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Belgium, from Model to Case Study for Conflict Resolution

Summary

- Since 2007, Belgium has displayed a rather surreal degree of political chaos. Belgian politicians have provoked three cabinet resignations, 24 “royal” mediators, and more than 420 days of coalition formation. With the rise of Flemish nationalism and intercommunal tensions, the country seems to suffer from an intractable ethno-linguistic conflict.
- The maximum degree of reform Walloon parties can settle with is by far insufficient to Flemish nationalists, whose package of demands is considered unacceptable in Wallonia.
- One way forward is the creation of a nation-wide electoral district for federal elections in which every Belgian, regardless of residence, can vote for Flemish and Walloon candidates.

As two Belgians working on conflict resolution at the U.S. Institute of Peace, we were used to receiving numerous questions from colleagues about Belgium’s federalism, constitutional arrangements and language and education policies. In the literature on peace and conflict, Belgium’s creative yet complicated institutional arrangements and policies often serve as a model for multiethnic states emerging from armed conflict.

Yet lately colleagues have stopped asking those questions and mostly inquire about the country’s internal tensions, as news about Belgium’s entrenched political impasse has reached this side of the Atlantic. The political elites of a country that used to serve as a model for multiethnic societies in war-torn countries are now exploiting linguistic and cultural differences and stirring up tensions to advance a parochial political agenda.

Since 2007, Belgium has displayed a rather surreal degree of political chaos. Belgian politicians seemed to be on a merry-go-round. They have provoked three cabinet resignations, 24 “royal” mediators, and more than 420 days of coalition formation. With the rise of Flemish nationalism and intercommunal tensions, the country seems to suffer from an intractable ethno-linguistic conflict.

Polarized Narratives along Linguistic Divisions

After the June 2010 elections, two political parties arose as the undisputable victors and indispensable heavyweights for the next coalition government: The “New Flemish Alliance” (NV-A), a young Flemish nationalist, right-wing party with secessionist tendencies, eager to implement a thorough constitutional reform that would lead to a more autonomous Flanders; and the “Socialist Party” (PS), a traditional leftist party with long-standing roots in Walloon society that is lukewarm toward institutional change and wants to preserve a strong federal state level.

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The Flemish nationalists argue that the current political impasse demonstrates that the existing consensus democracy within a federal structure is outdated. In their view, the Walloons refuse to assume responsibility for their economic destiny and systematically reject Flemish proposals vital to improving governance. Walloon parties, on the other hand, caution that the Flemish proposals would dismantle the solidarity system between the two communities. In their view, these plans and the increasingly nationalist rhetoric of the Flemish indicate that they are paving the road for secession, a move opposed by the majority of the Belgian population.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that whereas previous constitutional reforms were driven by broadly shared societal concerns, the current push for reform is driven by Flemish political elites. This elite has eloquently pulled the Flemish population into an awkward nationalist momentum, triggering a Belgian identity crisis, antagonizing the Belgian population and eventually turning institutional reform into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Belgium: A Case for Conflict Resolution

The negotiation process in Belgium faces significant challenges. After many months of tense closed-door negotiations and mudslinging in the media, the mutual trust has dissipated, reducing the parties' willingness to compromise. Moreover, the maximum degree of reform Walloon parties can settle with is by far insufficient to Flemish nationalists, whose package of demands is considered unacceptable in Wallonia.

The presence of sufficient political will also remains questionable. A successful agreement could remove identity politics—Flemish nationalists' electoral bread and butter—off the political agenda. On their end, Walloons never requested reform, and thus regard any concession as a political loss. Most concerning is the absence of common goals between the parties. For the N-VA, ideological impulses at times overtake their pragmatism. Many Flemish nationalists view decentralization or independence as a goal in itself, rather than an effective tool to improve governance. Walloons, meanwhile, often negotiate with a short-term mindset, are fearful of Wallonia's future and reluctant to search for sustainable solutions for their deprived position.

A Typically Belgian Outcome

The current political crisis is unlikely to result in any revolutionary change. Given the mutual stakes in the capital, strong levels of integration and interdependence between both communities and unitary sentiments within society, Belgium will most likely muddle along, and slowly dismantle its federal structure and increase the power of its communities, Flanders and Wallonia.

Intuitively, the exclusion of the most radical elements from the negotiation table, particularly the N-VA, may seem like a way out. This would facilitate the mediators' efforts to bridge positions and form the urgently needed government. It is ironic how the N-VA's electoral success has put the party in a position requiring it to strike a deal with opponents they want to distance themselves from, and to take a responsible leadership role within a federal state structure the party prefers to dismantle. Yet inclusiveness is key in any negotiation situation. Excluding less moderate voices would undermine the legitimacy of any future agreement, particularly given the electoral success of the N-VA in Flanders.

One way forward is the creation of a nation-wide electoral district for federal elections in which every Belgian, regardless of residence, can vote for Flemish and Walloon candidates. Even during national elections the Walloon and Flemish parties can only campaign within their respective Dutch or French-speaking electoral districts when running for positions which would require them

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Jonas Claes is a (Flemish) program specialist in USIP's Center for Conflict Management. Valerie Rosoux is a (Walloon) Jennings Randolph senior fellow at USIP in Washington DC. In this Peace Brief, these Belgian scholars analyze the current political crisis in Belgium from a conflict resolution perspective.

to represent the entire country. A national circumscription will incentivize national politicians to adopt an inclusive Belgian mindset when campaigning throughout the entire country, suppress nationalist rhetoric and formulate a policy agenda that suits the country as a whole.

The existence of such a nation-wide constituency became visible during recent demonstrations in Brussels, organized by half a dozen politically engaged youth on Facebook. Up to 50,000 protesters convened in the Belgian capital to demand an end to the political impasse. A few days earlier, 40 artists from all over Belgium sold out the Royal Flemish Theater for an event calling for a constructive dialogue and protesting the exclusive nationalist tendencies.

Decentralization is unavoidable, and perhaps even necessary for Belgium's future welfare. But the infusion of identity-based and exclusionary arguments into political negotiations about state reform is detrimental and has no place in a social welfare state at the center of Europe.



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