

Beyond the Myth of Unanimity

Opinions of Belgian MPs on Federalism and the Sixth Reform of the Belgian State

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During the 541 days (2010-2011) when Belgium was without a federal government and was going through a political crisis, it was the party leaders who dominated the political stage and featured in the media. It was they who negotiated the sixth constitutional reform of the Belgian state which was a prerequisite for the formation of a new federal government. Afterwards, it was the turn of the federal MPs to vote on the legislation introducing this state reform. Nevertheless, party discipline very often prevents MP's expressing their personal vision of Belgian federalism, particularly if some agreement has already been reached. This research, which was carried out in the summer of 2011, and therefore before any agreement on the sixth state reform, sought to capture how members of parliament perceived federalism in Belgium. We surveyed not only the federal MPs, but also their colleagues in the regional parliaments. In this article, we discuss some of the results of this research.

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Between July and October 2011, before any agreement on the sixth constitutional reform, the 513 members of parliament, who make up the House of Representatives, Senate, Flemish Parliament, Walloon Parliament, Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region and the Parliament of the German Speaking Region, were asked to take part in a detailed survey on the future of federalism in Belgium. They were sent a list of 26 questions that touched on four important themes: the model and the architecture of federalism in Belgium; their identities (local, regional, federal, European); the most important reasons for legitimising the sixth constitutional reform; and the relationship between the language communities. Finally, it is important to emphasise that the questionnaire was completely anonymous to encourage the MPs to be completely open in their responses.

Table of Political Parties in Belgium with a parliamentary representation, referred to in this article.

Political leanings	Flemish	Francophone
Socialist	Sp.a	PS
Christian-democrat	CD&V	cdH
Liberal	Open VLD	MR
Green	Groen!	Ecolo
Nationalist / Regionalist	N-VA	FDF
Far right Nationalist	VB	MLD
Right wing Liberal	LDD	

In all, 243 members of parliament¹ (49.8%) completed our questionnaire (Table 1). From an international perspective, that is a high level of participation for this kind of parliamentary research. However, if one looks at the degree to which the different political parties participated, there are some notable differences which have to be taken into account when analysing the results, even though in absolute terms (N) the number of replies were sufficient to achieve ‘critical mass’. We should also add that the results of the very small parties (LDD, MLD and the independents) are included in the tables and graphs but not discussed.

Table 1: Respondents by party.

In absolute numbers (N) and in percentages (%).

Parties	N	Members of Parliament	%
MLD	1	1	100
Ecolo	33	41	80,5
Groen!	10	15	66,7
Open VLD	29	44	65,9
cdH	22	35	62,9
Sp.a	21	41	51,2
MR	28	55	50,9
Independent	1	3	33,3
N-VA	26	56	46,4
FDF	5	11	45,5
VB	14	36	38,9
PS	31	85	36,5
CD&V	20	56	35,7
LDD	2	8	25,0
UF	0	1	0,0
Total	243	488	49,8

THE NEW ARCHITECTURE OF THE BELGIAN STATE

One of the most important sources of contention during the negotiations was the extent of constitutional reform, in particular in finding a balance between conflicting views on greater regional autonomy and the retention of a powerful federal government (Popelier, Sinardet et al. 2012; Deschouwer & Reuchamps, 2013). We therefore asked the MPs to place themselves on a scale of 0 to 10, in which 0 meant that all authority should be exercised by the regions and communities and 10 meant that all authority should be transferred to the federal state. 5 represented explicit support for the status quo (i.e. the situation before the sixth constitutional reform). The respondents could only enter one value.

On the basis of the prevailing political and media-driven discourse, one would expect the responses to this question, which lies at the heart of the Belgian crisis, to reflect a sharp division between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking MPs. But nothing could be further from the truth. If we take the averages, there is little difference between the Francophone and the Flemish parties. In other words, although it is frequently claimed that the Flemish are unanimous in demanding a transfer of power to the regions and communities and that the Francophones are equally unanimous in opposing it, Table 2 (above) shows that the average scores of some Francophone parties are more in favour of dividing up political power than some Flemish parties. The MR and Open VLD, the Francophone and Flemish

liberal parties, chalked up the same average of 3.93, while the Flemish socialist (Sp.a) and green (Groen!) parties scored higher with averages of 4.38 and 4.9 respectively. Ultimately the figures primarily reveal how divided the Flemish MPs are. Of all the parties the Greens and the far right, nationalist Vlaams Belang were the furthest apart. However, in general the averages do not diverge very greatly. The average for all the political parties was less than 5, which meant that they were all in favour of greater regional autonomy but often only to a modest degree. Considering that this question was posed before the sixth constitutional reform was agreed and which it was claimed was absolutely necessary for the survival of the state, it is quite surprising that many MPs, and Flemish MPs in particular, opted for something that was not very different from the status quo.

Table 2: The MPs' views on the distribution of competences (average per party).

With averages, n=237

Parties	Averages
Groen!	4,90
PS	4,83
FDF	4,60
Sp.a	4,38
cdH	4,29
Ecolo	4,23
LDD	4,00
Open VLD	3,93
MR	3,93
MLD	3,00
CD&V	3,00
N-VA	0,42
VB	0,00

Key: 0 = All authority should be exercised by the regions and communities; 10 = All authority should be exercised by the federal government; 5 = You are satisfied with the current situation.

When we look at the details, we can distinguish a group of seven parties whose averages differ by less than one point. More specifically, with averages ranging from 3.93 to 4.9, they are Groen!, Ecolo, PS, Sp.a, FDF, LDD, Open VLD and MR, cdH (Table 2). A second group made of the Flemish nationalist N-VA and far right VB hover around 0 on the 0 to 10 scale, with 0.42 and 0 respectively. Finally, the Flemish Christian democrat CD&V is the only party between the two groups. Its average of 3 is significantly lower than the first group and significantly higher than the nationalist parties. Our research therefore confirms the strongly-held views of the N-VA and VB on the institutional development of Belgium whereby they opt for a model in which virtually all authority rests with the regions and communities; the Belgian state needs not formally disappear but it would be no more than a hollow – empty – shell. The dividing line appears primarily to run between the nationalist and separatist parties on the one hand and the remaining parties on the other hand. Yet our research also confirms the conspicuous position of the Flemish Christian Democrats in respect of the regionalising of political power. With an average of 3 it is half way to a scenario in which power is exercised exclusively by the regions. However, again we must bear in mind that the value of 5 refers to the situation before the sixth constitutional reform.

It is also important to remember that so far we have grouped the responses of individual MPs by party. However, if we consider them individually we see not only differences between parties but also within parties. And these differences are sometimes quite significant even though they are often invisible in political debates and in the media. Moreover, they are more pronounced in some

parties than in others. To start with, in Table 3 we can see that none of the MPs gave a score higher than 8. This means that none of them opted to return to a unitary or very strongly centralised state. Furthermore, even the value of 8 was entered by very few: the French Socialists scored the most with 10% of their MPs choosing 8, followed by the French Christian Democrats and the Flemish Socialists at 5%. Nevertheless, that does not mean that a majority of MPs reject any form of re-federalisation. Quite the contrary. The value of six can be viewed as opting for some degree of re-federalisation and if we count up the values between 6 and 8 it is clear that it enjoys considerable support among MPs. On the francophone side, 40% of the Brussels FDF positioned themselves between 6 and 8, 30.9% of the Socialists, 16.1% of the green Ecolo, 9.6% of the Christian democrat cdH and 7.4% of the liberal MR. However, on the Flemish side some of the percentages are even higher: 50% of the Greens, 30.9% of the Liberals and 19.1% of the Socialists. These figures too run counter to prevailing perceptions and they also reveal a sharp divide between these parties and the Christian Democrats and Nationalists.

Table 3: The MPs' views on the distribution of competences.

In percentages (%), n=237

		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total
Flemish parties	CD&V	0,0	5,0	30,0	30,0	30,0	5,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	100
	Groen!	0,0	0,0	0,0	30,0	10,0	10,0	40,0	10,0	0,0	100
	N-VA	69,2	23,1	3,8	3,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	100
	Open VLD	6,9	6,9	10,3	27,6	13,8	3,4	10,3	17,2	3,4	100
	Sp.a	0,0	0,0	0,0	38,1	19,0	23,8	9,5	4,8	4,8	100
	VB	100	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	100
Francophone parties	cdH	0,0	4,8	4,8	9,5	38,1	33,3	4,8	0,0	4,8	100
	Ecolo	0,0	0,0	3,2	32,3	29,0	19,4	9,7	3,2	3,2	100
	FDF	0,0	0,0	0,0	40,0	20,0	0,0	20,0	20,0	0,0	100
	MR	0,0	0,0	11,1	33,3	25,9	22,2	0,0	3,7	3,7	100
	PS	3,4	0,0	0,0	20,7	27,6	17,2	3,4	17,2	10,3	100

Key: 0 = All competences should be exercised by the regions and local authorities; 10 = All competences should be handed over to the federal state; 5 = You are satisfied with the current situation.

Not a single MP from the CD&V, N-VA and VB entered a score higher than 5. In accordance with the official party line, every VB member and 69.2% of N-VA members wanted all powers to be exercised by the regions and the communities (value 0). For the N-VA the percentage rises to 92.3% if we combine the values of 0 and 1. None of the CD&V were entirely wedded to re-federalisation and 95% opted for more regional autonomy. 90% of them picked 2,3 or 4 on our scale which reflects some uncertainty about the degree of desirable regionalisation in contrast to the position before the sixth constitutional reform.

The other parties, both Flemish and Walloon, tended to support some shift of the political centre of gravity towards the regions and communities. However, what separates them from their colleagues in the N-VA, VB and CD&V is that they opt for only a slight shift. If we combine the values 0 to 2, which boil down to high degree of regionalisation, these parties retain their low percentages except for the liberal Open VLD which scores 24.1%. However, they are also the most divided over the question,

showing that 30.9% of them are in favour of re-federalising powers. The percentages for the other parties for the combined values of 0 to 2 are Ecolo 3.2%, 9.6% for cdH, 11.1% for MR, 3.4 % for the PS and 0% for FDF, Groen! and Sp.a.

In other words, except for the N-VA and VB, many MPs support a limited degree (3 and 4) of further regionalisation. In a context where for years politicians have hammered on about constitutional reform in which greater regional autonomy is the first political priority, initially in Flanders but then increasingly in Wallonia, it is surprising to see how many MPs do not support such constitutional reform and often even support changes that would move in the opposite direction. In fact if one counts up the values of 5 and above, or the responses of MPs who do not want any change in the direction of greater regional autonomy, one reaches some fairly high percentages even among the Flemish parties: Groen! 60%, Sp.a 42.9% and Open VLD 34.5%. These percentages are very similar to those of the Francophone parties: PS 48.3%, cdH 42.0%, Ecolo 35.2%, FDF 40% and MR 29.2%.

We also asked our MPs about 12 specific powers and whether they would best be situated at the regional or the federal level or both. More specifically, they were unemployment benefit, child benefit, overseas development, justice, labour market, noise control, science policy, pensions, overseas trade, defence, road safety and public health. The results confirm the above observation that there is no confrontation between homogeneous Flemish and Francophone points of view, and that the parties themselves are not monolithic blocs. The answers to the 12 questions also show that the division separating left and right is as important as the division between the language communities in determining the MPs' responses (for further details see Reuchamps *et al.*, 2012.)

There was a similar range of responses to the question of the architecture of federalism in Belgium, in particular whether we should continue with the present system with two types of constituency (regions and communities) or move toward a system based on four regions. On that issue there was no consensus within the language groups and very little within the parties themselves.

THE MPs' SENSE OF IDENTITY

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We not only sounded out the MPs' position in the institutional debate, but also their 'ethno-territorial' sense of identity. In concrete terms, we asked the Moreno question which is often used to probe such attitudes (in the Belgian case, 'Do you think of yourself as primarily Flemish/Francophone or Belgian?'). The problem with that question in the Belgian context is that it only allows the respondents one type of regional identity. For example, it was not possible to enquire about a Flemish and Brussels identity at the same time (a Brussels identity was sounded out in another question and is discussed elsewhere). That is why we only put the question of a Flemish or Francophone identity to the Flemish and Francophone MPs.

It is no surprise that most of the MPs who consider themselves to be 'Only Flemish' belong to the Flemish nationalist parties (all of the VB and 79.3% of the N-VA). What is fairly surprising, however, is that a significant minority of the N-VA MPs (26.1%) stated that though they saw themselves as primarily Flemish, they also felt Belgian. Similarly the FDF MPs identified themselves more strongly with a Francophone identity than the other Francophone parties. Most MPs in the other parties have a mixed sense of identity and see themselves as both Flemish/Francophone and Belgian: PS (79.2%), Groen (70%), Ecolo (69.2%), Open VLD (60%). The MPs of CD&V, Sp.a, MR en cdH also have mixed identities but one outweighs the other: in the case of Sp.a MPs, MR MPs and cdH MPs there is a marked sense of being Belgian whereas the CD&V MPs have a pronounced Flemish identity. On the Flemish side, it is the Sp.a MPs who stand out. Almost half of them feel primarily Belgian and only 5% as primarily Flemish. If we combine the 'Belgian' categories (Only Belgian and More Belgian than Flemish/Francophone) the sp.a MPs score more highly than all the other Flemish or Francophone parties.

Table 4: Sense of identity among MPs (the Moreno question).

In percentages (%), n=200

		Only Belgian	Belgian >Region	Belgian = region	Region > Belgian	Only Region	Total
Flemish parties	CD&V	0,0	5,3	47,4	47,4	0,0	100
	Groen!	0,0	20,0	70,0	10,0	0,0	100
	N-VA	0,0	0,0	0,0	26,1	73,9	100
	Open VLD	0,0	12,0	60,0	24,0	4,0	100
	Sp.a	0,0	47,1	47,1	5,9	0,0	100
	VB	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	100	100
Francophone parties	cdH	6,3	31,3	50,0	12,5	0,0	100
	Ecolo	7,7	19,2	69,2	3,8	0,0	100
	FDF	0,0	0,0	25,0	75,0	0,0	100
	MR	9,1	27,3	45,5	18,2	0,0	100
	PS	4,2	8,3	79,2	8,3	0,0	100

In sum, we can state that with the exception of the most nationalist MPs, there is an overlapping sense of identity (both regional and national). These results correspond to the results of earlier investigations into the whole population's sense of identity: an exclusively regional sense of identity, both in Flanders and Wallonia, was rare; in general, the sense of identity was mixed (De Winter 2007; Deschouwer & Sinardet 2010). This is not the picture painted by politicians and media which suggests that Flemish and Belgian identities are in opposition and mutually exclusive. Apart from that, we see that those who feel more Flemish or Francophone are those who support more regional autonomy. Those two variables are closely connected on both sides of the language boundary and is also reflected in the population as a whole, though to a lesser extent.

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In conclusion, there does not appear to be a discernible division in the sense of identity of Flemish and Francophone MPs. The traditional picture of Flemings who only feel Flemish in opposition to Francophones who only feel Belgian is only partially true. It is true that some Francophone MPs identify themselves exclusively with Belgium, but if one combines that category with 'more Belgian than Flemish' then it is the Sp.a MPs who score the highest.

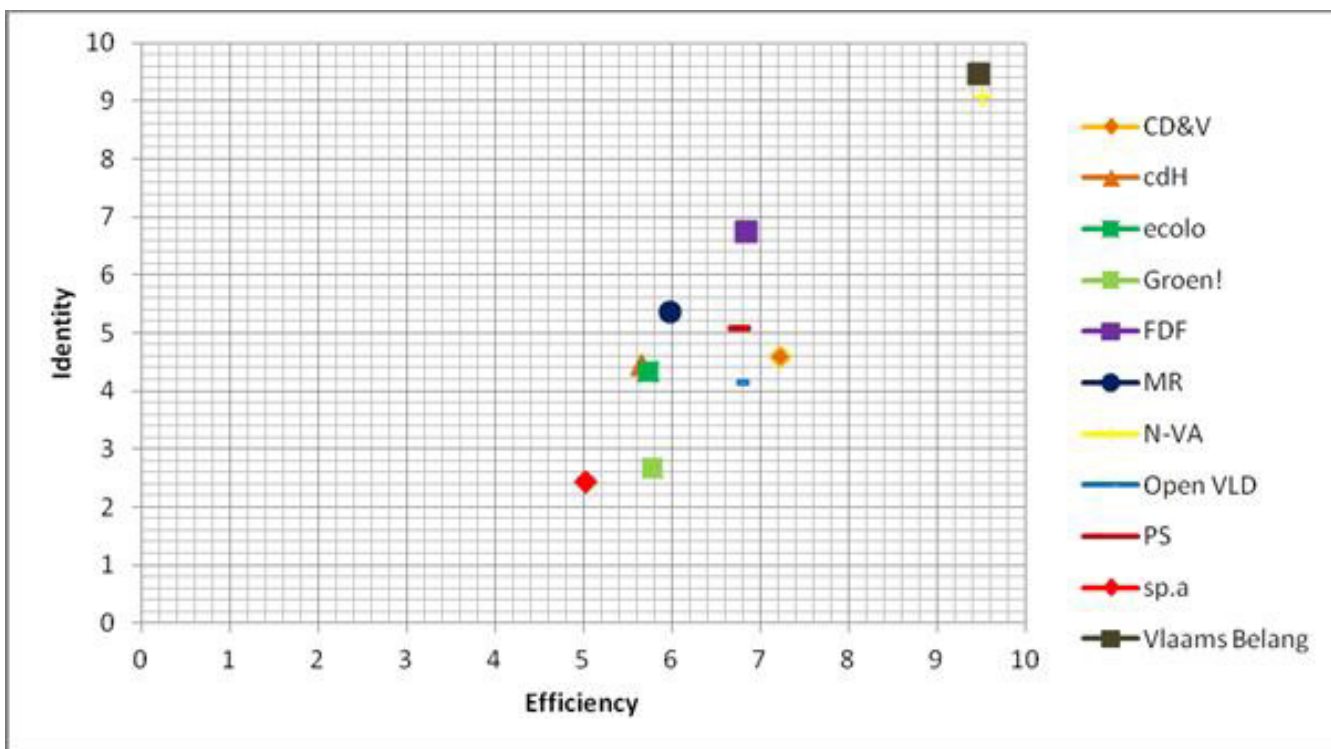
EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENCES: MOTIVES FOR THE SIXTH STATE REFORM

We have seen that the language difference is not the most important factor in explaining the standpoints of MPs in the debate on state reform. But what about the arguments used to support such reform? We can distinguish two important motives: identity and efficiency. Greater autonomy for the regions and communities can, on the one hand, be justified by the idea that a region - or even a nation - should have more autonomy because it possesses a specific identity and culture. That is a view which clearly links up with the definition of nationalism as formulated by Gellner (1983). According to that definition, Nationalists pursue a goal where nation and state coincide. On the other hand, there are more pragmatic arguments in defence of constitutional reform: the structure of the Belgian state must become more efficient. Good governance then becomes the most important motive. Obviously neither argument, identity or efficiency, excludes the other.

Therefore we attempted to apprehend through our questionnaire which argument was used most frequently by the members of parliament. For the first one - identity - we took the average of four questions, while efficiency was based on the average of five other questions. For each question the respondents were asked to select an answer ranging from 0, 'absolutely disagree', to 10, 'absolutely agree'; 5 explicitly reflected a neutral standpoint.

Unsurprisingly, the nationalist MPs were most strongly in favour of constitutional reform for reasons of identity (Figure 1). Nevertheless, it is striking that the FDF representatives (with an average of 6.75) scored less than the N-VA (9.06) and the VB (9.46). This may possibly be explained by the fact that for a long time, the FDF has historically framed its position in the form of a reaction to Flemish developments, whereas the N-VA and VB have been more proactive in their campaign for Flemish autonomy. Equally striking is that the VB and N-VA in this respect are very close to each other with an exceptionally strong emphasis on identity. Sp.a and Groen! on the other hand are the two parties that clearly reject identity as a reason for reform.

Figure 1: State reform for reasons of identity or efficiency: the positions of the MPs per political party.



All the other parties adopt a relatively neutral standpoint (around 5); the lowest figure being 4.33 for Ecolo and the highest being 5.37 for the MR. That means that the MPs of the CD&V consistently adopt a neutral standpoint (4.57) and cautiously reject reform for reasons of identity. In summary, with the exception of the nationalist parties, there are no political parties who consistently support constitutional reform with arguments of identity. So here too there is an absence of difference between the communities that we might have expected: many Flemish and Francophone parties were in close agreement. More strikingly, the only parties that explicitly reject the argument of identity are two Flemish parties, Sp.a and Groen!

One might expect that support for the efficiency argument would be the reverse of identity. Yet here too it is striking that VB and N-VA score much more highly than the other parties, while the Flemish Socialists had the lowest average with 5.28. With averages around 6, the Flemish greens and the Francophone parties (with the exception of the Socialists) position themselves slightly higher than

the Flemish Socialists with averages ranging from 5.77 to 6.22. Support for constitutional reform for reasons of efficiency is found most clearly from the PS, Open VLD and CD&V with 6.82, 6.98 and 7.49 respectively.

HOW DO MPs EXPLAIN THE POLITICAL CRISIS?

How do the MPs view the difficulties that the party leaders had in reaching agreement on the sixth constitutional reform? In order to find an answer to that question, we gave them 16 statements on possible reasons for the crisis and asked them to rate their reactions on a scale of 0 to 10. The results are set out in the form of average by party.

To start with, many blamed the crisis on ‘fundamental differences of opinion between Francophone and Flemish politicians’. That was about the only conclusion on which all the respondents were largely able to agree. That is fairly paradoxical if we remember the results above that showed differences of opinion between Flemish and Francophone politicians are in practice not particularly great. For the body of MPs as a whole, this reason scored above 7 with the exception, yet again, of Flemish Socialists and greens. Their averages of 6 and 5.4 respectively reflect a more neutral standpoint. And also once again the averages of the traditional parties were all very similar (between 7.04 and 7.76) while the nationalist parties were considerably higher: 8.4 for the FDF, 8.6 for the VB and 9.7 for the N-VA.

Furthermore, the blame was often placed on the parties of the other language community. Many Flemish members point the finger at their Francophone colleagues accusing them of ‘immobility’, ‘fearfulness’ and ‘reluctance’ to find a compromise. The same applies in reverse. With the exception of the Sp.a which scores a fairly low average on these assertions (between 4.2 and 5.9), all the other parties scored 7 or higher. Again it is the Nationalists, the N-VA, VB and FDF, who average the highest at around 9.0.

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However, it is striking that ‘the reluctance of some Flemish parties to compromise’ also scored highly among Flemish MPs whereas ‘the reluctance of some francophone parties to compromise’ was less widely supported among the Francophone MPs. While on the Francophone side only the MR and Ecolo were cautiously critical of their own community, on the Flemish side there was a greater readiness to criticise their own community by the Open VLD (6.3), CD&V (6.5), Sp.a (7.8) and the greens (7.8). Only the representatives of N-VA and VB strongly rejected that explanation with averages of 1.4 and 0.7. That is not particularly surprising since they argue that it is not the lack of political will to reach agreement but fundamental differences of opinion between north and south that have led to the clash. Conversely it is not surprising that Sp.a and Groen! are most willing to criticise the irreconcilable attitude of ‘some Flemish parties’ during the negotiations since they are the least sympathetic to the belief that fundamental differences of opinion lie at the heart of the crisis.

Quite surprising is that, with the exception of the Flemish nationalist parties, the MPs of all parties to a greater or lesser degree share the opinion that the political crisis is due to the ‘exaggerated expectations surrounding constitutional reform as the solution to every problem’ even though some of those parties openly shared or failed to denounce such exaggerated expectations. The highest averages were again to be found in Groen! (8.33) and Sp.a (7.45), but also Open VLD (7.35) and CD&V (7.0).

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE COMMUNITIES IN BELGIUM

We also asked the MPs about their contacts with the other community, including journalists and the public as well as political colleagues. This is important in light of Belgium being a ‘consensus

democracy'. One of the important elements of such political systems is, after all, a sharp division between social groups (in the past this particularly involved the religious and socio/political 'pillars') in which the elites who represent these groups have the important role of pacifying conflicts and reaching a 'Belgian compromise' (Sinardet 2010; Perrez & Reuchamps 2012). It is also interesting to see that the majority of MPs - with the exception of N-VA and VB - believed that the crisis can be explained by a 'failure of communication between Francophones and Flemings'. Although the PS (5.5) and Open VLD (6.4) averaged slightly lower, the Sp.a, MR, cdH and Ecolo scored between 6.9 and 7.2 while Groen! averaged 8.0. We shall consider in succession the contacts between MPs, with the media and with the public.

A. Contacts between Members of Parliament

First of all we must remember that these results relate to both federal and regional Members of Parliament. The figures might therefore be affected by the fact the regional MPs probably have less regular contact with their colleagues from the other community. Nevertheless, we should not attach too much importance to this methodological caveat since in both Flanders and Wallonia many MPs regularly move between the regional and federal levels.

An overwhelming majority of the MPs agree that it is important to 'maintain close contact with members of the same political family in the other community'. With the exception of N-VA, VB and FDF, for whom it was obviously a redundant question, and a fairly low score of 58% for cdH, the score of MPs who 'agree' and 'completely agree' with the statement swings between 84% for Open VLD and 100% for the Greens. That last score is no surprise considering that Groen! and Ecolo operate as a single political group in the Federal parliament (Ecolo came second with 92.6%).

It is therefore also interesting to investigate how important MPs thought it was to keep contact with members of other parties on the other side of the language border. In that respect, it is clear that the links between members of the same political family are stronger in spite of the ideological differences of opinion that can and do arise. There were far fewer positive responses to maintaining contacts with other political parties, with averages falling to 15.8% (CD&V) and 20% (Sp.a). More surprising perhaps is that although the MPs from Groen! thought it important, they did not give it the highest priority. There were more 'agree' than 'completely agree'.

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B. Contacts with the media

Our research shows that there is fairly little contact with the media across the language border. This stands out clearly in Table 5 in which the MPs report on their contacts with the media of both communities during the past six months. The differences are conspicuous: the MPs have contact with their own media between two and five times more frequently than with the media of the other community. These results correspond to the findings of another research project into the actual content of the media, which showed that news broadcasts, both north and south of the language border, do not often feature politicians from the other side. This weakens any sense of genuinely federal public life (Sinardet, 2012). However, the differences have a greater impact on some parties than on others. For instance, not a single VB MP appeared in the French-speaking media whereas the majority of them did appear in the Dutch-speaking media during the same period.

Nevertheless, the elected members do not appear to be satisfied with this situation since a large majority of them consider that 'federal MPs and ministers should make more effort to appear in the media of the other community'. With the exception of N-VA who were cautious (54.2%) and VB who were strongly against (72.7%) the MPs of all the other parties largely agree or 'agree completely' with the statement.

Table 5: Appearance of MPs in the audiovisual media and the printed press.

In absolute figures, n=210

Parties	The other community's media					Their own community's media				
	0	1	2-3	4-5	+6	0	1	2-3	4-5	+6
cdH	2	6	7	1	1	0	0	3	1	13
CD&V	3	4	10	1	1	1	0	1	6	11
Ecolo	17	3	5	2	0	2	3	5	6	11
FDF	1	2	1	1	0	1	0	0	3	1
Groen!	0	4	2	2	2	0	1	1	3	5
LDD	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
MLD	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
MR	8	3	3	8	2	0	0	0	2	22
N-VA	11	2	9	0	2	0	0	9	3	12
O VLD	11	1	7	1	5	1	2	5	3	14
PS	16	2	2	1	4	3	2	4	3	13
Sp.a	8	2	4	1	5	0	0	1	7	11
VB	11	0	0	0	0	2	2	3	1	3

C. Contacts between electors and elected

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A third aspect is the relationship with voters on the other side of the language boundary.

Because political parties in Belgium are divided along language lines and electoral districts do not cross the language boundary, political parties and their candidates only take account of a section of the Belgian electorate and primarily the voters of their own linguistic community.

What is the perception of the elected members? We make a distinction between the answers to questions relating to the electoral dynamic (the existence of two political areas in which the electoral battle takes place) and to questions about the role of the elected representatives (e.g. defending the interests of one community or of the country as a whole).

As of the former, a very large majority of the MPs find it problematic that 'federal election debates are in fact discussions within a community between politicians of the same language group' (Table 7). Only a significant minority (CD&V, 47.4%; Sp.a, 40%; N-VA, 37.5% and VB, 27.3%) denied that it was problematic. More than 70% in the other parties said that it was a problem. The others differed on the question whether it was so problematic that the country should be divided up. Not exactly surprising is that the only significant percentages were scored by the nationalist parties, VB (72.7), N-VA (41.7) and FDF (20). All in all, however, these are still fairly low scores for parties like N-VA and certainly VB. An important section of them did not see the federal organisation as a problem and certainly no good reason to break up the country.

Bearing in mind the results of Table 7, it is not surprising - in Table 8 - that very many MPs are also of the opinion that 'a federal minister or MP should primarily consider the interests of the whole country and not only the interests of his or her community', even if it is *not* currently the case (Column B). At least 75% of the representatives of Groen!, Ecolo, cdH, PS and Sp.a agree with that proposition (in descending order). Six parties scored somewhat lower percentages with on the one hand CD&V (63.2%, Open VLD (64%) and FDF (60%) and on the other hand, MR (70%), N-VA (45.8%), and VB (0%). In the first group a significant minority agreed with the proposition but believe that it already

Table 6: Appearance in the other community's media.

In percentages (%), n=210

Parties	Completely Agree	Completely Disagree	Irrelevant
cdH	88,2	11,8	0,0
CD&V	78,9	21,1	0,0
Ecolo	92,6	3,7	3,7
FDF	80,0	20,0	0,0
Groen!	90,0	10,0	0,0
LDD	100	0,0	0,0
MLD	100	0,0	0,0
MR	100	0,0	0,0
N-VA	54,2	25,0	20,8
O VLD	84,0	12,0	4,0
PS	92,0	4,0	4,0
Sp.a	90,0	10,0	0,0
VB	9,1	72,7	18,2

Table 7: Inter-community political responsibility.

In percentages (%), n=210

Parties	Do not agree	Agree, but not a problem	Agree and problematic	Problematic and division
cdH	11,8	5,9	82,4	0,00
CD&V	5,3	47,4	47,4	0,00
Ecolo	3,7	0,0	96,3	0,00
FDF	20,0	0,0	60,0	20,0
Groen!	0,0	10,0	90,0	0,00
LDD	0,0	100	0,0	0,0
MLD	0,0	0,0	100	0,0
MR	4,2	4,2	91,7	0,00
N-VA	0,0	37,5	20,8	41,7
O VLD	4,0	16,0	76,0	4,00
PS	8,0	20,0	72,0	0,00
Sp.a	0,0	40,0	60,0	0,00
VB	0,0	27,3	0,0	72,7

Table 8: The link between electors and elected in their own/the other community.

In percentages (5), n=210

Parties	A	B	C	D
cdH	11,8	82,4	5,9	0,0
CD&V	26,3	63,2	10,5	0,0
Ecolo	7,4	92,6	0,0	0,0
FDF	40,0	60,0	0,0	0,0
Groen!	0,0	100	0,0	0,0
LDD	0,0	100	0,0	0,0
MLD	0,0	100	0,0	0,0
MR	8,3	70,8	12,5	8,3
N-VA	8,3	45,8	20,8	25,0
O VLD	24,0	64,0	0,0	12,0
PS	16,0	80,0	4,0	0,0
Sp.a	20,0	75,0	0,0	5,0
VB	0,0	0,0	63,6	36,4

Key: A = Agree but it already happens; B = Agree, but it does not happen; C = Do not agree; one should put the interests of one's own community first; D = Do not agree; one should put the interests of one's electors first.

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happens. A number of MPs from the MR and N-VA, in the second group, go along with that but they are in a small minority (8.3% in both cases), particularly as a significant number of their colleagues believe that their primary concern should be for the interests of their community (column C) or their electors (column D). That is certainly the case with the VB members who were all of that opinion.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, mainstream media reporting as well as the dominant political discourse in Belgium have often given the impression that the conflict over institutional reform is being fought between two homogeneous blocs, the Flemish and the Francophones, with clear-cut and well-defined points of view. Even though there is sometimes talk of strategic differences of opinion or conflicts between parties in the same language group, the idea has taken hold that on either side of the language boundary everyone is in agreement on the heart of the matter: the Flemish want as much autonomy as possible while the Francophones remain devoted to Belgium.

Our research has shown that, as far as the MPs are concerned, this perception is far from the truth. Within the two main language groups, differences of opinion are sometimes very great, particularly on the Flemish side. The greatest difference of opinion in respect of the distribution of power between the federal level and the federated entities is between two Flemish parties, Groen! and VB. Consequently, we also see that some Francophone parties are in favour of a greater degree of regional autonomy than some of their Flemish colleagues. The MR MP's, for instance are as autonomist as those of Open VLD and more so than those of Sp.a and Groen. Also the sense of identity and the perception of community relations shows no clear division between the Flemish and Francophones. On many levels, it is the nationalist parties who clearly stand apart from the rest.

There is another dominant perception that needs to be modified in the light of our research, namely the internal homogeneity of political parties. In Belgium strong party discipline is exerted especially when it comes to parliamentary voting. However, that does not mean that points of view within the parties cannot differ. We have observed this on institutional questions, though that could have to do with the fact they are not the core concern of the non-nationalist parties. The most striking example is the Open VLD in which a quarter of its members support a high degree of regional autonomy while nearly a third of them would prefer to see an expansion of federal powers.

These results can also be read as an incentive for political analysts and commentators to take greater account of the nuances and differences of opinion within the language groups and within the political parties.

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Endnote

1/ 12 of the 25 German-speaking MPs also filled in the questionnaire but their responses have not been incorporated into this article.

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