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Combining Federalism with Consociationalism: Is Belgian Consociational Federalism Digging its Own Grave?

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Combining Federalism with Consociationalism: Is Belgian Consociational Federalism Digging its Own Grave?

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ABSTRACT Belgian consociational federalism is often praised for its ability to deal peacefully with the country's internal divisions. Nevertheless, recent political stalemates raise the question: Is Belgian consociational federalism digging its own grave? This article argues that granting segmental autonomy effectively accommodates political conflicts that are currently on the agenda, but renders the process of intersegmental conflict accommodation increasingly more difficult in the long run. More specifically, federalism undermines the problem-solving capacity of the other power-sharing mechanisms in three ways: (1) it increases demands for more autonomy, (2) it decreases the potential for package deals and (3) it lowers the costs of non-agreements which induce a political stalemate. These evolutions are often overlooked, but go to the heart of the impasse Belgian politics has recently experienced.

Belgium is generally considered to be a deeply divided society, a polity characterized by deep mutually reinforcing cleavages. Economic, cultural, social and political struggles are often reduced to a political competition between the different segments of society, and this situation is often considered detrimental to democratic stability. Yet, Belgium is also a polity that is often praised for its ability to settle its internal tensions and divisions peacefully. Like many other democratic regimes faced with deep societal divisions, it has adopted rules that are more demanding than simple majorities; these institutions force the conflicting groups to get together, and find solutions that every segment can endorse. And hitherto, these institutions seem to be working well, as they have always

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been able to foster mutual accommodation, power-sharing and a functional democracy (Deschouwer, 2006; Lijphart, 1981).

The relative stability of Belgium is often attributed to its steady process of federalization in a consociational fashion. As a response to the inherent risk of disintegration, Belgium was transformed from a centrifugal into a consociational system. Such a type of democracy stresses the importance of including all societal subgroups in political institutions, and the obligation to govern in mutual consultation. 'Divided societies', Lijphart argues, '[need] a democratic regime which emphasizes consensus instead of opposition and which includes rather than excludes all the disparate components' (1981, pp. 3–4). This means that the Belgian state structure has adopted the so-called power-sharing institutions to such an extent even that Lijphart at one time stated that Belgium 'is the most perfect, most convincing and most impressive example of a consociation' (1981, p. 8). These institutional innovations imposed the obligation to govern in a grand coalition, that is, a coalition that has to include both majority and minority groups.

The consociational features of Belgium emerged in the first half of the twentieth century as a response to the Church–State cleavage and the socio-economic cleavages opposing Christian democrats, socialists and liberals. They were, however, incorporated into the federalization of the country from the 1970s onwards in response to the linguistic cleavage between Dutch-speakers and French-speakers. Belgium incrementally developed consociational federalism. Indeed, the first state reform constitutionally anchored mutual veto rights of the two main linguistic groups as guiding principles for interbloc negotiations through special majority laws requesting a majority in both linguistic groups, linguistic parity in the council of ministers and an alarm bell procedure in case one community feels threatened by a law proposal (Reuchamps, 2007). This new institutional design made it virtually impossible for the Dutch-speaking demographic majority to impose its will on the French-speaking segment, and its importance in persuading the elites of the subgroups to sit together and resolve the matters at hand can hardly be overestimated. The new decision-making rules forced leaders to exhibit prudent leadership when accommodating intersegmental conflicts (Deschouwer, 2006, p. 902).

Despite the praise for the peaceful settlement of political problems in Belgium, the recent elections of 2007 and 2010 have shown that the search for a compromise has become particularly hard (Deschouwer & Reuchamps, 2013; Sinardet, 2008). Two successive long political crises occurred: the first one in 2007–2008 and the second one in 2010–2011 when it took no less than 541 days to form a federal government. Even though the country had experienced several episodes of deep tensions—for instance, between 1977 and 1981 Belgium had no less than seven different governments—never was the political impasse this deep, never were the linguistic groups this diametrically opposed and never were the political instruments this inadequate. Such political division demonstrates that the rules of pacification are increasingly contested and seem to have lost at least some of their initial appeal.

The question this article raises is the following: Is Belgian consociational federalism digging its own grave? It could indeed be argued that the consociational federal system has reached its limits, and that the current structures are no longer apt to regulate the conflicts between the linguistic groups (Bouveroux & Huyse, 2009, p. 189). Even though the functioning of the political system is not yet fundamentally questioned, the process of finding a viable compromise based on prudent leadership has had to endure serious pressure over the last few years. One of the main reasons why it is proving particularly

hard these days to form a stable government relates to the fact that the Belgian consociational system relies heavily on the process of federalization to contain conflicts. Each subsequent state reform since the 1970s was paralleled by the granting of self-rule in contentious areas to the regional levels, with the notable exception of social security at least until the last state reform (Popelier & Cantillon, 2013). Such a process of federalization combined with the installation of a power-sharing regime is generally considered a recipe for success, but it might undermine the potential for peaceful conflict resolution in the long term.

Even though the idea that granting segmental autonomy is normatively and empirically appealing, it is often critiqued. Granting self-rule is indeed considered to be a means of defusing conflicts at hand, but very little research has scrutinized the effects on the long term (Cameron, 2009, p. 310). After all, as more and more competencies are transferred from the national to the regional level, the dynamics of intergroup negotiations is bound to change. We therefore ask ourselves whether granting segmental autonomy is as good a conflict-management device on the long term as it is often considered to be.

Based on insights from Belgian federalism, we argue that granting segmental autonomy might effectively accommodate political conflicts that are currently on the agenda, but it renders the process of intersegmental conflict accommodation increasingly more difficult in the long run. More specifically, federalism undermines the problem-solving capacity of the other power-sharing mechanisms in three ways: (1) it increases demands for more autonomy, (2) it decreases the potential for package deals and (3) it also lowers the costs of non-agreements which induce a political stalemate. These three evolutions are often overlooked, but go to the heart of the impasse Belgian politics has recently experienced.

Before discussing each of these arguments, however, we present the relationship between federalism and consociationalism as federal arrangements and consociational techniques are generally seen as the two sides of the same coin, since both have important conflict-reducing qualities, and there are multiple ways in which they foster accommodation between groups. This is especially the case in Belgium where the nature of the conflict called for solutions made of both federalism and consociationalism.

The Relationship Between Federalism and Consociationalism in Divided Societies

The links between federalism, on the one hand, and consociationalism, on the other hand, have been for long a source of discussion between students of the two phenomena (Duchacek, 1970; Elazar, 1968; Lijphart, 1979). In 1985, *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* devoted one special issue on this topic under the lead of Elazar (1985) and Lijphart (1985). From this first collective and systematic effort to explore that relationship came out the conclusion that ‘both conceptually and empirically, federalism and consociationalism do not coincide, although they do overlap to an important extent’ (Lijphart, 1985, p. 3) but that also ‘both of these concepts entail a rejection of majoritarian democracy’ (Lijphart, 1985, p. 4). While both concepts stand out in favour of non-majoritarian democracies, ‘the differences can be seen to lie in the way in which the majorities are compounded’ (Elazar, 1985, p. 19).

Consociationalism can be defined in terms of four characteristics: two primary attributes—grand coalition and segmental autonomy—and two secondary attributes—proportionality and veto rights (Lijphart, 1977). Grand coalition lies at the heart of power-sharing in consociational societies: all significant groups, including minority groups, represented by their respective elites govern the plural or divided society jointly for common matters.

Conversely, for all matters that can be dealt separately by the different segments, a large segmental autonomy is provided. In such power-sharing dynamics, proportionality is the basic tool to ensure a fair political representation of all segments. On top of this proportional representation, veto rights give minority groups the guarantee that they will not be outvoted by larger groups for matters of common interest. Consociationalism is thus a ‘rigid and formal agreement, based on institutional representation, cooperation and inclusion’ (Bieber & Keil, 2009, p. 339).

Federalism, in the words of Ronald Watts,

refers to the advocacy of multi-tiered government combining elements of shared-rule and regional self-rule. It is based on the presumed value and validity of combining unity and diversity, i.e., of accommodating, preserving and promoting distinct identities within a larger political union. The essence of federalism as a normative principle is the perpetuation of both union and non-centralization at the same time. (Watts, 2008, p. 8)

While federalism always guarantees a constitutional division between central and regional governments, in divided societies the focus is even more on the implementation of a *territorial* segmental autonomy (Lijphart, 1985). There is therefore in federalism a strong emphasis on the structure.

This is indeed where federalism and consociationalism differ: ‘federalism relates to the form of the polity and consociationalism relates to the character of the regime’ (Elazar, 1985, p. 33). But in divided societies where both the structure and the process matter in the conflict management, the two concepts often reinforce each other. This is why, more recently authors such as O’Leary and colleagues (McEvoy & O’Leary, 2013) have demonstrated how the two should not be seen as separate but as different sides of the same coin. In his work on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Keil (2012, 2013) insightfully depicted that ‘[w]hile federalism focuses more on a territorial solution to the conflict between different identities, consociationalism highlights the importance of elite cooperation, veto rights and proportional representation’ (2012, p. 209).

Yet, political systems seldom present both features simultaneously. In his 1985 article, Lijphart counted only ‘three countries that are both full federations and full consociations’ (1985, p. 6), at some points in time of their history. But among them only Switzerland could be seen as a true example of both, since Austria (1945–1966) and Malaysia (1955–1969) had federal boundaries that ‘cut across rather than follow segmental boundaries [...] and can be more accurately described as “consociations but non-consociational federations”’ (Lijphart, 1985, p. 6). Today, beside Switzerland and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belgium can be seen as a major example mixing consociationalism and federalism. In the process of several state reforms, it has indeed transformed from a unitary consociation to a federal consociation and such transformation is due to the nature of the conflict in Belgium to which we turn now before assessing the conflict-management potential inbred in this consociational federation.

The Nature of the Conflict in Belgium

‘Of all these (peoples in Gaul), the Belgians are the bravest’. This quote, generally attributed to Julius Caesar in the first-century BC, is part of the early socialization of Belgian

pupils, whether they are Dutch-speakers or French-speakers. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to believe that the Belgians of the time geographically correspond to today's Belgians. The tribes that covered Belgic Gaul lived in a much wider land 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 in certain periods under the same ruler (Mabille, 2011).

After being under Spanish, Austrian and French rule, the territory of—future—Belgium was merged by the Treaty of Vienna in 1815 to the Kingdom of the Netherlands, led at the time by William I. Religious—pro-protestant—and linguistic—pro Dutch-speaking—policies (Witte & 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—had allowed the creation of a new State, it would only be short-lived because both the religious cleavage between the Church and the State and the linguistic cleavage between the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking communities were going to shape lastingly 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, Catholics, in favour of a strong relationship between the Church and the State and those, liberals, in favour of a clear separation between the Church and the State (de Coorebyter, 2008). This cleavage led to the progressive pillarization of society, strengthened at the end of the nineteenth 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, in a lesser extent, the liberal. These pillars co-existed and organized the existence of their members from cradle to 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 also appeared at the creation of the Belgian State 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 4.3 million population, 57% speak Dutch, 42% speak French and 1% speak 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' (2012, p. 30). This choice and its consequences on 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 harmful to the development of the Belgian nation, based on French as *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 voted, 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 Francophone bourgeoisie, despite the increasing power of the Dutch-speaking citizens who became electors. However, the demands of the Flemish movement led to new linguistic laws in the 1920s and the 1930s, 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 & 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 centre 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 & 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, linked with the centrifugal nature of the Belgian State that consociationalism was supposed to deal with as it did for the two other traditional cleavages—socio-economic and Church—State. The solution that was adopted was thus the federalization of a formerly unitary country into two sets of sub-states with different powers: Regions and Communities, which were granted typical territorial autonomy for the former but more personal autonomy for the latter as in Brussels both Flemish- and French-speaking communities are competent where sub-national identities do not exist (Deschouwer, 2005; Reuchamps, 2013a). Meanwhile, consociational power-sharing mechanisms were implemented with the first state reform in the early 1970s with super-majority laws requiring two-thirds of votes in both houses along with a majority in each linguistic group for all linguistic and territorial matters; a linguistic parity in the federal government; and an alarm-bell procedure that can be rung when one linguistic group fears a bill might harm its interest (Reuchamps, 2007; Sinardet, 2010).

Six state reforms later, the consociational Belgian federation still holds together despite several long crises. Yet, the recipe made of a mix of consociationalism and federalism seems to have increasing difficulties settling down conflicts between the two main linguistic groups. Indeed, over a four-year period (2007–2011), 737 days (196 days + 541 days) were days of deadlocks and conflicts. This raises the question whether on the long run federalism undermines the problem-solving capacity of the other power-sharing mechanisms. Three dynamics are at play: the paradox of federalism, the cost of federalizing and the nature of the paralysis.

The Paradox of Federalism

A first way in which granting self-rule renders intersegmental conflict accommodation more difficult is through the so-called paradox of federalism: autonomist tendencies are

stimulated by granting self-rule (Erk & Anderson, 2009; Nordlinger, 1972, p. 32), which is however sometimes contested (Gurr, 2000, p. 300). Devolution removes contentious issues from the common agenda, but at the same time it sets in motion a self-reinforcing spiral of demands for self-rule, which could lead to separation in the long run (Erk & Anderson, 2009; Tierney, 2009). After all, formalizing the fences between the segments implicitly acknowledges group differences to be a legitimate basis for political action, or as Simeon posits: 'federalism entrenches, perpetuates, and institutionalizes the very divisions it has designed to manage' (1995, p. 257). As such, the exacerbation of political conflicts could become a legitimate and effective strategy for gaining political support.

This is not how consociational theory perceives of self-rule, however. Lijphart argues that the aim of granting autonomy 'is not to abolish or weaken segmental cleavages but to recognize them explicitly and to turn the segments into constructive elements of stable democracy' (1977, p. 42). Autonomy therefore creates self-rule on issues that impact life within the own subgroup, but at the same time counteracts overarching centrifugal forces by reducing interference by the other groups to the bare minimum. The removal of conflict-inducing issues from the common agenda, according to consociational scholars, thus improves the chances of sustainable conflict accommodation.

Yet, granting self-rule may create multiple internally homogeneous public and political spheres, and these spheres are instrumental for more demands for autonomy. This further centrifugal logic might be explained in two ways: through fostering identities and through stimulating regional entrepreneurs. It could indeed be argued that federalism allows the segments to strengthen their regional identities (Tierney, 2009, p. 246), since it fosters a sense of legitimacy but federalism also makes it much easier to pass legislation and conduct policies that promote the development of specific regional cultures and identities (Bunce, 1999; Roeder, 1991). Nonetheless, the sub-groups that demand more autonomy do not necessarily seek legitimacy from the national level, quite the contrary since they might be fighting against the national level pushed by strong feelings of their own identity. Such a theoretical debate can be discussed in the case of Belgium in the light of longitudinal data on identities.

Since 1979, thus about a decade after the first state reform and just before the second state reform of 1980, data have been collected on identities in both Flanders and Wallonia (for a summary of this research endeavour, see De Winter, 2007). The most typical—and standardized—question over time was the so-called hierarchical question as to which entity the respondents identify themselves in the first place. Figure 1(a) for Flanders and Figure 1(b) for Wallonia show the evolution for the two main entities: Belgium, on the one hand, and the Flemish Region/Community or the Walloon Region/French-speaking Community (the two categories have been merged), on the other hand. Surprisingly, both figures show a similar two-fold trend: a steady decline of the regional/community identity and a stable national identity, even on the rise in the second half of the period. This means that in Belgium granting segmental autonomy did not lead to stronger regional identities, quite the contrary (Reuchamps, 2013b). 'Thus', in the words of De Winter and Baudewyns, 'the "divorce des Belges" is mainly situated at the elite level, rather than at the mass level' (2009, p. 297), which we need to explore now.

If identities do not explain the paradox of federalism in Belgium, the dynamics might be more political. In fact, self-rule offers an excellent breeding ground for political mobilization, and for the rise of regional parties (Bakke & Wibbels, 2006, p. 7; Lustick, Miodownik, & Eidelson, 2004). Once regional institutions are in place and policies are

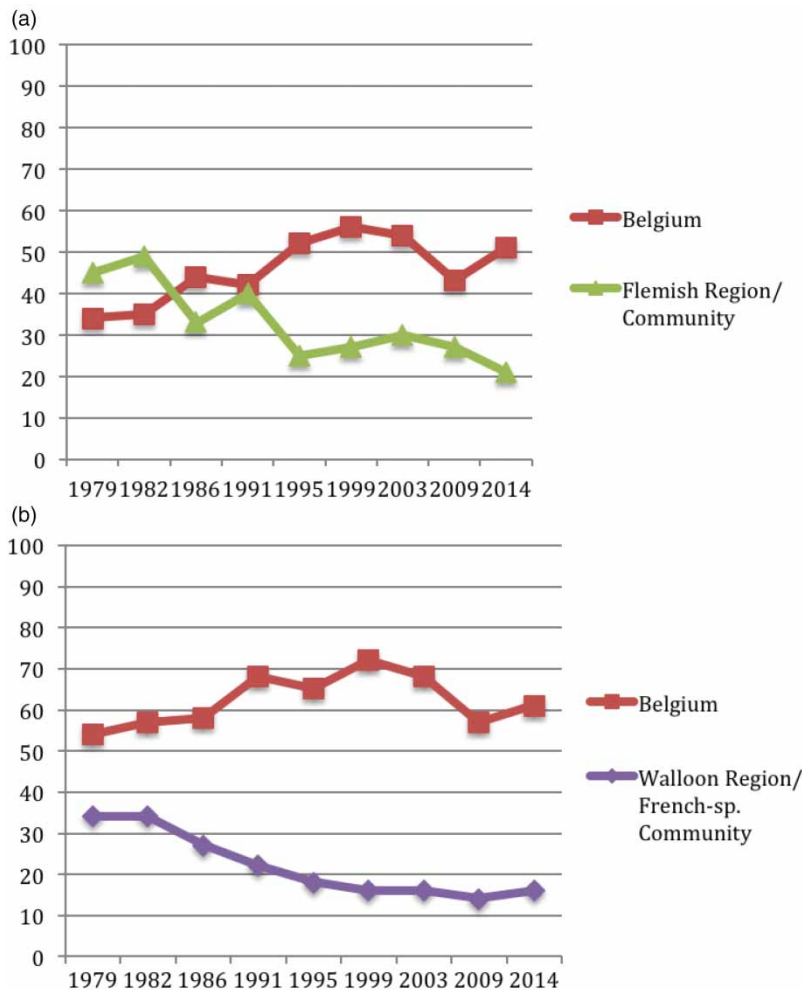


Figure 1. (a) Evolution of the first chosen identity in Flanders over time (1979–2014); (b) Evolution of the first chosen identity in Wallonia over time (1979–2014)

Notes: It is important to note that the identification to Europe was introduced in the 2009 and the 2014 surveys. Therefore the decline of the identity to Belgium might be explained by the fact that some respondents chose Europe first instead of Belgium first.

Source: Régioscope (1979–1986); ISPO-PIOP Belgian Federal Election Studies (1991–2003); and PartiRep Voter Survey (2009–2014).

implemented fostering a subgroup civil society, the potential for political mobilization increases. These widely spread societal networks act as important resources because they socialize citizens, which can be mobilized in support of autonomist claims.

In Belgium, as Figure 2 shows, this trend can be seen quite clearly in the evolution of vote shares since 1946. In the first election after the Second World War, the three traditional parties (Christian democrats, liberals and socialists) gathered altogether over 70% of the total votes. Yet, from the beginning of the 1960s onwards, there was a

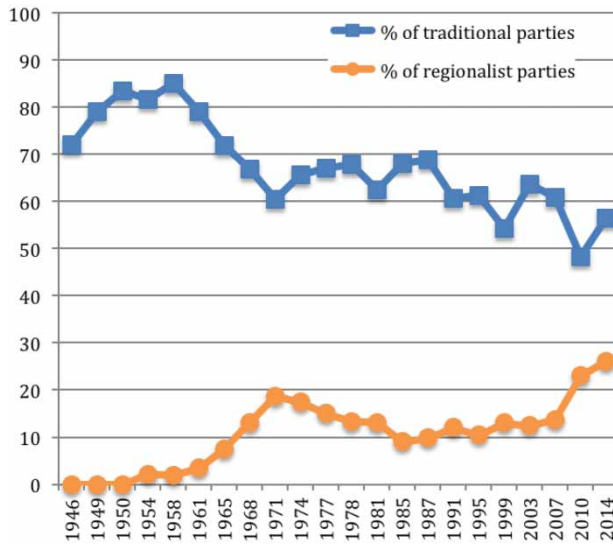


Figure 2. Vote shares of traditional parties and regionalist parties over time (1946–2014)

Source: Authors' own compilation from official elections data.

steady decline of the traditional parties and by contrast a steady increase in the regionalist parties. A first peak occurred in 1971, right after the first state reform where autonomy was granted for the first time. A second peak was the 2010 federal elections, confirmed in 2014, with the surge of the N-VA (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*, New Flemish Alliance) that collected along with the smaller regionalist parties on both sides of the language borders (Vlaams Belang in Flanders and the Francophone Democratic Federalists in French-speaking Belgium) over 20% of the votes, bringing down corollary of the traditional parties to a historic low.

Moreover, Brancati convincingly demonstrates the effect that regional parties have on the stability of the political system (2006, 2007). Her argument is that granting self-rule has a direct and positive effect on the stability of the political system because it removes contentious issues from the agenda, but at the same time, it creates the possibility for regional entrepreneurs to gain political legitimacy (Bermeo, 2002). After all, in a federalized system, these regional entrepreneurs will have a much easier time in gaining political power in the regional government because they only have to present themselves electorally in one region. Moreover, at the regional level, they can gain the legitimacy they do not have at the national level by showing that they are politically competent and able to govern responsibly (Tierney, 2009, p. 247).

Moreover, the increasing competition between regional entrepreneurs leads to 'ethnic outbidding': the demands that the regionalist parties put on the table reach further and further (Brancati, 2006). This is easily explained: because the regional entrepreneurs hold a particularly powerful position at the regional level, they want these regional governments to have decision-making power in more policy fields. Increasing the competencies of their regions implicitly means increasing their own power basis (O'Neill, 2003, p. 1075; Sorens, 2009).

This evolution towards ever-increasing demands for self-rule has certainly taken place in Belgium. Telling in this context is the fact that the federal state, which Belgium currently is, was never intended to be federal (Deschouwer, 2006). Initially, granting limited amounts of self-rule in contested areas was simply thought to contain the calls for secession. It was considered sufficient in order to guard the peace between the linguistic groups. Federalism was thus never considered to be the final solution to the tensions in the 1970s, except for the regionalist parties (van Haute & Pilet, 2006), so that its existence today says a lot about the increasing demands for autonomy and the role regionalist parties played in that dynamics (Deschouwer, 2013). These demands started to increase strongly when the country was split into linguistically defined entities. Once the boundaries for a new political arena were decided, a new generation of political leaders emerged, the regional entrepreneurs, who did not feel like defending the centre when their electoral success depended on representing their own region (Bouveroux & Huyse, 2009, p. 87). As such, there was no more need to talk to the other side, and the attractiveness of advocating a regionalist stance increased dramatically. This gives support to the ‘hollowing the centre’ thesis (Hooghe, 2004) that sees the centre being increasingly hollowed out as the sole solution to impede regionalist demands.

The positive effect of setting the linguistic border on the electoral scores of regionalist parties can be illustrated by the elections of 23 May 1965. This was the first election after fixing the linguistic border in 1963, and the political newcomers with a strong regionalist profile immediately got astonishing results. The Flemish Volksunie went from none to seven seats, whereas the francophone FDF (founded only in 1964) got three seats (Bouhon & Reuchamps, 2012). In a counterfactual perspective, however, these electoral results could be seen as the consequence of unleashing a pent-up desire that was there in any case, and that conceivably would have grown even more had the concessions to regional demands not happened.

Nonetheless, the process of regionalist outbidding exponentially increased by the split of the Belgian party system in the 1970s (Deschouwer, 2002). ‘[T]he regionalization of the party system’, Swenden and Jans contend, ‘increased the salience of the ethno-regionalist cleavage’ (2006, p. 880). From then on, *all* political parties, not only the regionalist parties, were competing for electoral support on their side of the linguistic divide. Appealing to regionalist feelings thus became a strategy for gaining power in the federal government (Sorens, 2009, p. 256). This led to a kind of balkanization of politics, in which parties and representatives only speak and listen to their own subgroups, fostered in that way by the electoral system that does not, beside limited exceptions in specific communes, allow for cross-community voting (Deschouwer & Van Parijs, 2011; Sinardet, Dodeigne, & Reuchamps, 2012). In such a system, there are no pre-electoral incentives that urge the candidates to campaign across groups (Horowitz, 1985), and therefore the winning electoral strategy is not to take an accommodative stance anymore, but to outmanoeuvre the more moderate parties on their regionalist flank (Jenne, 2009, p. 276).

The paradox of federalism thus means that granting self-rule turns the exacerbation of political conflicts into a rewarding electoral strategy. It increases the pressure for further institutional change at the federal level because the demands that reach the national agenda from the regional level go much further than they would have under a different political firmament.

The Cost of Federalizing

Beside the increasing demands from regional entrepreneurs, conflict resolution in Belgium has also experienced increasing difficulties in literally buying off peace. Especially in the 1970s and 1980s, financially rewarding the segments for settling conflicts in a peaceful manner was a preferred technique, and the elites proved very imaginative in finding compromises to circumvent the mutual veto rights that hindered the subsequent state reforms (Witte, Craeybeckx, & Meynen, 1997). These agreements could take the form of a proportional distribution of public subsidies among all segments, but most of the time they involved the devolution of national competencies to the regional level. Even though it is excellent from a conflict-management perspective that ‘the essence of political action has shifted from strife to distribution’ (Daalder, 1964, p. 24), we should not lose sight of the fact that reaching agreements became increasingly more costly to the national level as the compromises needed to pacify conflicts became more complex.

Such a ‘waffle iron politics’, as it is known in Belgium, was further stimulated by the fact that the demands for autonomy (or additional financial capacities) were different on both sides of the linguistic divide (Deschouwer, 2012). Flanders primarily wanted cultural and linguistic autonomy, and protection from the Francophone cultural dominance. Wallonia, on the other hand, witnessed a severe economic decline (Quévit, 1978). The Walloon movement wanted Wallonia to be able to steer its own economy and therefore needed a strong financial injection in its economy and infrastructure (Reuchamps, *Forthcoming*). By contrast, the Francophones who lived in and around Brussels—and therefore in Flanders—were looking for protection of their—notably linguistic—rights and the possibility to keep close—notably political—ties with the rest of the Francophones. The institutional architecture of Belgian federalism was modelled after these manifold demands, which led to a complex federal system with two types of sub-state—from 1993 on: federalized—entities: communities, which met Flemish demands and got cultural, linguistic and person-related competencies, and Regions, which would focus on economic policy (Witte & Meynen, 2006, p. 103).

Setting up such a bipolar federal state was in perfect harmony with the idea of buying off the peace. Two clearly distinct types of entities were created, each of which received the highly desired autonomy for conducting policies, notwithstanding the fact that they could be merged as it happened in Flanders where the Region and the Community were basically merged into one single entity. Federalizing was thus a perfect strategy for conflict management, but, on the down side, it largely emptied the national level of competencies and resources (Deschouwer, 1999, p. 103). Because the Belgian political parties were reluctant to transfer far-reaching fiscal autonomy to the sub-states, the Regions and Communities have been mainly financed by extensive annual grants. These endowments came at the cost of the national level, which steadily lost any financial manoeuvrability because of that budgetary burden. With the sixth state reform, the Regions (because they have a well-delineated territory, which is not the case of the Communities in Brussels) have now a significant portion of fiscal autonomy (Deschouwer & Reuchamps, 2013). This granting of fiscal autonomy, even though it is framed to prevent fiscal competition, might reinforce the distance between the Regions and make future compromises even more difficult.

Moreover, as less and less financial sweetener is available to seal the deal at the national level, the package deals that defused conflicts in the past become increasingly more

Table 1. Position of the MPs regarding the future of federalism (average per party—descending order by language groups)

Political party	Average
Groen! (Flemish greens)	4.90
sp.a (Flemish socialists)	4.38
Open VLD (Flemish liberals)	3.93
CD&V (Flemish Christian democrats)	3.00
N-VA (Flemish regionalists)	0.42
VB (Flemish separatists and radical right)	0.00
PS (Francophone socialists)	4.83
FDF (Francophone regionalists)	4.60
cdH (Francophone Christian democrats)	4.29
Ecolo (Francophone greens)	4.23
MR (Francophone liberals)	3.93
<i>n</i> = 237	

difficult to negotiate (Huyse, 2003, p. 92). This has largely exhausted the usability of granting segmental autonomy as a consociational technique. The traditional package deals that benefited all of the segments equally are thus much harder to find. To this end, each new step of devolution has to include new grounds of competence. This is why, for the first time in the federal history of Belgium, parts of the social security (notably child allowances and sectors of health care) have been transferred to the Regions and the Communities in the last state reform agreement (Popelier, Sinardet, Velaers, & Cantillon, 2012). For decades, social security was considered the backbone of Belgian federalism as it constituted the solidarity backbone to the country.

Only the future will tell whether the elites will still be able to find solutions, and now that there are very little competencies and financial means to be used as hard currency in the resolution of conflicts. What is obvious, however, from an MPs survey undertaken in 2011 is that the division line lies more within the language groups than between them (Dodeigne, Gramme, Reuchamps, & Sinardet, 2014). Table 1 shows the average position of the MPs by political parties regarding the future of Belgian federalism: whether all authority should be exercised by the Regions and Communities (score of 0) or all authority should be transferred to the federal state (score of 10).

Three groups of parties can be distinguished (Sinardet, Dodeigne, & Reuchamps, 2013). First, there is a group of eight parties whose averages differ by less than one point, from 3.93 to 4.90. The second group is made of the Flemish regionalist N-VA and radical right and openly separatist VB that hover around 0 on the 0–10 scale, with 0.42 and 0, respectively. The third group is composed of only one party: the Flemish Christian democrat CD&V. Its average of 3 is lower than the first group and higher than the regionalist and separatist parties. These empirical data show that there is an overlapping agreement between traditional parties on the future of federalism, which was actually the case with the sixth state reform that was not supported by any regionalist parties, but also that the differences remain important, and therefore another negotiation round seems to be inevitable on the longer term.

From Generalized to Single Policy Paralysis

In addition to generating a paradox of federalism and lowering the financial possibilities for buying off peace, granting segmental autonomy is flawed as a conflict-management institution in a third way. After all, it might solve problems that are currently on the agenda, but it also makes subsequent negotiations even harder. In order to understand precisely how this is so, we first need to take a closer look at the consociational decision-making dynamics that underlie the search for conflict accommodation in Belgium.

As a response to the deep mutually reinforcing cleavages that drive Belgian democracy to disintegration, Belgium has adopted a full-fledged consociational system. Intersegmental tensions are dealt with through power-sharing in a grand coalition which includes the elites from all segments. The inclusion of both majority and minority factions, and the gridlocks offered to ensure that decisions are made in mutual agreement, rendered it virtually impossible for any majority to impose its will on another segment.

However, the formal rules only tell part of the story as the resolution of conflicts via consociational techniques was and is not a permanent feature of Belgian politics (Deschouwer, 2006; Lorwin, 1966). After all, it is generally argued that these power-sharing devices are only activated at moments when the conflict between the groups is at its deepest. The search for accommodative strategies only starts when the elites of both segments acknowledge the undesirable consequences of confrontation. According to Jans (2001), the segments will only renounce confrontation and engage in joint decision-making as soon as the default option takes the form of a *generalized policy paralysis*. This means that the non-agreement 'entails a broad and generalised blockage of the wider decision-making processes' (Jans, 2001, p. 44). The elites, especially of traditional parties, will therefore turn to power-sharing as soon as all policies, instead of just the policies that are under discussion, at the national level are deadlocked.

Such a generalized policy paralysis at the national level is a common phenomenon in Belgium. What normally happens when regionalist tensions mount is that representatives of both linguistic groups gather at the federal level. Each linguistic group closes ranks and mobilizes all of its troops to defuse conflicts. The federal members of government and most of their staff are thus involved in these negotiations, and this in turn means that the policy process at the federal level completely paralyzes; the entire political class focuses on the negotiations between the linguistic groups, which means that no more substantive political decisions can be made in any other policy field. It thus takes no great effort to see that the political and policy costs of a non-agreement rise steadily as negotiations take longer.

The alternation of unilateral action and joint decision-making captures the essence of Belgian intersegmental conflict accommodation, but over the years this decision-making dynamics has radically changed. The process of federalization has transferred a large number of competencies from the national to the regional level, in an effort to grant self-rule on the most contentious issues. As more and more competencies were transferred, however, the national level was largely emptied, not only from financial means as we saw before, but also from any real decision-making power; most of the substantive policy areas are at the regional level instead of the national level (Swenden & Jans, 2006), and the sixth reform transferred parts of social security and some fiscal autonomy.

Self-rule has thus created two full policy levels, the federal and the regional, that exist in relative isolation from each other. There is very little spillover since political struggles and problems at one level rarely spread to the other governments. With the exception of the short-lived ‘dialogue from community to community’ in 2008 (De Landtsheer & De Sutter, 2011), the regional governments—or more broadly: the regional political class—rarely intervene at the federal level and vice versa. Its consent is not required for constitutional changes, and it is the nationally elected representatives of the regional parties, which engage in negotiations. In fact, the movements between the two levels of government are mainly due to a few big names, usually ministers (Dodeigne, 2014).

This relative independence is further fostered by the fact that the elections at the different policy levels were for almost two decades not held simultaneously as a way to strengthen the federal nature of Belgium. But because of this institutional gimmick, the coalitions at the federal and regional levels have been increasingly asymmetrically composed (Deschouwer, 2006, 2012), which is even more the case after the 2014 elections. This means that parties that are at the federal negotiation table are not necessarily included in the regional coalitions, which further enhances political tensions.

The growing importance of the regional level, combined with its relative independence, is highly problematic in the light of what we saw before. As we argued, conflict accommodation comes about when there is a complete political stalemate at the national level, but at the same time, the national level is largely emptied of competencies. As such, the day-to-day impact of a standstill at the federal level will no longer lead to a broad generalized policy paralysis. After all, the regional entities, which received increasingly more competences, continue to work properly despite conflicts at the federal level. This is what happened during the 2010–2011 crisis; despite the absence of a federal government, the country could still function because the sub-state governments were functioning (Devos & Sinardet, 2012). Another illustration of this reality comes from the coalition formations.

The effect of the stalemate at the federal level thus has a relatively limited impact, or at least much more limited effect than it had before, on the everyday lives of the citizens. Moreover, it will continue to decrease as the regional policy portfolio continues to grow. This means that the costs of non-agreement are no longer as detrimental as they once were. Because so few competencies are left at the federal level, political deadlock leads to no more than a single policy paralysis and the costs of the default option thus take much more time to reach their critical level.

Granting segmental autonomy has thus changed a lot. Whereas intersegmental compromises used to follow the logic of avoiding excessive costs, this no longer leads to conflict accommodation. The national level might very well be consumed by a complete political standstill, and the regions continue to work properly within the framework set out by the competencies they received. The sub-state entities have thus become full-grown political systems that are capable of taking substantive decisions and where there is still room for conducting new policies. As such, the institutional pressure of reaching an agreement is much more limited. Granting autonomy thus takes contentious issues off the table, but renders future conflict management more difficult.

The historically long and difficult government formation after the 2007 and 2010 elections seems to be a case in point for this argument. At first sight, the situation appears to be similar to previous conflicts: months and months of negotiations led to a complete standstill and on the international markets, Belgium was not flourishing either. Add to that

the interim government could not decide on new policies, and could not tackle the new socio-economic issues that rise. Finally, the pressure to reach an agreement is not an internal pressure anymore but rather an external two-fold pressure namely the European institutions through the budgetary framework and the international markets through the voice of the credit rating agencies (Quinet, 2012).

Conclusion

The relationship between consociationalism and federalism in Belgium is a two-faced story. The Belgian logic of federalizing competencies within a consociational system in order to accommodate conflicts shows mixed results. On the one hand, it has always succeeded in neutralizing conflicts, in guaranteeing the stability of the political system and in avoiding violent conflicts. Power-sharing has proven to be effective as a way of resolving conflicts and reaching agreement. On the other hand, the pacification techniques have made it increasingly difficult to reach agreements in the future. They solved conflicts, but rendered the solution of future conflicts increasingly hard in three ways.

First of all, granting autonomy induces new demands for autonomy. Within the newly created political spheres, regional identities will flourish and regional parties will start to compete as ethnic outbidders. This will widen the demands and harden the stance of the regional negotiators at the national level. As such, the polarization of demands makes finding a compromise increasingly hard. Secondly, subsequent state reforms systematically expanded the substantive competencies of these entities, and increased their financial means. The granting of segmental autonomy is an effective means for conflict management, but, on the down side, it left the national level with little resources to buy off the peace. And finally, because the Belgian federalization process has rid the national level of most substantive competencies, the cost of a non-agreement rises much slower than before. The policies at the regional level continue to function properly so that a deadlock at the national level does little more than instigate a single policy paralysis. This heightens the chance of non-agreement.

These three problems have put pressure on the ability of granting segmental autonomy as a technique for accommodating conflicts, and only the future will tell whether the elites will still be able to find solutions. What is more, reinforcing the dynamics that were sparked by the 2007, 2009 and 2010 elections, the federal and regional (as well as European) elections of May 2014 and especially the coalition formations that followed show the federal framework is step after step increasingly more confederal with incongruent coalitions both vertically (between the federal and the regional governments) and horizontally (between the political parties of the same linguistic group) where the relations between language groups despite consociational techniques are under pressure.

Even though consociational federalism has always been able to defuse conflicts in the past, it remains unsure how the future of conflict resolution in Belgium will turn out. Whether federalism as a consociational conflict-management technique will be successful in the future depends in no small measure on what the search for alternative modes of accommodation comes up with. Among the possible alternatives, three are often put forward that merit further research.

A first mechanism that could increase the cost of non-agreement, and thereby foster more power-sharing between the elites, is the installation of a federal electoral district. This would allow cross-community voting for a limited number of federal MPs; this is

a rather centripetal technique to alleviate somewhat the centrifugal nature of the electoral dynamics hitherto. While this proposition has its partisans (Deschouwer & Van Parijs, 2011), political parties are still quite reluctant to move in this direction (Sinardet et al., 2012) and other observers argue that it would at best not make any difference and at worse reinforce regionalist parties (Delwit, 2013).

Second, direct democracy via referendum is sometimes called to the rescue. In Belgium, most actors are quite hesitant to move forward in this direction since the Royal Question, a public consultation that further fuelled the division of the country along linguistic lines. Yet, despite this history, there are arguments in favour of referendum: on the one hand, it could help foster a federal public sphere that is currently missing (Stojanovic, 2009) and, on the other hand, it could once and for all provoke a real debate about the future of Belgium and what it should look like (Swenden, 2013). Nonetheless, the generalized fear of direct democracy in Belgium is likely to impede future developments in this direction.

Third, this might be an alternative way to the first two solutions, deliberative democracy is progressively gaining credibility even in a divided polity such as Belgium (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014a, 2014b) and some voices call for more dialogues between Dutch- and French-speaking citizens as long as they are randomly chosen (Van Reybrouck, 2013). Contrary to the rationale at the core of consociational techniques where only elites should be involved in the governing of a divided society, perhaps citizens themselves could help rescuing Belgian consociational federalism.

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