



Final call for Belgium?



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In Mark Twain's phrase, the rumours of Belgium's death appear to be greatly exaggerated – for now. While foreign media, particularly in the US, were quick to label Belgium's ongoing political crisis as the sign of imminent institutional implosion, the past fortnight has seen something of a return to normalcy here.

A month long ultra discrete mediation by a seasoned politician of the Flemish Christian-democratic party has paved the way for the return of its leader, Yves Leterme. Ever since his party won the Flemish part of the federal parliamentary elections in June, Yves Leterme has been Belgian Prime Minister in waiting. By far the most popular politician at the polling

station – he received 800.000 personal votes in a Flemish constituency of four million – he resigned his position as first minister in the regional Flemish government to profile himself as the inevitable next prime minister. He was duly appointed by the Belgian King to form a government but failed miserably in a highly mediatized fracas between Flemish and Walloon political parties.

This time around Leterme has opted for a behind the scenes approach. That may change the atmosphere but not the substance of his task. For over 110 days the negotiations to form the next federal Belgian government have been stalemated by seemingly insurmountable differences over state reform and devolution. Even though it is a federal country Belgium has no federal political parties. Beyond the ideological differences there is therefore the linguistic divide, since every political party is by definition either Flemish or Walloon. These linguistic blocs have developed different visions on the institutional future

of Belgium. All the Flemish political parties want more autonomy for Flanders; all the Walloon political parties prefer a unitary Belgium.

This fundamental division is further compounded by the symbolic case of Halle-Vilvoorde. As the result of a decades old compromise, French speaking inhabitants of this Flemish constituency near Brussels vote for Walloon political parties who can normally only present themselves in French speaking Wallonia or in bilingual Brussels. For the Flemish this is an absurdity and a tool for francophone expansionism in Flanders. For the Walloons it is the guarantor of the civil rights of a linguistic minority in Flanders.

Only yet another compromise can solve these differences. But can Belgium still compromise? Leterme is between a rock and a hard place. His Christian-democratic party has managed to win the elections by merging with a Flemish nationalist party. His nationalist wing will not accept anything less than an ambitious state reform package and wants no compromise on constituencies. On the other side of the linguistic border, the Walloon political parties do not want to budge on the symbolic constituency of

Halle-Vilvoorde and are loath to entertain any further regionalization of the country. The liberal party has won a seismic victory over the previously omnipotent socialists in Wallonia. It wants to capitalize on a historic breakthrough and keep the socialists out of the next government. But state reform requires a special two-third majority in parliament, for which socialist support is all but inevitable.

If this looks like a Gordian knot to you, remember that it is just the beginning. State reform is the Belgian precursor to actual government negotiations on the real political issues that occupy other democracies: the economy, ageing, the labour market, public finance, pensions, healthcare and so on. Now, and for the first time, all the Flemish political parties see state reform as an indispensable tool and precondition to

addressing the economic and social issues that face us. However, to refuse an agenda for policy reform without an agreement on prior state reform is an untenable position when the other side has exactly the opposite view and when only a minority favours a real split-up of

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the country. We are bound to find some middle ground as the pressure mounts with the passing weeks.

That is where we stand today. It is likely that some vehicle for a phased discussion on state reform will be mounted, setting an agenda for more dialogue and preparation towards 2009, when the next regional elections are due. Indeed, Yves Leterme is now discussing policy reform first while keeping the symbolic topics of devolution and state reform till last. This is an omen of less immediate devolution. The Flemish parties' initial desire to link policy reform to a prior and ambitious agenda for state reform looks all but doomed.

In the meantime the next federal government could concentrate on the hottest institutional issues and have a minimal agenda of real policy reform without profound state reform. It's not an attractive proposition to start a new government but it is perhaps the best that can be achieved today within the current confines of this complicated country.

Going forward, it is clear that the institutional paralysis of Belgium cannot last. Some see Belgium as an international example of the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic or linguistic communities. But at what price? Decades of successive compromises and piecemeal state reform have resulted in an inefficient and complex machinery of surrealistic proportions. Without a real overhaul today's nightmare scenario is likely to repeat itself into the future and public support for keeping the country alive will gradually erode.

Belgium's problems run deep. A historically artificial country on the border of the Latin and German cultures in Europe, it was formed almost by accident in the 19th century as a useful buffer state between France and Great Britain. Belgium's profound cultural differences, symbolized by different languages and an international capital whose identity is to have no identity, have been compounded by its own history. The newly born Kingdom of Belgium committed the original sin of imposing French as the official language on its Flemish majority. This historic discrimination constitutes the bedrock of the Flemish autonomy movement that first fought for equal rights and since 1970 has fuelled the gradual evolution from a unitary country to a federal country.

Federalization has further distanced the different linguistic groups from each other. With no federal political parties and no common media, the Flemish and Walloon communities are becoming increasingly alienated. The linguistic border that separates the Northern Flemish part from the Southern Walloon part has also become a political and economic border. Flanders is more a mixture of social conservatism and free market thinking, while Wallonia is rather a mixture of social liberalism and socialism. The economic development of both regions is dramatically different. Thriving Flanders feels it is subsidizing bankrupt policies in Wallonia. Wallonia feels that greedy Flanders is abandoning solidarity in her hour of need.

All these structural trends are now combined with a generation of politicians that have known nothing else and do not

know each other. Prime Minister designate Yves Leterme himself is a highly controversial figure in Wallonia and will have difficulty in surmounting personal distrust from that side. Yet this generation of politicians will have to rise to the challenge of solving Belgium's institutional conundrum.

For now, the Belgian stalemate looks hopeless but not serious. We are surfing on the waves of a good global economy. With no national currency there is little to no pressure from the financial markets. The outgoing federal government takes care of the day-to-day business and the state governments govern their respective regions. In the long run, however, this small country in Western Europe cannot

survive if it is unable to address its long term challenges such as globalization, ageing, welfare state reform and migration. In that context immobility will equal decline. Today's politicians owe it to tomorrow's generations to remake or break the dysfunctional institutional fabric that will otherwise smother the forces of progress. The current regime crisis gives them that opportunity and also that duty.

Marc De Vos

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