

# planning in a disunited kingdom

**John Tomaney and Claire Colomb** look at devolution and spatial planning in Belgium and find a cautionary tale within the Flanders experience



**Left**

Antwerp – experience of devolution in Flanders has shown that spatial planning can become a means of strengthening cultural and political boundaries and divisions

What happens to the planning system when a nation fractures? This question is highly pertinent in a UK context, but raises its head elsewhere in Europe. Since the 1970s Belgium has been transformed from one of the most centralised states in Europe into one of the most radically devolved, as political authority has been transferred to both language-based communities and territories. Such profound constitutional change has led to the transformation of the planning system, while planning issues are embedded in the most contentious political and language disputes.

The modern nation-state of Belgium was established in 1830 when the southern provinces seceded from the Netherlands. The new state included both a Dutch-speaking community in Flanders and French-speaking community in

Wallonia (and a small German-speaking community in the west). Tensions between these communities focused on the use of language, as French was initially decreed the only official language of the new state. The national elite spoke French, with Flemish relegated to a secondary status.

Given the highly centralised nature of the Belgian state during this period – modelled along Napoleonic lines – the official use of French was experienced as a form of exclusion by the Flemish population. Since the Second World War, Belgian politics has been centrally concerned with the struggle of the Flemish people for equal status for the Dutch language. The rise of Flemish nationalism prompted the transformation of the Belgian state.

The outcome of this conflict was a series of six constitutional reforms, the first passed in 1970 and

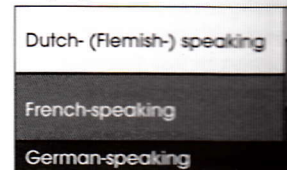


**Above**

**Fig. 1 Regions and language**



**Language area**



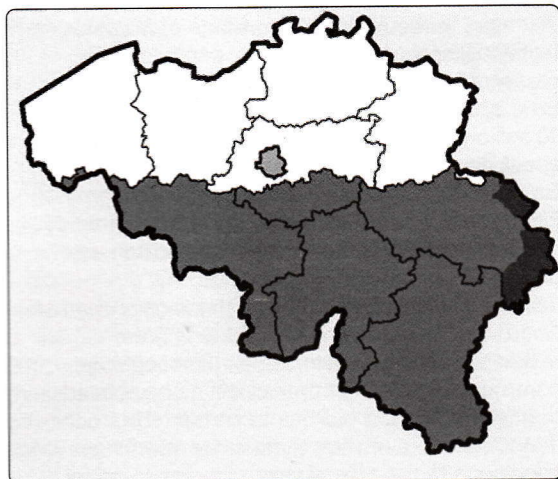
Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_language\\_areas\\_of\\_Belgium](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_language_areas_of_Belgium)

the latest in 2011, that began the process of territorial governance of Belgium.

Belgium officially became a federal state. Under the still evolving Belgian constitution, power has been devolved to three levels of governments (regions) and communities (see Fig. 1). Large amounts of political power have been gradually devolved to Flanders, Wallonia, and the German-speaking community – while responsibilities for social policy are devolved to the regions. In Flanders, the region and the community were merged, so that territorial boundaries are coterminous. The federal government remains responsible for social security, taxation, and foreign affairs.

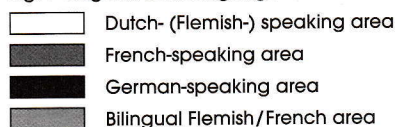
Planning is, since 1980, a devolved responsibility to the three regional governments. Regional transport, urban development, and regional planning. Previously, planning decisions





**Above**

Fig. 1 Regions and language communities of Belgium



Language area	Region
Dutch- (Flemish-) speaking	Flanders
	Brussels-Capital Region
French-speaking	Wallonia
German-speaking	

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communities,\\_regions\\_and\\_language\\_areas\\_of\\_Belgium](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communities,_regions_and_language_areas_of_Belgium) (Creative Commons License)

the latest in 2011, that bequeathed Belgium a system of territorial governance of Byzantine complexity.

Belgium officially became a federal state in 1993. Under the still evolving Belgian constitution, political power has been devolved to *both* territorial governments (regions) and language communities (see Fig. 1). Large amounts of authority over public policy have been gradually devolved to three regions – Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels-Capital Region – while responsibilities for educational and cultural policy are devolved to the Flemish, French, and German language communities. In the case of Flanders, the region and the language community were merged, so that territory and community are coterminous. The federal level maintains competence over social security, taxation, justice, defence, and foreign affairs.

Planning is, since 1980, a responsibility fully devolved to the three regions, alongside housing, regional transport, urban renewal, environment, rural development, and regional economic policy.<sup>1</sup> Previously, planning decisions were taken at the

national scale (on the basis of the 1962 Belgian planning legislation), with an advisory role for the provinces.

The regionalisation of planning has led to divergent trajectories of spatial policies in the three regions.<sup>2</sup> In Wallonia devolution has not fundamentally altered the approach to planning, which is still based on zoning plans in spite of the preparation of a *Schéma de Développement de l'Espace Régional* approved in 1998. In Flanders, however, devolution was accompanied by large-scale reforms to the planning system in the mid-1990s, resulting in the creation of new multi-level governance arrangements in which the regional, provincial and municipal tiers each prepare a structure plan and a series of implementation plans.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1990s, moreover, the Flemish regional government became a strong advocate of the spatial planning approach which gained ground in other European countries, such as the UK and the Netherlands, and was promoted by the European Commission through the preparation of the *European Spatial Development Perspective*.

In 1997 the Flemish Government approved the first Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders (*Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen – RSV*), which attracted international attention as an innovative example of the 'new' spatial planning approach. The RSV signalled a shift from traditional land use regulation to a more proactive, future-oriented approach to shaping sustainable territorial development involving multiple stakeholders. Notably, the plan promoted the concept of 'deconcentrated clustering', reflected in the metaphor of the 'Flemish Diamond' – a polycentric form of development based on the complementary qualities of the main cities of Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent (see Fig. 2). The plan, which is binding on lower tiers of government, designated infrastructure corridors, protected green areas, and required urban growth boundaries to be drawn in Flemish cities to contain the majority of new housing development and economic activity.

In one reading, the Flemish experience confirms the theory that the regionalisation of political structures facilitates a more integrated form of spatial planning and the emergence of a distinctive planning culture (as has been the case in Scotland).<sup>4</sup> But the Flemish story is more complicated. From its high point in the 1990s, the status of spatial planning in Flanders has somewhat declined. The current Flemish Government – since June 2009 a coalition of the centrist Christian Democrats (CD&V), Flemish Social Democrats (SPA) and the conservative Flemish nationalists (N-VA) – accords a low priority to the grand visioning and strategic planning embodied in the RSV.

The consociational form of government means that individual ministers have extensive autonomy in their policy domains. Planning is currently the



responsibility of Philippe Muyters of the N-VA, who generally favours market-based and greenfield solutions to planning problems. The N-VA, the rising force in Flemish politics, is strongly pro-growth and has approved a series of developments which are both controversial and at odds with the principles of the RSV. Against local opposition, the Flemish Government tried to force through the building of a contentious bridge and tunnel in Antwerp, designed to improve access to the port, although this proposal was rejected in a referendum in 2009.

## 'Planning, in the metropolitan fringe of Brussels, is highly political and contentious, and is used to prosecute language wars by other means'

The Flemish Government also approved the building of a 190,000 square metre shopping centre – called Uplace – on the site of a former Renault factory at Machelen on the outskirts of Brussels. Although the municipal council approved a construction permit, subsequently endorsed by Muyters, the province of Flemish Brabant used its authority to refuse an environmental permit for the development, although this decision was later overturned by the (Christian Democrat) Flemish Environment Minister, Joke Schauvliege.<sup>5</sup> Opposition to the development centred on the impacts of the development on congestion, the environment and the retail sector in neighbouring towns.

The Uplace story additionally illustrates the conflicts that exist between the Flemish municipalities around Brussels and the Brussels Capital-Region.

Planning, in the metropolitan fringe of Brussels, is highly political and contentious, and is used to prosecute language wars by other means. Around 58% of the population of Belgium of just above 10 million people is Flemish-speaking, 31% French-speaking. The growth and internationalisation of Brussels is an important driver of the economy of Flanders, but it has also altered the demographic and language structure of the metropolitan area, transforming it into a Francophone city.

In the Dutch-speaking 'Flemish Fringe' (*Vlaamse Rand*) that encircles the city, there is great resistance to the growth of new Francophone communities. Flemish municipalities have used restrictive planning policies to contain the 'Frenchification' of their territory by attaching conditions to the sale of public land or to social housing allocation (for example by stipulating that prospective buyers or tenants should have a link to the municipality), or by setting height limits to new housing development (as done in the contentious district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde).

In December 2011, the Flemish Government adopted a specific development perspective for the 'Flemish strategic area around Brussels' (VSGB), which delineates an urban growth boundary aimed at containing the growth of Brussels. The (Socialist) Minister-President of the Brussels-Capital Region subsequently filed a complaint with the federal Council of State against this plan in the summer 2012, on the ground that it has huge environmental and mobility impacts on Brussels, that it ignores the observations of its government, and that some of its elements (for example Uplace) are in conflict with the Brussels strategic plan.<sup>6</sup>

Currently the Flemish Government is preparing a revision of the RSV. The new 'Spatial Policy Plan for Flanders', as it is known, developed since 2011 on

the basis of the principle of elicited inputs from 100 so and 70,000 individuals. The to date has been a Green themes for inclusion in future

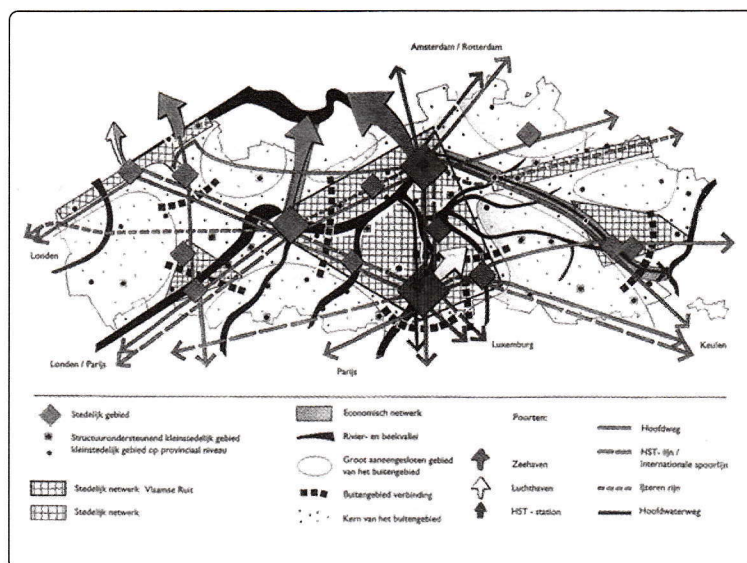
The co-production process strong resistance to intense development and a preference for green space and balanced which seems at odds with planning decisions and the of the current Flemish Government difficult political road ahead these preferences into policy development of a coherent policy remains overshadowed by other policy areas and at for example large-scale road development, retail siting.

Increasingly, senior planning unbridled inter-regional competition is one of the weaknesses of spatial planning in Belgium lack of dialogue and co-operation planners and politicians of key, trans-regional planning relationships with Brussels with by the regional government Office. In Flemish spatial planning and Wallonia are represented recent introduction of an 'Spatial Development' which civil servants from the three government is a step forward but has not yet been done.

The lack of co-ordinated guidance the growth of the Brussels region is a particularly pressing issue as the economy extends far beyond the Brussels region. Because of the municipalities of the administrative border of the region acts as a de facto growth boundary to increasing housing density and undesirable forms of peri-urban development distance commuting to the city.

The story of devolution in Flanders offers a cautionary exercise provided a long-term it played a marginal role in the allocation of resources – a 'missing link' between budgets and projects within the current contexts.

Moreover, the high ambition of the RSV is overwhelmed by the complex problems created by the federal government and by the realpolitik of Flemish political consensus. The 'right-wing', whereas the left



Left

Fig. 2 Strategic diagram from the Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen (RSV), showing the 'Flemish Diamond'

Source: Departement Ruimte Vlaanderen



the basis of the principle of 'co-production', has elicited inputs from 100 social partner organisations and 70,000 individuals. The outcome of the process to date has been a Green Paper which sets out themes for inclusion in future policy.<sup>7</sup>

The co-production process appears to reveal a strong resistance to intensive metropolitan development and a preference for the protection of green space and balanced forms of development – which seems at odds with the thrust of recent major planning decisions and the pro-growth political agenda of the current Flemish Government, and suggests a difficult political road ahead in terms of converting these preferences into policy. Moreover, the development of a coherent and overarching spatial policy remains overshadowed by decisions taken in other policy areas and at other government levels – for example large-scale road and rail infrastructure development, retail siting, and property taxation.<sup>8</sup>

Increasingly, senior planners recognise that unbridled inter-regional competition is wasteful and is one of the weaknesses of the devolved system of spatial planning in Belgium, as there has been a lack of dialogue and co-operation between the planners and politicians of the three regions on key, trans-regional planning issues. In Flanders, relationships with Brussels and Wallonia are dealt with by the regional government's International Office. In Flemish spatial planning maps, Brussels and Wallonia are represented by blank spaces. The recent introduction of an 'Interregional Forum for Spatial Development' which brings together top civil servants from the three regions and the federal government is a step forward, but much remains to be done.

The lack of co-ordinated strategic planning to guide the growth of the Brussels metropolitan area is a particularly pressing issue, as its functional economy extends far beyond the boundaries of the Brussels region. Because of the restrictive approaches of the municipalities of the 'Flemish Fringe', the administrative border of the Brussels-Capital Region acts as a de facto growth boundary, which has led to increasing housing densities within Brussels and undesired forms of peri-urbanisation and long-distance commuting to distant municipalities.<sup>8</sup>

The story of devolution and spatial planning in Flanders offers a cautionary tale. While the RSV exercise provided a long-term vision for the region, it played a marginal role in the allocation of public resources – a 'missing link' between plans, public budgets and projects witnessed in many other contexts.

Moreover, the high ambitions of the RSV were overwhelmed by the complex policy co-ordination problems created by the federalisation of Belgium and by the realpolitik of Flemish nationalism. The Flemish political consensus is typically defined as 'right-wing', whereas the largest political party in

Brussels and Wallonia is the Parti Socialiste. The notion of 'right-wing Flanders' and 'left-wing Wallonia' is a powerful motif in Belgian politics, although, as argued by the Flemish historian Bruno De Wever, this 'has not much to do with 'objective' socio-economic differences, but rather with a curiously persistent identity construction that is also an explanation for the current success of N-VA'.<sup>9</sup> Notions of left and right have also been embedded in language fault-lines.

Under these conditions, planning – far from being a rational means of policy integration and forward thinking – may lead to ideological and communal gridlock. Indeed, spatial planning can become a means of strengthening the cultural and political boundaries between territories and communities, unless strong mechanisms for inter-regional co-operation and dialogue are put in place.

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## Notes

- 1 The land registry, the taxation system, the railways and energy policy remain federal matters
- 2 L. Albrechts: 'Devolution, regional governance and planning systems in Belgium'. *International Planning Studies*, 2001, Vol. 6 (2), 167-82
- 3 J. Scheers: 'Spatial planning in the economic core of Europe: the transition from land-use planning to spatial structure planning in Flanders'. In N. Adams, J. Alden and N. Harris (Eds): *Regional Development and Spatial Planning in an Enlarged European Union*. Ashgate, 2006
- 4 J. Tomaney and C. Colomb: 'Planning for independence?' *Town & Country Planning*, 2013, Vol. 82, Sept., 371-73
- 5 'Uplace shopping centre gets green light'. *Flanders Today*, 6 Jun. 2012. [www.flandertoday.eu/business/uplace-shopping-centre-gets-green-light](http://www.flandertoday.eu/business/uplace-shopping-centre-gets-green-light)
- 6 A. Hope: 'Shopping centre dispute goes on'. *Flanders Today*, 18 Jul. 2012. [www.flandertoday.eu/business/shopping-centre-dispute-goes](http://www.flandertoday.eu/business/shopping-centre-dispute-goes)
- 7 *Green Paper. Flanders in 2050: Human Scale in a Metropolis? Spatial Policy Plan*. Flemish Government, 2013. [www2.vlaanderen.be/ruimtelijk/docs/groenboek%20ruimtelijke%20ordening%20EN%20DEF.pdf](http://www2.vlaanderen.be/ruimtelijk/docs/groenboek%20ruimtelijke%20ordening%20EN%20DEF.pdf)
- 8 K. Boussauw, G. Allaert and F. Witlox: 'Colouring inside what lines? Interference of the urban growth boundary and the political-administrative border of Brussels'. *European Planning Studies*, 2013, Vol. 21 (10), 1509-27
- 9 B. De Wever: 'Foreword'. In B. De Wever (Ed.): *Right-Wing Flanders, Left-Wing Wallonia? Is This So? If So, Why? And Is It A Problem?* Re-Bel e-book 12, 2011, p.4. [www.rethinkingbelgium.eu/rebel-initiative-files/ebooks/ebook-12/Re-Bel-e-book-12.pdf](http://www.rethinkingbelgium.eu/rebel-initiative-files/ebooks/ebook-12/Re-Bel-e-book-12.pdf). The N-VA party leader Bart De Wever (since 2012 Antwerp's Mayor) has pressed Belgium's Prime Minister to prepare for confederalist reform before the 2014 national federal election 'to enable both Flanders and Wallonia to look after their own affairs' and gain fiscal independence