



## Belgium: Unity Challenged by Diversity

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Belgium is a newcomer on the scene of federal countries. Only in 1993 did the Constitution acknowledge the federal character of the institutional reforms that have fundamentally restructured the former unitary state. Structural reform, however, has been taking place since 1970 – a process that has not yet reached its final stage. Presently, Belgium is confronting a major political crisis that questions its identity as a federal country. The possibility of confederalism – a voluntary union – or, ultimately, secession, looms large in the public debate. Although the future of the country is unpredictable, Belgium remains an interesting case for comparative research, since it has adopted a wide variety of institutional innovations explicitly designed to accommodate diversity.

### **An ongoing process**

From the very first years of the kingdom of Belgium, the dominant class that had instigated the revolution of 1830 was involved in developing a sense of national consciousness. However, this shaping of a Belgian identity centred on francophone culture to the neglect of the culture and language of the majority Flemish-speaking population. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Flemish cultural organizations began to contest the general disregard of their

cultural heritage. And by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Flemish movement had articulated its struggle for the recognition of a Flemish linguistic and cultural identity with a goal of the social and economic emancipation of Flanders. Since the 1930s, the Flemish have put forth claims for more and more political autonomy.

Although in recent years most of these demands have been met, the quest for autonomy has become more diverse and has spread to other component parts of Belgian society since the 1960s. In addition to cultural autonomy, social and economic development policies have been put on the agenda. In reaction to these broad demands, the state has responded by creating two types of overlapping federated entities: Communities, divided by the languages of Flemish, French, and German, and Regions, known as the Walloon Region, Flemish Region and Brussels-Capital Region. The former deals with education, language usage regulation, cultural and “person-related” matters; the latter focuses on economic and territory-related issues.

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In spite of these accommodations, there are still demands – especially from the Flemish – for a more encompassing autonomy, thereby challenging the relevance of the federal order. This never-ending story of reform after reform is inevitably shattering the *Pax Belgica*. It signals that no consensus has yet been reached on a constitutional

model that accommodates the centrifugal tendencies in Flanders with the status-quo advocated by Brussels and Wallonia.

### **Asymmetry**

Over the years Communities and Regions have developed into fairly well-functioning sub-national authorities, with their own governments. The main problem challenging the survival of this complex system is the emergence of a sense of nationhood in Flanders. Not coincidentally, the institutions of the Flemish-speaking Community and the Flemish Region have merged into a single framework, simply called Flanders, whereas the French-speaking Community and the Walloon Region are still separated from an institutional point of view. Moreover, by insisting on the interrelated character of different policy areas, Flanders is claiming an all-round competency for dealing with the manifold dimensions of governance. Therefore, the asymmetry between Flanders and the other Regions is not only of an institutional character; in its self-perception, Flanders is a full-fledged authority with the political profile of a nation-state. Recently, the Walloon and Brussels Regions have coordinated their policies and shared their political leadership. This alliance, called *Wallonie-Bruxelles*, is signalling the de facto bipolarity of the country.

### **Bipolarity**

Belgium is perceived by the outside world and by most of its citizens as a bipolar country composed of Flemish speakers and *francophones*. The German-speaking community, while highly respected and a full-fledged partner constitutionally, is not considered a relevant actor on the national political scene. However, this bipolar nation is not only divided by the use of different languages. The cultural-linguistic cleavage is an epiphenomenon, hiding a deeper divide. What is the national character of Belgium? The northern and southern regions of the country would answer that question differently, pointing to their different political discourses and distinct styles of policy-making. It is significant that the former national political parties, including the ones with a clear ideological profile, all split up in the 1970s and 80s. The non-existence of national political parties results in a vulnerability for the federal system. No politician, not even the federal prime minister, is democratically legitimized in the country as a whole. This leaves the Belgian legacy politically unprotected. As a solution, many sides advocate the introduction of a federal constituency where political leaders can address the nation in its entirety.

### **Brussels**

A Region of its own, the capital city of Belgium both unites and divides the country. Fittingly it is situated in the middle of the country serving as both a cross-road and dividing line between Flanders and Wallonia. However, if secession between the North and the South came to pass, it is quite clear that the *francophone* majority in Brussels would prefer to stay united with Wallonia. For its part Flanders is linked to the capital not only historically, but also economically and socially; relinquishing Brussels is not an option. The mere existence of Brussels is the best guarantee for the Belgian “marriage of convenience” to persevere. In spite of this, the complex institutional setting guaranteeing the Flemish representation in the Brussels Region, and the permanence of the current boundaries of the capital Region despite the marked presence of *francophones* in its periphery, are among the strongest disintegrating forces in the North-South dialogue.

### **Exclusive competencies and co-operative federalism**

In Belgian federalism, the principle of jurisdictional exclusivity, or only one authority having jurisdiction for any given matter, is central. This policy has not prevented dialogue and cooperation between the different governmental actors. On the contrary, diverse forms of organic cooperation (i.e., joint bodies), procedural cooperation, and conventional cooperation (i.e., inter-governmental agreements), have been increasing significantly over the last 20 years. However, despite these forms of cooperative federalism, there is a demand on the Flemish side for a more encompassing autonomy. Given its policy of jurisdictional exclusivity, the Belgian system of division of powers may shift from a federal into a confederal model.