

Belgium's Adaptation to the EU. Does Federalism Constrain Europeanisation ?

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I. Prologue

In January 2002 the Belgian media focused on an amusing debate between two prominent politicians, belonging to two different political parties in power. Federal minister for mobility and traffic safety Isabelle Durant (Ecolo) and former junior minister for traffic safety Jan Peeters (SP.A) openly disagreed on the introduction of new license plates. Already in August 2001 Isabelle Durant had decided to introduce reflecting plates at the front-side of all cars. The new regulation would officially start in January 2002 but prosecution would only be organised from July 2002 onwards. The basic argument for the introduction was that reflecting license plates would increase visibility and therefore traffic safety. In January 2002, MP Jan Peeters declared that it was unacceptable to oblige all Belgian car-owners to buy a new plate, because 'Europe' would soon introduce a European plate to replace national plates. Although Jan Peeters belongs to a coalition partner, he regarded the matter important enough to propose a law in an attempt to block the introduction. In an official response, the minister acknowledged the imminent introduction of the European plates, but added that the Belgian reflecting plates would only replace the front side ones, while the European plates would replace the rear-side ones. Hence, she concluded, both could easily co-exist: there would be no need for Belgians to buy new front-side plates after the implementation of the European directive. Jan Peeters said to be happy with this compromise, but at the same time he asked whether the minister had checked the possibility of the co-existence with the European Commission. The minister clearly did not. Neither did the MP, however. If they had, both would have discovered what a newspaper journalist did. One call to the cabinet of the Commissioner was enough for him to learn that 'Europe' had no plans whatsoever to introduce a European license plate in the near future. To sum up, the minister, her 'cabinet', the administration, the other ministers, the MP, neither his staff, nor his colleagues had been aware of the European context, nor did they think about contacting the Commission to check things out.

II. Introduction

At first sight, the license plate story is a case of minor importance. However, it is only one of the most recent examples of a series of events that question the degree of Belgian adaptation to the European Union. Especially European environmental and health policies seem to be rather problematic for Belgian authorities (waste,

nitrites, habitats, food additives...). All together, these issues touch upon the core of Belgium's European policy-making and therefore raise rather substantive questions about the degree of Europeanisation in Belgium.

In this article, Europeanisation is used in the top-down tradition¹ and hence points to the extent an EU member state is Europeanised, i.e. the degree of impact the EU level has on national and sub-national levels. In other words, Europeanisation deals with the extent to which (a range of structural and cultural aspects of) the member state level is adapted to the requirements of EU-membership. Whether or not Belgium is less or more Europeanised than other member states, is not the question that will be tackled here². However, also beyond such a comparative perspective, one can ask the question why Belgium seems to be confronted with a series of mismatches between the national and the European level.

The Belgian case is remarkable because one can easily imagine many reasons why Belgium could be – on the contrary – very highly Europeanised. First of all, Belgium is always regarded as the 'champion of European integration', meaning that it explicitly wants the European Union to develop along federal lines. It is not an overstretched expectation that such a position towards the EU is rooted in a context of European awareness and could lead to a rather easy adaptation to European requirements. Secondly, being a member state since 1952, one could assume that Belgium has had a long period to adapt to the European context. Moreover, as one of the founding fathers, Belgian representatives should have been able to shape European institutional and policy requirements – at least to a certain extent –, hence reducing the adaptation pressure and enhancing the degree of Europeanisation. Thirdly, Brussels becomes every day a little bit more the true European Capital. "The EU is therefore not in Belgium's backyard, it is in its drawing room, its kitchen, even its bedroom"³. One could expect Belgian policy-makers therefore to be subject to rather intensive Europeanisation pressures.

However, the impact of pro-European mindedness, long-time membership and proximity of European institutions on the degree of Belgian Europeanisation is not

¹ GREEN COWLES, M., CAPORASO, J., RISSE, TH. (eds.), *Transforming Europe: Europeanization and Domestic Change*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001; HERITIER, A., KERWER, D., KNILL, CH., LEHMKUHL, D., TEUTSCH, M., *Differential Europe: New Opportunities and Restrictions for Policy-Making in Member States*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2001; KNILL, Ch., *The Europeanisation of National Administrations. Patterns of Institutional Change and Persistence*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001; BOERZEL, T., *States and Regions in the European Union. Institutional Adaptation in Germany and Spain*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2002; KNILL, Ch., LEHMKUHL, D., *The National Impact of European Union Regulatory Policy: Three Europeanization Mechanisms*, *European Journal of Political Research*, 2002, vol. 41, 255-150.

² Comparative empirical data to answer this question are not yet available.

³ KERREMANS, B., BEYERS, J., *The Belgian Permanent Representation to the European Union: Mailbox, Messenger or Representative?*, pp. 191-210 in H. Kassim, A. Mennon and V. Wright (eds.), *The National Co-ordination of EU Policy: the European Level*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2001.

that linear. I will argue in this article that these hypotheses and expectations are based on superficial and incomplete analyses, because all three potentially Europeanisation-enhancing factors are constrained by domestic institutional features which act as intervening variables. In other words, whereas the potentially adaptation-increasing factors are numerous, this article will focus on how existing domestic institutions put serious constraints on a smooth adaptation process. The purpose of this article is therefore not to discuss the degree of impact of Europe on domestic institutions – which is the basic research line within the top-down Europeanisation research. This exercise must be placed within a specific niche of top-down Europeanisation research, which aims to explore the impact of domestic institutions on the extent to which the EU has impact on its member states.

The central argument is that federalism, both in dynamic terms – the federalisation process – and in output terms – the federal architecture – has had and still has got a negative impact on the Europeanisation process in Belgium. This line of arguing is similar to the one that has been elaborated by Börzel⁴. The argument is that highly decentralised or federal states have more difficulties to adapt to the EU than more centralised states. In addition, not all federal states encounter the same amount of problems: those federations whose sub-national levels opt for a confrontational strategy are more vulnerable than federations whose regions choose for co-operation with the federal level. In this respect Börzel speaks of competitive regionalism versus co-operative federalism, taking Spain and Germany respectively as illustrations. If levels rather compete than co-operate, she argues, “(...) actors strive to shift the costs to each other, which prevents the adjustments needed to re-establish the institutional equilibrium”⁵. Now, Belgium can be characterised more by competition than by co-operation. The Belgian ‘falling apart’ federalism leads to a situation characterised by continuous demands of regional levels for more autonomy and by a growing number of conflicts between the different levels. More concretely with respect to European policies, especially the Flemish Region puts a lot of effort in strategies to by-pass the federal level and to become a player of its own right in the European and international arena⁶. Also the mere fact that Belgian Regions can conduct their own foreign policies (*cf. infra*) leads to competition-like scenarios. Hence, it can be expected that Belgium is subject to a difficult Europeanisation process.

This competitive nature of Belgian federalism doesn't only constrain the domestic Europeanisation process because of the characteristics of its *formal institutional*

⁴ BOERZEL, T., Towards Convergence in Europe ? Institutional Adaptation to Europeanization in Germany and Spain, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 1999, vol. 37, 4, 573-596; BOERZEL, T., 2002, *o.c.*

⁵ BOERZEL, T., 2002, *o.c.*

⁶ See for instance the efforts Flanders has made to become directly involved in the 2000 IGC: BURSENS, P., How Multilevel Are IGC's ? The Belgian Federation and the 2000 IGC, *Regional and Federal Studies*, 2002, vol. 12, 3.

architecture but also because of the mentality and policy preferences of Belgian political actors which are partly caused by the *federalisation process*⁷. In the following, both these formal and informal mechanisms will be elaborated upon in an analysis of (1) Belgium's *European mindedness and awareness* and (2) its *domestic organisation of European policy-making* (including its up-loading and down-loading capacities). In other words, this article will explore to what extent the process of federalisation and the existing federal architecture put constraints on the Europeanisation of (1) political behaviour towards the European Union and (2) the elaboration of European co-ordination mechanisms⁸.

Summarising, this article seeks to explore how federalism in its dynamic (the federalisation process) and static (the federal structure) aspects constrains the Europeanisation of formal (procedures, mechanisms, agencies) and informal (opinions, awareness) aspects of Belgian politics. The following paragraph deals with the Europeanisation of European opinions and attitudes, while paragraph three focuses on the domestic institutional organisation of EU politics.

III. Belgian Elite and Popular Opinion on European Integration

A member state's degree of Europeanisation is not the same as the level of European mindedness of a member state. Neither can a heavily Europeanised public opinion be regarded to be the same as a pro-integration opinion. Also a well informed but Euro-sceptic opinion can be considered to be a Europeanised opinion. In this respect, the Danish public, for instance, must be considered to be more Europeanised than the Belgian public⁹. A Europeanised opinion can therefore be defined as an informed, articulated, interested, well-argued opinion of political elites and citizens who are aware that the European level has large impact on their political and daily lives and who are able and willing to translate this awareness in their political and personal behaviour. The following paragraphs will discuss opinions and awareness of the Belgian political elites and of the Belgian public towards the EU. I will elaborate on them and analyse their origins. More con-

⁷ As such this explanatory model follows the duality that has also been proposed by Knill. He argues that the degree of Europeanisation must be studied by both institution-based explanations (the federal architecture) and by agency-based explanations (the federalisation process); KNILL, Ch., 2001, *o.c.*.

⁸ These two clusters of dependent variables belong to both formal aspects (uploading and downloading co-ordination mechanisms) and informal aspects (political and administrative culture, opinions) of Belgian European policy-making. Also Knill acknowledges this double pressure. 'Member states feel an adaptation pressure in terms of structure (hard) en style/culture (soft). On the one hand, European integration and policies may ask for the creation of new structures, the centralisation or decentralisation of regulatory policies, (...) horizontal organisational change. On the other hand the EU may ask for change in patterns of regulatory intervention and administrative interest intermediation.'; KNILL, Ch., 2001, *o.c.*

⁹ BURSENS, P., Why Denmark and Belgium Have Different Implementation Records. On Transposition Laggards and Leaders in the EU, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 2002, vol. 25, 2, 173-195.

cretely, I will look for the extent to which federal characteristics shape EU-opinions and awareness.

A. *Belgian EU Policy: from Intergovernmentalist to Federalist ?*

Whether the elites or the public like the EU or not, is not the core issue at stake in the Europeanisation debate. It is, however, interesting to examine where the opinions – whatever they may be – come from. More in particular I'm interested in whether Belgian opinions stem from the federal dimension, to what extent they do and the consequences of this in terms of Europeanisation.

It is commonly accepted that Belgium has always been and still is the most pro-integration member state of the EU¹⁰. However, this image is not completely correct and should be modified in several ways. Above all, this paragraph explores the reasons for this alleged pro-European attitude. Firstly, the Belgian position towards integration should be analysed both in economic and political terms. The history of Belgian foreign policy reveals that with respect to international *economic* relations Belgium was already during the interbellum a very active supporter of the creation of a multilateral European economic organisation. Also immediately after World War II the Belgian government continued to plead for European economic co-operation. Belgium participated in the Marshall-plan and created, together with the Netherlands and Luxembourg, the Benelux. The three Benelux countries also wrote a common memorandum for the Messina-summit of 1955, arguing for the installation of a West-European common market, starting with the enlargement of the Benelux customs union and gradually evolving into a fully-fledged economic union. This pleading for economic integration continued to be a core aspect of Belgium's European policy and even today nearly all political parties support the Belgian membership of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU).

With respect to the *political* unification of Europe, Belgium has evolved from an adversary over a critical supporter towards a fierce adherent of a federal Europe. In the 1920's and 1930's Belgium stressed its neutrality and its first reactions to the Schuman-Monnet plans in 1950 were rather cool¹¹. During the first years of the European Communities Belgium could hardly be considered to be supra-nationalist. Only in 1979 Belgium left the intergovernmental path and turned into the federalist direction. This change in policy can be illustrated by official position

¹⁰ This alleged continuous pursuit of a federal Europe is sometimes called 'the Belgian orthodoxy'; see FRANCK, Ch., *La politique européenne de la Belgique. Les années 1970-1996: entre orthodoxie et pragmatisme*, *Res Publica*, 1998, vol. 40, 2, 197-212.

¹¹ COOLSAET, R. *België en zijn buitenlandse politiek, 1830-2000*, Leuven, Van Halewyck, 2001; COOLSAET, R. *Continuïteit en discontinuïteit in het Belgische Europa-beleid*, *Res Publica*, 1998, vol. 40, 2, 179-191.

papers and coalition agreements of the past 25 years. It is a more difficult task to explain why exactly Belgium changed its point of view. In this respect, historic accounts such as those from Coolsaet show that both international and domestic factors have caused the policy shift. Becoming in favour of a stronger European unity was certainly caused by a decrease of the Atlantic solidarity at the end of the 70's. Also the feeling that the *méthode communautaire* had made the European experiment to a success has led the Belgian political elites to plead in favour of a more federal future for Europe. At the same time, however, the pro European stance was rooted in domestic political objectives. Some political parties hoped to trigger an internal (downwards) federalisation process by pointing to the successful (upwards) federalisation process in a European perspective. This opinion originated within the regionalist parties and was copied by the more traditional parties and notably by those always in power (i.e. the Christian Democrats) after the electoral breakthrough of their regionalist competitors. In other words, support for European integration in a federal way was used to legitimise the domestic federalisation process towards more power for the regional entities¹². The result of this evolution was that the coalition government led by Wilfried Martens in 1979 explicitly opted for a federal Europe and for the (limited) foreign competencies of the regional entities (cf. *infra*).

Also later in history, Belgian support for crucial EU policies should be understood as the result of combined ideological, economic and domestic political factors. This was for instance the case with the Belgian support for EMU and more in particular for the Belgian efforts to become part of the first wave of EMU-members. Of course, being pro-EMU must be understood as a core expression of the overall Belgian pro-integration ideology. In addition, however, becoming part of the EMU was an absolute economic necessity. The Belgian budget deficit and public debt had risen to enormous heights during the '80s. For some politicians – including prime-minister Martens – the obligation to meet the Maastricht criteria was used as a supplementary argument to clean up Belgian finances. In some way, support for the EMU might be considered as an example of using the EU to reach domestic policy goals (cf. *infra*, the uploading mechanism). Acting this way, prime-minister Martens can be seen as a very Europeanised politician – which he really proved to be when he became, after his national career, a leading MEP.

The struggle for EMU membership was furthermore partly understood as a tool to ease tensions between the two Belgian communities (Flanders and Wallonia). Indeed, EMU-membership became an obsession of the Dehaene-led coalition governments in the late nineties. A failure could have been used by radical Flemish politicians to blame Wallonia, for not co-operating and for being unwilling to clean up the unhealthy financial situation. Similarly, the Belgian position in favour of a

¹² COOLSAET, R., 2001, *o.c.*

strong structural and cohesion policy, must be understood out of pro-EU ideology, sound economic reasoning (cohesion is good for the entire European economy) but also from the domestic political argument that solidarity transfers from the richer north (Flanders) to the poorer south (Wallonia) could better be co-financed by other rich EU-member states than by the Belgian (Flemish) budget alone.

Summarising, the sources of the pro-integration attitude are to a certain extent to be found in political parties' policy positions towards domestic political issues, such as the institutional architecture of the country. Of course, domestic politics is not the only, and perhaps not even the most important factor to explain the Belgian European positions. Indeed, also after the intra-Belgian federalisation process had been started, the pro-integration attitude remained dominant among a wide range of political elites. The Belgian case does illustrate, however, that a pro-integration approach is not exclusively rooted in a profound European knowledge or awareness nor exclusively in a pro-European ideology.

On top of this, the focus on Belgian domestic political problems has resulted in only marginal attention for European politics. This can be illustrated by several aspects and actors. Firstly, European election campaigns are not focused on European topics but are dominated by domestic political issues. EP-elections must therefore be rather considered as an evaluation of the national government's performance. This is true for many member-states¹³ but especially for Belgium¹⁴. Secondly, Belgian politicians don't seem to be very much aware or interested in the European dimension. This attitude is reflected in the low degree of attention that is given by parliamentary bodies to the control of the different governments' European policies. Comparative analyses of the role of national parliaments in European policy-making classify the Belgian Federal Parliament as weak¹⁵. Research on Belgium confirms these views, not only for the federal Parliament, but also for the regional parliaments¹⁶. Thirdly, this lack of attention for European politics by political elites is reinforced by the lack of attention from the media. Only a very small part of the (elite) news media seems to be adequately informed on EU-matters. The popular media (newspapers, radio and television) hardly bring any

¹³ IRWIN, G., *Second Order or Third Rate ? Issues in the Campaign for the Elections for the European Parliament*, *Electoral Studies*, 1995, vol. 38, 1, 183-199.

¹⁴ BEYERS, J., *Permissieve consensus, maatschappelijk debat en het draagvlak van de Europese Unie bij de Belgische maatschappelijke organisaties*, *Res Publica*, 1998, vol. 40, 2, 247-272.

¹⁵ RAUNIO, T., WIBERG, M., *Does Consensus Lead to Ignorance ? National Parliaments and the Legitimacy of EU Governance*, *ECPR Joint Sessions*, Mannheim, March 26-31, 1999; MAURER, A., WESSELS, W. (eds.), *National Parliaments on their Ways to Europe: Losers or Latecomers ?*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2002.

¹⁶ BURSENS, P., "Why Denmark and Belgium ...", o.c., 2002; LEJEUNE, Y., *La participation de la Belgique à l'élaboration et à la mise en œuvre du droit européen*, Brussel, Bruylant, 1999. To give just one example: in February 2002, the parliamentary debate about the nomination of the representative of the Belgian federal parliament to the European Convention was not focused on the European skills of the nominees but on the delicate political balance between the coalition partners.

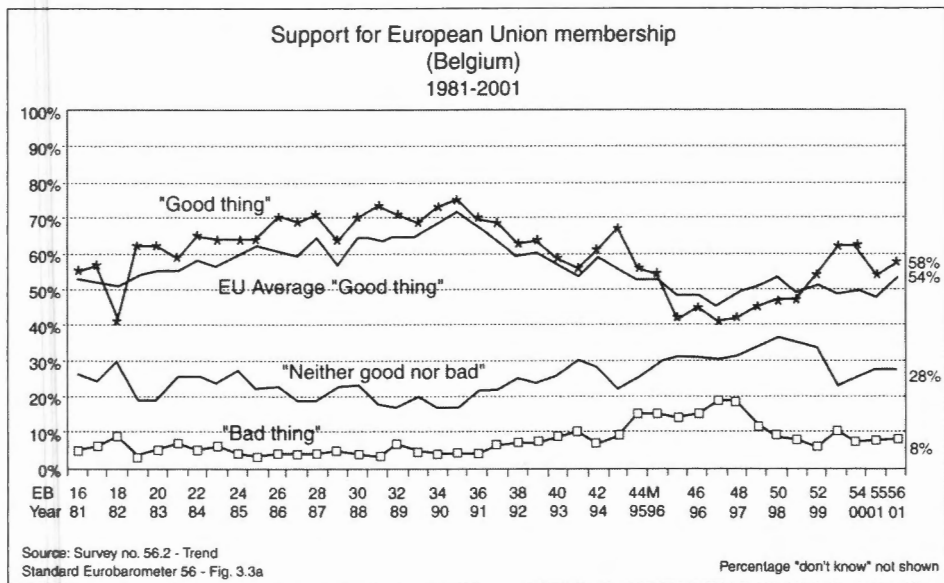
European news besides human interest stories of European politicians. This situation is probably also rooted in the overall pro-European consensus among political elites. Such a consensus hardly allows any debate on European issues, which makes Europe not really a sexy topic to focus on for popular newspapers and television news. In addition, this lack of attention for European issues in the media has serious consequences for the opinions and attitudes of the Belgian public opinion. I will focus on this relationship in the next paragraph.

To conclude this section, one can say that Belgium's federalist position stems from a complex set of factors. It is clear that being a pro-European politician is not only a matter of ideology and economic interests, but also the result of domestic political relationships: to a certain extent, the ideas with respect to the reform of the Belgian federal state influence the political parties' positions on the issue of European integration. In addition, the federalisation process, strengthened by other variables such as the role of the media and the overall political consensus on European integration, have created a political context in which domestic political issues, such as the appeasement of the communities, are dominant and in which hardly any time is left to broaden the scope of attention to the outside world, including the EU. In terms of Europeanisation, this means that, despite the favourable conditions discussed in the introduction, Belgian political elites are constrained in their European awareness by their inward focus on the federalisation process of the country.

B. Belgian Public Opinion: Still a Permissive Consensus ?

Despite the moderate European awareness, it remains true that nowadays Belgian politicians and other opinion leaders are very much in favour of a supra-national Europe. This attitude is, however, not completely backed by the broad public opinion. Euro-barometer data reveal that the Belgian public – unlike its political leaders – has never been and still is not the champion of integration. An analysis of recent Euro-barometer data shows that since the 1980's the Belgian public has only been a moderate supporter of integration, following more or less the average European opinion and sometimes even dropping below the average (notably at the time of the devaluation of the Belgian Franc in 1982 and during the struggle to meet the Maastricht criteria in the late '90s).

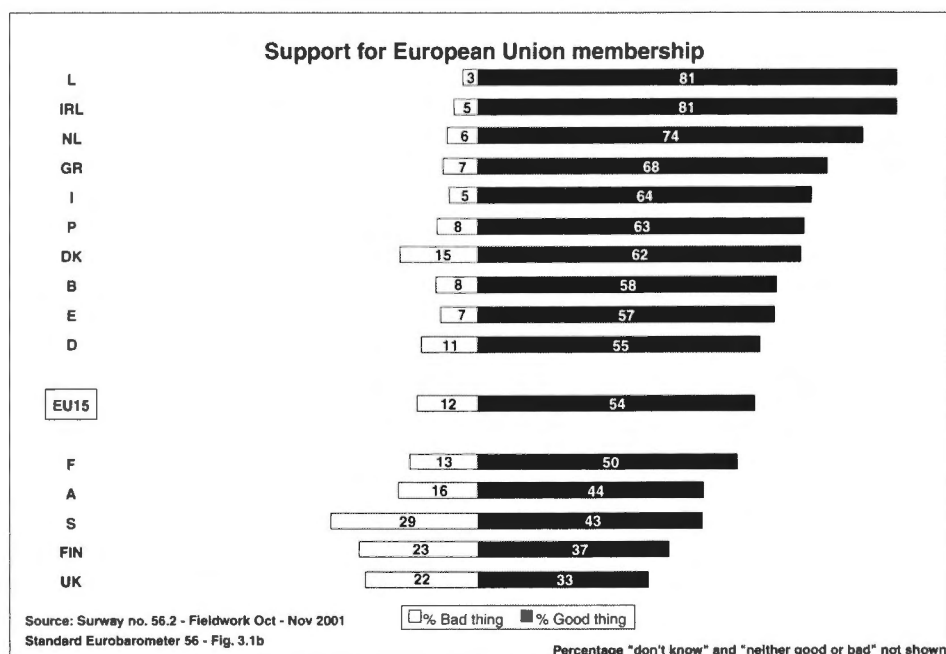
Figure 1: Belgian Support for EU Membership (Source: Euro-barometer 56)



At the same time this rather moderate support does not pose any political problems. Indeed, the percentage that considers the Belgian EU membership a bad thing is also quite low. Mobilisation against European integration in general or the Belgian EU-membership in particular is therefore not very likely. Of course, as in all EU member states, protest by particular groups (trade unions, farmers lobbies, anti-globalisation protesters) against particular policies sometimes occurs. Combining the figures of support and opposition, an interesting and for this article highly relevant feature of the Belgian public opinion becomes clear: it is above all not interested in the EU. In a comparative perspective Belgians seem to be even consistently among the most indifferent publics within the EU. The result of this has been characterised by the concept of *permissive consensus*¹⁷: inspired by indifference, the public adopts a *laissez faire – laissez passer* attitude towards the broadly shared pro-integration positions of the political elites.

¹⁷ BEYERS, J., 1998, *o.c.*

Figure 2: Support for EU Membership by Country (Source: Euro-barometer 56)



This political indifference is a general feature of the Belgian public opinion, but it is most manifest with respect to the European Union. It can be partly explained by the overall historical and cultural background of a rather indifferent public opinion, not only towards local government, but also toward national government and certainly toward European government. In addition, when discussing politics, the (popular) media almost exclusively focus on domestic political stories, above all the consecutive state reforms and the disputes between the communities. The news media are therefore not really helping in getting the public more acquainted with European politics¹⁸. To make the circle round, an uninterested public opinion is very unlikely to articulate European demands or to evaluate their political representatives with respect to the European positions they take. Consequently, politicians are not motivated to focus on European issues: opinions on the EU don't determinate electoral victories or defeats. Strong positions on domestic issues, such as state reforms, bring more potential electoral benefits. In short, political elites and the media don't make Europe very attractive, which results in a rather modest degree of European awareness among the Belgian public.

¹⁸ NORRIS, P., *A Virtuous Circle. Political Communications in Post-Industrial Societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2000.

Summarising this paragraph, it can be concluded that in spite of the location of the European institutions in Brussels, in spite of a long term membership of the EU, and in spite of pro-European politicians, Europe is no core business for either the political elites or the general public. Both groups clearly suffer from a modest interest and awareness in European issues. This paragraph has illustrated that the low degree of Europeanisation is partly induced by a one-sided focus on domestic institutional issues, such as the consecutive state reforms and disputes between the communities. One should add, however, that this preoccupation with domestic issues is probably not the only factor at play. Future research will have to seek for other factors.

IV. Domestic Organisation of European Policy-Making Mechanisms

This paragraph deals with domestic European policy-making mechanisms and more in particular with the installation of the co-ordination mechanisms. To what extent was the installation of European co-ordinating bodies and procedures in Belgium inspired by the European context? Did the introduction of constitutional and organisational reforms also take into account the efficient participation of Belgium within the related European policy-domains? Can the hypothesis that the degree of adaptation is determined by domestic factors be confirmed? Is, in other words, a potentially smooth adaptation process in Belgium obstructed by the absolute priority for domestic political issues during domestic institutional reform? Besides a reconstruction of the genesis of the mechanisms put into place, also an evaluation of the implementation performance is used to answer the question why Belgium is insufficiently adapted to the European requirements.

The general hypothesis follows an institutional argument which stipulates that European co-ordination mechanisms are based on existing domestic mechanisms (path dependency). This line of thinking leads to investigate the impact of domestic institutions. "Institution based approaches emphasise the role of existing institutional configurations as independent explanatory factors in the analysis of political outcomes and institutional development"¹⁹. With respect to Belgium this would mean that the consecutive state reforms should make changes in the European co-ordination mechanisms to keep them in line with European requirements. This is not an easy strategy, however, because the existing institutions tend to defend their institutional interests and are therefore difficult to alter. March and Olsen call this institutional stickiness or the logic of appropriateness²⁰. This phenomenon is also found by Kassim who argues "(...) that the systems developed by the member states for the co-ordination of EU policy have been shaped primarily by pre-

¹⁹ KNILL, Ch., 2001, *o.c.*

²⁰ MARCH, J., OLSEN, J.P., *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics*. New York, Free Press, 1984.

existing domestic institutional structures and values"²¹. Likewise, the pressure from above (the European Union) is "necessarily mediated through the existing institutional structures and values which characterise each national politico-administrative system"²². Also Börzel defends the fact that domestic adaptation to Europe is path dependent: "[T]he domestic impact of Europe is differential because it is institution dependent; the extent to which Europeanisation changes the institutions of the member states depends on these very institutions"²³. In the same study she argues that "[I]nstitution dependency denotes, first, that institutional adaptation to environmental changes is influenced by the strategies that actors choose in response and second, that the choice of adaptational strategies depends on the institutions in which actors are embedded"²⁴.

A more detailed analysis of the last two state reforms illustrates that the path dependency logic in the Belgian case was quite extreme because the debates were almost totally dominated by domestic arguments. That should be no surprise because the purpose of the reforms was to build (1993) and to refine (2001) the federal state of Belgium. However, since almost all competencies that were under revision – including foreign policy – had major European links, it is surprising that the European context was hardly taken into account. Let us examine this more closely.

A. *St-Michiel agreement (1992-93)*

Part of the coalition agreement of the Martens VIII government was a detailed description of the agenda of a next round of state reform negotiations. This agenda explicitly included foreign affairs (the right for Regions and Communities to conclude treaties) as an issue to be agreed upon during the talks, mentioning that an agreement on foreign affairs could only be reached as part of an overall package deal²⁵. However, unexpected troubles (export licences for weapons) ended the coalition before such an overall agreement could be voted in the Parliament. The coalition agreement of the next government (Dehaene I) restarted the state reform talks with the issues that the previous government had left behind. From then onwards, the negotiations were no longer held between the coalition partners, but within the framework of the so-called 'Dialogue between the Communities'. This innovative method allowed for the involvement of all (democratic) parties whose

²¹ KASSIM, H., PETERS, G.B, Conclusion: Co-ordinating National Action in Brussels – A Comparative Perspective, pp. 297-342, in H. Kassim, G.B. Peters and V. Wright (eds.), *The National Co-ordination of EU Policy: the European Level*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2001.

²² HARMSSEN, R., *The Europeanization of National Administrations: A Comparative Study of France and the Netherlands*, *Governance*, 1999, vol. 12, 1, 81-113.

²³ BOERZEL, 2002, *o.c.*

²⁴ BOERZEL, 2002, *o.c.*

²⁵ CLEMENT, J., D'HONDT, H., VAN CROMBRUGGHE, J. and VANDERVEEREN, Ch., *Het Sint-Michielsakkoord en zijn achtergronden*, Antwerpen, Maklu, 1993.

support had become necessary because the coalition parties on their own no longer disposed of the required two-third majority in Parliament. During the negotiations, a working group on international affairs very quickly reached an agreement on the issue of foreign affairs because this group could broadly copy the text that already had been agreed upon during the previous government²⁶. A few months later an overall agreement was concluded and the negotiators were able to present the so-called St-Michiël Agreement (September 29th, 1992). The texts were translated in laws and new constitutional articles, and were finally adopted by the Federal Parliament. A new Belgian constitution and a new Belgian federal state were born. A remarkable feature of this new constitution was that Regions and Communities were granted the right to conclude international treaties.

In fact, two domestic factors led to this decision:

- (1) a political reason: the regional right to conduct treaties was a demand formulated by regionalist parties, who were indispensable partners to reach an overall agreement;
- (2) an institutional reason following from the political option taken: because the new constitution explicitly stipulated that there would be no hierarchy between the legislative acts of the different levels within Belgium, the option of not granting the right to conclude treaties to Regions and Communities would leave open the possibility for the federal level to alter regional legislation by concluding a binding treaty on regional matters; this would be an unacceptable situation both from a legal and from a political point of view.

The growing importance of the European level was only used as a second order argument to install shared competencies in foreign policy. The only European motivation that could be found, was a paragraph in the coalition agreement of the Martens VIII government which explicitly mentioned the convictions by the European Court of Justice for insufficient implementation of environmental directives as a reason to make Regions competent for EU policies. However, as will be elaborated upon in the next paragraph, this motivation was not taken seriously, or has at least not resulted in efficient co-ordination mechanisms. Indeed, recent analyses of the Belgian backlog with respect to the implementation of EU law exactly point at the negative impact of the complex foreign policy arrangements on the implementation record²⁷.

²⁶ CLEMENT, J. (et. al.), 1993, o.c.

²⁷ DIERICKX, G., BURSENS, P., and HELSEN S. *How to Explain the Belgian Integration Paradox ? Structural and Cultural Explanations for the Failing Transposition of European Directives in Belgium*. Antwerpen, Universiteit Antwerpen, 2001; LEJEUNE, Y., 1999, o.c.

Above all, the wordings of the St-Michiël Agreement and the new article 68 of the constitution illustrate that the agreement is a careful balance between the demands of regionalist and unitarist parties²⁸. No international or European arguments to defend the federalisation process could be found, not even with respect to foreign policy competencies. Neither could there be found any European reference in the oral explanation to the agreement provided by the prime minister before Parliament. He merely states that "[T]he principles of the St-Michiël Agreement have a double aim: they should confirm the autonomy of the regional entities to conduct foreign policy within their competencies, including the right to conclude treaties and to guarantee the coherence of the Belgian foreign policy (own translation)"²⁹.

Also historians stress that the consecutive state reforms hardly considered the impact of the new institutional architecture on the representation of Belgian interests in the outside world. Coolsaet even mentions that this was partly due to the unwillingness of the federal diplomacy to grant Regions and Communities foreign competencies³⁰. However, as has become clear later, the federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs only partly succeeded in defending its institutional position. Only some diplomats of the older generations are said to be still reluctant to cooperate with the regional attachés that are now present in many Belgian embassies abroad and above all within the Permanent Representation to the EU.

Apparently, politicians soon considered that they had not really done a good job from a European perspective since they explicitly envisaged the creation of Cooperation Agreement between all governmental levels which should install a detailed co-ordination mechanism and a so-called Intergovernmental Conference on Foreign Policy (ICFP) to supervise the formulation of the Belgian negotiation positions in international fora such as the EU³¹.

It should be clear that the new Belgian Constitution of 1993 was not created to adapt Belgium to the growing impact of the European Union. On the contrary, it can even be argued that after the 1993 state reform Belgium even tried – and succeeded – to change the European Treaty to make it compatible with new Belgian institutional architecture. With the strong support of Germany, Belgium demanded and obtained a change of article 146 (now 203). This made it possible for regional ministers to represent the entire federation in the Council of Ministers. This event can be regarded as a rare case of successful Belgian uploading capacity. Belgium put a lot of effort to reach an agreement on this issue, because it was a necessary extension of the domestically agreed foreign competencies for Regions and Communities. Only after the conclusion of the Maastricht Treaty, Belgium

²⁸ CLEMENT, J., 1993, *o.c.*

²⁹ Kamer, *Parlementaire Stukken*; 1991-1992 110- 16/1°.

³⁰ COOLSAET, R., 2001, *o.c.*

³¹ One exception is the substitution mechanism which was already mentioned in the revised Constitution.

made the competencies envisaged in the St-Michel Agreement operational by executive decisions (by the Special Law on Institutional Reform of May 5th, 1993³² and the Co-operation Agreement of March, 8th, 1994³³).

The conclusion of the 1994 Co-operation Agreement was an obligation formulated in the 1993 Special Law. Whereas the revision of the Constitution did not mention the international context, the Co-operation Agreement was explicitly meant to adapt the Belgian federal architecture to the requirements of European integration. "Belgium has had to look for a system where it could reconcile the intergovernmental nature of its internal co-ordination with the need to negotiate in the Council"³⁴. Also Coolsaet considers this adaptation process as an example of how internal political processes can exert influence on how foreign policy is made³⁵. In other words, it is the chronology of events which is crucial here. Firstly, politicians decided – for internal political reasons – to organise a major state reform, including a revision of the Constitution and a partial shift of foreign policy competencies to Regions and Communities; secondly, the same politicians, but above all civil servants and diplomats, discover that the changed institutional architecture also triggers detailed changes in the co-ordination mechanisms that define the way Belgium operates within the European Union. "The adaptation of the Belgian co-ordination process to the state reforms reflects a general concern that the larger autonomy of the Belgian sub-national entities should be compatible with Belgium's ability to define a clear proactive EU policy. It therefore reflects the desire of both federal and sub-national governments to reconcile regional autonomy with the requirements of European integration"³⁶.

The institutions and mechanisms that have eventually been created show, however, that the preservation of the internal balance is considered more important than the wish to guarantee an efficient Belgian participation in European decision-making. Because the Belgian European co-ordination process has been discussed elaborately elsewhere³⁷, this section is confined to pointing out that the preservation of the internal balance dominates the Belgian EU co-ordination setting. This search for internal balances becomes above all clear with respect to the European co-ordination within the Federal Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Belgium's position for EU negotiations is prepared by the Unit European Affairs (P11). This unit already existed before the 1993 state reform. Its adaptation to the outcome of

³² 'Bijzondere Wet betreffende de internationale betrekkingen van Gemeenschappen en Gewesten' (5-5-1993)

³³ 'Het Samenwerkingsakkoord tussen de Federale Staat en de Gemeenschappen en de Gewesten' (8-3-1994)

³⁴ KERREMANS, B., 2001, *o.c.*

³⁵ COOLSAET, R., 2001, *o.c.*

³⁶ KERREMANS, B., 2001, *o.c.*

³⁷ BEYERS, J., BURSENS, P., KERREMANS, B, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg: Diversity among the Benelux Countries, pp. 59-88 in E. ZEFF and E. PIRRO (eds.), *The EU and the Member States: Co-operation, Co-ordination and Compromise*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2001.

the federalisation process took the form of incorporating more actors in the meetings, because it was obliged to do so by the Co-operation Agreement. However, this made the co-ordination meetings overloaded to such an extent that it no longer fitted into the European agenda which demands a quick reaction to new proposals. On the other hand the Co-ordination Agreement also stipulated that every position should pass P11. To solve this problem of efficiency, a series of specialised co-ordination mechanisms was created³⁸. These can prepare but not determine the Belgian position. Every negotiation position for COREPER and ministerial level must still pass through P11. To answer to the concerns of the Regions and the Communities, these positions should even be reached by consensus. This means that, given the composition of the P11 meetings, each governmental level can block a decision³⁹. Finally, it should be added that besides the balance between different levels of government also the balance between the different coalition-partners is safeguarded. This happens by means of 'inter-cabinet' working groups. These meetings are composed of representatives of the different involved ministers (which often belong to different political parties) and are meant to appease the ideological cleavages between the ministers. Such 'inter-cabinet' working groups also regularly meet in order to prepare European positions, but also their primary rationale is to reach an ideological compromise, not to optimise the Belgian position from a European point of view.

In addition, it should be mentioned that the more decisions are made on a civil servants level, the more Europeanised and adapted the decision-making proceeds. While P11 can be hijacked by the consensus-seeking requirement among the political representatives of the different governmental levels and parties, the specialised co-ordination mechanisms are more adapted to the European needs. Kerremans describes this rationale behind the installation of the specialised co-ordination mechanisms. "What appears to have been decisive is either the workload of the EU or the international agenda"⁴⁰. Quite often the Belgian position to be defended in the working groups of the Council is decided upon by these sectoral co-ordination bodies. P11 therefore often just has to rubberstamp the agreement. When the sectoral mechanisms fail to deliver a mandate, P11 meetings are used to find a compromise. If P11 fails, agreement can still be found within the Intergovernmental Conference for Foreign Policy (composed of the Federal Foreign Affairs Minister, the Federal Adjunct Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Secretary of State for Development Co-operation and the Regional Ministers for Foreign Relations), or ultimately in the Deliberation Committee (composed of the Federal Prime Minister and his Regional colleagues).

³⁸ KERREMANS, B., 2000, *o.c.*

³⁹ In reality, this condition is tempered by a gentleman's agreement which stipulates that a government will not use its veto in cases it has no competencies.

⁴⁰ KERREMANS, B., 2001, *o.c.*

B. Lambermont agreement (2000)

In 2000 Belgium witnessed yet another round of negotiations which led to more competencies for the regional levels. While the so-called Lambermont Agreement did not alter the division of competencies with respect to foreign relations, it did shift policy fields with major European and international aspects to the level of the Regions: foreign trade, development co-operation and above all agriculture. The latter can be regarded as one of the most Europeanised (in the bottom-up perspective) policy fields. One could therefore expect that the negotiations which led to the decision to regionalise agriculture would be to a great extent informed by the European context⁴¹. However, this was again not the case. Research by Beyers and Steensels and own interviews both confirm that the politicians who negotiated the Lambermont Agreement hardly used European arguments. Their discourse was almost completely dominated by domestic arguments. Even the Federal Minister for Agriculture, who is after all very intensively involved in European agricultural negotiations, referred not even once to the European requirements a regionalisation of agriculture would have to take into account. Only after the conclusions of the political negotiations were made public, civil servants from the Agriculture Department, who were called in to operationalise the political agreement, pointed to the consequences of the compromise for the efficiency of Belgium's representation in the agricultural fora of the European Union. In other words, only civil servants, supported by the direct stakeholders (farmers organisations), seemed to be Europeanised enough to consider the impact of the reform on the European policy-making mechanism within Belgium⁴². Our conclusion in this respect therefore reflects the evaluation of Beyers and Steensels: "The absence of communication between Belgian politics and the bureaucracy implicates the non-Europeanised character of domestic reform, although the substantive content of this reform is highly Europeanised"⁴³.

C. Copernicus reform (2000-...)

The current general reform of the federal administration (the so-called Copernicus program) is a last example of the lack of European awareness within the Belgian federal governmental services. The Copernicus program aims at an administrative reform of all federal ministries, including a new human resources system, the abolishment of the cabinet system and a modernisation of organisational charts in all departments. Overall, the management perspective dominates the whole process: political aspects are less crucial. This is not only the case with the

⁴¹ BEYERS, J., STEENSELS, C., An Exploration of Some Social Mechanisms Affecting Domestic Political Actors' Europeanisation: the Belgian Case, *ECSA Seventh Biennial Conference*, Madison, Wisconsin, May 31-June 2, 2001.

⁴² A similar line of argumentation can be given for the defederalisation of the policy domain of development co-operation.

⁴³ BEYERS, J., STEENSELS, C., 2001, *o.c.*

framework documents, which for instance do not refer to the multi-level governance situation within the federal state of Belgium, let alone to links with the European level⁴⁴. Also the departmental reforms are carried out from a one-sided management perspective. External consultants were hired to analyse the existing situation and to formulate suggestions to enhance efficiency. With respect to the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a report, including a new organisational chart was presented last year⁴⁵. Interviewees pointed out that the suggestions made by the external consultants were not very useful, since no attention was given to the unique characteristics of a Foreign Affairs department, such as the presence of diplomats next to civil servants, the organisation of 'the protocol' and the co-ordination between the different governmental levels competent for foreign relations. In addition, the report did not even refer once to the potential impact of the international or the European context on the organisation of a foreign affairs ministry. In order to redirect the proposals and to adapt them to international and European requirements, an internal task force had to be set up, led by a senior diplomat and (again) an external human resources expert.

Summarising, the findings of this paragraph point to the fact that the consecutive Belgian state reforms (St Michiel and Lambermont) and the ongoing administrative reform (Copernicus) have been negotiated and elaborated from a purely domestic or managerial agenda, without taking into account the implications for the Belgian functioning within the European political arena. A second finding was that politicians – even those who are regularly present in European settings – seem to be less aware of the European reality than civil servants who often attend European meetings. In short, this paragraph reveals a Europeanisation image with respect to institutional design which is similar to the image that in the previous paragraph has been discovered with respect to the cultural elements: Belgium's adaptation to the European Union is largely shaped by domestic factors, which include the ongoing federalisation process.

V. The Belgian Implementation Record

One way to measure the assumed negative impact of the federal architecture and mind-set is to look at Belgium's performance with respect to the implementation of European directives. The hypothesis is that a highly Europeanised member state would show an excellent implementation record, for several reasons: such a member state could be aware of the obligation to implement European policies and therefore putting a lot of effort in transposing, implementing and enforcing European legislation; or it could have changed its policies in the past hence having reduced the adaptational pressure of new legislation.

⁴⁴ <http://www.copernicus.be/>

⁴⁵ ANDERSEN CONSULTING / PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS / KPMG, *Conceptuele uitwerking van een nieuw organogram voor de FOD Buitenlandse Zaken*, Final Report, November 2000.

One of the tasks of the European Commission is to monitor the implementation performance of the member states. Statistical information is indispensable to carry this duty. The Commission's Secretariat-General regularly publishes the Internal Market Scoreboard and each year a detailed implementation report is put together. Table 1 shows own calculations based on several of those implementation reports.

Again it must be stressed that a high degree of Europeanisation is not the same as a high pro-integration profile. It is possible for a member state to have a rather sceptical view on European integration on the one hand, but being very 'Europeanised' on the other hand, either in terms of being very loyal in implementing what is commonly agreed or in terms of encountering a low level of adaptational pressure. Table 1 indeed confirms that there is no correlation between the pro-European profile of a member state on the one hand and the implementation record on the other. On the contrary, some of the most notorious euro-sceptical member states (Denmark, Sweden) end up to be the best pupils of the European class. On the other end of the ranking, European supra-nationalists (Belgium and Germany) are performing much worse. Overall, Table 1 shows quite a paradoxical picture which is difficult to explain if one only looks at the European opinions of the political elites.

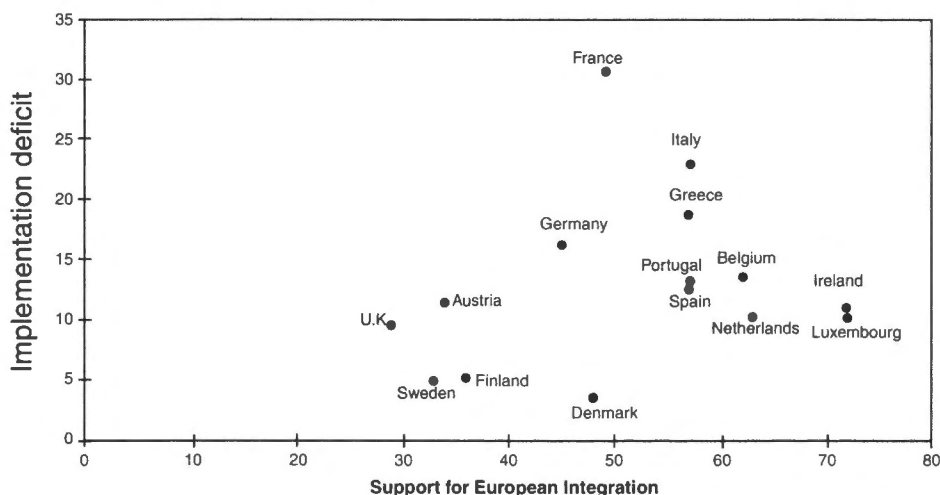
Table 1: The implementation records of the 15 member states
own calculations based on several 'Reports on Monitoring the Application of Community Law'

	Implementation deficit (%)				Total of Infringements (N)				Administrative procedures (N)				Legal Procedures (N)			
	"01	"00	"99	"98	"01	"00	"99	"98	"01	"00	"99	"98	"01	"00	"99	"98
DK	4	3.7	3.4	2.3	62	55	51	34	58	53	49	33	4	2	2	1
S	5.8	5.0	4.1	4.3	86	74	62	63	80	70	60	62	6	4	2	1
FIN	5.8	5.2	3.8	4.0	87	77	57	58	81	72	56	57	6	5	1	1
L	9.1	10.2	11.2	10.8	134	152	168	157	117	130	145	145	17	22	23	12
NL	9.3	10.2	7.9	6.7	138	153	119	98	123	137	112	91	15	16	7	7
P	11.6	13.0	12.2	14.9	172	194	184	218	158	178	166	207	14	16	18	11
IRL	11.7	10.9	11.5	10.1	173	162	172	147	146	142	152	136	27	20	20	11
UK	13.9	9.7	8.9	9.9	207	144	134	144	185	134	125	137	22	10	9	7
A	14.4	11.5	10.9	9.4	213	171	164	137	198	157	154	132	15	14	10	5
B	15.3	13.7	15.4	20.6	227	205	232	301	204	186	203	267	23	19	29	34
E	15.4	12.6	11.6	14.5	228	188	174	212	202	175	162	193	26	13	12	19
D	17.1	16.4	14.7	14.5	254	245	222	212	226	220	203	196	28	25	19	16
EL	17.3	18.8	18.3	16.6	255	280	275	242	221	241	241	214	34	39	34	28
I	23.2	23.1	19.8	24.6	345	345	298	359	288	293	254	328	57	52	44	31
F	24.9	30.8	29.4	29.8	369	461	443	435	316	388	380	393	53	73	63	42
TOT					2950	2906	2755	2817	2603	2576	2462	2591	347	330	293	226
EU-Average	13.3	13.0	12.2	12.9	197	194	184	188	174	172	164	173	23	22	20	15

In addition, Figure 3 shows that the paradox is also quite clear when implementation statistics are compared with public opinion data. There is no linear correlation between a pro-European public opinion and a good implementation performance. In other words, a pro-European public opinion is not always an interested public opinion that wants to put effort in pushing the political elites towards compliant behaviour (*cf. supra*).

Belgium is quite a nice example of the paradox that has been described above, especially with respect to the relation between elite opinion and implementation performance. The tenth place on the ranking is not exactly what you would expect from the champion of European integration. In 2001, 15.3 % of all directives that had to be implemented had not yet been transposed or had been transposed incorrectly or incompletely. While the Belgian record has been improving over the last few years due to a growing awareness, mainly caused by the preparations for the Belgian Presidency in 2001, it has recently again worsened. In other words, the temporary focus on Europe during the preparatory phase of the Presidency has not been able to create a permanent European awareness which is high enough to keep up the efforts needed to improve the record further.

Figure 3: Public opinion and implementation deficits in the 15 member states
own calculations based on Euro-barometer data and 'Reports on Monitoring the Application of Community Law'



Of course, part of the explanation for the insufficient implementation can be attributed to the institutional context of the European level. The complexity of the multi-level context and of the rules of the European decision-making process can explain why not all implementation runs as smoothly as desired. However, the

impact of these institutional characteristics is more or less equal for all member states. The rather big differences between the member states therefore point to the domestic context as the most important cluster of explanatory variables. Previous research has identified these explanatory factors for the Belgian implementation record⁴⁶. Many of them are rooted in the federalisation process and the federal structure of the Belgian state. They include the extremely complex co-ordination mechanisms and division of competencies between the federal and the regional levels (the federal architecture) and the political and administrative culture of policy-makers, which are partly caused by the dominant focus on the internal state reform (the federalisation process).

Firstly, the *federal architecture* is reflected in the unique *in foro interno, in foro externo* principle which constitutionally grants Regions and Communities the right to conduct a foreign policy with respect to those policy fields that belong to their domestic competencies. This, of course, includes the right to co-direct Belgian European policy-making as far as regional competencies are concerned. Another rather unique feature of the Belgian federal state is the absence of a hierarchy of norms: federal laws and regional decrees stand on equal footing which means that they cannot overrule each other and that each level has to prepare and implement the European policies which fall inside their respective competencies⁴⁷. One last important feature that should be mentioned is that the competencies are not homogeneously spread over the levels within Belgium. Most policy fields are partly governed by the federal level and partly by the regional level. All these characteristics were identified to have a negative impact on Belgium's implementation performance. Secondly, the ongoing *federalisation process* has resulted in what could be called institutional jealousy between the different governmental levels. This means that, especially the regional levels, are very keen to protect the acquired competencies. This attitude results in strategies that are primarily aimed at preserving autonomy, sometimes at the costs of reaching an efficient common position with respect to European negotiations.

In short, the implementation performance can be seen as an indicator of the degree of Europeanisation. This section therefore illustrated that the very moderate Belgian performance, which points to a low level of Europeanisation, is correlated with a range of factors that originate in the Belgian federal logic.

⁴⁶ DIERICKX, G., 2001, *o.c.*

⁴⁷ In order to prevent regional authorities from exploiting this lack of hierarchy (i.e. to prevent Regions and Communities from inactivity regarding European obligations), a substitution mechanism has been inscribed in the Special Law on Institutional Reform. Although this mechanism is still not operational, it entitles the federal authorities to replace regional authorities when Belgium is convicted by an international court for non-compliance of regional authorities with international obligations.

VI. Conclusions

This article started from the observation that the Belgian level of adaptation to the requirements posed by its membership of the European Union is rather low. This was quite surprising since the presence of pro-European political elites, the long-term membership and the proximity of European institutions, all lead to expect a high level of Europeanisation. Throughout the article it was argued that the impact of the European Union is seriously constrained by the characteristics of the Belgian federal system. The operationalisation was framed within an institutionalist way of thinking that forced to take into account both soft (cultural) and hard (structural) aspects. This resulted into defining both cultural (1) and structural (2) indicators for the degree of Europeanisation: (1) are Belgian actors (elites and public) adapted in terms of European opinions and awareness and (2) is the Belgian domestic organisation of European co-ordination mechanisms adapted to the European requirements? It was found that both complementary aspects pointed into the direction of limited Europeanisation. Also the explanatory variable was constructed within the institutionalist logic. It was argued that the federalisation process (the soft side of federalism) as well as the eventual federal architecture (the hard side of federalism) both function as intervening variables, explaining the rather low degree of adaptation. More concretely, it was found that the European opinions and European awareness of the political elites and the public opinion are coloured by an inwards-looking mentality that stems from the dominant focus on the ongoing federalisation process. In addition, the article also found that both the limited Europeanised installation and outcomes of the European co-ordination mechanisms were at least partly shaped by hard and soft federal elements. Figure 4 summarises these findings.

Figure 4: The impact of Belgian federalism on the Europeanisation of Belgium

	Degree of adaptation / Europeanisation	Impact of domestic federal institutions on adaptation / Europeanisation
<i>Cultural aspects:</i>		
Political elite opinion and awareness	Low	Federalisation process (cultural aspect)
Public opinion and awareness	Very low	Federalisation process (cultural aspect)
<i>Structural aspects</i>		
Organisation of domestic European policy-making mechanisms	Low	Federal architecture (structural aspect) / Federalisation process (cultural aspect)

The basic argument explored in this respect is that Belgian political elites (above all politicians) have focused for years on the internal political agenda of appeasement of the communities. Little time was left to broaden the scope and to give attention to the outside world or to the European context. This has resulted in state reforms and co-ordination mechanisms which paid very little attention to European incentives, not even with respect to reforms in highly European-relevant sectors such as foreign affairs or agriculture. In addition, the mechanisms put into place also caused a mental mind-set that prevented elites and public from taking the European level sufficiently into account.

Finally, I want to stress that the presented 'evidence' must be treated carefully. Many assertions with respect to the role of federalism should be elaborated and tested in future research. What can be stated, however, is that there is a link between the process of federalisation and the federal structure (as internal conflict-resolution mechanisms) on the one hand and a number of mismatches between Belgium and the EU on the other hand: a link that can be conceived as a lack of Europeanisation.

Summary: Belgium's Adaptation to the EU. Does Federalism Constrain Europeanisation ?

This article starts from the observation that the Belgian level of adaptation to the requirements posed by its membership of the European Union is surprisingly low. Following an institutional line of thinking, it is argued that the impact of the European Union is seriously constrained by the characteristics of the Belgian federal system. This results into defining both cultural (1) and structural (2) indicators for the degree of Europeanisation: (1) European opinions and awareness of political elites and the general public and (2) the Belgian domestic organisation of European co-ordination mechanisms. The article more concretely argues that the European opinions and European awareness of the political elites and the public opinion are coloured by an inwards-looking mentality that stems from the dominant focus on the ongoing federalisation process. In addition, it is also found that the limited Europeanised installation and outcomes of the European co-ordination mechanisms are at least partly shaped by hard and soft federal elements.