Belgium: History

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When the Belgians in 1830 proclaimed their independence from the Kingdom of the Netherlands, they had never lived together in the same country. In fact, even though Gaius Julius Caesar wrote in his *Commentarii de Bello Gallico,* when he was fighting the Gallic Wars in the 1st century BCE, that 'of all the Gauls the Belgae are the bravest', these early Belgians inhabited a territory that was much larger than present-day Belgium. At the time of the fall of the Holy Roman Empire, the territories of what eventually would form the Kingdom of Belgium encompassed several empires, kingdoms, duchies, counties and principalities. The Napoleonic Wars brought these diverse territories under French rule for a decade before they came under Dutch rule following the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Thereafter, the northern and southern Low Countries were united in the Kingdom of the United Netherlands. The new state experienced strong religious and cultural antipathy between the Roman Catholic south and the Protestant north. Amid rising linguistic and religious tensions (the Belgian elites were French-speaking, while the ruling class was Dutch-speaking), the Belgians revolted against the Dutch King Willem I and the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1830 and self-declared the independence of the southern provinces (with the exception of the territory of the future independent Grand Duchy of Luxembourg). These provinces were quickly recognized by neighbouring countries and the Netherlands in 1839. Belgium was thus a whole new country (Deschouwer, 2012).

Three Main Political Cleavages

In 1831 the young country adopted a liberal Constitution that provided for a monarch and a bicameral Parliament comprising a Chamber of Representatives and a Senate. Three main political cleavages have defined and divided the Belgian polity throughout the country's history. If the separation from the Kingdom of the Netherlands had been fuelled by the rejection of the Dutch King's pro-Protestant policies, the national union of the first years of independence quickly gave way to the crystallization of opposition between the Catholics, who favoured a strong relationship between the Church and the state, and the liberals, who sought a clear separation between the two. This cleavage led to the progressive consocionalization of society, strengthened at the end of the 19th century by the creation of the Belgische Werkliedenpartij/Parti Ouvrier Belge (Belgian Labour Party) by the socialists, who sought to protect the interests of the working class against the ruling class, and fought politically on a socioeconomic cleavage. On this cleavage, the socialists of the Belgian Labour Party fought alongside the Catholic Workers' movement. Yet on the state–Church cleavage, the socialists joined a group of liberals, supporters of a separation between state and Church, while in the mean time promoting free market economy on the socioeconomic cleavage. This interweaving of cleavages explains Belgium's consocionalist nature. Three pillars governed the state: the Catholics, the socialists and, to a lesser extent, the liberals. These three 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 it was not united (Lijphart, 1981; Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2020).

The third cleavage is linguistic. It appeared upon the creation of the independent Belgian state because it was unitary and above all francophone and unilingual. However, since the country's inception, a Dutch-speaking majority has inhabited Belgium. The first national census, conducted in 1846, confirmed that the majority of the population were Dutch/Flemish speakers (mainly living in the north of the country) while the remainder (around 40% of the population) were French/Walloon speakers (mainly living in the south of the country), with a—very—small minority of German speakers (living in the east of the country). Yet the language of the elites, regardless of where they lived in the country, was French, and hence the sole language of state was French. This choice and the consequences thereof for the Dutch-speaking Belgians, who were not allowed to use their mother

tongue in any official matter, gave rise to the Flemish people's movement. This nationalist movement, which emerged as a reaction to unilingual Belgium, demanded the recognition of Dutch as the second official national language, at least in Flanders. These demands were vigorously rejected by the Belgian elite because they were deemed harmful to the development of the Belgian nation, which used French as a lingua franca, instead of the Germanic dialects spoken in the north and the Walloon dialects spoken in the south. This led to the hardening of the Flemish movement, slowly reinforced by the extension of voting rights. In the 1870s the first linguistic laws were passed, which authorized the use of the Dutch language in tribunals and in the administration of the Flemish provinces (Zolberg, 1974). Finally, in 1898 the law on equality recognized Dutch as an official language, placing it on the same footing as 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 elites, despite the increasing power of the Dutch-speaking citizens who were now able to cast their votes. However, the demands of the Flemish movement led to the passing of a series of new linguistic laws in the 1920s and 1930s that 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 by both the French and Dutch speakers, as each sought to ensure the protection of their own 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 sub-division in Belgium—was included in a unilingual region—be that Dutch, French or German—with the exception of the municipalities in Brussels that were gathered in the only bilingual region in the country. However, Brussels was also the centre of the problem. Originally a Dutch-speaking city, it underwent rapid Frenchification owing to its role as a 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 progressive federalization of Belgium, legally since 1970 and constitutionally since 1993.

From a Unitary to a Federal State

In 1993 the Constitution was amended to create a federal state of Belgium. The first article reads: 'Belgium is a federal State composed of Communities and Regions'. There are three Communities: the Flemish Community, the French Community and the German-speaking Community. The Communities are primarily responsible for matters related to education, culture and people, whereas the three Regions—Flemish, Walloon and Brussels-Capital—are primarily responsible for matters related to the economy, territory and environment. This dual federalism reflects the twofold origin of the Belgian federal state. On the one hand, the Communities are the response to the linguistic and cultural demands of the Flemish movement. On the other hand, the Regions are the response to the socioeconomic demands of the Walloon movement. In-between the two main language communities, the small German-speaking community benefited from this twofold dynamic to gain progressively a constitutional status as one of the smallest federal entities in the world (Niessen, 2021).

In 1962–63, when the principle of territoriality became entrenched in the Belgian political system, another change was already under way in Belgium: the Flemish economy surpassed that of French-speaking Wallonia for the first time in the country's history. Until then, Wallonia's coal mining and heavy industries had always been the engine of Belgium's economic prosperity. However, after the Second World War, Wallonia's economy entered a phase of decline, whereas the Flemish economy enjoyed an economic boom (Reuchamps, 2015). In response to this new economic order, the Walloon elite started to seek greater socioeconomic autonomy in order to develop policies more adapted to their struggling economy. Since then, socioeconomic dynamics have had a bigger impact on Belgian politics. In this context, demands for greater linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic autonomy from the north of the country, and demands for greater socioeconomic autonomy from the south, led to the emergence of a unique two-level federal system comprising Communities with competence for cultural and linguistic matters and Regions for socioeconomic matters.

The history of Belgium has always been based on a compromise that satisfies each of the two main language groups. This is reflected in its federal structure. In 1970 the Communities were created and 10 years later, the Regions were created. At that time, the Flemish elite elected to merge the Flemish Community with the Flemish Region in a unique entity with a single Parliament and a single government. The francophone elite, in turn, determined that the so-called French Community should provide the linguistic link between the French speakers of Wallonia and of Brussels. These choices reflect different visions of what federal Belgium should look like: for the majority of the Flemish elite, Belgium should comprise the Flemish and the French Communities, while the majority of the francophone elite believe that Belgium should comprise three Regions—Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital. This, then, is the paradox of federalism confronting the people of Belgium: the Flemings embrace the linguistic ties accorded to them by the Community, but need the Regions to ensure clear boundaries and to obtain greater autonomy, whereas the francophones seek a regional vision that will recognize Brussels as a fully-fledged Region, but need the French(-speaking) Community in order to link Brussels and Wallonia.

A Country of Paradoxes

Belgium is indeed a country of paradoxes in economic, sociological and political aspects. Since the economic shift in 1962–63, when Flanders' economy began to surpass that of Wallonia's, there have been considerable regional economic disparities in terms of the growth of per capita gross domestic product (GDP). Furthermore, average income tax paid per capita is higher in Flanders than in Wallonia (and even higher than in Brussels, where there is a great difference between the relative wealth created in the Region and the relative poverty of its inhabitants), financial transfers (via social security) go from north to south, in order to maintain solidarity. The pervasiveness of this dimension has increased with the widening of the gap between the two Regions' economies; as a consequence, there has been a growing trend in Flanders to view Walloons as unfairly taking advantage of the Flemish economy, whereas some Walloons recall that prior to the 1962–63 shift, the prevailing economic conditions favoured Wallonia and not Flanders.

Socioeconomic factors play an important role in Belgium, because they ensure financial solidarity between the country's Regions, even though these fiscal transfers frequently come under close scrutiny. Furthermore, two important paradoxes appear. The first concerns Brussels. This prosperous City-Region located at the heart of the country has the highest GDP per capita of the three Regions—approximately double that of Flanders. Over 500,000 commuters travel to the city daily. However, they do not pay their taxes at source, which explains the important discrepancy between Brussels' high GDP and its low income tax return rate; because of their relative poverty, the inhabitants of Brussels pay considerably less income tax than the average Belgian. The second paradox concerns intra-regional differences, and not inter-regional ones. Even if Flanders is wealthier than Wallonia, the differences between the provinces of these two Regions are not negligible. The Walloon Brabant province is the area where the second highest wealth is produced, after the Flemish province of Antwerp. Limburg is the least wealthy of the Flemish provinces, but it is wealthier than the four remaining Walloon provinces.

Despite political discourse often claiming homogeneous realities, such heterogeneity exists in terms of national identity. Survey data show that at least one in two Belgians are willing to identify with Belgium, and that this sentiment is rather stable over time (Niessen et al., 2022). In Flanders, the largest Region in the country, data show that there is neither overwhelming support for, nor a complete rejection of, Belgium. Until the early 1980s when the Regions were created in Belgium, the majority of Flemings had a strong sense of their Flemish identity. Later, they tended to feel more Belgian than Flemish. In Wallonia, even though the data are generally similar, there is a difference in the extent of the sense of national identity. At different moments in time, between two-thirds and three-quarters of the people living in Wallonia had a strong sense of their Belgian identity. This amounts to a difference of almost 20% in the Flemish Region. Moreover, it is noteworthy that since the creation of the Regions in 1980, Walloons, unlike Flemings, have always felt, above all, Belgian.

However, inhabitants' sense of belonging to Belgium seems rather stable in both Regions, even if the sense of belonging to the Region/Community in Wallonia, as in Flanders, has decreased over time.

These figures shed light on the dynamics of national identity in Belgium. Far from being a marginal phenomenon, it is a crucial aspect of the transformation of the country that is still under way (Deschouwer and Reuchamps, 2013). However, none of the data show an identity gap between the two largest Communities, the Flemish Community and the French Community. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the citizens of both Communities have experienced a similar evolution in relation to their sense of belonging, even if this has taken place at a higher or lower level. There exists a national identity dualism in the country with a predominance of a sense of belonging to Belgium that varies according to region. Against this rather stable background, it is not surprising that a political paradox can be observed: despite the quite rapid transformation of Belgium from a unitary into a federal state over the past two decades, there does not appear to be strong support among the population for such a transformation.

In fact, in both Flanders and Wallonia, since 1991 (when the question was introduced in surveys) a greater proportion of people believe that Belgium should have sole decision-making powers compared with those who believe that Flanders or Wallonia should have the authority to make their own decisions. During the past two decades approximately 15%–20% of Flemings and approximately 20%–25% of Walloons have supported a unitary Belgium, while approximately 5%–10% of Flemings and fewer than 5% of Walloons support the independence of their Regions. Between these two extremes, the majority of Flemings and Walloons express a preference that falls between a preference for a federal Belgium and a preference for regionalism, with some favouring a balance of power. In Wallonia and Flanders, a relative majority of inhabitants would prefer a federal Belgium to have greater decision-making powers than the Flemish and Walloon Regions. However, in Flanders the option which receives the next highest amount of support is for the Flemish Region to hold primary decision-making authority, while in Wallonia the second preference is for a balance of power.

An examination of citizens' preferences confirms that the Belgian population has many different views of how the future of federalism in Belgium may evolve (Reuchamps, 2013). Unlike what could have been a priori thought, in light of the political tensions shaking the country, Dutch speakers and French speakers are not diametrically opposed; above all, there are as many differences within these two groups as between them. Furthermore, as shown by studies concerning voting intentions among the Flemish regionalist parties, their electoral behaviour is not directly influenced by the community issue but rather by socioeconomic issues. This is actually applicable to all the voters leaving community issues far behind socioeconomic aspects in the explanation of their vote (Niessen et al., 2022). This demonstrates an overarching feature, if not a paradox, of Belgian politics: the predominance of party politics, to the extent that the country can be described as a partitocracy.

Party Politics and Partitocracy

Partitocracy can be defined as a political regime whereby power—to an excessive degree—lies in the hands of the political parties. This is typically the case in Belgium, where the political parties are, for better or worse, the key actors in most, if not all, facets of the state structure (Baudewyns et al., 2022). Indeed, all the paradoxes discussed above echo the importance of political parties and, above all, party politics. Political dynamics in Belgium are largely driven by different and indeed often opposing visions, which ultimately have been the cause and the consequence of the fragmentation of the Belgian party system, of the end of the national parties as the starting point of the federalization of the country, and of the centrifugal competition between the Flemish and francophone party systems. While political parties' manifestos can be seen as reflecting the problems facing countries, they can also broker solutions to them. In fact, hitherto, political parties have always found ways to accommodate their competing visions and objectives.

An interesting illustration of this reality is the analysis of the vote share. In particular, by comparing the evolution of the cumulated share of the vote obtained by the traditional parties with that of the regional parties since the Second World War, it can be seen that the 1971 election marked a turning

point, when the regional parties garnered a peak of approximately 20% of the vote, followed by a downward trend that lasted until 1985, when the federalization of the country was well under way with the creation of the Communities in 1970 and of the Regions in 1980. In other words, the federalization of the country helped to mitigate the growing political tensions. However, in the medium term, new demands for autonomy were made, which were reflected in the new rise of the regionalist parties, particularly in the Flemish Community, in the 2010s. What had particularly changed between 1971 and the 2010s was that, at the beginning of the 'reform of the state', regionalist forces were found on both sides of the linguistic divide with the nationalist Volksunie (People's Union), the Brussels-based Front Démocratique des Francophones (Democratic Front of Francophones) and the Rassemblement Wallon (Rally Wallonia). At the time it was possible to find compromises because each team of negotiators, composed of delegates of the traditional parties, came under pressure from the regional parties. From 2007 onwards it was more difficult to do so because the francophones were unwilling to advocate for greater federalization of the country amid concerns that this could eventually lead to separatism (Reuchamps et al., 2021).

There also exists a divergence between political parties and the electorate due to the fact that in Flanders, none of the parties seek less autonomy for the Regions, although some Flemings are in favour of this, while in Wallonia, none of the parties present themselves as being openly regionalist (even if some of their members are). However, even within the political parties themselves, there is a diversity of opinion. Indeed, several surveys conducted among Belgian members of Parliament have shown that differences within a party (and within a language group) were sometimes greater than between Dutch-speaking as well as French-speaking political parties (Dodeigne et al., 2021). In this highly fragmented political context, it is not surprising that it can be difficult to form a coalition government, at the federal level in particular. A world record was broken in Belgium after the 2010 general election when it took 541 days to form a federal government. In fact, in the past 20 years the country has been governed by a caretaker government for a total number of 1,500 days, equivalent to a total period of over four years (Dandoy and Terrière, 2022). It was again a caretaker government that had to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020; it was led by francophone Liberal, Sophie Wilmès, the first woman to hold the post in Belgium. Invested of special powers by the Parliament to take the necessary measures to mitigate the public health and socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic, this minority government was finally replaced on 1 October 2020 when the Flemish Liberal, Alexander De Croo, hitherto the Open Vld Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, was sworn in as Prime Minister of a majority (but not in Flanders) coalition Government (with 87 out of 150 seats). De Croo's so-called Vivaldi coalition Government (the four distinct political parties represent the colours of the four seasons) comprised MR and Open Vld (with 14 and 12 seats, respectively), the PS and SP.A (20 and 9 seats, respectively), Ecolo and Groen (13 and eight seats, respectively) and the CD&V (12 seats), and governed Belgium until the general elections of 2024.

Multiple elections in 2024

With European and regional (and possibly federal) elections set on a five-year cycle and local elections on a six-year cycle, 2024 was marked to be a key electoral year in Belgium. Never in its history, so many elections were to be held on the same year: federal and regional elections on 9 June 2024, concurrently with elections to the European Parliament, and municipal and provincial elections on 13 October.

While the 2019 legislative elections witnessed a green high tide with the ecologists reaching a the second highest score (12,2%) in their history (after 14,4% in 1999), the 2024 elections were expected to be detrimental for them, and in the meantime a surge for the extreme right in Flanders. The recess was confirmed for the former: while Ecolo (Ecologistes Confédérés pour l'Organisation des Luttes Originale) and Groen (Green) down from 13 to 3 and eight to six seats, respectively, in the federal Chamber of Representatives. For the latter, opinion polls indicated that the Vlaams Belang (VB—Flemish Interest) could reach 30% among Flemish voters and would be the first party in Flanders (and hence in Belgium). Yet, despite losing one seat to 24 seats, the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA—

New Flemish Alliance) remained the first party, with two more seats than the extreme right party that won two extra seats to a total of 20 seats at the federal elections. The results are tighter in the Flemish Parliament where each party garnered 31 seats (a win of four for VB and a loss of eight for N-VA), falling short of one seat to achieve an absolute majority (out of 124 Members of Parliament) of independentist parties in Flanders. As a result, there was no political obligation for N-VA to start a coalition negotiation with VB and the N-VA preferred to form a government with the Flemish social-democrats of Vooruit (Forward) and the Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V—Christian Democratic and Flemish) who respectively secured 18 (+5) and 16 (-3) seats in the Flemish Parliament. Four other parties have representatives in this parliament: three with nine seats each – the Flemish Liberals of Open Vld (-7), the Partij van de Arbeid van België (PVDA—Workers' Party of Belgium) (+5) and Groen (Green) (-5) – and the Team Fouad Ahidar that secured one seat thanks to the votes in Brussels. The Flemish Parliament hosts six parliamentarians elected by voters who chose a Dutch-speaking party in the regional elections in Brussels.

In fact, one of the striking results of the regional elections in Brussels is the success (with three seats) of the party around Fouad Ahidar, a Brussels Member of Parliament who broke out from Vooruit during the previous legislature and formed his own Team that came second in the Dutch-speaking group, just after Groen that came first with four seats, like in the 2019 elections. As first party, Groen has initiated the Dutch-speaking side of the government formation process with three other parties (but not the Fouad Ahidar considered as too radical on politico-religious questions and not solid enough as a party to join a government): Open Vld with two seats (-1), Vooruit.brussels also with two seats (-) and CD&V with one seat (-). Three other parties have Dutch-speaking representatives in the Brussels Parliament: VB with two seats (+1), N-VA also with two seats (-1) and PVDA with one seat. In the French-speaking group (72 seats in total), the francophone Liberals of the Mouvement Réformateur (MR—Reformist Movement) came first with 20 seats (+7), followed by the Parti Socialiste (PS) with 16 seats (-1), the Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB—Workers' Party of Belgium) with 15 seats (+5), Les Engagés (LE—The Engaged), the heirs of the francophone Christian-Democrats whose previous name was cdH, with 8 seats (+4), Ecolo with 7 seats (-8), DéFi with 6 seats (-4). Based on these electoral results, finding a governing coalition in the French-speaking group requires more than two parties. As in Wallonia (see below), MR and LE are willing to govern together. In this perspective, the more plausible scenario is to form a tripartite government with the PS, who always held the Minister-Presidency since the creation of the Region in 1989 except during a five-years MR leadership between 1999 and 2004.

In Wallonia, the second largest region, the PS has held the leadership of the Region since its creation in 1981 with few discontinuities: for nine months in 1982 to the Liberals, for two years, one month and 24 days from the end of 1985 until the beginning of 1988 to the Christian-Democrats and, more recently, for two years, one month and 16 days in 2017-2019 to the Liberals, which was the only government without the Socialists. The 2024 elections gave a majority to the MR (26 seats, +6) and LE (17 seats, +7), leaving in the opposition PS (19 seats, -4), PTB (eight seats, -2), Ecolo (5 seats, -7). The two same parties will govern the French-speaking Community, also known as the Federation Wallonia-Brussels, that is the jurisdiction for French-speaking residents of Brussels and Wallonia for matters related to education, culture, sports, youth, scientific research and legal advice centres.

In the smallest substate entity, the German-speaking Community, the incumbent Minister-President of the regionalist party, Pro Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft (ProDG—For the German-speaking Community) received an increased support with eight seats (+2). In four days, he achieved to form a coalition with two parties: Christlich Soziale Partei (CSP—Social Christian Party) that had been the first party of the Community since its creation in 1974 until 2019 but in the opposition since 1999, with 5 seats (-1) and Perspektiven. Freiheit. Fortschritt. (PFF—Perspectives. Freedom. Progress.) that has been in government since 1999, with 3 seats (-). It means that the Sozialistische Partei (SP—Socialist Party) goes in the opposition for the first time since 1990. Two other parties have representatives in the Parliament of the German-speaking Community: the anti-establishment party of Vivant (literally meaning living) with four seats (+1) and the ecologists of Ecolo with two seats (-2).

By contrast to the German-speaking government, the federal government is usually the slowest to be formed. But the results of the 2024 elections and the political dynamics thereafter might enable a speedier process. As already mentioned, the N-VA remains first party in the federal Chamber of Representatives and with the 13 seats (+4) of Vooruit as well as the 11 seats (-1) of CD&V, they hold a majority among Flemish representatives that was missing in the previous federal government. On the French-speaking side, the MR with 20 seats (+6) and the LE with 14 seats (+9) will join government led by N-VA leader, Bart De Wever, who is currently the mayor of the largest Flemish city, Antwerp. The municipal and provincial elections that will be held on 13 October 2024 will likely impact the federal government formation.

The multiple elections in 2024 confirms another Belgian paradox: in this small country, many elections can take place and they are all intertwined. Such national interdependence mirrors Belgium's international position.

A Not-so-Small Country on the International Scene

Belgium is a small country with a very open economy. Owing to its geographical position and its diplomacy it has, despite its small size, a disproportional influence on the international scene, and particularly on the European Union (EU), of which it was one of the founding members. Brussels (whose name is often more familiar abroad than that of Belgium) hosts a number of European institutions and international organizations, including the headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Evere, Brussels. The Russian Federation invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a harsh reminder of the presence and importance of NATO in Belgium. NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) is situated in Casteau, near Mons. Belgium was one of the 12 founding members of NATO in 1949. Since then it has remained strongly politically committed to the organization, but paradoxically it has never committed many resources to its own defence. For decades, Belgium has been reluctant to increase defence spending to 2% of GDP by 2035 (from 1.1%), which would bring the country in line with NATO spending recommendations. Although there is quite strong consensus among the population to support Ukraine, Belgium is not one of the leading contributors to the defence of Ukraine. To put it in a more positive way, Belgium mobilizes more 'soft power' than 'hard power'. Furthermore, its national fate is intrinsically linked to its international interdependence. In fact, the strongly international feature of Belgium, despite its size, is probably not without effects on its internal politics.

The most pertinent example of this interdependence is reflected in the extent of Belgium's commitment to Europe. Europe is not a foreign country (Beyers and Bursens, 2006). Within the Belgian debate, the European argument is mobilized, but in diverging and sometimes contradictory ways. Some observers consider that the federal level has become an 'empty shell' between the European level above it and the regional level, particularly the Flemish, below. In such circumstances Europe would justify the dissolution of the Belgian nation state. Others insist that the EU, and particularly its member states, would not accept Flanders' inclination towards independence in order to prevent creating a precedent which could pave the way for Basques, Catalans, Scots and even Corsicans or Bretons to follow suit. Flanders is not Kosovo, and the Balkanization of a country at the heart of Europe, especially a founding EU member state, would not necessarily be favourably welcomed by the country's European partners, particularly those that have experienced (and there are many) similar situations. The question must be asked whether a new successor state, or a territorially modified Belgium, could remain in the EU. In this case, it is likely that Europe would prevent the dissolution of Belgium. Finally, some observers purport that Europe might come to the rescue of federal Belgium by showing that European integration, on the one hand, fosters co-operation between the Regions, the Communities and the federal authorities and, on the other hand, reinforces centralization and thus prevents the disappearance of that level of government (Beyers and Bursens, 2006). Thus, Europe would justify the continuing existence of Belgium.

Given its size, its openness to the world and its engagement in the international scene, Belgium is especially sensitive to external factors. These seem to have multiple—sometimes paradoxical—effects on the Belgian governance system and its political actors. Such dynamics are likely to endure in the

future. For the first half of 2024, Belgium has held the rotating presidency of the European Council. This presidency was marked by the renewal of the European Parliament in June 2024, which will be followed by a new Commission led again by Ursula von der Leyen.

Prospects from 2025 Onwards

No one can predict the outcomes thereof and above all the political, social and economic consequences in the short and long term. What is for sure, however, is that the national and international dynamics that have shaped the Belgian polity since the country gained independence from the Kingdom of the Netherlands will continue to mould the political dynamics of Belgium, which is due to celebrate its 200th anniversary in 2030.

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