

THE BELGIAN STATE: A UNIQUE PAST AND A QUESTIONABLE FUTURE

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Introduction

On Saturday, September 15, 2007, eBay posted one of its most bizarre listings: Belgium was up for sale. “For Sale: Belgium, a Kingdom in three parts . . . free premium: the king and his court (costs not included)” read the ad, whose author later noted that there was also the small matter of the \$300 billion national debt that the buyer would incur. (“Disgruntled Voter . . .”) This mock auction, a creative expression of voter frustration, came just prior to the 100-day mark of the state’s failure to form a government following the June 10 elections.

This was only the most recent mockery that the Belgian public has endured. In December of 2006, a TV broadcast now known as the Belgian breakup hoax rocked the small country and reverberated in Belgian embassies around the world. State-owned Walloon broadcast company RTBF interrupted regular programming to air an elaborately crafted segment depicting Flemish nationalists and fleeing monarchs; for 30 minutes, viewers believed that Flanders

had seceded and declared independence from Belgium and that the king and queen had fled. The Belgian national newspaper *Le Soir* followed up the following morning with the doomsday headline “Belgium Died Last Night.” (Bilefsky) Widely believed and widely condemned following the clarification that the program was fictitious, RTBF claimed that the report was an attempt to stir up much needed debate regarding the future of Belgium.

Troubling times are nothing new to Belgians, the latter term in itself a loaded one. Though it is common to anthropomorphize states and refer to them as singular entities, Belgium is more often metaphorically expressed in terms of a marriage, and not a happy one at that. As Robert Mnookin observed, “The nation’s founding was . . . not a love match but an arranged marriage between spouses who had little in common” (p. 106), and ostensibly have even less in common today. Such conditions have led *The Economist*, among others, to assert that “a praline divorce is in order.” (“Time to Call it a Day . . .”)

Today's prospective divorcées would be Flanders and Wallonia, which in 1932 retreated to separate ends of the house, so to speak, with a legalized territorial demarcation line establishing the Flemish region in the north and the Walloon region in the south; in the nineteenth century, the parties in question may have been the Catholics and Liberals, or Catholics and Socialists. In effect, "Belgium's society and polity have always been deeply split along several dimensions" (Heisler, p. 33), so one need only know the time period to know not whether there was a disagreement at hand, but rather whom the disagreement concerned. Historian Tony Judt goes so far as to make the argument that at the state's inception "it [Belgium] was held together not by any common feeling of Belgianness but by hierarchically organized social groups . . . that substituted for the nation-state." (p. 2) Thus, in a state whose cleavages predate the state itself by 1,500 years (Heisler, p. 33) and whose differences — be they religious, socioeconomic, cultural, or linguistic — rather than similarities seem to tenuously hold it together, one must wonder: Does the Belgian state really matter?

Given Belgium's track record of catalyzing ethnic strife and turning out disaffected authors who refer to their homeland as "that country that no longer exists" (de Heusch, p. 13), there is ostensibly little reason to go to the trouble of maintaining a state with no national identity. Apart from the monarchy, soccer, and perhaps beer (Mnookin, p. 113), the Flemish and the Walloons have nothing in common. The idea of a shared history is hardly worthy of mention; and were it not for the infamous "Brussels question," the regions may well have gone on their separate, autonomous ways by now. Authors from nearly every decade since Belgium's independence have written a doomsday forecast of an imminent split; yet the state somehow persists. Its remarkable resilience in the face of innumerable domestic clashes indicates that the state structure must serve some important function whose absence would leave the regions comparatively worse-off without it. The framework suits the interests of the Flemish and Walloons, who thus far have opted for unity over separatism because they recognize the need for the state to act as a forum for compromise and a protector of rights. Granted, Belgium may

not parallel the conventional notion of statehood. But in today's post-modern world that is moving further away from Westphalian ideals, that might not be such a bad thing.

This article will trace Belgium's history of divisiveness and the different measures each side has taken to push its particular agenda. The record shows a continuous conflict between ethnic groups, often leaving disgruntled citizens and a precarious state structure in its wake. However, the fact remains that the country has stayed intact; and the final analysis suggests that this arrangement, while problematic, will endure due to the current makeup of the international system¹ and the benefits this structure still offers its bickering factions.

Nascent Statehood

Belgium came into existence at a time when it was still *en vogue* to become a nation-state in Europe. In reality, the term "nation-state" is a misnomer in this instance and has never truly applied to Belgium's situation. After all, the formation of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1815 lumped two culturally and linguistically distinct territories — now the Netherlands and Belgium — into one unit, done at the behest of the great powers looking for a buffer state to prevent another war of Napoleonic proportions. Shortly thereafter, the unlikely bedfellows of Flanders and Wallonia formed an uncharacteristic Liberal-Catholic coalition to win independence from the Dutch, and the constitutional monarchy of Belgium was established in 1831. Fittingly, the two communities don't celebrate the national holiday on the same day: Walloons commemorate July 21 for King Leopold I's ascension to the Belgian throne, while Flemings, by decree in 1973, observe July 11 in honor of a Flemish victory over a French king in the Middle Ages. (Judt, p. 6)

The forced marriage was an unhappy one from the beginning, and the newly constructed

¹The nature of the international system is still one of sovereign nation-states, an arrangement established by the great powers of Europe in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. However, recent trends of globalization and increasing regional interdependence are eroding state sovereignty. The situation in Belgium will be examined in light of these concepts later in this article.

state did nothing to intermingle the linguistically-divided populations. The nineteenth-century politicized division, however, had less to do with language and territory than religious beliefs (or a lack thereof). Initially a two-party system comprised of Catholics and Liberals, the small country saw the addition of a third group, the Socialists, by the end of the nineteenth century. Each represented more than mere ideological preferences of citizens, but rather an identity unto itself. Describing the extent to which the parties institutionalized societal divisions, Heisler notes:

These orientations came to embody most aspects of life, not only political, economic, or religious issues. Each of the three segments of the population established organizational infrastructures to match world-views; therefore, it became possible for those who identified with the Catholic, Liberal, or Socialist perspectives . . . to avoid extensive and intimate contact with people of a different persuasion. (pp. 36–37)

Thus began the so-called “segmentation” of Belgian society. In a sense, this early compartmentalization of the population set a precedent for the modern federalization of Belgium, with separate regions, governments, media, and indeed lifestyles — each distinct and removed from the other.

On the heels of the religious cleavage between the Catholics and the Liberals came yet another division that predates the contemporary Belgian situation, one whose roots were socioeconomic in nature. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the southern region of Wallonia, replete with coal and other natural resources, underwent one of the earliest industrial revolutions in Europe and consequently became quite wealthy. This status took on a greater significance within the state of Belgium, as Wallonia’s wealth was glaringly apparent in contrast with poor agrarian Flanders.

Oftentimes wealth breeds power, and that axiom held true in Belgium’s case as well. The Flemish populace took on second-class status not only in terms of riches but in political, cultural, and linguistic terms as well. The francophone elite — both Walloons and privileged Flanders natives who spoke French — dominated the positions of power throughout

the country. The elite of Flanders had French educations as well, and for this reason were dissimilar from the rest of the masses inhabiting the same region. A command of the French language was seen as the only way for advancement within Belgian society, and consequently the Flemish² language was relegated to a low rank as a symbol of backwardness. Publicly, ambitious Flemings denied their own heritage and assumed varying degrees of the francophone culture, as well as the language. This led to the adoption of such common phrases as “French in the parlor, Flemish in the kitchen,” as well as the grudging acceptance of the late nineteenth century Flemings that “it was necessary to cease being Flemish in order to become Belgian.” (Heisler, p. 38) This mindset only served to temporarily repress the regional identity, as no greater state identity ever truly gelled.

A Push for Parity

This class divide, originally more of an economic issue, segued into the beginnings of the ethnic divisions of the present day. In the mid-nineteenth century, Flemings in the intellectual and professional sectors began the push for parity between the French and Flemish languages and cultures, an effort that came to be known as the Flemish Movement. Among the movement’s first objectives was to eliminate the numerous Dutch dialects for the sake of one standardized language, necessary in order to achieve parity with the linguistically unified francophones. Embedded in this ideal of language homogenization was the recognized need for a true Flemish elite — one that spoke Flemish rather than French — and thus a need for improvements in Flemish education, especially at higher levels. Political aims were secondary in nature and served mainly as the vehicle to implement the aforementioned changes in the state’s linguistic structure and educational system. (Stephenson, p. 503) Modest success came in 1898 when Flemish was declared Belgium’s second official language, a ruling that was more

²In the Flanders region of Belgium, both the citizens and the language are characterized as “Flemish.” The Flemish language is the same as the Dutch language, differentiated by name only according to the country where it is spoken.

de jure than de facto: most of official state business continued to be conducted in French.

More substantial progress came for the Flemings in the decades to follow. For hundreds of years, a virtual barrier had separated the Dutch-speakers to the north from the French-speakers in the south; and though it had remained relatively static, the boundary had never been officially recognized by the Belgian government. Finally, in 1932 the demarcation line became law; and, more significantly, a 1962 Parliamentary decree established regional unilingualism in Flanders and Wallonia and bilingualism for Brussels and state institutions. (Dunn, p. 146) The demarcation line now had the effect of determining the official language of the regions: outside of the country's capital, Flemish, not French, reigned supreme in Flanders. This effectively sent a message to the French-speaking Flemish elite: learn to speak Flemish — or leave. The principle of bilingualism in government further tempered francophone influence, as seats for Flemish-speakers opened.

Laws in Action

Initially, these changes looked better on paper than in reality. Through much of the 1950s and 1960s, the Flemish fought the government over the issue of “Frenchification” (Dunn, p. 147), the creeping influence of the francophones on Flemings in the culture and educational facilities within Brussels. Even today the Flemish complaint of not feeling at home in their own capital rings true; earlier generations made the same protest. The Catholics and secularists had a long-standing battle regarding state subsidization of education, an issue the government dealt with in the 1950s by passing the “School Pact,” which simply allowed for greater allocation of funds to both groups. Now the same fight was being played out by regional foes, with the Flemish agitating for education equality with the Walloons. This period was marked by what Dunn calls “the decline in specifically religious or philosophical conflicts between political parties” and allowed for “the rise of a more pragmatic interest-based style of politics,” i.e. the linguistic issue, which would henceforth remain the focal point of Belgian life. (p. 147)

Linguistic-driven politics contributed to much of the tumult seen across Belgium in the 1960s. This political shift must be seen in the context of the turn of economic events that occurred in the previous decade, when heavy industry in Wallonia fell on hard times and unemployment skyrocketed. The North saw the opposite effect, and for the first time in state history the Flemish usurped the Walloon's claim to economic superiority. (Heisler, p. 39) Success in Flanders wiped away the shame formerly felt by the Flemish in the days of their second-class citizenry, and they began to agitate for political parity as well. The Flemish wanted the same government privileges that the Walloons had long enjoyed; they consequently pushed for an equal division of state offices and subsidies, and the same level of regional control in Flanders that the national government allowed the Walloons in Wallonia. This economic shock to Walloon heavy industry disrupted the old order and is what caused Judt to remark that “what finally doomed the unity of Belgium . . . was the reversal of economic fortunes” (p. 4) and all its attendant consequences.

What the Flemish viewed as nothing more than an assertion of their rights was perceived by the Walloons as a bold quest for statewide dominance; thus in response the Walloons started seeking reforms of their own in an effort to protect themselves from the encroaching North. The ruling coalition in Parliament in the early 1960s recognized the need to halt the escalating language war and hammered out a series of new laws that sought to bolster the Flemish position while mitigating Walloon concerns. (Dunn, p. 148) To achieve maximum linguistic homogeneity, the 1932 demarcation line was slightly modified to allow Flanders and Wallonia to include Flemish- and Walloon-speaking villages, respectively, that had formerly belonged to the other side. In terms of education, new facilities were built in Brussels for the Flemish minority, a move designed to simultaneously help the Flemish and hurt the francophones, as this law effectively blocked Flemish parents from sending their children to French-speaking schools. At the same time, in attempts to appease the francophones, the government established French schools in a handful of communes in the Flanders region outside of Brus-

sels to provide resident francophones (of which there were many) a place to send their children to receive an education in French.

As often happens, in trying to please everyone the government pleased no one, or at least managed to draw the ire of both sides as a result of the 1960s legislation. Francophones decried the laws' infringement on the rights of self-determination and choosing how to educate one's offspring, while the Flemish cried expansionism in protest of the construction of French-speaking schools in Flanders. In hopes of putting these flaring passions on the back burner, in 1966 the Prime Minister declared a "linguistic truce" (Dunn, p. 149) in order to focus on other issues at hand. Though it was effective for a time, it was a university crisis that brought the truce, and that government, to an end. (Judt, p. 6)

In 1968 the five-hundred-year-old Catholic University of Leuven (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, or K.U. Leuven [Mnookin, p. 103]) marked the language war's newest battlefield. Given Belgium's history of francophone privilege in higher education, naturally there remained many French-speaking university professors and students at Leuven even after the Flemish language was placed on an equal plane with French. However, to residents of Leuven, a college town in a Flemish province, the francophone population — and worse, the primary schools that existed to serve this group — constituted an unlawful commune on their soil. In 1962 it was revealed that residents not associated with the university had been sending their children to the French-speaking schools, a perceived stab in the back of the Flemish Movement that had for so long struggled to prove, in reality and by law, that the Flemish language was equal to French. (Heisler, p. 43) Demonstrations and protests on both sides ensued, both within the community and among university students. In the end, the university split in two, with the French section of the university leaving K.U. Leuven and Flanders for Louvain, a town on the other side of the linguistic border in a Walloon province, where the French-speaking University of Louvain (Université Catholique de Louvain, or U.C. Louvain [Mnookin, p. 103]) was established. However, there was still the matter of the library. In a classic "Belgian compromise," the two sides split the assets 50–50:

U.C. Louvain took the books with even call numbers, while the odd-numbered volumes stayed at K.U. Leuven. (Mnookin, p. 103)

Intricacies of Belgian Government

The above anecdotal evidence of pragmatism speaks to a truth of the larger Belgian story, where rather than cooperating to find an equitable solution, the two groups only seek to ensure that no advantage, perceived or actual, is given to the other side. (Fortunately for the students, the library-splitting arrangement did ultimately result in an equitable, though unconventional, distribution of the assets.) Like the couple in the midst of a bitter divorce, the two regions want to take what's his and hers and keep the contact between them to a minimum, drawing a "do not cross" line through the living space. While democratic, all of this amounts to inefficiency, excess, and waste in various levels of government, and a populace divided to the point that they have nothing in common with those on the other side of the internal border. (Judt remarks that roads crossing from another country into Belgium have few indicators of entrance into a new country, but within Belgium the names of provinces are posted prominently. "It is as though conventional arrangements had been inverted: the country's international borders are a mere formality, its internal frontiers imposing and very real." [p. 6])

On the heels of the Louvain crisis came the first major revision to the original constitution. In 1970 the three regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels) and three cultural communities (Dutch-speaking, French-speaking, and German-speaking³) were officially established, with corresponding governments and competences⁴ which the separate regional parliaments have the authority to govern. (Heisler, p. 42) These competences, devolved to regions and cultural communities from federal government control, reflected desires on the part of each group to have greater power in certain policies, desires which often came out of fear based on past experiences. Flanders, for example, wanted autonomy in linguistic and cultural fields, a natural desire given the history of the Flemish as a marginalized group. Walloons, on the other hand, looking to protect themselves and their status

against the recent increase in the Flemish population and economic power, wanted control over social and economic policies. (Beaufays, p. 70) There were no constitutional amendments during the 1970s that satisfied the Walloons' wishes, and the goals of the Flemings continued to expand and deepen. Thus, Belgian politics is still marked by demands from both sides over increased competences for regions. In reality, little remains under federal control aside from the military and social security, and the latter is a point of contention between the regions. This indicates that the importance of Belgium as a state lies more in its passive position of allowing lower levels of government to compete for control than in any kind of active role in exercising power on its own terms.

Institutionalized Divisions

While the aforementioned devolution of the 1970s can be viewed as a victory for the lower levels of government, the competences can also be seen as a source of gridlock, making political decisions needlessly complicated. Any one issue is likely to involve multiple governments. For example, regions have control over energy policy, but the state sets the energy prices. Boundaries between competences tend to blur and may overlap.

Aside from specific issue areas, overlap is particularly evident when examining the parties themselves. Rather than a two-party system like that of the United States, Belgium has two separate multiple-party systems. For instance,

³Belgium is divided into three language communities: French, Flemish, and German. The German community is located on Belgium's western border with Germany and is part of the Wallonian region. (Portal Site . . .) The Belgian constitution accords certain areas of control (i.e. matters of culture) to the language communities, which are distinct from Belgium's three regions: Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels.

⁴The constitutional revisions in the 1970s federalized the Belgian state, with governments at the national, regional, and community levels. The central government underwent the process of devolution, ceding control over various issue areas to these lower levels and thereby increasing their autonomy from the center. The communities, for example, have the constitutional authority to create separate education policies for their citizens without input from the federal government. The Belgians refer to these domains of control as "competences."

there are two Christian-Democratic parties, one to cater to the Flemish and one for the francophones. While some may argue that the establishment of these separate systems reflects the regional divide and serves the citizens' needs, the separateness of this structure further reinforces these divides. In other words, the relationship between the institutions and the people is circular, and it is difficult to determine the driving factor. For example, while Billiet, Maddens, and Frogner note the role of the emergence of the two systems as a contributing factor in the growing division of the country, the authors later note that the division necessitated the creation of the two separate party systems and rendered the former unitary system obsolete. (Billiet et al., pp. 913–14)

The answer to the question of which factor exerts greater influence — the existing regional divide or the distinct party systems — matters less than the reality. Belgium is a country divided, and the replicated political parties are just one manifestation of this fact. The multiplicity of governments and government levels make Belgium's political system one of the more complicated ones in the world, as well as one of the more high-priced. The creation of duplicate governments under the revised constitution of the 1970s — and even the federalization process itself whereby the federal government ceded powers to the regions and communities — has proved costly, contributing to the enormity of the national debt mentioned earlier. The nature of this multi-layered setup yields substantial inefficiency. Aside from issue areas that fall under the domain of more than one government, the Belgian constitution, in its sensitivity to the demands of the different ethnicities, enforces quotas, requiring that a set number of representatives hail from Flanders and Wallonia so as not to give either region a numbers advantage. This renders the decision-making process cumbersome at best, and effectively reduces the Belgian government to anti-majoritarian politics.⁵ (Heisler, p. 43) The level of exasperation of the eBay author that permeates his advertisement noted in the introduction suggests that perhaps Belgian citizens would prefer to forgo the strict rules of proportionality in the name of greater governmental productivity, but of course only if the opposition were the ones making concessions.

Exasperation is running particularly high in Flanders, where, following the 100th day without a government in the 2007 elections, a Flemish opinion poll showed that a record 46 percent of the region wants to see Belgium split, and 65 percent think this result will eventually come to pass. (“Half . . .”)

Importance of Belgian Media

The role of the media ranks high among visible dividers in today’s Belgium. Ironically, while technology typically tops the list of factors that drive globalization and connect more and more people around the world, technology is one of the very elements driving Flanders and Wallonia apart. Much like their government arrangements, the regions have confined radio, television, cinema, and other forms of pop-culture to their specific spheres. A Fleming would have little knowledge of, or interest in, the news or cultural happenings in Wallonia, and vice versa. A Fleming will read a Flemish newspaper, listen to a Flemish radio station on the commute to work, choose among Flemish television programs to watch in the evening, and go out to see a Flemish movie on the weekend. This would not seem unusual in other countries. In the United States, most people get their news in English. But the situations of Flanders and Wallonia are unusual when one considers the fact that they are members of the same country, one approximately the same size as the state of Maryland. They reside no more than 170 miles apart from each other; yet they have no knowledge of the lives of those living on the other side of the regional border. (*Encyclopedia of the Nations*) When asked about her feelings on the regional divide, a Flemish woman responded that she “would have nothing to talk about” with a Walloon, citing the lack of common ground in the realm of popular culture, such as books and movies.

⁵The Belgian constitution is one that sets out to define and protect the rights of its various groups, and in the process gives disproportional control to minority groups. The tiny German community of just over 70,000 has the same powers as the larger Flemish and francophone language communities, and Flanders and Wallonia are equally represented in Parliament in spite of unequal populations. A majority is needed to pass a law in government, but the system is such that a majority is difficult to obtain.

This institutionalized media gap reinforces other areas of cultural separatism, and for some it illustrates the impotence of the Belgian state. As Billiet, Maddens, and Frogner remark, “Even in bilingual Brussels, the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking education networks are entirely separate. This means that the central Belgian authority has barely any policy instruments to promote or socialise a shared Belgian culture.” (p. 915)

For all the fuss made of the cultural division and monolingual media, one would think that these phenomena had developed relatively recently and indicate some larger social ill. The fact remains that there is nothing novel or recent about the ethnic divergence between the Flemings and the Walloons, and so the existence of a media gap should surprise no one and should not hint at the likelihood of Belgium’s dissolution. Even to the Flemish woman who could not imagine carrying on a conversation with a Walloon, the idea of a splintered state was still more unpalatable. Though many citizens may identify with their region before their country, this does not necessarily mean that they want to relinquish their ties to Belgium.

An Uncertain Future

As Van de Craen notes with a perceptible air of weariness, “It has been said over and over again that the country will fall apart, that there is no need for it to exist, and so on.” (p. 25) Scholars, pundits, and radical political groups have devoted themselves to this idea. While a split may not be desired by the majority of the Belgian population as a whole, those who hint at this so-called imminent breakup know that they are striking a nerve and giving life to an idea that, however unlikely it may seem, is never outside the realm of possibility. As long as Belgium remains a state and the ethnic cleavages remain intact, the question of the state’s relevance, and lifespan, will continue to persist.

As of January 2008, Belgium is setting the record for the number of days without a formed government, having already broken the country’s former record of 150 days. The Flemish parties further stalled the process when on November 7, 2007, in retaliation for the fran-

cophone parties' refusal to institute greater regional autonomy, they unilaterally voted to break up the Brussels electoral district, a move that Blenkinsop claims "effectively depriv[es] more than 100,000 French-speaking Brussels suburbanites of the right to vote for francophone parties." (p. 2) The Flemish have long agitated for increasing decentralization. A poll from September 2007 indicates that the separatist platform of the radical Vlaams Belang party, the extreme right-wing Flemish nationalist group, is not so radical anymore. Two-thirds of the Flemish community think Belgium will eventually split, and nearly half desire this outcome. ("Majority . . .")

Even those outside the country are weighing in: another poll shows that more than fifty percent of French residents living along the border would like Wallonia to become part of France in the event of a breakup. (Balmer) No one has extended any such offer to the tiny German community, the afterthought in the Belgian story, whose members want Belgium to stay together for reasons of identity, homeland, and the pampered minority status that the state grants them. (Codogno)

Whether or not Belgium remains together rests more in the hands of those in government than those casting votes in polls. For every ecstatic Flemish separatist, there is an equally obstinate Walloon who vows to freeze the proposed bill concerning the future of the Brussels electorate, whether fragmented and under Flemish control or status quo and favoring the francophones. Though population numbers would hint that the Flemish have the upper hand, this is not the case in Parliament. As Didier Reynders, the head of the francophone Liberals, put it, "The Belgian pact is based on compromise. In Belgium, you negotiate on the basis of protecting minorities. A majority of six million against four, that's not Belgium anymore." (as quoted in Blenkinsop, p. 1) The math may seem logical, but the Belgian constitution favors minorities over mathematics. The state exists less for practical purposes than for protection, and acts as a framework within which the various groups can meet to voice their interests and work out their differences in a way that would not otherwise be possible.

As one resident of the German community noted, the three communities share linguistic

ties with the surrounding countries, but the Flemish are not Dutch, the Walloons are not French, and the German-speakers are not German. (Codogno) For all the separatist talk of a "greater Netherlands" by right-wing Flemish politicians, Flanders does not share a great deal of common ground with the socially liberal Netherlands. Plus, the Flemish population of 6 million people would revert to minority status if absorbed into their northern neighbor, whose constitution does not take pains to look after minority interests in the way that Belgium's does. The Belgian state also affords extensive constitutional rights to both Flanders and Wallonia that neither would retain should they join the Netherlands or France, respectively. Thanks to Belgium's minority-minded constitution, these groups are much stronger inside the Belgian state than they could ever hope to be outside of it. The case is magnified in the case of the German and French language communities, where the countries who share their languages have populations several times larger than that of the entire state of Belgium. And that is not to say that these countries would willingly incorporate the leftover fragments. Just over half of the French citizens along the border were amenable to the addition of Wallonia; but in a move that would affect the whole of France, residents all the way down to the Mediterranean would need to share in that opinion.

In short, whether happy about it or not, members of all of these communities — separated by language, culture, and a host of other differences — are Belgian, and Belgium is their home. This does not mean that there is a prevailing idea of a national Belgian identity; it is well-documented that there are people in each region, more in Flanders than in Wallonia, who place their regional identity on a par with or even above their national identity. (Billiet, Maddens, and Frogner, p. 915) For some Belgians, the concept of a national identity is a joke (Van de Craen, p. 24); for others, it is nonexistent, save for a moment in sporting history when a Belgian rider won the Tour de France. (de Heusch, p. 11) On that point, all Belgians seem to agree, and nowhere in the country will one be badgered into displaying acts of patriotism. Paradoxically, being a resident of Belgium does not require one to be Belgian.

It does not follow that the absence of a strong national identity will bring about the eventual death of a state, particularly when the idea of unity was questionable at the state's birth. Indeed, the allowing for the expression of other identities, whether tied to the region, community, province, or municipality, and the ability to fight for those interests are paramount and something to be preserved. What happens within the space can and will change with the passage of time, so it matters little that the idea of a national Belgian identity or culture is not very strong and therefore not a unifying feeling. Culture is not a static concept, but one that evolves over time, regardless of location.

In the face of globalization and increasing regional interdependence, nationalism is losing its potency, particularly in other countries in the European Union. Just as the idea of culture is not a constant, neither is the concept of the nation-state. Currently it may be the preferred method of organization in the international system, but this is only a moment in history. Just as the international order evolved a few centuries ago into one of nation-states, so another form of order could eventually come to take its place. With all of the ethnic strife and

subsequent compromise that Belgium has experienced, it may ultimately fare better in the globalized era than other states who attempt to ward it off with such futile measures as quotas and other regulations to artificially protect an ephemeral culture that will transform in a matter of decades.

In other words, as Van De Craen puts it, "Whether or not [Belgium] is falling apart may well be totally irrelevant." (p. 26) The state is not without its problems — the national debt and the lack of government among them, as alluded to by the eBay ad — but it is not without purpose. Its reasons for existence may not fit with the design intent of the original model, but the original model is increasingly out of place in contemporary global politics. Belgium has teetered on the brink of disaster more than once in its history; and the potential costs, both economic and otherwise, of a split will likely save it from collapse yet again. Just as the concept of the nuclear family has evolved, so too has the conception of the state. Thus, like the couple who cannot afford the costs and consequences of a divorce or who stay together for the children, Belgium will take a deep breath, vow to make the best of it, and stick it out for the foreseeable future.

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