The Flemish Identity: Nascent or Existent?

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Introduction

In 1994 Belgium experienced its fourth major state reform in twenty-five years. Previous reforms took place in 1970, 1980, and 1988. All these reforms together, and especially the last two ones, transformed Belgium from a centralized state into a federal state. The subnational entities acquired a high level of autonomy and a wide scope of exclusive competencies. Their parliaments are directly elected and their laws (called *decrees*) have an equal legal status as the laws of the federal parliament. But besides resolving some basic problems of the Belgian state, the state reforms have also engendered new questions, especially in Flanders. Some of these have a direct political meaning. Others are more fundamental. The first group contains questions like the need for additional reforms in which even more competencies would be handed over to the subnational authorities. The second group consists of questions on the subnational entities and their identities. Although these questions are raised in both the Francophone and the Flemish parts of Belgium, the Flemish seem to be more concerned by it than their Francophone counterparts.

The question about identities has something to do with the legitimacy of the newly-created institutions in Belgium. Flemish institutions and Flemish autonomy can only be legitimized by the reference to a Flemish nation that is represented by its institutions and protected by its autonomy. The more pronounced the quest for more autonomy, the greater the need for evidence that their exists something like a Flemish nation that distinguishes itself from the non-Flemish by a specific identity.

To a certain extent, the search for a Flemish identity *after* the Belgian state reform seems to be strange. One would have expected this question to be cleared out before the reform started. Why giving more autonomy to the Flemish when it is unclear that there exists something like the Flemish? In the past, the perception of an interest as a Flemish interest was sufficient to mobilize the Flemish political elites in favor of more devolution of power to Flanders. Today, this doesn't seem to be enough anymore. One factor that can explain for this is the fact that the state reform has gone further than what was needed to protect the Flemish as a *linguistic* group in Belgium. Since the autonomy consists of much more than only the means to protect the *linguistic* integrity of the Dutch-speaking population of Belgium more fundamental arguments are needed to explain why the Flemish need to have an autonomy which also covers subjects that are not directly related to language, culture, and education. In other words, the Flemish "proto-state" is in need of a Flemish nation.

This article aims at proving that the Flemish nation, despite 166 years of "Flemish struggle" and 26 years of Belgian state reforms, is still at the beginning of its process of nation-formation. The Flemish identity is basically a contested iden-

tity that is the subject of elitist discussions. In these discussions parts of the so-
cial elites try to deny its existence or substance, other parts try to prove these by
pointing at specific features of the Flemish identity while a third group combines
the conviction of its existence with efforts to stimulate its formation (e.g. its ac-
ceptance by the Flemish population in general). Amazing however is the fact that
the process of the Flemish nation-formation bears a striking resemblance to the
process of nation-formation in the nineteenth century. The context may be quite
different, the actors and the means are almost similar, be it a little bit moderni-
zed. In order to show this, we will look at both the actors and the means in the
process of the formation of the Flemish identity and confront them with some
theories on nation-formation in the nineteenth century.

First, we will show that the Flemish identity is a contested identity by referring
to general discussions about national identity, to the relation between European
values and Flemish values, and to the strange relationship between the Belgian
identity and its Flemish counterpart. Second, we will focus at some theories of
nation-formation and the lessons to be learnt from these. Third, we will show
that the existence of the Flemish identity is principally an elitist concern. We will
also assess the role of the media in the process of the formation of the Flemish
identity. Finally, we will attempt to show that at most one can speak of the for-
mation of a Flemish identity, not of its existence and that the media play an im-
portant role in this.

I. The Flemish Identity: Subject of Contention

The Flemish identity is the subject of a lot of controversy. The first question
that has to be answered however, is what exactly is meant by national identity.

A. *National Identity Defined*

Before addressing the issue of the Flemish identity, a clear definition of what
we mean by national idenity is needed. Following Bloom (1990: 52) one can de-
fine national identity as: *"(..) that condition in which a mass of people have made
the same identification with national symbols - have internalised the symbol of
the nation - so that they may act as one psychological group when there is a
threat to, or the possibility of enhancement of, these symbols of national iden-
tity".*

Important in this definition is the emphasis on the subjective factor, the iden-
tification, which makes a group of people perceive themselves as a group. Even
if a group of people shares the same objective features like language, past, reli-
gion, or race, the feeling to belong to the same group is a *conditio sine qua none*
for the existence of a national identity. [1] Objective features are relevant insofar as
the group has bestowed a meaning on them. History, i.e. a particular view on his-
tory, is one of the most important of these. Aspects like harmony, unity, progress
and continuity are emphasized to underline the legitimacy of the nation (De Moor,

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1   This is not only the case for national identities but for all social identities; cf. Kreckel's
definition (1994: 14): "Gemeint ist damit der Umstand, dass Menschen einander nicht nur
als separate Individuen (mit unverwechselbarer persönlicher Identität) **wahrnehmen**, son-
dern auch als Angehöre sozial relevanter Merkmalsgruppen oder als Träger bestimmter
sozialer Rollen (..)" (bold added).

1993: 21; Smith, 1981: 47-51; Wilterdink, 1993: 122-123). Whether there is a common history is less relevant. The internalization of a common history (existent or non-existent) is the decisive factor. According to Martiniello (1994: 177), one of the common elements of Flemish nationalism has been its inclination to a belief in the objective existence of a Flemish ethnic group with specific properties inherited from the past.

Central to national identity is its distinctiveness, the emphasis on similarities among the members of the group and dissimilarities with those outside the group. This is not typical for national identities as such but common to all kinds of identities (Hahn, 1993: 194). Like Bowman (1994: 140) says:

"People create communities rhetorically through thinking that some people are 'like' themselves while others are 'unlike' them".

In the case of national identities, however, this in/out-group dynamic easily leads to the formation of national images (Wilterdink, 1992: 46) or to a process of "sozialen etikettierung" (Kreckel, 1994: 15). [2] The stronger this process becomes, the lower the tolerance towards dissidence within the group will be (emphasis on uniformity) and the higher the risk that the group will develop a kind of bigotry towards other groups (Verkuyten et al, 1993: 21). Kreckel (1994: 15-16) calls this the "Kehrseite des Etikettierungsmechanisme".

The role of information is of paramount importance in the process of nation-formation. The feeling to belong to a nation is based on (mostly political) information. According to Wilterdink (1992: 46), the susceptibility of people towards such information is due to the fact that it fulfills three important needs: Such information orders the world, helps people to understand particular patterns of social behavior and to assess them in terms of stereotypes. It becomes easy to discern the good guys from the bad guys (Leersen, 1993: 13). Verschueren (1994: 99-100) refers to this as the "homogenesis" which he defines as the "the belief that an ideal society has to be ethnically and culturally homogenous and its corollary, the conviction that migration, and ethnic and cultural diversity are intrinsically problematic" (my translation). According to Blommaert (1994: 305) and Martiniello (1994: 180) this homogenesis has taken deep roots in Flanders. In Flanders there exists a "collective psyche" that panics by the idea of linguistic diversity within society.

B. *The Flemish Identity Questioned*

The existence of a Flemish identity has been the subject of much controversy. Some see this controversy as part of a general controversy on national identities. The existence of national identities and nations as objective phenomena is far from evident (cf. Reynebeau, 1995). It is a concept used to legitimize power (Detrez, 1993: 5) or to serve other purposes such as the delineation of societies (Hechter, 1975: 4). Crucial here is that national identities almost never reflect objective realities. They are basically constructed, which means that their content results from political struggle and power relations. To give a concrete meaning to its con-

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2 This concept can be defined as follows: "Dabei werden Menschen von Anderen auf stereotype Eigenschaften festgelegt, die in der Regel mit Wertungen verbunden sind die vor allem die Wahrnemung anderer als stereotypisierten Eigenschaften ausschlieben (..)".

tent is for that reason problematic (Detrez & Blommaert, 1994: 10). As Bowman (1994: 144) puts it:

"The 'nation' in the discourse of an established national entity is an imprecise and effectively nebulous mythological concept which is, because of that imprecision, open to appropriation by all of its leaders". [3]

From this point of view, the attempts to give an objective content to the Flemish identity have to be criticized, something which happened in reaction to the many attempts to do this (see Verrelst, 1992; Deleu, 1991; Droste, 1994; Ruys, 1972; Daniels, 1986; Mc Rae, 1986). [4]

But even if one accepts that there exists something like a national identity, the answer to the existence of a Flemish one is far from answered. As showed by many authors, many properties attributed to the Flemish identity can as easily be described as Belgian (i.e. as common to the Flemish and the Francophone citizens of Belgium) or West-European. As shown by data gathered in 1981 and 1990 by the European Values Group, many features attributed to the Flemish or Belgians are basically European or even North Atlantic. [5] Processes that have influenced the Belgian or Flemish culture (whatever they are), like secularization, the changing sexual morale, and the emergence of postmaterialistic values (with the emphasis on individual freedom) are European, not just Flemish or Belgian (Kerkhofs, 1993; De Moor, 1993; Picht, 1993; Ester & Halman, 1994; Galtung, 1994). This brings Reynebeau (1994: 15, my translation) to the conclusion that the so-called essence of the Flemish identity consists of European values and attitudes that relegate regional differences (like the Flemish) to "folklore, anecdotes, and externals that are gradually becoming disfunctional and irrelevant".

With this conclusion, the controversy on the Flemish identity has not come to an end. On the contrary, one of the most controversial aspects of this identity consists of it being Flemish or Belgian. One Flemish (or Belgian) essayist, Van Istendael, typifies the Flemish identity as typically Belgian. According to him, most of the qualities attributed to the Flemish are Belgian, since they apply as much to the Flemish as to the Walloons (1993: 20). He adds (my translation): *"Nothing is as Belgian as Flemish nationalism. If Belgium wouldn't have existed, Flemish nationalism wouldn't have had a reason of existence".*

Furthermore, a Belgian think tank on state reform, the Coudenberg Group (1987: 45-46), beliefs that "the real nature" (volksaard) of the Belgian identity is the best guarantee against the dissolution of the country. One author (Vos, 1994) has tried to resolve this discussion by considering the Flemish identity as a "sub-

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3   Milward (1994: 25) has added to this: "(..) as far as the mass of the population has been concerned, national consciousness has always been more the consequence than the cause of nation-states".

4   Verrelst (1992), for instance, described 'The Flemish' as regionalist (oriented towards its own region or city), small-minded (a 'lower middle class' mentality of 'mind your own business'), conservative, world-oriented (in the sense that he wants to compete with the highest existing standards of culture, economics, sports, etc.), a hard worker (an economic calvinist), respectful of authority with an inherent dislike for state power, modest, ever looking for consensus, pacifist, and suffering from an inferiority complex.

5   According to Giner (1995) one of the big problems of the "European identity" is precisely the success of its values. They are becoming world values, which makes their "Europeanness" less visible or even problematic.

identity" of its Belgian counterpart. Within the Belgian nation "(..) a Flemish sub-nation emerged" (Ibidem: 129, my translation).

II. The Need for an Objective National Identity

The above indicates that the discussion on the Flemish identity, like on all other national identities, is a never ending story with divergent possible outcomes. But is this discussion really relevant? Is the question about identities more than a question of feelings and perceptions, more than a question of objective reality? What matters is not the existence of properties that can be defined as typically Flemish or Belgian, but the feeling of the citizens of Belgium to be Flemish, Walloon, or Belgian. Otherwise stated, the feeling to belong to a Flemish, a Walloon, or a Belgian nation. Therefore, Duyck stated (1994: 112-113, my translation):
"Identity as a phenomenon doesn't need its analyzability to be confirmed. Identity is in the first place an existential feeling".

A. *The Existence of a Flemish Existential Feeling*

From the point of view of an existential feeling - i.e. the feeling of the inhabitants of Flanders that they are part of a Flemish nation - the picture is as controversial as the discussions on the objective basis of a Flemish identity. A survey conducted by a research team of the University of Leuven, showed that there exists something like a Flemish existential feeling, but that this feeling, however stronger than the Walloon one, is weaker than the feeling to belong to a Belgian nation (Maddens, Beerten & Billiet, 1994: 18-21). The group that identifies itself in the first place with Flanders is a little bit smaller than the one that has a stronger feeling for Belgium (42 against 39.7%). [6] Moreover, the strength of the feeling for Flanders can be relativized even more by the large group that wants to give priority to the Belgian interests (compared with the Flemish interests). The results are 67.5 against 25.9%.

A recent poll conducted by the daily *De Tijd* found that 63% of the Flemish are in favour of a return to a unitary country, i.e. want to finish the Flemish autonomy which is part of the newly federalized Belgian state. [7]

All these surveys clearly indicate that one can cast serious doubts on the existence of a widespread feeling of belonging to a Flemish nation in Flanders. Nonetheless, discussions on this nation and its existence continue to show up and to entail emotional reactions and acrimonious debate. Consequently, one could start to think that "the Flemish existential feeling" exists perhaps, but only in a small, but nevertheless influential group in the Flemish society. Interestingly, the above mentioned *De Tijd* survey also indicated that, whereas the support for a return to a unitary Belgian state is widespread in Flanders, only 3% of the Flemish politicians share this opinion. Also the study of the University of Leuven indicated that the priority given to Flanders is much stronger among Flemish intellectual elites than among the Flemish population at large (Maddens, Beerten & Billiet, 1994: 31-32; 39). The same results showed up in a survey among young Flemish politicians (Kerremans & Vanden Berghe, 1995: 87). Whereas 35.5% iden-

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6 In Wallonia, the group that gives priority to Belgium is much larger (67%).
7 Quoted in European Voice, Vol. 2, 1996, nô 4, p. 24

tified themselves to the Flanders as the most important source of their national identification, only 6% thought the same about Belgium.

Can one base oneself on these figures to say that there is no Flemish national feeling and, as a consequence, that there is no Flemish nation, nor identity? If one defines this identity as an existential feeling, this is certainly the conclusion. Even Flemish political leaders implicitly admit this. When they talk about the Flemish identity, their first concern appears to be the *recognition* by the Flemish population of their identity. In the plan of the Flemish government for its policy until the year 2002, the absence of a widespread attachment to the Flemish identity is admitted and the objective for the "recognition and the acknowledgment of the Flemish identity by the Flemish" is explicitly stated (Van den Brande, e.a., 1993: 14-16, my translation). Therefore, the former chairman of the Flemish Parliament, spoke in its maiden speech of "giving content to our Flemish identity" (Vlaamse Raad, 1994: 936-937). At regular intervals, one can hear Flemish politicians advocate the need to form a Flemish identity or to find public support for this identity. Consequently, the Flemish identity seems to be more a question of formation than a question of existence. In this process the social elites seems to have given an important role to themselves. If one looks at the way in which they (or at least part of them) fulfill this task, the similarity with the process of nation-formation in the nineteenth century is striking. In that period, nation-formation was also a process driven and steered by a small elite. The means used for this purpose were education and the media. As we will see, at least the second seems to remain as important nowadays.

B. *The Formation of the Flemish Identity: Lessons from Gellner and Others*

Ernest Gellner, in his efforts to explain the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, has focused on the role of capitalism in this process. Three consequences of Capitalism and its corollary, the industrial revolution, have been conducive to nation-building: the enlarged scale of social life, the emergence of a new social class, and the increased migrations.

The enlarged scale of social life emerged as the process of industrialization has increased mobility and migration. In the capitalist division of labor, living and working became separated, both functionally and geographically. Workers left their farms and homes to work in big factories in other cities. This confronted them with people from other towns which on its turn instigated the development of a standardized language. In addition, migrations confronted them with the similarities and dissimilarities of their group compared with others and with their relative deprivation (which was a factor that reinforced the identification with their own large group). According to Gellner, language played a very important role in this. The requirements of the industrialized mode of production reinforced on its turn the need for " (..) universal literacy and education, and a cultural homogeneity or at least continuity" (Gellner, 1987: 15; see also Gellner, 1993: 28). This need was satisfied by a social group that emerged as a consequence of the industrial revolution: the middle class. This middle class became the organizer of an education system that provided the necessary literacy. Gellners calls this the "centralized method of reproduction" which he defines as (1993: 29-30): *"(..) a method in which the local method is significantly complemented (or in extreme cases, wholly replaced) by an educational or training agency which is distinct from the local community, and which takes over the preparation of the human beings in question".*

It is through this educational system that the new middle class infused the population with a national consciousness, a consciousness that was instrumental to the stability of the society as a whole and that would help the masses to accept the existing inequalities for the sake of that whole. It was only in this way that a feeling of community could be developed among mutually anonymous people. According to Gellner (1987: 6), "the anonimity of membership" is *the* crucial trait of a nation. [8]

In the diffusion theories (Hechter, 1975; Deutsch, 1966), the role of education has been enlarged to interaction and communication in general. The central idea in this is that "from interaction will come commonality" (Hechter, 1975: 6-7; Deutsch, 1966: 86-90). Therefore, to a certain extent, one could say that the central role attributed by Gellner to the social elite's (defined as the upcoming middle class) in the last century has remained the same, but that the scope of the means has been widened in this century from mere education to communication in general. In a mediatized society like ours, this means that the mass media can be used as tools for the development of a national consciousness. Can we see such tools at work in the case of the Flemish identity? The following analysis attempts to provide the answer.

III. Media and the Formation of a Flemish Identity: a Survey

A. *Analyzing two Newspapers*

We would like to focus on the role played by the media in the formation of a Flemish identity. In order to do so, a small survey has been conducted in the way in which two Belgian newspapers have reported on Belgian federal politics in the course of three months. Admittedly, the operationalization of "the media" into two newspapers is risky. But the objective of the survey was not to give final conclusions, just to provide indications of the way in which a certain social elite uses a particular kind of media to promote and to stimulate the formation of a Flemish identity. For that reason, we took two elitist newspapers, one Flemish and one Walloon and made a content analysis of their articles. Three questions were central in this analysis. First, in how many cases a Flemish/Walloon (or Francophone) perspective was used in the presentation of an issue of Belgian federal politics? Second, what was the source of this perspective? Were it the politicians that used this perspective or did it emerge in the minds of the journalists? Finally, the question was raised how the perspective emerged. Did it emerge as a reaction to "the other side" or not?

In our analysis we just looked at the newspaper reports on Belgian federal politics (i.e. within the scope of the federal government or parliament), for the first three months of 1994 (this period was chosen randomly), that were published in

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8 One can see this clearly in his definition of a nation: "A nation is a large collection of men such that its members identify with the collectivity without being acquainted with its other members, and without identifying in any important way with sub-groups of that collectivity" (Gellner, 1987: 6).

De Standaard and *Le Soir.* [9] We didn't look at the letters from readers or to the editorials from people other than the journalists of the two newspapers. [10]

B. *Flemish Pro-Activism and Francophone Re-Activism*

At first sight, the Flemish newspaper "De Standaard" has put more federal political matters into a Flemish-Walloon perspective than "Le Soir". Of the 402 articles published on the federal politics of Belgium, 120 or 29.8% of them put the problem in that perspective. For "Le Soir", 60 of the 291 articles on federal politics were put into a Flemish-Walloon perspective. That is 20.6%.

Interesting are also the differences in the source of the perspective. For "De Standaard", in 47 of the 120 cases (39.2%), the perspective was provided by the politicians. In these cases the journalist restricted himself to reporting this. In 60 cases (50%) the perspective was provided by the journalist. In 13 cases (10.8%), both the politicians and the journalist gave a Flemish-Walloon perspective to the case.

In the case of "Le Soir" the figures are somewhat different. The politicians provided in most of the cases the Flemish-Walloon perspective (35 of the 60 cases, or 58.4%). The journalists did that in 19 cases or 31.6%. In the remaining cases, 6 (or 10%) the perspective was provided by both of them.

The difference in the source could be explained by looking at the reason why the perspective was provided by the journalists. In the case of "De Standaard", the provision of the perspective by the journalists was pro-active in all cases. They didn't do this in reaction to the provision of such a perspective by "the other side" (colleagues from Francophone newspapers or television channels, or Francophone politicians) but on their own initiative. In the case of "Le Soir" however, 25% (15 cases) of the perspectives were attributed in reaction to declarations of Flemish politicians (7 cases), to reports in the Flemish press (7 cases; in most of these cases, "Le Soir" refers to "De Standaard") or to both of them (1 case). But even if there is no direct reference to a Flemish politician or to the Flemish press, the Flemish-Walloon perspective is introduced in reaction to alleged risks that the Flemish would introduce such a perspective or did it in the past.

All these results bring us to the conclusion that both, the Flemish politicians and the journalists of "De Standaard" feel themselves more inclined to think, speak and write in Flemish-Walloon perspectives than their Walloon counterparts or their colleagues from "Le Soir".

However, figures are just figures. They only tell part of the story. By analyzing the content of the different articles, the impression of the pro-active attitude of both the Flemish politicians and the journalists of "De Standaard" is reinforced, just like the reactive attitude of their colleagues on the other side of the linguistic border. By reading "De Standaard", one gets the impression that they mostly

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9 The choice of these newspapers was based on the fact that both of them are real elite newspapers with the largest number of readers in respectively the Flemish and Francophone Belgium. The pitfall of this choice could be that De Standaard belongs to the more Flemish among the Flemish newspapers. An extension of our survey to the daily De Morgen (which is a smaller, leftist, elite newspaper) would be useful for further research.

10 I am very grateful to Nora Rylant who analyzed the articles of *De Standaard*.

take the initiative of pointing at the other side, while "Le Soir" is on the defence. This is also visible in the timing of the perspective. In most cases, the Flemish-Walloon perspective is introduced by Flemish politicians or Flemish journalists first and only a few days later by their Walloon counterparts (even if they not always make it explicit that they are reacting). When Flemish politicians introduce the perspective, the reaction comes much faster, and with headlines. When it is a reaction to Flemish journalists, the reaction comes later and only with headlines if the reaction in Flanders is perceived as "massive".

Another difference is that whereas the Flemish side mostly starts thinking, writing and speaking in terms of "Flanders" and "Wallonia", the reaction on the Francophone side mostly starts with distinguishing between particular Flemish political parties or newspapers. It is only when the controversy becomes more intensive that, slowly but steadily, the reference is replaced by "the Flemish" or "Flanders". A typical example is the "Agusta case". [11] This case consisted of a scandal in which, at that time, three famous Walloon politicians were involved. [12] Despite growing evidence against them, the three of them didn't want to resign. At a certain moment, Flemish politicians and journalists started to consider this as proof of the fact that the rules of political dignity are different in both regions. In Flanders, it was argued that a politician in such a situation would have resigned much earlier. This conviction was supported by the fact that at the same time the chairman of the Flemish Council had resigned because of his alleged involvement in another scandal (he was later acquitted for this). Whereas "De Standaard" started to report and to speak about the political dignity in "Wallonia" (Jan. 7 and 9, 1994), "Le Soir" started to make the distinction between some Flemish that talked that way and some that didn't (Jan. 14, 1994). On January 23, in reaction to the resignation of the ministers that were involved, "Le Soir" reported on "the Flemish parties" and their opinions on the political dignity in Wallonia. On January 25, "the Flemish parties" was replaced by "Flanders". In the same vain, the reference to particular Flemish persons (like in the case of health care, amnesty, or the investment plans of the railways) has been gradually replaced by "Flanders". But whatever the reference, "Le Soir" seems to react to what the Flemish say or are supposed to say, rather than by introducing a Flemish-Walloon perspective by itself.

The analysis of three months of reporting brings us to the conclusion that "De Standaard" and the Flemish politicians on which it reports, behave in the first place as Flemish. The "Flemish perspective", if not always present, is dominant. In "Le Soir", this is not the case. There, one gets the impression that first a Belgian perspective is used, and only in the second place (and mostly as a reaction to the Flemish) the perspectives of the Francophone Belgians or Walloons are being presented.

If one looks at the extent to which "De Standaard" and most of the Flemish politicians, on which this newspaper has reported, use the Flemish perspective, and if one compares this with the low level of support or interest for that perspective among the Flemish inhabitants of Belgium, the difference is striking. At least part of the Flemish elite seems to think in completely different identity refe-

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11   The Agusta case has been considered as a federal case until the defence minister, Coème, resigned on January 22, 1994.

12   Only in 1995, the emphasis in this case shifted from the Walloon socialists to the Flemish socialists. In October 1995, it would even result in the resignation of Willy Claes, a Flemish socialist and former foreign minister, as NATO Secretary-General.

rences than most of the population. [13] This seems to indicate that there is more need for an emphasis on Flanders, the Flemish identity, and the Flemish interest among these elite's than among the population in general.

Conclusion: the Flemish Identity: Existent or Nascent?

Discussions on the existence of whatever identity are nebulous, and therefore, difficult to conclude with a clear conclusion. But if one approaches the Flemish identity from the point of view of an existential feeling shared by the Flemish, the conclusion can only be that doubts have to be cast on its existence. Among Flemish elites, this existential feeling seems to exist, but not among its population. This brings us to the question whether these elites feel themselves inclined to emphasize the existence of something that is not recognized by the population in general. Our analysis seems to indicate this. Politicians and at least part of the Flemish journalists, seem to be anxious to convince the population of the existence of a Flemish identity by using Flemish symbols (a flag and an anthem), Flemish references (do we have to talk about the Flemish coast or the Belgian coast [14]), and Flemish perspectives. By using these perspectives in the mass media, one can expect that the elites will finally succeed in letting the population think in Flemish-Walloon perspectives. One indication of this was the question of the social security transfers from Flanders and Wallonia in the survey of Maddens, Beerten en Billiet (1994: 18-21). Whereas 67.5% of the respondents said to give priority to the Belgian interests instead of the Flemish, only 49.3% did so in the case of social security. This could be an indication that already large parts of the Flemish population are convinced that there is something wrong with these transfers. Together with the results of our newspaper survey, this is maybe an indication that the Flemish elite's are doing the job attributed to them by Gellner, i.e. mobilizing the masses in order to create a national identity. As such they could be the midwifes of a nascent, but still contested Flemish identity.

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13 Besides that, the Walloon elites (both politicians and journalists) react to their Flemish counterparts as if the whole of Flanders thinks in the same way.

14 This discussion erupted in the Summer of 1995 when a radio journalist (and a scholar on questions of nationalities) was criticized for talking about the 'Belgian' instead of the 'Flemish' coast.

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Summary: The Flemish Identity: Nascent or Existent?

The existence of a Flemish identity is a much debated issue in the Flanders. Some deny its existence on the basis of a rejection of national identities all together. Others perceive it as just one variant of a Western European identity. Still others consider it, not as a identity on its own but as part of the Belgian identity. Whatever the outcome, the discussion itself seems to be restricted to a small elite. The general public in the Flanders is not interested in the issue and doesn't seem to identify itself with a Flemish identity. A small empirical research indicates however, that part of the Flemish politicians and journalists use this identity as a perspective on politics and society. For that reason, the Flemish identity seems to be a condition which is quite similar to the one attributed by Gellner to national identities in the nineteenth century. Isn't it better therefore, to talk about a nascent instead of an existent Flemish identity?