

The second dimension of the office is partisanship (Jenny & Müller, 1995). It refers to the extent to which the chair acts in favour of every councillor or whether the chair favours their own party group (or, the coalition at large). In the case of the latter, we speak of a politicised office (Bach, 1999). According to Jenny and Müller (1995), the chance of partisanship decreases when there is a challenging selection process, the candidate is not part of the government and the candidate is recruited from the party backbenches.<sup>12</sup> In line with our research objective, we operationalise partisanship slightly differently considering two basic elements of the office in the Flemish local government context. The first refers to the degree of politicisation with which the chair exercises their office (i.e. treating every party group equally or acting in favour of the government or the own party group). On the other hand, the dimension also relates to how the chair behaves personally as a fellow councillor. Combining both elements, a highly partisan position implies that the chair takes sides with their own group and participates as a regular politician in the council business. The opposite position is more procedural, meaning that the chair acts in a strictly neutral way while refraining from the debate and party politics in the council.

The combination of both dimensions allows us to develop a typology of ideal-typical council chairs that helps summarise and interpret our findings in a succinct way (see Figure 2).<sup>13</sup> Type I represents what we call the *captain*. Such a chair proactively defends the rights of their fellow councillors and tries to do this in an impartial way, refraining from an active role in council work. Type II is more of an *activist*. For this type, council empowerment goes hand in hand with a more politicised style of action, which entails participating in the debates and/or pursuing party political objectives. The latter occurs, for instance, when a chair from an opposition party strives to compete against the powerful BMA. Quadrants III and IV are comprised of council chairs who are less keen on (or capable of) incentivising their institution and its members. We label Type III as the *caretaker*. This chair adopts a more passive style and is mainly concerned with managing the council business by the books. Type IV stands for the *partisan*. Less concerned with strengthening the institution, this type also acts less neutrally and fulfils a political role in the council as a chair or as a common politician (e.g. participating in debates).

**Figure 2** *Ideal-Typical Council Chairs*

Next to this two-dimensional typology, we also want to explore the way in which the council chair represents their position and institution to the larger community. To some extent, a clear and distinct profile of the chair supports the image of the separation of powers presented to the outside world (cf. Jenny & Müller, 1995). Although this dimension does not impact the internal functioning of the council in a direct manner and is therefore not included in the typology, enhancing the councils' profile was one of the additional responsibilities attributed to the chair in the Flemish institutional reform of 2005. One could thus argue that presenting oneself as council chair to the outside world enhances the standing of the council as a type of 'external empowerment'. Again, several options are plausible in that regard, ranging from seeking to obtain high visibility as a chair to giving preference to the other office (e.g. as mayor or alderman) or consciously keeping a low profile.

## 5 Data and Methods

In order to examine the multidimensional nature of the office of the local council chair in Flanders, we developed a qualitative research design. More specifically, we conducted a comparative case study using elite interviews with councillors, chairs and municipal CEOs that targeted internal validity, exploration and contextual factors as much as possible (Mortelmans, 2018). The latter is of particular importance, as Flemish municipalities each have their distinctive political culture, actors and interparty relations (De Rynck, 2000). Other approaches, such as analysing the council minutes, were not considered, because these only encompass the chair's behaviour during official debates. Elite interviews, on the other hand,



allow us to provide a more complete picture of the chairmanship, which includes the external empowerment dimension and the internal empowerment beyond the official proceedings.

We selected five municipalities on the basis of several criteria. To verify if non-executive chairs act differently from executive chairs, we used the ‘chair type’ as the central selection criterion. We selected one municipality from the following basic categories of council chairs: a mayor, an alderman, an alderman-to-be, a majority councillor and an opposition councillor. The first two categories represent the executive chairs. The difference between a mayor and an alderman incorporates a basic difference in terms of functions and power in Flemish local government – whereby the mayor acts as the most powerful actor within the municipal government (Steyvers, 2007). The last two categories represent the non-executive chairs. We selected a non-executive chair from the majority and opposition, as the gap between these groups is one of the most prominent features of Belgian local government (Verhelst et al., 2011; for a general assessment, see Jenny & Müller, 1995). Finally, the alderman-to-be constitutes an in-between type. Formally, this type falls under the non-executive councillors. However, informally, the provision that they will become a member of the BMA in time can give this type more traits of an executive chair.

In addition to this central selection criterion, we take into consideration the intraparty status of the chair. Indeed, Jenny and Müller (1995) argued that backbenchers have a higher chance of acting less partisan as chair. In our design, we distinguish between party leaders, frontbenchers and backbenchers. The leader is a politician who occupies the most visible and powerful position in their party. Depending on the party’s position inside the government, this can be the mayor, an alderman, the first candidate on the ballot, or the party group leader in the council. Frontbenchers do not lead their party but take a prominent position in the organisation, on the ballot, in the BMA or in the council. Backbenchers, in turn, are less prominent councillors who had a lower place on the party list or did not occupy a key position in their party and in government. In our design, the mayor clearly represents the party leader position (cf. Rodenbach, 2017). In addition, we selected a council chaired by an alderman who qualifies as a frontbencher, because he ranks second in the BMA after the mayor of his own party. The two non-executive chairs in the sample are backbenchers. As the fifth type, we chose an alderman-to-be who leads one of the parties in the coalition. Thus, our sample contains two party leaders – one frontbencher and two backbenchers.

Finally, we include the variables ‘sex’ and ‘municipal size’ (based on the number of inhabitants) as additional selection criteria to refine and diversify our population. Our sample includes three male and two female chairs. With regard to municipal size, our sample ranges from a very small municipality (less than 10,000 inhabitants) to a big city (with more than 100,000 inhabitants). Due to the sensitive nature of the inquiry and the data agreement with our respondents, we anonymised our cases naming them after toponyms from the *Game of Thrones* series (see Table 1).

**Table 1**      *The Five Cases in Our Study*

		<b>Meereen</b>	<b>Oldtown</b>	<b>King's Landing</b>	<b>Braavos</b>
Position	Executive	Executive	Non-executive (formally)	Non-executive	
Chair type	Mayor	Alderman	Alderman-to-be	Majority councillor	Opposition councillor
Intraparty status	Leader	Frontbencher	Leader	Backbencher	Backbencher
Municipal size	Medium	Small	Large (40,000-100,000)	Very large (100,000+)	Very small (<10,000)
Sex	Female	Male	Male	Female	Male

The first case in our study is *Winterfell*, a medium-sized municipality where the mayor, who has extensive experience (and status) in national politics, chairs the council. The locality is governed by a coalition of three parties. *Meereen* is the second case. The council of this rather small locality is led by a chair who is not the leader of his party but occupies an important intraparty position as an alderman. The executive is composed of two parties, one of which has actually an absolute majority in the council. The third case of *Oldtown* is a large city run by a coalition of three parties. The chair is the political leader of the smallest party in the coalition, while it was formally agreed upon that they would be appointed as an alderman from September 2023. *King's Landing* is the fourth municipality in the sample. It is a very large city that is governed by a coalition of four parties. The council is presided over by a majority councillor from the backbenches. She is assisted by a vice-chair, which is a self-created office in King's Landing. The fifth case of *Braavos* is a very small municipality that is governed by one party with overall control of the council. Remarkably, the council chairmanship has been awarded to a councillor from the opposition. He is a former mayor and opposition leader who preferred a low-profile political existence in the current council.

Data were gathered through semi-structured individual elite interviews with four actor types per case: (1) council chair, (2) majority councillor, (3) opposition councillor and (3) CEO of the municipal administration.<sup>14</sup> To allow for historical and contextual interpretation, only respondents who were also active in the previous council term were selected. The random sample included male and female respondents per case. Interviews were conducted in two waves (April – May 2021 and August – September 2022) and lasted 40 minutes on average. The questions covered the appointment of the chair, the perception of the functions of the office, and a self-assessment (whereby chairs addressed their own functioning, and the other respondents reflected upon the proper chairmanship they advocated). To operationalise the three dimensions of the office, we asked questions about (1) the organisation of council or committee meetings, the organisation of council debates (the quantity and quality, and the role of the chair), the contribution to the classic council functions (representation, legislation, control), and the general relation with the BMA; (2) the behaviour of the chair towards the different party groups

and their involvement in council work; and (3) the profile of the chair as spokesperson of the council outside local government. In the next section, we discuss our findings along these three basic dimensions. Respondents' claims were systematically compared. When opinions differed, we specifically mention interviewees' diverging perceptions.

## 6 Results

### 6.1 *Inside Empowerment of the Council*

We start our analysis by exploring the chairs' role in the emancipation of the council and the councillors. First, we look into the legal functions of convening the meetings and setting the agenda (organisational component). Formally, chairs ought to convene the council at least 10 times per year while composing and distributing a clear agenda for the meeting. The interviews reveal that all chairs comply with these minimum requirements of their office. This is also the case in *Meereen*, where the formal provision on the quota was not always respected in the past. We found additional variance in the frequency of council meetings. This variance, however, is mainly due to the size of the municipality and not the council chairmanship. For example, the monthly council meeting in the large city of *King's Landing* is spread over two evening sessions (and also regularly in *Oldtown*), while the agenda is dealt with in a single monthly session in the other cases. In the very small municipality of *Braavos*, there is only one additional council committee which gathers twice a year, whereas in *King's Landing* and *Winterfell*, six standing committees are in place.

The general picture becomes more diverse when we look at additional initiatives with respect to the organisation of council meetings. Some chairs have taken structural measures in that regard. In *King's Landing*, the chair organises additional select or subcommittees to focus on specific policy issues (*thema commissies*) and on neighbourhood policy – the latter are held on location. In *Winterfell*, where the council is presided over by the mayor, several extra committees have also been established at the request of both the majority and the opposition. However, councillors do not receive remuneration for these meetings in order to avoid extra costs. The chair of *Oldtown* does not organise extra meetings but has significantly improved the agenda instead. On his initiative, committees started to discuss additional policy issues, including policies of inter-municipal cooperation and municipal companies. Extra meetings can also be held on an ad hoc basis. In *Braavos*, the opposition chair granted the request from the opposition to organise an additional meeting after the mayor got involved in a scandal. Although he was personally not inclined to do so – since the meeting was organised in the summer holidays when many councillors were on leave – legal stipulations left him with no choice. In *Meereen*, no extra initiatives were taken.

Next to these legal functions, council chairs have additional responsibilities to empower the council and its councillors as representatives, policymakers and scrutinisers and to strengthen the council's position in relation to the BMA (political component). Arguably, facilitating the political debate is one of the most

important and visible elements thereof. The five chairs all stressed the importance of having sufficient time and equal opportunities for fundamental political debate. Yet, our interviews demonstrate that there are different ways to achieve this goal. In *Oldtown*, the chair introduced a strict system to organise questions and interpellations in a neutral way (both in terms of time and word length). The chair of *Braavos* introduced templates for the submission of oral questions. In the other councils, speaking time is, to a large extent, unlimited, and flexibility is seen as a concession to the councillors. This involves not only applying flexible deadlines to submit questions beforehand but also granting room for improvisation during the debate. The chair of *Meereen* exemplified this as follows:

Sometimes it occurs that a councillor says: “We have a pressing question, but we were unable to submit it. May I ask the question?” I always allow them to ask.

In this case, the chair deviated from the council’s internal regulations to facilitate the debate. To improve the quality of debate, the *King’s Landing* chair examined the introduction of debate training for councillors. The mayor-chair in *Winterfell* regularly calls upon the coalition parties to also engage in the council debate. Holding in-person meetings during the COVID-19 crisis was considered a democratic safeguard in *Meereen*, while maintaining the livestream of council meetings after the pandemic was seen as an extra incentive to improve the accountability and the quality of debate in *Winterfell*.

The council roles are further facilitated by a range of extra initiatives the council chair takes. To foster input from the locality in council debates (representative role), the *Oldtown* chair introduced speaking rights for citizens. He also organised additional field visits for the council. In *King’s Landing*, the coalition agreement even included a new competence for the chair to bring local decision-making closer to the citizens. For example, she made existing participation instruments better known and accessible. Besides representation, councillors’ legislative and scrutiny roles rely heavily on the quality of information (Verhelst & Peters, 2023). On that point, the chair of *King’s Landing* ensured that the BMA’s main policy plans were debated in the committee twice, which should enable councillors to steer, monitor and evaluate the policy process. The *Oldtown* chair insists on having complete policy documents that should be distributed among the councillors well in time. To process information, then, facility support comes in handy. Councillors from *Winterfell* received a laptop, which was mainly motivated by the ambition to help councillors scrutinise policy documents from the BMA. The *Braavos* chair also considered additional IT support for the council. An opposite trend, however, was noted in the case of *Meereen*, where the quality of the information on inter-municipal cooperation has receded. According to an opposition councillor, the administration and the executive board also wait to hand over information on sensitive policy issues until the deadline for submitting oral questions has passed.

Finally, we address the chair’s role in maintaining a productive relationship between the council and the executive board, which includes constructive

cooperation in addition to a sufficient degree of independence. While the former is secured by the double hat of the chair in the cases of *Winterfell* and *Meereen*, interviews reveal a similar constructive relationship in *King's Landing*, *Oldtown* and *Braavos*. The chair of *Braavos* not only felt sufficiently supported by the BMA, but he also attended the meetings of the executive board to prepare and fine-tune the agenda of the council.<sup>15</sup> In *Oldtown*, the chair also joins BMA meetings on a systematic basis, be it mainly in his capacity as alderman-to-be. Institutionalising the Office of the Council Chair, on the other hand, might also help to secure an independent position of the council as a whole. This occurred most explicitly in *King's Landing* as the result of the chair's own proactive behaviour:

At the beginning of my first year as chair, I visited Germany and the Netherlands to see how things are done in our neighbouring countries. I got a lot of inspiration there, such as requesting a personal employee. (King's Landing chair)

Having an assistant funded by the BMA allowed the chair to initiate different reforms, such as strengthening citizen participation, and to prepare the council meetings better.

Table 2 summarises the results of the first dimension of our analysis. It shows that each type of council chair has made some minimal efforts to empower the council on the organisational and political levels. Moreover, additional variance in terms of extra initiatives to organise meetings, set the agenda and facilitate the council roles cannot simply be attributed to the type of chairmanship (even if one executive chair is more passive in that regard). In terms of optimising the relationship with the BMA, no systematic difference between executive and non-executive chairs is found either (although one non-executive chair takes more initiative to secure the council's independence from the BMA). Rather, the results show that especially municipal size affects this dimension, as it makes structural support and additional resources more likely in larger municipalities. Hence, we cannot straightforwardly conclude that non-executive chairs empower councils and councillors to a larger extent than executive ones. Sex and intraparty status did not seem to play a role either.

Table 2      *Inside Empowerment of the Council Chairs*

Municipality	Functions (Organisational)		Responsibilities (Political)			
	Organise Meetings and Agendas		Facilitate Council Roles		Optimise Relationship with BMA	
	Minimal	Extra	Debate	Extra		
<i>Executive chair</i>						
<b>Winterfell</b> (mayor)	+	+	+	+	+	–
<b>Meereen</b> (alderman)	+	–	+	–	+	–

Table 2 (Continued)

Municipality	Functions (Organisational)		Responsibilities (Political)			
	Organise Meetings and Agendas		Facilitate Council Roles		Optimise Relationship with BMA	
	Minimal	Extra	Debate	Extra		
Non-executive chair						
<b>Oldtown</b> (alderman-to-be)	+	+	+	+	+	–
<b>King’s Landing</b> (majority)	+	+	+	+	+	+
<b>Braavos</b> (opposition)	+	±	+	+	+	–

Note: ‘+’, structural initiative; ‘±’, ad hoc initiative; ‘–’, no initiative.

6.2 Partisanship of the Council Chair

The second dimension in our study is the partisanship of the council chair. Partisanship encompasses two elements in our design: (1) involvement in council work and (2) politicisation in chairing the council. Regarding the former, we analyse the chair’s participation in the council debates. On this point, we find a clear distinction between the executive and non-executive chairs. The chairs of *Winterfell* and *Meereen* are obviously forced to actively participate in political discussions when their portfolio as mayor and alderman is discussed. Yet, as they make political statements and defend their actions by answering council questions, they also remain in charge of the council proceedings as chair. Moreover, this involvement regularly outstretches the chair’s own policy portfolio in the case of *Meereen*. An opposition councillor claimed:

When his own policy fields are debated, he [the chair] always says: “I will answer the question because it is part of my competences”.... But if the debate involves a policy domain of the other members of the executive board, he actually responds as well.

This perception was endorsed by a majority councillor: “... he [the chair] regularly expresses his own opinion as a BMA member before he actually gives the floor to the other aldermen.” As such, the position of council chair seems to facilitate circumventing the ordinary rules of debate. In *Winterfell*, an opposition councillor also felt that this practice impedes the quality of debate: “At certain times, she [the chair] turns the council meeting into a one-woman show.” This situation is completely different in *King’s Landing*, *Oldtown* and *Braavos*, where chairs participate substantially less in the ordinary council debates and limit their political contributions as much as possible. Sometimes, this is part of a socialisation process. For example, the chair of the *Oldtown* council was reprimanded by the opposition for his active contribution to the council debates in his first months in office. This disappeared afterwards. When chairs do want to realise some personal political

objectives in the council, they have to act outside the council meeting (e.g. in the party ranks or through informal networks).

The second element of partisanship is the politicisation of the office. Council chairs can act in a very procedural way by strictly adhering to the formal rules and stipulations. On the opposite side, they can be very political and treat councillors and party groups differently based on their party affiliation and the dynamic between majority and opposition. We find clear differences between our cases regarding the style of chairing council debates, despite the official equal distribution of speaking time in each of them. These differences relate to the type of council chair. It is mainly in councils chaired by members of the BMA that the impartiality of the chair is being questioned. In *Winterfell*, there is a sense of missing a neutral referee for the opposition, as the chair tends to interrupt councillors too often. In *Meereen*, councillors even feel to be treated very harshly by the chair, who is unable to separate his office from the one as a member of the BMA. While the respective chairs do not perceive the situation as problematic themselves, councillors thus seem to challenge the desirability of their double role. We could not observe such critical opinions of the politicisation of the office in the councils with a non-executive chair. The case of *Oldtown* is situated in between. Although the chair is generally applauded for his procedural style of guiding the debates, opposition councillors still feel slightly disadvantaged in being awarded speaking time. On a rare occasion, the chair did not intervene when an alderman launched a personal attack on a member from the opposition either.

Finally, in some interviews, we encountered another indicator of the politicisation of the office that was not identified in our theoretical framework. Indeed, impartiality is also reflected in the collectivisation of the Office of the Council Chair as such. In a sphere of shared responsibility, for example, where different representatives from different party groups manage council affairs collectively in a kind of collegiate board, the council is enabled and encouraged to bridge the divide between the majority and the opposition. This system was installed in *Braavos*, where the municipal CEO testified:

What is very valuable is that once a year, we meet with the chair, the mayor and the party group leaders to deal with various topics ... it was actually also initiated by the chair. That is something that used to happen far less in the past.

In *King's Landing*, this cross-party deliberation is even institutionalised in the council's Bureau, a monthly meeting of the chair, the vice-chair, the leaders of the party groups and the mayor. Next to this gathering, the committee chairs are represented in the Extended Bureau (*Uitgebreid Bureau*). In *Oldtown*, the chair also convenes meetings with the party group leaders to discuss improvements in council business. The interviews reveal that these formal or informal collective meetings receive support from all political actors. When the chairmanship is not exercised collectively in any way, on the other hand, the institution is considered more



partisan. This is the case in *Winterfell*, where the opposition complained about the lack of consultation on organising council business.

Taking these elements together (see Table 3), we may conclude that non-executive council chairs act less politically than executive chairs. The *Oldtown*, *King's Landing* and *Braavos* cases are characterised by more objective and procedural chairmanship in combination with low levels of personal involvement in council debates. These non-executive chairs act in a strictly neutral way while refraining from party politics in the council. Their approach is epitomised by (a form of) collectivisation of the office and the installation of cross-party initiatives to stimulate nonpartisan working. This finding applies to non-executive chairs from the majority and the opposition. The chairs in *Winterfell* and *Meereen*, on the contrary, are highly involved in council debates due to their double hat as chair and member of the executive board. Their office is also strongly politicised, as it is believed that they do not treat every party group equally. Again, these differences seemed unaffected by the sex and intraparty status of the council chair.

Table 3      *Partisanship of the Council Chairs*

Municipality	Involvement	Politicisation	
	Contribution to Debate	Impartiality	Collectivisation
<i>Executive Chair</i>			
<b>Winterfell</b> ( <i>mayor</i> )	+	–	–
<b>Meereen</b> ( <i>alderman</i> )	+	–	–
<i>Non-executive chair</i>			
<b>Oldtown</b> ( <i>alderman-to-be</i> )	–	±	+
<b>King's Landing</b> ( <i>majority</i> )	–	+	+
<b>Braavos</b> ( <i>opposition</i> )	–	+	+

Note: '+', high; '±', medium, '–', low.

6.3 *Outside Empowerment of the Council*

The third and final dimension of our analysis concerns the representation of the council as an institution towards the locality at large. As Table 4 demonstrates, this dimension indeed clearly differs across the different types of council chairs. In *Winterfell* and *Meereen*, the chairs do not present themselves to the larger community in their capacity as council chairs. The CEO of *Meereen* stated, for example: “In fact, I can cite virtually no examples over the past three years where he [the chair] has exclusively come to the fore as council chair.” In their own perception, but also in the eyes of their citizens, the chairs from *Winterfell* and *Meereen* are first and foremost mayor and alderman, respectively. From their point of view, being a chair does not add an additional layer to the existing, already (very) exclusive, political profile. The case of *Oldtown* is more ambiguous in this regard. On the one hand, the chair actively communicates about his office via social media. On the other hand, at public events, where he regularly takes the stage, he tends to

represent the BMA rather than the council. To some extent, he is therefore regarded as the ‘tenth alderman’ of the city.

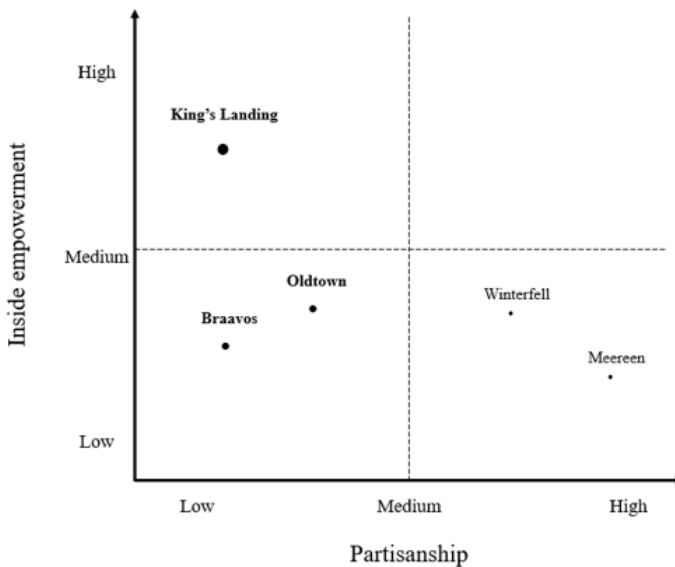
In *Braavos* and *King’s Landing*, the chairs do not purposively speak out on a regular basis as council chairs either; nor do they (claim to) proactively seek media attention for that purpose. In the case of *Braavos*, this reluctance stems from the chair’s own choice to move to a backbench position after having been in leadership positions for several years. Nevertheless, both non-executive chairs have generated attention for the council, at least in a reactive way. The chair of *Braavos* talked to the press about the organisation of council meetings during the COVID-19 crisis and the additional meeting about the scandal in which the mayor was involved. Through this communication, the role of the chair as the monitor of the democratic process in the municipality was underlined. He also attended official visits of the provincial deputy and a twin city on behalf of the council. In *King’s Landing*, a page of the local authority’s official magazine, which is distributed among all inhabitants, was devoted to the council and the chair as its representative. The chair also communicates with news media about her initiatives to bring politics closer to the citizens. Moreover, there were plans to invite her as a guest lecturer in schools and universities to teach young people about the values and organisation of local democracy. These initiatives do seem to hint at a more proactive role in local government’s public representation towards the local community.

In summary, our results indicate that regardless of the majority/opposition divide, a non-executive position provides more incentives, or at least political space and opportunity, to develop the council chair’s office into a more substantial political role outside local government. As the Flemish government has claimed, this could consolidate the institutional and societal position of the council as a whole. As was the case with inside empowerment and partisanship, sex and intraparty status do not display substantial variation on this dimension.

Table 4      *Outside Empowerment of the Council Chairs*

Municipality	Representation of the Council Towards the Locality		
	Not Present	Reactively	Proactively
<i>Executive chair</i>			
<b>Winterfell</b> (mayor)	+		
<b>Meereen</b> (alderman)	+		
<i>Non-executive chair</i>			
<b>Oldtown</b> (alderman-to-be)		+	±
<b>King’s Landing</b> (majority)		+	+
<b>Braavos</b> (opposition)		+	±

Note: ‘+’, applicable; ‘±’, partly applicable.

**Figure 3** *Types of Council Chair in Our Study*

#### 6.4 Case Summary

As we have obtained a three-dimensional picture of the council chair in the five cases, we can now connect our empirical insights back to the theoretical framework. More specifically, we relate the five council chairs under study to the different ideal types set out in the theory section. Figure 3 shows the results of this exercise, whereby the non-executive chairs are printed in bold. The chairs of *Winterfell* and *Meereen* are placed in the lower right quadrant and can be classified as an example of the *partisan* (Type IV). The chairmanship in both municipalities is characterised by high levels of politicisation and involvement in council debates. However, *Meereen* scored lower than *Winterfell* with regard to the inside empowerment of the council, because no additional measures were taken to strengthen the council's position.

As opposed to these cases, the chairs of *Oldtown* and *Braavos* are placed in the lower left quadrant, which represents the ideal type of *caretaker*. While these chairs are acting in a strictly neutral way and take some additional initiatives to empower the council, they do this in a less pronounced fashion than the chair in *King's Landing*, who is the only case in our study representing Type I, the *captain*. The latter combines proactive attempts to activate and emancipate the council and its councillors with a non-politicised work ethic as chair. In addition, the extent to which the chairs represent their office and institution to the outside world is expressed by the size of the dots. Here, too, non-executive chairs occupy a more prominent position in the scheme.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that not a single case comes close to Type II, the *activist*. This is not surprising in the Flemish local government setting, in which executives remain part of the council and there is usually a strict party and coalition discipline. Under such a monistic system, it is very unlikely that a chair can instrumentalise council empowerment as a partisan weapon against the BMA. In *Braavos*, the majority did offer the chairmanship to an opposition councillor, but they only did so because they knew the chair would not actively use his position to the BMA's disadvantage.

## 7 Conclusion

In this article, we sought to explore how Flemish local council chairs exercise their office. More specifically, we assessed whether a non-executive local council chair succeeds better in empowering the council as purported by the Flemish government in its 2005 institutional reform. In fact, having acknowledged the problematic role and position of the council and its councillors, the Flemish government introduced the possibility to appoint a non-executive local council chair as one way to reinstate the legislative branch. It was believed that the latter would strengthen the council vis-à-vis the executive, preside in a nonpartisan way and represent the council in the locality at large (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010; Verbeek, 2014; Verhelst et al., 2019; Vlaams Parlement, 2005).

Based on semi-structured elite interviews with local political actors, we have studied the council chairmanship in five municipalities with a different type of chair: a mayor, an alderman, an alderman-to-be, a majority councillor and an opposition councillor. Concerning the inside empowerment of the council, we found that all chairs make efforts to a certain degree to enhance the council's position. They try to facilitate the debate in the council meetings, are flexible with deadlines for oral questions, organise extra sessions and committees and provide laptops, among other things. Hence, on this dimension, we could not establish that non-executive chairs are systematically more inclined to strengthen the council than the chairs who combine their office with a position in the Board of Mayor and Aldermen. In our study, personal style, municipal context and size seem more important to interpret the chairs' contribution to the inside empowerment of the council in organisational terms and in taking measures to secure the council's independence in the political arena. As Verbeek and Van Bouwel (2010) have argued, our research also showed the non-executive chairmanship does not really succeed in resolving the strong reliance of the council upon the BMA and their administration, even if the relations are generally marked as cooperative.

Yet, the comparison between the five cases showed more differences between the types of chair with regard to the other two dimensions, that is, partisanship and outside empowerment. The non-executive chairs are particularly characterised by their neutrality and potential to act as the council's spokesperson. Contrarily, the chairs who are part of the BMA very actively participate in council debates, have difficulty distinguishing between their roles and do not represent their office in the locality. These results are in line with our expectations, that is, the premises

of the 2005 Local Government Act. It indicates that it does matter whether executive or non-executive councillors are in charge of the council. The ideal-typical council *captain*, or the more passive *caretaker*, are more likely to be found in the latter group. Double-hatted chairs, on the other hand, tend more towards the *partisan* type of chair. Whether the non-executive councillors then belong to the council's majority or opposition does not seem to play a determining role, as the *activist* type of chair is very unlikely to survive in Flemish local government, marked by its partitocracy and strong executive dominance. The intraparty status and sex of the chairs did not seem to be decisive either for that matter.

In summary, our comparative case study suggests that a non-executive local council chair can be an additional asset to local democracy. In our article, non-executive chairs are substantially less partisan and step forward more often as the council's spokesperson. This result confirms earlier research in which local politicians self-reported that the council proceedings, in general, and council scrutiny, in particular, were strengthened in councils that were not presided over by a mayor (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010; Olislagers et al., 2013). Some extra measures, however, could further facilitate the success of the reform. As suggested by the literature (e.g. Jenny & Müller, 1995), a more neutral appointment procedure would enhance the impartiality of the office. This could involve an election within the council after a genuine selection process and investiture debate instead of incorporating the designation of the chair into the general government formation process. Meanwhile, our study suggests that granting the office more support on the administrative, personal and institutional levels might also improve council management. In that regard, equipping the council with a council clerk, improving the stature of the chair or institutionalising a cross-party bureau could help to realise the just ambition that drove the reform in the first place.

Nonetheless, follow-up research is needed to examine the generalisability of our findings. Our comparative design was exploratory in nature and only comprised five typical cases. Using the analytical dimensions and corresponding ideal types developed in this article, assessments through quantitative measurements should verify our results on a larger scale. Furthermore, future research can also build on our work to investigate the head of the legislature in different settings (e.g. in other local government systems, or levels of government). At the same time, it can inspire the debate about introducing a non-executive council chair in the Netherlands, which still lacks solid empirical support (Boogers et al., 2021; Karsten & van Zuydam, 2019). Having the non-political mayor as council chair seems to provide a guarantee of having at least a *caretaker* chair, who organises the council business in a neutral way. Replacing this office with a non-executive councillor might risk ending up with a *partisan* or *activist* chair, who instrumentalises the office for party political gains. If the mayor is to be replaced by a *captain*, however, who acts as an ambitious and neutral chair and is supported by a collective bureau, the emancipation of the council could get an extra boost.

## Notes

- 1 Members of the executive board are prohibited, however, from chairing council committees.
- 2 The explanatory part of the Local Government Act stated the following: “The possibility to appoint a councillor who is not part of the board as the chair of the council can strengthen the council’s oversight role with respect to the executive officers. A non-executive chair can also more strongly emphasize the functioning of the council by giving it a more independent position relative to the board. If the municipality seeks a far-reaching separation between policy and management, the councillors might prefer as chair a councillor without an executive mandate” (Vlaams Parlement, 2005, p. 13).
- 3 Research on the office in the Netherlands is equally scarce (see Karsten et al., 2014 and Boogers et al., 2021, for general evaluations of the mayoral office; see Karsten & van Zuydam, 2019, for a quantitative study of the vice-chair of the council).
- 4 In many municipalities, there is a formal (or informal) agreement on the succession of a member of the executive board after a certain period during the council term.
- 5 Based on an observation of biological characteristics we determined chairs’ *sex*. We did not explicitly ask them about their *gender* identity.
- 6 Other objectives of the new act were directed towards the municipal administration (e.g. enforcing its role in the policy cycle, improving cooperation with the political actors and modernising financial management) (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010).
- 7 The reform exemplifies how Flanders and the Netherlands chose ‘different solutions’ to tackle ‘similar problems’ with the council (Steen & Wille, 2005). In the Netherlands, dualism was a more drastic response to the need to re-empower the council. Dualism did not abandon the double hat of the mayor, however, who chairs the executive board and the council as neutral and unelected broker by default (Karsten et al., 2014; Karsten & van Zuydam, 2019). The office of the vice-chair, assumed by a non-executive councillor to replace absent or indisposed mayors, is seen as an extra guard for the council and as a steppingstone towards a stronger identity of the institution as a whole (Karsten & van Zuydam, 2019).
- 8 Academic reports published in preparation of the new Local Government Act proposed much more drastic reforms, such as the introduction of a dualistic system, the mandatory appointment of a non-executive council chair, a constructive motion of no confidence (which has been introduced recently), the abolishment of multiple office holding, and the direct election of the mayor (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010).
- 9 However, a few chairs became opposition councillors during the legislative term, as they left their party or the governing majority.
- 10 In municipalities that are governed by one party the discussion about the distribution of offices, including the council chairmanship, takes place within that party.
- 11 Especially the collaboration with the CEO was deemed key (Verbeek, 2014; Verbeek & Van Bouwel, 2010).
- 12 When the chair is nominated from the strongest party, and this party is not part of the government, the authors reckon this to be a sign of non-partisanship. Appointing a council chair from the strongest opposition party is less common in practice, however.
- 13 The original typology developed by Jenny and Müller (1995, p. 328) was designed to distinguish between government systems. They discerned four types: speaker of the

house, neutral chairman, party asset and minor party position. For our research, we tailored this typology to the context of Flemish local government and the particular objective that the chair would act as instrument of council empowerment.

- 14 This differed to some extent for the *Braavos* case, as we opted for an alderman to replace the majority councillor and we did not find an opposition councillor willing to cooperate. For *Winterfell*, we did not succeed in interviewing the CEO.
- 15 Since the COVID-19 pandemic and a change in his professional life, however, he no longer systematically joins the meetings.

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