



# IS DEMOCRACY VIABLE WITHOUT A UNIFIED PUBLIC OPINION ?

The Swiss experience and the Belgian case

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*The Re-Bel initiative aims to rethink in depth, in an open, rigorous, non-partisan way, what the institutions of the Belgian federal state - or of whatever else this part of the world needs to become - can and must look like in the longer term, taking full account of the evolving European context.*

*The Re-Bel initiative does not aim to produce one programme or manifesto to which everyone involved could subscribe. Its ambition is rather to provide a fertile intellectual environment in which new ideas and promising initiatives of all sorts can germinate and develop, with a concern for their relevance to a thorough reform of Belgium's institutions, but also to the institutional design of other complex polities, most obviously the European Union.*

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# Introduction: Is there a Belgian public opinion?

Marc Hooghe (KULeuven) and Dave Sinardet (Universiteit Antwerpen and VUB)

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Almost a century ago, Walloon socialist representative Jules Destrée already stated that ‘there are no Belgians’, and that in reality there is only a Flemish and a Walloon public opinion, that are somehow connected in a Belgian political system. In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the question whether there is indeed a Belgian public opinion becomes all the more salient. Within the social sciences, and especially in political science, it is assumed that the support of the population is a necessary prerequisite for the stability of a political system. Political systems can only function if they receive some diffuse support from the population. If this is not the case, political systems will not survive strong crises they might be confronted with.

The question has become all the more salient, since Belgium evolved into a federal system since the constitutional reform of 1970. Federalism, in this regard, can be considered as a form of power-sharing: the two communities in the country have received a considerable degree of autonomy, and political power in Belgium is now divided among numerous actors. It is not clear, however, what could be the long-term consequences of this process. An influential author like Arend Lijphart assumes that this will lead to a new institutional equilibrium: citizens will develop a strong loyalty toward their subnational region, but simultaneously they will develop a sense of federal loyalty, a respect for the rules of the game. Lijphart expects that the two forces will develop into some sort of balance, thus offering a sufficient level of social support for the long-term stability of the system.

The Lijphart view, however, has been strongly challenged by the US political scientist Donald Horowitz. His prediction basically is that federalism cannot be a stable system, it merely functions as a transition phase. If regions receive autonomy, they will use their new powers to enter into a process of nation-building, strengthening the loyalty of their citizens toward the regional level. The call for regional autonomy will only strengthen over time, according to Horowitz: if a region gets competence over a specific area, the next step will be that nationalistic forces demand even more competences. The end result is that the federal system is left without any real competence. Furthermore, Horowitz assumes that the concept of ‘federal loyalty’ is simply too abstract for most citizens: they identify with strong symbols, that are offered to them by a nationalist discourse. Identifying with highly abstract constitutional rules is simply beyond the scope of most citizens.

The debate between Lijphart and Horowitz is especially relevant for the current situation in Belgium. It has often been observed that public opinion in Flanders and Wallonia has become highly segregated. A few decades ago, French language newspapers like *Le Soir* or *La Libre Belgique* still had quite some circulation in Flemish cities like Ghent or Antwerp. Up until the year 1974, Ghent even had its own French daily, *La Flandre Libérale*. Although these papers were mostly read by the then still more strongly present francophone population in the Flemish region, it is not entirely without significance that they have now completely disappeared. Some argue that Belgium and Wallonia are now two completely distinct societies (it is interesting to observe that Brussels is often completely disregarded in this kind of statements). The two communities in the country have their newspapers, broadcasting

systems, political parties and universities. Even with regard to literature, most authors are known and read in only one part of the country.

In this e-book of the initiative *Rethinking Belgium* we ask the question whether differences between the two communities are really that profound, and, if so, what kind of mechanisms would be available to bridge the public opinion of the two communities. Can we really speak of 'two public opinions'? And if so, in what sense? How does this exteriorate? And should we then necessarily consider this a problem? Does this form an obstacle to the organization of a democratic and efficient Belgian federation? Should and can something be done about this? If so, how and on which levels? Might the introduction of a form of direct democracy be an interesting option? Could other forms of institutional engineering help? What is the role of the media in all this? What is the historical context of today's situation? Can other multilingual countries be of inspiration? These are some of the questions that will be treated in this e-book by the different authors. Self-evidently we do not wish to enter the political discussion about whether a sense of nationhood should be encouraged either on the federal or on the regional level. But we can contribute a scientific understanding of the way public opinion is being shaped by various institutions, and what could be the consequences of this form of public opinion.

We open the book by a comparative perspective, developed by the Swiss political scientist Nenad Stojanović. To a large extent, the challenges for Swiss and for Belgian society are comparable. In Switzerland, identification with the cantonal level is very strong among the population, and the country has a highly developed system of federalism. The Swiss form of federalism, however, seems less prone to be confronted with major crises than the Belgian system. For most inhabitants of Switzerland, the federal system is self-evident and stable, and even can be considered as an object of pride. Stojanović claims that one of the reasons for this success is the routine use of procedures of direct democracy in Switzerland. A referendum offers the best possible interpretation of the 'volonté générale' of the population. As such, it can be considered as a unifying factor: everyone participates and everyone gets an equal say in the final decision. Since direct democracy is practiced in a routine manner, for each referendum new cleavages and coalitions arise, thus allowing for the development of cross-cutting forms of loyalty and conflict. Stojanović therefore assumes that a massive introduction of direct democracy also could serve as a good solution for the Belgian case: Belgian public opinion gradually would come to realise that the linguistic cleavage is but one form of conflict, and that on various other topics, the differences between the two communities are not that strong after all.

In the second part of this e-book, a number of authors react to the proposal by Stojanović. The Antwerp historian Marnix Beyen challenges the neo-institutionalist perspective of Stojanović. Beyen cites various historical examples, demonstrating that public opinion in Flanders and Wallonia was already strongly divided in a distant past. According to Beyen, this implies that public opinion will not be easily changed by institutional reforms, as they reflect a broader cultural pattern. Furthermore, Beyen poses the question why a divided public opinion should be considered as a problem? One of the main qualities of the Belgian political system, according to Beyen is that Belgium is founded on the peaceful co-existence of distinct cultures, and this kind of diversity should be cherished, in stead of aiming to destroy in order to develop a unified political culture.

Historian and journalist Marc Reynebeau looks back at the historical role political institutions have played in the shaping of Belgian identity. In his view, institutions are never neutral: apart from their explicit function, they always are designed to convey various messages to the population. Historically, the development of a Belgian sense of nationhood has not really been a success. But this should not mean that we adapt an essentialist view of 'Flemish' or 'Walloon' culture, Reynebeau argues. Maybe even on the contrary: these more recent identities are just as well a construction of political and media discourses. Although Reynebeau is critical too about the role referenda could play in the development of Belgian

public opinion, he explores a number of alternative institutional reforms that could help to balance the Belgian political system.

Marc Hooghe, too, poses a number of question marks with the article by Stojanović. First of all, it can be questioned whether there really is such a strong difference between public opinion in both communities of the country. On basic questions with regard to social redistribution, ethical issues or political morality, empirical research shows that differences often are not significant. Furthermore, Hooghe questions whether direct democracy procedures would really be appropriate to build bridges between both communities. After all, the historical experience with referenda in Belgium has not been all that positive, and the instrument can easily be used for different purposes. Rather, Hooghe proposes a number of other institutional reforms, aimed at parties and organisations, that should have as an effect that incentives are being offered to develop a stronger sense of federal loyalty.

Dave Sinardet, too, is skeptical about the benefits that direct democracy could have for Belgian multilingual democracy and even expresses doubts whether it really is an important factor to explain why Switzerland is considered as a more successful multilingual democracy. Rather, Sinardet points to differences in the organization of political parties, the electoral system and media system, which in Belgium lead to the existence of two separate public spheres. The lack of a common public sphere contributes to the (incorrect) representation of two homogeneous and opposed public opinions in Belgium, which forms fructuous ground for ethno-nationalist discourse. Sinardet argues that direct democracy will not be sufficient to construct a federal public sphere, as referenda results might still be interpreted and politicized according to the current political and media dynamic. His claim is that this dynamic especially stems from political parties and for this reason Sinardet pleads for electoral redistricting in the country.

In his contribution, Marc Lits elaborates on the role of mass media in the construction of Flemish and Walloon nationalist identities. The two media systems are by now completely segregated, and this in turn might contribute to the feeling of antagonism that sometimes develops between the two communities. Since the media only cater for the information needs of their own community, they have no interest at all to pay too much attention to what happens in the other community. Lits, however, offers some suggestions on how mass media might contribute to shaping a more unified public opinion in the Belgian political system.

We close with two observations 'from the outside'. Jeroen van der Kris is the Brussels correspondent for the Dutch daily *NRC Handelsblad*. He stresses the fact that there is a distinct 'Belgian way of life', that often is not noticed by Belgians themselves. This 'belgitude' can be found both among the Dutch as among the French speaking inhabitants of the country. Jean-Pierre Stroobants is the Brussels correspondent for *Le Monde*. He is a bit more skeptical than his Dutch colleague, by paying attention to the strong conflicts that have recently arisen as a result of nationalistic movements. Stroobants also suggests a completely different solution: would there be all that much difference between public opinion in French speaking Belgium and in France itself?

In a short final contribution, Nenad Stojanovic replies to the critics the other authors have expressed on his plea for direct democracy as a tool to better organize multilingual democracy.

This e-book, self-evidently, does not offer any over-all solutions for the future development of public opinion in Belgium, as this was not the aim of this project. In fact, it will be noticed that most authors express some doubts about the feasibility of introducing direct democracy in the Belgian context. However, at the same time, various other possible reforms are being suggested, most notably the introduction of a federal electoral district, but also the role of political parties and mass media, and the possible influence of history and education are looked at. All these suggestions make clear there is no single 'magic bullet' solution for building a stronger level of federal loyalty in the Belgian political system. But all these

suggestions taken together, might be a way to reach that goal. In a recent speech, Arend Lijphart repeated his claim that Belgium is one of the best and most successful examples of a consociation democracy, bridging strong ethno-linguistic cleavages in the country<sup>1</sup>. It is clear that some of the consociational mechanisms that were developed in the 1950s or 1970s might not be able to function anymore in the current age. But this e-book suggests that various functional equivalents might be available.

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<sup>1</sup>. The Lijphart speech was printed in *De Morgen*, 9 May 2009, with as title: "Belgium remains a shining bright example".



# Lead Piece

by Nenad Stojanović

# Is democracy possible in a multilingual country? The Swiss experience and the paradox of direct democracy

Nenad Stojanović (Universität Zürich)

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## *Introduction*

Is it possible to establish stable representative democracy in a *truly* multilingual society? If a minimal definition of representative democracy demands a combination of equal voting rights, free elections, and decision-making by majority rule; and if by “truly multilingual society” we understand not a society which members speak two or more languages (in that case I would speak of a “plurilingual” society, like Luxembourg) but a country in which most citizens are monolingual and live in territorially distinct language regions, then we must admit that the answer to this question can hardly be optimistic.

This was, indeed, John Stuart Mill’s view when he famously wrote, almost 150 years ago, that “the united public opinion . . . cannot exist” in a country which citizens “read and speak different languages”. And the united public opinion, he thought, is “necessary to the working of representative government” (Mill 1993[1861]).

What is the empirical record of Mill’s prophecy? A quick look at contemporary democracies shows that Mill was right. If we concentrate on old democracies – that is, countries that became (more or less) democratic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – we come up only with three empirical counter examples. These are Belgium, Canada, and Switzerland. Most other democracies recognized and/or imposed only one language as the official language of the country – usually the statistically dominant one – and progressively suppressed other minority languages and/or regional “dialects” (e.g., France, Italy, Germany, Great Britain). Other democratic countries recognized local languages only at the sub-state level, that is, without making the country as such officially multilingual (e.g., German in South Tyrol, Italy, or Danish in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany). In other cases, regional languages have obtained a strong official status in their historical territories but the dominant language still has official status nationwide (e.g., Catalan vs. Castilian in Spain).

Therefore, Belgium, Canada and Switzerland are the only three old *multilingual* democracies for which Mill’s remark is still a challenge. In these three countries there are two to four official languages. In spite of the demographic dominance of one language – Dutch in Belgium (ca. 60 percent), English in Canada (ca. 60 percent), German in Switzerland (ca. 70 percent<sup>2</sup>) –, only a minority of citizens belonging to *minority* linguistic groups understand and/or speak the language of the majority. In Switzerland, for instance, only 20 percent of French speakers and 30 percent of Italian speakers are fluent in German (Kriesi et al. 1996: 15). The figures are strikingly similar in Belgium, where 19 percent of inhabitants of

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<sup>2</sup>. Swiss citizens only. The figure is lower (slightly above 60 percent) if we include foreign residents.

Wallonie can speak Dutch (Ginsburgh and Weber 2006: 4).<sup>3</sup> In Canada, the percentage of Francophones speaking English is higher (42 percent, in 2006) but it is shrinking and it is lower in Quebec than in other provinces.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, with the exception of Canada, the linguistic majority displays a higher degree of knowledge of the first minority language.<sup>5</sup>

Mill wrote this sentence in times in which only a small proportion of citizens could actually read. In times when there were no radio, no television, and no Internet. Today his doubts about the prospects of a democracy in a multilingual society pose an even greater challenge to countries like Canada, Belgium and Switzerland. A quick look at the available evidence shows that in these countries the vast majority of citizens (> 90 percent) read newspapers, listen to radio and listen/watch to television only and exclusively in their own language (for Switzerland, see Kriesi et al. 1996: 16-18). How is it possible to achieve democracy in such a context?

### *The paradox of direct democracy*

In this article, I will advance the thesis that direct-democratic tools can greatly (and perhaps decisively) contribute to establish stable democracy in a truly multilingual society.<sup>6</sup> As I will show, this is a side-effect and a true paradox of direct democracy.

Direct democracy has many disadvantages. Thinkers like Plato, Edmund Burke, Max Weber or Joseph Schumpeter expressed doubts about the *competence* of citizens to vote on complex political issues (see Kriesi 2005: 4, Papadopoulos 1998). More recently, Sartori (1987: 120) and Budge (1996) have reasoned along similar lines. For Gerber (1999), direct democracy is often manipulated by rich demagogues and populists and, thus, risks being transformed from an instrument of citizens to an instrument for lobbyists. As such, it seriously undermines representative government (Broder 2000).

But the main disadvantage which should concern us here, is that direct democracy is an institution that by its very nature allows a majority of citizens (50 percent + 1) to impose its will on the minority. As such, it does not seem to be an adequate instrument for multilingual countries made up of a majority and of one or many minorities. Quite the contrary. Many authors consider direct democracy as an “antithesis” of the consociational model (Barry 1975: 485; see also Steiner and Obler 1977: 328, Reilly 2005), which, arguably, is the only model for “divided societies” if they wish to become democratic (Lijphart 2002). Indeed, the empirical record informs us that referendum results may create tensions among language groups (see the referendum on the “royal question” in Belgium, 1950) or, at worse, trigger violence and armed conflict (see the referendum on independence in Bosnia, 1992).

Against this background, it is a true paradox that a country which is generally considered as the most successful multilingual (as well as multireligious, multiethnic, multicultural, multinational, etc.) democracy, is at the same time the world’s champion in the practice of direct democracy. Almost a third (555 out of 1840) of all popular votes held in the world at the national level until the end of 2008 took place in Switzerland. The record is even more impressive if we look at the available data on popular votes held at the sub-state level: 4253 out of 7288 (58 percent) took place in Switzerland.<sup>7</sup>

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3. The figure for all Belgium’s Francophones is, however, probably a bit higher, since 29 percent of the inhabitants of the region of Brussels speak Dutch.

4. <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2007/12/04/language-census.html?ref=rss>

5. In Switzerland, French, the strongest of the two minority languages, is spoken by 36 percent of German speakers and by 34 percent of Italian speakers. Italian is spoken by 10 percent of German speakers and 8 percent of Francophones (Kriesi et al. 1996). In Belgium, 59 percent of the inhabitants of Flanders speak French and 11 percent speak German (Ginsburgh and Weber 2006). In Canada, 9 percent of the Anglophones speak French (see Footnote 3).

6. The paper builds on my opinion article “*Démocratie directe au secours de la Belgique?*” published in *Le Soir*, 24/25 Dec. 2008.

7. All data are available at the website ([www.c2d.ch](http://www.c2d.ch)) of the Centre for Research on Direct Democracy, Zentrum für Demokratie Aarau, University of Zurich.

Not only did the Swiss multilingual democracy survive such an intense practice of direct democracy. The *paradox* is that this institution has been an important factor in fostering internal cohesion of Switzerland, by making the whole Swiss democratic system viable and, indeed, stable in the long run. How was this possible?

There are at least four important advantages that a *frequent* use of the Swiss type of direct democracy can produce in a multilingual society: (1) it is a bottom-up type direct democracy which, far from oppressing the minorities, enables them to have a voice in national politics, (2) it creates obstacles to the emergence of (divisive) ethnolinguistic discourses based on stereotypes and the rhetoric of “us vs. them”, (3) it fosters the emergence of a common *demos*, necessary for the “functioning of representative government”, and (4) it produces centripetal effects across language borders.

### *Bottom-up approach*

We can distinguish between two main types of direct democracy, depending on who has the right to initiate a popular vote. The “top-down” approach is when a single official (president, prime minister) or a single body (parliament, government) decides to call a referendum on a given issue. The plebiscite is the best example of this approach. Compulsory referenda, typically required for constitutional amendments, also belong to this category.

Yet this approach has nothing to do with the Swiss “bottom-up” direct democracy. In fact, in six out of ten cases the Swiss have voted on optional referenda and on popular initiatives which had been initiated by citizens.<sup>8</sup> Basically every law adopted by the federal parliament can be overturned by an optional referendum. 50'000 signatures (less than 2 percent of the electoral body) are sufficient to call such a referendum. And 100'000 signatures are requested in order to launch a popular initiative demanding the introduction of a new article in the constitution.

The bottom-up approach thus enables minorities to put on the political agenda issues which have been ignored or not sufficiently covered by the institutions of representative democracy. For this reason, even though at the end of the day the decision will still be taken by the majority of the citizens, direct-democratic instruments can be seen as positive for minority rights (Kobach 1993: 26).<sup>9</sup>

It is important to stress that by “minority” we shall not think only of *linguistic* minorities. Indeed, in most cases it is a political and/or social minority that launches a popular initiative or an optional referendum. But the very existence of bottom-up direct-democratic tools enables groups situated within a minority language region to put a given issue onto the national political agenda. In November 2008, for example, the Swiss voted on a popular initiative demanding the elimination of “*imprescriptibilité*” in relation to pornographic crimes against children. The initiative had been launched by a small group of activists from the French-speaking part of the country, without an established political or party base. In spite of the fact that the federal government and parliament almost unanimously recommended to the citizens to reject the initiative, in the end it was accepted by a majority of the voters (52 percent).

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<sup>8</sup>. In four out of ten cases, usually for constitutional amendments and decisions about joining supra-national organizations cases, the referendum was compulsory. [Until 2008 the Swiss voted on 169 popular initiatives (30 percent) and 164 optional referenda (30 percent), compared to 188 compulsory referenda (34 percent) and 36 counter-proposals (6 percent) formulated by parliament in response to popular initiatives.]

<sup>9</sup>. According to Vatter (1997), the bottom-up type of direct democracy is closer to consociational (or “power-sharing”) democracy, as defined by Lijphart (2002), than to the majoritarian model.

Multilingual, as well as other “multicultural” or “multiethnic” polities, constitute fertile ground for the establishment of “us vs. them” political rhetoric and ethnonationalist discourse. This phenomenon has been largely explored in the literature on nations and nationalism. Nationalist politicians tend to simplify the complex reality by using simplistic categories (see Brubaker 1996). “The” Walloons are lazy because they rely on social transfers from Flanders. “The” Flemish are selfish because they lack solidarity towards their Francophone co-nationals. “The” Quebecers are more leftist than “the” Anglo-Canadians, etc. Yet how can we know what “the” Flemish, “the” Walloons, or “the” Quebecers really feel or desire? Elections and opinion surveys cannot but provide partial answers to this question.

My intuition is that on a typical daily political issue “the” Flemish, Walloon, or Québécois opinion simply does not exist. It is very likely that within each group there is a huge number of diverging opinions.

Bearing this in mind, we shall note that a frequent use of referenda and popular initiatives directly and deeply undermines the rhetoric of “us vs. them”. If, say, the results of an imaginary referendum on Belgium’s pension system shows that 60 percent of Dutch speakers and 40 percent of Francophones accept an increase of the legal retirement age, it is hardly possible for French-speaking politicians to claim that “the” Flemish are bad guys who want to destroy the national pension system.

In other words, the results of popular votes constantly cut the ground under the feet of (real or potential) ethnonationalist leaders. If the outcome of a referendum shows strong intra-group divisions it is more difficult for them to speak “in the name” of their group. And even if the result of a given popular vote does deeply divide two linguistic groups and enables political leaders to start developing ethnonationalist rhetoric, direct democracy will probably correct that problem by itself.

In order to understand this last and important aspect of direct democracy we shall mention that a frequent use of direct-democratic tools creates a context of multiple majorities and minorities which “increase the likelihood that members of ethnic minorities will be parts of political majorities on some issues and many members of any ethnic majority will be members of political minorities on some issues” (Rothchild and Roeder 2005: 17). There is more to be said on this. Majorities and minorities can change over time on the *same* (or at least similar) issues. Let me illustrate this point by using the following example taken from Switzerland.

In the 1990s many French-speaking politicians and opinion makers propagated the black-white picture of “open-minded” Francophones, favorable to the integration of Switzerland into the European Union (EU), vs. “closed-minded” German speakers (see Büchi 2000). The trigger was a referendum held in December 1992, when a tiny majority (50.3 percent) of the Swiss rejected to join the European Economic Area (EEA). Most significantly, in *almost all*<sup>10</sup> German-speaking cantons, as well as in the Italian-speaking Ticino, a majority of citizens said “no”, whereas in *all* French-speaking cantons the “yes” votes largely prevailed, with percentages above 77 percent.<sup>11</sup> A closer inspection allows us to estimate that 73 percent of French speakers accepted to join the EEA, whereas 56 percent of German speakers and 62 percent of Italian speakers rejected it. Yet the “no” votes prevailed in virtue of the demographic strength of German speakers. Therefore it was an easy game for Francophone politicians and the media to blame the German-speaking majority for blocking the “legitimate desire” of French speakers to integrate into the EU. The linguistic cleavage between the two main language groups – known as “röstigraben” – entered the daily vocabulary of the media

<sup>10</sup>. The only exceptions were the cantons of Basel-Stadt and Basel-Land where the “yes” votes prevailed with, respectively, 55 and 53 percent.

<sup>11</sup>. These figures refer to the four officially monolingual French-speaking cantons. The percentages of “yes” votes were lower in the two bilingual (French/German) cantons, in which Francophones constitute approximately two thirds of the population (Fribourg, 65 percent, and Valais, 56 percent).

and politics. “A person reading the newspapers in those days could have got the impression that Switzerland was about to fall apart”, affirms Büchi (2000: 269; my translation).

But Switzerland, of course, did not fall apart. In the 2000s the clichés about “open-minded” French speakers and “close-minded” German speakers could be hardly spotted anymore in the French-speaking media and the political discourse of Francophone politicians. The reason is that numerous popular votes held after 1992 showed that such a picture was totally false. So the claim that French speakers were in favor of joining the EU literally collapsed in March 2001 when 77 percent of the Swiss rejected the popular initiative demanding the start of negotiations for the EU membership. In *no* canton was a majority of the citizens in favor of this initiative. In French-speaking cantons the percentage of “no” votes ranged from 56 percent in Jura to 79 percent in Valais. One year later, the Swiss accepted to join the United Nations (UN). This vote underlined the existence of an urban-rural rather than a linguistic cleavage. Interestingly, some German-speaking urban areas were even more favorable to the UN than the French-speaking ones. For instance, in the city of Geneva – the European seat of the UN – the percentage of “yes” votes was lower than in the German-speaking city of Berne. The stereotype about “closed-minded” German speakers was additionally broken when as many as five popular votes (2002, twice in 2005, 2006, and 2009) concerning the relations with the EU showed that the majority of them were in favor of a gradual opening to the EU. In the aftermath of the last of these votes, on 8 February 2009, an expert on the relations between Switzerland and EU said that “l’idéalisme pro-européen n’est plus là: la Suisse romande, que la cause européenne mettait en transe, ne l’est plus.”<sup>12</sup> In reality, “the” French-speaking Switzerland – la *Suisse romande* – was never “in trance” for the “European cause”. It was, rather, wishful thinking and a cliché diffused in the 1990s by the media and a part of the Francophone political elite.

This example, I believe, nicely illustrates how the very exercise of direct democracy structurally dissolves a potential tension between linguistic groups and hinders the emergence of the “us vs. them” nationalist rhetoric of politicians.

### *The emergence of a common demos*

Multilingual countries face the problem that they cannot rely on the myths on common linguistic/ethnic/cultural origin in order to construct a national *demos*. Moreover, how can there be “a” people, or “a” nation”, if its supposed members speak distinct, mutually unintelligible languages? This was, as we have seen, a major concern for J. S. Mill but a similar concern can be also found in the works of contemporary political theorists who consider the emergence of such a *demos* as indispensable not only for a stable democracy but also for cross-country social solidarity (see, e.g., Miller 1995, Habermas 1998).

In Switzerland it is precisely the frequent exercise of direct democracy at the national level which makes the emergence of such a *demos* possible.

The thesis, here, is that a repeated practice of direct democracy strengthens the sentiment of the Swiss that they belong to the same “people” or to the same “nation”. It makes it *visible*. When, in the aftermath of a referendum, politicians and the media affirm that “the people has decided”, there can be no doubt what “people” they have in mind: it is the Swiss people, the Swiss *demos*. In a speech held in 2002 in front of the General Assembly of the UN, the Swiss president Kaspar Villiger affirmed that “national cohesion [in Switzerland] is ... not to be taken for granted. Its central element is our system of direct democracy, the right of the people to decide all important political issues at the ballot box.”<sup>13</sup> Let me recall now a concept advanced in 1882 by Ernest Renan in his famous speech “What is a nation?”. According to Renan, a nation is a “daily plebiscite” [*plebiscite de tous les jours*]. Probably no

<sup>12</sup> René Schwok, interview published in *Le Temps*, 9 February 2009.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.efd.admin.ch/dokumentation/reden/archiv/02538/index.html?lang=en> (consulted on 22 Feb. 2009).

other country exemplifies this definition better than Switzerland. Of course, the Swiss do not vote every day. But they do vote two to four times every year on major national issues. And it can be assumed that even those citizens who – occasionally or permanently<sup>14</sup> – do not vote indirectly get the feeling that they, too, belong to the common Swiss *demos*. I do not need to play football in order to cherish a victory of my national football team.

We can easily understand that this *demos* can hardly manifest itself in countries in which national elections are held every four years in linguistically separate electoral districts and in which other factors (especially linguistically segmented public spaces or the impossibility to rely on myths on common cultural origin) further prevent its emergence.

In order to grasp this last point I shall underline that in Switzerland popular votes held at the national level take place in a single constituency or “voting district”. This is only apparently mitigated by the fact that in 70 percent of the cases (i.e. in votes on compulsory referenda and popular initiatives) a double majority was required, of the people *and* of the cantons. The main claim of this section of the article remains unaffected by this consideration, since the cantonal *demos* do not *substitute* the Swiss *demos*, they are *additional* to it. Besides, only in a very small number of cases, the last time in 1994, was the will of the majority of the Swiss people overrun by the majority of the cantons.

If the thesis advanced in this part of the article holds, then direct democracy also helps to explain why is it incorrect to consider Switzerland as a “multination” state composed of distinct, linguistically defined, “nations” (see Kymlicka 1995, Ipperciel 2007) and why is it more appropriate to consider it as a single, albeit multilingual, “nation” (see Stojanovic 2000, Grin 2002, Dardanelli 2008).

#### *Centripetal effects of the single voting district*

If the common *demos* can be considered as a product of *vertical integration* triggered by the frequent exercise of direct democracy, the single voting district creates another important centripetal effects at the level of *horizontal integration* (see Tresch 2008: 278-9). By “horizontal integration” I mean the emergence of cross-linguistic dialogues as well as the flow of political views and opinions from one language region to the other.

The fact that popular votes are held in a single voting district creates incentives for politicians, political parties and social movements to cross cantonal and linguistic borders in order to seek support in other parts of the country and create ad hoc cross-regional coalitions (Hug 1994). It is in their interest to do so. The media play their role. The public radio and television channels, for instance, invite politicians with different linguistic backgrounds to participate in debates on the upcoming referendum.<sup>15</sup> The newspapers, too, often quote or publish interviews with politicians coming from different language regions. A recent empirical analysis of two votes on foreign (i.e. European) policy, held in 2001 and 2002, shows that in the articles published by the German-speaking *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* five out of ten most cited politicians were German speakers, four were French speakers and one was an Italian speaker. On the other side of the language border, in the French-speaking *Tribune de Genève*, top ten positions were held by five Francophones, four German speakers (two of which were in the first two positions!) and one Italian speaker (Tresch 2008: 193). However, it shall be stressed that this horizontal integration concerns only the well-known federal politicians. The inter-linguistic dialogue of other actors, not to speak of “simple” citizens, is

<sup>14</sup> The participation rates are rarely above 45 percent.

<sup>15</sup> This is even a formal duty for the Swiss public broadcasting service (SSR SSR Idée Suisse). Among its corporate principles we can read the following statement: “When it comes to creating programmes, we orientate ourselves towards the varied needs of the majorities and minorities in multilingual and multicultural Switzerland” (<http://www.srg.ch/336.0.html?&L=4>). And the federal law on radio and television of 2006 states (art. 24) that among the duties of the public broadcasting service is to “promouvoir la compréhension, la cohésion et l’échange entre les différentes parties du pays, les communautés linguistiques, les cultures et les groupes sociaux, et tenir compte des particularités du pays et des besoins des cantons” (<http://www.admin.ch/ch/f/rs/71784.40.fr.pdf>).

low. Only rarely do actors from different linguistic regions criticize or support each other in public. (Tresch 2008: 278).

A further centripetal effect of the single voting district is that it favors the flow of information between linguistic regions. As a matter of fact, as we have seen in introduction, multilingual polities face the challenge of segmented public spaces. If elections are held in numerous electoral districts which borders more or less fit the language borders, and if the media cover the elections only in their own linguistic region, there is the risk that citizens discuss completely different political issues. Direct democracy mitigates this problem insofar it obliges the politicians in all regions of the country to discuss *the same issue(s), at the same moment*.

Of course, two different groups can discuss the same issue by relying on completely different sets of arguments. Indeed, in Switzerland this phenomenon has been observed by some authors (e.g., Kriesi et al. 1996: 7). For instance, in French and Italian-speaking regions the votes on issues of social security like maternity leave are typically characterized by debates revolving on questions of social justice and family policy, whereas the financial sustainability of the proposal is usually at the centre of debates in German-speaking Switzerland. Nonetheless, the centripetal effect mentioned above – the fact that politicians cross linguistic borders – allows for a degree of permeability. The ideas and arguments of one region flow into the public space of the other region, and vice versa. This further centripetal effect shall not be underestimated. Indeed, the already mentioned study by Anke Tresch has shown that in referendum campaigns which preceded the two votes on foreign policy there was an increasing convergence of the arguments among the linguistic regions. The authors come to the conclusion that “there is no *fundamental* [grundsätzlich] contradiction between linguistic plurality and an integrated public space” (Tresch 2008: 277; my translation; emphasis in original).

### Conclusion

Let me sum up. In this article I have tried to show how direct democracy, an institution which is apparently inimical to “plural” societies because it does not contain measures for protection of minorities, may contribute to internal cohesion of a multilingual society and, more specifically, may foster integration of linguistic minorities. By exploring the Swiss experience I have identified four main advantages of direct-democratic instruments. First, the bottom-up approach which is proper to the Swiss type of direct democracy enables tiny minorities to raise issues, which they deem important, on the national political agenda. Second, the frequent use of direct democracy creates multiple majorities and multiple minorities which enable everyone to be, depending on the issue, every now and then on the winning side and, at the same time, it makes the life difficult for ethnonationalist politicians who cannot develop a permanent “us vs. them” rhetoric. Third, the practice of direct democracy at the national level promotes vertical integration and allows the emergence of a common *demos*. Finally, the fact that popular votes at the national level are held in a single “voting district” produces centripetal effects of horizontal integration by providing incentives for politicians, parties and social movements to cross language borders and by facilitating the flow of information and arguments across linguistically segmented public spaces.

It is important, however, to make two important disclaimers. First, the article does not claim that direct democracy is *the only* factor which explains why Switzerland has been and still is a stable multilingual democracy. But it does claim that it is an important factor. Indeed, direct democracy is an institution which structures, powerfully, a set of other practices and institutions which are often cited as “the” secret of the Swiss success. For example, the Swiss “Konkordanzdemokratie” – that is, the fact that at all levels (federal, cantonal, municipal) governments are composed by representatives of major political parties, covering the whole political spectrum – is a by-product of direct democracy (Neidhart 1970). And even the fact



that all major Swiss parties, as well as organizations of civil society, are multilingual has been recently explained as a consequence of direct democracy (Tresch 2008: 280).

Second, the article does not claim that this typically Swiss institution can be transposed *tel quel* to other multilingual societies and that it can immediately produce similarly positive results. Direct democracy is, indeed, a fundamental element of the Swiss political culture. But this culture did not emerge from one day to another. It is, rather, a result of a long-term process which started back in 1866, when the first national referenda were held. Even though I believe that its introduction in other contests may, in the long run, produce positive results, certain mechanisms of protection of minorities should be introduced. In fact, even in Switzerland the use of direct democracy did at some point create tensions between language groups. I shall recall the example of the 1992 referendum on the EEA. My analysis of the impact of direct democracy on inter-group relations in the four multilingual cantons (Stojanovic 2006) has also shown that a linguistic cleavage and tensions emerged on a number of votes which concerned “communitarian” issues (like the use of languages at schools, or a new electoral system with effects on linguistic proportionality in the cantonal government). Such issues are better dealt with at the level of representative democracy where it is easier to reach consensus.

Direct democracy is far from being the panacea for all ills of a multilingual democracy. But it is worth exploring its virtues. And it might be worth trying them.

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# Comments

# The duality of public opinions as a democratic asset

*Confessions of an historian*

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As most of the Belgian historians of my generation – both Francophone and Flemish – I was brought up with the idea the Flemish nation, in spite of its own alleged secular existence, was more recent than the Belgian nation. The Belgian nation, it was told, had its roots in the Burgundian rule of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and had afterwards continued to develop under the Spanish, Austrian, French and Dutch rulers. From the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the existence of a Belgian (proto-)nation was obvious for anyone. The revolution of 1830, therefore, was not an incident, as Flemish nationalists wanted to make believe, but the logical outcome of strong national feelings. In this same line of reasoning, the success of the Flemish nation building itself was turned into some kind of incident: it was presented as the product of Flemish middle classes, who felt the dominant use of French as an obstacle to their upward social mobility, and therefore construed an alternative national identification. Not popular feelings, but the selfishness of a small social class lay at the basis of the Flemish nation, according to this line of reasoning. The ultimate proof of this vision was found in the history of the First World War, when a small group of Flamingant intellectuals were lured by the German occupier into a radically anti-Belgian engagement; and in the fact that these same intellectuals were not cured from their ambition by the German defeat, but instead continued to hope for German support in their struggle against Belgium. The second Flemish nationalist collaboration was, within that same view, unavoidable. According to historians such as Lode Wils and Jean Stengers, therefore, the opposition between Belgium and Flanders was a sort of cuckoo's egg laid by the German occupier into the Belgian nest, and taken care of by a small, but ambitious Flamingant élite. The further development of an anti-Belgian Flemish Nationalism, which would eventually lead to the process of federalization, was interpreted within this scheme as an internal dynamic driven by the will of power. The process of federalization, thus the reasoning goes, was wanted by nobody but by the politicians themselves, for whom strong Flemish institutions implied more opportunities to obtain powerful positions. The underlying assumption of this thesis seems to be that Flemish nationalism has gained political force without the existence of a truly Flemish, let alone of a Flemish nationalist public opinion, and that Belgian public opinion, on the contrary, has been dismantled from without. This appeared to be a strong historical argument against the claims of Flemish Nationalism.

Today, some fifteen years later, I have become familiar, through research and readings, with several aspects of the political and cultural life in nineteenth and twentieth century Belgium, and I am less and less convinced whether this thesis still holds. Whatever part of Belgian civil society one studies from an historical perspective, one seems to find stark differences between the Flemish and the Francophone part of the country. Particularly the way that was reacted on international tendencies could be utterly different. These differences are so striking, and pertain to such a wide variety of fields, that they cannot be entirely ascribed to the agitation of a small political group. I give only three examples, taken from different fields and from different periods, in order to illustrate my point.

One very obvious example can be found in the electoral behavior of the Belgian population since the 1880s. Although none of the existing parties was organized according to 'subnational' lines nor waged a subnational propaganda, the gap between a 'right-wing' (read 'confessional') Flanders and a left-wing (read 'anti-clerical') Wallonia became very striking since that time. As my colleague Henk de Smaele has convincingly shown in his doctoral dissertation (which will soon be published), no social or economic differences can be found which suffice to explain the width of this gap. De Smaele searches the ultimate cause in cultural factors, and more specifically in the strength of a Flemish – and to a lesser degree, a Walloon – self-image. In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the association between Flanders and rural or provincial values became widespread, and the Catholic party, as the defender of the peasants' interests, profited most from this self-image in the Flemish regions of the country. In Wallonia, which in many ways was more rural than Flanders, this same association never became dominant. In the Walloon self-image, the modernity of the industrial towns became much more prominent, which was translated into electoral gains for the anti-clerical left.

That these images could become so powerful that they were able to influence electoral behavior, does suggest that there existed two different public opinions to convey them. It is certainly no coincidence that this evolution occurred in the same period during which the popular press knew a rapid development.

A second context in which the dissimilarity between the Flemish and the Francophone public opinions struck me, was that of the cultural avant-garde of the 1920s. Whereas the Flemish avant-garde of that period was heavily influenced by the formal experiments of German expressionism and, to a lesser degree, Dadaism, Francophone cultural élites turned out to be much more attached to a classical aesthetics. One of the reasons for that difference certainly was that the First World War had aroused much stronger anti-German feelings in the Francophone part of the country than in Flanders. That in itself is surprising, since the so-called 'German atrocities' had not hit the Walloon provinces so much harder than their Flemish counterparts. At a more structural level, however, these differences between the Flemish and the Francophone avant-garde find their roots in long term differences between the Dutch speaking and the Francophone cultural traditions of nineteenth-century Belgium. Even if some Francophone authors did appreciate German romanticism or the 'Nordic culture' as a 'healthy' alternative to the decadent French culture, they did not entertain equally close contacts with German intellectuals as many of the Flemish authors did. Without yielding in any way to the racial connotations that these terms can arouse, it is hard to deny the fairly self-evident fact that the Dutch speaking culture of Belgium was nearer to the Germanic sphere of influence, whereas the Belgium's Francophone culture was (and is) part and parcel of the larger French culture (even if it occupies a somehow eccentric place within that culture). The traditional defenses of Belgium as a place where cultures merged, which could be heard already in the 1830s and which resonated again during the Belgavox concert of May 17 2009, are primarily the product of wishful thinking by cultural élites with fairly little resonance among the population at large.

A third episode in Belgian history that I want to touch upon in this context, is the rise of the 'new social movements' and of second wave-feminism in the early 1970s. As movements which claimed to pay attention to the 'real concerns' of 'real people', and which therefore entertained a problematic relationship with institutionalized politics, one could have expected them to have taken their distance from the process of federalization. And yet, nearly all these movements split up fairly quickly into a Flemish and a Francophone wing. Sometimes, this scission was based on diverging perspectives on society – as was the case for the peace movement – sometimes it seems to have been caused rather simply by the fact that both parts of the movement experienced difficulties in finding a common language. That was evidently the case at a sheer linguistic level, but much more problematic was the fact that entire sets of references diverged. Symptomatic in this regard were the names of the most radical groups within second-wave feminism. Flemish neo-feminists were quick to name themselves after their Dutch examples De Dolle Minas (the name itself a reference to Dutch

first wave feminist Wilhelmina Drucker), a name which was senseless to the Francophone militants of feminism. The latter preferred to call themselves Marie Mineur, after a nineteenth century working class woman in the industrial town of Verviers. Although Flemish and Francophone neo-feminists would entertain good contacts during the following years, and even undertake some common actions, their paths were separate from the start.

I could easily extend this list by focusing, for example, on the history of the Boy Scouts movement in Belgium, or on the history of history writing itself. They would all reveal very diverging patterns in Flanders and Francophone Belgium. The conclusion of all these examples must unavoidably be that the duality of public opinions in Belgium by far predates the process of federalization of the political institutions. Probably, it is not very hazardous to claim that they exist as long as one can speak of modern, democratic public opinions as such. By this, I mean a framework of references and orientations shared by members of different social classes within the population of a given territory. In this sense, 'public opinion' could only see the daylight with the birth and rapid spread of modern mass media, and with the fulfilling of other democratic conditions, such as widespread literacy. If one can rightly state that a 'Belgian' public opinion existed before this date (maybe as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century), this was a public opinion of a totally different kind. It was confined to the upper classes, who had, since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the latest, opted for French as their language of culture and politics, and who shared in very broad terms a 'liberal culture' in spite of political differences between them. The multifaceted democratization of society since the last decades of the nineteenth century pushed this kind of culture nearly unavoidably to the margins, and turned it into a subculture (though with still strong access to the levers of power).

In the light of these findings, it becomes impossible to present the process of federalization as the product of an ambitious political class. We could even assert that politics in Belgium has been one of the last domains to become federalized. Maybe it is for that very reason that this process has been so radical, and has so utterly neglected to give a proper role to the central institutions. The federalization of the institutions does show some features of an improvised and hurried attempt to catch up with federalization of the minds, which had long been accomplished. The currently often repeated complaint that "Flemings and Walloons don't know each other any more" can be countered by the question "did they ever know each other?" Although there has been very little historical research to underpin this view, it seems unlikely that a substantial part of the Flemings ever read Francophone newspapers, or listened to French programmes on the radio. The situation today in this respect is probably not so much worse than one hundred years ago.

History, for that very reason, can hardly be invoked by those who want to defend Belgium against the claims of Flemish and Walloon sub-nationalists (unless by those who are nostalgic towards an elitarian *Belgique de papa*). Flanders and Wallonia are certainly not *older* than Belgium, but they probably are more firmly embedded in the modern and democratic society of the last century. At the very least, they can be legitimized by history equally well as Belgium.

### *Reflections of a citizen*

Does this historical insight mean that we should say farewell to Belgium, and happily engage in the sub-national projects (with maybe a sort of international statute for Brussels)? I don't believe this should be the case. It should only make us aware that the existence of Belgium should be legitimized by arguments referring to the present and the future rather than to the past. First of all, the question should be asked whether the existence of two (or more public) opinions needs to be a fundamental problem for a democracy. If the answer to this question were affirmative, all attempts to create a democratic Europe would immediately be reduced to vain illusions. There is no hope at all, that ever there will be one European public

opinion, and yet we try to let all Europeans partake into one single democratic process. Why couldn't we try the same for Belgium?

If we take the argument one step further, we can ask whether the existence of more than one public opinion in a given country can be an advantage for a democracy. That would not be the case if we would equal 'democracy' - as many Flameng intellectuals do today - with a political system in which 'the public opinion' is translated into political measures. In my view, such a definition is not only false, but also dangerous. It denies the homogenizing, and potentially anti-democratic aspects of the notion 'public opinion' itself. Even if public opinion cannot be simply considered as the product of political elites hungry for power, we cannot deny that it is always to a certain degree constructed, and that in this construction power relations and hierarchies do play an important role. Much rather than as a simple top down process, we should consider 'power' here as a highly circular 'regime' - to use the Foucauldian term - in which the mass media form an important mediator. By functioning as gatekeeper of information - and, more recently, by publishing the results of all kinds of surveys -, the mass media determine to a high degree what belongs to the public opinion and what is excluded from it. As such, they offer politicians an instrument to strengthen their claims by presenting it as congruent with 'the public opinion'. On the other hand, public opinion reduces the politicians' autonomy in representing opinions or interests falling outside of it. As such, public opinion can become a tyrant sitting on the throne which in a true democracy, according to Claude Lefort's much often-cited phrase, should remain empty. A democratic system, therefore, should be organized in such a way that it can resist to the homogenizing pressure of public opinion, and listen to alternative or eccentric visions.

Seen from this perspective, the duality of public opinions in Belgium appears rather as an asset for democracy than as an obstacle to it. Public opinion in this country is automatically de-centered, which could be seen as warrant for the openness of democracy. If Belgian democracy shows serious deficiencies nonetheless, this is not due to the existence of two public opinions in the first place, but to the fact that the homogenizing forces within each of these public opinions prevail over their potential to de-center one another. One of the reasons for this tendency can be found in the institutional setting that has been created over the last few decades. The federalization of the representative and executive institutions has been accompanied by the scission of all the political parties. As a consequence, the electorate has been radically divided into two entities, which have no reason whatsoever to be informed or concerned about one other. The recent decision to create community-wide constituencies for the federal institutions (notably for the Senate) has worsened this situation, because it engendered a direct confrontation between the two communities about the future prime minister .

If the homogenizing of the two public opinions would only be caused by recent institutional constellations, the solution could be relatively simple. The Swiss electoral procedures could in that case be considered as an example to follow, since Nenad Stojanović in his lead paper convincingly argues that direct democracy can help to overcome the disadvantages of a dual public opinion. At this point, however, it is the historian's task to warn against such an easy and optimistic conclusion. That the public opinions in Belgium are more homogenized *and* more antagonistic to one another is not solely due to recent institutional arrangements, but has very deep roots in the political history of the two countries. The fact that Belgium was (and largely still is) a bilingual instead of a multilingual society should be noted from the outset. Probably the most crucial difference between the two countries, however, is that Switzerland, unlike Belgium, has never attempted to be the most modern nation-state of the European continent. That ambition was from the very start imbued with contradictions. On the one hand, the architects of independent Belgium wanted their construction to be a centralized nation state, based on the idea of a homogeneous popular will. Hence, they constructed a strong central power. By giving this state at the same time an extremely liberal character, they immediately weakened this power base in a very fundamental way. The Liberal premises, indeed, implied the freedom not only for individuals but also for social identities to develop into autonomous forces which could eventually threaten the state itself.

In other words, the Belgian state construction created from the start the possibility for the Francophone bourgeoisie to monopolize state power *and* the possibility for the subaltern groups to contest this monopoly. In the course of the nineteenth century, this second possibility was used above all by the Catholic segment of society, since the end of that century the Flemish movement has taken over that role. Hence, the relationship between the language groups was much more politicized in Belgium than in Switzerland, where central state power was relatively weak, and therefore did not become the object of struggle.

In this context, I would believe the institutionalization of a referendum in the Belgian context could hardly play an integrative, and therefore democratizing role. Even if it would be organized nationwide, the debates surrounding it would probably soon be recast in sub-national terms and used to step up the differences between the two language groups. Aren't there any institutional or political arrangements, then, which might further Belgian democracy in spite of the cleavage between its two public opinions? According to me, any institutional change should go into two, seemingly opposite directions. On the one hand, it should be aimed at the decentralization of power, bringing democracy at the lowest possible level (local communities, but also enterprises and institutions themselves). Some federalism in the proudhonion sense of the word could help, according to me, to free the federal system in Belgium from the pressure of sub-nationalist opinion-makers and re-direct it to the true needs of people in their specific contexts; on the other hand, the central state level should be made the object of democratic debate once more, not by installing a referendum, but by creating a federal constituency for the existing institutions of representative government (and next to the existing, provincial constituencies). By such a double move, we might hope to bring about a multilayered form of democracy, reflecting the complexities and the multiple identities of modern life. In that case, the duality of public opinion in Belgium could turn out to be a democratic asset.



# Political institutions and the construction of a common public sphere

Marc Reynebeau (De Standaard)

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## *Institutions and the political culture*

For several reasons referendums do not sit well with Belgium's political culture, that is characterized by long traditions of political patronage and top down democracy. They might explain the current wave of distrust in politics: politicians can't deliver the goods anymore as real power and decision making have been evacuated largely out of the political realm. However, tradition is not a valid argument to bluntly reject Nenad Stojanovic' proposal as such. Any improvement of the political system deserves careful consideration. But changing a political tradition and in this case even reversing it, is difficult and time consuming and has an unpredictable outcome.

But not the means but the ends are what really matter. So why is it worthwhile considering the Stojanovic proposal? It's not merely about organizing referendums. It's certainly not about 'saving' the troubled Belgian state as an entity by trying to sustain it through a new practice, in this case a practice of referendums. The proposal is important and can be inspiring because it raises fundamental questions on democracy and its viability and how these are connected to the idea of a common cause. As all citizens are stakeholders in the society they live in, they need an institutional framework through which they can articulate their common cause and validate their interests. The challenge then is how to organize public debate and political decision making in order to enhance democratic agency.

Therefore institutions are important. And of course, institutions never are neutral. They shape the political practice by determining the mechanisms, limits and conditions of political agency. In doing so, they create a political habitus, which in its turn engenders a framework of thinking and attributing value, there is nothing illegitimate or darkly conspirational about that, although institutions can have unintended effects in the long run. It's all about efficiency: what goals do institutions have to serve and what is the best way to achieve those goals? Furthermore, how can they be altered in order to enhance their effectiveness or to avoid unwanted effects? These questions are important for Belgium as the country's institutions seem to be constantly under stress.

## *Institutions in Belgian history*

The so-called banal process of nation building is part and parcel of Belgium's institutional history. The country is a clear example of how a centuries-long historical experience within common political, social, cultural and religious institutions created the Belgian nation. However, a nation is seldom homogenous. Nationhood does not exclude internal differentiation or even strife, rivalry or contention. New historical phenomena can stress already existing internal divisions and create tensions that in the end might endanger national coherence. Already in the early decades of Belgium's existence as an independent state king

Leopold I worried about its future because of the intensity of the political and ideological struggle between Catholics and liberals.

Another new phenomenon of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the country's language problem. Linguistic diversity already existed a long time, but it gained societal importance because in the 19<sup>th</sup> century language as such became important – and thus became 'a problem'. First, Belgium developed into a modern, industrializing society, which needed new educational and communication systems in which language was a primary tool. Secondly, language became a symbol of social inequality as power was exercised in French, while Dutch – at first no more than a collection of dialects – was the language of the poor and the powerless. Language differences became politically relevant as a social marker. Thirdly, language became an element in territorial identification, as the southern part of the country, Wallonia, generally adopted French as its vehicular language, while the northern provinces, Flanders, stuck to the vernacular Dutch. This territorial differentiation was emphasized by a sharp difference in economic development: the Walloon provinces of Liege and Hainaut industrialized rapidly, whereas Flanders remained mainly agricultural. As a result, Wallonia – i.e. the industrial, commercial and financial elites of Liege and Hainaut – accumulated wealth, while most of the Flemish population lived in poverty. After 1945, the Walloon mining and steel industry declined and the situation reversed dramatically: Flanders became and by far still is the richer of the two.

Different historical developments entail a different political behavior. Already in 1884, when only the rich and the middle classes had voting rights, all members of the lower chamber of parliament elected in Flanders were Catholics. Although it substantially changed the social fabric of politics, the extension of suffrage to all male Belgians – women can only vote since 1948 – did not change this pattern. The Catholic and later the Christian-democratic party was by far the more popular in Flanders, in Wallonia the social-democrats dominated politics. As social and economic diversity coincided with linguistic difference, it seemed tempting to both sides to link them in an ethnic logic.

Democracy deepened the linguistic divide in Belgium, because in Flanders it gave a political voice to the Dutch speaking poor. The long process of democratization gradually reduced the weight and the power of the traditional French speaking political and social elite. Universal suffrage made it possible for the Dutch speaking population to express itself politically and to create its own elites. At first linguistic laws secured the official status of Dutch, followed soon by a process of decentralization and devolution, which turned Belgium into a federal state by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Institutions and identity building*

The new regions and communities that make up Belgium today created their own institutions and political practices, which engendered specific identitarian dynamics. As a result, most Belgians developed a layered national identity. In this so-called 'lasagna identity', they mix simultaneous and contingent senses of belonging to various territorial levels, in which a Belgian identity is more or less balanced by feelings of connectedness to a region, a community or a language group. Moreover, as a result of a long tradition of localism, an emotional attachment to the lower levels – the province, the city, the village or even the neighborhood – seem to be the more important, although they are seldom articulated politically.

However, the possibilities to express this mixed identity politically are limited, as every electoral candidate must by law choose a 'language group' to which he or she belongs. Hence, there are no more Belgian, 'national' or officially bilingual politicians any more, nor can a citizen vote for such a politician. As a result, there are no more parties that operate on a federal level.

How this discrepancy between mixed identitarian feelings – which are well described in academic surveys – and the limited institutional possibilities of expressing them politically is to be evaluated, is largely a matter of principle. Flemish nationalists see it as a temporary phase in the development of a sturdy and even exclusive Flemish national identity, by which the Belgian layer in the lasagna will ultimately evaporate. To some new political movements in the officially bilingual capital of Brussels however the electoral law is a hindrance, as in their view traditional linguistic conflicts do not matter very much anymore. For them Brussels is an essentially multicultural and thus multilingual society which has far more complex problems to address urgently. It remains to be seen how relevant these new movements really are, but their analysis is worthwhile considering.

Nevertheless, the discrepancy illustrates the way institutions influence and even determine the political process. The absence of national parties restricts political discourse to the members of one language group, to which the other language group can only be an out-group. On a party political and electoral level, relations between the two linguistic groups can only be a matter between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and thus are destined to be dealt with in a confrontational way.

In each language group this topic of intra-Belgian relations thus becomes a valence issue. This makes it is easy and even tempting for politicians to take a radical stance on it, because it can be rewarding. They can depict a Flemish c.q. francophone view as the national interest of their own community, as this is the only one they really represent, even though the Constitution states that members of the federal parliament represents the whole of the Belgian nation. Politicians never have to face, let alone fear an electoral sanctioning by the other linguistic group. Hence, for them the Belgian national interest can only be a function of the perceived regional interest, making federal loyalty always conditional. ‘What is in it for us?’ And, of course: ‘I want my money back.’

As rhetoric reveals ways of thinking, it is easy to understand why politicians nowadays tend to compare political debate on the federal level to ‘a diplomatic conference’, as if the Dutch and the French speaking communities already acted as independent states. Indeed, this is the format in which language groups deal with each other. It treats the federal level no more as a political body in its own right, but only as a forum for political negotiation between the language groups.

This rhetorical logic tends to confirm and strengthen itself by interpreting every disagreement on the federal level as an ethno-linguistic conflict, thus often obscuring its true ideological nature. Moreover, the format leads politicians to view differences between the language groups as more essential than their similarities. Therefore, in this logic Belgium’s ‘diplomatic conference’ does not deal with the interests and aspirations of its ten million citizens, it only has to accommodate – for the time being? – what is rhetorically often referred to as ‘two democracies’, which are supposed to be the genuine political expression of ‘two public opinions’.

This rhetoric is deceptive, because it confuses reasons with results and therefore harbors two problematic assumptions. The first one is that there is such a thing as ‘a’ public opinion that is supposed ideally to be homogenous. The second one assumes that there is a historical logic in which at a certain point in time Belgium indeed was only ‘one’ democracy, but has now to be split institutionally because the supporting public opinion has split. This integrated Belgian public opinion allegedly ceased to exist because the two linguistic communities, as is often said, don’t read each other’s newspapers any more nor watch each other’s television programs. They supposedly lost interest in each other because in many ways they were too different.

There can be little doubt that Dutch and French speaking Belgians indeed dispose of their own separate systems of mass communication. This does not contribute much, to say the least, to national coherence, as a nation nowadays is primarily a communicational

community. Certainly, Flemish and francophone Belgians know very little about each other and do not have a comprehensive set of cultural references, topics of conversation or easy to understand *non-dits* in common.

However, this is not new. In earlier times, the two groups did not read each other's newspapers either. But this did not matter, as society's structures were far more hierarchal than they are today. The only opinions that were taken serious politically were those of a small political, social, bureaucratic and intellectual elite, with a limited number of Flemings who had accepted French as the leading language and spoke it fluently. This elite does not exist anymore, mainly as the result of the democratization of society.

The question now is whether a distinct Flemish or francophone public opinion really exists. If the consumption of communication media is to be a measure of homogeneity, the answer is obviously negative. Because of cultural proliferation and the presence of a wide variety of lifestyles, combined with the development of new communication technologies, a vast assortment of specialized media, reflecting a multitude of social, cultural, local and even generational interests, values and preferences, cater for a plethora of groups and niches in society, which seem to have little in common with each other. It has academically been confirmed that this is even the case with mass media in Flanders, as between the audiences of the Flemish public broadcasting company VRT and its commercial competitor VTM 'a stabilized cultural divide' exists.

The supposedly solid public opinion of Flemish or francophone Belgians can thus only be very limited in scope and depth and at worst only reflects a narrow consensus among the political elites within both language groups. The issue here is what is really meant by public opinion and the shared political views and values therein. As the rhetorical argument of the 'two democracies' makes a wide-ranging cultural claim, it certainly can't be based on very much. Of course it's easy to point that the French speaking Belgians do like to go out and watch the odd French movie, while the Flemish audience does not even bother to take notice of it, this doesn't exclude that they all share the same enthusiasm for American movies, that make up the vast majority of their picture viewing habits, as does most of the rest of the world with them. The same goes for most of the entertainment and popular culture they prefer.

Not only all Belgians are fond of an international, mostly Anglo-Saxon commercial culture, they also share a distinct Belgian heritage, whether they are aware of it or not. International comparative surveys point out that Flemings at least share more values with their French speaking compatriots than with the inhabitants of the Netherlands, with whom they share their language, as the Belgian francophones have more values in common with the Flemings than with the French.

### *The use of institutional reform*

All this does not contradict or minimize the reality of distinct identitarian feelings within Belgium's language groups. It only learns that identity is a vastly more complex phenomenon than explicit or *de facto* nationalistic rhetoric usually assumes. Having said this, the point is not really what the content of a public opinion is. The issue is how the politically relevant aspects of it can be expressed in all its diversity and complexity. That is why political institutions are important. All that is needed is a basic consensus on this goal and on how it can be achieved. And it can probably safely be presumed that preference should be given to the democratic way.

Democracy is not invented to accommodate only one, homogenous public opinion in which everyone agrees on everything. Probably a society with such a public opinion does not exist. On the contrary democracy serves to organize ideological diversity and resolve political conflict in a peaceful, equitable and rational way. To that purpose it does not need a homogenous public opinion but an 'empty' and accessible public sphere, shaped by

institutions, wherein diverging views and opinions can be debated and decisions can be made effectively.

But again, institutions are not neutral. Or put in another way: institutions must be constantly under review for their effectiveness and efficiency, in order to check and control the effects they generate. That explains why the original Belgian state for very obvious and good reasons eventually became a federation. But here the political structure has an already mentioned flaw: its inability to accommodate the full variety of identitarian feelings. As a bold hypothesis it might even be argued that this flaw narrowed political perceptions, strategies and tactics to such a point that it caused the political stalemate the Belgian federal government experiences since 2007.

Here Nenad Stojanovic' proposal is important. It learns that Belgium should look for institutional change that has an effect similar to that of the Swiss referendum tradition: the creation of a public sphere in which different opinions can be debated and gives voice to political views that are blocked now by the electoral system. A proposal to that end has already been made: the creation of a federal voting district.

Some high-ranking Christian-democrats have already rejected it in principle as being quixotic, on the argument that 'reality' cannot – or should not? – be changed by institutions. Surely, institutions can do that. The question really is: what reality are those politicians referring to? Do they think of their own perception of it which, as is argued, is narrowed as a result of earlier institutional reform, or do they refer to the reality that is expressed in academic surveys and opinions polls? As is well known, every idea needs an argument and a reality check.

# Are there really two public opinions in Belgium?

Marc Hooghe (KULeuven)

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One of the recurrent claims in the rhetoric about Belgian linguistic divisions is that public opinion in the two communities would be radically different. The fact that Dutch and French speaking communities would adhere to different value patterns would render it all the more difficult to reach a political compromise on various topics, ranging from how to reduce the government deficit to how to fight corruption. If we want to develop coherent policies, the logic goes, we should develop two separate political systems: institutions should adapt to cultural realities in society.

At first sight, the argument makes sense. First of all, we know from empirical research how important public attitudes are for politics. We can assume that the political culture of a country to a large extent determines the way a political system operates. E.g., various international experiences have shown that it is very difficult for a government to fight corruption if there is a feeling among the population that corruption is not all that bad as a survival mechanism. Already from the 1950s on it has been shown that the political culture of a country has a strong impact on the stability of democratic political systems. Public opinion matters, to put it simply.

Furthermore, we also know that cultures tend to change slowly, and that there are profound differences between various cultures. The argument has been formulated most strongly by the late US political scientist Samuel P. Huntington in his work *The Clash of Civilizations*. The Huntington argument is by now well known: the assumption is that there are strong and stable differences between the basic values of different civilizations, and at some point these different civilizations will resort to a conflict in order to achieve hegemony. In the recent literature, a number of authors and political entrepreneurs have tried to apply the Huntington thesis also to the Belgian case: it is assumed that the two communities are so radically different that in the end there is no other solution than, either a culture clash, or a separation of the two cultures.

At his point, however, the argument becomes all too easy. One of the empirical mistakes of Huntington is his assumption that cultures are completely static. Apparently, there are some fundamental characteristics in Islam or other religions, that will never change, and inevitably will lead to conflict with other cultures. It is indeed true that cultures change rather slowly, and that we should not expect fundamental changes from one day to the next. But within a couple of decades, cultures do change. One of the strongest examples in this regard is the research that was done in the early 1950's in Western Germany. The survey still showed strong support for an authoritarian style of practising politics, and a strong lack of tolerance. Various studies published in that period openly questioned whether "the Germans" would ever be ready for democracy. Twenty years later, the situation is completely reversed. West Germany developed into a mature and very stable democratic political system. The basic structure of political attitudes might not change overnight, but it can change within a couple of decades.

This tends to undermine the validity of any 'clash of civilizations' argument. On a global scale, it can be observed that both in the Islamic world as in large parts of Asia, basic value

patterns have changed substantially in recent decades. One can argue therefore that there are no historically invariant blocks of civilizations, that necessarily will enter into conflict with one another. Cultures, self-evidently, can be on a collision course with one another, but most likely they will influence one another in varying forms of intercultural influences.

In a Belgian context, the same argument applies. There is no reason at all to assume that there would be something like a “Flemish culture”, or a “Walloon culture”, that will remain the same in the decades ahead. Just like in other countries and regions, we can expect that political cultures will evolve strongly in the decades ahead, partly because changing economic and structural circumstances. And while there might some historical examples where Dutch and French public opinion react differently to a number of political topics, in most of the cases this kind of difference was either non-existent or not important at all.

Furthermore, it has to be noted that the political culture of the Dutch and the French speaking population of Belgium does not differ all that strongly as is often assumed. The European Social Survey can be considered as the most reliable data source for social and political attitudes in Europe. With regard to most of the attitudes, Belgium is right in the middle of all observations. On one side of the continuum we have the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, that are characterized by high levels of political trust, a strong emphasis on volunteering, support for redistribution and low levels of ethnocentrism. On the other side of the extreme are countries like Italy, Portugal or Greece that traditionally are characterised by low levels of political trust, and less support for social redistribution programs. These patterns are remarkably stable and they show up in all kinds of survey programs from the 1970s on. And, as one might have guessed, Belgian public opinion is usually right in the middle, and there are indeed few other countries that come so close to the European average.

Self-evidently, there are some differences between public opinion in the Dutch and the French speaking part of the country. French public opinion tends to be a little bit more left-leaning, but differences are not all that significant. Using various scaling techniques, it becomes obvious that the distance between public opinion in Flanders and Wallonia is very small indeed. This fact is often neglected in the debate, because it is assumed that election results can be used as a reliable indicator for public opinion. This, however, is not the case. Various analyses, e.g., have shown that the level of racism or ethnocentrism is not different in Flanders than it is in Wallonia. Most people who are not familiar with the quantitative study of opinion data have a hard time in accepting this analysis. After all a political party that thrives mainly on feelings on ethnocentrism is remarkably successful in Flanders from the 1980s on, while a similar party is almost completely absent in the Walloon region. These elections results, however, do not inform us at all about the basic value pattern of the population. For various historical and organisational reasons, the Vlaams Blok or Vlaams Belang, indeed has been quite successful at the polls, while this is not the case for the Front National. But in the Walloon region, voters with a high level of ethnocentrism simply spread out to different political parties, but they do remain ethnocentric. All in all, the basic value patterns of Walloon and Flemish people do not differ all that strongly. Basically, Belgians can be considered as very average European citizens.

This finding does not imply that there would be something inherently “Belgian” or cultural about public opinion in the country. Rather, it can be argued that the way institutions function indeed has a profound impact on public opinion. In this regard, the neo-institutional approach as it is developed by Nenad Stojanović indeed makes sense. Long-term, historical experiences with, e.g., the welfare state, or a corrupt or well-functioning political system indeed can be expected to have a lasting impact on the way public opinion functions.

Other authors in this volume pay attention to the fact that the current institutional design of Belgium is not conducive at all to the development of a common public opinion in the country. The electoral system provides strong incentives to political parties to pay attention

only to their own constituency, and there is no reason at all to respond to the demands of public opinion in the other side of the country. Media systems are completely segregated, and French newspapers are hardly read in the Flemish side of the country or the other way around. This segregation by itself can be considered as a problem. Most theoretical approaches to the way federal systems function assume that such a political system at least requires some form of federal, or overarching loyalty. Citizens can have a strong loyalty to their own, subnational identity, but this should be compensated by at least some form of loyalty to the rules of the system itself, and the willingness to continue the system in the future. The most important author in this field, the Dutch-American political scientist Arend Lijphart already stated in his earliest works in the 1960s that federal loyalty is an absolute necessity if one wants to maintain the stability of such a system. In the current institutional design, it seems as if this element of federal loyalty has simply been forgotten. At least, there is no incentive whatsoever for citizens or for political actors to develop this form of loyalty. Applying the Lijphart logic would mean that this lack of federal loyalty indeed spells trouble for the long-term stability of the political system.

While I do agree with Stojanović that institutions can be instrumental in providing incentives for federal loyalty, I wonder whether forms of direct democracy offer the best tool to achieve this goal. To start with, the use of direct democracy runs counter to the basic idea in the Lijphart theory that ‘ordinary’ citizens can easily be mobilized into various forms of radical political action. In Lijphart’s view of a consociational democracy, the moderating influence always originates from the political elite, not from the rank and file. Second, however, the moderating effect of direct democracy could only be achieved in very specific circumstances. One could think of referenda on, e.g., nuclear energy, euthanasia, mobility, etc. For a lot of these issues, we know indeed there are no profound differences between public opinion in the North and the South of the country. Proponents of nuclear energy, indeed, could form coalitions, and this would encourage the development of political coalitions across the linguistic divide, as Stojanović would assume. But one can easily think of numerous other cases, where a referendum could only be divisive. How about a referendum on the legal position of the French speaking minority in the Flemish suburbs of Brussels? Or about the separation of the electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde? Even a topic that at first sight has nothing to do with the linguistic divide, like the membership of Turkey into the European Union, could easily show a strong divide. In the Flemish region, the Vlaams Belang would strongly mobilise for an anti-Turkish vote, while such a mobilisation campaign probably would be absent in the Walloon region.

The challenge for the Stojanović proposal therefore would be that some topics would be acceptable, while others would be off-limits, if we do not want to encourage a further opposition between the two main communities in the country. It would be unacceptable to introduce such a system, however, and this would not be considered as legitimate. Direct democracy, after all, implies that one considers the citizens to be a sovereign force for political decision making. We run into a fundamental contradiction here if the system allows referenda on obnoxious topics like nuclear energy, but not on the language regime in the Brussels suburbs.

Direct democracy therefore might not be the ideal mechanism to offer some incentives for the development of federal loyalty, but the underlying logic of Stojanović is correct: one should think of institutional incentives for political actors to develop a basic form of loyalty toward the stability of the system. The current institutional make-up of Belgium fails to deliver such incentives, and maybe on the contrary. The current electoral rules encourage political parties to pay lip service to nationalist rhetoric. Even parties that are not that strongly into nationalism, refrain from deserting the agreed upon “hard line” within their community. To cite but one example: together with my colleagues Stefaan Walgrave and Kris Deschouwer, we made a round-up of the positions of Flemish political parties for the regional elections of June 2009. Not a single political party dared to diverge from the resolutions that were approved by the Flemish parliament in 1999. Even parties that are



realistic enough to know these resolutions cannot be applied fully, will never admit that in the open. We might lament this lack of political courage, but it is clear that this is a natural reaction to the incentives provided by the electoral system. If a political party only has to be elected by – in this case – Dutch-speaking voters, there is no sense at all in stating that a further institutional reform of the country will be the result of a compromise between the two communities. In such a system, it makes more sense to support, at least symbolically, the demands of nationalists, even if these are not rational or realistic.

Changes in the electoral system, therefore, are called for. The Pavia group, that was initiated by Philippe van Parijs and Kris Deschouwer, has already called for establishing a federal electoral district. But maybe a much more urgent reform would be to have federal and regional elections on the same day, and no longer according to a separate calendar. Having simultaneous elections at least would make clear that – in some way or another – they will have to enter a government coalition following the elections and that this coalition will have to involve partners from both large communities in the country. Only paying attention to one's own community could be discouraged in such a setting. Other smaller institutional rules could be implemented too. E.g., one will remember that following the 2007 elections in Belgium, there was some discussion about which parliamentary party group should be considered as the “largest” group. This is not just a symbolic discussion as it is generally assumed that the largest parliamentary party group has the right to initiate governmental coalition talks. It would be possible to define the parliamentary groups in federal terms, offering an incentive to parties that succeed to reach an agreement with their counterpart in the other side of the country. Applying these rules to the 2007 elections, by the way, would have implied that the liberal family (i.e., MR and Open VLD) is clearly larger than the Christian-Democrats (CD&V and cdH). This is but one example, but various other incentives could be thought of to stimulate political actors to pay at least some attention to what happens in the other community. The experience of other federal systems shows that this kind of cross-cutting loyalty is a requirement for the stability of the political system.

# Direct democracy as a tool to shape a united public opinion in a multilingual society?

## Some reflections based on the Belgian case

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### *Introduction*

The arguments developed by Nenad Stojanovic, on the basis of the Swiss example, in favour of direct democracy as a tool to foster internal cohesion of multilingual polities, provide a fascinating and convincing new insight into the classic question of how to organise democracy in such multilingual polities. However, when we investigate whether an introduction of direct democracy in Belgium would similarly induce the ascribed beneficial effects to the Belgian multilingual polity, scepticism seems to be in order. To that extent that the question can be asked whether direct democracy can really be considered such an important factor in the explanation of the stability of the Swiss multilingual democracy.

### *Ethno-nationalist discourse and a common demos*

Let us concentrate on two of the main arguments: direct democracy would be able to ‘deeply undermine’ the use of ethno-nationalist rhetoric and create a ‘common *demos*’. The premise that multilingual polities ‘constitute fertile ground for the establishment of ‘us vs them’ political rhetoric and ethno-nationalist discourse’ and that they face difficulties to ‘construct a national *demos*’, as Nenad Stojanovic writes, can certainly be very well illustrated by the Belgian case. While Stojanovic’s intuition that ‘on a typical daily issue ‘the’ Flemish, Walloon [...] opinion simply does not exist’ can certainly be confirmed (cf. *infra*), these homogeneous opinions do exist through political discourse and media reporting<sup>16</sup>.

One of the reasons for this can be found in the tendency to ‘homogenise’ the two large language communities of Dutch-speakers and French-speakers, which pushes internal differences within the communities to the background. In political reporting, positions of a specific Flemish or francophone political actor are easily labelled as ‘the Flemish position’ or ‘the francophone position’ even if it is not too difficult to find other Flemish or francophone political actors that do not agree with that position. This first and foremost happens with the opinion of the ‘other’ community, but through that dynamic the ‘own’ community is

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<sup>16</sup>. The following paragraphs are partially based on Sinardet Dave (2007), *Wederzijdse mediarepresentaties van de nationale ‘andere’. Vlamingen, Franstaligen en het Belgische federale samenlevingsmodel*. Antwerpen: University of Antwerp, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences (doctoral dissertation), 491 p.

inevitably also stereotyped. It is only a small step for such a 'homogenised' political opinion to be ascribed to the entire language community.

For instance, when in the previous federal government, composed of liberals and socialists, the vice-prime minister of the French-speaking socialists was in conflict with the Flemish liberal prime minister on whether criminals should be able to be released before the end of their sentence, Flemish media tended to speak of a conflict with 'the francophones' and of a 'Walloon public opinion' which had a completely different (that is, more relaxed) view on the matter than the Flemish one. Even if the French-speaking liberals agreed with the Dutch-speaking liberals and the Dutch-speaking socialists with their francophone counterparts

This type of reporting fits in with more general stereotypes of the 'other' community. Flemish media and politics tend to reduce Wallonia to the old industrial areas and because of that to the Parti Socialiste, which in turn is often depicted as archaic. In French-speaking Belgium, there is an obvious tendency to attribute the separatist position in Flanders (held by about a quarter of Flemish political representatives – mostly of the extreme right – and by about 10 % of the Flemish population) to 'la Flandre'. This was externalised very explicitly by the infamous fake news program transmitted by the French-speaking public broadcaster RTBF in december 2006, in which Flanders declared its independence: the RTBF-journalist in front of the Flemish parliament announces that 'an overwhelming majority' of Flemish MP's has voted in favour of independence (in other words: when push comes to shove, all Flemish politicians are separatists). A few minutes later scenes are shown of the main square in the city of Antwerp where large crowds have gathered to celebrate Flemish independence (in other words: when push comes to shove, the whole Flemish population is separatist)<sup>17</sup>.

A logical consequence of this type of representations is that the two homogenised communities are also represented as very different from and opposite to each other. The francophone representation of Flanders as nationalist and separatist, at least implicitly includes a tolerant and universalist self-representation of French-speaking Belgium. The Flemish representation of Wallonia as archaic and decaying includes a self-representation of Flanders as modern and dynamic. Certainly in Flemish media, the 'community divide'-frame is often used to interpret Belgian political reality and leads to a focus on differences and not on similarities. The 'us vs them'-rhetoric can be taken very literally in some cases. Not only do many politicians tend to use it, media reports about political conflicts between the communities sometimes also speak of 'us' and 'them', this way positioning the journalist and the viewer or reader on the side of the 'own' community. During the recent political crisis, polarisation was often further achieved through the use of war metaphors describing political conflict and more generally through very dramatising political and media rhetoric, with incessant speculation on the imminent split of the country.

In other words: the representation of two homogeneous communities, that everything opposes, is the building stone for a widespread ethno-nationalist rhetoric and a stumbling block to the emergence of a common, national *demos*.

This should of course not be read as an accusation towards politicians and journalists as such. The point is not to discern or denounce an explicit political agenda in this type of discourse, although it is obvious that it implicitly fits in with such an agenda. Rather, as will be argued further on, this is a not too surprising consequence of the way the Belgian federal system functions.

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<sup>17</sup>. Some contend that this program was explicitly conceived as a caricature, which is rather at odds with the appearance on the screen, after the fake news show, of the heads of the RTBF telling the viewers that the scenario they had just been shown was realist, credible and probable.

## *Public opinion and political opinion*

But let us first investigate to what extent this image and often heard statement of two opposed public opinions can be considered as accurate. Such a tricky question obviously demands a prudent and balanced answer. A way to 'test' the veracity of this common representation is to turn to the available scientifically rigorous survey research. When looking at such research, one is indeed often struck by the existence of a gap, but not so much between Flemish and Francophone public opinion, as between the reality which reveals itself in the bare figures on the one hand and that created by political and media discourse on the other.

Looking, for instance at the figures of the ESS (European Social Survey), it seems that on general political attitudes, the north and the south of Belgium are not that divided. Concerning left right placement, ethnocentrism, homophobia, subjective well being, etc., differences between Flanders and Wallonia are generally limited, certainly in comparison to figures for some other countries. Moreover, those differences cease to be significant when they are controlled for socio-economic status. Although differences can be found between the party systems (the socialist party being much stronger in the Walloon region and the extreme right being much stronger in the Flemish region), these do not seem to be the reflection of significant differences in political preferences<sup>18</sup>.

Similarly, surveys on more specific day to day political issues (at least when they are held on a national basis, which is often not the case) also show that public opinion in the north and the south often does not differ strongly (in contrast to some other socio-demographic categories).

This is most striking concerning the issues *par excellence* where one would expect to see a north-south divide emerge: the community issues. On those issues the north-south divide is strongly present on the political level (at least on some specific issues, because particularly on the Flemish side the general institutional program strongly differs from party to party – that of the Flemish Greens differs day and night from that of the Flemish extreme right to take the two opposites of the spectrum<sup>19</sup>). However this clear cut divide does not seem to be reflected among public opinion. A 2007 post-electoral survey for instance showed that among the Flemish electorate, 40 % wants to redistribute competences in favour of Flanders, but another 40 % wants to do the same in favour Belgium. Given the positions of the Flemish parties, the researchers conclude that the second 40 % form an 'unserved audience'<sup>20</sup>. Another telling illustration could be found in a representative opinion survey organised jointly by *De Standaard* and *Le Soir* in march 2007 and more specifically in a question on the regionalisation of labour market policy. Autonomy for the regions concerning labour market policy is a quasi-unanimous and priority demand of Flemish political parties that was quasi-unanimously rejected by their francophone counterparts, certainly in the pre-electoral period during which the survey was held. However, when respondents were asked whether the regions should become more autonomous on this level, 'only' 50 % of Flemish respondents answered favourably, while 'as much as' 49 % of francophone respondents did the same. The linguistic division in the political world on this issue does not seem to be reflected in public opinion, which on both sides of the language frontier is neatly divided among itself. Even more stunning figures out of the same survey concerned the support for regionalising mobility, where only 35 % of Flemish respondents were in favour, against 50 % of francophones.

The lack of coherence between the political and public opinion on these matters could also point to a lack of interest for and knowledge of institutional matters. Indeed, on this level too,

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<sup>18</sup>. Hooghe Marc (2008), 'Is there a cultural divide? Comparing Cultural and Political Attitudes in Belgium' (presentation at 'Rethinking the Foundations of Belgium's Socio-economic Institutions', Brussels, Universitaire Stichting / Fondation Universitaire, 11/12/2008)

<sup>19</sup>. For more details on all the Belgian political parties positions on state reform, see Sinardet Dave (2009), 'Futur(s) de la fédération belge: paradoxes fédéraux et paradoxes belges' in *Le fédéralisme en Belgique et au Canada : un dialogue comparatif*, Bernard Fournier & Min Reuchamps (ed.), Louvain-La-Neuve : De Boeck

<sup>20</sup>. Swyngedouw, Marc & Rink, Nathalie (2008), *Hoe Vlaams-Belgischgezind zijn de Vlamingen? Een analyse op basis van het postelectorale verkiezingsonderzoek 2007*, (CeSO/ISPO 2008-6), Leuven: ISPO-KUL

there seems to be a divide in political and public opinion. While a state reform was largely considered as the first priority after the 2007 elections and while the Flemish vote was almost unanimously interpreted as 'a clear demand for a large state reform', results of post-electoral research showed that for only 13.3% of Flemish voters 'state reform' was one of the three most important vote-determining issues and for only 5.4% the most important one<sup>21</sup>. Among voters in the Walloon region, who were said to have voted against a state reform, only about 2 % had based their vote on that issue<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, it rapidly came to dominate political life in the weeks and months after the elections. Obviously politics and society can (thankfully) not be entirely separated from each other. Still we tend to find a lot of truth in a statement by the political sociologist Luc Huyse, who lived and described the deep crises that shook Belgium after the second world war around its fracture lines on the community, socio-economical and philosophical level, and who labelled the 2007-2008 events as a 'crisis without a public'.

### *Can direct democracy adjust these representations?*

So, when one looks at the divergence of political opinion and public opinion on some issues in Belgium, one would be tempted to think that introducing direct democracy – which would be a way to politicize the public opinion in a more direct way than through elections – is a way to avoid the political (mis)use that is made of oversimplified representations of 'the' Flemish and 'the' Francophone opinion.

However, the question is whether direct democracy would be a sufficiently strong tool to actually achieve this, as the 'us vs them'-dynamic at play seems to be very robust. Indeed, even when politicians and journalists are confronted with the dissonant voice of public opinion, they still seem to be tempted to interpret it in the classic community frame. A striking illustration is a news report of the Dutch-speaking public broadcaster VRT on a national opinion poll concerning six socio-political issues. As is almost always the case, results are being split up between opinions of 'Flemings' and 'Walloons' (at least when opinion polls are not organised on the regional level altogether, which is also often the case), which is already a first indication that this is considered the most important cleavage. The main 'frame' through which the results are presented by the journalist is the existence of two different public opinions in Belgium, 'a large gap between the opinions of Flemish and Walloon on quite all societal themes'. This is announced as the main conclusion of the survey.

However, such a 'gap' is not reflected in the figures. On three of the six questions, opinions of Flemings and Walloons are almost identical, on two other questions there are rather limited differences and only on one question one can indeed speak of a large difference (but this question concerns whether the Flemish extreme right party should be allowed to participate in government). One of the two questions with limited differences is whether crown prince Filip would be a good King for Belgium. The report does not conclude that a large majority of Belgians is in favour, but insists that in Wallonia 82 % think he would be a good King, while this is 'only' 67 % in Flanders. At the end of the discussion of the results for the question on the efficiency of anti-speeding measures, which showed 72 % of yes in Flanders and 66 % in Wallonia (with margins of error generally being around 3 %), the journalist concludes: 'Your Majesty, there are really no Belgians on the road anymore'.

A related example concerns a report on the post-electoral survey mentioned above in Flemish quality newspaper *De Standaard*. While, as argued, the results of the survey pointed in the direction of a continued support among Flemish voters for the federal level (a conclusion also explicitly made by the authors in the accompanying summary), the headline

<sup>21</sup>. Swyngedouw & Rink, *op cit*.

<sup>22</sup>. Frogner, André-Paul, De Winter, Lieven & Baudewyns, Pierre (2008), *Les Wallons et la réforme de l'Etat. Une analyse sur la base de l'enquête post-électorale de 2007*. (PIOP 2008/3). Louvain-La-Neuve : PIOP-UCL.

read: 'Fleming loses believe in Belgium'<sup>23</sup>. The only figure that could slightly be considered to point in this direction (a difference of 8 % in comparison to 2003 on a question relating to the preferred government level) was highlighted on the front page and used as a headline.

These quite excessive (although by no means unrepresentative) examples suggest that media (and politics) are so inclined to interpret issues through the lens of the community divide (while other interpretations could be just as relevant), that this is even the case when they are confronted with figures that do not support or even contradict this interpretation. The figures simply do not fit in their 'frame'.

It is a typical example of selective perception, where only facts that confirm existing convictions are registered. Of course, in some other cases, survey figures that do not confirm the representation of two entirely opposed public opinions are presented correctly. But even then, and in contrast to figures presented as confirming the image of the 'opinion divide', they almost never become an important element in political debate. In other words they are not politicized and therefore do not turn into relevant political realities.

Again, one could argue that the organisation of national referenda would do just that: politicize public opinion, even when it is at odds with political opinion. Even if a referendum would not be binding, it would certainly have a stronger impact than the publication of an opinion survey and therefore should be able to at least counterbalance homogenisation of Flemish and francophone public opinions.

However, the only 'experiment' with a form of direct democracy that was conducted in Belgium, hardly supports this argument either. On the contrary, the referendum of March 12<sup>th</sup> 1950 on the Return of King Leopold III to the throne, is often considered as the first plain and explicit externalisation of the regional-linguistic cleavage in Belgium. In total, 57 % of the Belgian population voted in favour of the King's return. However, when those figures were divided on a regional basis, the Flemish part of the country had voted in favour by 72 % while the Walloon region had voted against by 58 % (the region of Brussels showed an almost exact 50-50 divide). After the referendum, the opposition to the King's return became ever more vehement, causing enormous uproar and heavy and violent manifestations, mostly by socialist movements in the south of the country who felt dominated by the Catholic majority which had heavily campaigned in favour of Leopold's return. This finally led to the King abdicating in favour of his son, Baudouin. Mostly in Flemish, catholic circles, this left the feeling that 'their' majority had been 'neutralised'. At the highlight of the controversy, fear existed that a civil war might break out.

However, when one analyses the results of the referendum more closely, one can also read it is an indicator of another type of divide: that between agrarian regions on the one hand and urban or industrial regions on the other, the former voting in favour and the latter against the King's return to the throne. Indeed, the more rural Walloon provinces had also voted in favour of bringing back Leopold III: Namur by 58 % and Luxemburg by 65 %. It is true that in the 1950s the urban-rural divide largely coincided with the division in language regions, but on this vote the community divide was secondary to the urban-rural one.

Detailing the reasons behind this 'linguistic' interpretation of the referendum (amongst other reasons, the catholic party saw the controversy around the King as a way to attain an absolute majority on the national level, socialists wanted to break this majority) fall beyond the scope of this contribution. The point is that while the linguistic cleavage was certainly not the only way to interpret the results of the referendum, this was however the case. The Belgian example shows that direct democracy can also be used to reinforce 'us vs them'-discourse, and to undermine the existence or emergence of a national 'demos'. Although the difference between the region's vote was more pronounced in the Belgian referendum on Leopold III (72 – 42 in favour), Nenad Stojanovic's argument on how it would hardly be possible to

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<sup>23</sup>. 'Vlaming verliest geloof in België' (De Standaard, 10/06/2008)

engraft ethno-nationalist discourse on the basis of a referendum where 60 % of Dutch-speakers would vote in favour and 60 % of French-speakers would vote against increasing the legal retirement age, is therefore not too convincing. Figures are only figures, it is interpretation and perception that turn them into political realities. When 82 % in Wallonia and 67 % in Flanders consider the crown prince would make a good King, as was the case in the VRT-survey mentioned above, one can focus on the large majority on the Belgian level, or on the 15 % difference between the two regions. One choice is not necessarily morally superior to the other, and often that choice is not made purposely by commentators, but both choices clearly have a completely different political meaning.

#### *A federation without a federal public sphere*

It seems that when discussing the dualisation of public opinion(s) in Belgium, we must make a distinction between two ways to define public opinion. If we see public opinion as a measurement of opinion distributions among the entire population of a given territory, we cannot speak of a systematically disunited Belgian opinion or of two clearly separate and opposed Flemish and Walloon public opinions. However, if we see public opinion as the outcome of public debate and as taking form in a public sphere, we can indeed speak of two separate public opinions in Belgium, as there is clearly no such thing as a Belgian public sphere, but only a Dutch-speaking and French-speaking public sphere. And it is precisely the existence of two separate public opinions in the second sense that creates the illusion of two separate and homogeneous public opinions in the first sense.

Indeed, Belgium can be considered as a federation without a public sphere, due to the absence of federal media, but also because of the organisation of the political system.

Because of the linguistically split up media system, political debate is being conducted separately in Dutch-speaking and French-speaking media. Moreover, the debate that takes place within these two distinct public spaces debate is largely conducted only among representatives of the own community. When in Dutch-speaking and French-speaking media, federal issues are discussed it is generally between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking politicians respectively. This is even the case when the federal minister responsible for a certain policy domain that is being discussed is a member of the other language community, which often leads to the conducted policies not being defended, even by other parties in the government. When issues concerning community conflicts are discussed, debates in Flemish and francophone media are generally held within the parameters of the political consensus of the own community. Not the heart of the matter (such as the arguments of Dutch-speaking and French-speaking politicians) is the subject of debate, but rather why politicians of the 'own' community have not been able to push through the consensual position. Even factual elements of some issues (such as the very controversial one on 'Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde') are presented differently, with elements not fitting in the political consensus of the community being omitted or presented erroneously<sup>24</sup>.

This 'segregation' of political debate on the media level is closely connected to the way the political system is organised. Belgium's party system is split up on a linguistic basis, there are no nationally organised parties of importance, and electoral districts (besides the controversial district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde) do not transgress the borders of the regions. Thus, when federal elections are held, two sets of community-based, 'regional' parties compete among themselves for 'regional' votes through 'regional' election campaigns and 'regional' political debates, mostly fought in 'regional' media. After the federal elections, the two resulting 'regional' election results are combined to form one federal government. When Belgium is holding a federal election, it is in fact holding two simultaneous 'regional' elections: one Dutch-speaking election and one French-speaking election. Politicians

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<sup>24</sup>. See Sinardet, 2007 (*op. cit.*)

therefore only have an incentive to address the media and 'public opinion' of their own community.

It is therefore the absence of a federal public (and political) sphere that contributes to the creation of (the perception of) two opposed public opinions (in the sense of opinion distributions) and which fosters the development of ethno-nationalist discourse in politics and media. Actually, given the extent to which the two public spheres are segregated, one might even be surprised that two more explicitly homogeneous 'public opinions' do not seem to emerge.

Of course, the argument goes that introducing national referenda will precisely create such a federal public sphere. But I am not really convinced this will be sufficient or even effective to achieve a genuine federal public sphere if all the other elements that explain its absence in Belgium (bipolarity of the party system, electoral system, media system, ...) remain stable. It will certainly not be effective if – as can be expected based on the way the representative political system is now organised in Belgium – a consociational version of direct democracy would be introduced, with a requirement to reach a double majority, a majority in each language community or – given the fact that sub-nationality does not exist in the bilingual region of Brussels – a triply majority, based on the three regions (but in the latter case, it will probably be the results in the regions of Flanders and Wallonia which will be compared in the first place). This Belgian type of 'double majority' can be much more damaging for the centripetal effects of direct democracy than the Swiss type, which is based on a majority of the people and of the cantons.

But even if genuine national referenda based on a simple majority of the people are organised, chances are that the dynamic will be comparable to the way federal elections are organised in Belgium. Let's pursue with the example of a referendum on pension's reform. On both sides of the language frontier, political parties (and civil society organisations) organised on a linguistic basis would take position on the issue by positioning themselves against other parties of the same language community, Dutch-speaking and French-speaking media would organise separate debates on the issue with only Dutch-speaking or French-speaking representatives, etc. Just like federal elections are today in fact regional elections, one federal referendum might well turn into two regional referenda. And just like federal election results are today often analysed with a focus on the disparities between votes on both sides of the language frontier, referendum results might well undergo the same treatment, even if differences between provinces, urban and rural areas, socio-economic categories, etc. would be more significant.

Certainly if the 'losers' of the referendum on a national basis could nevertheless count on a majority in one of the regions, the incentive would be strong to emphasize the different regional majorities and to activate well known ethno-nationalist rhetoric to delegitimize the national decision that is unfavourable to them. For instance, if participants in a national referendum voted against an increase of the legal retirement age, but if at the same time results would show a majority on the level of the Flemish region, the Flemish lobby in favour of the reform (for instance the employer's organisations, but also centre to liberal parties) would probably insist on how 'the Flemish public opinion' has voted in favour of the reform but was blocked by the 'Walloon public opinion'. This type of discourse would make it more difficult for Walloon employer's organisations and Flemish trade unions to explicitly defend the referendum's results as they would be accused of being disloyal to the community consensus if not collaborating with 'the other side'. Of course, there is no proof that this type of scenario will develop, but based on the current dynamic, it is certainly not improbable. Because of this dynamic, the organisation of national referenda in Belgium might have opposite effects than the ones described by Stojanovic. Again, it is not so much the results of a referendum that matter, than the way they are interpreted and politicised.

Without saying that national referenda would not be able to have any of the beneficial effects that Stojanovic describes (if it is in the interest of some political parties to frame the



referendum in a 'national' way, they will probably do this), based on the arguments above, I believe the actual rub in the Belgian dynamic is at the party political level and more specifically concerns the interaction between party system and electoral system. Therefore, if the idea is to achieve a genuine federal public sphere (and for reasons of efficiency and democratic legitimacy this is necessary in the Belgian context), more is to be expected from ways to alter the dynamic on those crucial levels. In that respect, the introduction of a federal voting district for the election of (part of) the federal parliament in Belgium still seems one of the most promising and potentially effective instruments to me. The chances that a single voting district will have the supposed centripetal effects are much larger when such a district is introduced for the election of political representatives than for a popular vote, as interpretation of the latter is often determined by the first. It would be a more effective way to actually politicize majorities on the national level, even without resorting to direct democracy. Otherwise, a national majority that might be the outcome of the creation of a single voting district through the use of referenda, might at best not be politicized and at worse be turned into two different regional majorities, even if on the basis of the bare figures such an interpretation might not be the most obvious.

Much more than national referenda, a federal electoral district for the federal parliament should create incentives for political parties to cross linguistic borders and be able to achieve the 'horizontal integration' of which Nenad Stojanovic writes ('the emergence of cross-linguistic dialogues as well as the flow of political views from one language region to the other').<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, one of the reasons that political and media discourse tends to reinforce the image of 'us vs them' in Belgium is the segregation of political debate. The absence of federal debate in the media can largely be attributed to the lack of incentive politicians have to defend their positions towards the public opinion of the 'other' community. Although his policies affect Belgians all over the country, a French-speaking federal minister will consider a visit to the local market to be electorally more fructuous than a visit to the television-studio's of the 'other' language community. A federal electoral district might alter this 'incentive structure' and lead to an increase of 'federal politicians'. The only politician that is now incited to develop a federal profile through his position is the prime minister (the only official 'linguistically sexless' political function in federal politics). Guy Verhofstadt, a Flemish liberal who was prime minister for 8 years, remains among the five most popular politicians in the south of the country.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude, although the arguments based on the Swiss example are stimulating, I remain sceptical about the benefits of direct democracy to the challenges that the Belgian multilingual democracy is confronted with.

There can be two underlying reasons for this scepticism. Maybe direct democracy as such does indeed have positive effects in the Swiss context but only because of some important features in which it differs from the Belgian context, such as the existence of national political parties, absence of bipolarity, a less segregated electoral system and media system, ... Features which are of course interrelated and might well be necessary conditions for direct democracy to have a positive effect in a multilingual society. Those conditions would then be met in the Swiss case but not in the Belgian one.

But it could also be that direct democracy is not such an important element altogether to explain the success of multilingual democracy in Switzerland. It might well be those other

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<sup>25</sup> For a more detailed argumentation in favour of the introduction of a federal electoral district in Belgium, see a.o. Deschouwer, Kris & Van Parijs Philippe (2008), 'Een federale kieskring voor een gezonde federatie' in Sinardet, Dave (ed.), *Dossier staatsvorming: de rationele benadering*, Ghent: Stichting Gerrit Kreveld, 2008, p. 43-52

features that are essential in fostering centrifugal or centripetal dynamics. The benefits of direct democracy would then only be a consequence – or at best a reinforcement – of some of the other institutional features of the Swiss polity that have centripetal effects, not the direct cause of those effects.

This discussion would merit a much more extensive and thorough examination, but the concise comparison of Belgium and Switzerland undertaken here rather seems to point to the second explanation. In any case, if the question is why Switzerland seems to be a more successful example of a democratic multilingual polity than Belgium – a premise which incidentally also merits more profound discussion –, there seems to be no reason to in the first place look towards direct democracy for an explanation rather than at more striking differences between the political systems of the two countries.

# Media in Belgium: two separate public opinions

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For political science, the organization of a society rests in a determining way on lines of demarcation based on principles defined by the Constitution of a State or its particular political organization. The sociologist will rather look for convergences between social actors or groups sharing the same values to identify more or less homogeneous entities, and distinct from neighbouring entities. The analyst of the media will tend to observe which newspapers, which television channels are consumed massively by a given public, and will infer that the users of identical media form a community having a strong coherence. We can mention globalisation, we can celebrate these pseudo-worldwide media such as CNN or TV5, the consumption of the media remains, for most of the population, very local. For two simple reasons: each citizen reads the newspaper, looks at the TV news in his native or usual language, with some rare exceptions; each user privileges information of nearness (and more than ever) to know what happened “close to home”. Everywhere in the world, the share reserved for international information decreases. The daily newspaper most read in France is *Ouest-France* and not *Le Monde*; the VRT and VTM together represent more than 60% of the audience in Flanders; the 100 broadcasts most watched in French-speaking Switzerland were all seen on the public channel TSR which always accounts for 30,6% of the market share, far ahead of the other Swiss, German or French channels. In short, tell me which media you consume, I will tell you which community you belong to.

Each one, of course, according to its speciality, will consider that the latter's framework of reference is most crucial in order to distinguish these collective memberships, and will judge that the criteria developed by researchers of a different discipline are overestimated in the analysis of social realities. Consider the reflections of Nenad Stojanovic on the benefit of the Swiss voting procedures for the sake of guaranteeing a common political base, constitutive of a Swiss identity shared beyond the cantonal or linguistic variations. They can induce some perplexity as to the causal links which it seems assert between this initiative of local democracy established historically and the creation of a national identity which transcends regional cleavages.

If instead of adopting the perspective of the political scientist or the sociologist we adopt that of the arts, this beautiful Swiss national identity seems less anchored than it seems. Indeed, inter-regional differences exist for the analysts of Swiss literature. An important research effort was undertaken, about twenty years ago, in order to try to determine the specific features of Swiss identity, as they can be gathered from the regional popular literatures. The authors recognized obviously that there is a narrative heritage common to the European literatures, but also that there are characteristics peculiar to Switzerland, because “more than everywhere, the happy middle position, moderation is preached there, in short all that supports this astonishing image of a country out of history. (...) In French-speaking Switzerland, nothing of all that [such “national defects” as the pride of the Spanish or the avarice of the Scot, which further strengthen group identity], which could tarnish the moral integrity and lend itself to criticism: the middle state, the *aurea mediocritas* remain the privileged values<sup>26</sup>”. But while these characteristics (the cogency of which we shall not discuss

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<sup>26</sup> R. Francillon, D. Jakubec et alii, *Littérature populaire et identité suisse. Récits populaires et romans littéraires : évolution des mentalités en Suisse romande au cours des cent dernières années*, Lausanne, L'Âge d'Homme, coll. “Pluralisme culturel et identité nationale”, 1991, p. 164.

here, in so far as it does nothing but consolidate some national stereotypes probably constructed upstream of this literary corpus) are identified by their difference with French and German literary texts, it is interesting to see that they are also compared with samples of the Italian and German-speaking Swiss literature. The “suissitude”, to take again the neologism forged in the study, rely on « qualities — “mediocre”, for all that — “of reason”, of order, of measure, linked to a certain kind of individual conformism, to “a private” life hardly turned towards society and the institutions, (...) [which] support more a fusion with nature<sup>27</sup> ». But this *suissitude*, it is claimed, is not entirely shared by the literatures in Italian or German. The literature of Ticino thus expresses another relationship with history and society, testifying « to a greater potentiality of opening<sup>28</sup> », whereas the texts from German-speaking Switzerland allegedly show a less constraining family frame and more torn society.

These differences, founded on stereotypes conveyed by popular literary productions well equipped to recover commonplaces (but is this not precisely the reason why their study is significant?), are more than debatable. It could be easily demonstrated, by analyzing works of the Walloon tradition, for example the series devoted by Arthur Masson to Toine Culot, “obese of the Ardennes”, that these regionalistic stereotypes are characteristic of a certain literary tradition, i.e., the *roman du terroir* attached to the ancestral values, more than the expression of a particular national or regional identity. But what is interesting in this research is the prior assumption that takes explicit account of the presumably observable differences between the Swiss sub-identities, according to their linguistic membership. In contrast to what Nenad Stojanovic claims, there is supposed to be an “us versus them” within the Swiss Confederation. The Swiss literary texts are the tangible traces of these identity variations, or are responsible for it (according to whether one conjectures that the media are the reflection of society or they take part in the creation of our collective identities).

It is interesting, furthermore, to reconsider this “us versus them” rhetoric, insofar as it can produce more than debatable effects, further strengthened by the accumulation of consultations, and the electoral campaigning and vote-catching that necessarily accompanies them. Let us accept Stojanovic’s point of view on the positive impact of these voting procedures as regards Switzerland’s “common *demos*”. But there is then a risk of shifting the stigmatization of the other rather than removing it. Take the question of the access of Switzerland to the European Union, or indeed that of the reception of foreign residents and illegal immigrants in Switzerland for the last twenty years or so. There has been a significant rise of exclusionary policies, jointly with the rise of the UDC and its populist leader Christoph Blocher. Its electoral posters, during the 2007 consultation on asylum laws, showed white sheep well at the core of the Swiss flag and black sheep outside. This is a perfect example of a policy that preaches the “us versus them”, not between German-speaking Switzerland and French-speaking people, but between the honest Swiss citizens and the malicious foreigners, robbers and instigators of all disorders. In the end, all that was done is replace a model of intra-national exclusion by a model of exclusion between nationals and immigrants.

This simply allows us to show that identity questions are complex, and that they are, like all social phenomena, related to multiple factors, which historically generate them or result from them, according to logics that vary historically, culturally, sociologically. Logics of political organization have certainly important effects, but other factors are also constitutive of identity memberships. And the media form part of it, even if one needs to beware of mediacentrism.

During decades, daily newspapers like *La Libre Belgique* and *Le Soir* sold each day several tens of thousands of copies in Flanders, where French was still usually practised (so much so that there also existed French-language regional newspapers in Flanders, such as *La Métropole* in Antwerp or *Le courrier du littoral*). No symmetric phenomenon existed, because French-speaking people always had a more limited knowledge of Dutch. Little by little, this

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<sup>27</sup>. *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

<sup>28</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

pattern disappeared. French-speaking newspapers initially maintained regional pages devoted to Flanders, written by some local correspondents. Later, these regional pages those disappeared, thereby making the Flemish area vanish from the media and mental map of the French-speaking population, except in situations of renewed strong political tension with the Flemish government or between the two linguistic wings of the federal government. One could say that since Guido Fonteyn retired from the daily newspaper *De Standaard*, there is not a single Flemish journalist left with a strong knowledge of the Walloon political scene.

Recent studies, both on the French-speaking side and the Flemish side, show that the TV news of the North of the country very seldom calls on French-speaking politicians (among other things because their command of Dutch is insufficient), and that 90% of those are Ministers in the federal government. French-speaking public television covers Flemish politics slightly more, but in a proportion that remains small compared to the total of information. All in all, only 3% of the TV news is devoted to subjects relating to the other language community. While the federal government is composed equally of Dutch and French speakers, television channels allocate 80% of the speaking time to federal ministers from their own community<sup>29</sup>. Flanders is foreign territory for the French-speaking people, and the reverse is also true. Consequently, when a subject is covered, it is as if it were about foreign politics, with many simplifications and stereotypes. Some simplified images are retained on both sides: Wallonia is inhabited by unemployed persons who are held in a logic of assistantship by an omnipotent and clientelist Socialist party; Flanders is filled up by excited nationalists, pushed by the extreme right to always claim more autonomy, until independence. This shows even in the rhetoric used, which privileges the warlike metaphors ("the Flemish front", "the French-speaking riposte"...), as Dave Sinardet has demonstrated. And since politicians are elected in distinct electoral districts, they may not find it beneficial to take part in broadcasts on the other side of the linguistic border, where they will not reach any potential voter. The gap thus continues to widen; henceforth the two communities live in different worlds.

Thus less than 5% of the Flemish television viewers watch Dutch chains (owing to linguistic proximity). They are even fewer to watch the Belgian French-speaking channels. And while the French channels attract the French-speaking Belgians more strongly (over 30%, owing to greater cultural proximity between France and Wallonia-Brussels than between Flanders and the Netherlands), the Flemish channels do not form part of their ordinary media consumption. Consequently, if one accepts that a groups' collective identity is constructed to a significant extent by a shared consumption of the same media (it is because I am Belgian Francophone that I read *Le Soir* and not *Le Monde*; or alternatively, I read *Le Soir*, therefore I am a Belgian Francophone), we can only deduce from it that the media systems of the two Belgian communities (even of the three since the 72,000 inhabitants of the German-speaking area strongly identify with *Grenz Echo*, sold daily in 10000 copies, with the radio and TV station BRF) are henceforth completely distinct, both in their supply of information and in the logic of their consumption.

Consequently, when the French-speaking public television decides to start a debate on the possible end of Belgium, it can do so only by playing on the stereotypes and a form of destabilizing catastrophism. On December 13th, 2006, around 20:20, the magazine traditionally broadcast every Wednesday on RTBF, was suddenly stopped. After a few seconds, the anchorman of the TV news appears in the studio of the new programme (JT) in order to announce that an event both important as unexpected is occurring: Flanders is in the process of voting for its autonomy, which would involve *de facto* the break up of the Kingdom of Belgium. This broadcast, with the (English) title "Bye Bye Belgium", which exploits the effect of surprise, will have a worldwide impact<sup>30</sup>. "Panic in Belgium" was the lead

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<sup>29</sup>. D. SINARDET, *Wederzijdse mediarepresentaties van de nationale "andere": Vlamingen, Franstaligen en het Belgische federale samenlevingsmodel*, Antwerpen, Universiteit Antwerpen, Faculteit Politieke en Sociale Wetenschappen, 2007.

<sup>30</sup>. Cf. Ph. Dutilleul (sous la dir. de), *Bye-bye Belgium (Opération BBB). L'événement télévisuel*, Lovreval, Labor, coll. « Quartier libre », 2006 ; M. Lits (sous la dir. de), *Le vrai-faux journal de la RTBF. Les réalités de l'information*, Charleroi, Ed. Couleur livres, 2007.

title in *The Times* December 15th. The same day, a photograph of the broadcast is a headline in *Le Monde* with this title “Hoax. The death of Belgium live on the news”.

The impact of the broadcast was considerable, to the point of exceeding the intentions of its organizers who had not anticipated such an anxious reaction of the viewers. The RTBF received 31,368 calls on the paying number set up especially for the operation. The shock was so hard for some viewers that they felt the immediate need to share it with close relatives and to discuss it while looking at the broadcast (and the debate that followed): the audience reached 534,100 viewers, whereas only 350,937 viewers were present at the beginning. The surveys published at the end of the broadcast revealed that 89% of the viewers had believed for quite a while in the truth of what they saw, against 5% which had not believed it at all. A smaller part of the audience (5%) believed in it until the end, even when a permanent text indicated “This is a fiction”, a warning also repeated by the journalist on air during the last minutes of the broadcast.

Beyond the journalistic and ethical issues that arise in connection with framework discontinuities or the evolution of TV genres, this broadcast left a mark on the minds, because it served to reveal a situation of interethnic and intercultural coexistence which is more and more at the edge of a breaking point. The media testify to this situation, in a way that has become increasingly radical since the creation of two public television systems, French-speaking and Flemish, back in 1953.

Belgium is a federal state in which all competences regarding culture, information, press and audio-visual matters have been allocated to the Communities since 1970. Consequently, there is no more Belgian radio and television system, no more broadcasting for the whole of the nation, but two distinct public agencies, the RTBF for the French Community and the VRT for the Flemish Community. As of October 31st, 1953, the legislator created two distinct public channels of television, a French-speaking and Dutch-speaking, which chose very different logics of programming at once. The French-speaking channel gave priority to the broadcasting of programs from France, including TV news, until in October 1956. Flanders from the start made a different choice, because of its commitment to a political project of conquest of its cultural and political autonomy within a Belgian State inside which Flanders felt, rightly, dominated by its Francophone part which controlled until this moment all the political institutions, army, justice, education and the economy. It therefore gave priority to its own productions, which were meant to establish a Flemish identity and to support its emancipation from central power.

Political and linguistic divisions, reinforced by the dispersion of TV consumption make the assertion of a Belgian national identity more problematic than ever. Since there is no national public channel, the channels, public as well as private, give priority to supplying information that relates to the Community to which their audience belongs, with a quasi-total ignorance of the events occurring in the other Community. French-speaking television, for example, locates more room to public events in France (elections, sport, culture...) than in Flanders.

The broadcasting shock proposed by the RTBF on December 13th, 2006 was significant of this frame of mind. It is significant to find there a particularly caricatural picture of Flanders. It is depicted as an arrogant entity, scorning the French-speaking people, deaf for any attempt at negotiation, sitting on its numerical superiority and its economic power. Besides, the reactions of the political officials and of the Flemish editors was very hard. They denounced a broadcast that could only reinforce the fears, the tensions and lack of mutual understanding. In any case, this broadcast served the purpose of showing how much the TV programs carry identity values, here very explicit but often more implicit, which feed the political and cultural affiliations, generally by exciting a national (or nationalist) identity based on the refusal of the other and the return to oneself.

In this context of inter-community cleavages, the TV systems of federal Belgium reveal the identity crisis of a country approaching separatism more than the construction a strong (be it second-best) identity that could replace the model of a State which was never a nation by an emphatically regional vision. It is an *identité en creux* which transpires from the statutory texts that govern the public medias, from the organization of the program timetables and from the scattering of the audiovisual landscape.

These differences relating to the notion of membership explain, partly, the current conflicts which emerged with greater intensity at the time of the federal elections of June 2007. The cleavage on the splitting of the electoral districts or the protection of the linguistic minorities along the language border reveals inclinations towards confederalism, or even independence. And in these tensions, the media clearly functioned like relays of their respective public opinions, even if some centripetal movements, pleading for a revival of united Belgium, were also constantly present. But there is deep malaise, because the Belgian model founded on a culture of compromise is under attack, and because nationalist temptations gain ground. The stakes are clear: are communities which have less and less shared values, since they do not speak the same language and since they have different economic and social developments, able to find any interest in cohabiting, or must they choose to separate through an amicable agreement? Can cultural diversity persist within one State whose role reduces to some general arbitration, or will it be constructed between neighbouring States through cooperation agreements? Can we live together, while remaining married for better or for worse, or is divorce the most reasonable solution?

Daily newspapers like *Le Soir* and *De Standaard* have since tried joint initiatives. One of them consisted in sending journalists for a month to “the other” area, for the purpose of bringing back home reports that could shed light on realities badly known. But that still reinforced the feeling of an irreducible difference, which was the opposite of the aim. Even the tone of the journalists looked like the tone of reporters sent to remote and dangerous regions from which they brought back exceptional reports realized at the cost of risking their lives. Here, they had just gone 30 km from home, on the other side of the linguistic border, and hence in a different continent. Next, the two daily newspapers organized several public debates in the two languages, in order to try to bring closer together viewpoints regarded as being so distant. By doing so, they reckoned they were playing their role as citizens, in an attempt to inflect the separatist discourse and to contribute to the emergence of a shared national conscience. While the initiative is praiseworthy (even though one can wonder whether it is the role of a newspaper to take a stance in favour of a particular political option, now that our media are no longer dependent on political parties, whether in the North or in the South of the country), it looks somewhat hopeless. But do not worry, no other daily newspaper spoke about it, and it did not have any echo in the TV news bulletins.

# Living Together in Belgium?

Jean-Pierre Stroobants (UCLouvain and Le Monde)

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« The thesis, here, is that a repeated practice of direct democracy strengthens the sentiment of the Swiss [Belgians] that they belong to the same “people” or to the same “nation”. ». We only have to change one word to Nenad Stojanovic’s interesting analysis to at the same time contest it and inject it with an element of confusion. And this confusion comes from the use of the word ‘Belgian’, of which I daily notice, being an avid reader of the Dutch-speaking daily press – and at least of its political pages – that it seems to have disappeared from the vocabulary of many analysts in Flanders. ‘Belgian’, it seems, has become a denomination reserved for top athletes, who are French-speaking and merit to be talked about in the paper because they have realized a stunning performance. In other words: it is not frequently used. Otherwise, when reading the press of the north of the country, one is either Fleming or Walloon, ‘Bruxellois’ being a qualification that has to be used very carefully because it would evidence the existence of a real third region, which refers to symbolical-historical debates of the kind it is useless to go into here.

So, direct democracy, the popular initiative referendum as foundation of a new Belgian ‘living together’? During a large part of my career as a political journalist, a famous politician, referred to as ‘the Plumber’, ‘Panzer’ or ‘the bull of Vilvoorde’, was very prominent on the Belgian political scene. During the smart ‘off the record’ information sessions that he regularly organized for the press – separately for the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking press – this federal prime minister, a man who likes to pretend to be brutal, only reacted to this question by lifting his shoulders. When one of my colleagues had asked him the question, he replied: ‘A referendum? Bahhhh, if you want to see the country split up even more quickly, you should probably do that!’...

This is how this peculiar nation works. The only ones who have political power are of course the parties, who can claim to be representative and democratic as the compulsory vote offers them legitimacy at every election. According to them, a mode of direct expression for the ‘public opinion’ – by which I mean, the real opinion of the general public – holds the double danger of pitting the two large communities against each other and of giving way to the less noble sentiments of some.

This question can be raised in all countries and certainly in Switzerland.

Nenad Stojanovic uses – at random? – the example of a possible Belgian referendum on the future of the pension system. Let’s say that on such a topic, a coalition between Vlaams Belang, NVA, Lijst Dedecker, the radical wing of CD&V, the ‘governance’ wing of Open VLD and the ‘realist’ wing of sp.a would quickly determine the Flemish vote. While in the South, a political-trade union coalition of PS, CDH, FGVB, CSC, largely supported by Ecolo and benefitting of the silence of the liberals who will not want to be marginalized, would go in the other direction. Every other referendum – and, by the way, would it concern topics of federal or of regional politics – would seem to me to hold the dangers mentioned by Jean-Luc Dehaene, given that the Flemish and francophone/Walloon public opinions evolve, on numerous points, in radically different directions.

Therefore, Belgians face a bizarre paradox : the parties that, along the years, suggested that federalism, and today confederalism, were the only remedies to the tensions between the communities and that have largely supported this political, cultural, mental and maybe even economic distancing between the communities state that the worst of dangers would be to permit the opinion to express itself directly on every subject. The argument even holds if the topic under consideration would be connected to the federal or federal system, which often seems to be the main structure for this country. In this respect Belgium does remain a very



strange democracy. On an international level, it is a pioneer with regard to euthanasia, gay marriage and the international prohibition of land mines. Simultaneously, however, it seems impossible in this country that the majority in some municipalities expresses itself in its own language, or elects its own mayor, without any interference from the minister for the interior.

Another possible problem with this proposal to apply direct democracy to the Belgian case is that it is not really clear what could be the goal of this proposal. I mean : is there still a « living together » that could be saved ? One of my colleagues, José-Alain Fralon, who use to be the reporter for *Le Monde* in Brussels, for a long time has defended the idea of a country that was really united and unified. However, to me this idea always seemed a bit romantic and sentimental. One he has told me that he would like to write a book with as title : « It is sad when a country dies ». Finally, however, the book was published with as a title « Belgium – the end », which is just as clear, but indeed less poetic. With the example of this excellent reporter, who used to live part of the time in Brussels and part of the time in Paris, I want to show that there is not much that can be done to save the « idea » of Belgium. In this regard, it does not matter what happens on the political front, or what kind of new political incidents there are, and it does not even matter what is the name of the prime minister of the country. Whether this is Verhofstadt or Van Rompuy, as long as it is not Leterme, it does not matter.

In general, I tend to agree with José-Alain Fralon. I do not think I am disappointed or nostalgic. But nevertheless I am a bit sad because a very specific identity tends to disappear. That identity was the result of a living together, maybe not voluntarily, but always as a very real condition. My fear is that this identity is disappearing because of selfishness, a form of cultural closure, and a negative feeling toward the other.

Like many other observers, I wonder whether the French speaking inhabitants of Belgium, whether they live in Brussels or in the Walloon region are really opposed toward this trend. My fear is that strong identities often lead to conflict and violence. I believe that a peaceful, open and tolerant identity is always to be preferred and works in the advantage of everyone. And what I observe especially is that both in Brussels and in the Walloon region, one can notice an undescribed mixture of rancour and lack of knowledge, of contentment with oneself and of a lazy holding on the good life. The ultimate illusion in this regard is that, maybe one day in Paris, a political leader will hold the arms open toward the Belgian people. I call this an illusion because it is clearly grounded on a lack of knowledge. As for me personally, the idea of living (again) in France, does seems very seducing. But I have given up the hope that I will ever be able to do so, except as a foreigner to the French Republic.

# Belgium – a praline marriage

Jeroen van der Kris (NRC Handelsblad)

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The heat of the discussions in the media, parliament and public opinion led foreign observers to believe that the country was about to fall apart.” This quotation is about Belgium. It could very well refer to the situation after the elections for the federal parliament of June 2007, when it almost seemed impossible to form a new government. But in fact the remark – made by historian Sophie De Schaepdrijver in one of her books – refers to Belgium on the eve of World War I, almost a hundred years ago.

When I moved to Brussels in 2005, to work as a correspondent for *NRC Handelsblad*, a Dutch newspaper, I also was a badly informed foreign observer. Naïve as I was, I discovered something I did not know. At least, I thought I discovered something. Belgium does not really exist.

It is a standard procedure for a newspaper like mine. Whenever something happens in a home country, in this case the Netherlands, the editorial staff calls a couple of correspondents and asks them: what is the situation like in *your* country? In Belgium it was not always easy to answer a simple question like that. One time there was a proposal to give young people free entrance to Dutch museums. Then there was a discussion about the integration of migrants. Looking for information on those issues in Belgium I learned I should not always call the spokesperson of a minister of the Belgian government. It could very well be I had to contact the spokesperson of a Flemish minister for example. Who was very friendly of course and explained me what it was like in Flanders. But what about the rest of the country? Well, to be honest, he did not really know.

During the beginning of my life as a correspondent in Brussels I often went to the pub with Olivier, a French speaking Belgian. He was also a journalist. We talked, because he wanted to improve his Dutch and I wanted to improve my French. As I said, I knew little about Belgium. But the little knowledge that I had acquired in a couple of months, just by reading newspapers, was larger than his when we were talking about the news in Flanders, very much to my surprise. Many names of Flemish politicians, of which some were at the centre of fierce debates, sounded unfamiliar to him. And what about Clouseau or K3 – Flemish pop groups that almost everyone in the Netherlands knows? Didn’t ring a bell.

All that may not be surprising for the Belgians themselves, because that situation is not new. But for an outsider it is. Therefore it is not so surprising that foreign correspondents actually start to believe that the country is threatened in its existence. Almost daily they can read the announcement of its death in Belgian newspapers, especially the Flemish ones. ‘Walloon consult specialists more often than Flemish.’ ‘Less speed limit controls on highways in Walloon provinces.’ ‘More tax inspections in Flanders.’

By the way, there are no Belgian media, perhaps with the exception of press agency Belga. A while ago a colleague working for Belga told me the articles of the agency, made by Flemish and French speaking journalist covering the same event, diverge more and more.

A few years ago the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard* and the francophone newspaper *Le Soir* joined forces in a project about Belgium. Every day they the project lasted they also discovered new differences between the north and the south of the country. One detail that stuck in my memory: a Flemish journalist confessing that he went to Charleroi professionally

for the first time in his career of twelve years, „even though it is one of the biggest city in the country”.

Is Belgium really falling apart? What other reasons are there for thinking about possible solutions, as Nenad Stojanović does in his article.

There are some objective reasons to claim that Belgium is disintegrating. After the June 2007 elections it took 194 days to form a new government, due to differences between Flemish and French speaking politicians about the constitutional future of the country. That was an absolute record in Belgian history.

There is less ‘Belgium’ than ever before. During the last decades the Belgian state was reformed several times. And every time the regional governments got more power, in favour of the federal government.

And: at least in the south of the country quite a few people think that Belgium could really fall apart. What other explanation is there for the fact that so many of them believed the fake documentary *Bye Bye Belgium* in which public broadcaster RTBF announced the self declared independence of Flanders in 2006?

Then add the numerous scenarios for a separation in newspapers all over the country. Is it surprising that foreign correspondents start writing about it as well? That they talk about „a praline divorce”, as an often quoted columnist of *The Economist* did?

Could referenda help solve the problem? As a journalist I would be looking forward to a referendum asking Belgian citizens: should the country continue to exist? That would be a big story in the Netherlands, certainly fit to print on the front page. But I think the outcome would be less spectacular. I expect not only French speaking Belgians would say yes, but also a majority of the Flemish.

Unfortunately, such a referendum would not provide with an institutional model for the future of Belgium. That remains something that has to be negotiated between politicians. If they finally succeed, that model could be put to referendum. But I doubt it that would do much good.

The Swiss may have a lot of experience with referendums and use them in a responsible way. But using a referendum to let people decide, after long negotiations, on a difficult institutional matter, is a dangerous thing. That was one of the lessons that were drawn from the referendum in the Netherlands on the European Constitution. Many people voted ‘no’ without knowing exactly what they were voting about. Likewise, I think a majority of the Flemish public opinion is in favour of a reform of the state. But I’m not sure many people know what, for example, a regionalization of policies for the labour market means. But is it necessary to think about solutions? When friends and colleagues from the Netherlands asked me in recent years if Belgium was about to fall apart in the near future, I told them: don’t count on it. Because there are also many reasons to maintain that Belgium *does* exist.

I’m sitting in a train while writing this article. This afternoon I got on the train in Rotterdam, to continue through Brussels to Strasbourg. When passing the frontier between Holland and Belgium you can see it immediately: there’s another country. Dutch houses are small and uniform. They are lined up in precisely planned districts. And in between them everything is also neat. Often green. More often the green of agriculture than the green of woods, so shaped by man like the houses, but still. In Flanders there is red everywhere, the color of bricks, of houses that were not seldom built by the people that live in them – at least partially. Dutch people never built the houses they live in.

The linguistic frontier is not so visible. In the Walloon provinces you can see the same houses with red bricks, placed in the same unmessy manner, in the view of an outsider, like the ones in Flanders. Maybe they look a bit more shabby. And of course, signs are no longer in Dutch but in French. But if you forget that, and if you close your ears for people talking, you don't immediately have the impression that you are entering a new country.

I often sit in a press room filled with correspondents from 27 countries of the European Union. It's a miniature Europe. The Dutch tend to talk to colleagues from Germany, Great Britain, Austria and Scandinavian countries, just like our politicians. All of them speak English. Their questions are usually short and to the point. The French journalists gang up with the Spanish, the Italians, the Portuguese, because they also speak French. Their questions seem to last forever.

And the Flemish, well, they are somewhere in between. They talk to the Dutch of course, because we all speak the same language. But they also talk to all the rest, because they also speak French easily.

If there is a frontier in Europe it is not the linguistic frontier of Belgium. All of Flanders is a frontier.

A few years ago I interviewed photographer Stefan Vanfleteren. He had just made an exposition and a book with the provocative title *Belgium* – a contraction of Belgium and 'unicum', that is something that is unique. I told him that I often have the feeling that history lasts a little bit longer in Belgium. Buildings are longer maintained. Modernization – in education, in the health sector – is less popular in Belgium than in the Netherlands, where we like to change everything every one or two years. Vanfleteren, who often works in the Netherlands, immediately understood what I was pointing at. And he put it more briefly and beautifully than I could. „The process of passing away takes more time in Belgium”, he said. Vanfleteren, who makes pictures of fisherman with rotten teeth that are just as impressive as the ones he makes of industrial heritage, has made a job out of capturing that passing away. In Holland, he could not do that. But in Flanders he can do it as easily as in the Walloon provinces.

There are things I have to get used to again every time I return to the Netherlands. People talk more loudly. They are less polite and less patient. When I see people waiting with agitation to pay in my supermarket in Brussels, not seldom they turn out to be fellow countrymen. These are clichés, and there are not true for all Flemish or all Dutch. But they are based on something.

A few years ago I witnessed a course for Dutch entrepreneurs that wanted to invest in Belgium. The instructor told them: „The Flemish and the Walloons have everything in common, except the language. The Flemish and the Dutch have nothing in common, except the language.” This is also a cliché, but there is also some truth in it.

I wouldn't know how to measure the importance of language, compared to other expressions of culture. But language is extremely important. It is one of the most important things a human being has. You need language to express your most intimate feelings. To argue. To try to understand the world around you. For me, Belgium is a foreign country in many ways. But I remember very well the moment I sat at a table in the kitchen of my Flemish neighbours and friends, and we discovered that we had read the same books when we were children. *Oosterschelde Windkracht 10* by Jan Terlouw. *Kruistocht in Spijkerbroek* by Thea Beckman. I don't translate these titles because they mean nothing to people not speaking Dutch. At that moment I was still sitting in a foreign country, a country that I like very much by the way, but I also felt very much at home.

Is there perhaps a future for a united Holland and Flanders? Would that, because of the language, perhaps be an easier marriage than the one between Flanders and the Walloon

provinces? It is a hypothetical question, because I don't see Belgium falling apart just now. If only because there are too many practical obstacles. What to do with Brussels? With the national debt? With the membership card of the European Union? If only because I don't see Flemish and French speaking politicians agreeing about a way to end their praline marriage. And I have not met any Flemish that are ready to pick up any arms. There are a few that are willing to burn a Belgian flag, but that's about it – fortunately.

But is interesting to think about the question: what about the Flemish and the Dutch? When the political crisis in Belgium reached a climax after the last elections there were a few opinion polls in the Netherlands. And you know what? A lot of Dutch liked to idea of getting together with the Flemish.

One can understand that enthusiasm of the Dutch. They know very little about Belgium. It's a country they pass by car while heading for a vacation in France, preferably as quickly as possible, complaining about the poor state of Belgian highways – there's another thing one notices when passing the frontier between Holland and Belgium. But still, the limited picture that they have of Belgium is mainly positive: the food is good and the people are friendly. That's about it. I'm consciously talking about the Belgians here, not the Flemish, because the Dutch usually talk about the Belgians, even though they only know the Flemish a little. Only few Dutch speak French.

If the Dutch were a bit more intimate with the Flemish, they would learn from them that the Flemish are not always so positive about the Dutch – something that is not said during the first polite contact of course. The Dutch are considered noisy, rude and greedy, according to the clichés which probably also carry some truth. The previously mentioned Dutch entrepreneur reminded his students of a fact that most Dutch have forgotten: the last time the Belgians started a war, it was against 'us'. I admit, that was some time ago, and many things have changed since then. But I don't see why the Flemish, If they ever were to separate from the francophones, would choose to start immediately making compromises with someone else.

Because compromises would have to be made. What would the unified country be named? What would be the capital? Would it be a republic or a kingdom? What public broadcast system would we choose? What to do with all the well-known Dutch and all the well-known Flemish? For one country we would have an awful lot of them. Language can be a binding factor, but I'm not sure it would be enough.

Other differences would rapidly become visible. Differences in political culture for example. Flemish media may talk with contempt about 'clans' in political parties in the south. A lot of Dutch would be surprised by the large number of daughters and sons of Flemish politicians following their father's footsteps. And by the large cabinets that Flemish politicians maintain. Dutch ministers usually have one political assistant that is a member of his party. And that's about it. If a Dutch socialist becomes minister it is very well possible that he keeps the spokesperson of his liberal predecessor, if he is good at doing his job.

Over the years I talked to many Flemish nationalist who said they would like Holland and Flanders cooperate more closely. Sooner or later in these conversations they mentioned the year 1585, when Antwerp fell into the hands of the Spanish and was separated from the northern part of the Low Countries. „A black page in history.” I'm afraid very few Dutch know what happened in 1585. The Dutch education system is also quite different from the Flemish one and less orientated towards acquiring factual knowledge.

The Dutch also don't know that the second 'smartest man' is called Bart De Wever. This popular Flemish nationalist last year became runner up in an even more popular quiz of Flemish public broadcaster VRT. When I interviewed Bart De Wever last year he also said nice things about the Dutch. But he also warned not all Flemish nationalist mean it when they do so. Some of them simply want an alternative for Belgium, without really being

interested in the Netherlands. He told a joke that was popular amongst some Flemish nationalists. „A Greater Netherlands? If possible tomorrow. But please, can we have it without the Dutch?”

# Reply

by Nenad Stojanović

# Afraid of direct democracy?

## A reply to critics

Nenad Stojanović (Universität Zürich)

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On 17 May 2009 four out of ten Swiss citizens participated in two direct-democratic votes. One of them was a referendum against the federal law on the introduction of biometrical passports and the creation of a database in which the personal information on passport holders would be stocked. This referendum split the country in two: a slight majority of 50.1 percent voted in favour of the law, 49.9 percent said “no”.

One morning, three to four weeks before the referendum, I happened to listen to the Swiss public radio in Italian (*Radio svizzera di lingua italiana*). This was for me a natural choice, since Italian is my first language in Switzerland. Most (i.e. 98 percent) of my fellow German or French speaking citizens never listen to the radio in Italian. And, of course, the contrary is also true. That morning the radio broadcasted a political debate on the forthcoming referendum on the biometric passport. The journalist who was in charge of the debate had invited three members of the lower house of the Swiss federal parliament: a left-wing Social-Democrat, a centrist-right Christian-Democrat and a nationalist-right representative of the Swiss People's Party. For almost an hour they discussed passionately about advantages and disadvantages of the biometric passport. And, needless to say, they all communicated in Italian. Yet none of them could be considered as an “Italian speaker” (*Ticinese* or *Grigionitaliano*). The Social-Democrat was a French-speaking woman from Lausanne. Although her family stems from Italy, she speaks Italian with a French accent and uses often French words and expressions. The Christian-Democrat was a German-speaking woman from Zurich. She spoke Italian rather well but with a strong Swiss-German accent. The third guest was a bilingual French/German speaker of Austrian origin living in the French speaking part of the bilingual (French/German) canton of Valais/Wallis.

Why did the journalist invite these three politicians and not some “truly” Italian-speaking members of parliament? I don't know. But what is sure is that he had no obligation to do so. It could be that he simply chose politicians who were among the most involved in the referendum campaign and who had at least some knowledge of Italian.

Now why did these three politicians accept to participate in a debate on the Italian-speaking radio? Why did they choose to spend an hour of their time, and probably at least as much for the preparation of the debate? We don't know. What is sure is that they lacked the typical (and probably main) reason that motivates politicians to participate in public debates – the desire to speak to their potential electorate in order to improve their chances of (re)election. Each of them knew that his or her electorate did not listen to the Italian-speaking radio. So why did they take part in it? Perhaps they could not refuse the invitation. Perhaps they are narcissistic and would have spoken even for a Belgian radio channel if they had been asked to.

But what if they simply wanted to convince as many people as possible to vote for a political cause they firmly believed in? From this perspective it makes perfectly sense to address the audience of a minority language group. If this was the motivation, their participation to the radio debate might have been decisive. In fact, at the end the “yes” votes prevailed with a margin of only 5'504 votes.



The day after the referendum we could read the following statement in the German-speaking newspaper *Tages Anzeiger*:

*“If we look at the results in the single cantons, [we see] that none of the usual explanatory models holds. There was no röstigraben [i.e. divide between French and German speaking Switzerland]. We cannot spot any major differences even between urban and rural areas, or between the left and the right. The map of Switzerland, instead, looks like a colourful carpet with a lot of stains. The cleavage manifestly cuts across the population.”<sup>31</sup>*

Of course, this example is nothing more than anecdotal. But it nicely illustrates what kind of effect direct democracy can have in a linguistically segmented country like Switzerland. Only a serious empirical research could tell us what these effects really are. And in order to carry it out we would need insights from disciplines other than political science or political philosophy – for example from the field of cognitive social psychology. What is the indirect impact of direct democracy on people’s minds? What does it mean, for a common Italian speaker in Switzerland, to listen to politicians from other parts of the country discussing the topic of a forthcoming referendum? Does he feel proud to live in a country in which politicians who are speakers of two larger language groups (German and French) make an effort to learn and to speak Italian, a minority language? Does he, too, feel encouraged to make an effort to better learn German and French? Does she get new information or new insights on the topic of the referendum which, until then, might have been used only in the German and French-speaking media but not in the Italian-speaking public space? Or does she, simply, get a feeling of satisfaction inform living in a country in which she has a say – one vote, equal to all others<sup>32</sup> – even on such technical issues as biometrical passports, instead of being courted by politicians only once every four years, when they desperately seek her vote in order to be (re)elected and then disappear in the black box of politics for the following four years?

#### *A tool for integration or disintegration?*

In my introductory essay in this volume I argued for the thesis that direct democracy might have an important integrative function in a linguistically diverse country. If I read them correctly, most articles discussing this thesis claim that, on the contrary, direct democracy can lead to further disintegration. They would probably say that the above mentioned example of the referendum on the biometric passport is a typical case of “selection bias”: I described a popular vote in which there were no language or other cleavages. And what about the “röstigraben” cases which the author of the quoted newspaper article hinted at? Yes, they exist as well. Actually in my contribution to this volume I mention some of them.

The critique according to which direct democracy can be potentially divisive is, indeed, the main one which is raised every time when direct democracy is proposed in a divided society.<sup>33</sup> Most critiques of my proposal, with a possible exception of Marc Reynebeau, agree on this point. Direct democracy is a “dangerous thing”, according to, for example, Jeroen van der Kris

Interestingly, van der Kris draws this conclusion by referring to the Dutch “no” to the European Constitution. “Many people voted ‘no’ without knowing exactly what they were voting about.” I do not know if this is an empirical or an impressionistic claim. I am tempted

<sup>31</sup> Iwan Städler, “Zittersieg für Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf”, *Tages Anzeiger*, Zurich, 18 May 2009. My translation.

<sup>32</sup> The exception are the votes in which a double majority – of the citizens and of the cantons – is required. In such occasions the votes of the citizens from smaller cantons have more weight.

<sup>33</sup> For instance, if one proposes direct democracy in a country like Bosnia, the first reaction will be: what if the Serb republic holds a referendum on the secession? Or what if Bosniaks(-Muslims) win a referendum demanding a further centralisation of the country? Or what if through a referendum Croats decide to create a third Bosnian federal “entity”? See Nenad Stojanovic, “Referendumi mogu ujediniti BiH [interview]”, *Oslobodjenje*, Sarajevo, 11 April 2009.

to say that, often, members of parliament do not know what they are voting on either. Or they do, but because of the party discipline and the fear of losing their position (and wage) if they do not conform, they nevertheless vote against their own convictions. Is that form of indirect democracy better than the direct one?

Generally speaking, I would be more cautious in asserting that direct democracy is “dangerous”. Of course, in many countries a “no” to the European Constitution meant a myriad of different things which did not necessarily have anything to do with the Constitution itself. But why is this dangerous? What if the “no” was not against the Constitution itself, but against a possible lack of democracy in the EU? What if a more frequent use of direct democracy at the European level would have created a more democratic Europe, a more legitimate one?

#### *A softer version of direct democracy*

The objection about the divisive impact of direct democracy is a serious one and I do not intend to play it down. For this reason I wrote that in countries like Belgium or Bosnia “communitarian” issues must be out of reach of direct democracy.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, we should not see direct democracy as an all-or-nothing thing, as Marc Hooghe suggests. For him, either the people are totally sovereign and should have the possibility to vote on any matter, or they are not and should live forever in a system of representative (indirect) democracy. A middle way would be a “fundamental contradiction”. I don’t agree. Complex countries desperately need pragmatic and hybrid solutions. In Canada, for instance, an all-or-nothing approach would support such claims as “either all ten provinces are equal, or they are not” and would not allow for a degree of asymmetry which on some issues (like immigration policy) treats all (predominantly) English-speaking provinces as equal, but gives Quebec special rights in order to allow it to better preserve the French language. Today many observers of Canadian politics agree that such agreements have significantly undermined the secessionist movement in Quebec. After all, doesn’t the proposal to introduce of a federal electoral district in Belgium – in which only 10-20 percent of the parliamentary seats would be allocated, while the current system would be preserved for the remaining 80-90 percent – constitute precisely a hybrid solution which runs against the all-or-nothing approach?

#### *Not a zero-sum game*

I made an imaginary example (a reform of Belgium’s pension system) and claimed that a difference of 20 percentage point in the vote of Wallonia and Flanders would not allow ethnonationalist politicians to develop an “us vs. them” rhetoric. Dave Sinardet does not agree. He thinks that in the current political-mediatic context of Belgium such referenda would certainly be exploited for nationalist purposes. Jean-Pierre Stroobants also refers to this imaginary referendum and postulates that in such a case a large centre-right coalition in Flanders would defeat a large centre-left coalition in Wallonia and, thus, deepen the language cleavage.

Yes, it is possible that this occurs. But is it a reason to reject direct democracy? Would Belgium fall into a deep coma after such a vote? I do not think so. Or, to put it in a more provocative way, I do not believe that Belgium would get into a deeper crisis than the one it is in.

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<sup>34</sup>. In reality, this is my pragmatic concession to those who fear the “divisive” potential of direct democracy in a country like Belgium. I cannot develop this aspect here, but I suggest to the reader to have a look at the history of Jura. He or she will discover that it is precisely direct democracy that allowed a peaceful resolution of the only serious situation of ethnolinguistic and territorial tension in Swiss history.

One important point is that you must not think of direct democracy as a zero-sum game which is played only once. You must try to think of it as a game which is repeated over and over again. So even if a vote on the pension system shows deep differences between the two language regions, even if all political parties in Flanders favour the increase of the legal retirement age whereas those from Wallonia oppose it (as Stroobants believes would happen), even if nationalist leaders succeed in exploiting the vote and repeat the stereotype that “the” Flemish crushed “the” Walloon (in spite of the fact that, according to my example, 40 percent of the Flemish voted against the proposal and 40 percent of the Walloons were in favour of it), after a couple of months you will have another referendum which will not be divisive and could, indeed, show that the citizens of the two communities are not, after all, that distant from each other.<sup>35</sup>

Sinardet’s main fear, however, is that both politicians and the media would have the tendency to amplify even the *slightest* difference in the voting preferences of the two language groups and, thus, contribute to deepen the perception of two totally divided public opinions. I agree. But the fact is that they do it anyway. Even in the absence of direct democracy you will always have surveys the results of which will be misinterpreted by media and politicians. Yet as “the” Flemish and “the” Francophone public opinions do not exist, I think that it is also wrong to think that “the” media or “the” politicians, all of them, would project a blatantly wrong interpretation of the outcome of a referendum. There are enough high-quality journalists and politicians around who would propose a different interpretation of the results. At the end of the day, there is a good probability that the media consumers (i.e. citizens) get a more differentiated picture of the situation.

#### *Switzerland and Belgium: similarities and differences*

Marnix Beyem rightly underlines the differences between Switzerland and Belgium. Of course, nobody can erase the historical antagonism between Dutch and French speakers in Belgium and it is surely a favourable circumstance for Switzerland that its language groups have hardly been in conflict in the past.

But there was, once, a conflict in Switzerland which was divisive to the point that it ended up in a civil war (1847), through which seven Catholic cantons tried to oppose the centralization tendencies of predominantly Protestant cantons. Even though the war was very short and caused only a couple of dozens of victims, it was a war nevertheless. Now it is important to note that the emergence of direct democracy in the 1860s gave the Catholic minority the possibility of having a greater voice in federal politics. Through a couple of referenda in the 1870s and 1880s they succeeded, for instance, in blocking the centralization tendencies of the (for this matter mostly German-speaking) Protestant cantons. And probably this bottom-up political opposition convinced the ruling Radicals-Liberals to elect a first Catholic-Conservative representative in the Federal Council (executive) in 1891. Even though in my lead piece I did not refer to the religious situation in Switzerland, there would be much to say about the role of direct democracy in appeasing the Catholic-Protestant cleavage which is, today, almost inexistent in Swiss politics and society.

Whereas Beyem stresses the differences between Belgium and Switzerland, Marc Lits underlines the similarities between them. After all, he argues, the Swiss language groups *are* very different. “As opposed to what advances Nenad Stojanovic, there would be thus well a “us vs them” inside the Swiss Confederation.” I never claimed that Swiss people from different language groups are the same, or that there are no “us vs. them” attitudes. They exist. The only point I wanted to make is that direct democracy strongly undermines the development of a nationalist rhetoric of us vs. them. Again, such rhetoric does exist to a certain extent even in Switzerland. But it is more difficult to develop it in a country in which

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<sup>35</sup> By the way, nowadays the Flemish and the Walloon public opinions are not at all that distant (see Marc Hooghe in this volume). But the validity of such a statement is based on surveys. It is much less significant than the validity and clarity of a popular vote after which you know what the people actually voted for.

you have hard data – the outcomes of popular votes – which tell you with precision what the real preferences of the “people” (Flemish, Walloon, etc.) are.

Lits’s argument goes further and states that “us vs. them” does not perhaps concern anymore the relations between French and German-speaking Swiss, but between the “good” Swiss and the “bad” foreigners. This is, at least partly, true. Even though I am tempted to ask whether the attitudes towards the immigrants are better in the countries with almost no bottom-up direct-democratic tradition like France, the Netherlands, or Belgium, I consider this objection seriously. The argument could be restated as follows: direct democracy facilitates the development of us vs. them rhetoric against the foreigners. Indeed, there is currently a research project in Switzerland<sup>36</sup> which examines the impact of direct democracy upon the rights of non-traditional religious minorities (especially Muslims) and upon the foreign population. The first findings suggest that the exercise of direct democracy does tend to block the extension of rights for these groups. For example, the fact that the Swiss naturalization laws are among the most severe in Western Europe is related to the exercise of direct democracy. On a couple of occasions in the past twenty years the majority of the voters rejected the reforms of the naturalization law which had been approved by parliament. And very soon the Swiss will vote on a popular initiative launched by the nationalist-right parties which demands the ban of minarets on Swiss soil. Yet here, too, the picture is more complex. In a number of cantons and municipalities the citizens decided to give voting rights to foreign residents. And most of the anti-foreigners popular initiatives launched by the Swiss People’s Party in the last decade were rejected by a majority of the voters. (I have no doubts that the same will happen to the anti-minaret initiative, too.)

#### *A federal electoral district for Belgium*

Marc Reynebeau, who is probably the most open towards my proposal, is right to say that Belgium needs to take inspiration from Switzerland “and should look for institutional change that has an effect *similar* to that of the Swiss referendum tradition: the creation of a public sphere in which different opinions can be debated and which gives voice to political views that are blocked now by the electoral system. A proposal to that end has already been made: the creation of a federal voting district” (my italic).

Indeed, my plea for direct democracy is supporting the plea for a federal electoral district in Belgium. Even though the introduction of direct-democratic tools would, in my view, trigger much more powerful centripetal effects, a single electoral district is surely a step in the good direction.

I would like to conclude with a remark which concerns two important premises on which it is difficult to reach an agreement with some critics. First, it is true that my thesis and the proposal for a single federal electoral district both share a neo-institutionalist perspective (probably a mix of rational choice and historical institutionalism), according to which institutional design can significantly affect the behaviour of social and political actors and lead to more or less desirable outcomes. (This is a point on which Marnix Beyen strongly disagrees.) Second, both proposals share a normative vision of the desirable outcome. Implicit in their argument is the claim that multicultural and complex countries like Belgium should be preserved and that their fragmentation into two, three or more independent states is something we shall try to avoid. Surely not everyone shares this final objective (see Jean-Pierre Stroobants in this volume). Explaining the reasons underlying this normative vision should be a matter of another, very important, debate.

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<sup>36</sup>. The project is led by professor Adrian Vatter of the University of Zurich (forthcoming University of Berne).

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