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Belgium

For a federalism that is social and based on solidarity

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The recent elections have provoked debate on the left about the crisis of the federal Belgian state. This contribution by journalist Chris Den Hond illustrates many of the issues under discussion; it should not be taken as a formal expression of the views of our Belgian section.

The Flemish nationalists are on the offensive, aiming to accentuate the division of Belgium between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking people. This vision carries dangers for social rights. The biggest winner of the recent Belgian elections, Yves Leterme (Christian-Democrat, Flemish), got it right when he sang the Marseillaise, instead of the Belgian national anthem, on the occasion of the national day last 21 July. And it wasn't just one more Belgian joke. His conscious "error" provides a very good expression of the nationalist or regionalist intentions of the Flemish political élite. The difficulties in forming the new Belgian government bear witness to a system of a federal state which, with two peoples, has solved the question of the cultural and linguistic oppression of the Flemings, but which has created a new injustice towards French-speaking people living in certain "Flemish" communes around Brussels. At the same time, as far as socio-economic questions are concerned, this federal system encourages regionalist, even separatist tendencies. Some people even want to split up the social security system.

In Belgium, the national questions did not begin yesterday. From 1830 to 1970, the country remained a strictly unitary state, above all French-speaking. Even the Flemish bourgeoisie spoke French. After the First World War, consciousness of the oppression of the Flemish sharply increased, when Flemish soldiers who had received their orders in French came back from the front. After five reforms (1970, 1980, 1988, 1993, 2001), Belgium officially became a federal state, with three communities (Flemish, French and German-speaking) and three regions (Flemish, Walloon, Brussels).

An obsolete delimitation

The whole Flemish struggle stems from cultural frustration. The Flemings were fighting against the discrimination generated by a French-speaking ruling class; they were not fighting against another people. In secondary schools and universities, courses were given exclusively in French until 1930, the year in which the first Dutch-speaking university was established, in Ghent. Up until the 1950s, economic expansion and industrial growth were located in Wallonia, in the Walloon mines and industrial zones. Migratory flows of Flemish workers provided Wallonia and France with a workforce. But with the reduction in the importance of the mines, the iron and steel industry moved to where the raw materials from the colonies arrived, in the ports which are situated in Flanders. So alongside the French-speaking bourgeoisie, an autonomous Flemish bourgeoisie developed, and its political weight within unitary Belgium increased. Today, the Flemish bourgeoisie is not entirely separatist, but it is certainly regionalist. It considers that the regionalization of socio-economic questions will help it to pursue its liberal policy of dismantling social rights.

In the course of the numerous reforms of the Belgian state, the problem of the capital, Brussels, isolated in Flemish territory, has been the most difficult to solve. In 1830, Brussels was a Flemish city: only 15 per cent of the population spoke French. This ratio was gradually inverted: whereas a linguistic equilibrium was reached in 1880, the city is today made up of more than 85 per cent of French-speakers. Since 1989 the Belgian capital has nevertheless been a completely bilingual region, surrounded by unilingual Flanders. There is no territorial continuity between the bilingual Brussels region and the (unilingual) French-speaking Walloon region.

In 1963, at the time of the delimitation of the linguistic boundaries, the capital region of Brussels [\[1\]](#) was limited to nineteen communes. But this delimitation was based on the administrative boundaries inherited from a census of

1947! Now, between 1947 and 1963, the French-speaking population in and around Brussels had strongly increased. This demographic trend has been confirmed up to the present time. So the compromise of 1963 reduced Brussels to too small a territory, and it left without any linguistic rights a large French-speaking population living in the Flemish periphery. At each stage of this institutional evolution towards a federal system, which was made official in 1993, the "linguistic border" was confirmed, and it gradually became, for many Flemish political leaders, a quasi-state border. From then on, two watchwords stood opposed to one another: "Vlaanderen Vlaams" ("Flemish Flanders") for Flemish nationalists, and "Widening of the bilingual region of Brussels", for French-speaking people and Flemish democrats [2].

Injustice

Territorial federalism means that you delimit a territory under the authority of a government. This is the traditional conception, which implies that each state has its territory. But drawing borders between people, and between peoples, becomes increasingly problematic in areas where there lives a mixed population, since, very quickly, new minorities appear. So in the case of Brussels, it is preferable to apply a federalism that makes it possible to create cultural and linguistic institutions for the two communities which live there together. This is what has been done in the Brussels region [3], which has thus become bilingual. Flemish and French-speakers are able to choose a school - Dutch-speaking or French-speaking - for their children, and also to have their cultural centres and to choose the language in which they receive documents from the government, the post office or the unemployment office.

But this bilingual federalism applies only in regions having a mixed population, as in Brussels. French-speaking people in Antwerp (Flanders) cannot send their children to a French-speaking school, and a Fleming living in Charleroi (Wallonia) speaks French when going to the post office or the town hall. Wallonia and Flanders are unilingual areas. For the minorities living in the zones bordering each linguistic border, a system of linguistic facilities has been set up, in order to give cultural and linguistic rights to the Flemish or German-speaking minority in the Walloon unilingual area, to the French-speaking minority in the German-speaking region (annexed after the First World War) and to the French-speaking minority in the Flemish area. This system functions correctly, except in certain communes around the Brussels region. In six communes located in Flanders, around Brussels - Wemmel, Wezembeek-Oppem, Crainhem, Drogenbos, Linkebeek, Rhode-St-Genes - , there are more than 50 per cent of French-speaking people. In sixteen of the other "Flemish" communes around Brussels, there exist French-speaking minorities (between 10 and 40 per cent of the population), who are prohibited from creating French cultural or linguistic institutions. This is not in conformity with the European treaty of the Council of Europe for the protection of regional languages and minorities. Belgium certainly signed this treaty in 1995, but it never ratified it. (France did not even sign it).

This nonsense is the consequence of the linguistic border, fixed on the basis of the 1947 census. Considering the demographic trends, it is difficult today to maintain this linguistic border and, moreover, to deny the cultural rights of the large French-speaking minority in these Flemish communes, whereas 15 per cent of Flemings in the bilingual area of Brussels have the same institutions as the 85 per cent of French-speakers. So it would be logical to include these communes in the bilingual Brussels region. But the Flemish nationalists are not only deaf to this demand: they even want to abolish the linguistic facilities. Those who think that Flanders must remain "Flemish", even when there is a minority of more than 15 per cent of French-speaking people - even 30 per cent, and sometimes even more than 50 per cent -, have to explain why Brussels should not be "French-speaking", with more than 85 per cent of French-speaking people...

Safeguarding social rights

The cultural and linguistic oppression of the Flemish people within the Belgian state was resolved by a series of state reforms, leading to a federal state. But this system set up a federalism in which socio-economic questions are dealt with on a community or regional basis: energy, town planning, the environment, employment, the economy, housing, agriculture and fishing, taxation, public works and transport. Some of these questions have been entirely regionalized, but others are only partially so, and the Flemish Right demands their complete regionalization. The Walloon, Brussels and Flemish workers thus find themselves increasingly divided, obliged to defend their social rights within a narrow regional framework, while being confronted with the same liberal policies of the bourgeoisie and the government, whether they are Flemish or from Brussels, Walloon or Belgian.

Against this evolution, trade unionists, artists, journalists, people from various associations, academics - Flemish, Walloon and from Brussels – have launched a petition entitled "Safeguard solidarity". They do not want "new walls to be erected between people, between regions and between countries". In the petition, which has already obtained nearly 100 000 signatures, we can also read: "We want decent wages for the same work, independently of what language we speak. We want whoever loses their job to have the right to the same support and assistance, independently of the area where they live. We want all children to have the same chances, independently of the region where they are born. We want all old people to keep the same right to a decent pension, independently of whether they live in Brussels, Flanders or Wallonia. In short, we want solidarity, not a split and division". The battle is not lost yet.

[1] The Brussels region comprises the 19 communes which make up the city of Brussels, but the communes surrounding Brussels, located in Flanders, where a minority or a majority of French-speaking people live, are excluded from it.

[2] The term "Flemish democrat" means here those who are for the granting of cultural and linguistic rights to the French-speaking population living around Brussels, and who are for the inclusion of the "Flemish" communes in the bilingual region of Brussels. This term thus does not therefore designate the allegedly "democratic" Flemish parties which want to limit even further, or even abolish, the few linguistic rights that exist for the French-speaking people who have become a majority in the six communes around Brussels. The word "nationalist" is only progressive only when it refers to oppressed peoples.

[3] See note 1