

**Bart Maddens**

*Full professor of Political Science, University of Leuven*

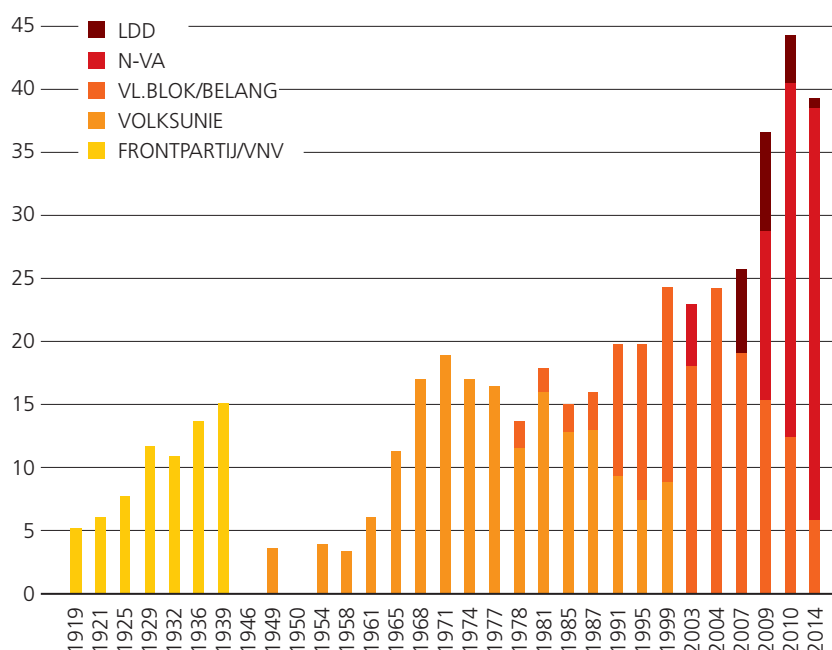
Flanders is often cited as one of the European regions which is closest to secession, together with Catalonia and Scotland. It is particularly the spectacular success of the separatist Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) which has fueled speculation about an imminent break-up of Belgium. In this paper, I will first of all assess how strong separatism really is in Flanders. Next, I will discuss both the discursive and the practical strategies the Flemish nationalists have developed against Belgium, with a special focus on the role of the EU in these strategies. Finally I will briefly deal with the current political situation and its possible implications.

### **The Flemish paradox**

If we look at the election results, the Flemish secessionist movement appears to be a growing and important political force in Belgium. As shown in Graph 1, the Flemish nationalist or autonomist parties increased their vote from 5.2% to 15% during the interbellum. After the Second World War there was a relapse due to the collaboration of a part of the Flemish movement with the German occupier. From the sixties onwards, the Flemish nationalist Volksunie party grew stronger and peaked in 1971 with 18.8% of the Flemish vote. During the nineties this centre party gradually waned due to internal ideological conflicts, and was replaced by the far-right and anti-immigrant Vlaams Blok, later renamed Vlaams Belang. This party peaked at 24% support in 2004.

The other Belgian parties refused to govern with this far-right party. This eventually caused the right-wing Flemish voters to turn to a new radical Flemish nationalist party, the N-VA, founded in 2001. This centre-right conservative party formed a cartel with the Christian democrats from 2004 to 2008. After its breakthrough as a separate party in 2009, the N-VA grew spectacularly and became the dominant party in Flanders and Belgium, with 32.1% of the Flemish vote in 2014. Finally, the LDD was a libertarian party which split off from the liberal party in 2006 and also took a radical stance in favor of a confederal reform. It obtained 7.7% in 2009 but faded away afterwards.

**Graph 1 : Percentage of Flemish-nationalist or autonomist parties in Flemish region (national and non-concurrent regional elections 1919-2014)**



Source: Maddens, 1998; Election results Belgian Interior Ministry.

Together, these radical autonomist parties peaked at 43.7% of the Flemish vote in 2010. For the concurrent senate election, this percentage was even higher, namely 47.2%. In 2014, the total autonomist vote decreased somewhat as the N-VA improved its score mainly at the expense of Vlaams Belang, and the LDD almost disappeared. Nevertheless, in 2014 38.2% of Flemings voted for an overtly separatist party and Flemish secessionism was the largest political force in Belgium.

These election results stand in sharp contrast to survey data about the support for separatism in Flemish public opinion. According to election studies by ISPO, in 2014 only a marginal 6.4% of the Flemish favored outright separatism. This percentage increases somewhat in times of institutional crises, such as in 2007 and 2010, but is never higher than 12%. A relative majority of about half of the Flemish is in favor of more competences for the regions, while rejecting separatism (Swyngedouw et al., 2015).

Thus, separatist parties obtained 38.2% of the vote, while only 6.4% of the electorate is separatist. How can this paradox be explained? At first sight, a straightforward explanation is that voters vote for separatist parties for other reasons. This is obvious from the above cited ISPO election study. Only 11% of the N-VA voters in 2014 mentioned the institutional issue as one of their motives for voting for the party. The main concerns of the N-VA voters were employment and labour (42.5%), healthcare (34.1%) and taxes and budget (30%). Similarly, only 7.9% of the Vlaams Belang voters were motivated by the institutional issue. Their reasons for a Vlaams Belang vote were mainly the issues of justice and criminality (54.5%) and migration and integration (49.5%).

At the same time, these findings do not really solve the problem of the Flemish paradox, but merely restate it. Why would a non-separatist voter choose a separatist party because he or she wants lower taxes when there is another non-separatist party, more specifically the liberal party, which offers the same? If you feel very strongly about Belgian unity N-VA would not be a logical choice, to put it mildly. How come the threshold to vote for a separatist party has become so low, even for voters who, when asked, do not favor secession? It can be hypothesised that this is the result of the strategy of Flemish separatists over the last decades, to which I will now turn.

## **“Belgium does not work”**

Flemish nationalists have always known that overt separatism is not so popular in Flanders. It is only the far-right Vlaams Belang which has defended an independent Flanders as a short-term goal, but the party has always put more emphasis on its anti-immigrant stance. The other Flemish nationalist parties have fostered a certain ambiguity about independence. The Volksunie was initially in favor of federalism (at a time when this was still a radical proposition), but shifted towards a more sovereigntist stance from the eighties onwards. The N-VA envisages a Flemish republic in the long run, but now focuses on confederalism as an intermediate step.

During the last decades, Flemish nationalists have put less emphasis on maintaining and cultivating Flemish culture and the Dutch language. The linguistic issue is still important in Flemish nationalist discourse, more specifically the language legislation in Brussels and its periphery. But the main focus is now on economic issues. A hallmark of this new approach was the 2005 “Warande Manifest”, published by a Flemish think tank and endorsed by a number of prominent Flemish businessmen (Denkgroep ‘In de Warande’, 2005).

This manifesto was the main source of inspiration for the discourse which the N-VA developed after its cartel with the Christian democrats collapsed in 2008. It is no coincidence that the first breakthrough for the party, at the regional election of 2009, coincided with the financial crisis and concomitant economic recession. The key message of the N-VA was that the Belgian state was unable to implement an efficient economic policy in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. “Belgium does not work” was one of its slogans.

This is so, according to the party, because Belgium consists of two different democracies. Due to the split of the national parties across linguistic lines (at the end of the sixties and during the seventies), the Belgian political system consists of two largely separate party systems. Election results differ considerably between the regions. While the centre of gravity of the Francophone party system is left of centre, the Flemish voters predominantly choose parties on the right or centre-right of the political spectrum. Also, this divergence between election results has grown over the last decade. As a result, it has become impossible – according to the N-VA – to form a federal government that can implement a coherent policy, attuned to both the leftist preferences in the south and the rightist preferences in the north.

Another explanation for the inefficiency of Belgium, the N-VA argues, is that the institutional structure has become extremely complex as a result of the previous reforms of the state. Competences have been devolved in a piecemeal way, as a result of which it is not always clear who is responsible for what. The proliferation of competences at different levels has made it increasingly difficult to coordinate policy measures. The N-VA adds that this complexity has also created superfluous bureaucracies, particularly at the federal level. Because the competences were never entirely devolved, the federal administration was not substantially reduced. According to the party, this is one of the reasons why taxes are relatively high in Belgium and the citizens do not get enough “value for their money”. It is remarkable, by the way, that this discourse to a certain extent runs parallel to the arguments of the proponents of a strong Belgium. But while the latter draw the conclusion that a number of competences should be refederalised and that a hierarchy of norms should be established, the Flemish nationalists want to simplify the institutions by abolishing the federal level of government.

Another central issue in the N-VA’s economic discourse concerns the transfers from the Flemish to the Walloon and Brussels region. A recent scientific study estimates these transfers to be about € billion per year (Decoster and Sas, 2017). The N-VA wants to maintain a certain solidarity, but argues that this should be limited in time in order to function as an incentive for Brussels and Wallonia to perform better. The present unlimited and automatic transfer, on the other hand, is considered to be “drug” to which the Walloon economy has become “addicted”.

The results of the 2009 and following elections have shown that this rhetorical strategy was effective. While the economic problems were the main concern of the voters, the N-VA has managed to convince them that these could only be dealt with effectively by giving more autonomy to the regions.

## The EU in secessionist discourse

Initially, the N-VA was an outspoken pro-European party. The European flag was prominent at party rallies and victory celebrations. This was also in line with the stance of its predecessor, the Volksunie, which was in favor of a “Europe of the regions”. The Volksunie was cofounder of the European Free Alliance, which brought together regionalist parties at the EU level. The N-VA abandoned this idealistic approach, but used the existence of an ever stronger EU as an argument against Belgium. As competences have been massively devolved to both a higher and a lower level, Belgium itself has become a superfluous layer of government, it was argued.

The party has also instrumentalised the “Size of Nations” approach proposed by the economists Alesina and Spolaore (2003). Thanks to the common market in the EU there need not be a trade-off between economies of scale and bringing policy in line with small-scale preferences. The economies of scale are realised at a European supranational level, which facilitates the breaking up of states into smaller segments without economic drawbacks. In June 2005, Enrico

Spolaore was keynote speaker at an N-VA congress on “Flanders, state in Europe” (Tegenbos, 2005).

Since its initial breakthrough in 2009, the N-VA has gradually shifted from a pro-European to a “Eurorealistic” stance. This development is analysed in detail by Brack et al. (2017). These authors show that the N-VA has become less enthusiastic about further European integration. The party now argues that the EU should focus on its core business of economic cooperation and explicitly rejects a federal Europe. It also plays with the idea of returning competences to the national level. The EU should remain a confederal entity – as Belgium should be in the future. This shift towards “Eurorealism” was also reflected in the choice of the party to join the parliamentary group of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) in the European Parliament after the 2014 European election, even though the party remains a member of the European Free Alliance.

Brack et al. (2017) also show that the party has remained ambiguous with regard to the EU and has not entirely embraced this “Eurorealist” stance. The discourse of the party spokesmen regarding the EU is generally more critical than the official party manifesto. The party appears to sense an electoral opportunity in overtly adopting Eurosceptical discourse, but is at the same time inhibited from fully grasping this opportunity. According to the authors, this can to a certain extent be explained by a change of generations in the party: the older politicians are still attached to the European ideals of the former Volksunie, while the younger ones are more Eurosceptical. But the reservations about full-fledged Euroscepticism might also be due to the fact that just a few years ago a stronger EU was a key argument against Belgium. In addition, the participation of the N-VA in the Belgian government, which has traditionally been strongly pro-European, may also put a brake on the Eurosceptic tendencies in the party.

## The pile village strategy

When Jan Jambon, the present federal minister of the interior, entered politics in the spring of 2007 his party formed a cartel with the Christian democrats. This cartel aimed at a new reform of the state, devolving new competences to the regions and communities particularly regarding taxes, healthcare and labor policy. Up to that time, Jan Jambon had been a leading member of the radical Flemish movement. At the beginning of the nineties, he had even pushed this movement towards an outright separatist stance. When asked about his remarkable metamorphosis from a radical separatist to a moderate realpolitiker in the CD&V/N-VA cartel, he compared the Belgian state to a pile village. If you take away one pile, he said, you will not notice the difference. If you take away a few other piles, the village will probably remain standing. But if you continue doing so, eventually the village will collapse. He added that he felt they were now close to that aim (Winckelmans, 2007).

In this way, Jambon deftly described the strategy the Flemish nationalists have followed since the seventies. During the past half century, at each of the six consecutive reforms of the state (in 1970, 1980, 1988, 1992, 2001 and 2011) new competences were devolved from the centre to the

regions and the communities. In 1988, 1992 and 2001 this was done with the support of Flemish nationalist votes. In themselves, a lot of these transfers were insignificant and partial. But, according to a reverse neo-functional logic, these seemingly insignificant reforms always sowed the seeds for new reforms and further transfers of powers. In this way, the Flemish nationalists have managed to hollow out the Belgian state in an incremental way.

As a result, the central state has lost crucial competences needed for nation building and identity politics. For instance, the competences regarding culture and media were devolved towards the communities in 1970, and competences regarding education were transferred in 1988. The recent Dutch government agreement envisages the obligation for schools to teach the national anthem as a means to strengthen a sense of national identity. The Belgian government, in contrast, could not take such a measure if it wanted to. The communities have exclusive competence in the field of education. If the Flemish government took a similar measure, it would probably oblige the schools to teach “De Vlaamse Leeuw”, i.e. the Flemish anthem. During the past decades, the regions, and particularly Flanders, have made use of their competences to create or strengthen a sense of regional identity and to obtain legitimacy as separate political entities.

It could be argued that this strategy of hollowing out the state has led to a gradual erosion of Belgian patriotism – to a certain indifference towards Belgium as a nation. Put differently, Belgian nationalism has been reduced to its most banal level. The Belgian nationality is still accepted as a fact of everyday reality. The Flemish still view themselves as Belgians, and will describe themselves as “Belgians” abroad. But they are not particularly proud of their nationality. It could be hypothesised that there is a growing indifference towards the idea of “Belgium”. This might explain why the threshold for voting for a separatist party is so low, even among voters who oppose separatism, when asked in a survey.

### **The “Scottish” strategy**

After the 2014 elections, it was in theory possible to form a government without the N-VA at both the regional and the federal levels. As the N-VA did not have any political leverage to impose a new reform of the state, it had to abandon all institutional claims during the government formation negotiations. The party had to agree to a government standstill of five years in return for taking part in a federal centre-right government. This government has a broad majority in Flanders, but no majority in Wallonia. The only Francophone party in the coalition represents just 25.5% of the electorate in the Walloon region.

In this way, the predominantly left-wing Wallonia is governed by a “Flemish” right-wing majority. The N-VA hopes that the left-wing majority in Wallonia will become so fed up with being ruled by a right-wing Flemish majority that it will eventually demand a confederal reform of the state (De Wever, 2017). Still, such a scenario is unlikely in the short run. It would take a spectacular U-turn by the Francophone socialists to accept the confederal model of the N-VA and the splitting-

up of social security. Arguably, the Francophone socialists will try to avoid what they consider a trap set by the Flemish nationalists. Nevertheless, such a development cannot be ruled out in the long run. In the same way as the Thatcher governments radicalised the left-wing Scottish voters and fuelled the drive for Scottish independence, a continuous dominance of right-wing Flemish parties at the federal level may sharpen the Walloon appetite for more autonomy.

It also remains to be seen how the N-VA will evolve. It is highly unusual for a regionalist anti-system party to participate in a national government. It is even more unusual for such a party to obtain the ministerial portfolios that are most associated with the central state (treasury, defence, interior affairs). This might draw the N-VA into the political system and gradually transform it into a centre-right mainstream party with, at most, moderate institutional demands.

### **Concluding remark: Does the N-VA make Belgium work?**

It can be argued that during the past decades Flemish-nationalists have succeeded in gradually delegitimising the Belgian state. While this has not involved increasing the number of separatists in Flanders, it may have lowered the threshold for voting for an anti-Belgian party. The N-VA has managed to convince voters that it can meet its concerns and provide an exit from the economic crisis by giving more autonomy to Flanders. As a result of this strategy, the N-VA has become the largest party in Flanders and Belgium. However, in order to take part in the current federal government it had to agree to an institutional standstill of five years.

As a governing party, the N-VA is obliged to abandon its former slogan that “Belgium does not work”. The party now alleges that the centre-right coalition is waging an efficient economic policy and is carrying through reforms that were never possible under the previous centrist governments. The obvious implication is that, apparently, Belgium does work. There is thus a tension between the defence of the current economic policy on the hand and the former institutional rhetoric on the other. For that reason, the N-VA has recently announced that it will not emphasise this institutional issue during the 2019 election. Instead, it will focus its campaign on the issues of security, identity and the economy. In this way, the party appears to pave the way for a continuation of the present government and the concomitant institutional standstill.

As the Flemish nationalists had to keep silent about the Flemish-Walloon conflict in order not to destabilise the government, the institutional issue dropped considerably on the public agenda. Since 2014, the federal state is now perceived to function quite normally, at least in Flanders. There are some indications that this has led to a re-legitimisation of Belgium. The trust in the Belgian government and the Belgian institutions appears to have increased (Dujardin, 2017). This development may be strengthened if the N-VA would agree to a new institutional standstill after the 2019 elections. But it is far from certain that this will be accepted by the Flemish-nationalist rank and file of the party.

## References

Alesina, A. and E. Spolaore (2003), *The size of nations*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press.

Brack, N., W. Wolfs and S. Van Hecke (2017), *Breaking the consensus. How real is the N-VA's Eurorealism?* Paper presented at the panel "Euro-scepticism in times of crisis", UACES 47<sup>th</sup> annual conference, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland.

Decoster, A. and W. Sas (2017), *Interregionale financiële stromen in België van 2000 tot 2020*. Leuven, Onderzoekseenheid Economie KU Leuven.

Denkgroep 'In de Warande' (2005), *Manifest voor een zelfstandig Vlaanderen in Europa*. Brussels, Denkgroep 'In de Warande'.

De Wever, B. (2017), "Slotessay. Van geblokkeerde mobiliteit, naar geblokkeerde democratie", in: F. Seberechts, *Onvoltooid Vlaanderen. Van taalstrijd tot natievorming*. Antwerpen, Vrijdag, pp. 207–225.

Dujardin, D. (2017), "Plots zien Vlamingen België liever dan Walen", in: *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 23/9/2017.

Maddens, B. (1998), "Verkiezingen", in: *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*. Tiel, Lannoo, pp. 3241–3256.

Swyngedouw, M., K. Abts, S. Baute, J. Galle and B. Meuleman (2015), *Het communautaire in de verkiezingen van 25 mei 2014. Analyse op basis van de postelectorale verkiezingsonderzoeken 1991–2014*. Leuven, Centrum voor Sociologisch Onderzoek.

Tegenbos, G. (2005), "Staten hoeven niet meer groot te zijn", in: *De Standaard*, 11/6/2005.

Winckelmans, W. (2007), "Nu is het moment om aan de kar te trekken", in: *De Standaard*, 16/3/2007.