

Belgium's Multicultural Society: “Federalism Laboratory” of European Integration

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The Kingdom of Belgium as a multilingual and multicultural society is today a federal type of the experimental laboratory of the European integration within the framework of the European Union (the EU). This is also a country in which the capital of the European Union is located and a country as one of the original six establishers of the present day the EU. The question of destiny of the Belgian multicultural federalism is of the crucial importance for the future process of European integration or disintegration.

The Belgian multicultural society: Long united and long divided

The population of the Kingdom of Belgium is 10 million and it is divided into two main linguistic groups: the northern Dutch speakers (the Flemish/Flanders) – 6 million and the southern French speaking population (the Walloons) – 4 million. The main third speaking group are the Germans (67,000) living on the German border. The capital Brussels upsets this neat division as it is mainly French-speaking city within the Dutch-speaking Flemish part of Belgium on the north. For the matter of comparison, the whole country is a quarter size of the United Kingdom, fitting into France 18 times and having 70% of the population number of the Netherlands (16 million).

Belgium not so often attracts outside attention. Yet the country is more than fine chocolates, delicious beers or Tintin. Usually, the others celebrate Belgium as a federal, post-nationalist country, which combines cultural pragmatism with a rather solid social consensus. The historians present the country without a critical vision of the origins of the Belgian independence in 1830 as a part of a game between the great European powers. Belgium as well as illustrates how the deep-seated tradition of local autonomy and suspicion towards state authority go hand in hand with a strong sense of individual tolerance and solidarity, with a rejection of violent confrontation and a continuous search for consensus between the Flemish and the Walloon parts of the country. Belgian history from the very beginning in 1830 up to the present is a history of linguistic diversity, cultural plurality and a search for a kind of a “Belgian” common identity of its all citizens who are constantly living between state’s integration and its territorial disintegration.

Belgium is an example of the ambivalent relation between history, national myths, and the “lasagne” identity of most Belgians for whom the King, as a political institution, is de facto the only factor of the national unity. The Belgian case of multicultural federalism can be at the same time and a model but also and a warning for the rest of Europe. Its history addresses questions of identity and security, of a sense of cohesion and common purpose – or the lack thereof. Like for the rest of Europe as well.

Any history of the Belgians from 1830 onwards has to describe the traditions and transitions

that have developed on the territory of the present-day Belgium in a sense of shared identity, common government, and a centralized nation-state – and then over a few

recent decades paved the way for Flemish-Walloon schism that now threatens to break up Belgium. However, it has to respond to the crucial question: Why does a government, unified for more than 150 years, no longer seem capable of holding together a linguistically divided country? If Belgium, as a symbol of the west European successful policy of multiculturalism and multilingual cohabitation, can not function anymore as a united political system and a country based on it, what other parts of Europe with the same structure and problems as Belgium can expect in the post-Cold War future of Europe which basically already started in 2014 in the multilingual and multicultural Ukraine?

In historically tracing the evolution of the governance of Belgium, one has to describe why and how the dominance of the French-speaking propertied elite eroded after having monopolized the land's governance for centuries. The extension of suffrage, combined with the rise of literacy and schooling enabled labor and the Flemish movement to gather sufficient power to fracture the Belgian polity, splitting its parties and frustrating its politics. The presence of the European Union (the EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (the NATO) has, in a tangential way, enabled the Belgian separatists to discount the merit of a national government that is no longer needed to defend the country militarily and economically.

Therefore, for example, in 2008, after 196 days after parliamentary elections Belgium finally got a new government. This new Belgian record in not having state government is achieved due to the main historical disputes between two major ethnolinguistic groups – the French speaking Walloons at the south and the Flemish/Dutch speakers (the Flanders) at the north (both of them are Roman-Catholics). Previous record in not having government was from the year of 1988 – 148 days. The winner of the spring 2007 parliamentary elections – Ivo Letens – Flemish nationalist could not form a new Belgian government even after several rounds of negotiations and interventions by the King. Ivo Letens, ironically a politician with a French name, was accusing at that time the Walloons for obstruction, while at the same time, the French speakers were accusing him for uniform nationalistic mind. At such a way, Belgium, as one of the central protagonists of the pan-European integration, is in the stage of real disunity and possible territorial dismemberment in the recent future.

Historical disputes

The struggle between the Walloons and the Flanders (the Flemish/Dutch speakers are 60% of the Belgium population) at linguistic, political, national and cultural levels is not novelty in Belgium as they are historically rooted from the very beginning of common political life – from 1830 when the Kingdom of Belgium was established. Belgium's federal structure is established on the principles of two ethnolinguistic regions (northern Flanders and southern Wallonia) and Brussels with special bilingual status (the Flemish dialect of Dutch language was recognized as an equal official language in 1922). Two federal units are governing one parts of their regional economies, transport, education, while the federal power has jurisdiction over foreign politics, defence, justice and social insurance. However, the Flemish winning coalition in 2007 was requiring more federal rights: higher level of taxation policy independence, regionalization of social insurance, autonomy in traffic regulations, separate car-plates, and even „constitution autonomy“. On the other hand, the Walloons are in a real fear that such requirements will finally end with disappearance of the common state (which

economic weight buttressed the industrial domination of the French-speaking Walloon south over the Flemish/Dutch-speaking majority in the north, whose wealth derived from agriculture and commerce). What concerns economy, we have to remember that Belgium was the first industrialized continental European state (second one in geographical Europe, i.e. after the United Kingdom or better to say – England).

The Belgium's political life historically had always the same main problem: the Flemish north was wishing more power and separation, while the French-speaking south was for preservation of Belgium as one state. Thus, for instance, after the Second World War the Belgian society was in unpleasant debate upon collaboration with the Nazi-Germans which left deep scars in the Belgian political life, as the population of Wallonia accused many Flemish/Dutch-speaking Belgians of sympathizing with the occupiers and even helping them for the reason of hope to get independence (like, for instance, the Ukrainians did during the Second World War).

Economic differences

As the Belgians became from the 1950s emphatically European, their own national identity was under question, which has an economic background as well. Namely, the structural difficulties of heavy industry, which had been the backbone of Wallonia's prosperity, gradually shifted the economic advantage to the Flemish north of the common country. Flanders continued to prosper through trade and commerce, and was a favoured location for the new industries owing to its ready access to the sea. Similarly to the case of the North Italy (Lombardia region), the reach regions of Flanders are propagating to stop to „feed“ any more poor Wallon south which is arrogant towards the Flemish language and culture. For instance, the Walloons consider the Flemish language as „underdeveloped“ to be used as the official university language in Belgium. Basically, one of the main Flemish political complains is of economic nature: financial capital of „developed“ north is directed to „underdeveloped“ south by the ruling Walloon politicians in Brussels for the matter of economic help to Wallonia. For the Flemish population of Flanders that is economic exploitation by the Walloons as the Flemish north is much more participating in the central budget than lesser developed Wallonia (the same complains of economic nature started Yugoslav crisis when at the end of the 1980s Slovenia and Croatia advocated policy of non-supporting any more underdeveloped Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro). The most fervent critics of current financial policy on relations Flanders-Wallonia are the big Flemish capital owners and managers who in 2005 openly advocated division of the country as Flanders is overburdened by taxation in the favor of Wallonia. Such Belgian financial politics, originally introduced to form and maintain state unity and Belgian nation, was later implemented within the framework of the European Community/Union. In addition to this pure economic problem, the Walloon politicians are accused by their Flemish colleagues for deliberate settlement of Francophone immigrants to Brussels in order to “Francophonize” this once upon a time biggest Flemish city.

Political instability

The growing economic, social, and emotional gulf between the two ethnolinguistic parts in Belgium led to political instability, firstly heightened in the 1970s and secondly today. In addition to the emergence of a number of regional parties, the Flemish and the Walloon sections of the main parties (the Christian Democrats, the Socialists, and the Liberals) split

to form separate regional parties.

In an effort to address its growing divisions, the country was built into a federal state in three stages (in 1980, 1988, and 1993). By 1993, there were parliaments for the Walloon region, the Flemish region, and the bilingual city of Brussels (three parliaments – one state!). The federal regions were given authority over around 40% of the public expenditure for matters in their purview (education, culture, health, economic and the labor policy). In these areas, Flanders and Wallonia are also empowered to conclude international treaties (similarly with „Muslim-Croat Federation“ and „Serbian Republic“ in Bosnia-Herzegovina). Further powers to the regions in matters of agriculture, transport, and foreign aid were granted in 2001. The contrast between the Flemish part and Wallonia was exacerbated by the growth, in the Flemish part, of separatist and xenophobic parties from the mid-1990s, most notably the Vlaams Blok (the Flemish bloc). Advocating the Flemish independence (like northern parts of ex-Yugoslavia – Slovenia and Croatia) and racist immigration policies, it polled over 20% of the vote in Belgium's second city – Antwerp in 2000. In federal politics, a major political shift occurred in 1999, when the Christian Democrats lost the leading role in the politics which they had occupied throughout the century, owing to a series of corruption scandals. From that time, the Liberals became the biggest party bloc in the parliament.

The Belgian Pandora Box

During the last political crisis in Belgium it became obvious that the Walloons are making all kinds of obstacles for the creation of a new functional government in Brussels what gives an argument to the Flanders to claim that basically the southern Walloons are the main „separatists“. The crisis was a quite serious with unpredictable consequences for territorial integrity of Belgium in the future, but also and what concerns the everyday political activities. For instance, it was at that time in question could Belgium sign a new European agreement in Lisbon without the government. The Flemish political parties, frustrated because of the Walloon obstructions, are threatening the south to unilaterally proclaim the city of Brussels as their own with the Flemish/Dutch language as the only official one. As a response, the Francophone parties proclaimed they will stop any further negotiations if the Flemish north will realize its threat concerning Brussels. It can be said that the roots of the

Belgian governmental-political crisis are so historically deep that the territorial decomposition of the state is becoming more and more realistic. When the Belgian Pandora Box will be open is probably only the question of time. However, the Belgian Pandora Box can have quite negative consequences for further European unification as in the case of its decomposition the Belgian experiment of multiethnolinguistic integration is going to be definitely put to the archives. In this case, Belgium as a „laboratory of European integration“ (definition given by one Belgian Prime Minister) would have a great influence to numerous European separatist movements and to the remapping of the European political reality. For instance, according to one public research, 54% of interviewed French citizens expressed wish to incorporate Wallonia into France in the case of the Belgian dismemberment as a state. The boomerang of „selfdetermination rights“ sent to the ethnolinguistic nations of ex-Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union from Brussels at the beginning of the 1990s is via Kosovo today returning back to Brussels with 87% of Flemish/Dutch speakers from Belgium supporting separation and with 77% of their linguistic-historic cross-border compatriots from the Netherlands wishing to include Flanders into the „motherland“ as historic region of the Netherlands (till 1830). At such a way, the supraethnolinguistic „Belgian“ nation could experience the same destiny of its „Yugoslav“ counterpart, however,

with a lesser chances to finish its existence by the civil war and ethnic cleansing as it was in the case of the destruction of ex-Yugoslavia from 1991 to 1999. Finally, indication that the Belgian „laboratory of European integration“ is collapsing have been and dramatic appeals in 2007 to the Belgians by their King Albert II to preserve national unity as „anachronic and catastrophic separatism“ could „erode international role of Brussels“ (and deprived him from the throne in the case of constitution of two republics instead of one Kingdom).

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