

# The termination of coalitions in Belgium

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## I. Introduction

Coalitions are the usual form of government at the national level in Belgian politics. Since the introduction of the universal (male) suffrage in 1918, seven governments have been homogeneous: one lasting for 9 days in 1925, one lasting for 6 days in 1946, one lasting for three months in 1950, one lasting for two years between 1950 and 1952 and another one lasting for two years between 1952 and 1954, and finally one lasting for four months in 1958. Only the two governments between 1950 and 1954 had a parliamentary majority.

A coalition can be defined as an agreement between two or more organizations, that want to do a number of things together. A coalition then is by definition reduced both in its scope and in its duration. It ends when the job is done, when the term for which the agreement was valid is over, or when one of the partners decides that it does not want to continue the cooperation with the others. This all looks very simple, and actually it is simple.

In this article we want to systematize the knowledge on the termination of coalitions in Belgium, and at the same time look for some general mechanics or rules that could enable us to understand these terminations. We do not yet seek the elaboration of something that can be called a theory, with clearly defined variables and well formulated relationships between them, that could then be tested for Belgium and exported for comparative research. Since there has been no systematic account of the life and death of the Belgian coalitions - an account that goes beyond the basic statistics on composition, size and duration - this description is needed in order to see how eventually a more fully fledged theory could be produced. Furthermore the literature on coalition formation has focused very much indeed on the formation, and has so far not paid too much systematic attention to the mechanics of termination.

We will focus on the context in which coalitions live and survive, and on the events or kinds of events that can be held responsible for the termination of the coalitions. Our main source of inspiration will be Pridham's inductive theoretical framework for coalition behaviour<sup>1</sup>. He introduces it as a way of looking at coalitions that is deliberately not formalistic or predictive, and that should be useful both for the description of coalition formation and coalition duration.

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1 G. PRIDHAM (ed), *Coalitional behaviour in theory and practice*, Cambridge University Press, 1986;

This theoretical framework was also used in C. RUDD & PIJNENBURG B., *De contextuele dimensies van de vorming van regeringscoalities in België, 1965-1985*, *Tijdschrift voor Sociologie*, 1988, p. 29-54

## II. Belgian coalitions : a general overview

Table 1 gives a general overview of all the governments since 1954. We start there, for 1954 was the end of the last single-party government the country ever had (with an exception of four months in 1958). The variation in duration is extremely high, going from 4 to 51 months. The latter is really exceptional : the coalition formed in 1961 was the only one that was able to reach the normal end of term. All the others died before that. The text under 'termination' gives a very short indication of the main reason (at first sight) for the termination of the coalition. It shows clearly how problematic the linguistic problems in Belgium have been (and still are) for the governmental stability.

TABLE 1

### Overview of Belgian governments since 1954

Date	Duration	Composition	N of parties	Size	Termination
4/54	50	SOC,LIB	2	52%	End of term
6/58	4	CD	1	49%	Enlargement of minority govt
11/58	30	CD,LIB	2	59%	Economy
4/61	51	CD,SOC	2	85%	End of term
7/65	8	CD,SOC	2	67%	Economy
3/66	27	CD,LIB	2	59%	Language
6/68	42	CD,SOC	3	60%	Hope for good electoral score
1/72	12	CD,SOC	3	60%	Language
1/73	15	CD,LIB,SOC	5	76%	Economy
4/74	2	CD,LIB	4	48%	Enlargement of minority govt
6/74	33	CD,LIB,RW	5	54%	Language
3/77	3	CD,LIB	4	48%	New govt formed
6/77	16	CD,SOC, VU,FDF	5	83%	Language
10/78	4	CD,SOC, VU,FDF	6	83%	New govt formed
4/79	10	CD,SOC,FDF	5	71%	Language
1/80	5	CD,SOC	4	66%	Language
5/80	5	CD,LIB,SOC	6	83%	Economy
10/80	8	CD,SOC	4	66%	Economy
4/81	6	CD,SOC	4	66%	Economy/Language
12/81	47	CD,LIB	4	53%	Heysel drama Language
11/85	30	CD,LIB	4	54%	Language
5/88	39	CD,SOC,VU	5	71%	Economy/Language
10/91	5	CD,SOC	4	63%	Language

The rise in the number of parties has to be mentioned. The government formed

in 1966 was the last one to be able to produce a coalition with two parties. The rise in the number of parties has a very simple reason: the three traditional parties (Christian-Democrats, Socialists and Liberals) were all split up in two different and unilingual parties. That happened in 1968 for the Christian-Democrats, in 1971 for the Liberals and in 1978 for the Socialists.

Two governments (1958 and 1974) started as minority governments, the first with only one party. This is very unusual in Belgium, and both governments were enlarged as soon as possible to a 'normal' majoritarian government. For the 1974 government that is of course a very special and unique reason for 'ending' the previous coalition.

For two coalitions the reason for the termination is indicated as 'formation of a new government'. This actually illustrates a methodological problem. Technically, any government stays in power until the next government is formed. During its last days or months, there might be no parliament any more (dissolved to be re-elected), and the activities of the coalition are during these days restricted to what is called the 'current affairs'. The political reality then is that the old governmental coalition is terminated, and that a new one still has to be formed. To produce the figure for the duration of the governments, we have used the technical definition, i.e. counting from the date of the appointment of a government until the date of its official dismissal. The governments formed in March 1977 and October 1978 are in fact governments that have already politically ended their life. Either one of the partners left it (1977) or the Prime Minister left it and was replaced (1978). The 'new' coalition then only goes on until the next one has been appointed. The reason to really form a new coalition and to keep a government going, are mainly constitutional: there must be a strict linguistic balance in the cabinet (that might be disturbed when one partner leaves), and often the newly elected Parliament is expected to be able to change the constitution, and therefore a declaration by a 'real' government is needed.

But in trying to explain how to read table 1, we have already started the explanation of the context in which coalitions live and die. We will do this now in a more systematic way.

### III. The contextual dimensions of coalition termination

#### A. *The historical dimension*

##### a. *The ethno-linguistic cleavage*

One needs a little bit of history in order to understand the setting in which coalitions are formed and dissolved. To be stressed in the first place is the importance of the ethno-linguistic cleavage that divides the Belgian society. The information in table 1 already shows how many times linguistic problems are the cause of coalition termination, or at least the final issue that makes it fall apart.

First the ethno-linguistic cleavage has produced a growing fractionalization of the party system. This happened in two ways, one direct and one indirect. The direct effect on fractionalization is the creation of new parties, becoming electorally successful since 1965, and focussing explicitly on the linguistic issues: the Volksunie defending the Dutch-speaking Community, the Rassemblement Wallon defending the interests of the Walloon region, and the FDF defending the rights of the French-speaking inhabitants (the majority) of the Brussels region. Their presence in the party system made the formation of coalitions more diffi-

cult, because the number of seats controlled by the traditionally governing parties was reduced. And the electoral success of these new parties put the traditional Belgian parties under stress, making them much more sensitive for these linguistic problems. In the governmental coalitions this stress can be felt, because it becomes less easy to deal with the linguistic problems, and crises concerning exactly these matters become more frequent, and can lead coalitions to their end.

The indirect effect of the success of the regionalist parties is even more important for the life of coalitions. Keeping the two language groups together within national parties has proven impossible. The three national parties fell apart, and this happened three times after the termination of a coalition that came to its end as the result of linguistic tensions.

For the old and linguistically separated Belgian parties the job might seem at first sight more easy now. They do not have to seek internal compromises any more. For the parties this is easier indeed, but for the coalitions it is a major problem. When before the split a linguistic issue might be solved by reaching a compromise within the parties, almost every linguistic issue that comes to the surface now ends on the table of the government. It is impossible to avoid these issues. And they have proven to be extremely effective coalition killers. Of the eight coalitions formed after 1978<sup>2</sup>, six ended because of (among others) linguistic troubles.

The separation of the national parties has one more effect on the coalitions. There is indeed no national party system any more. The Dutch-speaking parties only present candidates in the Dutch-speaking constituencies and in Brussels, while the French-speaking parties only present candidates in the French-speaking constituencies and in Brussels. They do not compete with the parties belonging to the other linguistic community. Electoral results are never computed and commented on the national level, but on the regional level.

The effect on the life of coalitions is obvious: the partners compete in the national governmental arena, but they are not sanctioned at that level. Elections can not really solve problems, because when an election is called as a result of a linguistic issue, the Dutch-speaking voters are offered no choice between different attitudes: all the parties will defend (more or less) the Flemish point of view. And in Wallonia everybody defends (more or less) the other view. And after the election, the two dissenting opinions have to coalesce again anyway. There is thus no danger to be sanctioned by the voters for blowing up a coalition. The parties in the opposition will often have defended an even more radical view than the parties in the government. When a linguistic problem comes up, parties feel a lot of pressure to be radical, and eventually to leave or kill the coalition, and not so much pressure to try to find a compromise in order to save the coalition. The separation of the national Belgian parties has built in a strong mechanism to shorten the life of the coalitions.

#### *b. The traditional and the new parties*

The so-called 'traditional' Belgian parties are the three - now six - parties that have their origins in the nineteenth century. These traditional parties are generally considered to be the governing parties. That means that so far they have indeed been the governing parties, and that for coalitions in the future they will

<sup>2</sup> There was a ninth coalition after October 1991, but that was only the remainder of the previous coalition, that had collapsed because of a linguistic problem.

be the most obvious candidates. The link between being traditional and having coalition potential, is very clear. The newer parties are sometimes called traditional, as soon as they show the readiness to play the traditional game, i.e. the game of coalition government.

Before 1974, all the coalitions had been formed by the three traditional parties. The enlargement of the Christian-Democratic and Liberal coalition in 1974 with the Walloon regionalists, was a historical moment. Later in 1977 the VU and the FDF participated in a coalition. The VU left the government in 1978, and the FDF in January 1980. In 1987 the VU was taken into the coalition again, but it left it in October 1991.

These few participations of non-traditional parties in the coalitions can not be considered as good experiences. The RW in 1974 caused quite some troubles. The party itself changed radically while it was in government (the more liberal wing joined the French-speaking Liberal party that was also in government at that time), which led to a reshuffling of the positions in the coalition. In 1977 it urged the other partners to go faster in realizing the regionalization plans, and wanted to put pressure on them by refusing to vote parts of the budget. This made the Prime Minister ask them, during a plenary session of the Parliament, to resign. It had never been seen before.

The VU entered the government in 1977, and was a fairly loyal partner. Yet its electoral results after the collapse of the coalition were disastrous, and a new and more radical Flemish Nationalist party was created: the Vlaams Blok. The FDF did better, and was also present in the next government. But then their fate looked like what happened with the RW before. They wanted the government to do more to please them, and were finally asked to resign. They never came back.

The VU came back into government in 1987, because it believed that the programme of reform of the state in the direction of a purely federal Belgium was worth the risk. It was again a loyal partner, often asking the other partners not to forget the state reform, but never pushing too hard. A conflict on the export of weapons - produced in Wallonia - finally made them leave the government. But this was close to the end of the government's term, and did not enable the VU to explain to its voters that it had at least realized the start of the federalization. It was again severely beaten.

Thus so far there have been four coalitions in which other parties than the traditional parties have been present. In three of them the premature termination of the coalition was caused by the non-traditionals. One can safely say that coalitions with non-traditional parties live shorter than the others. This should not be blamed on these parties as such. When they are asked to govern, it is because the other parties really need them: in 1974 to provide a simple majority, the other three times to provide a two-thirds majority in order to change the constitution. They are then put in a position that allows them more easily to increase the pressure on the partners.

There are today of course other non-traditional parties than the regionalists: two Green parties (one in each language group), a Communist party, two extreme right-wing parties, and a libertarian party. These never participated in a coalition (except for the Communists in 1945, but they are not represented in Parliament any more since 1985), and are not considered as potential partners. That means: one does not believe that they would play the game according to the rules.

## B. *The institutional dimension*

There is a whole range of institutional rules that form the context in which coalitions are formed and terminated. Some of these rules are formal, i.e. they are written and have the status of a law or of a constitutional rule. Most of these rules however are informal, are unwritten agreements. They might also be classified as belonging to the historical dimension of the coalition context, because they get the status of binding rules by simply referring to the past.

### a. *The linguistic parity*

Since 1970 the Belgian constitution obliges all the coalitions at the national level to respect a perfect balance between the two language groups. It means that the numbers of French-speaking and Dutch-speaking ministers (except for the Prime Minister) have to be exactly the same. This is called 'linguistic parity'. The practice already existed more or less before 1970, but it became constitutional in order to give the French-speaking minority in Belgium strong guarantees against discrimination<sup>3</sup>.

The Belgian government is a collective body that reaches its decisions by consensus. That is not a written rule, but it is generally accepted. It enforces the meaning of parity, for no decisions can be taken against the will of any of the language groups. The consequences of this for the life of the coalitions are very important. At first sight this device can help the coalition to stick together. It obliges the partners to look for consensus, and it offers the possibility of solving conflicts by log-rolling. A very often used technique to avoid a cabinet crisis, is letting several problems come together, and then solve them all at once. When the tension in the cabinet becomes very high, the solution is usually very close.

This consensus-type of decision making, combined with the linguistic parity, can also work in the opposite direction. It can attract problems, and especially - once again - the problems concerning the ethno-linguistic divisions. If one group feels that an issue is very important, and that it should be solved very quickly, it will try to get it on the agenda of the government. Then the other group is not able to avoid it, and when it does so, it opens immediately a crisis. A good example of this is what happened in 1981. The French-speaking Socialists wanted absolutely that the national state gave subsidies for the steel industry of Wallonia. The Flemish partners did not really refused this, but did not want to be pressed too hard. They wanted to deal with other matters first. The PS Ministers then went on strike, refusing to start any cabinet meeting if the first agenda item was not the Walloon steel industry. It meant the end of the coalition, also because the other French-speaking partner in the government had to follow this radical line.

If one party has a dissenting opinion, it might well decide to forget it and to stay with the others. For the outside world there is then consensus. If the issue is linguistic, it is never the problem of one party, it is immediately the problem of half of the government, and thus of the government as a whole. Once again, the Belgian coalitions are extremely vulnerable for these kind of problems.

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3 Actually there had always been a French-speaking majority in the cabinet, that slowly had become a fifty-fifty balance in the late sixties. The French-speaking parties were then able to get this parity rule, in order to avoid that the country's Dutch-speaking majority would be reflected in a Dutch-speaking majority in the cabinet. Before 1970, the parity rule would have been a protection for the Dutch-speakers in the coalition.



*b. Majoritarian and symmetrical governments*

No governmental coalition is able to realize anything, if it can not rely on a majority of the members of the Parliament. That is a very obvious principle of democratic control. As such it is part of the institutional context of coalition making and ending.

In the Belgian context there is also an unwritten rule to be added to this. It says that a governmental coalition should be sure to be able to control a majority in the Parliament. That simply means that a coalition has to be majoritarian. There is absolutely no tradition of minority government, and no experience with the mechanisms that keep minority coalitions going. When a coalition has no majority, it is simply not considered as being a valid coalition.

Two governments since 1954 had a minority status: a one-party government in 1958 that was enlarged to become a majority coalition after 4 months, and a coalition government in 1974. This latter could be started because there were negotiations going on with the three regionalist parties, in order to reach an agreement on regionalization. The promise by the minority coalition to try to reach an agreement as soon as possible was enough to offer it the guarantee of passive support in Parliament. Finally only the RW entered the coalition 2 months after the start.

The best illustration of the rule that says that a minority government can not go on, unless it knows for sure that it can soon become majoritarian, is the way in which this 1974 coalition came to its end. The RW ministers were forced to leave the government. From that point on, everybody simply accepted that there was a major political crisis, and that the coalition could not continue its life. The Prime Minister reshuffled the government in order to keep the linguistic parity intact, and then called new elections. He was more or less accused of having organized a coup, because he went on with a government having no majority and at the same time sent the Parliament home. There was of course nothing illegal, it was only unusual. When a coalition loses its majority, it means the end of that coalition. That is the rule in Belgium.

This is of course also connected with the bipolar structure of the country and of the government. When a party decides not to support the government any more, there is more than just a reduction of the majority or a loss of it. It also means - unless the party that quits has no linguistic counterpart - at the same time a disturbance of the delicate balance that is built into every coalition. If for instance the Dutch-speaking Socialists do not want to support a coalition any more, it is unthinkable - again an unwritten rule - that the coalition would go on without them, and with the French-speaking Socialists still inside the coalition. Whether the remaining coalition is majoritarian or not, is in this case absolutely irrelevant. If then a government would lose its majority this way, it would immediately be terminated. That is: the remaining parties would not continue together.

The (unwritten) rule is that governments must be symmetrical: both parties of the same ideological tradition are either both in or both out. A non-symmetrical government has so far never been formed, and when the symmetry is gone, the whole coalition comes to an end, and a completely new (but again symmetrical) construction has to be made. In other words, a change in a coalition is in Belgium automatically also the real end of it. There is no need to differentiate between a coalition that merely changes (one partner going or being replaced) and a coalition that ends. That is due to this law of symmetry.

### *c. The Parliament under control*

We have so far been telling stories in which the political parties played a major role. Nothing has been said about the role that the Parliament and the parliamentary fractions play in all this. That is not by accident: this role is almost nonexistent, and absolutely irrelevant. The Parliament plays no substantial role in the termination of coalitions, only sometimes a formal ritual role, although this is much more important for the creation than for the ending of coalitions.

The role of the political parties in Belgian politics is predominant. They do not only control the government, but also the Parliament, the public administration, the judiciary institutions. This is to a large extent the consequence of Belgium being a consociational democracy.

The role played by the political parties in such a democracy, is very important. The parties are deeply rooted in society. They are much more than pure political organizations. They are the political centre of a densely organized subculture, of a world of their own. At all levels of the society, and in almost all the spheres of life, the parties can be seen. At least, the subcultural divisions can be seen, but then the party belonging to that subculture is never far away.

At the same time, the parties are the structures that organize the seeking of consensus at the level of the political elites. It is actually the parties' elites that must be 'prudent leaders', in order to prevent the subcultural divisions (organized and mobilized by themselves) to become the source of centrifugal mechanisms<sup>4</sup>. The political agreements then also have to be implemented, which brings the parties to a firm control over the Parliament and over the public administration, and which brings us back to the idea that parties are almost everywhere<sup>5</sup>.

A coalition is an agreement between parties. And in the parties, it is the central executive body (the Bureau), chaired by the party president, that has the power. The party president leads the delegation that negotiates the agreement with the others, decides on who can be a cabinet member and with which competences, leads or controls all the negotiations that are needed to reach consensus in the cabinet, and will prominently be there when no further agreement can be reached and when the coalition is terminated. The only importance of the fractions in all this, is their size. The size of each party in the Parliament is the basic information to know which combinations are viable, i.e. have a secured majority. Every fraction is thus considered as a single bloc, ready to deliver its fixed amount of votes every time when it is needed. And that is indeed how it goes.

The relevant conclusion for us here, is that a coalition is never terminated in the Parliament. It ends when the parties in it realize that they do not agree any more. If then the cabinet would go to the Parliament and ask for its support, it would not get it, because the MP's of the party or the parties that decided to quit, will not support the government. And even if the cabinet would still have a 50% majority after the departure of one of the partners, it would not go on, for then the symmetry would be gone. And in any case, the vote in the Parliament would not take place. When the end of a coalition is decided on the level

<sup>4</sup> R. LUTHER, Consociationalism, parties and the party system, in R. Luther & W. Müller, *Politics in Austria. Still a case of consociationalism*, Frank Cass, London, 1992, p. 45-98

<sup>5</sup> K. DESCHOUWER, *Organiseren of bewegen? De evolutie van de Belgische partijstructuren sinds 1960*, VUBPRESS, 1993



of the party's executives, the Prime Minister will announce the end of the coalition to the King, without first going to the Parliament.

There is one single exception on this rule for the coalitions after 1954. The coalition of Socialists and Christian-Democrats in 1980 introduced a plan for a regionalization of the state, for which it needed a 67% majority in both Houses. When in the Senate one article of the law was rejected by a few Dutch-speaking Christian-Democrats, as a result of which it failed to get the needed 67% support, the coalition was terminated. For all the other cases, the Parliament was not involved at all - except for the mathematical information on the size of the fractions - in the termination of the coalitions.

#### *d. The electoral system and the electoral strategies*

Belgium uses a very proportional list PR system. The most important consequence of that is of course the obligation to form coalition governments. After 1950 no party was able to reach a majority, and since today there are no national parties any more, it has become absolutely impossible to reach a majority. Coalition government has definitely become the rule.

The consequence of the proportionality is that there is no direct link between the electoral result and the subsequent coalition formation. Really winning the elections, in a way that guarantees the winning party to be part of the next coalition, is not possible. This is due in the first place to the fact that the relative winner - the largest party - will be fairly small. After the 1991 elections (producing the highest fractionalization so far) the largest party (Dutch-speaking Christian-Democrats) polled 16.8%. In 1987 it had 19.5%. Its highest score since the linguistic split in 1968 was 26.2% in 1977.

Since really winning is out of the question, the term 'winning' has received a different meaning. A party scoring better than its own previous score, will be considered as having 'won' the elections. And this way of winning is politically more important than being the largest party. The 'winning' party will then claim that it has the right to be in the coalition, or at least has the right to make the first move. If that 'winning' party is a traditional party, it might indeed be allowed to have a try. But the final result can be just anything.

Not only the electoral result per party is important. The second reason why there is no way of winning that guarantees a place in the coalition, is again the needed symmetry of the government. The 'winning' party family in the north might well be a 'losing' party family in the south. A really large party in the south might be rather small in the north.

Taking all this into account, there is a general rule to be found, that connects - but only in the long run - the electoral results to the coalition formation: the parties that are the largest in their own region, and the parties of the other region that are ideologically connected with one of these, have more chances to be in the coalition. Or more concrete: the Christian-Democrats (strongest in Flanders) and the Socialists (strongest in Wallonia) have the best chances, and do indeed often govern together. It is a combination that always has a majority. The Liberals do not govern that often. They are too small both in the north and in the south, although the French-speaking Liberals are larger than the Christian-Democrats, and the Dutch-speaking Liberals have the same size as the Socialists. Only when the 'normal' coalition is not possible (for ideological, not mathema-

tical reasons), a combination of Christian-Democrats and Liberals may be formed<sup>6</sup>

These mechanism of coalition formation are also important to understand coalition termination, because they give us the context in which parties decide on their strategies. They have to combine three kinds of goals: realizing their ideology, winning elections and reach power. A coalition is a way of realizing (at least partially) the first, but in order to be able to do so or to keep on doing so, they must have enough votes and be able to enter a coalition. The closer a coalition comes to the end of its term, a process that starts from the very first day, the more the participating parties will start thinking of the next electoral deadline, and of the votes needed in order to keep the size that enables it to govern again, and if possible get even more power in the next coalition. At the end of the coalition, it is of course not the coalition going to the voters, but every single party separately, and all of them only in their own region.

A coalition can eventually be terminated because the parties feel that going on might harm them in the longer run. Actually, a premature end of a coalition is almost by definition the result of this kind of strategic clash. That is just part of the democratic game. A coalition is a sort of chicken game, in which staying too long might be disastrous. But how can a party know when it is time to jump out of it? What information does it have in the first place to assess the possible consequences of an early departure? Opinion polls can give indications of the potential electoral strength, but not on the effect of blowing up a coalition. And in any case - and here is our major point - the electoral result as such is not extremely important, since there is no immediate link between that result and the power of the party in a possible next coalition.

This absence of a direct link between the electoral effects of ending a coalition, and the chances to be part of the next one, gives the parties quite some freedom, and enables them to focus very much on their ideological goal. They can use that goal as their major yardstick to measure the advantages of staying in the coalition. And the more the further power of a party is 'disconnected' from its electoral score, the more freedom it will have and take to play the game that way. The strength of a party in the coalition is then not only a function of its size and its weight in the coalition, but also of the degree in which its presence can not really be avoided.

The current situation, in which the fractionalization in Flanders is much higher than in Wallonia (the largest parties scoring respectively 27% and 37%), gives quite some power to the French-speaking Socialists. Controlling almost 40% of the French-speaking votes, the party can easily lose at the polls, and still be absolutely needed for the next coalition. In a coalition, it enables them to stay, and to put the pressure on the others. The others have to make a choice: either go on and accept the ideas of the French-speaking Socialists (risking electoral defeat and a reduction of their power), or quit. But then next time they will have to deal with the French-speaking Socialists again.

#### *e. The need to reform the unitary state*

Belgium was created in 1830 as a unitary state. The growing awareness of both the Flemings and the Walloons of their own distinct identity, has led to the

6 K. DESCHOUWER, *Ideologie of de voorkeuren van de CVP? Coalitievorming en de economische toestand in België*, in *Verkiezingen en de economie*, Centrum voor Economie en Management Science, V.U.Brussel, 1991, p. 113-148

gradual devolution of the state into autonomous and federated Regions (geographically) and linguistic Communities. To do so, the Constitution had to be changed. This happened in 1970, 1980, 1988 and 1993. In order to change the Constitution, the Parliament and the government have first to make a list of the articles that can be revised. The approval of such a list leads to the automatic dissolution of the Parliament and to new elections. The new Parliament is then able to change the articles that were in the list, and it needs therefore a two thirds majority.

Since the early sixties, the issue of the state reform has been on the political agenda and almost all the Parliaments since then have been 'constituant', i.e. had the right to change the Constitution. Yet only a few coalitions did control enough seats in the Parliament to initiate changes.

Both the issue as such and the institutional rules needed to deal with it, are an important part of the context for coalition formation and termination. First they lead to oversized coalitions, with partners that are more or less explicitly brought in for the extra seats that they can control. In 1977 the VU and FDF were added to a classical Christian-Democratic and Socialist coalition. One of the two extra partners could even been missed for the 67% majority. The VU not wanting to go on governing, the next coalition only kept the FDF as extra partner. In 1980 the Liberal parties (and one could actually been missed) were added to such a coalition, after it had failed to pass a vote for which the 67% was needed. In 1988 only the VU was added to the same basic coalition (the FDF had then become too small to play a significant role). For the normal work of the coalition, these extra partners are not needed. It puts them in a difficult situation. The 1977 coalition came to an end when the real work on the state reform had to start. The next coalition got rid of the FDF after 10 months, the 1980 coalition saw the Liberals leave (after having provided the two thirds) after 5 months, and the VU left the 1988 coalition (*idem*) in 1991. These large coalitions are thus not very stable. Especially the partner that gets the status of 'extra' becomes frustrated, because it has not enough power to influence the other decisions. For these decisions, the other parties can simply take the risk of losing the extra partner.

The work on the reform of the state took four revisions of the constitution, and many reforms were started and tried out, without reaching the final implementation. Every time when a coalition collapses, and when premature elections seem to be the only way out, there is this idea that one should not forget to do what is necessary in order to allow the next Parliament to carry on the work on the state reform. It means that after the real political end of a coalition, it goes on working - eventually with one partner out of it, when this does not hamper the symmetry - and its only task is just to draft the list of the constitutional articles to be changed. This explains the coalitions for which the reason for their ending is the installation of the next government. In reality, they were already gone before.

### *C. The general context*

This last heading is more like a rest category. Two more aspects of the coalition context have to be mentioned, but they can not be classified under the previous headings. We want to discuss the effect of international events, and of the economical situation.

### *a. The international context*

Belgium is too small to play a major role on the international scene. It merely follows the others. International events or initiatives are not very important for the life of a coalition, and have so far never produced the termination of one. This does of course not mean that conflicts and debates about the international policy do not occur, or do not contribute to the stress that in the end makes a coalition die for an other cause. The debates on the installation of cruise missiles in the late seventies and early eighties for instance produced some heavy storms in the coalitions.

The international context in general looks more like something that keeps a coalition alive. Two examples can be given here. The coalition formed in 1988 was not doing too well. It managed to get some elements of a state reform accepted, but not all that was agreed on when it started. In normal times this coalition would have collapsed on any explosive matter that would have occurred one day or another. But the international tension in the Persian Gulf kept it alive. As soon as the tension started, there were (a few) military forces sent out. And every time that the idea of ending the coalition came up, the argument of 'the boys abroad' was used. Sending soldiers out is indeed exceptional for Belgium, and there was this general feeling that the government should not leave them alone. It had to stay. When the tension in the Gulf increased and when the real war came, this argument was even stronger.

### *b. The economical situation*

The economical situation of the country (of course connected to the economical situation abroad) is something that seems to be a fairly good predictor of coalition changes<sup>7</sup>. The mechanism goes like this: when the economical situation is high on the agenda (higher than the ethno-linguistic quarrels), and the indicators are bad (inflation, unemployment, public dept,...), the Socialist parties tend to be replaced by the Liberal Parties. The party in the centre, the Christian-Democrats, then needs to change its policy, and this is done by changing the leadership.

In 1966 there is a centre-left coalition. Financial experts publish a report, urging the government to cut down expenses. The Socialists do not accept this, and the coalition dies. The leadership in the Christian-Democracy changes, and a man much more inclined to follow an orthodox liberal policy (Paul Van den Boeynants) becomes Prime Minister. He governs with the Liberals.

In 1974 there is a large coalition of all the traditional parties. The oil-crisis makes inflation and unemployment jump up. Liberals and Socialists in the coalition are not able to reach an agreement on the kind of economic policy to be followed. It means the end of the coalition. A new Christian-Democratic leader (Leo Tindemans) comes to the front, and forms a coalition with the Liberals. The urge to get rid of the Socialists and to govern with the Liberals was so big, that the new coalition started off as a minority cabinet.

In 1981 the Christian-Democrats govern once more with the Socialists. The problems with the budget become very important, but the Socialists do not accept a very radical plan introduced by Prime Minister Wilfried Martens. First only

7 K. DESCHOUWER, *Ideologie of de voorkeuren van de CVP? Coalitievorming en de economische toestand in België*, in *Verkiezingen en de economie*, Centrum voor Economie en Management Science, V.U.Brussel, 1991, p. 113-148

the Prime Minister goes, and is replaced by an other one, but after a few months the coalition is terminated, and Martens comes back with a coalition with the Liberals.

## Conclusion

In this article we have tried to describe in a logical manner the circumstances and the context in which coalitions in Belgium are terminated. We have not produced an elegant set of propositions, but only went through a more or less organized check-list of contextual dimensions that might throw a light on the life and death of the coalitions.

The major element in this context has been the duality of the country. The salience of the ethno-linguistic cleavage, the separation of the parties and of the party systems of the north and the south, and the attempts to solve the linguistic problems by reforming the state, all have explicitly to be taken into account by any researcher trying to understand the termination of coalitions. Only with this description in the back of the mind, the Belgian data on the kind of coalitions and the duration of them, can be fully understood, and can then be entered into models for comparative analysis.

## Summary: The termination of coalitions in Belgium

*Coalitions have a limited life-span. There has been quite some research on the duration of coalitions and on the factors explaining variations in duration. But there is so far no solid theory on the mechanics of the termination of coalitions.*

*This article gives an overview of the mechanics of termination in Belgian politics. By using the contextual approach (Pridham), that has originally been produced to analyse coalition formation, this overview might be a first step in the construction of a comparative explanatory model. The historical context, the institutional setting, the international context and the economical situation are described as elements that affect the termination of coalitions. The Belgian ethno-linguistic cleavage proves to be a very effective coalition-killer.*