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# ETHNIC STRUCTURE, INEQUALITY AND GOVERNANCE OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR IN BELGIUM

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**January 2004**

Part of UNRISD Project on Ethnic Structure, Inequality and Governance of the Public Sector.

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## Introduction

Belgium is a divided country. A linguistic borderline between French and Dutch divide runs from west to east. Of course this is not enough to explain the fact that the language groups have engaged into a long lasting conflict. The main reason for that is the fact that in 1830 – when Belgium was created as a new state – the language of the people involved in politics was French. With a small majority of the population not speaking French but Dutch, this would gradually make the use of language a major political issue.

Yet we need to say immediately that the conflict never became violent. Not one single shot has been fired in this ethno-linguistic conflict. It has been at the origin of many fierce debates, of governmental instability and of a major financial crisis (politicians being concerned with this ethnic conflict rather than with a sound financial policy). In the long however, the conflict between the long language groups was to a certain extent pacified. This was done by using the logic and technique of conflict management that had become fairly familiar to the Belgian political elites: consociational democracy. It is a technique of conflict avoidance. Conflict is avoided by granting a large degree of autonomy to the groups in conflict, and by obliging them to move together or not move at all for all matters that remain common.

This consociational democracy led in this case to a deep reform of the Belgian state. The former unitary state became a federation of regions and of language communities. The Belgian federation is extreme in the degree of autonomy that it has given to the language groups, and its extremely complex in its attempts to provide checks and balances at all levels of political decision-making.

In this report we will first go back in history, and explain how Belgium was created and how the tensions between the language groups gradually built up. Next we look at the political parties. We have to do so, because one of the striking features of Belgian politics is the falling apart of the Belgian parties into unilingual parties only participating in elections in their own part of the country. It reflects the deep divisions between the language groups, but at the same time it makes it very difficult to keep a legitimate and responsive democracy alive.

In the third part of the report we present the federal reforms. We do so in some details, because the way in which the modern Belgian state is built reflects the way in which the language groups have been separated and yet still need still need to accommodate to each other. In the fourth and final part we further explain how ethnic minorities in Belgium are defined and protected.

## 1. Historical background: the origins of the linguistic tensions

Two fairly old societal frontiers cut across Western Europe, more or less from north-west to south-east: a linguistic and a religious frontier. The first divides Europe roughly into the area that was linguistically influenced by the presence of the Roman Empire, and where varieties of Latin-type languages are spoken, and the area that escaped from that influence or was less thoroughly influenced

and where – among others of course – a variety of German-type languages are spoken. This language border starts today in the north-west of France, just south of the Belgian border, then enters Belgium and cuts it in two while passing just south of Brussels, before going down through the Alsace to Switzerland and to the north of Italy. The religious divide, reflecting the result of Reformation and contra-Reformation, starts in the south of the Netherlands, and then proceeds to divide Germany and Switzerland. The two lines do not coincide, although they run sometimes close to each other. Belgium belongs to an area where they are close, yet exactly the fact that they do not coincide is an important part of the picture.

Let us go back a few centuries first. When in 1648 the southern border of the Netherlands was fixed in the Treaty of Westphalia, it actually created a third division line, just in between the language borderline to its south and the religious borderline to its north (Andeweg & Irwin 1993). The modern state of the Netherlands was born, and that comes after a long war between the Dutch Calvinists and the Catholic Habsburgs. The new Dutch state, which had already been institutionalized before the Treaty, was clearly both a Protestant and a Dutch-speaking state. Especially the religious identity was more or less the *raison-d'être* of the Netherlands. Yet the state borderline does not follow the religious divide, but is situated south of it, creating thus a Catholic minority in the south of the Netherlands. Here is the origin of one of the major cleavages in modern Dutch politics. The language of the Netherlands was less problematic. It was Dutch, and would subsequently be further standardized.

This little piece of history did not only fix the southern border of the Netherlands, it also defined the current northern border of Belgium. In 1648 the area south of the Netherlands was not yet called Belgium. But the separation will have far-reaching consequences. One direct result of the ‘liberation’ of the northern part of the former United Seventeen Provinces from the Catholic and Habsburg-dominated south, will be a brain-drain of Dutch-speakers to the north and the non-standardization of the Dutch dialects spoken outside of the new political boundaries, i.e. in the current northern part of Belgium.

South of the linguistic borderline, standardized French (from Paris) was becoming more important, without of course at that time eradicating the differences between the dialects spoken by the common people. In the course of the eighteenth century this French became even more important, as the language of the Enlightenment, of liberalism and modernity. French had become the language of the elites, of education and actually of court-life almost throughout Europe. That will of course become even stronger under the French rule of Napoleon, who conquered Belgium from the Austrian Habsburgs. French was now in the area that would become Belgium the language of the upper class, that is: the upper class both south and north of the linguistic border line.

The French rule did not last very long. The Congress of Vienna rearranged the territorial organization of Europe and created the Low Countries, re-uniting more or less the former Seventeen Provinces, but then after centuries of separation and of different development. The political leadership of the Low Countries was given to the Dutch monarch William of Orange. Actually a number of ‘Belgian’

regions were added to the long existing Dutch state. And that Dutch state, as we said above, was clearly Dutch and Protestant. The union was not going to last very long. Three forces would quickly pull Belgium away from the northern Low Countries. The first was political liberalism. The Dutch monarchy was still fairly absolutist, and demands for a more responsible parliament were not met. The second force was religion. The Catholic Church did not like the Protestant domination of the north and of the monarchy, and saw the possibility to create a homogenous Roman Catholic State. And the third force was language. The Dutch state used Dutch, and wanted to impose this language on the southern provinces. Yet the upper classes there were Francophone, and did not at all appreciate this policy.

And here we are at the beginning of the Belgian state. The date is 1830. This new state will be more liberal than the Low Countries, will be Catholic and will be Francophone. The Catholicism will be a real issue. The will to keep the country firmly controlled by the Church was not acceptable for the Liberals, and this Church-state cleavage will dominate Belgian politics until deep into the 20th century. The language to the contrary was not an issue. Belgium was at that time not seen as composed of two different language groups. It was just Francophone, in a natural but also deliberate way. The Constitution guaranteed the freedom of language, but that was meant to give the Belgian Francophones indeed the freedom to speak their own language, and not to be obliged to use the Dutch imposed on them in the Low Countries from which they seceded.

Yet language will slowly but surely become an issue, and even a major one (Lorwin 1966; Zolberg, 1974; McRae 1986). Already before the creation of the Belgian state, a small movement existed that tried to promote the use of Dutch, and that resisted the too easy use of French in public life in the non-francophone part of the country. During the nineteenth century, thus during the early days of Belgium, a mainly urban and middle-class based group of intellectuals went on promoting this use of Dutch, tried to preserve the Dutch culture and actually started to claim the right to use that language in public life and in administrative matters. The newly born 'Flemish movement'[1] defended a non-homogeneous view of Belgium. It stated that Belgium was bilingual, and that the use of the second language should at least be allowed and respected. It asked for some individual language rights for the population of the north.

The Flemish Movement did not grow very fast. It started as a very marginal phenomenon, and grew into a larger and also more radical movement because of the fierce refusal of the Belgian Francophone elites to take its demands really into consideration. The marginality of the movement is also due to the fact that there was no real consensus about the nature of this second language. Dutch was a possibility, but also a problem. Dutch was the language of the Dutch state, and thus the language of the enemy. Dutch was also the language of Protestantism, which lead the Church to be rather reluctant in accepting it.

1. Actually the 'Flemish' refers to the western part of what is today the northern region of Belgium. It used to be the County of Flanders. The name Flanders was gradually used to define all the Dutch-speaking parts of Belgium, and often the term Flemish is also used to refer to the Dutch spoken in Belgium.

Attempts were made to promote regional languages as the standard for the second language in Belgium. In the end the Flemish movement clearly opted for Dutch, but that then was a language which still to a large extent had to be learned by the population of the north. And the absence of a properly standardized language was a perfect argument for the Francophones to claim that French was already available as a standardized and universal language and that the learning of French would help the population of the north to get access to high culture. The idea that Dutch was going to be used for instance at universities was absolutely unthinkable.

While the tension is building up during the nineteenth century, one issue within the language problem becomes very visible and very salient: the role and position of Brussels. The capital city of Belgium is situated close to the language border, but clearly north of it. As a city of government and administration, and as a city close to the francophone world it had already slightly been frenchified before the creation of Belgium. The choice of Brussels as Belgium's capital city will only increase the process. By the turn of the century the majority of its population speaks French. This is due to immigration from the south and to the rapid frenchification of the immigrants from the north, who needed French to function in the public administration and who wanted of course their children to be educated in the language of upward social mobility. Not only did Brussels become a francophone 'enclave' in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, it also gradually grew and expanded, just like any other (capital) city. This expansion meant of course the expansion of the francophone enclave in Flanders. The pieces of a very difficult puzzle were being put on the Belgian table.

The First World War is an important turning point. During the war it became utterly clear that the language issue could not be avoided any more now. Several elements contributed to that awareness. First there were the problems at the war front. Flemish soldiers had complained about the language situation, and they became conscious (and were mobilized to become conscious) of the fact that they were eventually expected to die for a country that did not even try to communicate with them in their own language. Flemish elites had tried during the war, i.e. during German occupation, to obtain the right to organize some classes at the University of Gent (in Flanders) in Dutch. They did succeed, but were of course accused of high treason, high treason that apparently was needed to obtain such an elementary right.

But not only the language question sharpened during the war. The soldiers were of course lower class people, who had the right to fight for their country, but not the right to vote. Actually an imperfect system of universal male suffrage had been introduced in 1893, giving all men at least one vote, and granting a second or a third vote to the property owners, tax payers and better educated citizens. One of the first things to be realized after the war, was the introduction of full and equal male suffrage. But this would of course directly translate into the parliament the demographic situation of the country, in which almost 60% of the population lived in the non-francophone part. And with the language problem now clearly on the agenda, it would start producing real changes.

The most obvious and visible change that came about, was the *territorialization* of the issue (Murphy, 1998). Of course territory was part of the problem from the very beginning, but the Belgian elitist perception of the problem was not territorial. Once language laws are introduced, they would follow a territorial logic. The way to boost Dutch as a full and equal second language, without introducing Dutch as a new language in the south, was the division of the country in three linguistic regions: a Dutch-speaking north, a French-speaking south and the bilingual area of the capital city. Language laws passed in 1921 and in 1932 were clearly territorial, although they kept the possibility open for the language border to move, according to the languages effectively spoken at the local level. This was measured by organizing a language census every decade. The consequence of this was the further gradual loss of Flemish municipalities to the bilingual area of Brussels or straight to the francophone region. In 1963 the borderline would be finally fixed (see the map below).

***Figure 1: Map of Belgium with the borderline between the Dutch-speaking north and the French-speaking south.***

The Flemish movement came out of the First World War as a political and even party-political movement. The newly created Frontpartij – referring thus to the war front – wanted to see a reform of the Belgian unitary state into a decentralized and even federal state, which would grant the Flemish region the right to organize its cultural life itself. This now bipolar view of Belgium will soon lead to a new francophone perception of Belgium. They rather have the feeling that their Belgium is gone, that there are no Belgians any more, but only Flemings and Francophones. And among the Francophones, those living in Brussels are in a different position. They live in a former Dutch-speaking city

that is claimed by the Flemish movement as being still a part of Flanders. And they would therefore prefer not to be in Flanders.

We have witnessed in this short overview of a long history the politicization of the language divide and its translation into a territorial definition of alternative solutions, with of course discussions about the exact boundaries of the territories. Belgium now contains four linguistic territories, one of which we left out so far for the sake of clarity. The first one is the Dutch-speaking area or the Flemish region. The second one is the region of Wallonia, which is francophone. Actually Wallonia includes also an area in the east which was transferred from Germany at the Treaty of Versailles in 1918, and where the population of course speaks German. It is today formally recognized as the German-speaking territory, but for regional matters (see below) it belongs to Wallonia. The fourth area is Brussels, the limits of which have been set and fixed in 1963. That region is bilingual. It is on the basis of this territorial division that the Belgian federal state will be built, but in a rather complex way, since the Francophones defend mainly a division in three regions, meaning that Brussels should be a separate region, while the Flemings defend then idea of a bipolar federation, based on the language groups, which means that Brussels belongs territorially to Flanders.

Until now we have only discussed the language question as such, although we already pointed at the fact that its connection with the religious divide has played a significant role. Yet there is more than just language. The other cleavages in Belgian politics are strongly related to the language divide, not because of the language as such, but *because of its territorial base*. The different regions did not develop in the same way, and that makes them look different in more than just the language aspect.

Flanders and Wallonia – the two larger regions – have more relevant differences, although it would take some time before they were perceived as such. Most obvious are the social and economic differences. A number of areas in what was to become Wallonia were the first in Europe to industrialize. The Flemish provinces remained for a long time mainly rural, except for some industry in the major cities (Gent, Antwerpen). In other words, in the 19$^{th}$ century the economic centre of the country was concentrated in the Walloon industrial basins. Yet the financial centre of the country was located in Brussels since all the holdings, controlling the Walloon industry since the 1830s, had their seats