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Falling Apart Together. The Changing Nature of Belgian Consociationalism, 1961 - 2001

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Abstract

Belgium is one of the classical cases of consociational democracy. In this chapter we show that Belgian consociationalism has always been partial. It has come in waves, pacifying cleavage after cleavage, while always allowing for a very competitive attitude to the remaining cleavages. We focus on the last remaining one, which has obliged the Belgian political elites to rely on prudent leadership in order to keep it under control: the linguistic-territorial divide. We show that the institutional reforms have changed Belgium into a very consociational federation. First this checked the decline in power of the Christian-Democratic and Socialist families, and now it is proving to be potentially very unstable. The splitting of the parties and the party system, in particular, puts the political elites in an awkward position, as they are pulled towards a more conflictual attitude and majoritarian democracy at the regional level, but are obliged, at the same time, to play the consociational game at the federal level.

1 Introduction

When Arend Lijphart (1968, 1969) introduced and developed his concept of consociational democracy at the end of the 1960s, he was looking at a set of characteristics of 'fragmented but stable democracies' in which both the fragmentation and the stability seemed to have come to an end. His book on Dutch politics, first published in 1968, explicitly referred to the fact that the times were already changing.

When Luc Huysse (1971) applied the consociational concept to Belgian politics, he did the same. That is: he looked back on the period during which Belgian politics could be considered consociational. He used 1944 as the starting point, and 1961 as the end point. The latter was defended with logical arguments, like the cooling down of the old religious conflict after the 'school pact' of 1958, the major reform of the Liberal Party, the rise of economic tensions, the revival of the linguistic tensions and especially the increasing overlapping of these two cleavages. Huysse was less sure about 1944 as the starting point. That was a more

pragmatic decision, inspired by the lack of – at that time – good historical data. The analysis presented in this chapter takes 1961 as the starting point. That year does indeed mark the beginning of a new period. Yet, we will try to prove that it does not mark the end of consociationalism as such, but rather the beginning of a new consociationalism, based this time on the territorialization of the linguistic conflicts. Today there is a new and federal Belgium, but with a very consociational type of federalism. The consequence for Belgian politics is that it is (still) confronted with the kind of criticism, discontent and subsequent instability that can be expected in a modern fully-fledged consociational democracy.

2 Consociationalism as crisis management

We mentioned above Huysse's hesitation in 1971 to go further back than 1944 when labelling Belgium as consociational. However, we believe that we need to go further back in history to discover some very specific aspects of the Belgian system. Belgium's modern political history starts somewhere between 1893 and 1918. The first date marks the introduction of a kind of universal male suffrage. Although some male citizens had the right to cast two or three votes, this change of the electoral system nevertheless meant the arrival in parliament of 13 representatives of the new Belgian Labour Party. The entrance of a third partner put an end to the logic of the old party system, which was a bi-polar system with a Conservative-Catholic party on the one hand and a Liberal party on the other. The politicization of the labour-capital cleavage also changed the two existing parties. The Liberals did not only defend a modern and secular state, but also a free-market economy. And the Conservative-Catholic party was soon to be confronted with the internal rebellion of a Christian labour movement, pushing the party in a more Christian-Democratic direction.

This new political landscape slowly froze towards the end of the 19th century. The introduction of proportional representation in 1900, intended to save the shrinking Liberal Party, helped to produce and reproduce the electoral balance that was going to survive until the 1960s. The First World War did not really change this landscape, but did add the conditions for the future disintegration. The war itself had highlighted the difficult position of the Dutch-speaking majority of the country that had been ruled so far mainly in French. Dutch-speaking elites, for instance, had been collaborating with the German occupying administration to obtain the right to teach a number of courses in Dutch at the state University of Gent, something which the Belgian state had been against.

At the end of the First World War, it was very clear that a rather explosive cocktail of problems was forcing its way on to the political agenda. Both the social-economic and the linguistic tensions needed to be taken into account, in order to avoid serious destabilization of and loss of legitimacy of the Belgian political system. An awareness of the danger brought the leaders of the three major political forces – Catholics, Socialists and Liberals – together, on the initiative of King Albert, and they decided in consensus to introduce universal (male) suffrage at once, even if the Constitution at that time did not yet allow for this change of the electoral law. This ‘Pact of Loppem’ of 1918 (‘Loppem’ referring to the location of the King’s castle where the agreement was reached) can be considered the starting point of Belgian consociationalism.

Yet, this did not mean that the logic of elite accommodation immediately became spread throughout the system. This was actually one single, yet important agreement, to reduce the tensions at that time. What did develop subsequently was the ‘vertical’ integration (Luther 1999) of the subcultures. Mainly the Catholic and the Socialist subgroups created and incorporated a whole range of auxiliary organizations, constituting the Catholic and the Socialist ‘pillars’. It is important to stress here that the real organizational integration of the two largest subgroups took place *after* the first consociational agreement. It is very difficult therefore to support the idea that the consociational-type reaction of the elites after the First World War was a reaction to the pillarization of society or to the institutionalization of the subcultures, as is suggested in Lijphart’s theories. Rather, it was a reaction to the presence or potential presence of the conflicts. And real institutionalization or pillarization did not get off the ground until later. However, this does not support the opposite causal relation either, i.e., that elite accommodation caused pillarization, since elite accommodation was not yet a normal and permanent feature of the system.

For the Belgian case in particular, the regional-linguistic division severely hinders the building of really strongly integrated pillars. The regional division has a double effect. In the first place it is responsible for the uneven integration of the pillars. The Catholic pillar was strong in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking north), but was much weaker in the more industrialized and more secular Wallonia (the French-speaking south). The opposite was true for the Socialist pillar, which was mainly a Walloon phenomenon. Two strong pillars were indeed built, but both strong pillars had a much weaker regional wing. The Belgian story always needs this territorial qualification.

The second effect of the regional division is of a more direct kind, but is related to the first. The fact that the pillars developed in a different way in the two regions is further reinforced by the fact that the political parties themselves were internally divided. Therefore, the link between party and pillar is of a problematic kind, or is at least again different in the two regions. The Flemish

wing of the Catholic party was integrated in the stronger Flemish wing of the Catholic pillar, while the Walloon Catholic party had looser ties with a pillar that was less firmly integrated. And again the opposite is true for the Socialist party, although it was – at least in this interwar period – able to keep the party well united. But the Socialist party felt less pressure to take into account the regional differences, since the demands to do so mainly came from Flanders, where the Socialist party was weak and the Catholic party very strong.

If we want to assess the degree to which the consociational logic and practices were present in those early days, we can look in the first place at the composition of the government. Before the First World War and especially before the turn of the century, the two-party system and the majoritarian electoral technique had produced one-party governments. An important change in this respect is the enlargement of the government during the war. At the beginning of the war a Catholic-Liberal coalition was in power, but in 1917 a representative of the Socialist Party was invited to join the team. That produced an all-party grand coalition, of course inspired by the external pressure of the war. But the change is significant, because the grand coalition did more than just manage the war period. After the war, the principle of keeping the three major ideological families together for major decisions was continued, among others in the above mentioned ‘Pact of Loppem’. The grand coalition itself was continued formally until late 1921.

In the following 15 years, there was only a very short period of grand coalition (18 months in 1926-27). Much more significant, however, is the fact that the Socialist party had not yet become a real full partner. The Catholic party governed all the time, and in coalition with the Liberals. There is only one exception: a Catholic-Socialist coalition of 11 months in 1925-26, followed then by a short period of grand coalition. Therefore, it cannot be said that the consociational logic, in which all the relevant partners have a permanent status as full partners, was completely developed during the interwar period. Of course, the composition of government coalitions is only one indicator, but it is a significant one, and it surely translates here the limited extent to which the Socialist Party and its eventual auxiliary organizations were treated as full third partners.

The grand coalition of the First World War was a typical *crisis management phenomenon*. The war itself and the potential instability of the post-war period made the elites accept the idea that cooperation might be profitable to all. But as soon as the crisis period was over, the political system almost went back to normal as far as the dominating role of Catholics and Liberals is concerned. The situation was only new in the sense that a third party was now present, but mostly not incorporated.

Yet in the second half of the 1930s things begin to change. We are again looking at a crisis phenomenon. The economic conditions were bad,

unemployment was rising and the Belgian Frank had to be devalued. In 1935, therefore, one week after the devaluation of the currency, a new grand coalition was formed. It continued after the elections of 1936 and formally until 1945.

The occupation by the German forces and the way in which the resistance to it was organized, had obvious effects on post-war politics in Belgium. Especially the social and economic policy could rely on a fairly large consensus between representatives of workers and employers. In the immediate post-war period there was rapid economic reconstruction, the building of solid foundations for a modern social security system and for the development of organized, permanent negotiations between workers and employers, i.e., for the development of a well-oiled neo-corporatist circuit of decision-making. These are all indicators of a fairly consensus-oriented attitude and of consensus-oriented procedures and institutions (Luyten 1995), at least as far as this particular cleavage is concerned.

Nevertheless, post-war politics were *very competitive*. The period between 1945 and 1958 is very difficult to label in terms of the consociational logic. Except for the social-economic cleavage, the Belgian system seemed to function in a quite majoritarian way. Yet precisely these majoritarian strategies led to such political tensions that the only way to cool them down was to rely on classical consociational strategies. This point is also stressed by Seiler (1997) who states that Belgium is an 'exemplary' case of consociationalism, but then also asserts that it displays some quite 'French' or southern characteristics, with strong ideological competition and a majoritarian logic (see also, Frogner 1988). One could even say that consociationalism came in waves, pacifying only one problem at a time, and leaving room for competition on the others. After the Second World War, the social and economic cleavage was pacified and transferred to a large extent to the corporatist arena. Then came the troubles called the 'King's Question', then the school war, and finally the linguistic-regionalist tensions. Each one is taken into the consociational logic when, after a period of strong mobilization, the tensions are so high that pacification is needed.

The 'King's Question' illustrates this well. The starting point was a conflict between the government and King Leopold III in May 1940 concerning how to proceed with the war. The king remained in Belgium, while the government went to London. After the war, since King Leopold III had been taken to Austria by the German troops, his brother temporarily took his place. Very soon the question whether the king could return became salient and dominant. The Catholic Party defended his return, while other political forces wanted him to resign. The Catholic Party won a majority of the seats in 1950, and also organized a referendum on the question whether the king should return. The result of the referendum was that 57 % of the voters said 'yes'. However, it was only the Dutch-speaking population that had clearly said 'yes',

while among francophones the 'no' vote was larger. King Leopold did return, but after riots had started in the south of the country, the leaders of the three major political parties sat together and convinced him to resign. The Catholic and Dutch-speaking majority was thus not used to fighting to the end and to winning the battle.

At the elections of 1954, the Christian-Democratic majority was beaten and a coalition of Liberals and Socialists took over. Here we are again in a purely majoritarian logic. There were not many issues on which the Liberals and Socialists agreed, but one of them was the school issue, and, of course, the will to remove the Christian-Democrats from office. The 'leftist' government tried hard to propose and implement a number of laws that would promote the secular state-run secondary education and harm the Catholic schools. But the Catholic world and also the Christian-Democratic party mobilized strongly against the government's plans. The strength of this protest finally led to an end of the conflict in a very classic consociational way: in 1958 the three traditional parties signed the 'school pact'. It settled the conflict by granting the two school systems more or less the same rights and financial means. That basically pacified the old church-state cleavage in Belgium (Tyssens 1997). With the labour-capital cleavage being pacified in the corporatist logic, only the regional-linguistic issue remained salient. And precisely that issue then dominated Belgian politics in the 1960s and 1970s.

3 Increasing complexity: the splitting of the party system

The salience of the linguistic tensions is easily illustrated by looking at what happened to the Belgian political parties from the 1960s onwards. The most spectacular and most relevant change is the death of the three traditional parties. None of three parties – Christian-Democrats, Liberals and Socialists – were able to survive the growing linguistic tensions, and within a time-span of only ten years, they had all fallen apart. The consequence of this change is the total absence now, and since 1978, of all-Belgian political parties. All parties are now regional, and they did not even keep a federal structure of cooperation (Deschouwer 1992, 1994a).

Not only have regional parties replaced the former national parties, all more recently formed parties are also regional: the Volksunie in Flanders, the Walloon Rally in Wallonia, and Francophone FDF in Brussels. In the early 1980s two Green parties were born, one for each part of the country: AGALEV in Flanders and ECOLO in the Francophone electorate. In 1978, radical nationalists – not accepting the participation of the more moderate Volksunie in the federal government – created a new Flemish nationalist party. That party, the Vlaams Blok, was not very successful until it became an

extreme right-wing populist party in the early 1990s, combining the radical Flemish nationalism with xenophobic and conservative ideas. In 1999 it achieved its best election result so far in Flanders, obtaining 15.5 per cent of the votes (more than the SP). There is a less successful right-wing populist party called Front National in Wallonia and in Brussels. It is more obviously neo-fascist, and is badly organized. It polled 6 per cent of the Walloon vote in 1995, and 4.5 per cent in 1999.

This disappearance of the national Belgian parties and the creation of two new electoral party systems is a quite spectacular and unique phenomenon (Deschouwer 1996). As discussed above, the differences between north and south are not new. The north has always been more Catholic or Christian-Democratic and the south has always been more Socialist. But that only meant that a regional wing of these parties was stronger in one of the regions. Now that the party competition has been divided, the perception and the *real political meaning* of these differences have increased. It also means that the loss of the old consociational parties follows a different logic in each party system.

In the electoral arena the Belgian party system has definitely disappeared. Electoral evolutions thus have to be analysed at the regional level. That is the level at which the parties themselves and the political commentators (including political scientists) are looking at the figures. Table 1 gives the electoral results for the two major regions: Flanders and Wallonia.

Table 1 Electoral results in the regions of Flanders and Wallonia since 1961

Flanders													
	1961	1965	1968	1971	1974	1977	1978	1981	1985	1987	1991	1995	1999
CVP	50.9	43.8	39.1	37.8	39.7	43.8	43.5	32.3	34.6	31.4	27.0	27.8	22.2
SP	29.7	24.6	25.7	24.2	22.0	22.3	20.9	20.6	23.7	24.2	19.6	20.3	15.0
VLD	11.6	16.6	16.2	16.3	17.2	14.4	17.2	21.1	17.4	18.5	19.1	21.1	22.6
VU	6.0	11.3	16.9	18.8	17.8	16.3	11.5	16.0	12.7	12.9	9.4	9.0	8.8
AGALEV								3.9	6.1	7.3	1.9	7.0	11.0
VB							1.4	1.8	2.2	3.0	10.4	12.7	15.3

CVP: Christelijke Volkspartij (Christian-Democratic)

SP: Socialistische Partij (Socialist)

VLD: Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Liberal)

VU: Volksunie (Regionalist)

AGALEV: Anders Gaan Leven (Green)

VB: Vlaams Blok (Extreme right)

Wallonia													
	1961	1965	1968	1971	1974	1977	1978	1981	1985	1987	1991	1995	1999
PS	47.0	35.7	34.5	34.4	36.8	37.2	36.7	36.2	39.5	43.9	39.2	33.7	29.0
PSC	30.5	23.7	20.9	20.5	22.6	25.8	26.9	19.6	22.6	23.2	22.5	22.5	16.7
PRL*	11.7	25.5	26.7	17.7	15.1	18.8	17.5	21.7	24.1	22.2	19.8	23.9	24.5
PCB	6.3	10.5	6.9	5.8	5.7	5.4	5.9	4.2	2.5	1.6	0.3		
RW	0.2	3.4	10.5	20.9	18.5	9.0	9.2	7.1	0.6	0.8	1.2		
ECOLO						0.5	1.2	6.1	6.2	6.5	13.5	10.3	18.3
EXTR. RIGHT**											2.4	6.4	5.0

* Electoral alliance between PRL and FDF

** Front National and Agir

PS: Parti Socialiste (Socialist)

PSC: Parti Social Chrétien (Christian-Democratic)

PRL: Parti Réformateur Libéral (Liberal)

PCB: Parti Communiste Belge (Communist)

RW: Rassemblement Wallon (Regionalist)

ECOLO: Ecologistes (Green)

FDF: Front Démocratique des Francophones (Brussels Francophone regionalist)

These regional electoral results can tell us a lot about the evolution of Belgian politics after the split of the parties. After the Second World War the two largest parties – Christian-Democrats and Socialists – together with their auxiliary large and broad social movements, became the dominant forces. The important regional differences already discussed are shown clearly in the results for 1961. The Christian-Democrats polled 50 per cent of the votes in Flanders, but only 30 per cent in the Walloon region. On the other hand, the Socialists obtained 50 per cent of the votes in the Walloon region, but only 30 per cent in Flanders. The splitting of the parties and the party system, a consequence of the territorial divide in Belgian society, reinforces this party-political difference between north and south.

Much more important though is that the position of the two largest ideological families is being reinforced, despite the fact that it is weakening at the polls. It is in fact being reinforced via the governmental arena. The government level is where the two party systems join. This juncture is made relatively strong by the unwritten rule that national coalitions ought to be symmetrical, with parties that belong to the same ideological family being together either inside or outside the government. To date this has always been the case. However, it is a rule that is difficult to abide by, if at the same time there needs to be a relation between the electoral result and the right to govern.

One way of doing this – looking at the largest party – is meaningless in Belgium since there is more than one largest party in the electoral arena. And these two parties have become, certainly since the split, the almost ‘natural’ ingredients of the Belgian governing coalition. Between 1961 and 1999 the Christian-Democrats and the Socialists governed together for 25 years. The alternative coalition of Christian-Democrats and Liberals governed for 12 years. There were two short periods during which all three traditional parties governed together. Maybe even more striking is the long period between 1987 and 1999, during which the two largest families governed together for three consecutive terms.

During that last decade, however, the electoral results of the two dominant families actually declined steeply. They lost so many votes that they finally reached the same size as the gradually growing Liberal family. Yet the level at which the Liberal family has become a genuine third party, that is the level of the country of Belgium, does not exist any more. At the level where it really matters, the Liberal parties were second or third until recently. They were not a ‘largest party’ and so, politically, they were still as much a ‘half’ party as before.

The decline of the largest parties differs in the two regions. The Christian-Democratic decline in Flanders is breathtaking, while the Socialists in Wallonia have fared a bit better. In 1999, they achieved just 29 per cent of the Walloon votes, whereas the Flemish Christian-Democrats polled only 22 per cent in their region. In 1999, something quite spectacular happened: the Flemish Liberal party VLD overtook the Christian-Democrats. For the first time the VLD became the largest party in Flanders and in Belgium, and it was able to put together a very innovative coalition of Liberals, Socialists and Greens. In this way the Christian-Democrats were removed from power. The Socialists remained as they were still the largest party in the south.

A first and striking consequence of the split of the parties is thus the reinforcement of the position of the two dominant families, and then a slowing down of the effects of their electoral decline. The electoral decline is clearly the result of an erosion of the old cleavages and of an erosion of the formerly strong and pillarized links between the electorate and the parties. While the ‘de-pillarization of the minds’ was weakening the party identification (Billiet 1981), the parties dominating the pillars – one in the north and one in the south – were able to maintain their positions and to keep alive the organizational aspect of the pillarization. We can say that *the pillars in Belgium have survived the decline of their ideological relevance*. They have become more state-oriented; have become the providers of the services of the welfare state. They have become more output-oriented than mobilization-oriented. They have become political concerns rather than ideological organizations, which led Huyse (1987) to say that the segments have moved beyond pillarization. The splitting of the parties reinforced all this.

The existence of two electoral party systems in a country that attempts to have one governmental party system is a feature that has not improved the stability of the coalitions. That is a second consequence of the split. The linguistic cleavage as such has proven to be a very effective coalition killer, but the effects of the cleavage on the parties and the party system have even reinforced this killing power (Deschouwer 1994b). At first sight it would appear that the parties have an easier job, since they do not have to accommodate themselves internally to the linguistic cleavage. However, this accommodation is still necessary when a government has to be formed or even kept alive. Opposition parties that do not have to play an accommodative game, generally push very hard on the regionalist issues, and put quite a lot of pressure on the governing parties, who can then be accused of being traitors. The last time – at the time of writing – that a crisis related to the regionalist issue caused the end of the coalition was in 1991. Since then government stability seems to have been restored.

We have already mentioned the fact that government formation cannot be very responsive in a divided party system. North and south produce different majorities, and display different movements of the electorate. The parties of the two party systems move and think in different ways and directions. Forming a government that ‘respects’ the will of the voters is a difficult exercise. The split of the parties and of the electoral system certainly did not help to bridge the gap between the elites and the citizenry (Deschouwer 1999a, 1999b). So far, the parties have been able to keep tensions under control by building congruent coalitions, i.e., the same coalition at the federal and at the regional level. However, in doing so, they are obviously not able to be responsive towards their own regional electorate. The reformed federal state does not offer solid guarantees for a more stable and legitimate system.

4 Institutional reform: towards consociational federalism

Belgium has gradually become a federal state. That has been the answer to the linguistic-territorial divide. This institutional answer is extremely complex, because the ideas on how to reform the state differed between the elites of the north and the south. The Flemings defended a bipolar federation of the two major language communities, while the francophones defended a division into three regions, thus giving the (formerly Dutch-speaking) capital city of Brussels the status of a fully-fledged region. The result is a non-symmetric and double federation of both regions and communities.

It is not possible to discuss the nature of the institutions in detail in this chapter (see Deschouwer 2000), but we would like to stress two points here. The first refers to the way in which the institutional solution was produced. It

was another example of Belgian consociationalism: crisis management. The second point refers to the nature of the institutions. Here we argue that the federal institutions are full of in-built mechanisms that oblige the elites to deal with the regionalist tensions in a consociational way. The federalization of Belgium, having slowed down the decline of the old consociationalism, has created a new type of consociationalism, in which the language territories are the segments of a still deeply divided society.

The first constitutional reform of 1970 already included an obligation to go further using consensual techniques. Indeed, the 1970 constitution introduced the obligation to have an equal number of French-speaking and Dutch-speaking ministers in the government. It also introduced the principle of the 'double majority' for all further institutional reforms and for all laws implementing institutional reforms. The double majority means an overall majority of two thirds (the normal requirement for all constitutional reforms) and a simple majority in each language group.

The threshold for future reforms was thus fairly high. That has certainly slowed down the further implementation of the reforms, but, on the other hand, it has also helped to find solutions. The thresholds being so high, there were many attempts to continue with the reforms, but many attempts also failed. This meant that after a few years there were a lot of unsolved problems and tensions, leading once in a while to a very deep crisis. These crises usually occurred when new governments had to be formed. As was explained above, most governments since the 1960s collapsed because of the linguistic divide. Following a governmental crisis a new government has to be formed, and it needs to be formed by parties of both sides. When things became really troublesome, the risk of a total deadlock of the political system actually helped to produce the awareness that a solution had to be found. And a solution was indeed found. We are looking again at the Belgian 'crisis consociationalism'. The major actors in this process were of course the political parties (Deschouwer 1999a). Problems always had to be faced at the level of the central government, which could not avoid being cut in two by the linguistic divide (for a more detailed account of this mechanism, see Deschouwer 1994b, 1996). So, either the parties had to negotiate in order to keep the government alive, or they had to negotiate to form a new one. Two (or four) parties were more actively involved in this process, because of their size and because of their position in their respective regions: the Christian-Democrats and the Socialists. In 1963, an agreement to fix the linguistic border was produced by a centre-left government. The reform of 1970 was also realized by a centre-left coalition, led by Gaston Eyskens, who had already settled the Royal Question in 1950 and the school issue in 1958. A major reform plan (which eventually failed) was presented in 1977 by a centre-left coalition in which both the Volksunie and the FDF participated.

In 1980 the Liberals joined the government for just five months, which helped achieve the majorities for a second constitutional reform. This was the only Liberal participation towards the federalization of Belgium. In 1988, a further constitutional reform was realized, again by a centre-left government in which the Volksunie this time helped to provide the qualified majorities. And in 1993 another constitutional reform was the work of a centre-left government. On this occasion it had to seek the support of the Volksunie and of the Greens. This little chronicle of 30 years of piecemeal constitutional change offers another striking illustration of the how the Liberal parties have faded away politically, at the same time as their total electoral strength was growing constantly.

The Belgian federation is a fairly extreme kind of federation. The federal level has been almost completely emptied, and most of the powers have been given to the linguistic communities and to the regions. That is a clear result of the double party system. All the parties are regional parties. They only represent one part of the country and only compete with the parties of their own language group. This produces a very centrifugal competition, because there is simply nobody to defend the centre. All parties want, in varying degrees, more autonomy for their region and/or community. The separated electoral competition unites the parties on each side, and creates a huge cleavage between the two sides. And then these same parties have to bridge the gap when they form a Belgian coalition government. The way to do that is by using the consociational logic: waiting until there are a lot of problems to be solved, and then produce an agreement which essentially institutionalizes the non-agreement by letting each side deal with its own policy. In consociational language this is known as 'granting autonomy', and that is exactly what is done in a federal state.

The solution produced by the consociational crisis management was then a *consociational federal state*, full of checks and balances, power sharing and veto powers. The granting of autonomy discussed above is probably the most obvious feature. But there is more. We have already mentioned the constitutional obligation to share power in the federal government. There is either no government, or a government in which parties from both sides have reached an agreement and govern together. The logic of decision-making in the federal government is consensus, which means that both sides have a veto power. This is much more important than the rather symbolic obligation to have an equal number of ministers from each language group.

At the level of the parliament, there is also a veto power. When one linguistic group declares (with a two third majority of the MP's of that group) that a proposal is probably going to harm them as a linguistic group, it can activate the so-called 'alarm bell'. In that case the proposal goes to the government, and this has to produce an alternative proposal (by consensus, of course) within thirty days.

Conflicts over distribution of powers or so-called conflicts of competence are settled in a judicial way. If a conflict over the distribution of powers is signalled after a law, decree or ordinance has been issued, it is settled by the Court of Arbitration. This court is composed of twelve judges, six Dutch-speaking and six French-speaking, all appointed by the federal government, as proposed by the senate. Half of the judges are former politicians, and half of them belong to the judicial profession.

Conflicts of interest, i.e., conflicts involving lack of agreement on the substance of laws, decrees or ordinances, are more problematic, since they need a political solution, in an institutional setting that is complex, full of subtle equilibrium and full of potentially diverging interpretations. The conflicts here are likely to occur between the two language groups, and will then in practice have to be solved by an agreement between them. In order to deal 'officially' with conflicts of interest, the Concertation Committee was created. It is composed of the federal prime minister, five ministers of the federal government and six members of the governments of regions and communities. It also needs to be perfectly linguistically balanced. Either the federal government or the government of one of the federated entities can signal a potential conflict to the Concertation Committee. This move suspends the debated decision for sixty days. During that time the committee can try to find a solution by consensus. If one has not been found after sixty days, the suspension is lifted and the conflict remains unsolved. This Concertation Committee is the official way to deal with such problems. In practice it is rarely used. The prevention of conflicts is more usually dealt with by the leaders of the governing parties, who meet regularly with the prime minister. The absence of federal parties in Belgium does indeed oblige the parties to be active at two levels (the same party governs at the regional and at the federal level), and it obliges them to contain potential conflicts between the levels within the party. Other institutions for a more permanent concertation and cooperation are not available, since the fairly exclusive competencies do not imply (at first sight) a great need for this cooperation. However, the system does generate tensions concerning the interpretation of the rules and their eventual further reform. In the absence of good institutions for discussing problems, they are allowed to pile up until a general and broad round of negotiations becomes necessary (i.e., until the system has become blocked). The formation of a new federal coalition government is usually the time to hold such negotiations, and to produce one further step in the reform of the state.

5 Territorial segmentation and consociational democracy: how stable can it be?

Modern Belgian society is extremely segmented. The two language groups have their own society, their own parties and party system, their own political system, their own communication system, their own education system. Members of the segments can obtain all they want without leaving their subculture. This looks very much like classical pillarization, but then on a territorial basis. The federal institutions oblige the elites to play the role of prudent leaders, which is why we have described the modern federal Belgium as a consociational federation.

It is difficult to find another consociational case comparable to Belgium in this respect. The Netherlands and Austria do not have such clear-cut territorial division lines between subcultures. The concentration of Dutch Catholics in the south and the east-west division between Conservatives and Socialists in Austria is not of the same kind. Switzerland is the only other federal case, but there the consociational (or consensus) element at the federal level is not an accommodation between the territorial sub-units, because the federal parties are not, as in Belgium, at the same time only regional parties. The only case that comes close to the federal-consociational institutional setting that has arisen in Belgium, also with a dual structure and with no federal party system, is the short-lived federal republic of Czechoslovakia (Henderson 1995; Lijphart 1992). Neither federalism nor consociationalism was able to keep that country together. Belgium is not on the eve of a final collapse, but its now very bipolar nature, with territorially defined and closed subcultures and with no federal parties, certainly creates a level of political tension that might not be able to be contained forever.

Yet a consociational democracy should be a stable democracy, since it is the institutional answer to the centrifugal forces of a deeply divided society. Lijphart (1968) has defended the idea that centripetal democracies (homogeneous society, conflictual elite attitude) and consociational democracies (heterogeneous society corrected by prudent leadership) are stable systems. The centrifugal democracy and the depoliticized democracy are supposed to be unstable. The latter – which he labelled 'cartel democracy' – is potentially unstable because the prudent elitist attitude in a now more homogeneous society (depillarized, desegmented) will be challenged by the population. Elites can learn again from this situation, and move towards a more conflictual attitude and a more majoritarian, but – given the homogeneity of society – now stable, centripetal democracy.

Figure 1 Lijphart's classification of democracies

POLITICAL CULTURE		Homogeneous	Segmented
		ELITE BEHAVIOUR	Prudent
Competition	Centripetal Democracy		Centrifugal democracy

(Source: Lijphart 1968: 202)

Classifying the Belgian political system in this scheme is not easy. Belgium is – as far as the old economic and religious cleavages are concerned – indeed more homogeneous and less segmented. This allows for a more majoritarian attitude of the elites. Yet, along the linguistic lines Belgian society is deeply divided, and the institutional reforms have further deepened this segmentation. The role of the elites – i.e., in the first place of the political parties – in this system is an extremely difficult one. The splitting of the parties means that no party recruits across the linguistic borderlines. This is absolutely normal in a consociational democracy, where parties defend their own segments, but rather awkward in a federal system. There are political parties in federal systems indeed that are only active in one single substate, but all federations also have parties that recruit in all the substates, especially for elections to the federal parliament. In each of the Belgian segments there is more than one party. There is actually a party system per segment. That is normal in a federal state, but rather awkward in a consociational democracy. The parties of the same segment compete with each other and often engage in outbidding each other on the regionalist issues. That is especially the case for the opposition parties. Parties in government have to be more prudent, since they have to be present at the place where the elitist accommodation takes place.

Political parties in power have to play a difficult and double game. They have to be legitimate representatives of their own segment and at the same time organize the federal decision-making. In federal systems these two roles are played by two different party bodies, one at the regional level and one at the federal level. The Belgian parties are all regional parties, and have thus to combine the two roles in one single organization. So far, the parties have been able to contain the tensions, by forming congruent coalitions, i.e., by forming the same coalitions at the federal and at the regional level, and by forming symmetric coalitions (parties of the same ideological family either govern

together or are together in opposition). This does facilitate their own role, since they do not have to be in a majority (with some partners) and in opposition (against these partners) at the same time. Yet it reduces dramatically the autonomy of the regions.

In 1999, a very innovative 'purple-green' coalition of Liberals, Socialists and Greens was formed. It is the result of a pre-electoral agreement between the Socialists and Liberals on the francophone side. They could govern the Walloon region and the Francophone Community together. The Greens were asked to join the coalition, because they were needed to achieve a majority of seats at the federal level and for a majority in the Flemish regional parliament. The Flemish and the Belgian coalition are thus the result of a francophone agreement and of the will to keep the coalitions symmetrical and congruent. Especially in Flanders one can hear the criticism (voiced very strongly by the right-wing populist party Vlaams Blok) that the normal majoritarian game is not being played, but that the current coalition was dictated by the will to respect a Belgian equilibrium.

Going back to Lijphart's classification of democracies, we can say that Belgium is both a consociational democracy (for the territorial divide) and a depoliticized or cartel democracy at the regional level. The latter is one in which the elites play a consociational game in a society in which a more majoritarian logic can be expected, but which is not possible because of the existence of the Belgian level. Because the same party actors have to play the game at the two levels, they are likely to be challenged and criticized for it. The leading party has a particularly difficult job. The Flemish Christian-Democrats used to provide both the Flemish and the Belgian prime ministers, each of them pulling in a different direction. These days the Flemish Liberals have to play the game. They are trying to do so by giving the Flemish Prime Minister a lower profile than before. However, this means he can be challenged for not defending Flemish interests properly. And this frustration is indeed often voiced in Flanders, that is today much richer than Wallonia and demographically stronger than Wallonia.

It appears to be a game that can never be won. And that is just the problem. The very special kind of territorial and federal consociationalism that has been built in Belgium, and that has to be managed by parties that are completely divided along the territorial divide, offers little hope for an enduring stability of the system. The tensions between the language subgroups could be given free rein, in which case the system might be confronted with the necessity to negotiate a divorce. Yet the incomplete territorial logic of the system, with Brussels at the 'wrong' side of the linguistic borderline, makes this a very difficult exercise. As long as Belgium exists, it can be politically divided into both two language communities and three regions. But without Belgium, one of the two segments will have to lose.

Keeping the linguistic tensions under control is also possible, and it is actually what happens today. But in order to do so, the political elites have to play strange games, they have to break down the levels that were created to pacify the language tensions in the former unitary state, they have to keep coalitions symmetrical and congruent and hence electoral results become almost meaningless. The price that has to be paid for democratic stability is very high, and it does not even really look like democracy. This was exactly what Luc Huyse said back in 1971, when he assessed the 'old' consociational democracy in Belgium. Things may have changed a lot since then, but the conclusion remains the same.

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