

What's holding Belgium together?¹

The Red Devils, chocolate or beer and the King, such are the typical answers given to the oft-asked question of what is still holding Belgium together. To these three symbols, two more elements are often added: the debt and Brussels, the capital of the country and of the Flemish Region/Community, the French Community (politically but not constitutionally, the Wallonia–Brussels Federation), the European Union (to be more specific, one of the three capitals, along with Strasbourg and Luxembourg), while being as well the seat of the Brussels Capital Region. Generally, the list of factors of unity in Belgium ends with this short list. Is it already too long, or to the contrary, is it even too short? This is the main question of this chapter.

Paradoxically, although this question often arises, there are very few academic publications analyzing it. To do so, this chapter will discuss six sets of factors: historical, identity, socio-economic, political, international and symbolic. Nonetheless, it is important to take into account that such an enterprise seeks to be informative and not prescriptive. This chapter does not assume that Belgium should be united. There are several points of view about what Belgium should be, and this contribution merely wishes to nurture the political debate by conveying an original approach to six types of factors.

1. Historical factors

'Of all these (peoples in Gaul), the Belgians are the bravest.' This quote, generally attributed to Julius Caesar in the 1st century BC, is part of the early socialization of Belgian pupils, be they Dutch-speaking or French-speaking. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to believe that the Belgians of that time geographically correspond to today's Belgians. The tribes that covered Belgic Gaul lived in a much wider area than the territory that would eventually become Belgium in 1830. Between these two periods, the components of what was to become Belgium were never unified, even though some parts of the territory had been more or less unified under the same ruler in certain periods (Mabille 2011).

1 The initial version of this chapter served as the basis for a chapter published in French by Min Reuchamps, Conrad Meulewaeter, Pierre Baudewyns & Lieven De Winter, *Les facteurs d'unité en Belgique: Diables rouges, attitudes politiques et sentiments identitaires*, in Jean-François Caron (ed.), *Les conditions de l'unité politique et de la sécession dans les sociétés multinationales: Catalogne, Écosse, Flandre, Québec, Québec*, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2016, pp. 99–126.

After being under Spanish, Austrian and French rule, the territory of – future – Belgium was united by the Treaty of Vienna in 1815 in the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, led at the time by William I. Religious policies – pro-Protestant – and linguistic – pro Dutch-speaking – of the latter (Witte and Van Velthoven 2000), soon fuelled a movement of contestation among the inhabitants, mainly the Southern provinces' bourgeois, leading to their secession in 1830 and to Belgium's independence, quickly recognized by neighbouring countries and The Netherlands in 1839. Belgium was thus a whole new country (Deschouwer 2012). Even though a double unity – religious and linguistic – allowed the creation of a new state, it would only be short-lived because both the religious cleavage between the Church and the State as well as the linguistic cleavage between the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking Communities were going to mold the dynamics of Belgium's politics.

If the separation from the Kingdom of the Netherlands had been fuelled by the rejection of King William's pro-Protestant policies, the national union of the first years of independence quickly gave way to the crystallization of the opposition between those in favor of a strong relationship between the Church and the State (overwhelmingly Catholics) and those in favour of a clear separation between the Church and the State (liberals) (de Coorebyter 2008). This cleavage led to the progressive consociationalization of society, strengthened at the end of the 19th century by the creation of the Belgian Labour Party, which protected the interests of the working class against the capital holders. The Belgian Labour party also joined some liberals, supporters of a separation between State and Church, and some Catholics of the Catholic workers' movement. This interweaving of cleavages explains Belgium's consociationalist nature. Three pillars governed the State – the Catholic, the socialist and, to a lesser extent, the liberal. These three pillars co-existed and organized the existence of their members from the cradle to the grave. Politically, contacts were limited to the cleavages' elites, who ruled a segmented and pacified country, even though not united (Lijphart 1977).

A linguistic cleavage appeared at the same time, from the creation of the Belgian State onwards, because it was unitary and above all francophone and unilingual. However, since its origins, a Dutch-speaking majority has inhabited Belgium. The first national census in 1846, indicates that out of a 4,3 million people, 57 % spoke Dutch, 42 % spoke French and 1 % spoke German (McRae 1983). Nevertheless, the only official language was French, which was the exclusive language in politics, economics and culture. As Deschouwer explains 'the choice of French as the sole official language of Belgium was an obvious choice for the political elites, but it was a choice for a language that was not spoken by a small majority of the population' (Deschouwer 2012, 30). This choice and its consequences for the Dutch-speaking Belgians, who were not allowed to use their mother tongue in any official matter, gave birth to the Flemish movement. This movement, born as a reaction to unilingual Belgium, demanded the recognition of Dutch as the second official language, at least in Flanders. These demands were vigorously rejected by the Belgian elites because they were thought to be harmful to the development of the Belgian nation,

based on French as the *lingua franca*, instead of the Germanic dialects spoken in the North and Walloon dialects spoken in the South. The constant refusal led to the hardening of the Flemish movement, slowly reinforced by the extension of the voting rights (Deschouwer 1999–2000). In the 1870s the first linguistic laws were passed, which authorized the use of the Dutch language in tribunals and in the administration in Flemish Provinces (Zolberg 1974). Finally, in 1898 the law on equality recognized Dutch as an official language, placing it on the same footing than French, even though the latter was still the dominant language in the country.

In 1921, universal – male – suffrage did not modify the supremacy of the Franco-phone bourgeoisie, despite the increasing power of the Dutch-speaking citizens who became voters. However, the demands of the Flemish movement led to new linguistic laws in the 1920s and 30s, and made possible the use of Dutch, notably for matters of justice, administration and education. At the same time, the idea of a generalized bilingualism throughout the whole country, was rejected both by the French- and Dutch-speakers, as each preferred to ensure the protection of their language in their territory (Swenden and Jans 2006). The logic behind these linguistic laws was thus *territorial*. Depending on the language spoken by the majority of its population, each municipality – the smallest administrative subdivision in Belgium – was included in a unilingual region – Dutch, French or German – with the exception of municipalities in Brussels that were gathered in the only bilingual region. However, Brussels was also the center of the problem. Originally a Dutch-speaking city, it quickly ‘Frenchified’ because of its role as the capital that attracted French-speaking civil servants and elites (Witte and Van Velthoven 2000). It is therefore understandable why this dual issue, both linguistic and territorial, constitutes one of the main foundations of Belgian politics, leading to the federalization of Belgium and linked with the centrifugal nature of the Belgian State. However, historical factors do not seem to have a major uniting role in Belgium.

2. Identity Factors

The history of Belgium since 1830, which was briefly illustrated above, shows the progressive transformation of a linguistic dynamic in an identity dynamic through the territorialization of political tensions and then the federalization of the State, originally a unitary State. The question is: did the federalization of Belgium alleviate identity-related tensions, or did it worsen them? In this country, as in other multi-national states analyzed, and in this publication/edition, the issue of federalism consists in the cohabitation of the different national groups forming the State. However, it goes beyond simple pacific cohabitation, as it is a matter of organizing the country ensuring a common participation in power and even a certain form of solidarity while offering a sufficient degree of autonomy to different entities and thus, allowing each of them to pursue different goals. Yet, this organization of power generates a paradox: the paradox of federalism. Erk and Anderson put it as followed (2009, 191–192):

‘[t]erritorial recognition of minorities through the adoption (or strengthening) of federalism may intuitively seem to be the best way to manage ethno–linguistic conflict but, in the long run, such recognition perpetuates and strengthens the differences between groups and provides minority nationalists with the institutional tools for eventual secession. Further, federalism provides opportunities for conflict between regions and centers that might otherwise not exist. The fundamental question, then, is whether federalism provides a stable, long–lasting solution to the management of conflict in divided societies or is, instead, a temporary stop on a continuum leading to secession and independence.’

Did the adoption of a federal solution since 1970, and officially since 1993, strengthen regional identity? In order to explore this question, surveys since 1979 have measured the identities of people living in Flanders and Wallonia (De Winter 2007; Deschouwer et al. 2015). These data show that at least one Belgian out of two belongs to Belgium first, and that this feeling is rather stable. In Flanders, the largest Region of the country, we find neither overwhelming support nor a complete rejection of Belgium. Up until 1982, a majority of Flemings felt Flemish first. Later, they tended to feel more Belgian than Flemish. The most significant fall could be observed between 1991 and 1995 with a decrease of 15 % in the support of Flemish identity. The fact that the State became officially federal did not, in this case, seem to strengthen the feeling of belonging to the Region, but on the contrary, to weaken it. However, this does not mean that there is a transfer of the feeling of belonging to Belgium but rather towards the local level.

In Wallonia, even though the results are generally similar, there is a difference of degree. At different moments in time, between two thirds and three quarters of the people living in Wallonia felt Belgian above all. This amounts to a difference of almost 20 % with Flanders (De Winter 2007). Moreover, unlike the Flemish, and already since 1979, Walloons have always felt, above all, Belgian. However, the feeling of belonging to Belgium seems rather stable in both regions, even if the feeling of belonging to the Region/Community in Wallonia, as in Flanders, decreased over time: over a period of 20 years, it decreased from 22.9 % to 13.9 %. In Flanders, it was the local level that saw its support increased, ... whereas in Wallonia it was the European level that benefitted the most.

These figures shed light on the dynamics of identity in Belgium. Far from being a marginal phenomenon, it is a crucial aspect in the transformation of the country which is still under way (Deschouwer and Reuchamps 2013). However, no survey shows an identity gap between the two major communities in the country, the Flemings and the Francophones. In this regard, it is interesting to note that both electorates have had the same evolutions in relation to their feelings of belonging, even if these took place at higher or lower levels. We can find identity dualism in the country with a – more or less strong, depending on the Region – predominance of the feeling of belonging to Belgium. These numbers confirm the observation made by Karmis and Maclure according to whom ‘[t]he federal citizen may feel more attached to one community of identification than to another, but they don’t not wish to make a choice among their allegiances. They care for all of them; they all have a categorical

importance. Only particular circumstances may force a choice upon them, and it will usually be a reluctant choice.' (Karmis and Maclure 2001, 375) Hence, it seems that while in the medium term the identity factors contributed to the stability of the Belgian federation, or to be more precise, did not increase its instability, they also did not contribute to the unity of Belgium. Still, identity factors are constantly present in political and media discourses where an opposition between blocs, strengthened by socio-economic reasons, is often seen (Perrez and Reuchamps 2012).

3. Socio-economic factors

In 1962–63, when the territorial principal was set in the Belgian political system, another change was in motion in Belgium: The Flemish economy surpassed the Walloon's for the first time in the history of Belgium. Until then, Walloon industry had always been the engine of Belgium's economic prosperity. But after World War II, the Walloon economy entered a phase of decline, whereas the Flemish economy was entering an economic boom (Quévit 1978). In answer to this new economic order, Walloon elites started seeking greater autonomy, neither linguistic nor cultural, but economic autonomy in order to develop policies more adapted to their struggling economy. Since then, the socio-economic dynamics have had a bigger impact on Belgian politics. In this context, demands for greater linguistic and cultural autonomy (but also socio-economic) coming from the North of the country, and the demands for greater socio-economic autonomy coming from the South, gave birth to a unique two-level federal system: Communities for cultural and linguistic matters, and Regions for socio-economic matters.

Currently, economic difference in terms of the GDP is still prominent, as shown in Figure 1, between the three Regions of the country. A second aspect needs to be taken into account in this dynamic (Figure 2): since the income tax yield by person is higher in Flanders than in Wallonia (even higher than in Brussels, where a great difference between relative wealth created in the Region and the relative poverty of its habitants exists), financial transfers (through social security) go from North to South, in order to maintain solidarity. The pervasiveness of this dimension increased with the deepening of the gap between the two Regions' economies with, as a consequence, an increase in Flanders of a feeling that Walloons unfairly take advantage of the Flemish economy (Bayenet et al. 2007).

Table 1: GDP per capita by region

	2000	2005	2010
Brussels	50000	57300	61300
Flanders	24400	28700	32500
Wallonia	17800	20800	24100

Source: epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu

Table 2: Personal income tax by region (Belgium = 100)

	1995	2000	2005	2008
Brussels	93	90	86	83
Flanders	105	107	106	107
Wallonia	93	91	94	94

Source: epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu

Socio-economic factors play an important role in Belgium because they ensure financial solidarity between the country's Regions, even though these transfers are regularly criticized (Denkgroep 'In de Warande' 2005) and these criticisms are themselves criticized (Pagano et al. 2006). Furthermore, two important specifications need to be provided. The first one concerns Brussels. This City-Region at the heart of the country has the highest GDP per capita of the three Regions – more or less twice as much as Flanders. It attracts over 500,000 commuters who work there every day. They, however, do not pay their taxes there, which explains the important discrepancy between Brussels's GDP and its income tax return rate, in which Brussels is considerably below the Belgian mean. The second specification concerns intra-regional differences, and not inter-regional ones. Table 1 shows that, even if Flanders is on average richer than Wallonia, differences between the provinces of these two Regions are negligible.

Walloon Brabant is the Province where the second highest amount of wealth is produced, right after the Flemish Province of Antwerp, while the Flemish Province Limburg comes right before the four remaining Walloon Provinces.

Table 3: GDP per capita by province (2010)

UE 27	24500
Belgium	32700
Brussels	61300
Flanders	32500
Province Antwerpen	37600
Province Vlaams-Brabant	34500
Province West-Vlaanderen	30700
Province Oost-Vlaanderen	29500
Province Limburg	26700
Wallonia	24100
Province Brabant wallon	35900
Province Liège	24300
Province Namur	23400
Province Luxembourg	22000
Province Hainaut	21300

Source: epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu

Finally, the sixth State Reform is going to modify the socio-economic landscape of Belgium (Reuchamps 2013a). In order to answer the demands for reinforced socio-economic autonomy – mainly coming from the north of the country –, many competences are transferred to the Regions and Communities, whose authority is thus increased. These transfers of competences from the federal to substate level account for slightly more than sixteen billion Euros, twenty billion after indexation. This will have effects on some elements of the labour market, health care and personal support, family allowances, justice matters, mobility and road safety and also for other domains, such as economic and industrial policies, energy, agriculture, urbanism, housing and land use and local administration. Even though these transfers are substantial, from a monetary and symbolic point of view, some elements remain federal. First of all, social security remains federal, which means that any person living in Belgium, no matter which region they live in, has the same right to social security, which strengthens interpersonal solidarity. As indicated by the title of the agreement, negotiators wanted to establish ‘a more efficient Federal State with more autonomous federated entities’ (Accord institutionnel pour la sixième réforme de l’Etat 2011). In this light, many transfers of competences as well as a new financing law were decided upon.

The last chapter of the agreement on the State Reform of 2011 revised the financing of Regions and Communities, granting more latitude to these entities and empowering them with greater responsibilities (with a provision of an extra € 461 million to refund the budget of the Region of Brussels-Capital). Leaving technical details aside, this can be explained as follows: after a transition period (10 years + 10 years, starting with the voting of the new law), emphasis will be put, for the Regions, on a fiscal allocation key (through fiscal autonomy or endowments redistribution) and, for the Communities, on a system taking needs into account. In terms of fiscal autonomy, the Regions will be able to establish a system of additional regional taxes, differentiated for every income tax bracket in addition to the federal taxes. They will also have to respect the progressivity of the income taxes. Moreover, substate entities will take part to the consolidation of public finances. Finally, a solidarity mechanism will be maintained: it will have to be objective, capped and deprived of perverse effects.

The financing of the substate entities is a fundamental issue for Belgian federalism and its future. Socio-economic factors are at the heart of the unity-fragmentation dynamic in Belgium, but they totally favor neither unity nor fragmentation. On this issue, the Federal Authority as well as the substate entities seek a fair equilibrium, which is not an easy task, especially in harsh economic times.

4. Political factors

The recent history of Belgian federalism seems to indicate that the political dynamics of this country are more a fragmentation factor than a unity asset. It is obviously true that the unitary State became federal. But this evolution has always been

based on a compromise that satisfies each party. For instance, the Flemish elites decided to merge the Flemish Community with the Flemish Region into a unique entity with one single Parliament and one Government. The Francophone elites, in turn, decided that the French Community (which has become, as mentioned before, the Wallonia–Brussels Federation) will be the – linguistic – link between the French-speakers of Wallonia and of Brussels. These choices reflect different visions of what Belgium should be: for most of the Flemish elites, Belgium should be based on two Communities – the Flemish and the Francophone – and for most of the Francophone elites Belgium should be based on three Regions – Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. Here the Belgian federalism paradox appears: the Flemings prefer linguistic ties, given by the Community, but need the Regions to ensure clear boundaries and obtain more autonomy, whereas the Francophones prefer a regional vision in order to recognize Brussels as a fully-fledged Region, but need the French Community in order to link Brussels to Wallonia.

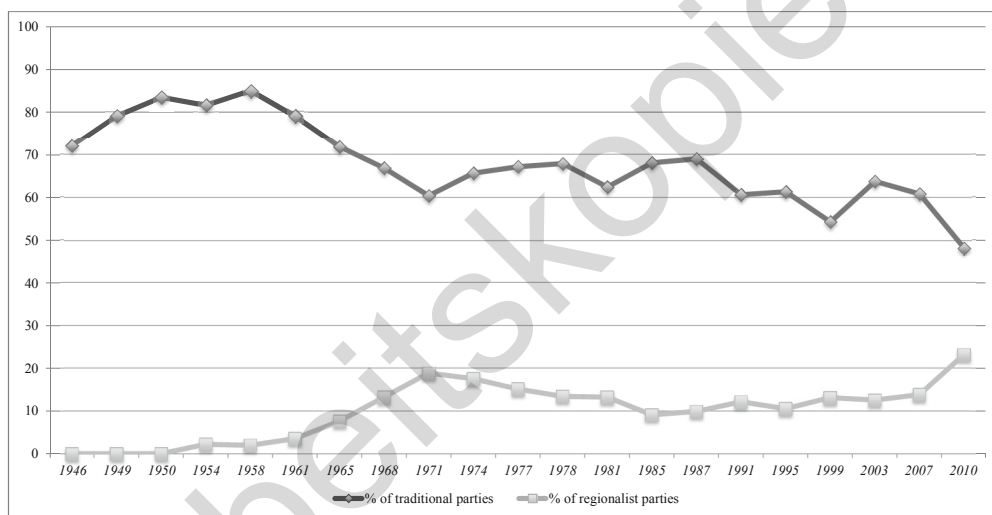


Figure 1: Percentages of votes of traditional and regionalist parties, since 1946

Source: Renard  eigne 2012 and authors' own calculations

We see here that the political dynamics are largely driven by different or even opposing visions (which were the cause and the consequence of the Belgian party system's record fragmentation, the end of the national parties, and the centrifugal competition between the Flemish and the Francophone party systems), but that they have, until the present day, always been able to accommodate this. Figure 1 illustrates this reality in another way. By comparing the evolution of the cumulated vote shares obtained by traditional parties with the regionalist parties, it becomes apparent that the 1971 election was a turning point with a historical peak for the regionalist parties with some 20 % of the votes, followed by a diminishing phase until 1985 when the federalization was increasing. In other words, the federalization of the country eased the political strain. But, in the meantime, new demands for autonomy appeared, which played a role in the new rise of the regionalist parties, particularly in Flanders. What particularly changed between 1971 and 2010 was

that, at the beginning of the State reform, regionalist forces were found on both sides of the linguistic boundary with the Volksunie in Flanders, the Front démocratique des francophones in Brussels and its outskirts and the Rassemblement wallon in Wallonia. It was possible at that time to find compromises because each team of negotiators, composed of delegates from the traditional parties, was under pressure by regionalists. From 2007 onwards, it was much less the case because the French-speakers were unwilling to further federalize the country (Sinardet 2008), fearing that more federalism would *in fine* lead to separatism (Reuchamps 2009).

These elements do not allow us to consider the political factors as uniting factors. However, if we do not consider electoral preferences as indicators of a wish for more or less autonomy for the substate entities, but as a question directly linked with the vision of the future of Belgium, the results qualify the role of the political dynamic as only oriented towards fragmentation. Thus, to the same extent in Flanders as in Wallonia, we found that since 1991 there has been a larger proportion of people who believe that Belgium should decide everything than people who believe that Flanders or Wallonia should decide everything. We observe that over the last 20 years between 11.7 % and 20.5 % of the Flemish and between 16.0 % and 23.7 % of the Walloons support a unitary Belgium, whereas between 5.3 % and 10.3 % of the Flemish and 0.8 % and 3.8 % of the Walloons support the independence of their Region. Between these two poles, the majority of the Flemish and of the Walloons choose an option ranging from predominance for Belgium to predominance for the regional level, going through a shared option. In Wallonia and Flanders, in every survey until 2007, people who wanted Belgium to have more of a say than Flanders/Wallonia were in a relative majority. However, in Flanders, the second most popular option is the predominance of Flanders while in Wallonia it is the median position that comes second.

This look at the citizens' preferences confirms the multiplicity of the visions of the future of federalism in Belgium that the population holds (Reuchamps 2013b). Unlike what could have been thought *a priori*, in light of the political tensions which have been shaking the country since the federal elections of 2007, Dutch-speakers and French-speakers are not diametrically opposed; in fact, we find just as many differences within these two groups as between them. Furthermore, as studies about electors of the Flemish regionalist parties and in particular of the N-VA show, the electoral behaviour is not directly influenced by the community issue but rather by socio-economic issues (Swyngedouw and Abts 2011). This is equally applicable to all the voters leaving community issue far behind socio-economic aspects in the explanation of their vote (Deschouwer and Sinardet 2010).

To sum up, political factors, if they do not constitute uniting factors, cannot be considered as being directed only towards fragmentation. A discrepancy also exists between political parties and voters, as can be seen in the fact that in Flanders no party defends a lesser autonomy for the Regions while a part of the population would consider that scenario, and in Wallonia no party presents itself as being openly

regionalist (even if some of its members are), advocating as much autonomy as possible for this Region at the expense of the federal level. However, even in the political parties themselves, there is a diversity of opinion. A survey among Belgian MPs during the political crisis indeed showed that differences within a party were sometimes greater than between Dutch and Francophone political parties (Dodeigne et al. 2013; Dodeigne et al. 2016; Reuchamps et al. 2015). The study of the political factors helps in understanding both the instability and the stability of Belgium.

5. International factors

Belgium is a small country with a very open economy. However, due to its geographical location and also because of its diplomacy it has a remarkable influence on the international scene, and particularly on the European construction of which it was one of the pioneers. Brussels hosts the European institutions and many other international organizations. This international feature of Belgium is probably not without effects on its internal politics. We can thus wonder about the extent to which international factors contribute to Belgium's unity compared to domestic factors.

The first of these international factors certainly comes from Belgium's European commitment. As Beyers and Bursens put it, 'Europa is geen buitenland' (Beyers and Bursens 2006a), Europe is not a foreign country. Even within the communitarian debate the European argument is mobilized, but in diverging and sometimes opposing ways. First of all, some believe that the federal level has become an 'empty shell' between the European level above and the regional level, particularly the Flemish, below. It is, for example, the argument set forth by the think-tank *In de Warande* which favours Flanders independence whilst maintaining a strong European link (2005). Europe would in this way justify Belgium's disappearance.

On the other hand, others insist upon the fact that Europe, and particularly its member states, would not accept Flanders inclinations towards independence in order to prevent creating a precedent which could pave the way for Basques, Catalans, Scots, and even Corsicans or Bretons. Flanders is not Kosovo, and the 'balkanization' of a country at the heart of Europe, moreover a founding member, would not necessarily be welcomed by the European partners, particularly those who experience similar situations. The continuity of the EU membership of the new states' successors to Belgium or the continuity of a territorially modified Belgium would also need to be applied for. Faced with this situation, Europe would try to prevent Belgium's disappearance.

Finally, some scholars defend the idea that Europe comes to the rescue of federal Belgium by showing that European integration fosters cooperation between the Regions, the Communities and the federal Authority and reinforces centralization. It thus prevents the disappearance of that level of government (Beyers/Bursens 2006b). In this way, Europe would justify the survival of Belgium. An example

of cooperation between the Regions, the Communities and the federal Authority thanks to Belgium's participation in the European Union is the obligation for the different Belgian entities to agree on a common position in the Council of Ministers of the European Union, without which Belgium would have to abstain. Furthermore, Belgium can be represented by a federal, regional or community minister according to the matters discussed and there is a rotation.

In addition, international law is also mobilized in Belgian politics. It is mainly when Belgium's end is discussed that international law implications are taken into account. This is also the case with the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe which has not yet been ratified by Belgium, because all the Parliaments of the country have to approve it. Still, the Flemish Parliament does not want to extend the status of minority according to this Convention to its French-speaking inhabitants (Scholsem 2009). Its ratification by Belgium is often the object of political debate but without agreement so far. This question would become more acute in the case of a separation of Belgium, which – first condition – would see the creation of new states which – second condition – would have to follow the application process to (re)integrate into the EU, one of the requirements of which is being a Member of the Council of Europe, which in turn implies ratifying all of its Conventions.

Finally, besides international political and juridical factors, a new international (f)actor has appeared these last years: credit rating agencies. In the context of a sovereign debt crisis, the credit rating agencies have seen their political influence sharply increase, given the fact that a degradation of the note of a country implies a net loss of tens or even hundreds of millions of Euros after the increase in interest rates for the country. Apart from the question of the democratic nature of private economic actors in the states' management, which is important but beyond the scope of this article, it can be observed that Belgium has experienced this new international (f)actor.

Indeed, after the agreement on the sixth reform of the state, parties around Elio Di Rupo had to reach an agreement on the 2012 budget, before being able to work as a new fully empowered government. While negotiations were very arduous, two external (f)actors unblocked the situation: the threat of a € 710 million European fine within the framework of the excessive deficit procedure for the absence of a budget for 2012 and the degradation of Belgium's note by the credit rating agency Standard & Poor's. Quinet showed how the Belgian debt issue was put in its European context, notably given the Greek spectrum and, in that context, how the note degradation further stalled negotiations (Quinet 2012).

Given its size, its openness to the world and its engagement in the international scene, Belgium is especially sensitive to international factors. These seem to have multiple effects on the Belgian system and political actors, who certainly do not neglect them. International factors thus contribute to the federal dynamic in Belgium, (re-)forcing unity rather than fragmentation.

6. Conclusion: Back to the symbols

In this chapter we outlined different factors that could contribute to the state's unity – historical, identity, socio-economic, political and international – without being able to really identify 'the one' explaining factor of Belgium's unity or, at least, of Belgium's stability in the long run. Thus, it seems that the combination of these different factors has led the Belgian people into a common history that, as we have showed before, did not seem self-evident at the beginning. In conclusion, it is now relevant to inquire about the role of the symbolic factors of which the two most important ones (according to Vox Pops regularly held by the media) are the Monarchy and sports.

Since its creation, Belgium has been a constitutional monarchy. From the beginning, 'the powers of the King have been limited by the Constitution' (Molitor 2001, 62, author's translation). The federalization of the country has modified the sovereign's dual role: political, on one side, and symbolic or representative, on the other. Politically, the king's power had already been reduced to the benefit of its ministers and of the political parties before the country's federalization. In this context, Belgian federalism has not turned over the king's political role. At the federal level, after each legislative election, he ensures the formation of the federal government by nominating, according to the elections results, a *formateur* – sometimes preceded by an *informateur* – who will generally become the Prime Minister of the new government. For the entire duration of the government, the king's political function consists of a 'right of influence' which allows him to suggest initiatives on the medium and long term. He can do so during the *colloques singuliers*, face-to-face meetings with the ministers and other political personalities, as well as during official speeches. At the substate level, even if Belgium has become a federal state, the king stays the Head of State. His administering of the oath to the minister-presidents of the substate governments attests to this reality. Moreover, the king's legislative and executive activities are now limited to the areas of competence that are still federal.

Symbolically, Belgium's federalization has increased the importance of the federal institution's uniting role, especially the monarchy, which is supposed to escape the bipolar dynamic. For example, in his speeches the King Philippe frequently reaffirms the importance of learning the language of the other communities in order to create bonds between the Belgians. Swenden and Jans add that 'the monarchy serves as a federal tool for mobilising the Belgian public against more regional autonomy, let alone secession' (Swenden and Jans 2006, 890). Thus, in the bipolar Belgian federation, the importance of the king's symbolic and representative role increases. However, criticism has been voiced about the too Francophone aspect of the Royal Family, and hence of its federative potential, particularly in Flanders, which, however, has been more favorable to the monarchy in the past (Deschouwer 2005, 64). In Flanders as well as in Wallonia there are partisans of reducing the Royal function to a formal role. However, resistance to this proposition is particularly strong among French-speakers who see in it another sign of Belgium's unity erosion. It is in this

context that King Philippe ascended to the throne in July 2013, following the abdication of his father, King Albert II. He now faces a significant challenge because he needs to be an image of unity in a country where that unity is considerably debated.

Finally, are sportsmen the only ones creating a sense of unity? This country has known some sportsmen of international recognition in diverse disciplines: tennis, motocross, cycling, table tennis, or even judo. Football, after some glorious moments in the 1980s, is back on stage with the remarkable performances of the Red Devils, the national team. Above national fervor, on both sides of the linguistic border, that can be aroused by Belgian champions' victories on the international level, no study has yet demonstrated that these successes have a long-term positive impact on Belgian identities. This work still needs to be done. Without it, the question of what's holding Belgium together will not be definitively settled.

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