

What Do the External Relations of Federated Entities Indicate About Belgian Federalism?

Edouard Xia

Since 1993, Belgium has become a federal state in which Regions and Communities are constitutionally mandated to manage their own external relations. This development has brought about a number of challenges, including the difficulty of speaking with a single voice, the risk of abstention that may result, the increased need for internal coordination, and the limited resources available to federated entities to ensure effective international representation. At the same time, it has also generated important benefits, such as the diversification of policy issues addressed and the expansion of privileged relations grounded in cultural proximity. Above all, the regionalization of foreign policy competences has underscored a clear decentralization of the decision-making process.

The conference, held on 27 January 2026, aimed to explore these Belgian specificities in greater depth to better understand the state of the country's nation-building process, which has always evolved in close interaction with its external environment. The panel discussions²⁶³ provided particularly insightful perspectives on the state of Belgian federalism, from an original angle combining political science, international relations, history, science diplomacy, and defense studies. This contribution reflects part of these discussions, introducing the three subsequent chapters.

Belgium has long been regarded as a deeply divided society. Since the country's independence in 1830, divisions have been numerous (*e.g.* economic, social, religious, and linguistic)²⁶⁴. Yet, nearly two centuries later, the country endures. The Belgian case clearly demonstrates that deep societal divisions do not necessarily lead to democratic disintegration²⁶⁵. A segmented society can thus be governed in a relatively stable manner. In this respect, Belgium constitutes a textbook case of '*consociational democracy*'. Lijphart has shown that divided societies require a democratic regime that emphasizes consensus over opposition and seeks to include, rather than exclude, all segments of society²⁶⁶. Such systems rely on institutions that accommodate conflicts rather than exacerbate them, and that

²⁶³ The author extends his warmest thanks to Christoph Niessen for chairing the panel the day of the conference.

²⁶⁴ Delwit, P. (2025). *Politics in Belgium from 1830 until 2025*. Brussels, Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles

²⁶⁵ Lijphart, A. (1981). Introduction: The Belgian example of cultural coexistence in comparative perspective. In A. Lijphart (Ed), *Conflict and coexistence in Belgium: The dynamics of a culturally divided society*. Berkeley, Institute of International Studies.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

compel elites to negotiate and resolve their differences²⁶⁷. The institutional architecture of Belgian federalism has thus given rise to two types of federated entities: the Communities, which responded to Flemish demands and were granted cultural, linguistic, and person-related competences, and the Regions, which are primarily oriented towards economic policies²⁶⁸.

However, the question that has consistently attracted scholarly attention concerns the resilience of the Belgian political system in the face of centrifugal dynamics. How can we explain that the Belgian state did not disintegrate, despite a societal structure marked by persistent tensions? Academic research has highlighted the risks inherent in power-sharing democracies, foremost among them the ‘*paradox of federalism*’²⁶⁹. This paradox rests on the idea that federalism removes certain contentious issues from the political agenda while simultaneously fueling demands for greater autonomy. As such, segmental autonomy, initially intended to mitigate centrifugal pressures, paradoxically tends to reinforce them and could, in the long run, encourage secessionist dynamics²⁷⁰. One explanation advanced is that federalism strengthens regional identities rather than fostering cross-cutting ones²⁷¹.

Belgium fully illustrates this dilemma²⁷². Decentralization, referred to in the Belgian context as the ‘*defederalization*’ of competences, appears to have intensified demands for further regionalization and to have triggered major institutional reforms²⁷³. Nevertheless, the transition to federalism did not result in an escalation of conflict²⁷⁴. More recently, the

²⁶⁷ For the record, these power-sharing institutions are intended to facilitate the formation of grand coalitions operating on the basis of proportionality, notably through the design of the electoral system. Additionally, minority groups are to be protected by veto rights, while ethnolinguistic communities are granted a significant degree of autonomy. Cf. in particular Lijphart, A. (1977). *Democracy in plural societies*. A comparative exploration. New Haven, Yale University Press; Steiner, J. (1971). The principles of majority and proportionality. *British Journal of Political Science*, 1(1), 63–70.

²⁶⁸ Witte, E. & Meynen, A. (2006). *De geschiedenis van België na 1945*. Antwerpen, Standaard Uitgeverij, p. 103.

²⁶⁹ Erk, J. & Anderson, L. (2009). The paradox of federalism: Does self-rule accommodate or exacerbate ethnic divisions? *Regional & Federal Studies*, 19(2), 191–202; Erk, J. & Anderson, L. (2010). *The paradox of federalism: Does self-rule accommodate or exacerbate ethnic divisions?* London, Routledge.

²⁷⁰ Caluwaerts, D. & Reuchamps, M. (2015). Combining federalism with consociationalism: Is Belgian consociational federalism digging its own grave? *Ethnopolitics*, 14(3), 277–295.

²⁷¹ Tierney, S. (2009). Federalism in a unitary state: A paradox too far? *Regional & Federal Studies*, 19(2), 237–253.

²⁷² Reuchamps, M., Sinardet, D., Dodeigne, J. & Caluwaerts, D. (2017). Reforming Belgium’s federalism: Comparing the views of MPs and voters. *Government and Opposition*, 52(3), 460–482.

²⁷³ Pascolo, L., Vermassen, D., Reuchamps, M. & Caluwaerts, D. (2022). The changing dynamics of Belgian federalism: Is there a reversal of the paradox of federalism? In D. Caluwaerts & M. Reuchamps (Eds), *Belgian exceptionalism: Belgian politics between realism and surrealism*. Abingdon & New York, Routledge, p. 138.

²⁷⁴ Vandenberghe, M. & Maréchal, W. (2025). *The paradox of federalism and its many faces: Reviewing conflict indicators against the background of decentralization in Belgium*. Workshop on Federalism, Conflict Management, and the Paradox of Unity, Proceedings.

country even seems to be experiencing a reversal of the paradox of federalism²⁷⁵. Belgian federal dynamics are evolving. Although all six state reforms have been driven by centrifugal logic, demands for further defederalization remain significant, particularly among Dutch-speaking political parties. However, since the federal and regional elections of 2019, centripetal dynamics calling for the ‘refederalization’ of certain competences have gained prominence, following a trend already observable among French-speaking parties since 2007²⁷⁶.

Belgium’s external relations offer a compelling illustration of the system’s resilience. Although complex and at times prone to deadlock, the legal framework enables all actors to find their place within it. Whereas the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by a trend towards the ‘*paradiplomacy*’ of federated entities, understood as a form of parallel diplomacy, the past two decades have witnessed a gradual shift towards greater integration with the federal level, within a system of ‘*multilevel diplomacy*’²⁷⁷. Today, in Belgium, neither Flanders, Wallonia, nor the Brussels-Capital Region conforms to a conflictual model of systematic opposition. On the contrary, the three Regions increasingly operate within a multilevel diplomatic framework, at times benefiting from state resources while simultaneously advancing their own specific interests.

Moreover, the current security environment is prompting other core state functions, such as defense, to enhance cross-cutting coordination through a ‘*whole-of-government approach*’. Federated entities are, in this regard, key stakeholders in areas such as industrial policy, trade, and infrastructure. This growing convergence warrants further scholarly attention. ‘*Science diplomacy*’ likewise illustrates how the different levels of governance in Belgium accommodate the internal distribution of competences in order to strengthen the country’s international outreach and soft power, as exemplified by the role of the Academia Belgica in Rome²⁷⁸.

Finally, the discussions in the panel underscored that the governance of external relations now stands at a crossroads. The 1994 cooperation agreements no longer appear to adequately reflect the current distribution of competences, and their reform has become a priority for the Arizona government²⁷⁹. This issue is particularly sensitive, as negotiations are not merely technical but deeply political. The coming years will determine the trajectory of Belgian federalism in the making of foreign policy, in an increasingly crisis-prone international en-

²⁷⁵ Caluwaerts, D. & Reuchamps, M. (2020). Still consociational? Belgian democracy, 50 years after ‘the politics of accommodation’. *Politics of the Low Countries*, 2(1), 28–50.

²⁷⁶ Pascolo, L. *et al.* (2022), *op. cit.*, p. 151.

²⁷⁷ Cf. *infra*, this edited volume, Xia, E. (2026). *Belgium’s sub-state external relations and the emergence of multilevel diplomacy. 2026: Quo vadis?*

²⁷⁸ Cf. *infra*, this edited volume, Evers, C. (2026). *The Academia Belgica in Rome: Science diplomacy and soft power in an international context.*

²⁷⁹ Cf. *infra*, this edited volume, Dabe, X. (2026). *The cooperation agreement of 8 March 1994: Origins, technical updating, and centrifugal pressures.*

vironment, that is whether it will evolve towards a more centrifugal or, conversely, a more centripetal dynamic.