

BELGIUM

The fragmentation of power

Belgium

The federal state



The Communities

The Flemish Community



The French Community



The German-speaking Community



The Regions

The Flemish region



The Brussels-Capital Region



The Walloon Region



A City torn between the Flemish Dutch-speaking Community and the French-speaking Community: Reflections

The increasing influence of the political parties

The increasing influence and power of leaders and senior members of the main political parties in Belgium since the sixties, has made it possible for them to exercise all three powers which should, according to Montesquieu, remain separate.

The executive power

It comprises the members of the seven current executives (only one in 1960) whose first task is to designate the party leaders. These leaders are the "mother-in-laws" of the executives until the time comes when they choose to nominate themselves as the head of one of them. It is therefore in the interest of every potential minister to "invest" in his party and chairman rather than in managing public affairs. It is also the senior party members who designate the most important positions in ministerial cabinets. Consequently, these officials are often tempted to report to the senior party members rather than to their minister.

The legislative power

The composition of the legislative power, i.e. that currently in office in Belgium, is determined by the same top party members. Again, they are also responsible for their own proliferation as a result of the successive State reforms. Who would dare suggest that there are too many of them?

The judicial power

The third power is of course also subject to the influence of the parties, not so much from the point of view of initial appointments but rather with regard to advancement and empowerment.

The rise of the parties is certainly a common feature of many democracies and especially those that adopt the proportional system, which favours coalitions of parties. However, the Belgian situation is very special as a result of the centrifugal bipolarity and its capital which is trapped between two poles.

Centrifugal communities and parties: an adverse effect on the central State

In Belgium, each community has its own political parties, which is the opposite to the situation in other federal countries such as Canada, Germany or Switzerland, and each party answers only to the electorate of its own community. In fact, they no longer have a national objective and they continue along their path of power conquest with only their respective Communities in mind. Their leaders aspire to giving them the status of State, to the detriment of the Belgian State.

The control of the federal State is the result of a "dialogue between the communities", in other words between groups of parties, that ultimately decide which aspects shall remain federal. For the Flemish parties, this quest for "the common well-being of Flanders" is reflected in the Resolutions of the Flemish Parliament of 1999 that demand the status of federal States for the federal entities, i.e. the replacement of federalism by a confederalism with two states. These resolutions continue to underpin their demands regarding autonomy.

The weakening of the Belgian State in the international context

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Defending "Belgian" interests has become very difficult within the context of today's Belgian State. For example, the regionalisation of the waterways and ports have made it impossible for Belgium to negotiate an acceptable proposal with the Netherlands, i.e. the deepening of the western section of the river Scheldt which is indispensable for the port of Antwerp, in exchange for the supply of "Belgian" water, which the Dutch need so badly. On its own, Antwerp, which is only supported by the Flemish government, has nothing to offer in exchange for the vital co-operation of the Dutch.

New perspectives for political parties

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The elections of 2003 (federal Parliament) and 2004 (other Parliaments) opened new perspectives for political parties and changed the political landscape drastically. As a result, CD&V (formerly CVP), the Flemish Christian Democrat party, remains essentially "client-oriented" (stability). However through its alliance with the separatist party N-VA has now taken a more confederal stance (change).

Important changes have also affected the French-speaking Parti Socialiste. Elio Di Rupo who in a significant gesture chose to become leader of the party instead of president of the government of the Walloon Region has stressed the limitations of Walloon regionalism and the necessity to move closer to Flanders and not to ignore Brussels.

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Brussels-Capital: a region in its own right?

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The division of the country directly affects the central bilingual region called Brussels-Capital, which in principle is a region in its own right, but whose resources are endangered by the actions of the two communities.

For example, its share of the national personal income tax revenue is calculated exclusively in proportion to the number of inhabitants and the level of income because the tax is levied at the place of residence. The capital's share continues to fall.

On the other hand, tax on real estate constitutes nearly half of regional income. The Flemish government has in fact implemented favourable real-estate taxation and this has an adverse effect on fiscal revenue from real-estate in Brussels.

Inheritance tax is also more favourable in Flanders and this may also result in the draining of funds to the Flemish region.

Perspectives on civil society

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In fact, only a regional development programme in favour of a population with medium or high income will make it possible to increase.

Such a residential development objective will require an effective urban development and crime prevention programme as well as more accommodation facilities, including social housing. This implies the recycling of "urban wastelands", zones located near the city centre, which are excluded from the residential market. Cities all around the world are rediscovering the potential of their waterways and river basins. These kinds of projects also exist in Brussels.

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However, they are not on the political agenda. The territory of the 19 communes of Brussels (160 km²) accommodates less than one million inhabitants while the 20 administrative districts of Paris (87 km²) have twice as many, i.e. half the area for twice as many people. These figures speak for themselves! The urban wastelands, the mono-functional office districts, the warehouses and large shopping centres with their car parks which generate little added value, hamper to a great extent any efforts with regard to residential development.

Assets still to be exploited

Despite its political isolation, Brussels-Capital is in an ideal position to play an active role as a truly multicultural European region: the link between the Belgian communities and the European regions alike. The city should assume this new status rather than fall into the custodian supervision of the federal States.

Each of these options will require the regional governments to finally make a choice. Will the opinions of the various political party leaderships prevail: they all have their own radically different visions on the future of Brussels. Nothing could be less certain. The Brussels section of the French-speaking Parti Socialiste has developed conflicting opinions. One option reflects the regionalist vision: common defence of the Region by all of Brussels' political parties, French-speaking as well as Flemish; the other option reflects the more radical community-driven vision, in other words an ever-growing osmosis between Walloon and Brussels socialists within the French-speaking Community with the intention of positioning themselves in the context of future supervision by the Communities and Regions over Brussels.

Conclusion: from civil society to political activity in favour of a European city

Perhaps the time has come for civil society in Brussels to opt for the project of the open European city. Brussels already has a great track record:

- its international community which is generally quite attached to Brussels.
- its cultural and artistic protagonists: bi-community public institutions, private foundations and multilingual associations.
- private sector players and economic associations from both communities.
- the defenders of its heritage and urban environment, and last but not least
- its inhabitants, irrespective of whether they are born in Brussels or elsewhere.

Considering the ongoing enlargement of the European Union, the multicultural potential of the city can only grow.

The eligibility and voting right of foreigners opens important new perspectives and provides opportunities for the representatives of the multicultural civil society on the lists that will be presented by the political parties for the next communal elections in 2005. This requires strong and organised action which still has to be put in place.

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