

# Introduction: Is there a Belgian public opinion?

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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".