

Belgium – a praline marriage

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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. ‘Walloons 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 *Belgicum* – 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?”