



Ne vous quittez pas¹

On the political crisis in Belgium

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¹ Reference to the famous Belgian musician Jacques Brel, « *Ne me quitte pas* »

For years, federal Belgium had been an example of “consensus democracy”, where various parties and interests take part in decision-making without one dominating the political process. However, since 2007, the Dutch speaking north and the French speaking south have been quarrelling over a reform of the state structure, a quarrel that led to the government falling and finally new elections in the spring of 2010. These new elections have not yet brought a solution; the opposing parties continue to disagree which powers should go to the regions and which powers should remain federal. This has led some analysts and other Belgian citizens to the conclusion that Belgian politicians have lost the ability to compromise and that the political culture is rotten. If only it were that simple.

The democratic deficit of federal Belgium

Belgium was created in 1830 as a constitutional monarchy, after its citizens revolted against The United Kingdom of the Netherlands, the country of which modern day Belgium was part after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. With a French speaking south and a Dutch speaking north, Belgium remained a unitary state for many years, but officially became a federal state in 1993, divided in 3 communities (Dutch speaking, French speaking and German speaking) and 3 regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels), each with their own responsibilities and interests. This complicated institutional set-up of Belgium is the result of a decentralization process that had been put into motion at the end of the sixties, when mainly the Flemish community started to demand more autonomy over cultural matters.

Although Belgium has three official languages, it is not the case that everyone speaks all three languages. The north is Dutch speaking (about six million), the south is French speaking (about 4 million), a small south-east region is German speaking (about 75000) and the capital (Brussels) is bilingual. Secondly, the government institutions are largely organized according to these linguistic divisions. The federal state is only in charge of those matters specifically allocated to it by the regions and communities, although in practice it is the other way around. Thirdly, since they split up in the seventies there are no Belgian political parties but only “regional” parties, each representing the interests of their own community/region and forming a federal government based on a majority of seats in both language groups in the non-federally elected federal parliament.

A prerequisite for any democracy, however, is accountability of its elected politicians to the citizens that are affected by its policies. In a federal system, this requires some kind of accountability of the elected federal politicians to the citizens of the whole country, either by a federally elected president or a federal constituency with federal political parties. By contrast with other federations in the world, this federal accountability is basically absent in Belgium, as half of its citizens have no say over half of its federal politicians. Although there is a federal government, people vote for the political parties of their community who then sit together with the parties of the other side to form a coalition for the federal government. The absence of a federal political dialogue and the separation of different language groups, each with their “own democratic system”, media and public opinion facilitates a clearer definition of the regional interest over the federal interest and drives the communities further apart.

One solution to this could be the introduction of a federal constituency, with some politicians being elected country-wide, as has been proposed by a group of Belgian professors and experts.² This would add a federal political dialogue to Belgian politics, with a number of federal politicians competing for votes from all Belgian citizens and not just their community.

The rise of the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA): popular movement or personal popularity?

It is exactly within this institutional context that the Flemish separatist party led by Bart de Wever has successfully painted a picture of “us and them” by instrumentalising the institutional complexity and the economic dominance of the Flemish region against the “poor” Walloons. In his thinking, it would be good for both regions if they had more autonomy and say over their own destiny: Wallonia would be less dependent on Flanders and take its own destiny in hand; Flanders would be able to act more swiftly and in its own interest. The other Flemish parties at the negotiation table are following this logic to a certain extent and in different degrees; the parties of the French community do not really agree but would be prepared to compromise. There is, however, a wide gap between what the biggest party of the French speaking community, the socialist party, is prepared to give in and what the N-VA finds acceptable for the reform. Different proposals have been worked out, all wiped off the

² <http://www.paviagroup.be/>

table by either one or the other party that is supposed to be part of the coalition government³.

But what is being presented by N-VA as a positive-sum game and in the interest of both parts of the country is merely an independence struggle based on a flawed idea of a Flemish identity, which is nothing new in Flanders and has its sources in a scattered popular movement that has existed throughout the 20th century. In his own words, Bart De Wever said that: “Belgium is the sick man of Europe” and that it will dissolve sooner or later anyhow. Belgium is an artificial construction and Flanders is a nation in itself, to be part of the European Union and no other supranational or federal framework. It is unclear, however, which solution he has in mind for the officially bilingual but predominantly French speaking capital Brussels, geographically enclosed by the Flemish area. Brussels is not only the capital of Belgium, Flanders and the French community; it is also home to the European institutions and is of great economic importance to the whole of Belgium.

Nevertheless, although the ultimate goal is Flemish independence, Bart De Wever says that he does not want a revolution and is therefore interested in a gradual process towards independence, at least if this is not possible at this point in time. His case is immensely helped by the cult that has emerged around his person, due to his successful TV-performances in a quiz for Flemish celebrities and to his intelligent sound bites. When criticized by another Flemish intellectual, his Flemish admirers merely shout that the other intellectual is intellectually incapable of understanding Bart De Wever whatsoever. In their eyes, Bart De Wever, a historian who quit his PhD to go into politics, is intellectually superior to all other politicians. So although the N-VA was able to draw on the nationalistic forces in Flanders, the electoral success of the N-VA was also partially due to Bart De Wever’s personal popularity.

One can blame the Belgian politicians for incompetency or being part of a rotten political culture as much as he or she wants, but it is rather the ideological incapability or unwillingness of one person or party to come to a compromise that is the problem, as was also mentioned by European Commissioner Karel De Gucht recently. In other words, the longer the

³ From the Flemish side this is: N-VA, the Christian-democrats (CD&V), the social-democrats (SP.a) and the greens (Groen!). From the French speaking side this is: the social-democrats (PS), the Christian-democrats (CDH) and the greens (Ecolo)

negotiations take, the more the party can make people believe that the Belgian system is no longer functioning. Welfare is not their primary goal, Flemish independence is.

What next?

Then why don't the other parties just go ahead without the N-VA? Theoretically, this would be possible, as a federal government just needs a majority in both language groups of the federal parliament. In practice, however, it is not that simple. The N-VA remains the biggest party in the federal parliament and it is thus seen as undemocratic if they are to be excluded from decision making. Moreover, the other political parties, mainly the Flemish, believe that it would moderate the N-VA if they took up responsibility in the federal government; leaving them in the opposition would only make them stronger.

Meanwhile almost 40 000 citizens, both French speaking and Dutch speaking, took to the streets last weekend (23 January 2011) to express their concern about the political deadlock. With about 228 days without a government (not taking into account the caretaking government) the clock is ticking and soon Belgium will beat the record of the longest time without a government, a record currently held by Iraq with 248 days. Whether this will have any real impact on the politicians is doubtful, but what should really worry them is that the financial markets are becoming nervous, although the financial problems of Belgium are not from the same order as troubled countries on Europe's periphery⁴. The problem here is not really the question of whether Belgium will be able to repay its high debt, but whether Belgium will continue to exist. Hence, long term interest rates on government bonds have risen in the last few weeks, threatening the economic future of all Belgian citizens.

It is thus important that the negotiators soon come to an agreement to show observers that Belgium is still able of overcoming its internal problems and that it will not cease to exist, but also that the government can start dealing with issues that really matter to the welfare of its people: the budget, an ageing society, poverty,... The most recent proposal of the N-VA and the CD&V, the Flemish Christian democrats, to take up fewer issues for decentralization and reform, but deeper reform ("less is more") was received with much scepticism on the French speaking side and did not bring their minds closer together. Most probably the liberals will

⁴ Financial Times (2011) *Belgian political turmoil stokes bail-out fears*, 16 January.

be invited to the negotiation table in the hope that their ideological proximity on socio-economic issues to the N-VA will break the ice. If this does not work, there is still the unlikely option that the N-VA chooses to leave the negotiation table, which would leave the option open for the other parties to go on without them or to organize new elections. However, new elections would be a dangerous venture on which no politician is eager to embark.

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Whether Belgium will continue to exist as a federal system in the long run is largely dependent on whether the democratic deficit of the federal level will be resolved. The effectiveness of the Flemish nationalists in exploiting the economic divergence between the regions, increased complexity of society due to globalisation and the institutional complexity of Belgium to construct a Flemish identity will further impact on this. The more the two parts start seeing each other as two different worlds, the more solidarity and cooperation within the federation will be undermined. Clearly, this also puts a huge responsibility in the hands of the Walloon region to reform their post-industrial economy before it is too late.

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