Belgium: a (nation-)state on the verge of implosion ?

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Introduction

- Dramatic years after June 2007 general elections
  - Government formation (took 193 days) and instability (5 governmens june 2007 - june 2010)
  - Party and media radicalisation: end of Belgium regularly voiced as potential solution to community conflict
- June 2010 elections: nearly half of Flemish voted for independist parties (N-VA, VB, LDD)
- N-VA becomes largest party: goverment formation is still running& no outcome in sight

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Paradoxes: deepest crisis in spite of

- Consociational democracy: B was model case for consensus democracy in « segmented pluralism »
- radical transformation from unitary state to fully fledged federal state 1970-1993
- reversal of centre/periphery cleavage (N-S; Flemish-francophone)
- B = in heart of EU and interface between latin and germanic cultures. So profound challenge to EU ideal of « ever closer union of peoples… »?

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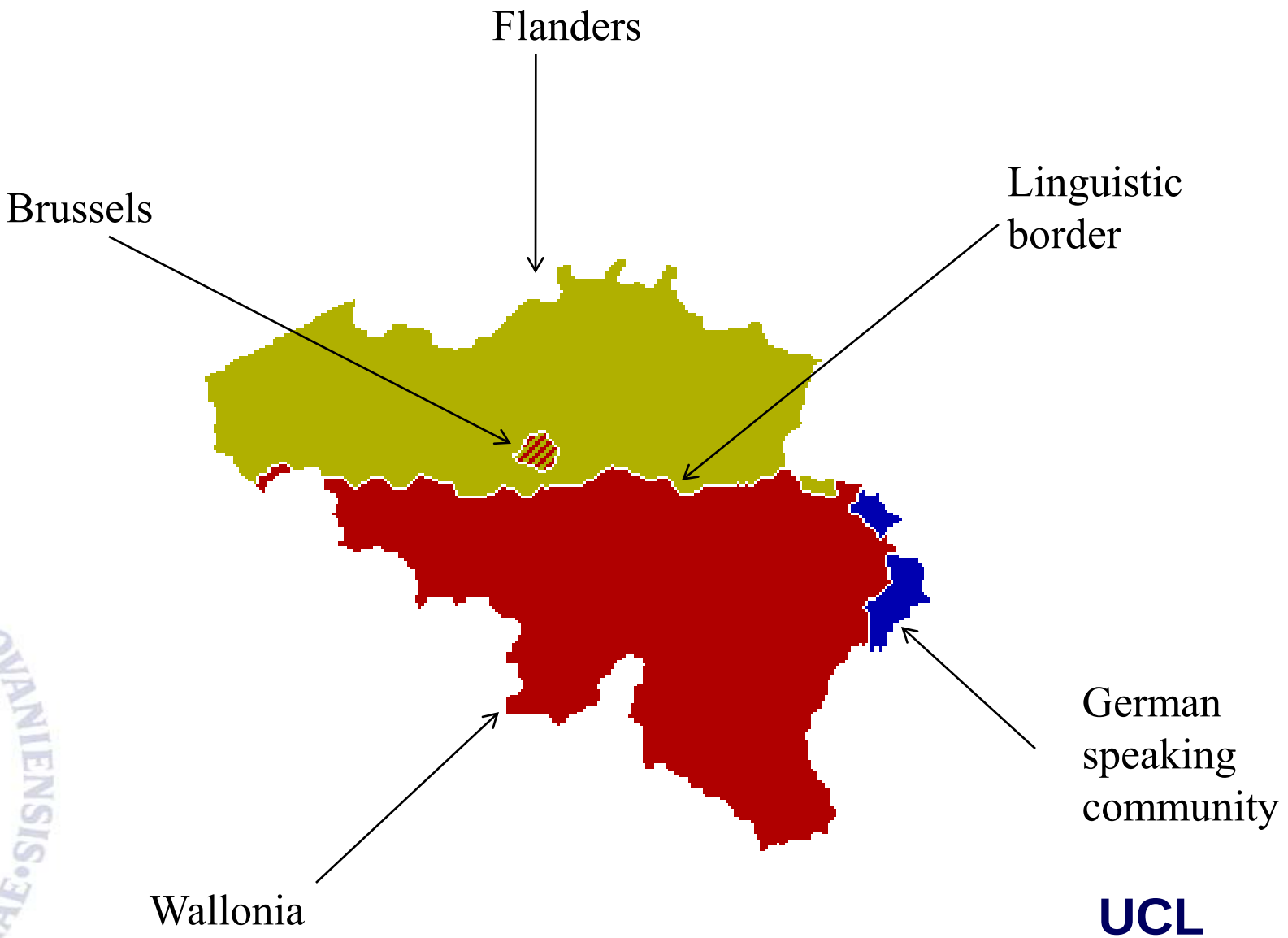
Flanders
Brussels
Linguistic
border
German
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community
Wallonia

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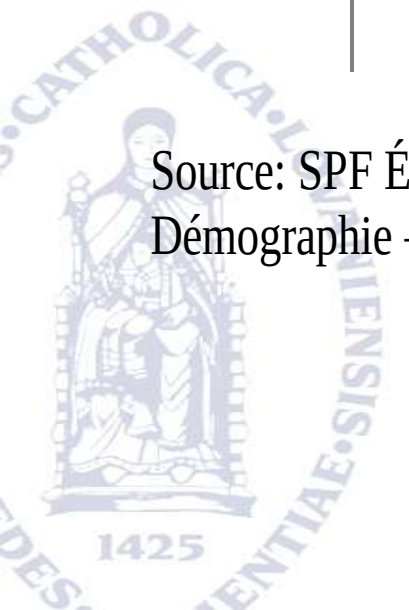
	Belgium	Flanders	Wallonia	Brussels
Area (km²)	30,528	13,522	16,844	161
% of country		44	55	0.53
Population*	10,666,866	6,161,600	3,456,775	1,048,491
% of country		57.76	32.41	9.83

Source: SPF Économie -- Direction générale Statistique et Information économique -- Service Démographie – janvier 2008



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Reversal centre-periphery

- 1830: Belgian revolution and patriotism vs. NL
- Flanders = periphery in economic (agricultural), cultural adn linguistic (no standardised language), political (elites in FL are frenchspeaking); administrative terms (not in population, about 60%)
- « centre » = Brussels (political, cultural & financial) + Wallonia (most industrialised region on the european continent)

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Language and culture

- Belgian independence movement (1830) against Dutch rule resulted from an alliance between different groups of the French-speaking elites: aristocracy, gentry, provincial bourgeoisie and an emergent industrial bourgeoisie in the growing urban centres

French hegemony in the new state

- By 1830, Elites in Flanders were French-speaking (ex: Gent)
- The official language of the new state = French
- At the time
  - Flanders => economically poor
  - Wallonia => economically prosperous
  - Brussels => political, cultural and financial centre
- Hegemony of the French culture was overwhelming in spite of Flemish demographic majority

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The gradual emancipation of the Flemish periphery I

- Around 1840, the first Flemish cultural movements were created
- In the 1860s, the first Flemish-speaking MPs were elected
- During the 1856-1898 period, the Flemish language earned gradually a full recognition (except in higher education) as an official lannguage in Flanders, next to French
- Growing parliamentary power due to universal male (plural) suffrage vs. censitary majoritarian system (1% voters in 1831)

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The emancipation of the Flemish periphery II

- 1898-1914: first Walloon reactions => more in terms of opposition to Flemish nationalism in the name of National Unity
- 1914-1918 and 1940-1945: some Flemish demands with the help of German occupant but from a minority of activists but no answers because National feeling during World Wars
- From 1930: list of laws confirming linguistic territorially: only Dutch official language in Flanders, French in Wallonia, and Brussels bilingual (allowing shifts by census)

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The emancipation of the Flemish periphery III

- From 1960: shift from the culture issue to the territorial issue and finally the economic issue for 2 reasons:
  - 1962-1963: end of discussion regarding language with the laws fixing the « linguistic border »
  - Economic activity in Flanders based on small and medium sized companies and multinationalis >< heavy industry in Wallonia

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Laws fixing the linguistic border and protecting minorities

- Protection of different types of minorities

  1) Francophones at federal level (parity in cabinet, special majority laws)

  2) Flemish in Brussels region (at the regional level, and in each one of the 19 Brussels *communes*)

  3) Francophones in Flemish "facilités" communes in Brussels periphery

  4) German-speaking minority in Belgium

  5) Communes on flemish-french linguistic border

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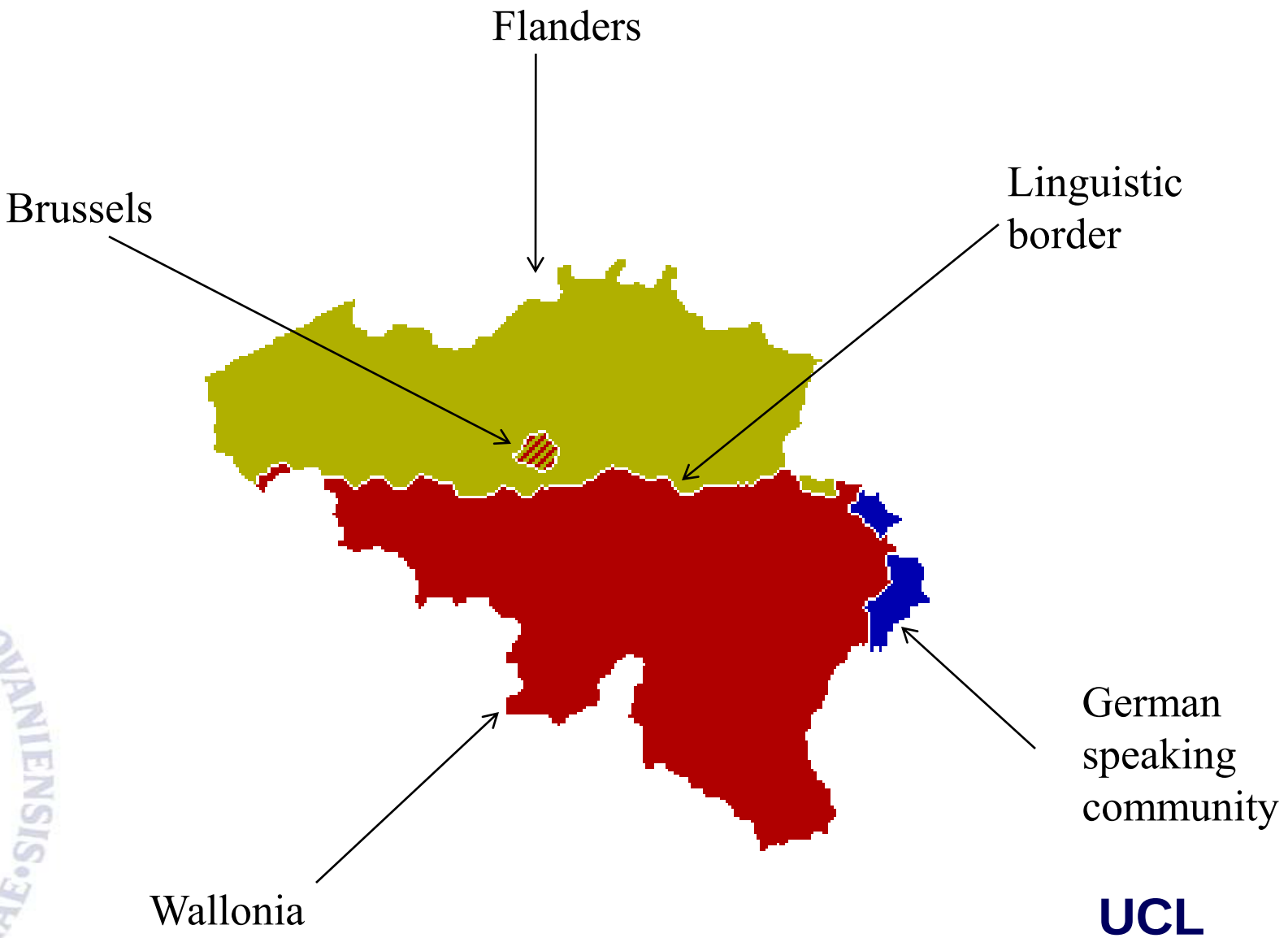
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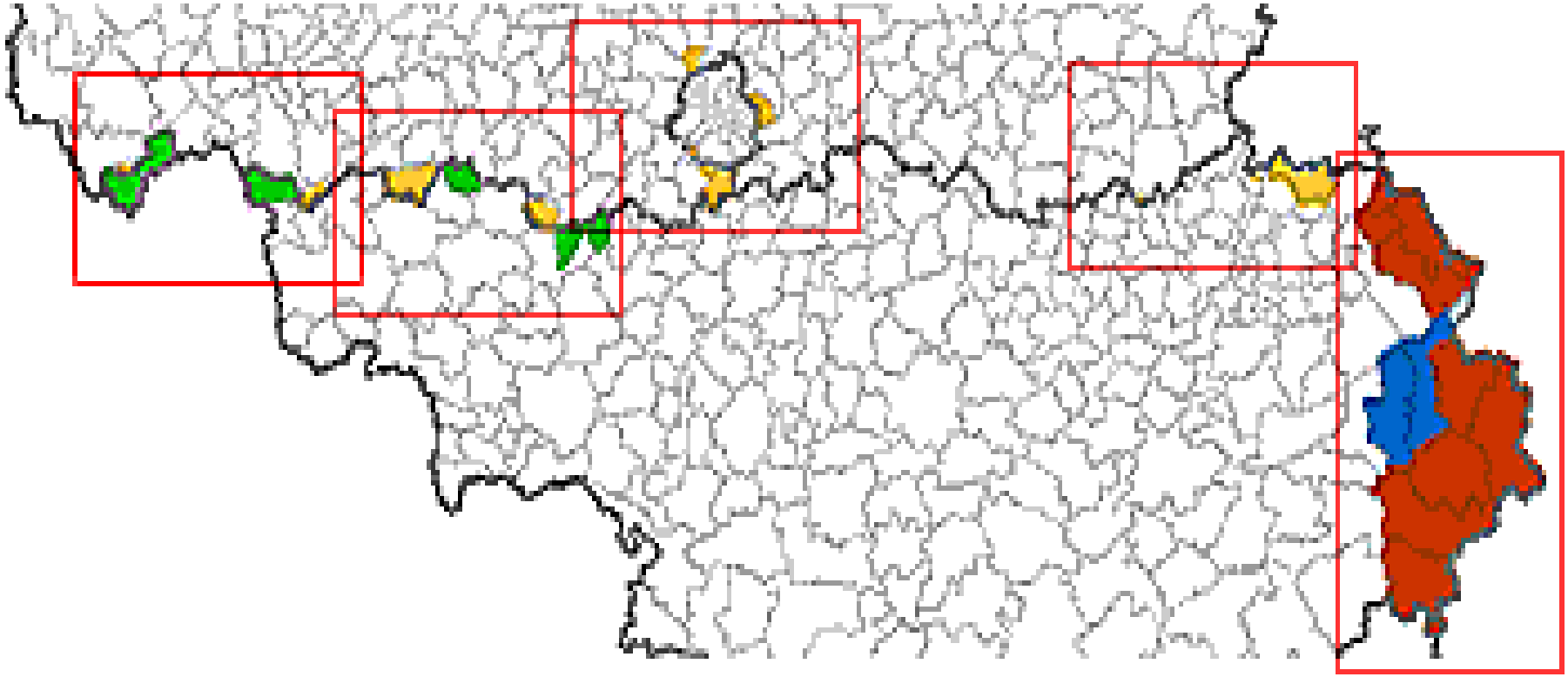
The linguistic border & facility communes



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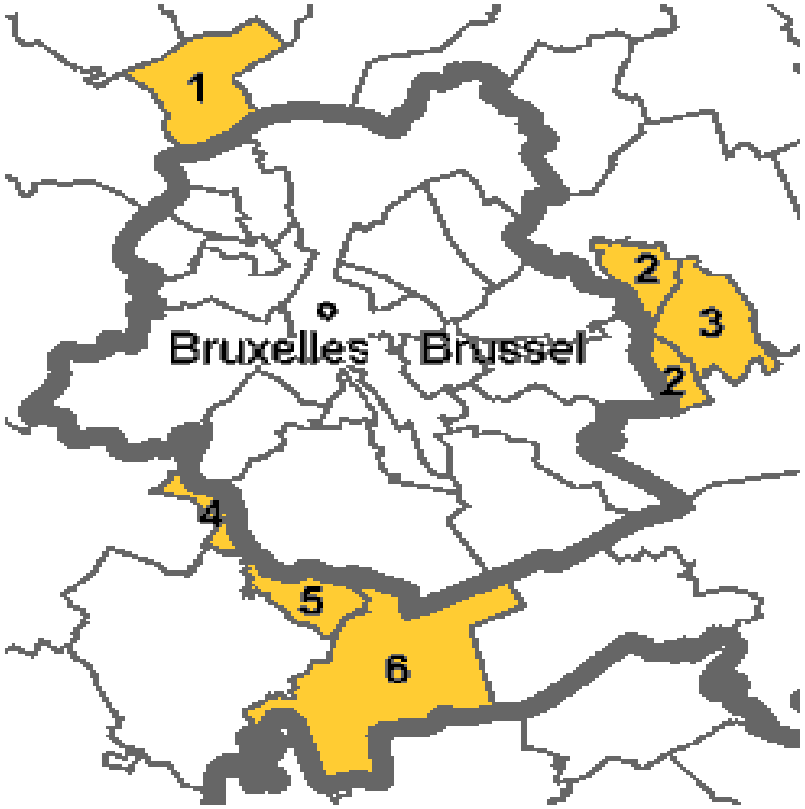

Commune néerlandophone à minorité francophone protégée

1. Wemmel
2. Kraainem
3. Wezembeek-Oppem
4. Drogenbos
5. Linkebeek
6. Sint-Genesius-Rode (Rhode-Saint-Genèse)

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Regionalisation / Communautarisation

- From 1970: transformation of the unitary structure of the state to full federal state by 1993
- Consequence of the compromise made between two contradictory but complementary concepts
  - The Flemish = idea of a federal structure with two components - Flemish and Walloon - based on the existence of two distinct languages, cultures, or even "nations", with common management of Brussels.
  - The Walloon = in favour of autonomy supported the idea of delegating economic policy to three regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels) which would then control their own economic development

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The compromise: a 3 + 3 federation

- Five major revisions of the Constitution: 1970, 1980, 1988, 1993, 2001
- The 1993 Constitutional transformed Belgium into a federal country based
  - on three overlapping linguistic Communities (Flemish, French and German, a tiny minority) and
  - three socio-economic Regions (Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia)

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3 Regions

3 Communities

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In terms of representation and levels of decision

- Five levels:
  - Federal
  - Regional
  - Cultural Community
  - Provinces (not represented)
  - Communes (not represented)

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Devolved competences 1

- After the 1993 reforms, regional competencies include urban planning, environment, local government, housing, as well as parts of the following sectors: agriculture, economy, energy, employment, public works, transportation, science and research, and even international relations reg. matters falling under regional/community competences

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Devolved competencies 2

- The communities' competences include nearly all educational matters, culture, media, parts of health policy and assistance to families, to the disabled and elderly, youth policy, etc.
- In 2001 were further devolved agriculture, developmental aid and sub-regional government (= communes & provinces)

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A new political level

- Federalisation created an entirely new political system in the regions and communities, each of which has its own directly elected legislature, an executive headed by a PM, a civil service, public policies, media, parties and to some extent interest groups.
- This level of government controls more than one- third of overall public spending.

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Splitting & fragmentation of party system

- Emergence of NSWP (VU, RW, FDF)
- Split of 3 traditional parties (CVP-PSC 1968; PVV-PLP 1972, PSB-BSP 1978)
- Extreme fragmentation (ENP > 9 in 1999); largest party captures 14% of national vote, 10th party more than 5%)
- Coalitions count 4 to 7 parties…
- High gvt instability: 74-81

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Year	PCB/ KPB	PSB/BSP		E	A	RW	FDF	PSC/CVP		VU/ NVA	PL/LP		UDRT	FN	VB	Others	Effective Number of parties	Total seats
		PS	SP					PSC	CVP		PRL	VLD						
1946	23		**69**						92*			17				1	2.9	202
1949	12		66						**105***			**29**					2.8	212
1950	7		77						**108***			20					2.5	212
1954	4		**86**						95*	1		**25**				1	2.6	212
1958	2		84						**104***	1		21					2.5	212
1961	5		**84**						**96***	5		20				2	2.7	212
1965	6		**64**			2	3		**77***	12		48					3.6	212
1968	5		**59**			5	7	**19**	**50***	20		47					5.0	212
1971	5		**61**			14	10	**20**	**47***	21	20	14					5.9	212
1974	4		59			13	9	**22**	**50***	22	**9**	**21**				3	5.8	212
1977	2		**62**			5	**10**	**24**	**56***	**20**	14	17				2	5.2	212
1978	4	**32**	**26**			4	**11**	**25**	**57***	14	14	22	1		1	1	6.8	212
1981	2	35	26	2	2	2	6	**18**	**43***	20	**24**	**28**	3		1		7.7	212
1985	0	35	32	5	4	0	3	**20**	**49***	16	**24**	**22**	1		1		7.0	212
1987	0	**40**	**32**	3	6		3	**19**	**43***	**16**	23	25			2		7.2	212
1991	0	**35**	**28**	10	7		3	**18**	**39***	10	20	26		1	12	3	8.4	212
1995	0	**21**	**20**	6	5		(a)	**12**	**29***	5	18	21		2	11		8.1	150
1999	0	**19**	**14**	**11**	**9**		(a)	10	22	8	**18**	**23***		1	15		9.1	150
2003	0	**25**	**23(5b)**	4	0		(a)	8	21	1	**24**	**25***		1	18		7.0	150
2007	0	**20**	14(0b)	8	4		(a)	10	**30(5b)***		**23**	**18**		1	17	5	7.9	150
2010	0	26	13	8	5		(a)	9	17	27	18	13		0	12	2	8.4	150

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Unfinished business II

- Language status of linguistically mixed regions (Brussels and periphery)
- Economic differences North-South
- Social security transfers and abuses (still federal competence)
- Flemish demands for further socio-economic and fiscal autonomy (but also transport, justice, etc.)

Unfinished business I

- « Unfinished business »: “minor” but symbolically loaded linguistic problems: facilités, BHV, status Bxl
- North-South transfers & accusations of abuse + pressure of globalising economy on Flemish export economy
- transformation of any normal policy issue into North-South issue (ex. traffic security, development aid, justice) + therefore calls for defederalisation

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North-South relations

- deadlock between Flemish demands for defederalisation and Frenchspeaking calls *status quo* that fear salami strategy towards separatism + use of large veto possibilities of Francophones to block change, vs. Flemish threats to "pull out the plug" and impose (Flemish) majority rule
- growing alienation between Fl & Fr elites (more contacts before 1995 MP's "double hat")

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Reasons for non-pacification 1

- The creation of regional autonomous and democratically legitimized parliamentary and executives creates it own dynamics, as political entrepreneurs tend to prove their relevance, cfr. Minister-Presidents & resolutions of Flemish parliament
- Radicalisation of Flemish media, one partially of francophone media (diabolisation of Flemish demands as VB driven, or egoism of richest region vs solidarity principle)

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Reasons for non-pacification 2

- Both started to replace in 1990s the role of traditional organisations of Flemish civil society in setting the Flemish agenda of demands for autonomy & independence
- Walloon (& Brussels) regionalism (RW & FDF) already (fully) recuperated by traditional Francophone parties in 1980s

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Reasons for non-pacification 3

Party system dynamics

- end of single federal party system, no more state-wide parties
- extreme fragmentation and growing volatility
- Decline of regionally predominant parties (CVP,PS)
- polarisation on community conflict cleavage
- centrifugal competition for capturing vote of Flemish nationalist electorate
- Electoral threshold leads to cartels between main parties and small flemish-nationalist parties, radicalising the former

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Quid public opinion?

- Identity
- Constitutional options
- Preferences for decision making levels
- Democratic deficit mass/elite in Flanders?

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Tableau 2: Evolution des sentiments d'appartenance sur base de la question hiérarchique classique de la période 1979-2003 (en parenthèse l'ordre de la catégorie de réponse sur la carte montrée par l'intervieweur au répondant)

WALLONIE	1979	1980	1981	1982	1986	1992	1995	1996	2000	2003
Ensemble des Belges – Belgique	54(1)	59(1)	61(1)	57(1)	58(1)	69(1)		71(1)	73(1)	70(1)
Comm. française	16(2)	16(2)	17(2)	16(2)	11(2)	11(2)		9(2)	5(2)	6(2)
Région wallonne	18(6)	17(6)	15(6)	18(6)	16(6)	12(5)		10(5)	11(5)	11(5)
Province	2(7)	1(8)	1(8)	1(8)	2(8)	0(7)		1(7)	2(7)	2(7)
Ville-commune	9(9)	6(9)	6(9)	8(9)	12(9)	7(8)		9(8)	9(8)	10(8)

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FLANDRE	1979	1980	1981	1982	1986	1992	1995	1996	2000	2003
Belgique	34(1)	40(1)	37(1)	35(1)	44(1)	43(6)	39(4)	53(1)	57(1)	55(1)
Communauté / région flamande	45(3+5)	44(3+5)	47(3+5)	49(3+5)	33(3+5)	41(2)	24(3)	25(3)	27(1)	29(1)
Province	2(8)	2(8)	2(8)	2(8)	3(8)	3(7)	3(2)	3(7)	2(7)	4(7)
Ville/commune	19(9)	14(9)	13(9)	14(9)	20(9)	13(8)	34(2)	17(8)	14(8)	12(8)

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Tableau 3 : Questionnement « Moreno »
des identités wallonne/flamande et belge

Wallonie	**%2007**	**% 2003**	**% 1999**	**% 1995**
Je me sens uniquement wallon(ne)	1,6	3,6	2,30	1,5
Je me sens plus wallon(ne) que belge	6,1	8,3	11,3	9,4
Je me sens aussi bien wallon(ne) que belge	38,0	39,7	41,8	44,7
Je me sens plus belge que wallon(ne)	19,9	18,3	22,0	25,3
Je me sens uniquement belge	34,4	30,0	22,5	19,1
Total %		100	100	100
N		764	1381	1223

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Flandre	%2007	% 2003	% 1999	% 1995
Je me sens uniquement flamand(e)	6,5	7,2	7	3,6
Je me sens plus flamand(e) que belge	26,9	23,3	22,4	23,1
Je me sens aussi bien flamand(e) que belge	36,0	42,3	42,2	45,3
Je me sens plus belge que flamand(e)	17,9	15,1	13,3	17,2
Je me sens uniquement belge	12,7	12,1	15,1	10,8
Total %	100	100	100	100
N		1202	2157	2088

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Tableau 6: Les préférences des Wallons et des Flamands quant au niveau de décision politique le plus approprié pour la gestion des problèmes dans cinq secteurs politiques en 2007 (en %)

r=0.95

Politiques publiques	Région		Belgique		Europe	
	Wallonie	Flandre	Wallonie	Flandre	Wallonie	Flandre
Chômage	21,9	26,7	42,6	46,9	35,5	26,4
Immigration	6,5	9,1	32,6	38,8	60,9	52,1
Environnement	20,7	13,5	18,1	28,0	61,2	58,6
Lutte contre criminalité	16,8	15,9	28,9	31,8	54,3	52,3
Soins de santé	13,9	19,2	57,7	50,1	28,4	30,8

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Tableau 7: Les préférences des députés fédéraux francophones et néerlandophones quant au niveau de décision politique le plus approprié pour la gestion des problèmes dans cinq secteurs politiques en 2007 (en %)

Politique	Région		Belgique		Europe	
	Wallonie	Flandre	Wallonie	Flandre	Wallonie	Flandre
Chômage	24,5	61,6	53,9	17,0	21,6	21,4
Immigration	0	15,2	25,0	13,0	75,0	71,7
Environnement	12,3	33,3	9,3	6,2	78,4	60,5
Lutte contre criminalité	1,5	24,3	36,8	34,1	61,8	41,7
Soins de santé	2,4	56,9	77,4	31,9	20,1	11,2

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Mass-elite gaps

	Mass						Elite					
	Region		Belgium		Europe		Region		Belgium		Europe	
	Wal	Fla	Wal	Fla	Wal	Fla	Wal	Fla	Wal	Fla	Wal	Fla
Unemployment	21,9	26,7	42,6	46,9	35,5	26,4	24,5	61,6	53,9	17,0	21,6	21,4
Immigration	6,5	9,1	32,6	38,8	60,9	52,1	0,0	15,2	25,0	13,0	75,0	71,7
Environnement	20,7	13,5	18,1	28,0	61,2	58,6	12,3	33,3	9,3	6,2	78,4	60,5
Criminality	16,8	15,9	28,9	31,8	54,3	52,3	1,5	24,3	36,8	34,1	61,8	41,7
Health Services	13,9	19,2	57,7	50,1	28,4	30,8	2,4	56,9	77,4	31,9	20,1	11,2

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Elite driven conflict?

- Relation between ordinary citizens: similar “Belgian” social values
- Moreno: dual (nat/reg) identities are predominant
- No common public sphere: 2 media systems, but now more media attention regarding other community (but still polarising (Flemish) press)
- Language learning (écoles d’immersion, Fr. success of Fl. schools in Bxl),
- Political distrust & delegitimation parties, federal political system & principle of federalism

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Concluding reflections 1

- No stable equilibrium yet in division of compentencies for state and regions
- Major division in opinion between Flemish and Francophone party elites, but less in public opinion
- Centrifugal competition in dual party system requiring more centrifugal electoral system (Pavia proposal)

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Concluding reflections 2

- « Belgium light » sufficient for Flemish actors? Cfr. Regional elections of june 2009 and federal elections of June 2010 show dramatic growth of separatist camp in Flanders
- Conflict over language and culture replaced by fight over financial resources under pressure of increased competition due to EU integration and globalisation (see also Catalonia, Padania, etc)

In case of separation?

- Quid Brussels?
- Quid impact financial crisis and recession (public debt > 100% GNP)
- Quid EU in B?
- Quid impact of desingration of core state on integration and separatist movements elsewhere in EU?
- Negociation separation more difficult than bargaining over further federalisation? (cfr. Czeckoslovakia)

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