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The separatism debate in Flanders: Actors and Arguments

Since the gradual secularisation of the country and the decreasing importance of religious issues, the Belgian party system is divided along two main political cleavages: a socio–economic and a linguistic one. Broadly speaking, the linguistic cleavage opposes Dutch–speaking (Flemish) and French–speaking (mainly Walloon) parties. Contrary to territorial debates present in other West–European countries, this cleavage does not oppose parties from the centre vs. parties from the periphery. Consequently, the party system (some authors even speak of two separate party systems) is divided along linguistic lines, rather than territorial issues.

In 42 years, Belgium has known no less than six state reforms, radically transforming the country from a unitary to a federal state. The questions of autonomy, identity and institutional reforms have therefore been on the agenda for a large part of these four decades and been relatively salient in electoral campaigns and during times of political crises. Separatism as such has never been on the negotiation table, nor a main issue in political debate, but it has nevertheless been discussed, especially in the long period of political instability around the negotiation of the sixth state reform between 2007 and 2011. In this chapter, we will identify the most relevant actors involved in the issue of separatism in Flanders and analyse their respective positions, arguments and strategies over the years.

1. Actors in the separatism debate

As mentioned in the introduction, the linguistic cleavage opposes Flemish and French–speaking parties. However, this divide does not perfectly reflect the separatism debate as each linguistic camp can be divided into different groups of parties and territorial issues cross party lines. Based on their positions regarding the future of the Belgian state, we can identify three main types of party actors in Flanders – two almost equally strong camps and a minor one – to which we add actors from the civil society. Even if this typology does not take into account the differences that exist at the individual level within each political party and parliamentary group (Reuchamps et al. 2015), and even if party positions on the separatism issue may strongly evolve over time (Dandoy et al. 2013a), we believe that it constitutes a useful way to reduce the complexity of their position on the separatism debate.

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1.1 Separatist parties

The first group concerns political parties that demand a split of Belgium, leading to the creation of an independent Flemish state that broadly corresponds to the borders of the Flemish region (the inclusion of the Brussels region within this independent state remains a sticking point). Two parties belong to this separatist group, but they differ in their way of seeing how Flemish independence may be obtained.[1]

The extreme–right party *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest) holds the most radical position, as the party demands an immediate and unconditional split of Belgium and the creation of an independent Flemish state. This was the first Flemish party to advocate separatism, right from its creation in 1978, when it was still called *Vlaams Blok*. As the mainstream Flemish regionalist party *Volksunie* was included in the negotiations on the so-called Egmont Pact in 1977 (an agreement on a further institutional reform of the Belgian state), its radical nationalist and extreme–right wing decided to leave the party because it could not live with the compromises included in the pact. The *Vlaams Blok* originated from the merge of two political organisations which had split from the *Volksunie*.

While the *Volksunie* had never defended an official separatist position, this was the case right away for the *Vlaams Blok*. In the 1980s the party concentrated most of its discourse on the linguistic conflict and profiled itself as a radical nationalist party. It had quite limited electoral success. This changed from the 1990s onwards when the party started to focus much more on immigration and security issues, similar to extreme–right parties in other West European countries. While an agreement among the other parties on a so–called *cordon sanitaire* prevented the party from participating in majorities at any policy levels, its continuous rise in electoral support projected it to the centre of political debate. In 2004 the party reached its highest electoral score, gaining about a quarter of the vote in the Flemish regional elections, shortly after it was forced to change its name to *Vlaams Belang* due to a court decision concerning racism.

The impact was felt mostly in the immigration debate, which was clearly the key to the party's success. However, the fact that a quarter of the Flemish population also voted for a separatist party probably contributed to making this proposition more mainstream. On the other hand, the fact that separatism was defended (only) by an extreme–right party that was excluded from mainstream politics can also be seen as delegitimising the position. After it's electoral peak in 2004, *Vlaams Belang* steadily lost votes, dropping to some 6 % in Flanders ten years later.

1 The populist party *Libertair, Direct, Democratisch* (Libertarian, Direct, Democratic) also belongs to this group of separatist parties, but the regional and federal elections of 2014 excluded it from any legislative representation.

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The same period saw the rise of the *Nieuw–Vlaamse Alliantie* (N–VA, New Flemish Alliance). Today this party is without doubt the main player in the institutional debate. It is again a spin–off from the *Volksunie*, which disappeared in 2001 because of irreconcilable differences between a more moderate and progressive wing on the one hand, and a more radical nationalist and conservative wing on the other hand, the latter forming the N–VA. The actual reason for the split was again disagreement on whether to support a state reform proposal, the so–called Lambermont Agreement in 2000–1.

Since its creation in 2002, the first article of the N–VA statutes stipulates that the party strives towards an 'independent republic of Flanders, member state of a democratic European Union'. It has not pleaded for immediate unilateral secession, but rather for a gradual process of disappearance of the Belgian state. However, even though independence clearly remains in the statutes of the N–VA and was initially publicly advocated, in its public discourse the party has gradually moved away from this position. While the party aimed at becoming an important actor in the political landscape, the fact that the number of separatists among Flemish public opinion is generally estimated at around 10 % (2014 electoral studies even point towards some 5 % – see Deschouwer et al. 2015) is no stranger to this. In the electoral campaign of 2010, other Flemish parties were regularly pointing out that the N-VA was in fact separatist, knowing this might frighten potential N-VA-voters, while the party itself tried to avoid the subject.

Instead of outright separatism, the N–VA started to defend an idea of 'confederalism', which, however, remained quite vague for a long time. In January 2014 the N–VA organised a conference to elaborate what the party actually meant with this concept. The analysis of the conference resolutions shows that the N–VA's model is quite close to an actual confederation. Even though there would be no creation of new independent states, the Belgian constitution would be replaced by a treaty between Flanders and Wallonia, a 'confederal' parliament would be constituted by delegates of the Flemish and Walloon parliaments and a 'confederal' government would be appointed by the Flemish and Walloon governments with a rotating prime minister and only very limited competences. But while this model comes close to a confederation (which actually supposes independent states signing a treaty) and thus to a far–reaching dismantling of Belgium, the media discourse which accompanied these proposals sounded quite different. Actually, typical Belgian unionist arguments (see below) were used to communicate on a proposal which entailed a quasi–split of Belgium: the proposals were framed as a Belgium 2.0, where this solution would pacify relations between the language groups, with the national level still kept important powers. This is linked to a broader shift in discourse by the N–VA, which will be dealt with more in detail in the section on arguments. Between 2003 and 2014, the N–VA succeeded in going from only one to 33 seats in the Chamber of Representatives, coinciding with the evolution of the party from a more specific Flemish–nationalist stance to a broader position of liberal conservatism.

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1.2 Mainstream (autonomist) parties

The second group concerns parties that have been or are in favour of a larger decentralisation and further autonomy for Flanders. This group of parties gathers all mainstream Flemish political parties together, i.e. the Christian–democrats (CD&V, Christian Democratic and Flemish), the liberals (Open Vld, Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats) and the socialists (sp.a, Socialist Party Differently).

The Flemish Christian–democrats have historically been one of the main drivers of the Belgian federalisation process, together with the French–speaking socialists. In 2001, when in opposition for the first time in almost five decades, the CD&V adopted a model of 'confederalism' as its official position, but in the case of the N–VA, it was not entirely clear what was meant by this label. Neither the N–VA nor the CD&V are in favour of an actual confederation. While the concept was strategically used by the N–VA to appear less radical, it was used by the CD&V to look more radical and – as the centre party which had always had a more Belgian and a more Flemish wing – to attempt an ideological renewal. Between 2004 and 2008, the CD&V also formed an electoral alliance with the N–VA: while not agreeing on what should be the end station of the Belgian institutional reforms, they did agree that important new steps towards Flemish autonomy should be taken and that these should be a priority. Following the negotiation of the sixth state reform (2012–14), the CD&V did not focus on these issues anymore, in part because leaving the theme on the agenda was thought to profit the N–VA. Rather, the party started to defend a temporary institutional *status quo* in order to fully and calmly implement the sixth state reform and concentrate on socio–economical issues (Dandoy et al. 2015).

The Flemish liberals (*Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* – Open Vld) have had a more varying position towards Flemish autonomy. In the 1960s and 1970s, the party at times profiled itself as the defendant of Belgian unity. In the 1990s, as part of attempts to regroup different right–wing forces in Flanders (including Flemish nationalists), and because more autonomy was seen as a way to facilitate more liberal policies in Flanders, the party developed a more autonomist agenda. This was partly mitigated when Guy Verhofstadt – a Flemish liberal – became Prime Minister. Against the will of the party leadership, in 2003 a small majority at a party conference voted to also adopt 'confederalism' in the party manifesto, but this was dropped again in 2014, when the Open Vld adopted a federal project for Belgium, which includes a reinforcement of the federal state in some respects. In 2016, the party's vice–prime minister of the federal government declared that a number of competences should be re–attributed to the Belgian level.

The Flemish socialists (*Socialistische Partij Anders* – sp.a) have also most often adopted quite instrumental positions on institutional reforms. Given the fact that voters are traditionally more left–wing in Wallonia than in Flanders and that the participation of its French–speaking sister party also generally secured Flemish socialists a place in the national government, the party did not have much interest

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in pleading for far–reaching Flemish autonomy. More fundamental anti–nationalist ideology and defence of Belgian interpersonal solidarity also played a role. Nevertheless, the sp.a is the only Flemish party to have negotiated and voted on all six reforms of the Belgian state: even though they were generally not the drivers of the process, they have also not strongly opposed it. Furthermore, its electoral alliance with the small regionalist party *Spirit* – another splinter party from the *Volksunie* – between 2002 and 2008 may have left autonomist traces on the party's ideological profile.

1.3 Non–autonomist parties

The third group – smaller in terms of electoral relevance – concerns parties that are quite critical of the way the Belgian federalisation process has been conducted. This is or has been in part also true at some stages for the Flemish liberals and socialists, but it is more the case for the Flemish greens (*Groen*). They have in the past criticized the priority given to the institutional debate, arguing this prevented focusing on more important issues. While the Flemish greens do not *per se* oppose further autonomy for Flanders, they often appear reluctant on too far–reaching allocation of competences to the regions and communities and also defend a 're–federalisation' of specific competences as well as a strong federal level of governance. Nevertheless, they have participated in the sixth state reform, which was rather a continuation of the logic of previous state reforms, arguing that this would permit the institutional question to be solved so that political leaders could concentrate on other (more crucial) policies.

To this last group, we can add the French–speaking parties that are present in Flemish municipalities around Brussels. Even if poorly represented in electoral terms (they have never managed to obtain more than one seat in the Flemish regional parliament), they hold several mayorships in Flanders and have an impact on the Flemish political agenda. It mostly concerns the French–speaking regionalist party (*Democratic Federalist Independent* – Défi, previously FDF) and *ad hoc* electoral alliances of mainstream French–speaking parties, i.e. the Christian–democrats (cdH), the socialists (PS) and the liberals (MR), under the common banner of UF (Union of French–speakers). These parties strongly oppose Flemish separatism and defend the French–speaking population living in Flanders, but do not question the actual federal institutions. They obviously do not demand more autonomy for Flanders, but rather opt for an institutional *status quo* as they believe that the country needs a (more or less) large period of institutional and linguistic 'peace'.

Finally, we have to mention political parties that would like to strongly reverse the actual trend, i.e. to reduce the autonomy of the regions and the communities and to strengthen the Belgian central state. These parties *de facto* strongly oppose Flemish secessionism but vary largely in their preferences. The bilingual radical–left PTB–PVDA (Workers' Party) – the only national party represented in the Belgian

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parliament – would like to have several competences 're–federalized' while the unitarist and bilingual BUB (Belgian Union) would like to return the state structures that were in place before the first steps of regionalisation.

More generally, while in the past the Flemish debate always focused on to which extent competences should be further de–federalised, recently the suggestion to also re–federalise some competences has entered the Flemish institutional debate. A survey among federal and regional MPs (Sinardet et al., 2016) showed that an increasing number favoured a situation where more competences would be attributed to the Belgian level. Such a slight re–federalization scenario was the average position favoured among MPs of Groen, Open Vld and the sp.a. The difference with the position of MPs from the N–VA and *Vlaams Belang* has consequently increased. Nevertheless, parties are also internally divided over this issue. In any case it shows that the debate in Flanders is evolving and that it is not always easy to unequivocally and definitively pin non–separatist parties to a specific position.

1.4 Other actors

If political parties are the main actors when discussing separatism in Belgium, two other types of actors also participate in the debate. First, there are several lobby and pressure groups that are independent of political parties. On the side of Flemish separatism, there have always been different actors that together formed the Flemish movement. While this was strong in the 1960s (organising large marches on Brussels) and in the 1970s (organizing protests against the Egmont Pact), it has lost most of its strength today. The fact that the N–VA attracted a number of prominent figures from the Flemish movement to its electoral lists in recent years also contributed to its gradual weakening. Today it concerns groups such as the *Vlaamse Volksbeweging* (VVB – Flemish People's Movement) and more recently the *Comité Vlaanderen Onafhankelijk* (CVO – Independent Flanders Committee). Similarly, one can also find think tanks such as *In de Warande* that gather Flemish academics, economists and journalists or radical groups such as the *Taal Aktie Komitee* (TAK – Language Action Committee) that advocate for more direct action via public events, demonstrations, occupations of official buildings, tags of road signs, etc. Even if their instruments and their scope of action differ, the objective of such groups clearly remains the secession of Flanders. On the other side of the separatism issue, there are fewer societal movements, with the notable exception of 'I want you for Belgium' (that was mostly active in 2007) and *B Plus* (Belgium Plus), which are clearly against separatism but still in favour of federalism.

Second, socio–economic actors also participated in the debate. Contrary to the party system, most of the worker's and employer's unions in Belgium are not divided along linguistic lines, even if some of them are composed of autonomous regional branches. These actors not only participate in the preparation, development and implementation of socio–economic policies, but also may have strong positions on

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the separatism issue (Vandaele and Hooghe 2013). For example, the demands of the worker's unions (mostly in Wallonia) since the 1960s led to a gradual regionalisation of economic policies. In Flanders, organisations of employers, and in particular the VOKA (*Vlaams Netwerk van Ondernemingen* – Flemish Network of Companies), are often in favour of a larger autonomy of the regions in various socio–economic issues (Oosterlynck 2006). Yet, and even if they are perfectly aware of the impact of a Flemish secession on their interests, most of these socio–economic actors remain uncertain about the best scenario for the future of the country.

Finally, one can hardly find a strong and clear stance on the separatist claims in governments in Belgium. This is partly explained by the consociational characteristic of the Belgian political system where all political parties – independently on their position in the opposition or in government – have an impact on the cabinet's preferences (Deschouwer 2006; Dandoy et al. 2013b). In addition, separatist parties are not excluded from government participation and their presence in the cabinet's benches renders impossible any clear–cut position on the separatism issue. For example, the forerunner of the N–VA – the *Volksunie* – participated in several federal governments (in 1977–79 and in 1988–91) and Flemish regional governments (in 1981–5, in 1989–95 and in 1999–01). After the 2014 federal and regional elections, the separatist N–VA – Belgium's largest party – entered the federal government and managed to obtain the position of regional prime minister in the Flemish region. Because of this direct (via government participation) or indirect (via consociational structures) involvement of separatist parties in the definition of the cabinet's policy preferences, the Belgian Government plays a weak role in the separatism debate.

2. Main arguments and issues

Over the years, a wide variety and a vast number of arguments have been used by separatist parties in order to justify their preference for an independent or more autonomous Flanders. In this third section, we attempt to summarize them.

2.1 The evolution of the separatist discourse

We will first concentrate on one of the main shifts in argumentation in the discourse of the main political parties defending Flemish nationalism, i.e. the N–VA. In the past, Flemish nationalists have often used a classic nationalist discourse, stating that nation and state should be congruent (Gellner 1983). The need for Flemish independence – or at least for increased autonomy – was presented as the logical consequence of the existence of a Flemish identity, people or nation. The existence of a nation legitimised the demand for increased autonomy or the creation of an actual independent state. This type of classic nationalist arguments was also used by the Christian–democrat leader of the Flemish regional cabinet in the 1990s, who

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strongly relied upon the existence of a Flemish identity, which was also reinforced by the nation building policies of his government and advocated further transfer of competences from Belgium to Flanders.

Under the leadership of Bart De Wever, the N–VA largely dropped traditional nationalist arguments, as these were no guarantee for electoral success. Rather, the N–VA shifted its emphasis to a more conservative, right–wing liberal socio–economic platform. Flemish autonomy was no longer presented as being a goal in itself, but rather as a means to conduct a more right–wing policy in line with demands from the Flemish voters, mostly on socio–economic and migration issues. It was believed that the Flemish electorate was in favour of liberal economic reforms, a decrease of taxes, stricter immigration regulation, etc. Yet, because of opposite orientations of French–speaking voters and the dominance of the French–speaking socialists (PS) over the federal government, Flemish voters do not obtain the policies they voted for. This argument is linked to the discourse on the existence of 'two democracies' within Belgium. This discourse also makes the socio–economic and the linguistic cleavages coincide to a large extent.

A consequence of this argument – according to which autonomy is not a goal in itself, but rather a means to conduct a right–wing policy – is that this policy goal can be reached without significant improvement in the autonomy status. This is what happened in 2014, when the N–VA decided to take part in a centre–right federal government without any further increase in Flemish autonomy. This is a clear historical break with the strategy of Flemish nationalist parties that previously participated in Belgian governments only if large steps towards Flemish autonomy were made. The N–VA actually signed a federal government agreement which for the first time in 30 years did not contain any reference to a further institutional reform. But at the same time, it is the first federal government since 1988 in which the French–speaking socialists are not present, which is presented by the N–VA as a 'political revolution' in itself.

After attracting support from Flemish employer's organisations and from many right–wing voters, some prominent figures of the N–VA have reassured their supporters that a form of separatism remains the long–term goal of the party. They also argued that conducting a right–wing policy in Belgium will lead Walloon socialists to demand more autonomy, and thus precipitate a break–up of the country. A past drive for economic autonomy in Wallonia came from the left, but chances that Walloon socialists become very strong regionalists again are now not that strong. Indeed, one of the main competences remaining at the federal level is social security, and all studies show that splitting social security would lead to an impoverishment of the Walloon and Brussels regions. The PS is therefore not very likely to start pleading for maximal regional autonomy.

The question is also whether and to which extent the shift in the discourse of the N–VA and more importantly its transformation into a governing party in the federal

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cabinet will have a more profound and long–lasting effect in its transformation from a party focused primarily on the ethno–linguistic issues into a party predominantly preoccupied with socio–economic issues. More fundamentally, the question is also what this evolution means for the relations between these two fault lines in Belgian politics and society in the long term.

More generally, the arguments used by separatist parties and movements to advocate the independence of Flanders (or more Flemish autonomy within Belgium) can be grouped into four types of issues and phenomena: socio–demographic, economic, political and geographical. Each set of arguments will be developed in the following sub–sections.

2.2 Socio–demographic arguments

The first group of arguments is of socio–demographic nature and argues for the non–existence of a Belgian society. This states that a Belgian people or nation does not exist, that there is no feeling of belonging together and that the national identity relies solely on superficial and symbolic elements, such as beer, chocolate or the national football team. In the context of this type of arguments, the Belgian state is often referred to as merely an artificial construction created by European states in the 19th century which never managed to unite its two main elements. Separatist parties argue that Belgium is composed of two different societies, with different languages, different cultures, different demographic structures (for example the population in Flanders is aging more rapidly, while migration is more important in Brussels), different education systems, diverging public opinions, etc.

They also refer to the absence of Belgian–wide political parties (see above) and media. Indeed, most media in Belgium, newspapers but also public and private radio and television broadcasters, are organised on a linguistic basis. In today's Belgium, national (bilingual) media has almost disappeared and there are only Dutch– and French–speaking media. In addition, very few Dutch–speaking inhabitants follow French–speaking media and vice–versa. Research shows that this language–based media organisation also tends to reinforce the political consensus in the own language community instead of contributing to a genuine federal public sphere (Sinardet 2013).

A counterargument used against this analysis is that differences concerning the language and other cultural aspects do not prevent people from living in the same democratic system. Moreover, sometimes a reference is also made in this respect to the European Union, for which Belgium could be a laboratory or even an example. Or put differently: a break–up of Belgium would harm the European project. The idea of two separate societies within Belgium is contradicted by surveys which demonstrate that, also in the Flemish region, the Belgian identity is still stronger than the Flemish identity and that there is no proof of a declining Belgian identity

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over the last decades. Also, according to public opinion polls, the support for separatism among the Flemish public is only between 5 % and 10 % and the Flemish public opinion is even divided concerning demands for more autonomy (Sinardet et al. 2018). Thus, there seems to be a difference between political and public opinion on these issues, rather than between public opinion in the North and the South (Reuchamps et al. 2015).

2.3 Economic arguments

Another set of separatist arguments concerns the economy. It is stressed that the structure of the economy is different across the country's regions. Broadly speaking, the Flemish economy is supposed to be more focused on services and innovation, while the Walloon economy still relies on (heavy) industries and on the leftovers from its golden economic age. The same applies to the differences in the labour market and in the economic orientations given by the different regional governments. Altogether, Flanders is viewed as a sustainable economy, whose market and companies are large enough to compete with other Western countries. In addition, separatist parties believe that the Flemish economy is particularly adapted to the challenges of the 21st century and to growing globalisation.

Related to the economy, the issue of regional disparities and financial transfers is also recurrent in the separatist discourse. Due to its economic performance over the last decades, Flanders is now wealthier than the rest of the country. The Belgian system of social security covers many aspects of the citizen's life, like health care, unemployment and family benefits, pensions, etc. Because of these regional disparities, a proportionally larger share of these social schemes benefits Walloon and Brussels inhabitants. The separatist argument can be oversimplified to this formula: 'the Flemish worker pays for the Walloon unemployed'. These North–South transfers in social security go along with similar transfers concerning taxes, government debt and deficit, public investments, etc. Overall, the idea is that the Flemish region contributes more than proportionally to the common good, unlike the two other regions.

On the other side, non–separatist parties refute these arguments by questioning the economic viability of the Flemish project. First of all, Brussels is the most prosperous region of the country and is an economic motor on which the development of Flanders relies. This economic reality can in part explain why separatist parties often believe that a largely French–speaking Brussels should be part of an independent Flanders and remain its capital. Without the inclusion of the Brussels region, the Flemish project is economically more uncertain. And contrary to 'Belgium' or even 'Brussels', 'Flanders' is not (yet) an internationally recognized entity or a renowned marketing brand for companies and investors. In addition, the regional socio–economic differences between French–speaking and Flemish populations shadow the intra–regional disparities. There are poor and rich municipalities in each of the three regions. Finally, if Flanders can be considered a wealthy region,

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some indicators indicate certain concerns, such as a Flemish population that is ageing more rapidly than in the other two regions. The inter–regional social security transfers (that include pension benefits) could be reversed in the long term as a consequence of demographic changes.

2.4 Political arguments

Yet other separatist arguments concern the Belgian political system. Separatist parties mostly view the Belgian system as in constant evolution, characterized by centrifugal regional or linguistic forces (Reuchamps 2013; Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2015). In that context, separatism is seen to constitute the only viable option proving a sustainable solution in the long–term. This is sometimes also articulated as if a split of Belgium is an inevitable if not natural process, as if 'written in the stars'. In addition, the current political system relies on no less than five different and intertwined policy levels (municipal, provincial, regional, community and federal) with a complex division of policy issues, especially in and around Brussels. Most of these policy issues are shared between two (or sometimes more) policy levels and this large number of levels also creates direct additional costs (related to a large number of ministers, parliaments, etc.). At the federal level, the current system also relies on a subtle system of consociational checks and balances that limits the capacity of the (Flemish) majority to impose its will (Sinardet 2010).

However, the non–separatist parties do not agree with this vision of two completely separate sets of voters. According to these parties, the split of the party system did not lead to substantially diverging electorate or party positions. This is mostly due to the phenomenon of 'sister parties' (the Christian–democrats, socialist, liberal and even green parties) that share a common ideological background and that, with few exceptions, govern together in the federal cabinet (Dandoy and De Decker 2009). In addition, separatism would directly increase the costs, as the political (ministers, parliaments, etc.) and the administrative institutions would probably double (or triple in the case of an independent Brussels). Each newly independent state would need to have its own body of civil servants, army and police forces, its own buildings, etc. Finally, an argument that is often used by the non–separatist camp concerns the non–solution provided by separatists to existing phenomena: What about the future of the monarchy and the royal family? What about the future of Brussels and/or Wallonia? What about the important federal public debt? etc. The reasoning is that separatism is not possible before these important questions are answered.

2.5 Geographical arguments

The last set of separatist arguments has a geographical dimension. The whole idea of the separatist discourse relies on the fact that Flanders is linguistically homogeneous

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over its territory. In addition, Flanders is supposed to have a satisfactory size (in terms of territory, population, etc.) that would not only make its independence viable but also make it similar to existing European states and in particular to especially prosperous Scandinavian countries. Separatism would also prevent a further 'francization' of Flanders, especially in the municipalities around Brussels in the province of Flemish Brabant (see also Sinardet 2010). Over the last decades, the share of French–speakers in these municipalities increased significantly – in some cases, they now constitute the majority of the population – mainly because of the development of (mostly French–speaking) Brussels beyond its regional borders, due to sometimes advantageous taxation schemes and to the geographical proximity of employment. Separatism is therefore sometimes seen as a way to stop these internal migration movements.

The opponents of Flemish separatism reverse these geographical arguments by pointing out the relatively small size and density of the Belgian territory. Given the small distances between the population area, there is a large interregional mobility: many Belgians work in one region, while living in another. For example, most of the companies which have settled in Brussels have employees coming from the country's three regions. It is likely that a secession of Flanders would decrease this mobility and that this would occur at the expense of most companies and of the overall state of the economy. In addition, separatism would probably lead to gradually diverging taxation and social regimes that would increase competition between states. Given the small geographical distances, increased flows of migration from one region to another may also appear.

3. Communication methods

The communication methods used by both separatist and non–separatist parties in Belgium are fairly similar: in between elections, they express their positions mostly via traditional and social media. During the campaign period, they additionally tend to use other techniques such as campaign posters or party manifestos. Obviously, the amount of activities, conferences and public speeches also increases during these election periods. Yet, these campaigns can take non–traditional forms, for example, the political party N–VA which in 2005 organized a mediatized event that consisted of twelve trucks filled with counterfeit money, symbolizing the amount of money that yearly leaves Flanders and arrives in Wallonia due to the financial transfers in social security. Symbols and flags are also often used by the two camps, such as the large presence of Flemish flags in bicycle races (even outside the country) promoted by the Flemish nationalist organisation *Vlaanderen Vlagt* or the more spontaneous anti–separatist campaign of 2007 that led to the presence of Belgian flags in the windows of numerous houses and apartments throughout the country.

In addition, the two types of actors also use marches. Since 1961 and the first Flemish 'March on Brussels' in order to defend the Flemish identity, separatist parties

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and movements have sporadically used this form of demonstration to express their concerns and demands. Between 1981 and 2012, the most politically relevant non–traditional method of communication used by the separatist parties was the *Gordel* (i.e. the belt), a bicycle and walking event that links Flemish municipalities around Brussels. The political message was to reaffirm the unconditional Flemish character of these municipalities, threatened by a growing French–speaking internal migration. Among non–separatist movements, marches are also sometimes used, such as the 'March for the unity of Belgium' that gathered 35,000 people in 2007 or the 'Shame' march against the political gridlock in the country in 2011.

4. Conclusion

Separatism is not at the centre of political debate in Belgium, not even in the Flemish region. The last period in which it was discussed in Belgian media was during the long political crisis around the negotiation of the sixth reform of the Belgian state (2010–2012), as this prompted questions on whether the state would survive this crisis. Paradoxically, French–speaking media has in the past been more focused on the 'threat' of separatism than Flemish media. The 'fake news' broadcast of the French–speaking public broadcaster RTBF in 2006 in which Flanders declared its independence can be considered as the most striking example of this, but it reflected a more structural vision of a 'separatist' Flanders in the French–speaking media (Sinardet 2007).

Still, the statutes of the largest Flemish party, the N–VA, refer to the objective of an independent Flemish republic. But because this party realized that support for separatism among the Flemish population is extremely low, it changed its official party position towards 'confederalism'. This makes the extreme–right *Vlaams Belang* the only openly separatist party in Belgium, but it has not been able to dominate the Flemish political agenda for some time due to its electoral decline.

However, the broader question of autonomy and linguistic conflict has been quite present in the Flemish political debate for decades. Its polarization among political parties and the oversimplification of some of its arguments (the 'us' versus 'them' based on language) explains the over–mediatization of this issue and its overwhelming presence even outside of election periods.

If we consider that the 'confederal' position of the N–VA can be reduced to a separatism that dare not speak its name, the Flemish separatist debate broadly opposes Flemish–nationalist parties on the one side and mainstream and green parties on the other. As we have demonstrated, the arguments used have strongly evolved over time and are today increasingly linked to the socio–economic left–right divide in Belgium. National and regional governments barely tackle the separatism issue (also because parties from both sides of the debate participate in the same cabinets) and the civil society largely remains a peripheral actor.

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Still, even if French–speaking parties are quasi–absent from the electoral scene in Flanders, they have some influence on the debate, mostly via the situation of Brussels and via the Belgian federal features. Brussels is central in several economic, geographical and political arguments and the future of an independent Flanders without Brussels is uncertain. But any separatist solution involving Brussels would basically mean giving a veto to French–speaking parties as they dominate Brussels politically and institutionally. In addition, the institutional arrangements at the federal level giving large veto powers to French–speaking actors and the need for intergovernmental cooperation across the linguistic border prevent a unilateral secession of Flanders.

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