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Axe

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Ethno-linguistic mobilization in Belgium: the Flemish case

Belgium and its ethno-linguistic mobilizations: the reasons why

The difficult task of tracing the paths of the ethno-linguistic mobilization in Belgium would imply telling the long and tortuous story of a nation-state building process called Belgium. And if, adding to that, we chose to elaborate on the Flemish ethno-linguistic mobilization, it would then lead us directly into the colorful details (or not) of an ethnic nation striving for political, cultural and linguistic recognition, as well as looking for economic growth within a *sui generis* federal asymmetric state (Wilfried, 2002: 67).

Belgium resolves mainly around ethno-linguistic clashes that have been going on since its foundation in 1830 and which opposes two antagonistic regional nationalisms: the Flemish regional nationalism on the northern side of the country and the Walloon nationalism on the southern side of the country.

The curious thing is that today's overwhelming linguistic cleavages between Francophones (people living in Wallonia and speaking the French) and the Flemings (people living in Flanders and speaking the standardized Dutch) was not in fact the primary opposition between when Belgium came to existence in 1830 (Béland and Lecours, 2008: 160).

In fact the main cleavages of nineteenth century Belgium were religious and class-based, rather than linguistic. Indeed, immediately after independence, the country was permeated by tension between clericalism and anti-clericalism leading to a crystallization of political and social life around Liberal and the Catholic pillars. Flanders was a largely rural region, and was therefore fertile ground for Catholic political ideas. It became, in fact, a Catholic stronghold, while industrialized Wallonia was more amenable to anti-clerical political traditions such as liberalism and socialism. Today's cleavages are religious, social, political, economic and linguistic: "cleavages" would definitely be the most appropriate noun to define Belgium in one word.

In order to understand how Belgium was brought up in 1830, we should look at the formative moment of the Belgian state and its earlier structures before that time. In 1795, France annexed the territories of present-day Belgium and for two decades, French authoritative "exported" the French political model to these territories and many members of the Belgian elites studied in France. Between 1815 and 1830, what is now Belgium was known as the Southern Netherlands and was part of Dutch kingdom. With the eventual defeat of Napoleon, the Congress of Viena (1815) created a Kingdom unifying the northern and southern Netherlands under the Dutch King William I (Howell, 2003:133). William introduced a radical language policy in 1823 in the Flemish-speaking areas of the South making Dutch the one official language of administration, education and the legal system. The Northern Dutch written language had developed for nearly two centuries with virtually no input from the southern vernacular. As a result, it represented a language nearly as foreign to speakers of Flemish as French was. These linguistic difficulties were exacerbated by social and religious differences between the North and South. Opposition to domination protestant Holland and to the imposition of the northern Dutch written language in the South eventually led to open revolt, resulting in the repartition of the Netherlands in 1830 and the creation of the kingdom of Belgium, where French re-established itself as the dominant language in public domains.

The Belgian revolution of 1830 was primarily the work of French-speaking bourgeoisie, though it did receive the support of the Flemish traditional petty bourgeoisie (which also spoke French) and clergy, for whom religious solidarity superseded linguistic considerations. Consequently, the Belgian state was established as a French speaking state, and French was the exclusive language in Parliament, the higher courts, the central administration and the army.

The constitution specified no official language, but because French was associated with modernity and the enlightenment, the builders of the early Belgian state assumed that the French language would erase *lesser* tongues – the Dutch tongue (Béland and Lecours, 2008: 148). Belgium's centralized structures, designed to project a nation replicating the French Jacobin model, were meant to facilitate this process.

The Flemish movement¹ emerged as a reaction to this nation-building project of the francophone elites. The early Flemish Movement was more Belgian than Flemish in the sense that it sought to make Belgium less French (bilingual and bicultural).

While a Flemish problem has existed for decades, it did not pose a serious problem to the francophone ruling elites in Belgium until the establishment of the universal suffrage after the First World War significantly increased the political clout of the Flemish majority. In the first years after the war, the francophone élites responded to the growing Flemish challenge by questioning the loyalty of all proponents of the legislative proposals seeking to strengthen the status of Dutch in administration and education, a programme that was linked to the Flemish “activists” who had collaborated with the Germans.

In the late 1920's an important division emerged in Belgium's francophone population. Wallonians began to demand official monolingualism for the provinces of Wallonia, while francophone elite in Brussels and Flanders continued to favor official bilingualism in administration and education, which in turn would protect the use of French in Flanders. As a result, three major factions engaged in the resolution of the linguistic situation in Belgium.

The administrative and education laws of 1932 set the stage for the eventual federalism established in the 1960's, with official monolingualism in Flanders and Wallonia and official bilingualism in Brussels. Belgium was divided into four language areas: unilingual Dutch-speaking (Flemish region), unilingual French-speaking (Walloon region), unilingual German-speaking region and the bilingual Brussels. These laws froze the linguistic frontier between the three major regions and halted the expansion of the bilingual Brussels region.

In the 1960's and in the 1970's, ethno-regionalist parties emerged which defended the French speaking character of Brussels and its suburbs (Front Démocratiques des Francophones – FDF) or insisted on keeping the suburbs Flemish (Volksunie or people's union- VU). Concurrently, the Rassemblement Wallon (RW), a Walloon ethno-regionalist party, campaigned in favor of more socio-economic autonomy for Wallonia, enabling Wallonia to devise the socio-economic policies which it was refused by the centre. These ethno-regionalist forces clearly illustrate two different types of nationalism: cultural-linguistic (Flanders) and socio-economic (Wallonia).

Although the legislation of 1962-1963² precisely defined the administrative linguistic border between unilingual Flanders and Wallonia, the implementation of the territoriality principle took more

¹ The Flemish Nationalist Movement took off in the nineteenth century as a romantic literary movement that turned later on into a political movement, demanding the recognition of Flemish/Dutch on equal footing with French in the Flemish provinces. The emergence of the Flemish Movement in the late nineteenth century should be understood in light of the formative moment of the Belgian State and its earlier structures. In 1795, France annexed the territories of present-day Belgium.

² In 1962-63, language laws were adopted which entrenched the character of language zones as Dutch, German and bilingual. Although these laws confirmed legislation that was put in place in the 1930's, they changed the method for determining what languages zones a municipality should belong to. Until 1948, language censuses determined whether a city or a municipality should remain within its language zone. If the share of adult citizens reporting to speak the language of

than a decade (Howell, 2003:149). Since 1971, the status of Dutch in Belgium was finally legally settled, with Dutch established as the official language in the provinces of East and West Flanders, Antwerp, Limburg, and Northern Brabant and with French as the official languages in the provinces of Hainaut, Namur, Luxembourg, Liège, and Southern Brabant.

Along the linguistic border numerous enclaves are either officially Dutch or French speaking but have officials' facilities for large linguistic minorities. In fact, in spite of the regional transfer of forty-nine municipalities and very small bits of territory, the 1963 laws could not engineer perfectly homogeneous regions. Six communes around Brussels and some municipalities either side of the border retained limited bilingual facilities.

Many Francophones and many Flemings have never accepted the freezing of the linguistic frontier around Brussels. Attempts to negotiate a permanent settlement for boundaries and linguistic minority rights around Brussels have failed consistently in 2007 and last June 2009, respectively.

Last events concerned six municipalities from Brussels-Halle-Vilvorde³ "arrondissement" which refused to undertake the 2009 European Elections by demanding in exchange the splitting-up of the "arrondissement" of Brussels-Halle-Vilvorde. By doing so, these municipalities were denying Francophones civic rights to vote for Brussels candidates to the European Elections and were preventing them from being judicially heard in French if needed. This "political demonstration" was therefore infringing article 7.1⁴ of the Council of Europe's Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, but the problem is that Belgium has signed the Convention but it has not yet been ratified by its all seven regional and national parliaments to give it legal force. The intent was to split this "arrondissement" in order to culturally homogenize it, since it would irrevocably pave the way for the (eventual) Flemish independence⁵.

For the French speakers who live in and around Brussels, the linguistic concerns play an important role but for French-speakers elsewhere in the country are more likely to support regionalism as a means to increase autonomy in socio-economic matters. In addition to being more weakly developed than its Flemish counterpart, Walloon nationalism is driven more strongly by a desire to expand socio-economic rather than a cultural autonomy.

To that respect, all Flemish governments so far have given a very limited and restrictive interpretation of the linguistic rights given in 1963 to the Francophones minority in a small number of municipalities around Brussels and along the language border, the so-called "facilities" in administrative and educational matters. The Flemish governments want to safeguard the "Flemish character" of the linguistically mixed municipalities around Brussels, by discouraging the migration from Brussels to that area and by encouraging Flemings to settle in the Brussels municipalities.

another zone, was higher than 30 per cent, a municipality could acquire a bilingual character or switch to the other language group. Flemish speakers contested these censuses because they worked against their interest in the Brussels suburbs. The language laws of 1962-1963 "froze" the language zones and dispensed with the language census as a method for demarcating the borders. Although some suburbs were forced to offer language facilities in French, they remained a part of Dutch-speaking language zone.

³ The "arrondissement" of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde gathers 19 communes from Brussels capital and 35 communes from the Flemish Brabant (which gathers in fact the communes belonging to the six cantons of Hal-Vilvorde: Asse, Hal, Lennik, Meise, Vilvorde and Zaventem). This hybrid entity lies between the unilingual Flemish region and the bilingual Brussels region and is the outcome of the 1962-1963 legislation.

⁴ The European Charter for regional or Minority rights states that "Regional or minority languages need a public life as well as a private one, as pointed out in the charter (article 7.1). Providing them with as public life can best be done at the local level, in those areas where the languages are spoken and by the representatives of speakers of those languages in regional and local public bodies" and that "this makes it important that, in the regional or local assembly and in the work of the regional or local executive, regional or minority languages be allowed and actually used both in speaking and writing. The charter provides for this in article 10.2 a, c, d, e and f."

⁵ In Duchesse, Val. "BHV: c'est quoi ce truc?". Journal *La Libre* du 06/09/2007 and Quatremer, Jean. "Couliesses de Bruxelles, UE". Journal *Libération* du 05/02/2009.

The official discourse says that all the inhabitants of Flanders are Flemings. Yet when the francophone minority of the area around Brussels is referred to, the discourse becomes more ambiguous. The region of Brussels represents only 10 per cent of the country's population and, is officially bilingual, though Dutch is making inroads in what was earlier in the century a primarily French-speaking region (Howell, 2003: 149). Brussels is a predominantly French-speaking urban agglomeration surrounded by Dutch-speaking territory. It goes without saying that this unbalanced situation does not completely fulfill Flemish political intents regarding Brussels, which also explains the late recognition of Brussels regional status only in 1989⁶.

The francophone minority living in majority Flemish municipalities on the surroundings of Brussels is the *Achilles heel* if the Flemish identity (Keating, Loughlin and Deschouwer, 2003: 84). The Francophones necessarily feel the need to learn and to adapt to the official language of the region, which is often not the dominant language at the very local level. Flanders perceives this as a lack of respect, which can easily be linked to the long history of non-adaptation of Francophones to the linguistic reality of Flanders. For most of the Francophones, supported by political elites and press, this policy is perceived as an unacceptable discrimination against the Francophone minority in the Brussels periphery which explains why the Francophones now turn to the Council of Europe, asking for support and protection under the auspices of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages⁷ (1992).

Since 1993, Belgium is a federal state in which three regional councils (Walloon, Flemish and Brussels) and three linguistic communities (French, Dutch and German) claim decision-making authorities (Kurzer, 1997: 34). The Belgian nation, like its state institutions, is irrevocably split into two major separate self-contained language communities. Brussels is a linguistic region – it is a bilingual region – but not a community. Instead, the French community has jurisdiction over French-speaking individuals and the Flemish community is in charge of Dutch-speaking people in Brussels. Flemish region speaks Flemish – a Germanic language that is a standardized Dutch⁸ (Keating, Loughlin and Deschouwer, 2003:81) – and the Walloon region speaks French – a Latin language inherited from the French dominance which preceded Belgium nationhood. The intensity of the language cleavage explains why the first step towards devolution resulted in granting some autonomy to three language communities and not to the administrative provinces. (Wilfried and Theo, 2006: 880). “Autonomy” for the language community complied better with the demands of the Flemish nationalists. However, devolving powers to language communities has always been difficult in Brussels and remains as such.

Today's most relevant nationalist oppositional feature is based on linguistic differences but language has always been a socio-economic marker as well. In the nineteenth century, until perhaps as late as the Second World War, those with power, money and aspirations spoke French. The roles are now reversed in contemporary Belgium (Hooghe, 2004:56) and economics are at the heart of antagonism between Flanders and Wallonia. For Paulette Kurzer (1997: 34), the most important development for explaining the widening spiral of ethnic or communal conflict is the inversion of economic fortunes

⁶ The Flemish and the Walloon regions acquired legislative powers in 1980, the Brussels capital region not until 1988-1989 – at least ten years after a form of Community autonomy was agreed upon. This delay reflected the fears of the Flemish party leaders who believed that a federal structure built on three regions would turn the state-wide Flemish demographic majority on its head. Brussels is the capital city of Belgium and the capital city of Brussels region.

⁷ The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) is a European treaty adopted in 1992 under the auspices of the Council of Europe to protect and promote historical regional and minority languages in Europe. It only applies to languages traditionally used by the nationals of the State Parties (thus excluding languages used by recent immigrants from other states), which significantly differ from the majority or official language (thus excluding what the state party wishes to consider as mere local dialects of the official or majority language) and which either have a territorial basis (and are therefore traditionally spoken by populations of regions or areas within the State) or are used by linguistic minorities within the State as a whole.

⁸ The standardized Dutch is today the official lingua franca of the Flemings and not a standardized Flemish vernacular and this is the result of the mobilization of the Flemish Movement. Standardized Dutch has indeed become the written language of the Flemings and this written version is quasi identical to the Dutch of the Netherlands, but the spoken language has remained different. Today most of the Flemings still speak, depending on the context, either a very local dialect or a form of “general Flemish”.

between the main linguistic regions. In the post-war period, traditional industrialized Wallonia declined and traditional agrarian and rural Flanders prospered. In the 1960's, Flemish GDP overtook that of Wallonia for the first time while the Walloon coal and steel industries were facing a painful reconversion process (Wilfried and Marthen Theo, 2006: 878). This strengthened the bargaining position of the Flemish in the centre. From this, new political battles erupted, which at first incapacitated one coalition government after another, and then resulted in gradual devolution of policy jurisdiction to new administrative agencies.

Impressively enough, Belgium has been able to survive among economic, social, political and linguistic cleavages between its three regions – Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels - and its three cultural communities – the Dutch, the French and the German speaking community - and this has been achieved through a gradual transition from a unitary state to a federal one. Political devolution which has favored mostly the cultural communities and the regions has been the proper answer for containing powerful tensions between Flemish nationalistic demands and the need to stick the country together by avoiding secession.

In this article, we will sustain that Flanders has been successful in using Europe, broadly speaking, as a means to achieve “political distinctiveness” at the national level, as much as it has been successful in discharging it whenever it would collapse with its ethnic nationalistic aspirations.

Flemish Ethno-linguistic mobilization and Europe

Europe has enhanced regional leverage and has called our attention upon the Europeanization of resurgent regional nationalism by questioning the traditional relationship between *nation* and *state* (Keating, 2004: 367) as well as questioning the state's national sovereignty.

It is commonly claimed that Europe has increased “regional autonomy”, which consists of the right of regional communities to govern themselves (Loughlin, 2000:10), and that sub-national actors, such as regions, have been looking at Europe as a *political opportunity structure* (Tarrow, 1998:76), which means that Europe has been perceived as an external political environment that provides incentives for regional collective action.

Over a period of twenty-five years, we have witnessed the waxing and the waning of the idea of the “Europe of the Regions” which has been gradually replaced by the imagery of the “Europe *with* the regions” and with the “Europe with *some* regions” (Marks, Nielsen, Ray and Salk, 1996:63). In the nineties, given the rise of regional assertiveness, it was not surprising that the speculation of this powerful image of the “Europe of the Regions” has grown rapidly. According to this widespread image, the nation-states were deemed to fade away in favor of regions and super-regions that would successfully survive and thrive within the European Union and the global economy without the support of the nation-states. This vision was reinforced by the increasing tendency of both the European Union and the regions to try to by-pass the central state, often in the name of the principle of subsidiarity which came into play with Maastricht.

The growing involvement of sub-national authorities in EU policy making has rendered the state centric conception of the Union obsolete while the notion of the “Europe of the Regions” has forged a “European federation” compounded of smaller, more natural units (regions) gathered around a strong supranational core (Hooghe, 1995:177). The “Europe of the Regions” intended to stress the crescent empowerment of regional actors within the Europe Union and Belgium regions rapidly acknowledged how to take advantage of it.

Soon enough, the European Union started to be perceived as a *political opportunity structure* for regional empowerment at the national level.

The concept of “political opportunity structure” was coined in the literature on social movements and political contention (Princen and Kerremans, 2008:1130). The literature on political contention is mainly interested in the level and type of interest group and social movement activity.

Each of these approaches would picture institutional factors as crucial for the “fit” between decision-makers and interest groups demands and in this context, the political opportunity structure would be broadly defined as “a set of characteristics of a given institution that determines the relative ability of (outside groups) to influence decision-making within the institution”.

This conceptualization presents “political opportunity structures” as exogenous, that is, these structures are seen as outside constraints on the activities of social movements and interest groups. However, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001:43) have pointed out that political opportunities should not just be seen as objective structural factors but also as “subject to attribution”. As they stressed: “no opportunity, however objectively open, will invite mobilization unless it is a) visible to potential challengers and b) perceived as an opportunity.

Hence, the existence of political opportunities is (also) the outcome of a process of cultural and strategic framing (Gamson and Meyer 1996).

The use that groups can (and will) make of opportunity structures depends on the organizational resources and capabilities those groups have (McAdam *et al* 1996). The resources and capabilities include money, expertise, legitimacy and pre-existing networks.

Conceptually, then, *political opportunity structures* are best seen as necessary “conditions” for social movements activity (Princen and Kerremans, 2008: 1132). In the absence of favorable political opportunities, social movements are unlikely to become active (at any level). In that sense, the political impact of Europe as a *political opportunity structure* on a given group – let’s say the region - is not solely a function of the European level of governance structures.

These structures serve merely to define a new *external environment* with which the *political actor* - the region - must interact. How “successful”⁹ (Marks and McAdam, 1996: 250) the region adapts and interacts with this environment is more a function of regional internal features, mainly “resources” (Giddens, 1984). According to Giddens (Nizet, 2007:19), “resource” would be closely related to the notion of power and would consist on the actor’s ability to produce change in interaction with the “structure” (Europe) by the means of “social practices” (recurrent interventions of political actors inside the region itself). This definition fits into our research and this is how we will apply it.

The “capability” (Giddens) to pursue and effectively fulfill greater leverage in Europe is strongly wedded to the existing political national order, which means that it is deeply rooted in a national system of law, a national system of belief structures *versus* an expected regional order, sustained by a renewed system of law expressing the deeply rooted regional system of belief structures. Together, these two sets of factors – European opportunities and the national organizational context - have shaped the overall impact of Europe on regions and, more specifically, on their regional nationalism, as it has happened in with Wallonia and Flanders and its regional nationalisms.

Belgium lies at the heart of the European Union. Flemish and Walloon regional nationalisms have evolved according to the European factor: regional nationalisms have Europeanized their agenda and have managed to gain more political relevance *in* and *outside* Belgium borders.

In Belgium, European integration was used by sub-state elites to solidify their hold over power, instill new political affiliations and identifications among confused voters and to be sure to undermine the authority of the Belgian nation-state (Kurzer, 1997). By the 1990’s, most of the main Flemish parties sought to anchor Flanders in the European context, where they could distance themselves from Wallonia and its economic problems, exploit the powers granted to the regions by the Belgian state, and find institutional and economic support for their respective party agendas

We strongly believe that the Flemish nationalist cause has been able to evolve according the European Union project and has been able to perceive “the European contribution” as a political opportunity structures to use on the attempt to benefit their nationalist causes, or, conversely, as a political structure to be ignored whenever it wouldn’t benefit their causes (as it happened with the Flemish refusal on the Council of Europe’s Convention on Regional or Minority Languages).

⁹ The adjective successful is not a precise category but is commonly used to address the ability to achieve the expected strategic goals, irrespectively of their relative meanings and nature.

Furthermore, European membership played an important role in the widening economic disparities between Flemish and Walloon regions, as well as giving them the ability to better represent their interest, through formal - the council of Ministers and the Committee of the Regions since Maastricht and through regional offices to the European Union on the aftermath of Maastricht - and informal means – Regleg¹⁰ and lobbying practices between multi-level actors, namely through European Members of Parliament. European integration has provided one of the stimuli for regionalism, emboldening “regions” to assert for their territorial autonomy by opening *quasi-embassies* (regional representations), enabling them to get into *para-diplomatic activities* (see Duchacek, 1986; Soldatos, 1990; Aguirre, 1999; Aldecoa & Keating, 1999; Paquin, 2002).

In such a context, the main Flemish political parties remained overtly Euro-enthusiastic (CVP, PS, VLD¹¹). As for the nationalist parties – the Volksunie¹² and the Vlaams Block -, they presented very different visions of the Flemish nation as well as different visions of the appropriate political order they wish to see at the European level (Laible, 2001: 224). Based on different visions of Europe, both believed that the European Union would threaten political arrangements what would support Flemish culture as well as the future capacity of the Flemish nation to preserve its autonomy and to protect its cultural interests.

As the role of foreign capital in Flemish corporate life grew in the wake of the (Laible, 2008: 128) Single European Act, Flemish leaders increasingly sought novel means to respond to a perceived loss of control of their regional economy. As stated by Paulette Kurzer (1997), the EU membership has intensified the Flemish-Walloon conflict because it has exacerbated divergent economic developments between the regions. But it is also true that it has also lowered the stakes of territorial conflict. It has eased the terrain for federal reform, and as a polity-building exercise it has increased incentives for cooperation among these territorial units (Hooghe, 2004:81). European membership has made the implications of a split-up of the country more predictable and less consequential. Independent Flemish and Walloon states would find themselves restricted by the EU membership in ways that are similar to the Belgian State.

Many Flemish politicians turned to European institutions as a context to help protect and legitimize the cultural, economic and political autonomy of Flanders, but by far the most ardent enthusiasts of European integration were found in CVP, the Flemish Christian Democrats, led by the Flemish-president Luc Van Den Brande. In 1998, the party had passed a resolution during its annual conference declaring support for Flanders in a Federal Europe, echoed in its campaign slogan in the next general election: “Flanders in Federal Belgium and federal Europe”. But more radical position was advocated in the early 1990’s by Van Den Brande (Laibel, 2008: 127).

In March of 1993, his regional government published a strategy document, entitled *Vlaanderen-Europa 2002*, intended to set the terms for the evolution of “a new Flanders in Europe” (Keating, Loughlin and Deschouwer, 2003:81). The new document represented an attempt to create a feasible model for a Europe of the regions, with Flanders playing a salient role while Belgium, deprived of significant policymaking capacity, faded. Van Den Brande envisioned three essential levels of decision making in the EU: local authorities, regional government and the EU.

¹⁰ Regleg is a political network for EU regions with legislative power. It comprises representatives of regional governments who work together on issues of common concern. REGLEG believes in effective multi-level governance involving institutions, Member States and regions. It believes that regional governments can add to the legitimacy of European policy making. For further details, see Regleg website at www.regleg.eu.

¹¹ The Flemish Liberals used to be called the PCC until November 1992. They were renamed by that time with the VLD initials.

¹² Defectors from the Volksunie formed two new Flemish nationalist parties, the Vlaams-Nationale Partij (Flemish National Party, VNP) and the Vlaams Volkspartij (Flemish people’s Party, VVP): The Vlaams Blok party was formally established to replace the VNP and the VVP in 1979 (Laible, 2001:225)

Belgium would serve only to coordinate European affairs. The long term strategy for Flanders involved embracing Europe as the context in which Flemish political, cultural and economic life would flourish.

Van Den Brande rejected charges that he was a separatist; he based his vision of Flanders “in Europe” on the grounds that, with the Belgian state playing a decreasing role in public life, it was time for the Flemish to recognize that the EU, not Belgium, was the most significant political arena above Flanders (Laible, 2008: 128). He claimed that he did not seek Flemish independence “according” to international law, that is, with formal recognition. Yet short of recognition, he used the European dimension of politics to create the image of a Flanders that was no longer dependent on Belgium, but was an integral part of a much larger political project.

Surprisingly enough (or not), Luc Van Den Brande has intelligently used “Europe” for sustaining his political and economic leverage at national ground and has left “unappealing” Council of Europe contributions aside. In fact, he believes that there is no such thing as Francophones minorities in Flanders but just Francophones who refuse to “become Flemish” as they should “feel obliged to”¹³.

Luc Van den Brand stands for the autonomy of Flanders in Europe and has always made all the efforts on that direction. He is currently the President of the Committee of the Regions and he believes that Belgium should become a “confederation”

This apparent “political incoherence” between the “positive” and “negative” picks on Europe became more salient when he decided to apply for the post of General Secretary of the Council of Europe last February 2009. His candidacy was delivered by the Belgium government (by Yves Leterme and by Herman Van Rompuy) and was supported by the Council of Europe Christian-Democrat parliamentary group (PPE).

Conclusions

Belgium is a small European Democracy that constitutes a fascinating laboratory for the study of political mobilization, nationalistic mobilization and institutional reforms.

Over the past four decades, it has evolved from a Jacobin unitary state to a federal system where many policy areas now fall under the jurisdiction of the Regions and the Communities (Keating, Loughlin and Deschouwer, 2003: 92).

The Flemish region-building project has its roots in the Belgian history, but today it is very much oriented to the outside world, projecting Flanders as a region of Europe and using the European theme in turn to define the modern Flanders.

The Flemish identity is predominantly cultural, and its nationalist mobilization has focused on language and this is how we should look at it.

Flanders has evolved with time and has been able to adapt itself to the European Project by being successful in using Europe as a *political opportunity structure* to redefine itself as a nation and as an autonomous “polity”.

We could assert that Europe has been perceived as the *missing* “conditions” for Flemish political and economic plans to prosper at both domestic and international level. Europe has been perceived as the new *external environment* to be explored for nationalist benefits as well, even if each political party approached Europe in many different ways, but in that context, the Flemish Christian Democratic Party and Luc Van Den Brande has played a special role.

¹³ In Quatremer, Jean. “Quand l’europe recycle les Flamings”. Journal *Libération* du 19/02/2009.

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