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**Will Belgium Dissolve?
A Comparative Examination of State Dissolution in Europe**

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Abstract

The parliamentary deadlock surrounding the 2007 Belgian election, fake news reports of dissolution and Time magazine's discussion of a Czechoslovak style divorce, showcase how Belgium may be inching towards breakup. We argue that the case of Belgium will be more likely to follow that of dissolution, the consensual breakup of the center; rather than go through a divisive secession, the removal of a territory on the periphery. This differentiates the Belgian case from other contemporary peaceful separatist movements like Quebec, Catalonia and others which may make it more susceptible to breakup. Moreover, we argue that based on Hancock (1998), sufficient political and economic changes could exacerbate tensions such that dissolution becomes increasingly inevitable in the future. We show how the case of Belgium will likely be similar to that of Czechoslovakia in 1993 as well as providing lessons from the breakups of personal unions such as Norway-Sweden in 1905 and Serbia-Montenegro in 2006. In sum, we argue that Belgium will not easily dissolve and that while dissolution is quite possible, it is not yet probable. This study, therefore, presents some interesting theoretical lessons for dissolution, how it occurs and how mature democracies face very real challenges with state breakup.

Introduction

Belgium was, in some senses, Europe's battleground for close to two millennia as it effectively demarcated the division between Europe's Latin and Germanic languages (Reid 2004, 253). Today it is a peaceful state that serves as the capital of a new and emerging Europe keen on returning to a multipolar world at least in economic terms. Nonetheless, conflict albeit political and cultural, is persistent in Belgium with the Flemish Dutch speakers in the north making more and greater calls for increased autonomy and perhaps outright independence from their Walloon French speaking countrypersons in the south. Top this all off with a minority German speakers in the east of the country as well as a capital city that is in the Flemish north of the country, but is dominated by francophone's and you have an incredulous mix of peoples and opportunities for political conflict.

It should come as no surprise then that current events on Belgian parliamentary problems are difficult to stay up-to-date with as new twists and turns occur almost every week. There have been three Prime Ministers in the last year alone coupled with a significant period where no leader was available after former Prime Minister Yves Leterme originally had difficulty forming a government. Seemingly, the divisive issue between the Flemish north and Walloon south has created significant conflicts over governance and the future of the country. This has gotten to the point whereby Belgian scholars are now questioning whether Belgium still exists (Billiet, Maddens and Frognier 2006), whether Belgium is sustainable (Swenden and Jans 2006) and whether political identity based on language is so bad that the state may breakup (O'Neill 2000).

Furthermore, there are obvious structural changes that have happened since 1970 which preclude the idea that the breakup of Belgium may not be that far away. The goal of

this paper then is to assess the current problems in Belgium and to compare them to other cases of state breakup, most notably the ‘Velvet Divorce’ of Czechoslovakia. We also follow Hancock’s (1998) argument regarding economic access, political participation and cultural identity as major factors to showcase why Belgium is or is not in danger of breakup. Finally, we describe the process through which Belgium could breakup in the near future. There are plenty of theoretical implications stemming from this case that are linked to the process of dissolution and many if/then scenarios that could dramatically change the Belgian state.

Some Current Tensions

As noted at the outset, there are numerous tensions in Belgium. By way of compelling introduction, we note the case of Katholieke Universiteit in Leuven before moving on to contemporary cases like RTBF’s fake news report of the breakup of Belgium and the parliamentary deadlock that occurred for over six months in 2007 and 2008. This was not the first case of prolonged parliamentary deadlock (1987/88) but if the problem persists, the continued unity of Belgium may be in grave danger.

University of Leuven Conflict

Perhaps the most compelling example of the divisions in Belgian society is evidenced in the conflict over the Katholieke Universiteit of Leuven, just over the border in the Flemish north of the country. Founded in 1415, Katholieke Universiteit in Leuven is a prestigious university set an hour east of Brussels. It is a typical, almost American style university lodged in a quaint town. It is here, in some ways, that the genesis of modern problems

broke out. Just prior to the constitutional reforms of 1970, this case served as the backdrop for the growing divisions in the country and perhaps evidence more so than anything else, the linguistic divisions in Belgium.

Unhappy with the expansion plans for francophone instruction at the university (McRae 1983, 115), riots broke out in 1968 over the issue and Flemish students demanded a linguistic division of the university (Stallaerts 2007, xix). The issue was so large that the Flemish Christian Social party withdrew its support from the coalition government thus bringing down parliament on February 7, 1968 (McRae 1983, 115) and, in some senses, paved the way for increased federalism based on linguistic regions.

The Belgians famously compromised by constructing another university for francophone students in the Wallonian south of the country in the 1970s after linguistic differences became too great (Hooghe 2004, 79). This new university was opened in Louvain-la-Neuve about 15 miles south of Leuven just across the linguistic border in the Walloon half of the country (McRae 1983, 115). What was perhaps most interesting in this case is what happened to the numerous library collections: odd numbers were given to one university and even numbers were given to the other; the divisions were made sensibly, of course, so as to keep collections of books together.

Fake News of a Breakup

The current debate over the future of Belgium has some pragmatic lessons available from the cases of Norway-Sweden and Czechoslovakia. Echoing the Czechoslovakian ‘Velvet Divorce,’ writers are questioning whether the Belgian union could be similarly divided

between the Flemish and Walloon regions.¹ Given the current strength of Flemish parties in the Belgian parliament, this has increased speculation into the future of the country. A deadlocked parliament is the cause of this but a recent hoax may now serve as a premonition for future events.

On 16 December 2006, a fake news report aired on the francophone television station, RTBF, announcing that the Flemish half of the country had declared “independence.”² This news report broadcasted the “secession” of the Flemish region on television with images of Flemish crowds celebrating and waving black and yellow flags. Many Belgians, especially in the south, openly wept at this sight and the television station even had to confess that it was a fake story before the two hour broadcast was over. This fake news story was meant to provoke a discussion on the future of Belgium and presents the possibility of dissolution as a very real outcome for the state. The divide between the Flemish and Walloons is getting more and more attention around the world and the possibilities for dissolution indeed seem greater in the current climate.³

2007-2008 Parliamentary Deadlock

In recent years, the Belgian state has garnered more attention because of the rise of Flemish nationalists. The first piece of notable attention came in November 2004 when the far-right Vlaams Blok was outlawed as part of a constitutional compromise mechanism between the two major linguistic groups.⁴ This party has since re-emerged in recent years as the Vlaams

¹ See *Time*, ‘A Belgian Divorce?’ (5 Dec. 2007)

² See *BBC News*, ‘Viewers fooled by ‘Belgian split,’’ (14 Dec. 2006) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6178671.stm> [accessed 14 Dec. 2007].

³ Ibid.

⁴ See *BBC News*, ‘Court rules Vlaams Blok is racist,’ (9 Nov. 2004) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3994867.stm> [accessed 14 Dec. 2007].

Belang and its current leader, Filip Dewinter, argues that the dissolution of Belgium is only a matter of time and that the country is essentially “two different nations now.”⁵

Furthermore, the June 2007 general election of a moderate Flemish nationalist, Yves Leterme, and his subsequent failure to form a government (mainly because of Walloon mistrust) has threatened to dissolve Belgium in the very near future. Moreover, Leterme resigned his post as Prime Minister and the Belgian king has now been forced to help negotiations for the creation of a new government.⁶ While a new government was eventually formed when Leterme returned, this crisis may serve as a precursor to future problems especially over the issue of powers for the regions. Once again, however, the situation changed when Leterme resigned over the Fortis bank issue. A more moderate leader, Herman Van Rompuy, has now emerged but his expertise in compromise will surely be tested. If he fails, further parliamentary deadlock could ensue causing further threats to the future of Belgium.

The 2007/08 deadlock was not the first time that Belgian parliament was deadlocked for a significant period of time. In 1987/88, for example, Jean-Luc Dehaene was charged with forming a coalition government. This might seem normal under most circumstances except for the fact that Dehaene was the third mediator charged with bridging the parliamentary crisis and it took him 105 days which was largely unexpected as the task was considered “mission impossible” (Hooghe 1991, 1).

As in the cases of Norway-Sweden and Czechoslovakia, elites such as Yves Leterme and Filip Dewinter are, in some regards, hoping to provoke a real constitutional crisis that will render the country open to dissolution. Because of Leterme’s inability to

⁵ See *New York Times*, ‘Calls for a break-up grow ever louder,’ (21 Sept. 2007) <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/21/world/europe/21belgium.html> [accessed 21 Sept. 2007].

⁶ Stephen Castle, ‘Belgian King enters Dispute,’ *New York Times*, A4, 4 Dec. 2007.

form a government for over six months, Belgium was been operating with a very weak former government that has little authority or ability to govern. The Flemish ethnics has mobilized such that a real continued constitutional crisis could lead to the break-up of the country. It may not be the best solution but the previous attempts to share power are seemingly proving to be very difficult at the present.

Overall, the 2007/08 deadlock did not lead to the dissolution of the state. It is possible then that a resolution may be found and Belgium will continue to exist as normal. Flemish nationalism, however, will likely continue and the Belgian state will remain at risk in the interim. Therefore, some investigation of Flemish nationalism can aid in the discussion of the possible dissolution of Belgium.

A Brief History of Belgium

This section seeks to introduce some of the historical grievances between Flemings and Walloons throughout their history together. Obviously, this section could be several books in and of itself, but it is at least important to highlight some of the differences between the groups and some significant dates that are still important to people in each community.

One of the earliest descriptions of Belgium comes from the time of Julius Caesar when he subjugated the Gallic tribes, one of which is the Belgae. Most notably, Caesar notes that “Of all the tribes, the Belgae are the bravest” (Staellaerts 2007, xxvii). From here, as was the case with much of Europe, the territory was conquered by various different armies but the territory remained a juxtaposition between French and Dutch speakers.

Flemish nationalism, historically, has been aroused through subjugation and domination by the French. In 1226, for example, the Treaty of Melun effectively imposed

French domination over the Flemish Counts and all people within the territory were forced to adopt French customs and culture (Snyder 1982, 86). This, however, would not last for long as political expansion from the Burgundian period beginning in 1382 brought a unity between northern and southern Dutch speakers. However, in the 1580s, the Spanish attempted to reassert themselves and successfully re-obtained the southern provinces thus initiating the religious gulf between Protestant Netherlands and Catholic Flanders (and Belgium) (McRae 1983, 14).

Throughout the following centuries the Belgian provinces changed jurisdictions numerous times with the House of Hapsburg taking control in 1500 but the Flemish again ended up under French control when the provinces were annexed to France in 1794 (Snyder 1982, 86). Belgians vociferously resisted French rule especially under Napoleon and his downfall effectively contributed to Belgian national unity in its new state (Snyder 1982, 87).

The 1815 Congress of Vienna amalgamated Belgium and Holland into the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Snyder 1992, 67). This served to effectively detach the Belgian provinces from France and created a larger Netherlands (McRae 1983, 20). King William I, despite his progressive behaviors, was stubborn in temperament and initiated a Dutch only language policy in 1819 which obviously frustrated his francophone subjects (McRae 1983, 20). Furthermore, William I also frustrated the governmental and professional elites in the Flemish provinces such that by 1829, the United Kingdom of the Netherlands was under significant separatist pressure from a re-emergent Belgian territory (McRae 1983, 20). This chain of events ultimately led to the Revolution in 1830 which

effectively severed Belgium from the Netherlands and gave the former outright independence for the first time in its history (McRae 1983, 21).

By 1830, Belgium gained its independence from the Netherlands (Rooney 1982). Belgium, by virtue of its territorial divisions, found itself in a multiethnic state with both Flemish and Walloon peoples. The Flemish remembered their historical subjugation at the hands of French speaking people and their grievances remained paramount in an independent Belgium. Flemish nationalists made sure to entrench some cultural and linguistic protections for their people and this proved to be a foundation of the Belgian state (Clough 1930, 44-46). This grievance centered largely on the issue of identity based differences.

Argument

There are two significant points of analysis in examining the potential breakup of Belgium: why and how. The why question might seem somewhat obvious when examining some of the current tensions and the historical divisions in the country, but it requires more than simple estimation or conjecture. This is where our introduction of a theoretical approach could prove useful. Utilizing Hancock's (1998) argument examining perception of institutional underdevelopment, we are able to make predictions for the future of Belgium. The how question is answered by a) delineating dissolution as a mechanism of obtaining independence from secession and b) explaining the process of dissolution. Process is important in dissolution and this discussion will be mentioned in two parts. First, it will be mentioned in this section so as to introduce the basic concepts. Second, it will be described

in detail in the latter part of this paper when the process can be directly compared to other cases of state dissolution.

There are three main variables in Hancock's (1998) relative deprivation argument including: political participation, economic access and cultural identity. Variations in the first two variables are what create the sense of relative deprivation. It is this sense of deprivation that leads to protests and calls for changes, generally peacefully.

Essentially, differences in cultural identity are reified with changes in political participation and economic access. Increases in one should be mirrored by increases in the other. Otherwise, a sense of relative deprivation becomes apparent.

While Hancock's (1998) argument is applied to cases of violence in Northern Ireland, former Yugoslavia and Sri Lanka, we believe that the argument is transferable to Belgium. There are, however, two major caveats. The first caveat is that the original cases all involved secessionist movements. In the case of Belgium, however, we believe that the more likely mechanism of obtaining independence is dissolution rather than secession. Some explanation of this is provided next. The second caveat is that all three of Hancock's original cases involved significant levels of violence whereas the Belgian case has been devoid of much violence. We argue that unlike the other cases, Belgium has maintained full institutional development for both major regions and has not neglected one in favor of the other. For this reason, there is little fear of extinction on the part of one group and violence has not occurred for this reason. Again, some further discussion is required.

Mechanisms of Independence: Dissolution versus Secession

Despite the multitude of discussions on the subject of secession, it is incorrect to think of this mechanism as the only way in which a given region may become independent.

Dissolution is possible in Belgium given that the state does not have a mechanism to hold a referendum (Kauffman and Waters 2004). Obviously, this causes significant problems for the Flemish if they desired the ability to democratically withdraw from the Belgian state.

Dissolution, we argue, means that the center dissolves entirely creating two or more brand new states. If we take the hypothetical example of state A, in a dissolution state A no longer exists; rather, it is replaced by states B and C (and, if necessary, states D, E and so on). Secession, in contrast however, is the removal of a territory on the periphery of a state. This means that in our example, state A continues to exist after secession but is joined by state B (and, where applicable, by states C, D and so on). State A diminishes in population, territory size and overall GDP but nonetheless continues to function as a legitimate and viable state.

Why Peaceful, Not Violent Dissolution?

Peace, for the most part, will prevail in the case of Belgium unlike other cases of ethno-nationalism like Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, Rwanda and many others. The reason for this is that there is no real fear of extinction on the part of either linguistic constituency.

Unlike these other cases, there is relatively little institutional underdevelopment. As we shall see in the next section, Wallonia enjoys the same institutional benefits as Flanders even if the region is unhappy about the increasing separatist tendencies within the region.

Beyond this, it is difficult to imagine the heart of Europe descending into political violence and civil war regardless of how intense linguistic disputes become. Belgium is a wealthy state also which again reduces the likelihood of conflict.

Cultural Identity underscoring Economic Access and Political Participation

Hancock's (1998) argument notes three important variables: cultural identity, economic access and political participation. As mentioned earlier, the most important point is with respect to changes. In the latter two variables, they must follow one another in equal measure with increases and decreases. For example, if region A becomes significant wealthy, region A also requires greater autonomy otherwise the group increasingly senses relative deprivation. State dissolution, we argue, is more likely if this occurs.

In this section, we start by spelling out some of the main cultural differences between Flanders and Wallonia such that Belgium has two clear linguistic communities each with a separate sense of identity. Once this is in place, we examine economic access and political participation. It does not matter necessarily if one group is richer than the other so long as it is matched with a similar distribution of political power. Relative deprivation occurs when an increase in one area is not met with an increase in another area. It is at this point, we argue, that dissolution will likely occur.

Cultural Identity

The major difference between Flemish and Walloons, in most measures, differs on the issue of language. Flemish is an offshoot of Dutch whereas the Walloons speak French (Snyder 1992, 68). Furthermore, only 11 percent of the country is bilingual which

facilitates further problems with regards to national unity (Snyder 1982, 67). Modern Belgium is divided into three parts encompassing Flemish, Walloon and a small German speaking population. These areas are quite homogenous in terms of language and culture with the notable exception of the capital city. Indeed, the capital city of Brussels is in Flemish territory but is dominated by Walloons who have government jobs or other positions at the headquarters of the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Lyon 1971, 128-130).

As a result of the linguistic and cultural divide in Belgium, a number of key facets of the Belgian state are divided. This is most evident in government whereby the Flemish and Walloons have separate lower houses (similar to the Czechoslovak case). Political parties are also divided into linguistic blocs despite supposed uniformity in national platforms. Ideology, once the uniting factor in Belgian politics, has faded in light of increasing nationalism and the politics of compromise have only seemed to facilitate national differences between the groups.

The Flemish obtained unilingual status in 1962 replete with cultural autonomy (O'Neill 2000, 116). While linguistic liberty was enshrined in the Constitution in 1831, the upper class in Belgium was dominated by francophone's providing them with significant advantages in the new society (Hooghe 1991, 11). This, perhaps, obviously was bound to lead to problems as it stifled the ability of the Flemish to gain real access to institutional levers in the country as well as succeed economically. A language census in 1846 identified 42.1 percent French speakers, 57 percent Dutch speakers and 0.8 percent German speakers (Hooghe 1991, 11). Dutch being the dominant language in Belgium was also associated with lower classes and lesser economic development in the nineteenth century.

To protect their interests and ability to ascend the economic ladder, language laws were important to protecting Flemish rights. Moreover, a new policy of unilingual territorialism in 1932 brought protections for Dutch speaking workers and effectively served to keep jobs for the Flemish (Hooghe 1991, 12).

In the case of Belgium, the linguistic and cultural divide has cemented the existence of two different *ethnie*'s⁷ in the country. Furthermore, Flemish elites such as, Yves Leterme and Filip Dewinter, despite their ideological differences have, in some regards, made the current Belgian state unworkable. This case has some startling similarities with Norway-Sweden and Czechoslovakia with regards to elite led problems and an existing constitutional crisis that threatens to dissolve the state. Only time will tell as to whether the current constitutional crisis is large enough to lead to dissolution but many of the requisite factors are in place.

The electoral system in Belgium too has contributed to the reification of ethnic and linguistic communities. Guy Lardeyret (1996) argues in response to Arend Lijphart (1994) that the parliamentary-proportional representation system in place in Belgium has indeed reified the differences between the Flemings and Walloons such that the monarchy is the only cement that has retained national unity (Lardeyret 1996, 177).

With regards to other cultural factors like religion, it has long been asserted that the Flemish north was more religious than its Wallonian neighbors to the south (Billiet, Maddens and Frogner 2006, 913). Nonetheless, the decline in Flemish religiosity has declined to the point of parity so religious differences can no longer really be asserted as a reason for difference.

⁷ The term “*ethnie*” is Anthony D. Smith’s (1991) basically describing a nation with shared ethnic, religious and linguistic traditions.

The three communities are drifting further apart even with regards to their media sources. The Flemish have VRT, the Walloons have the aforementioned RTBF and the German community has BRF (Billiet, Maddens and Frogner 2006, 914). As the media remains divided, identity remains divided because what people see, hear and discuss on a daily basis will be different in each community. The glue, so to speak, of society is eroding in this way.

Another cultural factor is intermarriage between different groups. Intermarriage between people in Flanders and Wallonia is quite low with less than 8 percent in Flanders and less than 20 percent in Wallonia (Billiet, Maddens and Frogner 2006, 915). This is perhaps the best evidence of cultural separation between the Flemish and Walloon populations.

Given the evident cultural separation between the two populations, not to mention the small German minority in the east, Belgium falls under the criteria established by Hancock (1998) such that it deserves further scrutiny under the lens of political participation and economic access.

Economic Access

Modern Belgium is a strong example of a market economy with a strong export base (Stallaerts 2007, xxx). Traditionally, the French speaking bourgeoisie dominated the economic make up across Belgium (Hooghe 1991, 11). This was problematic in many senses because even in Dutch dominated areas, the French bourgeoisie were in positions of power. Over time, however, the economic dominance of the French eroded such that gross

national product as of 2003 was distributed in this way: 57.2 percent in Flanders, 23.4 percent in Wallonia and 18.2 percent in Brussels (Stallaearts 2007, xxx).

Liesbet Hooghe argues that economic factors examining the desire for separatism and the business cycle fall flat (Hooghe 2004, 81). However, economic concerns are important in the Flemish-Walloon divide given the significant disparity between the economic engine in Flanders. This might not be so bad if it were not for transfer payments to the Wallonian south which many Flemish consider a drain on the north and its prosperity.

Since the French were historically tied to the upper and upper-middle classes, but since this has reversed the Flemish desire more for their economic clout. As in Hancock's (1998) model, increased economic clout coincides with increased desires for political control which helps to explain why the Flemish has increasingly pushed for greater political autonomy.

Political Participation

The Flemish movement, in some ways, began as early as 1830 upon Belgian independence as a reaction to the "Frenchification" of the state in order to protect Dutch linguistic and cultural rights (De Witte and Klandermans 2000, 702). The francophone superiority in the state was an obvious point of animosity but it was not expected to dominate the discourse of the state or affect it so dramatically over 150 years later.

In political terms, Belgium historically, was a unitary state that existed despite some trouble between the two major linguistic groups. There were few indicators that suggested the Belgian state would be shaped by the Flemish-Walloon conflict (Hooghe 2004, 55).

However, as Liesbet Hooghe argues, the center has gradually been hollowed in return for peace (Hooghe 2004, 77-86).

Belgium underwent numerous constitutional changes starting in 1970 to “hollow the center” and to allow for greater autonomy on the part of the different linguistic communities (Hooghe 2004). Constitutional reforms took place in 1970 (Swenden and Jans 2006, 877), 1980 and 1988 (Stallaerts 2007, xix-xx). Provinces existed from 1831 to 1970 but autonomy for the various language communities better quelled Flemish dissent at their lack of autonomy (Swenden and Jans 2006, 880). These reforms were significant because they changed Belgium from a unitary state to a federal state (Hooghe 1995, 135). Federalism is much more connected with state breakups in general than are unitary states.

Federal arrangements are tighter than other forms of power sharing. They are tighter than consociations because power is focused amongst electoral winners at the center; and tighter than confederations because the center has stronger powers than the regions. Federations represent dual institutions in the state at the national and regional levels with national powers taking precedence (McGarry and O’Leary 2005, 263). Power is divided amongst these two levels of government by some form of agreement and the state functions largely through compromise between these levels. Federal states, however, also have direct powers over the whole state whereas confederal arrangements do not. Federalism is often used in large countries with vast expanses of territory or people whereby, so the logic goes, more local decision making is deemed to be necessary.⁸ This is where the move to federalism is interesting because Belgium is not a big country. It does,

⁸ The United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Russia, India, Nigeria, Sudan, Germany, Australia and Pakistan among others are all examples of large countries, either in terms of land mass, population or both, that have federal governments.

however, have different groups of people who are geographically concentrated such that power sharing may actually help the state.

Federalism therefore has led to a level of 'de-Belgification' whereby political actors and decision makers talk more about policy at the regional and community levels (Hooghe 1995, 138). This led to full legislative powers for Flanders and Wallonia in 1980; although the Brussels region did not receive similar rights until 1988/89 (Swenden and Jans 2006, 881). Slowly the center has become increasingly weaker and terms like confederation and consociation are used to describe Belgium even though neither really holds at least in a strict definitional sense.⁹

Politically, Belgium is becoming quite divided which has, in small measure, led to other problems for the wider society. The rise of the Vlaams Blok in 1991 restricted identity around the Flemish ethnic and was openly separatist but also racist in ideology (De Witte and Klandermans 2000). While the Vlaams Blok has been banned, it has come back in other forms such as the Vlaams Belang.

What can be gleaned from Hancock (1998), therefore, is that economic access and political participation have changed in step with one another, thus preserving a united Belgian state. However, as evidenced by increased support for Flemish nationalists (both moderate and extreme), the divisions in the country continue to grow. If this continues to happen, then there are limits to the commensurate compromise that has been found for increased political autonomy as the economic gulf widens.

⁹ In a confederation, the regions should be more powerful than the center which is not yet true. A consociation, furthermore, is supposed to have specific positions for various groups within the state and the official Head of State is supposed to be neutral whereas the case of Belgium has a decidedly French monarchical family.

Process of Dissolution

Belgium is not constitutionally able to hold a referendum (Kaufmann and Waters 2004, 36). This makes the possibility of state dissolution all the more plausible because if independence is an option, dissolution is seemingly the way to proceed unless the Walloons accept a unilateral secession from the Flemish regional parliament. The Czechoslovaks did have the constitutional power to hold a referendum but did not and thus dissolved into two states without national plebiscite (Leff 1997).

Even though, at present, most Belgians prefer a united state, the same could be said for most in Czechoslovakia by the polling in 1992 (Leff 1997). State dissolution is not an easy process to predict but there is evidence to suggest that Belgium may well be on the road to breakup. There is always a danger in academic circles of predicting that something will occur but the signs of a breakup are becoming worthy of discussion.

However, as hinted above, there are numerous parallels with the case of Czechoslovakia. There are two distinct linguistic communities, Flemish and Walloon (Dutch and French). They occupy two separate pieces of the territory with very little migration from one to the other with very little intermarriage and bilingualism.

Furthermore, the structure of Belgian and Czechoslovak political institutions are becoming increasingly similar. The Czechoslovaks had a bi-federative parliament which basically provided a unified upper chamber with two equal but separate lower chambers divided between Czech and Slovak persons. Seats in the upper chamber were based on population (99 Czech and 51 Slovak) whereas the lower chamber provided 75 seats for both lower houses. Beyond the center, each community had their own regional parliaments in Prague and Bratislava.

Belgium, somewhat similarly has what is described as a bipartite parliament. There is a Senate and a Chamber of Representatives. Like Czechoslovakia also, there are regional parliaments beyond this. Even though the Chamber of Representatives has significant linguistic divisions, all members sit in the same parliament unlike Czechoslovakia.¹⁰ This is a small difference but a significant one given the ability of thirty Slovak deputies to veto all Czechoslovak legislation.

Beyond this there are two other major differences between the Czechoslovak case and Belgium. Brussels is the capital of Europe and a major factor in the success of the Belgian economy. It has a great number of francophone's in the city who would not easily be persuaded to be part of an independent Flanders. Second, democracy has been present in Belgium for much longer than it had been in Czechoslovakia given the short amount of time between the 1989 Velvet Revolution and the 1993 Velvet Divorce.

Despite these differences, there is now a real point of comparison with other dissolved unions like Czechoslovakia. In some senses, the various linguistic communities are evidently drifting apart in ways that are comparable to other cases. The center has become gradually weaker to the point that the Belgian state is now described as a consociation and a confederation. As noted earlier, we do not fully accept these labels, but their use suggests that Belgium is at least closer to them. We also assert that Belgium is closer to dissolution than other states due to institutional factors.

What differentiates the Flemish separatist movements from other prominent peaceful movements like Quebec, Catalonia and Scotland is the institutional structure of the state. The set-up of the state and its legislative functions makes Belgium more

¹⁰ Even here there are striking similarities with Czechoslovakia such that both linguistic groups have to successful vote for each piece of legislation.

susceptible to dissolution than other states like Canada, Spain or the United Kingdom. Each of these states faces the possible threat of secession from the periphery; most notably in the case of Quebec where two referenda's have already been held on 'sovereignty.' The relative power, however, of Quebec, Scotland and Catalonia within each of their states is not extensive. For instance, Quebec has 75 MPs in the 308 member Canadian House of Commons. If the Bloc Quebecois were somehow able to win all 75 seats in Quebec, they could still not deadlock Canadian parliament. The same logic holds true for Scotland and Catalonia. Flemish nationalists, however, do have the ability to deadlock parliament as we saw at the outset of this paper. On a few occasions this has happened such that Belgium does not have a functioning legislative branch for months at a time. The only question is when does this become a tipping point for the dissolution of the state into two separate pieces, one Flemish and one Walloon?

The process of dissolution, however, is not as simple as a guaranteed breakup once one part of the state wants out and deadlocks parliament. This has happened before in Czechoslovakia and, to some extent, Norway-Sweden and Serbia and Montenegro. What is required is both units of the state to agree to the terms. For example, the Czechs finally called the Slovak bluff (Kraus and Stranger 2000; Leff 1997; Musil 1995; Svec 1992), Sweden accepted Norway's incessant calls for independence from 1884 through 1905 (Derry 1973, 136) and Serbia came to terms with the Montenegrin referendum results and the will of the international community (Darmanovic 2007; Roberts 2007).

What is required then is the acceptance albeit reluctant acceptance by both sides. Even if the Flemish are set on independence, it will have difficulty passing without some Walloon support. In states like Belgium that does not have referenda procedures, Wallonia

is a key factor in the future of the Belgian state. Even if Belgium did allow for a referendum, much is still required. There is setting the date, setting the question, the campaign, rallies, sober second thought and then a vote. If we compare two cases briefly, Montenegro and Quebec, this difference between independence and the status quo can be marginal. The May 2006 Montenegrin referendum was given a 55 percent threshold by the European Union (EU) in the hopes that violence would not return to the former Yugoslavia. As a result, the Montenegrin 'yes' campaign had more work to do in order to reach this threshold. When the results came in, 55.5 percent of Montenegrins had voted to support independence. Independence was declared by both Montenegro and Serbia respectively which brought an end to their union. Quebec, in contrast, held their second referendum on independence in October 1995. After a tight fought campaign and the rise of Lucien Bouchard, Quebec came precariously close to obtaining the magic 50 percent threshold. The vote, when fully counted, came to 49.5 percent.

What these examples illustrate is that in a democracy, the future of a country can be decided by less than fifty thousand votes as occurred in both Montenegro and Quebec. It is far from obvious that a 50 percent majority of Flemish want outright independence so, even if they could hold a referendum, the results are not clear.

All this does is continue to illustrate the point that the dissolution must be at least tacitly mutual such that Wallonia accepts independence and moves on from there. Within the EU, this should not be a problem but state breakups obviously leave deep emotional wounds on the psyche of the state.

Conclusion

We conclude, based on the theory and process outlined in this paper, that Belgium is not yet at a point of dissolution. It is, however, becoming likelier with political participation since some prominent leaders and parties favor separatism. If the variables of economic access and political participation do not continue to move commensurately then dissolution will likely occur.

Moreover, the process of dissolution is certainly possible in Belgium given the comparison to other cases which exemplify how dissolution has occurred in other cases. Yet, however, the process is not as easy as it may seem. Belgium, thus far, has provided an increase in economic access with increases in political participation so as to satisfy the different cultural communities. In this way, Belgian federalism has pacified the full demands for independence. Having said this, however, there are limits to how much autonomy can be granted before the state basically ceases to function as a unified polity. Belgium is not there yet but by the mere fact that it can be described as a confederation is alarming; the regions have at least equal amounts, if not more power than the center.

Another consideration is the transfer payments made from richer Flanders to poorer Wallonia. If the gap between the two regions continues to widen, further problems may develop as money is transferred from one part of the country to another. Relative deprivation increases without a parallel increase in political participation and since there is little more autonomy to give, dissolution may increasingly become a viable option.

Naturally, a sense of relative deprivation declines if the Walloons were to narrow the economic gap between the two communities. This, however, is unlikely in the modern economic climate but it could possibly change with shifts in the global economy towards

different sectors. It could also decline if transfer payments were significantly reduced but this, in many ways, would decrease the value of the state since it would apportion resources like two separate countries. What we mean by this is that if transfer payments are decreased, Flemish health care and education become vastly superior to Wallonian health care and education because of funding. It is at this point that the two communities become de facto independent states even if they remain together in name. Dissolution will merely be a parliamentary act waiting to happen.

Finally, the comparisons between Czechoslovakia and Belgium are very interesting. Not only is the structure of parliament very similar but Belgium does not have the ability to hold a referendum (Kauffman and Waters 2004, 36). Czechoslovakia dissolved through an Act of Parliament even with the constitutional ability to stage a referendum. Some will argue that this is undemocratic; however, it was democratically elected officials that cast their votes for dissolution. These lessons are important for the future of Belgium and it is certainly quite possible that Belgium could follow the example of dissolution in other cases unless the theoretical warnings are heeded.

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