

# Causes of the problematic government formation in Belgium

*Astrid Van de Voorde looks at how a flawed institutional framework and competing political rationales have contributed to turmoil at the top level of Belgian politics.*

**T**he 6th of December 2011 was a day for celebration in Belgium, marking an end to 541 days of fruitless efforts in the Federal Parliament to form a coalition government (Goossens and Cannoot 2015, 31). The extreme length of negotiations should not have come as a surprise; Belgium has a history of difficulty in forming coalitions, so much so that it has struggled through various unstable interim governments. In 1979, some claimed that a breakup of the country was the only possible solution for the linguistic divisions in Belgium (Baetens Beardsmore 1980, 145). After the 2007 elections it took 194 days to form a coalition agreement, which itself turned out to be ineffective, breaking down and calling for early elections in 2010 (Louwerse and Van Aelst 2013, 2).

Belgium's seeming inability to form stable governments could be explained by several factors, including Belgium's unique institutional structure and the fragmentation of political parties during its federalisation process. An especially key factor is the linguistic and historical divide between Flanders and Wallonia, a long-entrenched tension which has recently fuelled Flemish nationalist movements and helped to radicalise the political sphere. The Belgian political structure contributes to inefficient government formation, but these structures in turn are an elemental product of the two communities' distinct language-based identities. Academic literature has explored these communal tensions as well as the federal structure in Belgium, but it has only analysed these forces separately, rather than examining how they interact to produce political instability. It is crucial to examine the interplay of these forces and their effect on government formation for a more complete picture. Accounting for socio-linguistic and economic factors reveals nuanced political fault lines that have shifted over time.

Since its foundation as an independent state in 1830, Belgium has been characterised by linguistic heterogeneity and segmentation with an attached set of socio-economic markers (Zolberg 1974, 183, 197). The French language (spoken in the Belgian region of Wallonia) was considered socially superior to Flemish; this stratification, compounded with uneven industrialisation efforts favouring Wallonia over Flanders, produced a pejorative conception of the Flemish as being 'economically backward' (Zolberg 1974, 204). In light of recent developments, there is a clear link between the history of these communities and the current political struggles, as their linguistic divisions tend to correspond to political and economic developments. The rise of Flemish nationalism through the 'Flemish Movement' is a direct consequence of these dynamics and poses a serious problem for the Belgian government. This movement initially advocated the acknowledgement of the Flemish language as an essential part of Belgian culture (Vos 1998, 84). Soon, however, it evolved into a national organisation with a socio-economic agenda (de Wever 2013, 58) naming the goal of some form of Flemish self-rule (Swenden and Jans 2006, 878). This nationalism is still strong today, with the 2010 elections seeing augmented support for the right-wing nationalist New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) which complicated the coalition formation with the francophone Socialist Party (Abts et al 2012, 448).

Nationalism can be considered a form of identity politics, as it is derived from shared common markers such as language and ethnic origins (Beland and Lecours 2005, 678). However, Flemish nationalism and Flemish identity are no longer built solely on an ethnolinguistic debate. Blommaert (2011, 241) argues that Belgian language diversity was initially a democratisation effort, but that it evolved into the fabric of potentially divisive demographic and socioeconomic transformations in Belgium. Reflecting on nationalism generally, Gellner

(1983, 38) and Hobsbawm (1990, 170) add that culture and language form the core of nationalism, but only when combined with other social, socio-economic, or political issues. This potentially troublesome combination is seen in recent developments of Flemish identity, as language has become emblematic of greater issues troubling Belgium. Hooghe (2012, 132) endorses this view, claiming that Belgium was originally subject to cultural nationalism, proceeding into economic nationalism during the twentieth century.

German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder stated that depriving a nation of its language (and by extension, its character) is the greatest harm that could be done to it. Cultural nationalism, which involves the pursuit of a set vision of one's national identity, can be a result of such deprivation (Woods 2016, 430-431). The Flemish demand for further regional autonomy arose from the discrepancy between their rate of contribution to the economy and that of Wallonia, incorporating financial incentives into a nationalism previously based on community and culture alone. Although language can be used as a means to identify different groups within Belgium, it is not the only source of communal conflict anymore. Nonetheless, language remains foundational to the socio-economic disparity in Belgium (Blommaert 2011, 241; Gellner 1983, 38; Hobsbawm 1990, 170).

Belgium's cultural and economic nationalism makes it somewhat unique. Although sub-state nationalism and independence issues are present in other nations - such as Scotland - Flemish nationalism is linked more to culture, in contrast to the policy-focused Scottish nationalism (Beland and Lecours 2005, 693). Hence, Beland and Lecours (2005, 698) argue that, while Scottish nationalism is based on ideological, historical, and institutional differences, Flemish nationalism has not promoted any specific social policy. This does not necessarily contradict Hooghe's account of economic nationalism; Beland and Lecours primarily focus on social policy, whilst Hooghe observes the general developments of Flemish nationalism.

Although these cultural and economic identities often translate into political convictions and affiliations, this contrast is not merely based on ideological beliefs. The lack of a left-right distinction is underlined by Howarth and Torfing (2005), who argue that the major difference between Belgian political parties is fundamentally based on opposed cultural attitudes rather than ideological standpoints (Howarth and Torfing 2005, 202). It is likewise posited that policy disagreements between the Flemish and Walloon constituencies lie within a matter of degree, not across the full spectrum of political belief (Reuchamps et al. 2012, 15). For instance, survey data reveals a shared desire for more substate autonomy, though the Flemish community appear to hold this desire to a greater extent than the Walloons (Deschouwer and Sinardet 2010). Hence, compromise on their political issues will involve scope, rather than direction, as a critical point (Reuchamps et al 2012, 15). The division in the Belgian government is thus not solely political, as cultural issues have embedded themselves within the political ones. This interplay of linguistic and socio-economic differences leads to political tension between the two communities, which makes it more complicated for parties representing each community to form a cohesive federal government.

Aside from ethnolinguistic and economic differences, academic literature also points to institutional structure and federal framework as causes of unstable government formation. Sinardet (2010, 353) argues that the inability to form a government is primarily a result of the fully split party system that Belgium adopted as part of its federalisation process. During the 1960s and 1970s, the state-wide parties broke up along linguistic lines so that citizens were only able to vote for parties belonging to the majority language group associated with their region (Swenden and Jans 2006, 879). The federalisation is structured in such a way that the constituency boundaries correspond roughly to those of the linguistic communities, further polarising the process of forming a coalition government (Abts et al. 2012, 449). This lack of federal parties led to the divergence of the two regions, as well as two parallel sub-national party systems (De Winter et al. 2006, 870 ; Bardi and Mair 2008, 155). The electoral structure only further strengthens the communal identities and the schism between them, allowing the regional operations of individual parties to paralyse progress towards an agreement on a national level (Abts et al 2012, 451). The paradox of federalism, which holds that the formal recognition of identity groups can reinforce their presence, can help to explain this problem (Erk and Anderson 2009, 192). To ease communal tensions, the Belgian government has granted each group more autonomy and substantive regional political institutions. Yet, this may have the opposite effect of reinforcing their identities and further deepening the oppositional divide. The political structure thus plays a significant role in the struggle to form a government, even if merely because of its underlying connection to cultural forces.

The impact of the Belgian federalisation - accommodating incongruence between regional- and federal-level realities - came to light during the 2004 elections. Previously, political parties had succeeded in forming symmetrical federal coalitions by cooperating with the opposing communal party with which they most align in policy (Swenden and Jans 2006, 883). Federalisation took shape along similar lines, with regional coalitions tending to ideologically replicate federal coalitions (Swenden and Jans 2006, 883 ; Louwerse and Van Aelst 2013, 13 ; Dandoy 2013, 58). Further compounding this pattern, holding the regional and federal elections simultaneously has been found to encourage election congruence (Dandoy 2013, 58). Structural changes in 2003, however, led to the uncoupling of the federal and regional elections, which now occur non-simultaneously (Swenden and Jans 2006, 883). This increased differences between regional and federal coalitions and widened the margin of strategic opportunity for new coalitions (Dandoy 2013, 61). The process of reaching agreements between the Flemish and Walloon party groups became increasingly tense and complex, and each region's desire for increased regional autonomy increased (Swenden and Jans 2006, 886). Thus, the Belgian federal system is caught between two divergent (and equally damaging) trends: one towards regional and federal alignment along an increasingly polarising communal divide, and another towards a deepening incongruence between regional and federal priorities which could come to destroy the possibility of intercommunal cooperation.

This dual federalism also provides a partial explanation for the results of the 2007 and 2010 elections. The 2007 elections illustrated Belgium's increasingly divided political landscape, inciting the breakdown of the social-liberal coalition which had been ruling for eight years (Pilet and Van Haute 2008, 547, 550). Flanders is dominated by right-wing parties, while socialist and green parties prevail in Wallonia; the three groups need to cooperate in their decision-making on federal policies. The question of greater autonomy and the reformation of the federal system are issues that cause tension between these groups. Due to the unaccommodating federal structure, cultural diversions were thus further amplified. The 2010 elections brought even further radicalisation with large gains for the N-VA, opposed by the francophone Socialist Party (Pilet and Van Haute 2008, 448). This shift in power balances left the opposing parties 540 days to negotiate a government coalition. The record-breaking length of these negotiations cannot be explained only by the left-right cleavage; the communitarian cleavage will have played a decisive part (Pilet and Van Haute 2008, 451). In this way, these elections illustrate how the opposed communities and issues with the federal structure contribute to greater political instability and more complex government formation in Belgium.

Thus, the issues Belgium faces regarding coalition formation are a product of communal identities, reinforced by a flawed institutional design. It is this combination of linguistic, socio-economic and political forces that complicated government formation. The communal identities represent the initial and dominant source to this conflict, whilst the institutional design adds a layer of complexity and strengthens the significance of the linguistic divide. The importance of cultural aspects and their effect on political outcomes also deserves attention. From this perspective, it would be beneficial to correct these structural errors, but this would not necessarily lead to a solution for the communal tensions. The focus on consonance amongst the Belgian communities is thus vital for a stable and efficient government.

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