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Troubles in the heart of the EU – Political crisis in Belgium

When Belgium became independent in 1830, its political situation was not complicated at all. After the Congress of Vienna in 1815 some of the territories of what is now the kingdom of Belgium were added to the Netherlands as a buffer-zone against future French imperial ambitions. The anti-French and anti-catholic policies of the Dutch unified the Francophone elites of Flanders and Wallonia. Their reaction sparked the Belgian Revolution, which was eventually accepted by the international community. The new government set up a constitutional monarchy in which the king *de facto* was a contracted manager. The constitution foresaw a unitary, consociational democratic system with a parliament and senate. They chose Duke Leopold of the Saksen-Coburg dynasty as first king of the Belgians, and Brussels as the new capital. Despite the fact that the new government legitimized its existence on its multicultural nature, the language of the administration, courts and army remained French.

From its beginning, Belgium has been a multi-ethnical country. In Flanders, in the north, lived the Flemings who spoke different Dutch dialects (there was no standardized Dutch in 1830); in the south lived the Walloons, of which most spoke French by then (but also Walloon, a Romanic language like Norman). In the Middle Ages, Flanders was a very rich region, with many important trading cities like Bruges, Ghent, Ypres, Brussels and Antwerp. However in the 19th century the economical center lay in Wallonia, which would become the first industrialized region on the European continent. In comparison Flanders was a poor, underdeveloped and peripheral region at the moment of Belgium's independence[1].

Belgium emerged in a time where European monarchic dynasties slowly lost their grip on their vast territories and where a rising bourgeoisie, heavily inspired by French ideals such as *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité*, filled in this political space. With industrialization and expanding capitalist enterprises, the new elite sought to replace aristocratic power and its institutions with a society based on their liberal democratic values and beliefs. Leopold I had very little power compared with the Dutch king or the German emperor. With this new regime also came an enhanced appeal for collective identity based on shared history, ethnos, community and destiny[2]. Belgium was exceptional for that it based it's (threatened) identity on both ethnic groups (Flemish and Walloon). Deeply catholic, rural Flanders and Francophone, secular, liberal Wallonia found each other facing the threat of the Dutch dominance. Identity is always more salient when the

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[1] L. De Winter. P. Baudewyns, *Belgium: "Towards the Breakdown of a Nation-State in the Heart of Europe?"*, "Nationalism and Ethnic Politics" 2009, vol. 15, p. 282.

[2] J. Bone, *The Social Map: Cohesion, Conflict and National Identity*, "Nationalism and Ethnic Politics" 2006, vol. 12, p. 364–366.

group is threatened. This union against the Dutch indirectly created another group iden-
tity: a Belgian one, which was culturally based on the identity of the Francophone elite,
but included the lower status Flemish group.

Regarding the theoretical framework of this article it is important to differentiate be-
tween the psychological concept of (individual identity) with the conception of social
or political (group) identity. Despite the fact that both forms are used in overlapping
disciplines of identity studies, this study focuses on group identity. Individual or per-
sonal identity is linked with *ontological security*[3]: Every human needs to find a balance
between his individual self and the group he/she belongs to. Therefore the individual
constructs different identifications within his/her identity. These identifications are
formed through socialization and enable humans to reduce the complexity of the world
and behave accordingly in different social situations. One can be a father, a son, an em-
ployer, a citizen of a certain region or city, a national of a certain country, a European,
etc. all at the same time. But one cannot have different identities. These identifications
can be *ascribed* (constructed by others) or *acquired* (by experience). They exist at dif-
ferent levels and often overlap. They allow humans to feel unique and nourish their
need to belong. Every identification contains a set of common (group) values, behav-
ioral prescriptions, shared identity characteristics and an emotional tie with the target
group. Not all identifications can be equally strong at the same time; depending of the
situation some are more salient than others. Since both groups and individuals change
over time, they are also dynamic in nature and reconstructed every time[4].

Group identity is the common denominator of all individual identifications linked to
a specific group. Likewise they are dynamic and evolve over time. Unlike smaller so-
cial identities, regional or national identities prove to be very resilient over time; since
they can legitimize and keep a group together not only basing themselves on common
values and characteristics, but also on common history and sometimes even a specific
language[5]. A good way to describe a social identity is to filter it down to prototypes.
These cover the stereotypical attributes of groups in ideal-types. Typically they are not
a checklist, but rather fuzzy sets of concepts that capture the context-dependent features
of group membership. Prototypes embody all attributes that characterize groups (in-
cluding beliefs, attitudes, feels and behaviors) and distinguish them from other groups[6].
When describing both regional identities in 1930, both groups were antagonized, but
not politicized yet, against each other: The Flemings and Francophone elite were di-
vided on socio-economical level, cultural prestige, linguistic and religious axis. The
prototype of a Fleming was a poor, catholic farmer with, if literate, the knowledge that
Flanders was a rich region, but now has no hope of obtaining this status again. They
looked up at the Francophone elite with envy and realized that assimilation might im-
prove their social position. The elite's identity was superior: they looked down on the

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[3] A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Cambridge Polity Press, 1991, p. 35–69.
[4] J. Bone, *The Social Map: Cohesion, Conflict and National Identity*, "Nationalism and Ethnic
Politics" 2006, vol. 12, p. 347–359.
[5] Ibidem, p. 359–370.
[6] M. A. Hogg, D. J. Terry, *Social Identity and Self-Catherogization Processes in Organizational
Contexts*, "The Academy of Management Review" 2000, vol. 25, no 1, p. 123–124.

Flemish and Walloon languages and dismissed them as incapable of transmitting Enlightenment ideals and as impediments to economic development[7]. Both identities were weak at that time, and Belgian identity, which covered both ethnic groups, ruled. For the Flemings and poor Walloons it had more prestige than their regional identity. For the elite, it was the group they governed, and how the 'nation' differentiated itself from France and the Netherlands.

Already ten years after the independence, Flemish opposition against the Francophone domination was voiced through demand for linguistic autonomy. The Flemish movement was born. The Dutch-speaking lower-middle-class patriots in the more populous Flanders discovered that French was needed for professional advancement. If they wanted the loyalty of the local population they felt that the state should recognize Dutch as an official language[8]. Already in 1840 the Flemish dialects were standardized with the Dutch of the Netherlands. This notion of group identity, with low status and a sense of system blame were central to the development of political action[9]. Although there were no political claims until World War I, different cultural groups and associations promoted Dutch. Some of these organizations linked up with the national Catholic party to get more leverage on politics. The Francophone religious elite did not stop the Flemish lower clergy for co-opting these claims, as long as they were keeping the flock catholic and stopped socialist ideas from spreading[10].

The urban-based Flemish movement did not have territorial claims yet. But the escalation from cultural demands to political was a natural reaction to the intransigence of the Francophone elite. The first language laws were adopted in the late 19th century. Asymmetrical bilingualism was imposed on Flanders to accommodate the movement. The rest of Belgium remained unilingual. The legislation was limited and most remained dead letter. The most important change was the Equalization act of 1898: the boost of Dutch as an official language of Belgium on equal footing with French[11].

Political claims were born in the trenches of World War I. The Flemish soldiers realized that their troops often met with an untimely death because the French-speaking officers were not able to translate their orders. This enmity was magnified by class differences. In 1919 introduction of universal male suffrage led to the creation a system of "verzuilling" (pillarization), in which the three main parties (Catholics, Liberals and Socialists) were divided over two overlapping cleavages. Historically these three pillars were geographically defined: Industrial centers were socialist, the countryside was Catholic and provincial town with domestic industries were Liberal[12]. The first postwar

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[7] B. Ceuppens, *Allochtons, Colonizers, and Scroungers: Exclusionary Populism in Belgium*, "African Studies Review" 2006, vol. 49, no 2, p. 154.

[8] Ibidem, p. 153.

[9] L. Huddy, *Context and Meaning in Social Identity Theory: A Response to Oakes*, "Political Psychology" 2002, vol. 23, no 4, p. 826.

[10] L. De Winter, P. Baudewyns, *Belgium: "Towards the Breakdown of a Nation-State in the Heart of Europe?"*, "Nationalism and Ethnic Politics" 2009, vol. 15, p. 283.

[11] L. Hooghe, *Hollowing the center*, in: *Federalism and territorial cleavages*, eds U. Amoretti; N. Bermeo, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2004.

[12] B. Ceuppens, *Allochtons, Colonizers, and Scroungers: Exclusionary Populism in Belgium*, "African Studies Review" 2006, vol. 49, no 2, p. 151.

elections also brought forth the first genuine Flemish nationalist party of the Frontpartij (Front party), which caught 5.2% of the Flemish vote. It radicalized during the 1920's due to the government's unwillingness to grant more cultural autonomy to Flanders. This caused some moderate Flemish nationalists to leave the party and promote their interest in the traditional political families[13].

After a long stretch of elite opposition against Flemish cultural autonomy, the regime finally gave in with a new law in 1932, which proclaimed Dutch as the only official language of Flanders. The Frontpartij is finally absorbed by a new nationalist party in 1933. The Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (VNV, Flemish National Union) was an umbrella for all from Flemish moderate nationalists to fascists. Different fractions were kept in line by the authoritarian leader, Staf de Clercq. At the outbreak of World War II, the democratic elements were overruled and the party collaborates with the Nazis in the hope to realize their ideal of Dietsland (Dutchland): the creation of the independent state of Flanders and the Netherlands. The VNV kept losing support during the war, but still discredited the whole Flemish movement. The party was banned after the war and its leaders trialed. Immediately in the postwar period, Flemish interests were only promoted through the traditional parties[14].

The Flemish collaboration stained the movement as a whole, while Degrelle in the south mostly discredited the Walloon catholic right. The French-speaking referred to the Flemish nationalists as *les Flamands-Boches* (Boche being a pejorative term for German). The king-question, right after the war also polarized both communities. A referendum was organized to measure popular support for the king's continuation of office after accusations of collaboration. Two-third majority was not obtained, but Flanders got the upper hand with their yes-vote because of their demographic majority position. This led to a serious political crisis, and violent manifestations in the Francophone communities, who had overly voted for the king's abdication. Finally the issue was resolved by Leopold III's removal in favor of his son Boudewijn. From this moment on Francophone identity would be defined against the anti-democratic *other*: the Flemings who wanted to impose their authoritarian policies by forcing legislation upon the French-speaking Belgians with their majority. This Francophone fear would deeply shape the transition from a unitary to a federal state model.

In the beginning of the 1960's tensions between the two ethnic groups touched high peaks once more. Manifestations and political crisis resulted in a series of new language laws. The successes of the Flemish movement also initiated a countermovement in the Francophone community. These reforms were the foundations for all further (state) reforms and all the seeds of today's political crisis can be traced back to the way how the elite accommodated Flemish cultural demands. In 1963 the language border was fixed and four linguistic zones were established: Dutch-speaking Flanders minus the capital region, bilingual Brussels, a monolingual French Wallonia and finally a small Germanophone corner near the German border[15]. This was an answer to the old

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[13] L. De Winter; P. Baudewyns, *Belgium: "Towards the Breakdown of a Nation-State in the Heart of Europe?"*, "Nationalism and Ethnic Politics" 2009, vol. 15, p. 283.

[14] Ibidem, p. 284.

[15] These so called "Oostkantons", concentrated around the cities of Eupen and Malmedy, were added to Belgium after World War I.

Flemish fear for the Frenchification of Brussels. Since the end of the 19th century, the capital became increasingly dominated by the Francophone elite and migrants from Wallonia. Since the language border was not fixed with the law of 1932, a 10-year language census decided which districts were added to what language zone. The Frenchification of Flemish territory and distrust about the outcome of earlier censuses, increased demands to settle the border for once and for all.

The historic unwillingness of the Belgian elite to impose a bilingual regime on the whole territory of Belgium in fear of losing jobs in public administration to bilingual Flemings, finally put Belgian on a certain path regarding language rights. The compromise of 1963 clearly chose for an interpretation of language as a territorial right and not an individual one. The Flemish '*Territorialiteitsprincipe*' on behalf of the socially disadvantaged was chosen over the Francophone '*Principe de personnalité*' on behalf of the socially dominant[16]. From now on the fixed linguistic borders would transform into real identity borders for both ethnic groups; thereby deeply ingraining the two regional identities, characterized by language, on territorial terms. In turn the evolution from individual to collective linguistic rights of Flemings was also a result of the regime's unwillingness to stop the Frenchification of bilingual Flanders before 1932. The new policy effectively extinguished the lasts cores of Francophone residents in cities like Ghent or Antwerp, shifting the problem solely to Brussels, which kept frenchifying due to the influx of French-speaking migrants, mostly from Morocco and Algiers. The provision of facilities[17] (language rights) to the French-speaking minority in the Flemish municipalities around Brussels would reemerge later and polarize both communities once more.

Between 1966 and 1968 escalation of a linguistic turf conflict profoundly changed Flemish identity, while the changing economic situation in the 1960's triggered a regionalist turn in Wallonia and an identity schism within the Francophone community. In 1966 in the Flemish city Leuven, student protest escalated into mass manifestations, finally leading to the fall of the government and the first state reform in 1970. The issue was the lack of space for the postwar baby-boom generation at the Catholic University of Leuven. The Catholic, Francophone university council and staff opposed the demands to dutchify the university and when an objective case was made to link the city administration of Leuven to Brussels the long-lasting tensions exploded. Mass student protests, supported by Flemish politicians and the population escalated into violent demonstrations, and at the height of the protests Leuven was technically an occupied city. The whole affair initiated an anti-clerical and anti-French turn, which spread through Flanders. Under the slogan "Leuven Vlaams – Walen Buiten" ("Leuven Flemish – Walloons Out") the protest movement appealed to the government to protect the rights of the ethnic Flemings in the city against these policies. In the end the University was split in a Dutch and French part. The French part was moved to a campus just across the language border, now called Louvain-la-Neuve (New Leuven).

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[16] B. Ceuppens, *Allochtons, Colonizers, and Scroungers: Exclusionary Populism in Belgium*, "African Studies Review" 2006, vol. 49, no 2, p. 155.
[17] Ibidem, p. 155.

The decline of the Walloon economy and the rise of the Flanders, tipped the balance to the north. Flanders had been able to attract new industries and many small and medium businesses, while the Walloon industry based on steal and coal stagnated. With the announced reform of the federal government in which the number of Flemish and Walloons would be equal, Wallonia feared that its new economic policy would be dictated by Flemings. They were also distrustful towards the influence of Brussels in federal politics. Both issues stimulated Walloon demands for political regional autonomy. So in 1970 following the crisis, the new state reform restored the balance between the ethnic communities on the one hand, but embedded new anti-majority mechanisms along with it. For instance, the Francophone minority at federal level can block motions with a special alarm-bell procedure regarding communitarian issues. The "Cultuurgemeenschappen" (culture communities) are taken up in the amendments and on request of Wallonia, Belgium became divided in two regions with yet unspecified socio-economic competences[18].

In reaction to the Flemish movement's successes, Francophone identity became threatened and they started up their own nationalistic political parties. These parties were not created in Wallonia, but in Flanders and Brussels, were the French-speaking community was most anxious about increased Flemish influence. So in the 1960–1970's the party scene underwent deep changes, with new nationalistic or regionalist parties like: The Volkspartij (VP, People's party) protecting Flemish interests; Rétour à Liège (RàL, Return to Liège), a radical Francophone party opposing the switch of the municipality of Voeren from the Walloon province Liège to Flanders; The Front Démocratique des Francophones (FDF, Francophone Democratic Front) in Brussels, defending French-speaking majority in Brussels and trying to keep the capital away from Flemish influence; and finally the Rassemblement Wallon (RW, Walloon Rally) defending regional interest of Wallonia with a popular-agrarian program. Three of those would become main contenders for the traditional 'national' parties and catalyze the disintegration of the unitary party system. In Flanders the VP, with a nationalist, social and Catholic program, took away votes from the Catholic party. In Brussels the FDF challenged the Liberals, who were traditionally the biggest party in the capital. In Wallonia RW conquered terrain at the cost of the Parti Socialiste (PS, Socialist Party). The regional and nationalistic programs of these new parties took a big bite out the electorate of the traditional parties. Communitarian issues started dividing the traditional families, until they spit one by one. When the last one split at the end of 1970's there was no national party left to defend Belgian interests.

The natural consequence of these trends was clearly visible in the following state reforms of 1980, 1988–89, 1993 and 2001–2002. The ethnic identity conflict based on territory and Belgium's long consociational tradition of accommodation increasingly hollowed out the center. The parties on either side carved up the center, handing over those central policies that matter most to the competing groups; or installed mutual checks these (in case the parties were not keen of vacating a certain federal policy area). This altered the center's balance of power by interlocking the actors with additional

[18] Deredactie.be (20.10.2011): http://www.deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws/politiek/111004_overzicht_staatshervormingen.

anti-majoritan measures in every reform. By buying off disaffected groups, conflicts could also be settled, often at a high cost[19]. This unlocking, or allocating of resources manipulated the relation between group and center. In essence every state reform in time led to an even more hollow center, which again lead to a necessity to take up the new reality in the constitution[20].

A very short overview of the different state reforms confirms the statements above. In 1980 the culture communities gained more authority, and the "Gewesten" (Regions) were created to regionalize socio-economic issues like labor, economy, environment and spatial planning. Both Communities and Regions got an executive branch and a council. The Flemish Community and Region, which overlap geographically, decided to merge them in one executive and one council. Moreover the "Arbitragehof" (Constitutional court) was erected to judge if conflict arises between Regions or Communities. Already in 1988–1989 the Communities became completely responsible for education, and a third Region was created: the Brussels Capital Region. A new financing law regulates the allocated budgets of communities and regions vis-à-vis the federal level, which collects the taxes. 4 year later, Belgium was baptized again as a federal state, with extended competences (fiscal policy) and direct elections for the Regions. In 2001–2002 they reshuffled the hierarchy of the system: From now on the Regions control and govern provincial and municipal levels. For instance the Flemish government can now appoint mayors in the municipals around Brussels. On demand of the Francophone society, the budgets for the Communities were raised. Finally the Constitutional court is now competent to declare laws null and void when conflicts arise[21].

Until the 1970's Belgium has been praised as a prime example of a unitary, consociational state, afterwards it became a textbook case-study of the evolution from a unitary to a federal model. The world did not seem to understand how such a political crisis could occur in such a stable democracy as Belgium. This article will explain that the crisis was in line of a long path dependency of system erosion. Remarkable was the stubbornness of both camps, which can be explained by looking at identity. The causes of the crisis all have their roots in the historic systemic changes, which interlocked the two alienated groups in such a way, that the core issues that bind them together, are the ones they cannot compromise on.
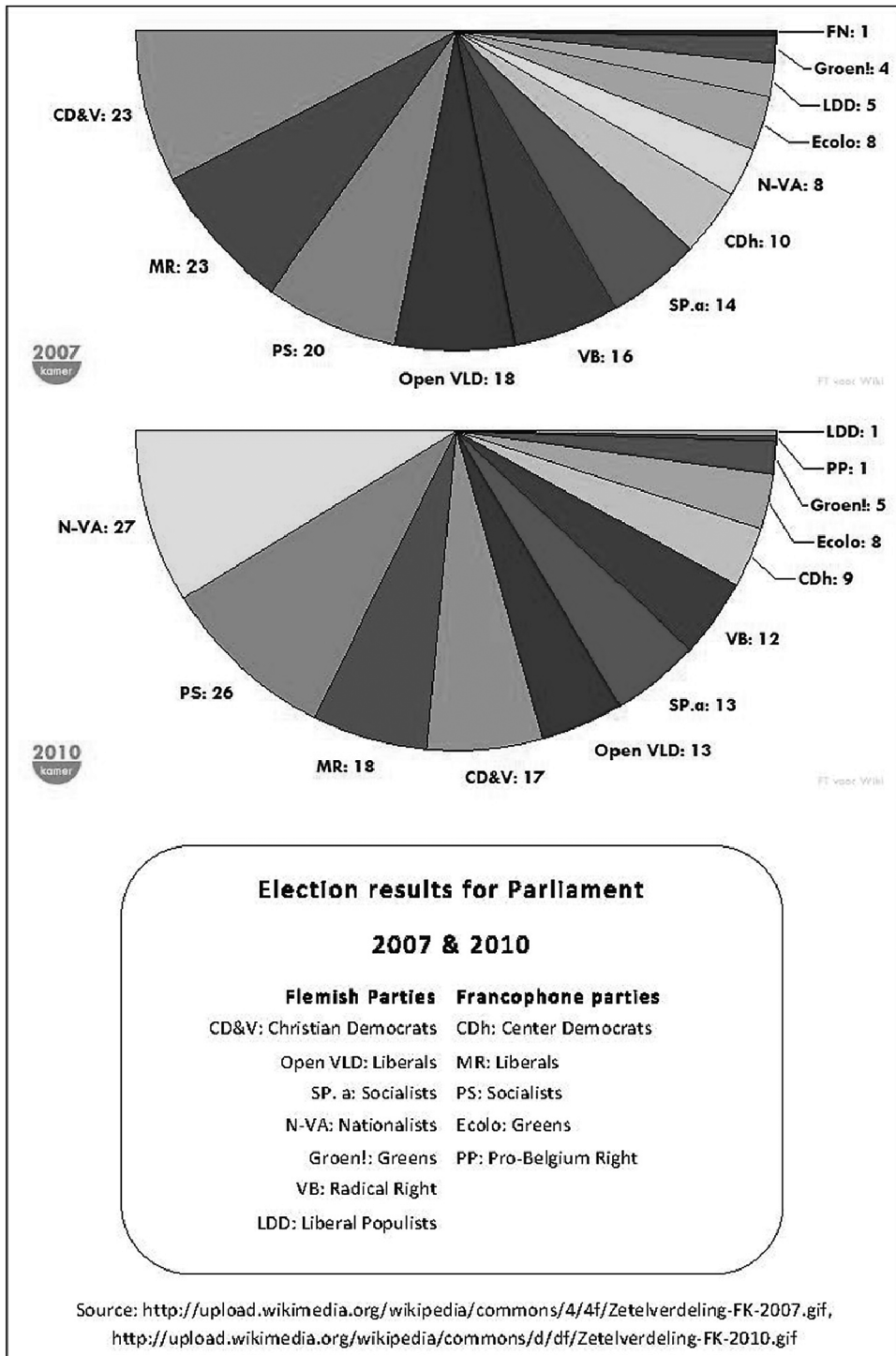
When in 2007 after 8 years, the CD&V[22] (Christian Democrats) in alliance with the N-VA (New Flemish Alliance, nationalists) won the elections with the promise of splitting Brussel-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV), the electoral district of Halle and Vilvoorde near Brussels, and announced a new state reform the troubles started. The French parties were definitely not demanding a new reform and likewise did not want to be humiliated in front of their voters by a unilateral split of the electoral district. With the alarm bell procedure they postponed the issue with almost a year, and by blocking the negotiations

[19]   L. Hooghe, *Hollowing the center*, in: *Federalism and territorial cleavages*, eds U. Amoretti, N. Bermeo, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2004.

[20]   Ibidem.

[21]   Deredactie.be (20.10.2011): http://www.deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws/politiek/111004_over-zicht_staatshervormingen.

[22]   Christen Democraten & Vlaams: Christian Democrats & Flemish.

2007
kamer

FN: 1
Groen!: 4
LDD: 5
Ecolo: 8
N-VA: 8
CDh: 10
SP.a: 14
VB: 16
Open VLD: 18
PS: 20
MR: 23
CD&V: 23

2010
kamer

LDD: 1
PP: 1
Groen!: 5
Ecolo: 8
CDh: 9
VB: 12
SP.a: 13
Open VLD: 13
CD&V: 17
MR: 18
PS: 26
N-VA: 27

Election results for Parliament

2007 & 2010

Flemish Parties	**Francophone parties**
CD&V: Christian Democrats	CDh: Center Democrats
Open VLD: Liberals	MR: Liberals
SP. a: Socialists	PS: Socialists
N-VA: Nationalists	Ecolo: Greens
Groen!: Greens	PP: Pro-Belgium Right
VB: Radical Right	
LDD: Liberal Populists	

Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4f/Zetelverdeling-FK-2007.gif,
http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/df/Zetelverdeling-FK-2010.gif

for months they were able to convince the CD&V to drop their nationalistic partner in exchange for their state reform. Since time was ticking, the CD&V and French Socialists decided to create a new government first and delegate the state reform to a newly set up commission. Distrust rose, the commission turned into a talking shop and plug was not pulled out until April 2010 of the troubled government because of the economical crisis of 2008.

Brussel-Halle-Vilvoorde is a complicated and highly symbolic issue. Halle-Vilvoorde is an electoral zone next to Brussels, which finds itself part of two overlapping Regions (the Flemish and Brussels Capital region) since the state reform of 1980. The region technically belongs to Flanders, but the French-speaking inhabitants enjoy distinct minority rights, that allow them to vote on political lists in Brussels. In 2002 a new electoral law was introduced that reshaped the electoral districts to the size of provinces, but it could not find a solution for BHV. Therefore the law was declared unconstitutional in 2003 by the constitutional court, which did not propose a solution. When the issue was put on the table by the CD&V-N-VA alliance after the 2007 elections, the identity differences became more clear than ever.

From the Flemish point of view, BHV is the incarnation of the old fear of Frenchification of Flanders. They claim that the rights which have been granted the French-speaking in BHV were a temporary measure to help them integrate in Flanders. Since the municipalities lie in Flanders, a simple majority suffices to split it and move on, no compromise needed with the French-speaking. All obstructions that have been used, e.g. the alarm bell procedure, invocation of minority rights; or demands to create a corridor between Brussels and Wallonia, are perceived as malicious attempts to undermine the sovereignty of Flanders, allowed by the undemocratic federal system. By law, Flemings living in Wallonia cannot call upon these minority rights. The starting point of this attitude is the belief that the area's belonging to Flanders, will be eternally monolingual. This logic is somewhat flawed, but it is supported by the constitution which links language to groups and territorial rights and not to individuals. The resistance of the French-speaking[23] in those area's to speak Dutch and integrate, brings back images of a French elite who looks down on the Flemings, their language and culture[24].

The Francophone side of this issue is completely opposite: Most French-speaking insist upon their right to speak French throughout the country and believe that state institutions in a multilingual Belgium should allow them to do so[25]. They feel harassed by Flemish attempts to force Dutch upon their group, especially in a unilateral way like with BHV. For them, at those times, Flanders shows its undemocratic, authoritarian (for some even fascist) nature. It is true that there is no French-speaking equivalent of Vlaams Belang (VB, the xenophobic separatist radical right party), but this does not mean that Flemings are more racist or authoritarian than Wallonia and Brussels. VB was known to get the protest votes against the traditional parties. Wallonia, where trust

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[23]   These are mostly rich people from Brussels, who work there, but prefer not to live in the capital, to avoid the big-city problems or other reasons.
[24]   B. Ceuppens, *Allochtons, Colonizers, and Scroungers: Exclusionary Populism in Belgium*, "African Studies Review" 2006, vol. 49, no 2, p. 156.
[25]   Ibidem, p. 156.

in the (federal) government is even lower as in Flanders, does not have a party like that. Besides the feelings of moral superiority, there would also be an electoral loss in BHV got split: The FDF (Francophone Democratic Front, in alliance with the French Liberals, MR), always defending the rights on the French-speaking in and around Brussels, can count on many voters among the French minority in BHV. If the region would get split they would lose a lot of votes.

The elections of June 2010 then produced a spectacular victory for N-VA at the cost of all other Flemish parties. In Wallonia the outcome was similar to the one of 2007, despite the shift of the PS to the first place. Distrust was already high before the elections, and with N-VA as the biggest party of Belgium, a stronger Flemish front emerged at the negotiating table. All messengers from the king who tried to clear the field, failed; and all proposals were dismissed by one side or the other. The issues dividing the two groups were: Brussel-Halle-Vilvoorde, the appointment of three Francophone mayors, the state reform and extra money for Brussels. The mayors' issue, was a typical turf war between Flemish authority and Francophone rights: Three French-speaking mayors in municipalities around Brussels were elected democratically, but the procedure was done in French and not in Dutch. In response the Flemish authorities did not appoint the mayors, causing a huge row. One side accused that the mayors did not respect the language requirements (by law), the others were outraged that the Flemish region refused the outcome of a democratic election.

Finally, the state reform is not so much a communitarian issue as it polarizes the deep socio-economic cleavages of both sides. While after the 2002 state reform, a purple-green government (Liberals, Socialists and Greens from both groups) avoided or bought off all communitarian issues, the newly elected Flemish right in 2007 was more than eager to reform some core federal issues like pensions, distribution of unemployment payments, migration, etc. For Walloon politicians, especially the Socialists (PS) this would be electoral suicide. Besides this, Wallonia and Brussels profit from the even distribution of budgets for Communities and Regions, since taxes are a federal issue. With a richer Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels get more, than they collect. These "transfers" (transactions) have been a popular election mantra for rightist Flemish parties; often framing the Walloons as lazy unemployed, who profit from the system, provided by their clientelistic parties. Despite these real problems, these politicians bluntly dismiss other socio-economic factors like the problems of migration and declining key economic sectors.

Above were mentioned many examples of how regional identities eroded the Belgian (national) identity, but this trend has been supported by global political and economic changes too: The institutionalization of Europe at levels below the nation-state, the creation of regional structural funds, the consultative Committee of the Regions reporting to the European Commission, new rules related to partnerships and subsidiarity, and the development of transnational networks of local authorities[26]. Regarding economical globalization, the combined effects of deindustrialization, increased mobility of capital global flows, lessened trade barriers, etc. have taken away some prime re-

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[26] P. Le Gales, *European Cities: Social Conflicts and Governance*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK 2002, p. 2.

sponsibilities from nation-states and tossed them in the hand of collective deci-sion-making on supra-national level[27].

As K. Opp pointed out in this article *Decline of the Nation State?*[28] the strengthening of regional identity is not a zero-sum game with national and European identity. A stronger association with European values and norms, leads to higher levels of na-tional and regional identity. The political reforms in Belgium might have hollowed out the center, while the two identity groups became stronger and more antagonistic, but this has not harmed the European identity so far. Belgians tend to be proud Europeans, realizing that as a small Western European country, they can only benefit from an inter-national framework of governance to cope with those national policy areas, for which the Belgian state is too small. So while the regions dug away at Belgium from below, the EU has successfully taken over some primordial sovereignty aspects of the state. At the same time, the EU recognized the regions, and integrated them in the broader Euro-pean framework of globalized economy and politics.

The N-VA for instance is not a Eurosceptic party, it demands more autonomy for Flanders with the aim to create a confederal Belgian state, or an independent Flanders, but in the mean time it quietly waits until the national level evaporates[29]. Even now after 500 days of crisis, the traditional parties succeeded in finding a compromise without the N-VA. In traditional Belgian style, it is a compromise in which the center is again a bit more hollow, with more (fiscal) autonomy for the regions, a split BHV, enhanced minority rights for Francophones living in Flanders and Flemings living in Wallonia, a new status for the three mayors, etc. What else they will come up with and how the government will look like, only time will tell, but knowing that this state reform, the sixth, has no cohesive elements, and that Wallonia and Brussels are actively constructing their identity[30], the next demands for further reform are already in the make. Especially if the EU's enhanced control on fi-nances to cope with the crisis, forces regions to adapt more socio-economic regulations, Flanders might find some new arguments to demand autonomy.

Summary

Troubles in the heart of the EU – Political crisis in Belgium

This article looks for the causes of the Belgian crisis in its history, political reforms and iden-tity changes. It further analyzes what might be the consequences of these changes for Belgium and Europe.

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[27]   H. V. Savitch, P. Kantor, *Cities in the international Marketplace: The Political Economy of Urban Development in North America and Western Europe*, Princeton University Press, 2002.

[28]   K. Opp, *Decline of the Nation State? How the European Union Creates National and Sub-National Identifications*, "Social Forces", vol. 84, no 2, December 2005, p. 653–680.

[29]   Interview with B. De Wever in "Der Spiegel" (25.10.2011): http://www.spiegel.de/internatio-nal/europe/0,1518,734735-2,00.html.

[30]   For instance the creation of the new alliance of Wallo-Brux in april 2010, or the decision to change the "Walloon Region" with "Wallonia" in official texts and communication, are indicators that in reaction to the political crisis, a threatened Francophone identity is reframing itself.