



## What is the matter with Belgium?

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The country that gave surrealism to the art world is now turning political surrealism into an art form. Last week, Belgium's current Prime Minister – Yves Leterme – tendered his resignation for the fifth time since his Flemish Christian-democratic party romped to victory in the federal elections of June 2007. At the behest of a weary King, the leader of the francophone conservatives, Didier Reynders, engaged in a last-ditch mediation effort. It proved as utterly pointless as the previous three years of constant internal crisis. The government has fallen and early elections loom.

Belgium's problems have deep and intricate roots. Situated on the murky borderline between the Latin and German cultures in Europe, Belgium was formed almost by accident in the 19th century as a then-strategic buffer state between France and Great Britain. Artificial in its origin, 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 fueled the gradual evolution from a unitary kingdom to a federal country, with ever more regional autonomy.

Along its decades-long tortuous but peaceful path of devolution, Belgium has acquired a linguistic border, formally separating the Dutch-speaking north (Flanders) from the French-speaking south (Wallonia). Brussels is as an officially bilingual enclave in Flanders, surrounded by a string of Flemish communities with special rights for French-speaking inhabitants. In reality, however, Brussels is cosmopolitan – with French as the dominant language and Dutch marginalized – while its surroun-

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ding Flemish communities have become increasingly francophone through internal Belgian migration. The reverse never happens: in an apparent testament of cultural inferiority, Flemings who move south learn or speak French, to become francophone after a couple of generations.

The problem that has gridlocked the Belgian political scene for the last three years is part of this unholy quagmire. Known in Belgium as “BHV”, – the acronym for Brussels and the two Flemish cities Halle and Vilvoorde – it represents the only election constituency that ignores Belgium’s linguistic border. French-speaking inhabitants of both Flemish cities can vote for Walloon political parties that can normally only present themselves in Wallonia or in Brussels as such.

The Flemish want to split up “BHV”, period. In their eyes, it is a constitutional 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. The issue is therefore as fundamental as it is personal. It is not just about two different cultural communities having difficulty living together; it

is about a profound difference in understanding of what it means to respect the other culture. For the Flemish, people living in Flanders should respect the fact that Dutch is their official language. For the Walloons, the language choices of individuals are sacrosanct, irrespective of their place of residence.

What makes this cultural divide a political chasm is the fact that Belgium has no federal political parties: all political parties are exclusively regional, as are all the media. All the Flemish and Walloon parties can freely grandstand on language issues before their own regional constituencies. But since they are condemned to governing together at the federal level, such grandstanding comes back to haunt them in any federal majority.

The recent tendency of traditional parties to form alliances with more radical linguistic parties has aggravated this situation. Mr. Leterme’s Flemish Christian-democrats achieved electoral victory in 2007 through a cartel with Flemish nationalists. This particular marriage of convenience did not survive the ongoing institutional crisis. Mr. Reynders’ conservatives are bedfellows with a militant francophone party. It was hoped that their alliance could be the weakest link that may yet give

way and finally offer the possibility of a compromise among the mainstream parties alone.

Hope springs eternal, but failed to break this particular deadlock. Belgium's federal government is now a caretaker government. With yet another coalition effort seemingly out of the question, the country is en route for early elections in June. BHV, in the meantime, is not going anywhere. A 2003 ruling by Belgium's constitutional court forces the country to reconsider this atypical constituency. Flemish political parties may now try to force a vote in parliament, only for Walloon parties to resort to delaying tactics. The end result could well be an election radicalized by the language issue and open to constitutional challenge.

And it doesn't stop there. Whatever the outcome of this depressing spectacle, even solving delicate "BHV" will only be a temporary reprieve. Belgium's internal divisions are not just cultural and historical, institutional and political; they are also economic and financial. Flanders is more a mixture of social conservatism and free market thinking, while Wallonia is rather a mixture of social liberalism and old-school socialism. The economic development of both regions is dramatically different. Thriving Flanders feels it is subsidizing bankrupt policies in Wal-

lonia. Wallonia feels that greedy Flanders is abandoning solidarity in her hour of need.

More than anything, the problem with Belgium is one of incredible internal complexity that stifles democratic decision making. Brussels stands out as a basket case: a medium-size city of little over a million souls is "governed" by 19 different smaller cities, one regional government, two regional communities, and one shared community – don't even try to understand all the distinctions. What makes political leadership in this country is not the energy to govern with conviction but the ability to reach compromises for the sake of compromise, essentially maintaining the status quo and serving various interest groups in an ever more complex web of checks and balances.

As a result, Belgium consistently lags behind its European peers in crucial areas of policy reform: in labour market, on pensions, on competitiveness, in healthcare, etc. The combined weight of the economic crisis and demographic ageing will therefore pose a much bigger challenge to the Belgian compromise than the essentially symbolic case of "BHV". A ballooning deficit, unfunded social security entitlements, and generous funding for the regions, have left the Belgian federal level vir-

tually cash-stripped. Complexity is the price for diversity, but the time when that price becomes simply too high is approaching fast. Belgium's internal divisions are bound to resurface after the next federal elections, whether in 2011 or before. Increasingly, they will deal with the substance of key economic, social, and fiscal policies, not with the symbolism of language and culture. The surrealism of Belgium's predicament will become very real instead.

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