

The Right Wing Parties Dynamic between the Economic and the Identity Discourse: Case study - Belgium

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Abstract. Latest developments of the global economic crisis but also the way people use to build their perception on their own identity brought interesting developments in the political sphere. Thus, Belgian right wings parties have amplified the identity discourse. Belgian political crisis is an interesting example in terms of political reconciliation. The problem became so acute that makes discussion on Belgian state dissolution/dividing to be almost trivial. Interrogation on problems like: should regionalization be a priority? Which will be the future of federal state concepts? It is the question about social solidarity or about autonomy and regional development? What kind of news can occur in institutional organization? The problem is not really the way the two communities (Flemish and Walloons) can live together separately in a federation, each speaking its own language, building a separate culture, having own perception of things. The most difficult to manage is the problem of economic redistribution. This and no other disagreements made the issue of the Belgian state segregation to be worthy of discussion. Centrifugal dynamics that happen in Europe lately are signs of rethinking their identity. The idea of confederalism in the case study on Belgium appears to be a possible solution to the crisis problem and generate a new and radical reform of the state.

Keywords: *centrifugal dynamics, confederalism, identity discourse, economic crisis, political crisis*

Latest developments of the global economic crisis but also the way people use to build their perception on their own identity brought interesting developments in the political sphere. Thus Belgian right wings parties have amplified the identity discourse. Belgian political crisis is an interesting example in terms of political reconciliation. The problem became so acute that makes discussion on Belgian state dissolution/dividing to be almost trivial. Interrogation on problems like: Should regionalization be a priority? Which will be future of federal state concepts? What to be chosen: social solidarity or autonomy and regional development? What kind of news can occur in institutional organization?

The problem is not really the way the two communities (Flemish and Walloons) can live together separately in a federation, each speaking its own language, building a separate culture, having own perception of things. The most difficult to manage is the problem of economic redistribution. This and no other disagreements made the issue of the Belgian state segregation to be worthy of discussion.

Today's world offers us examples of politico-economic paradox, dual, contradictory. Seeing interesting political developments in and with states that we, the Eastern European countries, we use to consider them models in terms of institutional stability, efficiency of the political, economic, constitutional establishment, and they offer now images of political, institutional crises, unsuspected surprises. Belgium is one such example.

Belgium can be seen as a success story. And success is based on effectiveness, efficiency whether political, economic or institutional is. What I am trying to determine in this paper is how, in the context of the current global economic crisis, and political crisis too Belgium has experienced also in the recent years, how the right-wing parties has been evolved, with an especially view on the identity discourse and its own changes.

Belgium is a parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarchy. Gained its independence in 1830, Belgium adopted the Constitution in 1831 a series of reforms initiated after 1970 leading to the situation of becoming a federal state; officially in 1993-1994 the federal structure established itself on the same considerations of efficiency.

The Belgian Government implies the existence of a parliamentary democracy under a constitutional monarch.

According to Belgian Constitution, Belgium is a federal State composed of Communities and Regions (art.1). Belgium comprises three Communities: the Flemish Community, the French Community and the German-speaking Community) and three Regions (the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region and the Brussels Region).

Five major rounds of state reform in 1970, 1980, 1988-89, 1993 and 2001 have turned it into a federal state, composed out of language areas, communities and regions¹.

Also, as political subdivisions, since the fourth State reform (1 January

¹ Vande Lanotte, Johan, Bracke, Siegfried & Goedertier, Geert, *België voor beginners. Wegwijs in het Belgisch labyrint*, Die Keure, Brugge, 2008, pp. 27-33.

1995), Belgium comprises 10 provinces: in the Flemish Region there are Antwerp, Flemish Brabant, West Flanders, East Flanders and Limburg provinces. In the Walloon Region there are Walloon Brabant, Hainaut, Liege, Luxembourg and Namur provinces.

Add to this is the Brussels Region which has a particular administrative condition².

The Communities and the Regions, each in its own field of concern, have competences in exercising power. The Regions are competent for area-specific matters, such as economic policy, employment, environmental planning, housing, public works and conservation³.

According to the 36 Article from the Belgian Constitution, the federal legislative power is exercised jointly by the King, the House of Representatives and the Senate. The federal executive power, as regulated by the Constitution, belongs to the King (art.37) and the Judiciary power is exercised by the courts. Court decisions are executed in the name of the King (art.40).

So the Executive power is shared by the King (head of state), Prime Minister (head of government) and the Council of Ministers (cabinet). The Council of Ministers is composed of fifteen members and with the possible exception of the prime minister; the Council of Ministers is composed of an equal number of Dutch-speaking members and French-speaking members (art.99).

In Belgium redistribution of power took place over two levels. The first one relates to language and, in a larger sense, to everything related to culture. The result: three linguistic and cultural communities. Belgium is on the line that separates the German culture of the Latin one. This explains why the country has three official languages: Dutch, French and German.

The second level concerns the redistribution of power efficiency based on

² The powers over community affairs that belonged in that region to the Provincial Council and the Permanent Deputation of the old province of Brabant were exercised from then on by the Flemish Community Commission, the French Community Commission and the Joint Community Commission. The powers over regional or federal affairs that belonged in that region to the Provincial Council and the Permanent Deputation of the old province of Brabant, are exercised by the Brussels-Capital Region. – cf. **Portal Belgium – Official Information-** http://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/government/provinces/.

³ Vranken, Jan, De Decker, Pascal, Van Nieuwenhuyze, Inge, *National and city contexts, urban development programmes and neighbourhood selections. The Flemish (Belgian) background Report*, a working paper for UGIS (Urban Development Program), UFSIA – UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP, 2001, http://webhost.ua.ac.be/ugis/results/NR1/NR1_Belgium.pdf

economic interests and led to regionalization. There was establishment of the three regions that aspire to greater economic autonomy: Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels region, partially comparable U.S. States or German federal Lands (Lander).

Although, going in-depth country is further divided into 10 provinces and 589 municipal councils, the federal state still retains important powers: foreign affairs, national defense, justice, finance, social security part of public health and internal affairs.

Belgian constitutional amendments are related to ethnic and linguistic conflicts, for example in 1970, 1971, and 1993, and with this it was decided to increase the power of the three regions in the federation, at the expense or by limiting the power of the central. Gradually the cultural and economic differences between the regions have contributed to political rifts between Flemish and Francophone parties across the ideological spectrum, with the wealthier Flemish north seeking increased self-rule and reduced taxpayer support for the less prosperous Wallonia. According Freedom House reports, voting takes place along strict linguistic lines: except in the bilingual district encompassing Brussels, parties are only permitted to run in their respective linguistic regions⁴.

Reconciling regional and cultural identities in a federal structure is still a very sensitive and complex purpose. The Phenomenon which is facing the Belgian society now and to which we'll come back soon, is an interesting centrifugal dynamic of the federal and regional identities.

Belgian federal elections in 2010

The most recent federal elections in Belgium, took place on June 13, 2010. The results were interesting though not contradicted expectations and political analysis, being along the lines of the predictions, but leading to an unprecedented political crisis.

The main parties that participated in the elections relevant scoring were:

N-VA (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*) - is a Flemish political party, Centre-right oriented, as it results from its own declaration⁵. N-VA it is

⁴ <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2011/belgium>

⁵The N-VA is a party that puts socio-economic responsibility high on the agenda. We believe in the merits of a free-market economy and believe that the government must give

a conservative and liberal movement⁶ and also a nationalist Flemish party. They won the 2010 elections with a score of 17, 40% in the Chamber of Representative and 19, 61% in the Senate but they did not form the Government.

On the second place, PS (*Parti Socialiste*) is a Francophone social-democratic political party. Their main values are solidarity, brotherhood, equality, justice and freedom s fundamental values⁷. The PS continues to promote by continuously adapting their promotion to the new challenges of contemporary society. In 2010, PS managed to gain a score of 13, 70% in the Chamber and 13, 62% in the Senate, and they formed the Government.

Next on top runners in the election results stood CD & V, the Christian Democratic and centrist Political party of Flanders, with 10, 85% in Chamber and 9, 99% in Senate. "Christian Democrats want to restore Their Ideology, for the welfare and prosperity of every Fleming, with respect for everyone."⁸ The ideology of CD & V can be performed with the combination of Christian Democracy and four V-words, verbs, each word to a component of the party name can be connected, although not exclusive to it: **Verzorgen** (taking care), **Vooruitzien** (looking ahead), **Verbinden** (creating links) and **Versterken** (strengthening).

Then it's coming MR (*Mouvement Réformateur*) a Walloon right wing party, named The Reform Movement, a French-speaking liberal and conservative-liberal Political party.

The next one is **SPA** (*Socialistische Partij – Anders*), The Different Socialist Party, a Flemish social-democratic political party, branched off from the former Belgian Socialist Party.

individuals and companies all the opportunities possible to take initiatives. The government must, however, determine a standardising and regulating framework and must also organise the solidarity between stronger and weaker people. This solidarity must be organised in a transparent, efficient and effective manner. It cannot become a hammock, but rather a safety net, and preferably even a trampoline. The N-VA is therefore certainly not a neo-liberal party. It does not stand for a "laissez faire, laissez aller" approach, but we do believe that the government must focus on its core tasks and leave the remaining adequate space to be filled with the free initiatives of citizens and companies. - <http://international.n-va.be/en/about/faq#faq-ideo>

⁶ See also Manifest van de Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie – on http://www.n-va.be/files/default/nva_images/documenten/manifest.pdf

⁷ "La solidarité, la fraternité, l'égalité, la justice et la liberté sont des valeurs fondamentales. Le PS continue à les promouvoir en adaptant en permanence leur promotion aux nouveaux enjeux de la société contemporaine." – on the official site of PS Party - <http://www.ps.be/Pagetype1/PS/Valeurs.aspx>

⁸ Cf. official site of CD&V - <http://www.cdenv.be/wie-zijn-we/ideologie>

Open Vld (*Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten*), Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats, a Flemish liberal political party, comes next.

Under a score of 9% recorded, Vlaams Belang, the only party that assumes explicitly right-wing, far-right ideology. **VB**, (*Vlaams Belang*) - Flemish Interest is a Belgian far-right political party. VB promotes and advocates for ideas as Flemish independence, nationalism, strictly limitation of immigration under the conditioning of their cultural and linguistic assimilation ("multiculturalism is a mistake!"). It promotes euro-skepticism, being very cautious and critical of the European Union with its bureaucracy and to meddle where the sovereignty of the people should prevail⁹.

The next one placed is **CDH** *Centre Démocrate Humaniste*, The Humanist Democratic Centre, a Francophone Christian democratic political party.

Ecolo and **Groen!** are two green parties, the first one French-speaking Belgian green political party in Wallonia, Brussels and the German-speaking Community of Belgium and the second one a Flemish green party.

Other parties, as *Lijst Dedecker*, *Parti Populaire*, for example, and so on, failed to gain any places in the federal parliament, as can be seen in table in Table 1.

Table 1: Federal Election Results Chamber of Representatives and Senate, Belgium, 2010

Party	Ideological orientation	Region	Votes for Chamber of Representatives	Chairs in Chamber	% in Chamber	Votes for Senate	Chairs in Senate	% in Senate
N-VA	Right	Flanders	1.135.617	27	17,40	1268780	9	19,61
PS	Left	Walloon	894.543	26	13,70	880828	7	13,62
CD&V	Center	Flanders	707.986	17	10,85	646375	4	9,99
MR	Right	Walloon	605.617	18	9,28	599618	4	9,27
SP.A	Left	Flanders	602.867	13	9,24	612079	4	9,48
Open Vld	Right	Flanders	563.873	14	8,64	533124	4	8,24
Vlaams Belang	Right	Flanders	506.697	12	7,76	491547	3	7,60
CDH	Centric	Walloon	360.441	9	5,52	331870	2	5,13
ecolo	Left	Walloon	313.047	8	4,80	353111	2	5,46
GROEN!	Left	Flanders	285.989	5	4,38	251246	1	3,89

⁹ Cf. Vlaams Belang's official site on <http://www.vlaamsbelang.org/>

Lijst Dedecker	Right	Flanders	150.577		2,31	130779		2,02
Parti Populaire	*	Walloon	84.005			98858		
PVDA+	Left	Flanders	52.918			53995		
PTB+	*	Walloon	38.857			51056		
WALLONIE D'ABORD	*	Walloon	36.642			98858		
R.W.F.	Right	Walloon	35.743			40393		
FN	Right	Walloon	33.591		0,51			
Front des gauches	Left	Walloon	20.734			28346		
BELG.UNIE	Centric	Belgium	20.665					
FN+	Right	Walloon	11.553					
PTB+PVDA+	Left	Belgium	9.313					
PROBRUXSEL	*	Walloon	7.201					
LSP	Left	Belgium	6.791			7841		
Parti Pensionné PP	*	Walloon	6.688					
VIVANT	Centric	East Cantons	6.211		0,10%			0,24
W+	*	Flanders	5.857					
EGALITE	Minority	Walloon	5.670					
RESPECT	*	Walloon	5.630					
MSplus	*	Walloon	2.827			3981		
MP Education	*	Walloon	2.572					
V.I.T.A.L.	*	Walloon	2.259					
PIRATE PARTY	*	Walloon	2.200					
VRIJHEID	*	Flanders	1.576					
N	*	Walloon	610					
CAP	*	Walloon				6,254		
Total			6.527.367	149	94,49	6.482.691	40	94,55

Source: Data processed from Belgium Federal Public Service Home Affairs¹⁰

We have presented the main parties in Belgium in order of votes obtained in the elections of 2010.

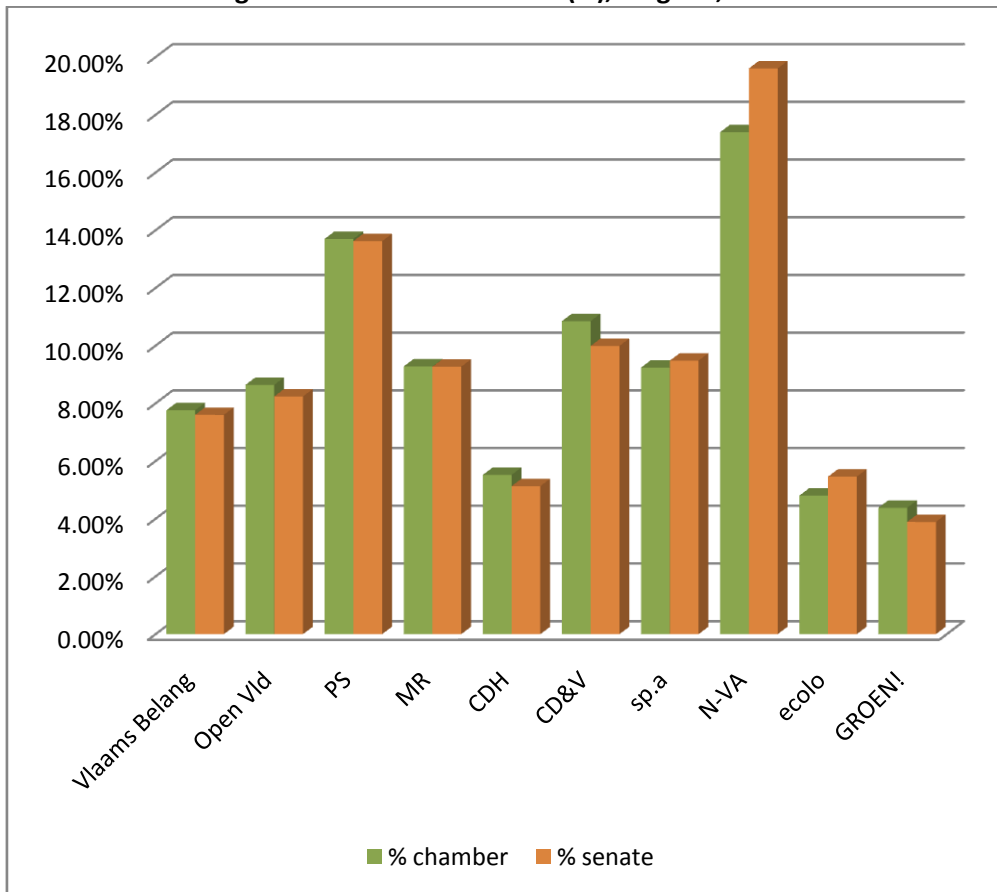
- N-VA - right-wing conservative and liberal, nationalist (part of the Flemish

¹⁰ Bron: Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken on <http://verkiezingen2010.belgium.be/nl/>

movement) led by Bart de Wever won the elections but ended up in opposition

- PS (Socialist Party) - Walloon social democratic party, the result of the division in 1978 in the Belgian Socialist Party Walloon and Flemish branch (SPA)
- CD & V - from popular Christian Party, Christian Democratic and Flemish Party is a centrist party, the Flemish Christian-oriented democracy, with historical ties to corporate and professional organizations. Until the election of 2010 was the largest political party in Belgium, but has made a major failure.

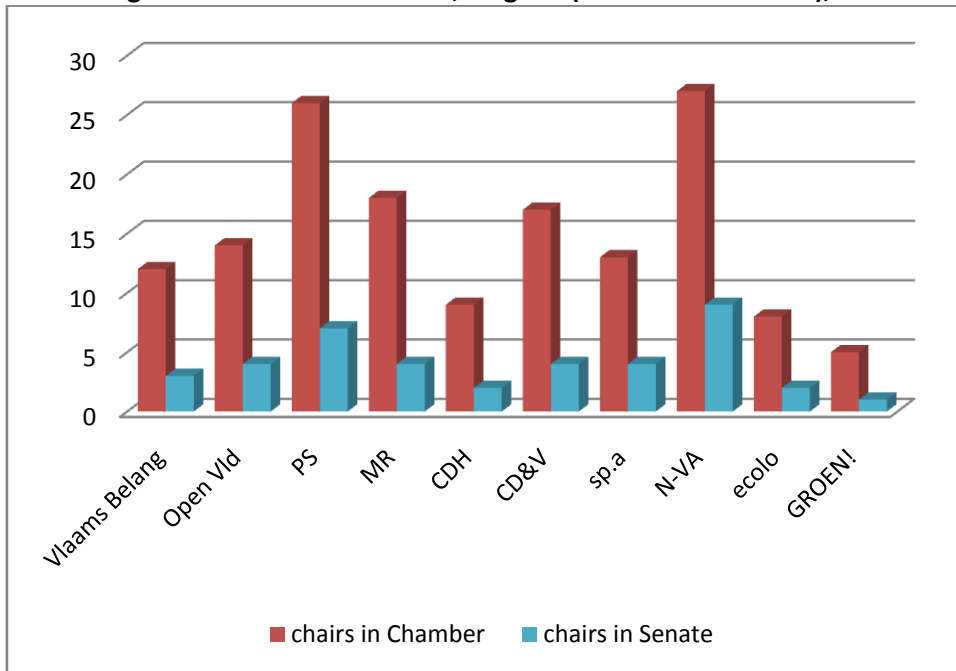
Fig.2 Federal Election Results (%), Belgium, 2010



Source: Data processed from Belgium Federal Public Service Home Affairs

Both the Flemish nationalists of the New Flemish Alliance (NV-A), headed by Bart De Wever, and the Francophone Social Democrats (PS), led by Elio Di Rupo, emerged as the winning parties.

Fig.3 Federal Election Results, Belgium (chairs in Parliament), 2010



Source: Data processed from Belgium Federal Public Service Home Affairs

Right-wing parties and movements in Belgium

Right-wing parties and movements have evolved in close connection with ideas of autonomy Flemish in Belgium, as in the Netherlands, two regions where this trend is well established and solidarism is based on traditionalist Catholicism. Over usual development groups related to different sensitivity or arising from repeated divisions, in Belgium are added duplication and even rivalries between Francophone and Dutch-speaking parties, before and after the Second World War. South of the linguistic border, defined with great difficulty in the '60s and remodeled in 1980 by creating three regional areas - one of which is Brussels - French far right has lived often in unison with his older brother French, in North there are plenty of activists who look to the Netherlands with tenderness.

After the Second World War in Flanders has been a political grouping, *Vlaamse Concentratie* (Flemish Concentration). From this emerged two durable parties: *Volksunie*, a nationalist party, which emerged as a spokesman for the Flemish nationalism since 1958 and who cannot be classified as belonging to the extreme right, even if its militants are among this movement; *VMO - Vlaamse*

Militanten Orde (Flemish Militant Order), born in 1949, categorically activist, movement that racist theories and practices have violent and definitively separated from Volksunie in the '60s.

Besides nationalism linked to the emancipation of Flemish language, Belgian right-wing parties have manifested anti-immigrant attitudes. This attitude has historical roots and is linked to a precarious economic situation that the country faced in the early 70's. It is often accepted the hypothesis that economic deadlock caused a largely anti-immigrant mobilization. Since the decline of the extractive industries of coal and steel affect very early Wallonia and Dutch-speaking region of Limburg, far right movement multiply their sympathy signs for miners on strike, but without much success. Their attitude and voice have been heard when the immigration subject has been related to the threaten surrounding the workplace and security of the Belgian workers. By this motive around 1975, each of the two linguistic regions, had a tandem configuration with a party accompanied by an activist movement.

VMO's, reconstituted in Antwerp in 1971, was charged with assault and punitive expeditions, undertaken individually or in collaboration with Youth Front and solidarist movement, which brings VMO defendant's position to set up a private militia in 1980, its leader was sentenced to one year in prison¹¹. Since then, the VMO began to divide. The harshest elements have lost none of their usual combativeness. Joined other members of Vlaams Blok, a party without complexes, which presents candidates Dutch-speaking region as well as in Brussels, with slogans such as "Immigration = unemployment, insecurity", in 1978, the very Catholic city Antwerp chooses the Deputy President's Vlaams Blok, Karel Dillen therefore gained ground xenophobia and the list grew more violent actions, even if migrants security here was less precarious than in some cities British and French.

Terrorism arrived in Belgium in 1981, as a criminal attack directed against the synagogue in Antwerp and it becomes a very worrying phenomenon in 1984-1985, when anti-American actions claimed by communist cells overlapped combat armed attacks on supermarkets, actions dubbed a gang of "*De Bende van Nijvel*"

¹¹ Anne-Marie Duranton-Crabol, **Europa extremei drepte din 1945 până în zilele noastre**, traducere în limba română de Bogdan Geangalău, Iași, Editura Institutul European, 2002, pp.110-115.

("Crazy Brabant killers" group formed in 1982). Significant electoral gains right wing recorded: the 1988 municipal elections Vlaams Blok had reached almost 18% of the vote in Antwerp.

Vlaams Blok, created in 1978, was the most notable right-wing party. Election campaigns were mainly from immigration issue, combined with the desire Flemish autonomy. Because of its ideological identification with the extreme right, all significant Flemish political parties were reluctant to enter coalition with the Vlaams Blok. Following the 1989 agreement, known as the *cordon sanitaire*, the party was blocked from entering any level of government. The Court of Appeal of Ghent, condemned the party for violations of anti-racism law, taking him outside the law. Final decision has been made on 9 November 2004 and shortly party reorganized as Vlaams Belang. By 2004, the party was undoubtedly the most popular party Flemish in Belgium, supported about a quarter of the Flemish electorate and manifesting itself as one of the most successful radical right-wing populist parties in Europe.

Collective mind links militant movements and actions by far right-wing ideologies. Therefore, even when a certain group, such as "*De Bende van Nijvel*", is not tied to a particular party or movement, but simply a criminal gang, the collective consciousness reflecting on the movements of the extreme right, anti-communist or anti-American, anti-Islam or anti-migration in general and linking them to violence and abuse, isolating them. The paradox is that despite this, at least locally (local elections are always considered more important, reflecting interests closer to citizen's needs) right-wing parties were successful.

The success of right wings parties in the Flanders region remains, however, primarily related to promoting the Flemish language and Flemish culture, a sensitive issue for this part of Belgium for a long time, which may ended for the young generation but for the generations born after World War did not end yet.

"Flanders case" in Belgium is primarily the result of a long political mobilization of a "historical" ethnic group, characterized by language, Dutch¹². This process of emancipation of the Flemish Community, the Flemish movement, initiated in the nineteenth century questioned the economic policy and cultural

¹² Huyseune, Michel, "Contemporary Centrifugal Regionalism: Comparing Flanders and Northern Italy", in **Contemporary Centrifugal Regionalism: Comparing Flanders and Northern Italy**, Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, Brussel, 2009, pp.5-6.

domination of the Belgian francophone elite after independence (1830). Started with the goal of obtaining the right to use the Flemish language, which is often superimposed, confused with Dutch (differences are only dialectal) in public (government, courts, education, etc.) to recognition as the national language. Only in 1930 Flemish language obtained legal status equal to the French, and in 1960 held border demarcation community speaking Flemish, Walloon and Flanders administrative delimitation of the bilingual region of Brussels. The next step was questioning the state itself, as a unitary entity (even a federal one) followed by a series of institutional and constitutional reforms that culminated in the federal state today. The centrifugal dynamics of this process, the pressure coming particularly from the Flemish continuously renewed requirements for transfers of powers to the regional level, raises the question of the future Belgian State, culminating with the political crisis in years past.

From an economic perspective, in the 19th century and early 20th century, Flanders was economically underdeveloped compared to Wallonia, and therefore Flemish movement has always been interested in the economic development of the region and creating an entrepreneurial Flemish class. Flanders is an economic success story, it managed to reach the dominant economic position in Belgium after World War II, along with the decline in coal mines in Wallonia (1950) and later steel industry (1970 and 1980) the decline coincided with a boom in Flanders. Flemish economy is a success story on the one hand, on the Antwerp port and inland waterways, which have attracted international investors, on the other hand, the major development of SMEs, trade, diamond trade, etc.

Building a Flemish identity has also an important development. Until the First World War, the Belgian State was never in doubt and Flemish identity and Belgian identity was found compatible. Part of the Flemish movement was radicalized in World War I, adopting after 1918, a strong nationalist profile, and rejecting the idea of a Belgian state. The purpose of achieving autonomy coincided with a reformulation of identity issues in accordance with the new terms of socio-economic modernity. Dominant discourse in Flanders, including one produced by the Flemish government, now emphasizes the need for regional normality modernity and a "virtuous insertion into the global economy" and suggests the region as a development model. The importance of traditional grievances and Flemish nationalist mythology gradually decreased, and took the form of specific extreme right Vlaams Belang ideology. Vlaams Belang Flemish symbolizes the dark

side of nationalism and questioning the apparent "normalization" of Flemish identity, placing it in contrast with ethnicist position and to exclude non-Western immigrants.

Dissolution of the Belgian state, as a "failed state" appears to be the solution that promotes Vlaams Belang. They¹³ think that in order to end the impasse Belgium has arrived is declaring Flemish sovereignty and starting the negotiations on the dissolution of the kingdom¹⁴. It is been talking about "post-Belgian future" and the emergence of two new states: Flanders and Wallonia. This solution appears to the authors necessary because "Walloons and Flemings are constantly at cross-purposes about almost every important issue, while there is no prospect of improved relations at all. The most logical and candid conclusion would be to start negotiations between the two communities about a fair and balanced split-up of this failed State¹⁵. Moreover, it is our right to rid ourselves from Francophone domination and blackmail, which has lasted more than 180 years now. Of course Flanders would be a strong and viable nation State from the start. The Flemish Region is already characterized by reliable political institutions and a thriving economy. Until now Flemings have been able to solve the main problems of the whole of Belgium, so they will undoubtedly have enough strength to take care of their own wealth¹⁶".

Centrifugal dynamics and federalism versus confederalism

It is recognized the existence in Europe of regional centrifugal dynamic forms. "Regionalism and the affirmation of regional identities in the European

¹³ Gerolf Annemans and Steven Utsi, the authors of **After Belgium - The Orderly Split-Up**, are head of Vlaams Belang research department.

¹⁴ Annemans, Gerolf & Utsi, Steven, **After Belgium - The Orderly Split-Up**, Uitgeverij Egmont, Brussel, 2011

¹⁵ "To understand the essentially unjust nature of Belgium, we should recall that the majority of all Council of State and Constitutional Court judgments on communal differences have been decided in Flanders' favor. One of the most notorious examples was the CC degree of 26 February 2003, which ordered the annulment of the provincial constituencies, in particular Flemish Brabant. This single decision means that every subsequent federal election has been technically unconstitutional and has made the contentious issue of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV) constituency loom large over each incoming administration. The Belgian problem is about unjust structures, *not* ethnic hatred." Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

Union are perceived in an ambivalent and at times schizophrenic way”¹⁷. In the EU area this problem has a solution in multi-level governance, an offer for pacifying ethno-political and secessionist conflicts¹⁸.

Centrifugal dynamics problem is always placed in relation to economic issues. “Contemporary justifications of centrifugal regionalism emphasize the rootedness of economic virtues in regional culture and traditions. In the case of economically more successful regions this easily leads to the formulation of a discourse that suggests their cultural superiority”¹⁹.

The public and political discourse on immigration and integration in Flanders is difficult to understand, as we’ve been seen without the notion of Flemish nationalism. There is not only the undeniable influence of the extreme-right nationalist party Vlaams Belang, since almost all the Flemish parties make use of nationalist elements, arguments and reflections in the debate on immigration and integration issues. But the relationship between Flemish nationalism and the Flemish approach to newcomers and migrants is controversial. There is a Flemish history of nationalism and the struggle for autonomy, language rights and cultural emancipation, are used to accept that newcomers are bound to their own language, culture, etc. It supports the idea of “emancipation without loss of cultural identity”. “On the other hand the Flemish history of nationalism is used as an argument for assimilation and against multiculturalism. The languages, cultures and religions of the newcomers are conceived as a (new) threat for the Flemish culture”²⁰.

So we can notice an ambivalent dimension of regionalism, “the articulation of regional identity combined with the development of centrifugal tendencies whereby richer regions question national solidarity and redistributive policies, interacting with the affirmation of xenophobic parties”²¹.

This overlap allowed formulations like those of journalist Peter Vandermeersch: “Belgium is two countries”. The regional elections of June 2009

¹⁷ Huysseune, Michel, op.cit., p.2.

¹⁸ Hooghe, Liesbet and. Marks, Gary, **Multi-level Governance and European Integration**, Lanham (Md), Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Oxford, 2001.

¹⁹ Huysseune, Michel, op.cit., p.4.

²⁰ Loobuyck, Patrick and Jacobs, Dirk, “How to Understand the Peculiar Public Discourse on Immigration and Integration in Flanders?”, in **Contemporary Centrifugal Regionalism: Comparing Flanders and Northern Italy**, Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, Brussel, 2009, p.138.

²¹ Ibidem.

proved this hypothesis: “In the Walloon regional parliament 43 out of 73 seats were allotted to the two left-wing parties, the Socialists and the Greens. The corresponding parties obtained only 26 out of 124 seats in the Flemish regional parliament. The difference becomes even more striking when one looks at the right-hand side of the political specter. In Wallonia, an outspoken Right-wing party does not even enter into parliament. The Christian Democrat party is dominated by left-wing tendencies, and even the Liberal Mouvement Réformateur can only be called Centre Right. A very similar distribution of the seats can be found in the Francophone Parliament, which includes also the Francophone representatives of Brussels. By contrast, 45 seats in the Flemish parliament are occupied by parties positioning themselves firmly to the right of the Liberal and Christian Democrat Parties²²”.

The assumption that Belgium is actually composed of two different countries is strengthened by the finding that Belgium does not have a shared public opinion. “The Flemish and Walloon people do not read each other’s newspapers, nor do they watch each other’s television stations. Nowadays even Flemish people interested in politics hardly know about the major issues in the other part of the country, while the French-speaking people equally do not comprehend the issues that keep the Flemish region awake. Is this a problem? Not necessarily. It depends from what you expect the Belgian federation to do. Both French speaking and Dutch-speaking people can perfectly live in harmony in two separate communities that hardly seem to be in contact with each other, provided their housekeeping and accounts are also kept separate. The moment one expects more from the federation, then indeed there is a problem. If two parties build a welfare state which implies continuous repartitions, as is the case today, then you need more mutual connection and alliance”²³.

All this indicates that it is not accidentally or shifted its efforts to reform the Belgian State. And one of the solutions planned reform would be to shift from federalism to confederalism.

As shown in sections on the latest federal elections in Belgium, which took

²² Beyen, Marnix, “Tragically Modern Centrifugal Sub-Nationalisms in Belgium, 1830-2009”, in **Contemporary Centrifugal Regionalism: Comparing Flanders and Northern Italy**, Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, Brussel, 2009, p. 17.

²³ Ibidem, p.25.

place in 2010, topped the list winners were two parties in the two regions "competing" Flanders and Wallonia, CD & V and PS respectively. CD & V was ranked first, without having Tots majority at a short distance from the PS. In fact to get one more chair in the Chamber of Representatives and two more chairs in the Senate in compare with the PS.

After the general elections in June 2010, Belgium's major parties began negotiations on constitutional reforms forcing the largest in decades for the country to keep both groups happy. But given that the interests were diametrically opposed, all negotiations ended in a deadlock. Neither of the two parties not amenable to negotiations, and that situation led to the longest contemporary government crisis. 535 days to find a compromise and negotiation every 20 hours for each minister.

The stakes dispute was the increasing regional autonomy in order to better reflect the differences between the two ethnic groups. Flanders, richer, is trying to get autonomy, while trying to maintain the francophone national unity as closely and together with it and financial solidarity.

As shown analysts, Belgium is actually not a country, but two: Belgium does not have a common opinion public. Flemings and Walloons seem to coexist in a separate quasi-total. This may not be a problem in itself. It becomes a problem when you challenge the expectations of the Belgian Federation. It seems that the speaker of French and Dutch could live comfortably separation provided separate accounts. The idea of building a welfare state, which involves continuous distributions, implies some connections and mutual alliances.

The slogan launched from Vlaams Belang, despite its aggressiveness, makes us wonder:

Vlaams geld in Vlaamse handen! Flemish money in Flemish hands! (Vlaams Belang)

The crisis involves both interest and identity, economic arguments, reflecting the reluctance of many problems.

On how it was solved the Belgian government crisis (2010), we must note that Elio di Rupo, became the first prime minister from a Francophone socialist party after more than three decades. He succeeded after many rounds of negotiations to form a coalition of six parties including the Socialist, Liberal and Christian Democrat, both of the Flemish Region and the Walloon part but not the big winner Flemish separatist N-VA party lead by Bart De Wever, who promised to make a fierce opposition to the newly formed government.

Interview with Bart de Wever – the N-VA leader

In the interview he gave to us²⁴, Bart de Wever justified his party's success in elections, on the one hand the Flemish discontent and frustration felt in recent years, led by a coalition that was not representative in Flanders and on the other hand, understanding of the need for reform, transform the policy into action by his party²⁵.

Asked about the party's ideological position on the traditional left-right axis, Bart de Wever stated that „leftwing/rightwing dichotomy” is not relevant anymore “in the more postmodern political landscape we are entering in the beginning of the 21st century” because he thinks “that the old dichotomy between both sides is fading in the complexity of everyday political life and the economic globalization. But putting this aside, and returning to the old left-right-ax, I would situate my party in the center right: right of the green and socialist parties, slightly to the right of the Christian-democratic and liberal party, but still to the left of the traditionalist nationalists of the Vlaams Belang and the libertarians of LDD”.

Another question was about representation at national level, if the N-VA party does represent the interests of the Flemish population, as part of the Flemish movement, or if they want actions and goals more general than that?

Bart de Wever declared that he represents, in the first place the interests of the Flemings, “seeing as they are my constituency”.

“But my main focus is not solely satisfying their demands. The much needed reforms in our country will also benefit the other communities in Belgium. By creating financial and fiscal responsibility for the regions, I’m convinced that Wallonia will be able to create a new economical dynamic and break through to barriers of the old socialist doctrines of the PS. Reforms will give way to economic recovery. For Flanders, as well as for Wallonia or Brussels. My socio-economic

²⁴ At my request, Bart de Wever agreed to answer a set of questions, submitted in April 2012.

²⁵ Question: *Despite the fact that you're a relatively young party, NVA have registered remarkable scores in elections. How do you explain this?*

Bart de Wever: “I believe the rise of our party in the past ten years is due to a feeling of democratic frustration and economic anxiety within the larger Flemish society. For the last three years our country has been governed by a coalition that does not even have a majority in Flanders, notwithstanding that the Flemings form a majority within the Belgian state. There is a Flemish desire for change, for reform. My party has captured this unarticulated need for reform and has translated it into democratic political action.”

program also appeals to center-right politicians in Wallonia and Brussels and French-speaking entrepreneurs. I'm not interested in revenge for supposed wrongdoings in the past. Flemings who believe they are still oppressed by French-speaking elite, fool themselves. It's time to move on. I want a better future for all. And it is my firm believe, that such a goal can only be obtained in a confederal Belgium".

We must notice that Bart de Wever is often speaking about confederalism. He use to promote in his public discourse that he is convinced confederalism will be a stake in the 2014 parliamentary elections. Also N-VA statutes provide Flemish independence, a "Republic of Flanders"²⁶, as a member state of EU, so, implicitly the dissolution of Belgium kingdom.

Another question pointed the political negotiations after the 2010's elections:

Question: Despite the success from 2010's elections, you have chosen the Opposition in the political crisis negotiations. You were even criticized for certain inflexibility. Why this option?

Bart de Wever: "First of all, I didn't choose for the opposition, we we're forced into the opposition. We rejected the paper put forward by the formator Elio Di Rupo, but after a thorough and elaborate reading of his work. It was not a basis on which a compromise could be forged that reflected the will of both the Flemish as the French-speaking electorate. It wasn't the first paper that had been rejected, my own paper was rejected after only half an hour. The French-speaking parties didn't even bother to read it. Looking back, I'm starting to believe that the PS, the French-speaking socialist party, was just seeking a way the corner us and kick us out of the negotiations. In retrospect, I should have known better. At that point, the other Flemish parties, who swore never to form a government without us, abandoned us and accepted to enter the government on the terms of the socialist party.

The criticism that I am inflexible, is just plain political justification for the flip-flopping of the other Flemish parties. You must understand that the demand for reform has always been a Flemish demand, ever since the 1950's. The French-

²⁶ "Als enige ongebonden partij, los van drukkingsgroepen, zuilen of financiële machten, verdedigt de Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie het algemeen Vlaams belang. In haar streven naar een beter bestuur en meer democratie kiest de Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie logischerwijs voor de onafhankelijke republiek Vlaanderen, lidstaat van een democratische Europese Unie."- 1.1. paragraph of NV-A Statute, on http://www.n-va.be/files/default/nva_images/documenten/statuten/statuten2013 .pdf

speaking parties only reluctantly agreed to reform, and tried to temper it in every way. This resulted in the complex and barely understandable institutional structure of the Belgian state. The French-speaking parties only went as far as they wanted to go, and traditionally the Flemish parties accepted their defeat in the negotiations, and took the little the French-speaking parties offered. This time, I said no. No to the crumbs that the French-speaking parties were trying to sell us as grand reforms. Flanders wants change, and it's time that this is recognized by the French-speaking parties. If we're only presented some cosmetic riffraff without fundamentally changing the status-quo, I pass. "

In the regional elections of 2009, N-VA won a very good score, 13% of the votes, making N-VA the winner of the elections together with his cartel partner CD&V.

Asked about ending a remarkable electoral cartel with CD&V, which have been a success in the past, Bart de Wever denied they quit the cartel: "Again, I did not quit the cartel. CD&V blew up the cartel. We, and I mean N-VA and CD&V, made a promise to the Flemish electorate in 2007 that we would not enter a Belgian government without the insurance that there would be fundamental reforms. In 2008, the CD&V broke that promise. It's they who stepped out of the cartel, not us. And the Flemish voter rewarded us for it in the elections of 2009."

An important part of the interview was about economic problems Belgium confronts with, as other European countries, or world countries threatened by economic crisis.

Bart de Wever points of view were:

"First of all, this is a European and global crisis. As an individual member state, the impact on macro-economics is barely noticeable. But our economy has a few features which aggravate the current crisis. Our tax rate is far too high, and taxation is focused on Flanders, being the economically strongest region. This high tax rate is endangering the economical competitiveness of Flanders. And what does this government do? It imposes more taxes that again focus on the Flemish saving accounts, the entrepreneurs and hardworking middleclass. Enough is enough. Secondly, our labor force is too rigid. The labor cost, being the taxes on labor that have to be paid by companies, is driving out those companies to foreign territories, where taxes are lower. This means jobs are lost. Furthermore, our labor policy has a limited focus on redirecting unemployed workers to the social benefit system, where they are pampered into lethargy. Belgium is the only country in the world where you can make a career out of being unemployed. I'm not kidding, there are examples of people who went from school straight to the unemployment office and

stayed there until they retired. It's of the utmost importance that we actively escort unemployed workers to the labor market. Helping them to find new jobs by redirecting their job skills, offering them new opportunities, giving career courses. For that goal to be obtained we have to limit the duration of the unemployment benefits in time, so people are encouraged to take their responsibility. Social security is a safety net, not a hammock. We must reform our labor market, and ensure the economic future of the working class. And thirdly, the overhead costs of the ever growing state apparatus must be lowered. Government is too big. It's a halt on innovation, it crushes entrepreneurship and it drains out the social fabric of society by robbing the citizens of their individual responsibility. These three issues (taxes, labor market and bureaucracy) must be addressed if we want to tackle the crisis on a national level."

The challenging question is if would be better to be in opposition to fight the economic crisis or not?

The politician thinks that "it's frustrating that we were forced into opposition. If we were in government, we could enable economical and institutional reforms. Now we are powerless to stop the dreadful policies of this monstrous government. We're watching it all go down the drain and the only thing we can do is yell 'For God Sake!' in the idle hope that some of the more sensible majority politicians will listen."

Observing and lecturing position and statements N-VA, according to which segregation is desirable for Belgium and N-VA is fighting to create an independent Flanders, so to dissolve the federal state, we also noticed that N-VA reasons and argumentation are based and related to structural differences between the two cultures and democracies. But there are also serious economic reasons, such as financial transfers from Flanders to Wallonia redistribution of national money. Bart de Wever comments on these issues were:

"My main goal is that every region is responsible for its own affairs. What is independence in the European Union of the 21st century? We're all part of a bigger picture. But I want Flanders to play its own part in that bigger picture, in mutual cooperation with our neighbors. I became a politician so I could mean something for my community, not to play semantic games.

I don't believe that cultural differences are still the main problem today. They accentuate the existing problems, but nothing more than that. The real problems are economic, institutional and democratic in nature.

The problem with the financial transfers is not as much that they exist, but that Flanders has no control over them. We don't even know how much they annually amount to. Some think tanks and banks calculate them every so often, and then we understand it's between 6 to 12 billion each year. We have no idea where that money comes from or where it is going to. We only know that the PS uses it to pay for its subsidized economy in Wallonia and to buy its electorate with social benefits. And that's the problem. I want to sustain the solidarity. Hell, I would gladly pay if I knew that the average Walloon would be better off. But he isn't. All those studies point to only one conclusion: while the transfers from Flanders to Wallonia grow each year, the average Walloon is getting poorer each year. And then I'm the selfish nationalist who doesn't want to share? I want to objectify the financial transfers, make them transparent so we all know why and for whom we pay. And most off all, I want that the money is directed to those people who need it, and not the party structure of the PS-state in Wallonia."

Raising the question of objections and reservations to the collapse of Belgium that could cause problems, about the new position occupied in Europe by the new alleged state, and its significance, Bart de Wever declared that he is: "Opposed to a revolutionary break up of Belgium. I'm in favor of a negotiated evolution towards confederalism. If Belgium would dissolve into the greater European Union, then so be it. I don't for see any major institutional or diplomatic problems. The biggest problem undoubtedly would be Brussels and the financial debt. What would be the status of Brussels in a confederation, or even an independent Flanders? And how will the national debt be divided amongst the member states of the confederation or, in case of events, the new formed states?"

Belgian capital, Brussels, is another matter in dispute. What will happen to Brussels? Will be the double administration workable?

Bart de Wever: "Again, it's not cultural or linguistic problems that create the difficulties within the Belgian state. I believe French-speaking and Flemish inhabitants of Brussels can govern their city in cooperation and mutual respect.

The real problem is that Brussels is both the savior of and the time bomb beneath Belgium. Most politicians will acknowledge that without Brussels, Belgium would have ceased to exist decades ago. The city is what ties the communities together. Therefore it has always been in the center of the institutional framework and the political debate. The problem is that Brussels

wants it all, but will not be responsible for its own actions. Brussels is an international capital, it's the capital of Belgium, it's the capital of Flanders, it's the capital of the French-speaking community, it's an institutional region of its own, it's a metropolitan area, and it's a city, its nineteen towns and six policing zones. And depending of the subject at hand, it plays the role it wants to play.

Take the noise standards for example. As an institutional region, Brussels is competent to create its own noise standards. But by setting the bar so high, it prohibits air plane flights at night over the Brussels territory. That means that all flights from the airport of Zaventem, which is located on Flemish territory, have to be redirected over Flanders. But when it comes to controlling the airport, Zaventem is suddenly Brussels National Airport, and thus a part of the metropolitan area. Brussels is like chameleon, it takes the form of the entity from which it benefits the most.

But at the end of the day, someone has to pay for Brussels. It's not financially viable on its own. And thus Flanders, being the economical strongest region, pays the bill of Brussels. And that causes frustration in Flanders. Brussels wants Flemish money, but if the Flemings in return want political participation in Brussels – no taxation without representation, remember – the Brussels answer is: shut up and be a Belgian. This is becoming more and more untenable.

The situation of Brussels is peculiar, and therefore the position of Brussels within the Belgian framework will also be peculiar. But Brussels must also understand that it will have to make some choices about its own future. You can't have your cake and eat it".

Asked about Wallonia and its future political and administrative destiny, Bart de Wever thinks that this is a problem that *"is for the Walloons to decide. But most of all, I want them to know that Flanders will never accept the impoverishment of Wallonia. They are our neighbors, our fellow men. Solidarity will be assured"*.

Regarding the issue of migration and labor mobility, the position of N-VA is more nuanced, at least for a discourse level and at a long distance to what the ideology of Vlaams Belang is known to be (an anti-immigrations discourse).

"Migration is not a negative thing. Human history has been forged by migration flows. And our labor market is in dire need of skilled workers. Everyone who wants to play a constructive role in society, and anyone who seeks shelter from repression, is welcome. But we cannot carry the burden of the world on our

shoulders. Migration must be regulated and controlled. Our social system is not build to nurture every poor soul on the planet. We must be strict, otherwise we create a whole new class of have-not's who are condemned to live in appalling conditions in the margins of society. Therefore I am in favor of a strict, reasonable and humane migration policy."

Although not declared an anti-Islamic party, N-VA is to promote traditional values, such as Flemish language and culture, so the question is how they see the increase of the Islamic population related to the natives?

Bart de Wever: "One cannot deny that there are social problems related to migration. But I believe that integration is possible if we can contain the flow of global migration and if we can create a sense of community. A sense that we're all part of a bigger entity, a community that encompasses us all. But for that to happen, we must be able to communicate with one another. We must speak the same language. In a literally sense, we must speak Dutch. But also in a more figurative sense. We must all accept and cherish the liberty and fundamental rights of democracy: the freedom of speech, of worship, of assembly, ... and the equality of all human beings, regardless of sex, sexual preference and skin color."

Finally we emphasized that Bart de Wever do appreciate the concept of "glocalization", which will favor the secession objectives and he supports the slogan "Denken, Durven, Doen!" (Eng.: "*Think, Dare, Do!*"), confessing the admiration for Edmund Burke's philosophy. So we proposed a short comment of the philosopher's thought: "Our patience Will Achieve More Than our force," from ***the works of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke***.

Bart de Wever: "*As often, I believe Edmund Burke is right. Evolution, not revolution. But in these hard times, I find myself reflecting on those others words of wisdom in the 'Reflections on the revolution in France': A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation*".

A very interesting thing in the reform that aims N-VA is the concept of a "confederal Belgium". There are a lot of discussions about competencies, and federal government power that Flemish and Waloons have to handle jointly or not: safety and defense, military defense, police force and fire services, social security and pensions, railway network, questioning monarchy and replacing the king by an elected president, the role and place of Brussels and not in the end income taxes.

The conservative-nationalist position of N-VA must be nuanced and problems solved or even find an alternative solution to please everyone.

Conclusion

Anno 2013, one year before the national election of 2014, and the election battle already started in both sides of the country.

Belgium is still in a ban of the far-right wing party who is aiming for an independent Flanders.

It is however not clear enough how the NV-A is going to achieve their goals, whilst all other Flemish parties are stating that the NV-A has no clear view aim would not be to how to achieve this independence one of the leading members of the NV-A tries to obtain public acceptance in stating that independence is a definition of the 18th century and the aim is not to create chaos but to solve all Belgium problems in a confederal state.

Bart de Wever on the race to become mayor of Antwerp in 2012 and N-VA managed to win elections and tore a large part of the party's vote's extreme right, anti-immigration Vlaams Belang. Yet, without the help and support of the other Flemish party, the 7th state reform cannot be started, as the N-VA and Vlaams Belang didn't reach the absolute majority in the Chamber of Representatives and Senate.

In the long run the Flemish thinking is to work on a more responsibility's for their own regions, even a resolution in the Flemish Parliament was voted, called the Copernicus revolutions. The main problem today at Flemish side is the time frame, all parties in the long run have very equal opinion on the future of the Flemish region or state, depends on who you are asking. The French part of the country slowly-slowly seems to accept the idea that the future of the Belgian state will be completely different then in the past, and idea's wishes are growing between these party's looking for a common goal in order to face the upcoming force form the NV-A.

All parties, Flemish, French are in full agreement that the capital of the country is a difficult problem to solve, all parties claiming for territory and people, to be theirs. The Flemish proclaims them as economic victims considering the fact that Flemish are the major financing source for the entire country. And in all the time in these discussions the German speaking region (*oostkantons*) are forgotten, it is unclear where or what the representative of this regions are position is.

One can say easily that the understanding from leading people of what population is thinking is very minimal, the people of Belgium is interested in there

income, jobs and overcoming the crises rather than political issues.

But these discussions are not really relevant in this very actual moment as the budget problems and the execution of the 6 the state reform which should be the major concern.

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