

Foreword

Is Belgium's federal democracy stalled? Both inside and outside the country, many people thought so as it struggled to form a government in the aftermath of the federal election of June 2007. Many people still believe so today. Can a reform of Belgium's electoral system fix the problem, or at least alleviate it significantly? A group of academics from all Belgian universities known as the Pavia Group believes it can. On the 14th of February 2007, it made public a detailed proposal for the introduction of a federal electoral district in which part of the seats of the federal Parliament would be allocated. It enjoyed generous press coverage on both the Flemish and the Francophone side but met with widespread scepticism.

However, the long stalemate that followed the June 2007 election provided spectacular evidence for the existence of the problem the Pavia Group had emphasized and boosted the interest in the solution it proposed. Thus, the interim Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (Open VLD) included a version of the Pavia proposal in his report to the King of 7 January 2008, and the current Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy (CD&V) expressed his support for the introduction of a federal electoral district in an interview published on 26 January 2008 with the daily *De Morgen*.

The local repercussions of the financial crisis, combined with the anticipation of the regional elections, pushed the public debate on state reform onto the backburner. Sooner or later, this debate will move centre stage again. It is to be hoped that it will be guided by intelligent long-term thinking that takes due account of all types of arguments and reaps the benefit of relevant experience and discussions abroad.

The ambition of the present e-book is to contribute to such long-term thinking. It opens with a didactic presentation, with a foreign audience in mind, of the Pavia Group's proposal for a federal electoral district, the context in which it is being made and the considerations that motivate it. This lead piece is followed by four critical comments: by two of the most articulate Belgian critics of the proposal, Laurent de Brie (University of Namur) and Bart Maddens (University of Leuven), and by two of the most distinguished contributors to the international discussion on electoral systems for divided societies, Donald Horowitz (Duke University) and Brendan O'Leary (University of Pennsylvania). In the reply that closes the volume, we defend our proposal by restating its objectives and by comparing its merits and drawbacks to those of the interesting alternatives put forward by our critics.

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