

# 'Divided we stand'<sup>1</sup>. Regionalism, federalism and minority rights in Belgium

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## I. Introduction

For a Belgian it is not an easy task to write a non-biased essay on the inter-group relations in his or her country. Flemings, Walloons and 'Bruxellois' commonly each have a different perception of the same Belgian reality. Since I perceive myself as belonging to one of these language communities my analysis might be biased by this membership. As a (political) scientist though I am of the opinion that I should make an effort to look at things through a pair of non-partial spectacles. Since I cannot literally step outside my Flemish 'skin', I must attempt to do so intellectually.

## II. The Belgian 'ethnic' conflict and its political settlements

### A. *Clarifying 'ethnicity'*

Today, the (Dutch-speaking) Flemings in Flanders and Brussels on the one hand and the (French-speaking) Walloons on the other hand perceive themselves and are being perceived by the others as separate 'ethnic' entities. The French-speaking 'Bruxellois', living outside Wallonia but speaking the same language as the Walloons, are less easy to categorize. In a broad anthropological perspective an ethnic entity is "any group of people who set themselves apart and are set apart from other groups with whom they interact or coexist in terms of some distinctive criterion or criteria (...)" (Seymour-Smith, 1986: 95). These criteria, on the basis of which ethnic groups therefore categorize themselves and others are largely ascriptive characteristics, i.e. identifying features of persons (and therefore of the group they are a member of) that lay outside the individual's control, such as color, language, religion, geographical origin and customs.

Individuals are not necessarily aware of their ethnicity. They can look, think and behave like many others without realizing their (relative) 'sameness'. Jackson (1984) calls this a 'dormant' form of ethnicity. A number of persons just possess (some) ascriptive characteristics that make them objectively identifiable as a separate group. But, this dormant form of ethnicity is susceptible to socio-political mobilization. This would not only mean that (some of) the members of the eth-

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1 This is an 'adaptation' of the device of the Belgian nation-state 'United we stand' ('Eendracht maakt macht'/'L'union fait la force').

nic category become aware of their ethnic identity but also that they become organized. In this process of mobilization "ethnic categories are awakened and transformed into ethnic groups or ethnonations." If such an ethnic group also develops "an interest in possessing public authority in a country, but not outright sovereignty", it becomes an 'ethnonation'. (Jackson, 1984: 228) Ethnonations finally can transform into 'nations' when they "possess, have a desire to possess, or remember that they once possessed and wish to repossess political sovereignty". (Jackson, 1984: 211) In my view Jackson takes too little account of the fact that people can have an ethnic identity without being politically mobilized. People can identify with their ethnic category [i.e. being aware of their (perceived) ethnic sameness] without being organized with the purpose of defending their interests vis-à-vis an other ethnic category. This is because people can identify with an ethnic category without attaching much importance to this membership. Identifying with an ethnic category may be of no more importance to somebody than identifying with the female population of one's country, for instance. It is only when great value is attached to this ethnic membership, that the identification takes the form of 'ethnonationalism' or 'nationalism'. (Maddens, Beerten & Billiet, 1994: 11)

#### *B. Ethnic identification and mobilization in Belgium: a short historical overview*

For the predominantly French-speaking elites (living in Wallonia, Brussels and Flanders) of the newly created (1830) strongly centralized unitary state it went without saying that the official life in Belgium should take place in only one language and that this language should be French. Unilingualism was considered to be absolutely necessary for national integration. (Zolberg, 1974: 188) Permitting official language differentiation would endanger the unity of the new country. Moreover, among several elites anti-Dutch<sup>2</sup> feelings existed. Above that, wasn't French the language of the values promoted by the French Revolution, a universal language and the 'only language of civilization'? (Kesteloot, 1993: 14) French was the language of culture and therefore, a prestigious one. In view of the sociological background of the Belgian elites of that time, therefore, French quite 'naturally' was proclaimed the only official language (1830) despite the constitutionally guaranteed free use of languages (1831). Since the vast majority of the common people, whose life was limited to their village and its immediate rural surroundings, only spoke the distinct local (Flemish or Walloon) dialect because this was all they needed, the exclusiveness of French on the supra-local level was not contested for a long time. (Reynebeau, 1995: 111-114)

In view of this situation it is hardly surprising that the group identities of the common people of that time were of a local kind, like it had been for centuries. (Murphy, 1988: 42-43, 53) 'Flanders' and 'Wallonia' as ethnic linguistic-territorial entities did not yet exist in the minds of the common people, and certainly not in those of the French-speaking Belgian elites who first and foremost identified with the new Belgian state. Their Belgian collective identity corresponded with the French bourgeois liberal model of the nation. (Reynebeau, 1995: 94-95)

2 In this case we use the adjective 'Dutch' as referring to both (1) the language-policy of King William I (in 1823 he made Dutch the exclusive official language of administration, secondary education and the judicial apparatus in the entire territorium of what was to become Belgium in 1830) and (2) his authoritarian, anti-liberal and anti-catholic regime in general (Wils, 1993: 131-132).

In short, in 1830, neither among the elites, whose economic dominance was politically supported by an on property based electoral system, nor among the powerless common people, languages had an ethno-territorial connotation (Reynebeau, 1995: 111). Therefore, regionwide ethno-linguistic identities simply did not exist yet.

How then can we explain the progressive identification and mobilization process of the initially 'dormant' Flemish and Walloon ethnic categories? The first process of linguistic ethnic mobilization modestly took off in 'Flanders' around 1840. (Wils, 1991: 225) From the start and throughout the nineteenth century this 'Flemish movement' was an explicitly pro-Belgian (patriotic) and moderate one. Its first leaders did not demand any public authority for the Flemings nor did they claim Dutch unilingualism within Flanders. They wanted the recognition of 'Flemish'/'Dutch'<sup>3</sup> on an equal footing with French in 'Flanders'. (Alen, 1990: 3) For them there was no contradiction between, on the one hand, their agitation in favour of the defense of what they called the 'popular' language and its people (both of which did not yet exist though, taking into account the variety of dialects in 'Flanders' and the absence of a Dutch standard language) and, on the other hand, their loyalty vis-à-vis the Belgian state. Hroch demonstrated that the most important supporters of the Flemish movement in the nineteenth century were urban middle class intellectuals. (Hroch, 1985: 111-112) Why would these 'Flemish' intelligentsia ('Flamingants'), most of whom were educated in French, support the demands of the Flemish movement? Many scholars agree that language became the ethnic marker for mobilization because of the link between the relative backward social position of these Flemish middle class literati's with their mother tongue that was held to be inferior. Even if they adopted French as a means of communication, they remained an outgroup, which put them in a relatively disadvantaged position. Hence, "national agitation (...) offered to the educated individuals among them the opportunity to create a new in-group based on a common language, all of whose members would be equal and hope for better opportunities for social advancement without having to assimilate." (Hroch, 1994: 29) As a result these 'Flamingants' created a mythical 'Flemish people' which formed the basis of legitimization for their language demands.

In the beginning of the 1870s the pressure of the - all in all still not weighty - Flemish movement augmented, which resulted in the first language laws. Although they allowed for a (secondary) place for Dutch in public life in the Flemish provinces, next to French, many of the Flamingants considered these language laws to be inadequate. Towards the end of the nineteenth century a combination of limited economic recovery in 'Flanders' and state bureaucracy expansion produced more opportunities for upward mobility. By that, more and more of these modernizing Flemings became confronted with their relative disadvantaged position. Although by then public life in Flanders had officially yet partly become bilingual, Flemings still had to pay the additional cost of learning another language. The "formal grant of linguistic parity by no means resolved problems of linguistic equity in Bel-

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3 The promoters of a 'popular' language for the Flemings did not agree which idiom to advocate. Some of them made a plea in favour of a standardized vernacular language ('Flemish') that had to be different from the one that was spoken in Holland, while others advocated that the standardized language should be the same 'Dutch' as it had been developing in the Netherlands since the 17th-18th century. (Vandeputte, Vincent & Hermans, 1986: 31-32) This internal disagreement obviously played into the hands of the Franco-phone elites who kept arguing against the official use of Flemish/Dutch. (cf. Becquet, 1977: 9-20)

gium." (Zolberg, 1974: 209) A part of this new Flemish bourgeoisie continued to assimilate into the dominating culture (so called 'Frenchification'), but another and growing group became susceptible to Flamingant mobilization.

After World War I, which acted as a catalyst to this potential Flamingant rank and file, the Flemish movement reached the masses. (Wils, 1991: 233; Murphy, 1988: 111) The introduction of proportional representation (unqualified universal male suffrage) in 1919, which raised the expectation on the Flemish side that their numerical majority would throw its weight into the electoral scale, is certainly not alien to this evolution. It is only at this stage that 'Flanders' received its full linguistic-territorial connotation, as a result of which the till then claimed demands for individual language rights would be turned into demands for collective language rights, i.e. for language rights for the Flemish *people*. By means of education, a Flemish press and propaganda a civilization offensive started that, it is evident to us now, in the long run enabled the Flemish masses to "imagine" themselves as one "community" (to restate Anderson, 1991). (Reynebeau, 1995: 152-154) Flemish-national parties were created and reached their best, although modest, election result just before World War II. As Lorwin points out, their "threat to the established parties, especially to the Catholic party, and especially after 1930, was much greater than their percentage of the electorate. For they functioned, in effect, much like groups of pressure upon the national parties and the government." (Lorwin, 1974: 191)

When the Flemish movement began to aim at the bilingualization of the Belgian centre itself, towards the end of the nineteenth century, it caused the emergence and the development of a 'Walloon movement'. (Zolberg, 1974: 208) The Walloon movement remained marginal until the First World War and their influence on the political parties is even negligibly small until 1940. (Vagman, 1994: 5, 12-13) The first Walloon movement formed a language movement, that is to say, a movement in defense of the dominance of the French language <sup>4</sup> which was contested by its Flemish counterpart. (Kesteloot, 1993: 13) It is therefore no surprise that this kind of 'Wallingant' agitation originated outside of Wallonia, i.e. in Brussels and the Flemish cities of Gent and Antwerpen where Francophone functionaries felt threatened by the language laws (Wils, 1993: 188) and that the first 'leagues' of the Walloon movement were created in Brussels, likewise by French-speaking officials (Kesteloot, 1993: 19; Wils, 1993: 189) Given the social, economic and political supremacy of the Francophone elites in Belgium and their affinity with France <sup>5</sup>, one should not be at all surprised that the leaders of the Walloon movement wanted the preservation of the unitary centralized Francophone Belgian state. (Vagman, 1994: 6) Fonteyn calls this line of thought, whose successors persist up till today, in defense of French (and the position of its speakers within the Belgian state) c.q. against the Dutch language (and the aspirations of the Flemings), the 'untrue' (oneigenlijke) Walloon movement. (Fonteyn, 1988: 62)

<sup>4</sup> The Walloon movement never fought a language struggle in favour of the Walloon idiom, although the care for the dialects was an object of its pursuits. According to Fonteyn nobody seems to mind because (1) the development of the Walloon dialects closely followed the development of the standard French language and (2) cultural affinity between Wallonia and France has always been strong and remains to be so. (Fonteyn, 1988: 62).

<sup>5</sup> For quite a long time a strong tendency within the Walloon movement persisted which wanted a re-attachment to France. A small group of these 'rattachistes' still exists today.

In course of time the Walloon feeling of threatening minorization was enhanced by two other factors. On the one hand, because of the progressive demographic decline of the Walloon provinces in combination with the above mentioned extension of franchise, the Walloon elites started asking questions on the consequences for their political representation on the national level. (Kesteloot, 1993: 27) On the other hand there was the progressive economic upheaval of Flanders which started around 1880 but which only became a major preoccupation within the Walloon movement in the beginning of the 1930's (Kesteloot, 1993: 21). Under the influence of both factors a regionalist tendency developed and slowly became dominant within the Walloon movement. (Vagman, 1994: 9-12) From 1930 onwards one can say that the Walloon movement was exclusively occupied with the Walloon territory, a fact which marks the beginning of the distinct territorial integrity of Wallonia. (Kesteloot, 1993: 29) The Walloon movement 'dropped' Brussels and the Francophone elites in Flanders and entirely focused on Wallonia. This happened because, meanwhile, the Walloon movement had come to realize that the Flemings, who were well on their way to become the inhabitants of the more prosperous region, would not cry off their demands. Therefore they judged it more wise to concentrate on a unilingual Wallonia and the defense of the Walloons within the Belgian state. Fonteyn calls the defenders of this 'pure Walloon' line of thought, the 'true' (*eigenlijke*) Walloon movement. (Fonteyn, 1988: 63)

Flemish and Walloon mobilization reinforced each other. The evolution in the minds of the defenders of both the Flemish and the Walloon case explains why in 1932 a language legislation was adopted that laid the basis for complete administrative unilingualism in Flanders and Wallonia. (Murphy, 1988: 115) The law introduced the 'principle of territoriality' according to which the use of the language of the area is compulsory in the public domain.

Yet, the compelling of this legislation proved to be very difficult because it did not carry measurements to sanction the numerous violations. Therefore and despite its contribution to the reinforcement of the position of Dutch in Flanders, the 1932 legislation did not bring about the change hoped for on the Flemish side, i.e. the achievement of linguistic equality in Flanders and in the Belgian state, and the termination of the Frenchification of Flemish/Dutch-speaking people, especially in Brussels and its surroundings, a 'problem' (as perceived by the Flemings) to which we shall return extensively later on. Yet, the 1932 law was important "in framing the language question in regional terms". (Murphy, 1988: 117) Kesteloot affirms that from 1932 on the conflict between Flemings and Walloons was re-defined as a conflict between two 'communities' (although this term is more used in Flanders than in Wallonia) which focused their demands on the issues that are the bearers their identity, i.e. cultural issues (Flemings) and economic issues (Walloons). (Kesteloot, 1993: 30)

The politicization of the ethnic conflict augmented in the two decades after the Second World War when two major political crises took an ethnoregional undertone. (Murphy, 1988: 125-127) Above that, Flanders continued its economic and demographic march. The old coal and steel industry located in Wallonia had become "technologically outmoded and inefficient" while investments in new technologies and industries were primarily made in Flanders. <sup>6</sup> (Mughan, 1979: 25) A growing number of Walloons lost their confidence in the Belgian state which

6 See for a general overview of the problem of the economic decline of the Walloon region: Quévrit, 1978.

they accused of being monopolized by the Flemings to their detriment. Voices were raised that claimed some kind of parity of political representation possibly connected with decentralization of decision-making in economic affairs, but with equal distribution of resources. (Zolberg, 1977: 116) Increased Walloon consciousness made appear a regional Walloon party ('Rassemblement Wallon') that, however, disappeared relatively soon. (Buelens & Van Dyck, forthcoming).

Nevertheless, on the Flemish side old grievances persisted. An inconsistency between their enhanced social and economic status on the one hand and the still relative low cultural-linguistic status on the other hand reinforced Flemish mobilization. In 1954 the Flemish-nationalist party 'Volksunie' was created that successfully mobilized the Flemish electorate. (Mughan, 1979: 26) For the Frenchification to be stopped, the fixation of the language border between Flanders and Wallonia and the sealing off of the bilingual Brussels area were claimed, combined with a decentralization of decision-making in cultural affairs. (Zolberg, 1977: 115) The Flemish movement partly obtained what it had demanded. The 1962-1963 language legislation, coordinated in 1966, consolidated the territoriality principle. Belgium was constitutionally divided into four language areas: three monolingual (a Dutch, a French and a German language area) and one bilingual (Brussels Capital: Dutch and French). This implied, for example, that in the three monolingual areas the language of instruction in schools could only be the language of the area in question. Nevertheless, some exceptions to this rule were made (municipalities with 'language facilities') to which we shall return later on too.

Because of the 'binary' character of the Walloon movement, indicated by Fonteyn, the Walloon movement constantly showed an attitude of ambiguity vis-à-vis the French-speaking 'Bruxellois'. It has always found it very difficult to balance, on the one hand, what was perceived to be in the interest of the Walloons (i.e. their 'region') but which went contrary to the Francophones in Brussels and, on the other hand, the preservation/enlargement of the 'solidarity' among all the French-speaking Belgians, whether Walloon or 'Bruxellois'. (Vagman, 1994) As a result, the Bruxellois themselves have resolutely taken the lead with respect to the specific Francophone interests, especially since the sixties. An important form of ethnic mobilization took place as a reaction to the national language laws of 1962-1963. A distinct Brussels 'language party' was created to defend the interests of the Brussels Francophones (the 'Front Démocratique des Francophones'). These 'Bruxellois', of whom most did not speak Dutch, feared the loss of their privileged position because bilingualism became a legal requirement for certain jobs ('status panic'). Since most of the Flemings spoke both languages, bilingualism would be an advantage to them. The importance of joined Francophone forces against the Flemings was always (and still is) stressed. (Buelens & Van Dyck, forthcoming)

### C. *The ethnic conflict in Belgium and its political solutions: 'regionalization' and 'communitarization'*

We pointed out that within the Belgian state two forms of regional ethnic identification and mobilization arose. The first one, embodied by the Flemish movement, demanded linguistic and cultural autonomy, i.e. autonomy that would lead to "a genuine recognition and development of their own language (...) and culture". (Alen, 1990: 9) The second one, that was mainly a reaction to the successes of the Flemish movement and the economic deterioration of the Walloon region, was embodied by the Walloon movement. The Walloons demanded re-



gional autonomy, i.e. autonomy over social and economic matters to resolve the economic crisis of their region. As a result of this dynamic, the Brussels Francophones wanted their city to become a full-fledged region in its own right too. (Alen, 1990: 10)

Because of Brussels and its location in Flanders the demands of the Flemings and those of the Walloons were intrinsically incompatible. According to the Flemings, the entirely by Flemish territory surrounded city of Brussels had to become an integral part of the Flemish community. The Francophones (including the Walloons) boggled at the idea of leaving 800.000 Brussels Francophones under the 'domination' of the Flemings. According to them, Brussels had to become a region of its own. In other words, Flemings and Walloons simply demanded two different things. Therefore compromising, i.e. both parties doing concessions so that the settlement agreed upon is 'something in between', was impossible. In fact, there were only two possibilities of which the first one, keeping the centralized, unitary state, had been "overtaken by events". (Alen, 1990: 9) Therefore, the only possible solution was *both* a 'communitarization' *and* a 'regionalization' of the state structure. That is what happened. In four successive constitutional revisions (1970, 1980, 1988, 1993) Belgium became a federal state with three communities<sup>7</sup> and three regions. For Brussels, with a Francophone majority and a Flemish minority, a special settlement was agreed upon in 1988.

'Regional' matters and 'community' matters are of a different kind. The Regions are competent for a variety of economic and environmental matters, public works, public transport, area planning, housing and competencies vis-à-vis the local governments (municipalities). The Communities have competency over cultural, educational, linguistic and a number of other 'personalized' matters. Since both regions and communities have legislative power, in principle each region and each community has its own parliament, government and administration. Yet, the competencies of the Flemish Community and those of the Flemish Region have always been administered by only one legislative, one executive and one administrative body. On the Walloon/Francophone side to the contrary legally there are still two separate parliaments, governments and administrations. However, the Walloon Region has taken over the greater part of the competencies of the French Community. Moreover, since the 1995 elections the members of the parliament of the Walloon Region are also the members of the parliament of the French Community. In the latter the Walloons are joined by the Francophones of the Brussels regional parliament. In the Brussels Region, regional matters are administered by both Flemings and Francophones. But, when it comes to specific community matters, they split up in separate bodies, the so called 'community commissions'.

So, the Belgian ethnic conflict has not only given a settlement by 'agreeing to disagree' (Covell, 1982) or 'splitting the difference' (Zolberg, 1977), i.e. on the one hand giving Flemings, Walloons and Francophones the authority to legislate both on regional and on community matters and, on the other, keeping as federal competencies only those for which an agreement could be reached upon. The conflict has also been dealt with by allowing asymmetry in the structures. As far as the Flemings are concerned, more emphasis is laid on the Community whereby the Flemish community living in Brussels (only 3% of the total Flemish

7 The German-speaking community (70.000 people) received a (restricted) cultural autonomy of its own, but became a part of the Walloon region for social and economic matters.

community in Belgium) is an integral part of the Flemish community. This means that the Brussels Flemings have (almost) no legislative power in Brussels as far as community matters are concerned. On the Walloon side to the contrary, much more emphasis is put on the region. When the Walloon Region took over a large part of the matters of the French Community, the Francophones in the Brussels Region (17% of all the Francophones in Belgium) received their own legislative powers as far as community matters are concerned (since the Brussels Region has no competencies to regulate community matters). As a result of this Belgium has become a *de facto* 'bipolar' federalism in which the Flemish Community and the Walloon Region play first fiddle. The French Community is more and more forced to play the second one and the Brussels Region and the German Community must content themselves with a third and fourth players' status.

Next we can classify the Belgian federal construction both as a 'jurisdictional' and as a 'dual' form of federalism. A 'jurisdictional' division of competencies (in contrast to a 'functional' one) means that both the federation and the regions have both legislative and executive powers with respect to their (specific) competencies. In Belgium these competencies are exclusive competencies, which produces a 'dual federalism' (in contrast to 'cooperative'). It means that each government is supreme in its own domain of action. Since no joint decision-making is undertaken there are no problems of cooperation as a result of which there are hardly any conflicts of competence. If the latter do occur nevertheless, they are to be dealt with by the Supreme Court. On the other hand does the strict division of competencies not exclude conflicts of interest completely. If there is a conflict of interest it receives a political solution: the so called 'concertation committee', composed of ministers from both the federal government and the communities and the regions, equally balanced in linguistic respect, has to pronounce a judgment by consensus within a given period of time.

#### D. Concluding remarks

Compared to the Flemings the mobilization of the Walloon collective identity took another course. The Flemish ethnic identity was created along cultural-linguistic lines and turned into an ethnoregional identity after the First World War. Flemish ethnic mobilization provoked a Walloon reaction when the position of the Francophones began to be threatened. The Walloon movement initially started as a language movement, but within the 'true' Walloon movement other aspects than the cultural-linguistic would come to front. In the absence of ethnic characteristics such as a separate common past, a language that was not exclusively theirs and a different religion, it was the Walloon *territory*, i.e. that part of Belgium which belongs to the Romance language area since the Middle Ages, that became the most important unifying characteristic of their identity. (Kesteloot, 1993: 18) Although we must not forget that the concept of territory must be viewed in a broad, not exclusively material way [since "territory is not; it becomes for... it is human beliefs and actions which give the territory meaning." (Knight, 1982: 526, quoted in Murphy, 1988: 27)], it is also true that the Walloon identity of today is less ethnic in character than its Flemish counterpart. That is to say, at least in their official rhetoric, the Walloon elites maintain that Wallonia is not an ethnic nation but a political one. The exponents of the present-day Walloon movement give more evidence of a kind of 'regionalism' whereby taking cultural aspects into consideration is disregarded, even disapproved, especially when Walloon interests are legitimized vis-à-vis Flanders. The nationalist aspirations of some Flemish elites to the contrary, that meanwhile have become predominantly economic aspi-



rations too, are very often and without hesitation legitimized by referring to the ethnic character of the region/its inhabitants. Of course, the 'Flemish culture' has been an important element of Flemish ethnic mobilization from the very beginning, while this is not true for the Walloons.

In sum, according to Jackson's typology there is no doubt that the Flemish ethnic group meanwhile reached the 'ethnonation'-stage. Although Wallonia has also demanded and received political autonomy, scholars do not agree whether to define it as a 'ethnonation' given the non-ethnic emphasis of the elites' discourse. And, as far as Brussels is concerned, the 'ethnicization' of the entire region is highly improbable. The French-speaking 'Bruxellois' could be considered a distinct ethnic group though. This is much less true for the Dutch-speaking people in Brussels. But this might change because the institutionalization of both the Flemish and the Francophone subculture within Brussels reinforces the internal ethnic divisions. For a different reason the Belgian federal system also causes a centrifugal tendency between Wallonia and Flanders. On the political level these component parts of the federation tend to drift apart because it is electorally not rewarding to speak either for Belgium or for the other ethnic group since there the political parties seek their votes entirely within the own ethnic group (region). In general, the federalization of Belgium reinforces ethnoregional identities which has a profound influence on the way the ethnic groups perceive themselves and are perceived by the others. This causes new demands and problems which require new answers. (Murphy, 1988: 175-188)

To conclude this part, in contrast to the Italian case (Diani, this issue) we cannot say that there is a straightforward connection between the Belgian ethnic conflict and the present-day legitimization crisis of the state. In Italy the Lega Nord consciously used the ethnic factor as a catalyst for questioning the political system. This party deliberately grafts its ethnic discourse upon this political crisis. This is not the case in Belgium. The ethnic conflict is neither a cause nor a consequence of the present-day legitimization crisis of the state. At its utmost we could say that, because of its complexity and the long duration of the preceding negotiations, the institutional framework that has been set up to deal with the Belgian ethnic conflict causes some resentment among the citizens and creates new problems as well. As such it might enhance the common people's feeling of apathy. But none of the actors intentionally uses its resentment vis-à-vis each other to foster the existing anti-politics feelings.

### III. The remaining 'stumble blocks' within the Belgian federal model: Brussels, its periphery and the language border area

#### A. *Flemings and Francophones: 'liberal' and 'regulated' views on democracy*

The twofold federalization of the unitary Belgian state has dealt with the biggest part of the interethnic conflict, but there are still some stumble blocks left behind that might endanger the present stability. That is to say, *de jure* all the problems have received a legal settlement. But there are two area's where (a number of) Flemings and Francophones (including the Walloons) *de facto* still 'disagree to agree' and which keep the feeling running high from time to time. The stumble blocks concern the position of the Flemings within the Brussels Region and that of the Francophones in the area just outside Brussels (the so-called 'pe-

riphery') and the language border area. These remaining stumble blocks are problems of language 'minorities'.

How is the situation of these language minorities perceived by both the Flemings and the Francophones? Our main finding is that, according to the situation of the language minority concerned, a different view on democracy is held. These contrasting views on democracy are used for legitimizing the claims regarding the policy (to be) conducted vis-à-vis the own and/or the other language community. Which opinion is held by a language community (its elites) is closely connected to the perceived interests of the own ethnic group in relation to the perceived interests of the other.

Our characterization of the respective opinions on democracy is largely inspired by J.L. Talmon. (Talmon, 1952: 1-13) He confronts two types of democracy, which he labels (in their extreme forms) as 'liberal' and 'totalitarian-messianic'.

The starting point of both opinions is the ideal of freedom. According to the 'liberal democracy', the citizens are *defined as free* and this freedom has to be protected by not touching it. The other type sees freedom as something that has to be realized. The citizens have *to be liberated* in the first place. Therefore political actions have to be undertaken, that eventually curtail the citizens' absolute freedom. There is a regulating task for the political authority. The first type of democracy emphasizes the freedom in the procedures of political decision-making, the second - which we will label here the 'regulated' view - emphasizes it in the outcomes of decision-making. To put it differently: while the 'liberal democracy' type stresses equality in *chances*, the 'regulated democracy' one demands equality in *results*.

### B. *The Gordian knot in Belgian politics: Brussels and its periphery*

An often heard statement is that, if Brussels would not have been surrounded by Flanders, Belgium would not exist any more. Whether true or not, it points at a problem that has been at the very heart of the Belgian ethnic conflict for more than a century.

A long time ago Brussels was a relatively small though important Flemish town, located close to the internal language border (which coincides with the border between the Romance and Germanic language families in Europe). In 1846 already 31% of the people spoke French, of whom the majority belonged to the upper classes. (Fonteyn, 1984: 48) Because French was the vehicle for upward mobility a language shift occurred among the Flemish-speaking masses too. As a result, the majority of the Brussels people became 'Frenchified'. In 1910 the majority of the people in seven of the nineteen municipalities of what we call 'Brussels' today spoke French and their number was rising in the other municipalities too. In 1930 the Flemings did not constitute half of the total Brussels population any more. In 1947 almost 71% declared to speak French most of the time. (Fonteyn, 1984: 50) In sum, the "once quiet little Flemish city had become a French-speaking metropolis" (Lorwin, 1974: 195). We do not know exactly how many Dutch-speaking and how many French-speaking Belgians are living in Brussels at

the moment since no language census has been held any more since 1947.<sup>8</sup> Estimates run from 80% to 90% French-speakers and 10% to 20% Flemings. But we also know that there is a 'grey area' of truly bilingual people who do not wish to categorize themselves exclusively as either 'Flemish' or 'Francophone'.<sup>9</sup>

Frenchification was (is) possible since, what was an ascriptive characteristic at birth can change during a person's lifetime because of the person's achievements or, in other words, because the "features of labeling and contrast are dynamic, subject to contextual reinterpretation, and exist variously at different levels. Boundaries established by both labeling and contrast do not prohibit individuals from moving back and forth between respective groupings or categories, nor do they prohibit people from identifying or being identified differently as they move back and forth." (Seymour-Smith, 1986: 95) Although the existence of ethnic differences itself contributes to the persistence of different ethnic categories, it does not make impossible changes in the ethnicity of individuals and the groups they belong to: "the human material that is organized in an ethnic group is not immutable, and though (...) social mechanisms (...) tend to maintain dichotomies and boundaries, they do not imply 'stasis' for the human material they organize: boundaries may persist despite what may figuratively be called the 'osmosis' of personnel through them." (Barth, 1969: 21) That is exactly what happened in Brussels.

Not only *in* Brussels. The Frenchification of Brussels has gone hand in hand with the Frenchification of its surroundings. These Flemish municipalities around Brussels increasingly became residential areas. More and more people who worked in Brussels, wanted to live just outside the city in this green periphery. Between 1950 and 1960 73% of these immigrants came from Brussels, 21% from Flanders and only 6% from Wallonia. (Fonteyn, 1984: 58) Frenchification was reinforced after the sixties when the depopulation of Brussels took a high flight (Van der Haegen, 1991: 1-6). Because more and more people fled Brussels to live in its 'green belt', the number of French-speaking people in these Flemish municipalities increased drastically, in so far that now they constitute an actual majority in a number of them.

Officially, i.e. legally, there is no 'problem' because several legal agreements have been reached for both the Flemish minority in Brussels and the Francophone population in the Brussels periphery. Despite the fact that the Francophone parties at that time agreed upon the settlement concerned, we can only observe that today most of the French-speaking political elites and the common Francophone people in Brussels and its periphery do not accept this situation

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8 Because of the ongoing Frenchification process along the language border and around Brussels, the results of a language census could bring about a transfer of language heterogeneous municipalities from Flanders to Wallonia. The 1947 census indeed held possible unpleasant results for the Flemings. Therefore, they demanded the language border to be fixed for eternity as well as the perpetual sealing off of the bilingual area of Brussels. After years of reinforced ethnic tensions the language border was established in 1963. Consequently, questions with respect to linguistic affiliation have been left out of the Belgian decennial censuses.

9 For Brussels we can deduct the proportion of both populations from the percentage of votes cast by the Francophone respectively the Flemish parties in Brussels, although for two reasons these numbers can only be estimates. The first reason is the 'grey area' of bilingual speakers just mentioned. The second one is that in Brussels a Dutch-speaking person can vote for a Francophone party and vice versa (in contrast with Flanders and Wallonia that each have a separate party system).

(wholeheartedly). In the present discourse one reproach always comes to the front: the alleged non-respect for democracy.

As far as the language minorities in Brussels and its periphery are concerned the Francophones have a more 'liberal democracy' opinion while the Flemings tend to give a more 'regulated democracy' interpretation to the situation. In general, the more 'liberal democracy' view of the Francophones holds that the political authorities should not regulate the use of languages. The opportunities for participation in the political market for (their) language 'minorities' should not be controlled, i.e. restricted. Every French-speaking person living in any heterogeneous language area must always have the right to speak French in his/her relations with the municipal authorities and public institutions. The present situation whereby in some of these municipalities a Francophone can only use French in public affairs in a restricted number of cases (or not at all), is completely 'undemocratic', it is argued, certainly in those municipalities where the Francophones constitute an absolute majority of the (Belgian) inhabitants. So, many French-speaking people argue that these municipalities should become a part of the bilingual area of Brussels. In view of the present demographic situation in the periphery it is indeed very likely that in some of these municipalities a majority of the inhabitants would express themselves in favour of 'joining' Brussels if their opinion would be asked.<sup>10</sup> Extending Brussels to its periphery has always been and still is the ultimate goal of many Francophones.

The Flemings generally reject the Francophone point of view because, they argue, in reality this free market situation has resulted in maintaining and even strengthening the existing inequality. Free language use has led to a massive Frenchification of the Flemish population in Brussels and its periphery. The Flemish dialect that was (is) spoken by the population and even the standardized Dutch later on could for a very long time simply not compete with French on an equal basis given the latter's linguistic superiority and the corresponding higher socio-economic status of its speakers. Despite their demographic majority (in origin) the Flemish-speaking people were a powerless ethnic minority in Brussels. By using Talmon's terminology therefore we can argue that the Flemings consider the competition between French and Flemish/Dutch to have been/be unfair because it was/still is guided by the right of the strongest. Therefore the result (Frenchification) could not be accepted. Henceforth the eagerness of the Flemings to stop this assimilation process.

This could only be achieved, according to their opinion, by regulating (i.e. restricting) the use of languages in the public domain. Francophone 'immigrants' who wish to live in Flanders should be legally obliged to speak Dutch. They have to 'adapt' themselves. Becoming a part of Brussels is completely out of the question. As mentioned before, to a large extent thanks to the combination of their demographic preponderance and growing economic prosperity, the Flemings ultimately received what they wanted: a *de jure* unilingual Flanders (and Wallonia). But, they had to accept a compromise: in six municipalities of the *de facto* language heterogeneous Brussels periphery Francophone inhabitants received language rights, 'language facilities' as they are called. Francophones living in one of these municipalities have the right to have their children educated in a number of

10 This explains why the abolishment of the language census practice discontents the Francophones who, with the results of an official language census in their hands, would undoubtedly be able to add force to their plea for attaching the periphery to the area of Brussels.

French-speaking kindergarten and primary schools that are entirely financed by the Flemish Community. Also, all communications from the local government to the public must be made in both Dutch and French. Francophones can also ask for a number of official documents in French or ask for a free translation. So, as far as the Brussels periphery is concerned, one could argue that Francophones and Flemings managed to find a compromise between the 'liberal' view which in theory does not allow for any restrictions and the 'regulated' view which in principle would like to regulate as much as possible on a legal basis. None of both groups has wished/been able to push its own opinion to its extreme.

By means of the 1963 language law the territory of what now coincides with the borders of the Brussels Region became officially bilingual. In view of the unequal status of French and Dutch this situation would have been to the disadvantage of the Flemings. Yet, in Brussels the Flemings received special forms of protection to overcome this disadvantage of competition. They first received extra means to develop their own education system and network of cultural organizations. Moreover, in 1988 the Flemings received equal representation in the executive body of the Brussels Region (not in its parliament though, something they had demanded too). Despite the fact that the Flemish parties in Brussels cast only one out of every six votes, since 1989 they have as many ministers as the Francophones, except for the 'prime minister' who should take a neutral position though. The Brussels settlement is the reflected image of the federal one. Since 1971 the federal government is composed of an equal number of Francophones and Flemings too, to which a prime minister is added who should act as an arbitrator. Above that, all decision-making within both the Brussels and the federal government has to take place by consensus. So, it were the Francophones who, for fear of the numerical dominance of the Flemings, demanded equal representation in the national government. In this arena it were the Francophones who pleaded for a 'regulated' type of democracy and it were the Flemings who tended to adhere more to the 'liberal' view. This shows that the use of the one or the other view on democracy is basically dictated by the perceived interests and contains an element of strategy. Indeed, according to the perceived advantages for the own group a different opinion is defended.

Despite the willingness to compromise between the political elites of both ethnic groups, which is reflected in the settlements for the Flemish minority in Brussels and the French-speaking population in the Brussels periphery in Flanders, there have always been voices that pleaded in favour of a maintenance of or a return to a more extremist view on democracy, be it in a 'liberal' or a 'regulated' direction. As we mentioned before, as far as the Brussels periphery is concerned, many Francophones continue to make a plea either for an extension of the received language facilities or for attaching the periphery to the bilingual territory of Brussels.<sup>11</sup> Especially in those municipalities where the Francophones constitute an absolute majority of the inhabitants they want to have the right to de-

11 Other Francophone propositions have been made such as giving the inhabitants of these (Flemish) municipalities the right to vote for the parliament of the French Community instead of 'obliging' them to vote for the Flemish Community that would be 'alien' to the Francophones. The most recent (February 1996) 'move' on behalf of the Francophone side is the creation, by the Brussels French Community Council (COCOF), of an 'advisory council' composed of Francophone politicians living in the periphery. The COCOF has no competency outside of Brussels though. In fact, both the voting-proposition and the 'advisory council' trench upon the exclusive Flemish prerogatives in this area, a reason for which they are vigorously rejected by the Flemings.



cide to become a part of Brussels (referendum). It is argued that not possessing this right, as it is the case for the moment, is 'undemocratic'. As far as the language facilities are concerned, many of the Francophones have always seen them as a first step towards a bilingual status of the periphery. In any case they are considered as an infeasible right. However, a number of Flemish politicians recently made a plea for completely abolishing the language facilities for Francophones, which would come to a full regulation (restriction) of the use of language in the public domain. According to the official Flemish interpretation the language facilities for Francophones were meant as transitional measures. It was hoped that, in the long run, these facilities would become superfluous because the Francophone immigrants and their children eventually would learn Dutch, so the problem would be solved in a 'natural' way. Yet, this has proved to be an illusion. Since the language facilities in the Brussels periphery only serve further Frenchification, it is argued, they should disappear completely. Only legally establishing Dutch as the exclusive official language will force all non-Dutch speaking people in the periphery to learn Dutch and to use it in public, it is argued.

By 'non-Dutch-speaking people' one does nowadays not only understand the Francophone Belgians. Indeed, because of the evolution Brussels went through as the capital of the European Union, more and more citizens of other EU countries took up their residence in the green periphery around the capital. These people usually do not speak Dutch, but English or French as a second language. Henceforth a number of Flemings argue that the danger for an ongoing Frenchification is not over. To the contrary, it is in these days reinforced by the presence of the EU citizens. For the same reason the present Flemish government is opposed to the right to vote for EU citizens because, it is supposed, they would mainly vote for (local) Francophone parties.<sup>12</sup> Francophones to the contrary (because of the same assumption although founded on the 'liberal democracy' view), are in favour of municipal suffrage for EU citizens, in the Brussels periphery at least. A number of Flemings also fear the negative influence of English, often the 'lingua franca' among European citizens, on the use of Dutch in the periphery (and its influence on the use of French, in Brussels, as far the Francophones are concerned). One reason all the more for those who live in the periphery to make them learn and use Dutch in public. It is not clear however where the public domain ends and where the private one begins. There are (extremely 'regulated democracy' minded) Flemings who would like the use of another language but Dutch to be forbidden in a number of 'cultural' affairs that constitute a 'grey area' between the public and the private domain (masses in church, regional television, local radio, etc.).

As far as the situation of the Flemish minority in Brussels is concerned Francophone voices are raised that toughen their ('liberal') opinion. Notably the fixed parity within the Brussels regional government does not receive much support any more among parts of the Francophone majority, all the more because the relative number of Flemings in Brussels is further decreasing, at least according to the most recent regional elections at which the Flemings lost a seat.<sup>13</sup> It is argued that, in view of the increasing demographic majority of the French-speaking population this parity annex decision-making by consensus rule is 'undemocratic'. The Flemings to the contrary keep defending this form of what they con-

12 A recent study (Deschouwer & Mariette, 1993) shows that the EU citizens in the periphery are hardly aware of the possible political meaning of a linguistic choice.

13 The Flemish parties won 13,7% of the votes in 1995 compared to 14,7% in 1989.



sider to be fair 'positive discrimination'. They thereby use the argument of the defenceless Frenchification to which Flemings in the past fell a prey to and will continue to do so in the future in Brussels.

The Flemings on the other hand still have some grievances on the Brussels municipal level. Despite the legal obligation of providing public services in both languages, they feel that Dutch is in practice still not treated with the same kind of self-evidence as French. Therefore Flemings demand that the existing language legislation is applied correctly. On the other hand, in contrast to the situation on the regional level, there is no guaranteed presence of Flemings in the political institutions of the Brussels municipalities. In 1994 the 'Fourth Congress of Brussels Flemings' demanded a small though guaranteed presence of Flemings on both the legislative and the executive level within each Brussels municipality. This demand has immediately been rejected by the Francophones. They do not only point at the position of the Francophones in the periphery, but also state that granting the Flemings 'more than they deserve', i.e. according to their demographical strength (rather: weakness), would be 'undemocratic' and therefore unacceptable.

### C. *The language border and the municipality of 'Voeren'/'Fourons'*

Where territories of speech groups 'touch' each other municipalities tend to have a mixed population. Shortly after the language border between the unilingual Dutch area and the unilingual French area was fixed, in a number of municipalities citizens of the other language group received the same kind of language facilities as in the Brussels periphery. Generally speaking there are, at the moment, no problems worth mentioning, except in one municipality: 'Voeren' (in Dutch) or 'Fourons' (in French).

The Francophone part of the population of Voeren has always protested against the settlement that was decided (by the national government) with respect to what, at that time, still were six small municipalities. In 1962 they were transferred from the province of Liège (situated within the French language area) to the province of Limburg (situated within the Dutch language area). By that they became *de jure* unilingual Dutch municipalities with language facilities for Francophones, while they had been *de jure* unilingual French municipalities before. Language facilities were granted because Voeren has a mixed population due to both migration and its location.<sup>14</sup> The transfer of the Fourons municipalities was part of a 'Belgian compromise': in return for a number of other municipalities being transferred from Flanders to Wallonia they moved the other way round, i.e. from Wallonia to Flanders.

As a result of this transfer the French-speaking population of Voeren became a minority within the Dutch language area (which coincides with the present Flemish Region). Yet, within their own municipality they constitute a (small) majority. Therefore, it is not surprising that this local Francophone majority did not agree with the settlement decided upon them 'in Brussels'. The Francophones received lan-

14 Before the independence of Belgium (1830) Voeren was namely a part of the 'large' province of Limburg, i.e. the present Belgian and Dutch provinces of Limburg that formed one whole at that time. After the independence this 'large' province was split and after the border between the Netherlands and Belgium was definitely fixed (1839), the area became geographically cut off of the (Belgian) province of Limburg and from then on formed one geographical whole with the province of Liège. Until 1962.

guage facilities too, yet, Dutch is compulsory for all public administrative acts. As a result they became very militant claimants of the return to Liège ('retour à Liège'), as a result of which the Flemish population would become a minority though. Of course, the Flemings refuse. The rhetoric at the moment used on both sides is, again, embedded in a discussion on what it means to respect democracy.

Former acting-mayor José Happart and figurehead of the 'retour à Liège' movement summarizes it nicely: "The Flemings say that Voeren is Flemish, but a majority of the people does not agree. If the same situation would occur elsewhere in the world, the most passionate 'Flamingants' would be the first ones to condemn it. (...) We are in Voeren living in an undemocratic situation and I do not accept that." (interview with J. Happart in 'De Standaard Magazine', 23.05.95) José Happart clearly uses the 'liberal' view on democracy: the (local) numerical majority has to have the right to decide upon its own destiny. Since the majority of the population are Francophones<sup>15</sup> they must have the right to use their language in the public domain. But, since this is impossible, the present situation is a mockery of the democratic will of the majority of the people. According to the Flemings, to the contrary, it were José Happart and his local government who did not respect democracy because they refused to use Dutch in public administration, as they should have done according to the 1962-1963 national language legislation that was also approved by the Francophone parties. For the Flemings the situation in the small municipality of Voeren has become a symbol of what they perceive as the ongoing Francophone disdain towards the Dutch language and the corresponding unwillingness to speak it. It is because of Voeren becoming a symbol that the problem has exceeded the borders of its municipality and has become a 'national' problem.

The developments within the EU also influence the problem of Voeren. It seems that nowadays both language communities tend to make use of the opposite 'democracy' interpretation than the one they use with respect to Brussels and its periphery. If the citizens of the EU would receive the right to vote at the municipal level, the relatively high number of Dutch citizens might strengthen the Flemish votes, at least this is what is speculated on, and by doing so it might reverse the actual power balance in the municipality.<sup>16</sup> Since there are only two lists presenting themselves at the municipal elections, one Flemish and one Francophone, the votes of both Dutch-speaking electorates might render an absolute majority to the Flemish list. Correct or not, this view is being shared, be it with fear, by the Francophones. Henceforth their unceasing zeal in the cause of the return of Fourons to the province of Liège. We are faced with a situation whereby both Flemings and Francophones stick to their original opinion ('Voeren has to remain Flemish' and 'Fourons has to become a part of Liège (again)' respectively), but whereby the legitimization that is attached to each view, is being turned the other way round. The Flemings tend to adopt the 'liberal democracy' opinion by speculating on a future demographic majority of Dutch-speaking inhabitants (Flemings and Dutch), while they firmly reject the same logic with respect to the periphery. The Francophones seem, for the same reason, a little confused. One the one hand they have always been passionate defenders of the liberal view on

15 This is to say, again, according to the number of votes for the local Francophone list since we do not have any language census data at our disposal.

16 In 1991 (census) there were 566 inhabitants of Dutch nationality in Voeren, out of 625 foreigners and out of a total population of 4.226 inhabitants. (Algemene Volks- en Woningtelling op 1 maart 1991, Part 1B, p. 94-95 and p. 186-187)

democracy, but when the own language community is likely to be harmed by changing demographic and political circumstances, they do not know what to think of it and accuse the Flemings of hanging their cloak to the wind.

#### IV. Conclusion

Val Lorwin once called the Belgian ethnic situation a "unique national triangle of one oppressed majority and two oppressed minorities" (Lorwin, 1974: 199). He hit the nail on the head. How is it possible that at the same time, on the same level, there is both an oppressed majority (the Flemings) and two oppressed minorities (the Walloons and the 'Bruxellois')? In this essay we tried to provide an answer: different perceptions on democracy, embedded in conflicting interests, legitimize and thus reinforce these coexisting minority feelings. Neither among scholars nor among politicians there is a consensus on what 'democracy' precisely means. They all have a different opinion on what democracy is or what it should be. Thinking about democracy essentially is a normative business. Because of this normativity it is impossible to say which view is the 'right' one. One can plead in favour of one view, furnish it with every plausible argument, but it is and remains a normative point of view. Both Flemings and Francophones defend their own interests and thereby develop a view on their interethnic relations that is either of a 'regulated democracy' or of a 'liberal democracy' kind, according to the situation. Both opinions are acceptable as such. Whether you agree or not depends on which starting point you take: freedom or regulation.

Drawing a border always creates dissatisfaction among those who, due to this border drawing, have become a minority. In Belgium this dissatisfaction will remain to exist because this situation has been stabilized partly due to the institutionalization of the ethnic groups. Presently none of both languages is able to 'overrun' the other. The Frenchification of Flemish people (outside Brussels) has stopped, thanks to the language regulation, the shift in the economic and political balance of power to the advantage of the Flemings and the rise of the status of the Dutch language attendant upon it. (Willemys, 1992: 7-8) Likewise, the linguistic and the socio-economic cleavages that coincided in former times, have become cross-cutting cleavages. The times when the common man spoke a Flemish or a Walloon dialect and only the elites spoke French are definitely over. The standardized Dutch<sup>17</sup> and French have become the 'lingua franca' of a much broader part of the Flemish population on the one hand and the Walloons and 'Bruxellois' on the other.

The interdependence of the position of the Flemish minority in Brussels on the one the side and the position of the French-speaking population in the Flemish region, i.e. the Brussels periphery, on the other is at the same time an element of stability and instability. The compromises that rule both language minorities have worked precisely because throughout the years they have become a complex whole of intertwined and evenly balanced agreements. If somebody would upset this balance, the stability of the Belgian construction is in danger. It is true that unilaterally changing this situation is impossible since such a change constitutionally requires both a majority in every language group of the federal parliament and a overall two third majority. The Francophones would never spontaneously agree with the abolishment of the language facilities in the Brussels pe-

17 See generally, for a good socio-linguistic overview of the Dutch standardization process in Belgium: van de Craen and Willemys (1988).

riphery. But, in view of the present worsening socio-economic situation of the Walloon Region, they might be forced by the Flemings in return for Flemish financial support. This might in turn have repercussions on the (still relatively weak) position of the Flemings in Brussels. In sum, if any of the constituting parts of the Belgian federation unilaterally sets the ball of conflict rolling, it is uncertain where it would come to a standstill.

### *Abstract*

*In the present Belgian situation the three major ethnic groups (Dutch-speaking Flemings, Francophone Walloons and 'Bruxellois') share the belief that they are culturally, economically and/or politically dominated by the other linguistic community. This article expounds the thesis that these minority feelings are embedded in different interest which are legitimized by a discourse on democracy. Both Flemings and Francophones defend their own perceived interests and thereby develop a view on their interethnic relations that is either of a 'regulated democracy' or of a 'liberal democracy' kind, according to the situation. This political 'war of words' is nowadays concentrated on those areas that were left 'untouched' by the recent decentralization and federalization of the country which was designed to defuse the ethnic tinder-box. These remaining stumble blocks concern the position of the Flemings within the Brussels Region and that of the Francophones in the Brussels periphery and along the language border. The article starts with a short historical overview of the Belgian intergroup conflict to provide a better understanding of the present-day democracy discourse.*