

*A Discreet and Pragmatic Europhile Approach***Highlights**

- ★ Belgium has historically been a pro-European country. It depends on trade and foreign investment. As a small country, it benefits from being part of an institutional framework that balances the power of bigger Member States. The lack of a strong sense of national identity also helps to explain why there has been less reluctance to transfer competences to the EU.
- ★ The arrival of an explicitly conservative government ending a 24-year socialist presence in government could impair the general pro-EU consensus among elites in the country. Moreover, the change of tone by the nationalist conservative N-VA, which has become more eurosceptic, could also be consequential on the Belgium intellectual debate on the EU.
- ★ Solving the economic and social crisis is the first priority for Belgians. Several options would be supported including a bigger European budget, a common minimum income and a bolder EU investment policy. A greater involvement of citizens in the EU decision-making process would also help legitimise the EU further.

Building Bridges project

This paper is part of the Building Bridges Paper Series. The series looks at how the Member States perceive the EU and what they expect from it. It is composed of 28 contributions, one from each Member State. The publications aim to be both analytical and educational in order to be available to a wider public. All the contributions and the full volume *The European Union in The Fog* are available [here](#).



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About Building Bridges

Called “Building Bridges Between National Perspectives on the European Union”, the project aims to stimulate the public debate around national experts on the relationship between their Member State and the EU and on the future of the Union. This project confronts their visions with others’ from different member states, but also those of people from different horizons via workshops in Warsaw, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, which took place in 2015 gathering experts and local citizens.

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What does your country hope to gain from its membership to the European Union?

Belgium has historically been a very pro-European country. It was one of the founding members of the European Coal and Steel Community, the precursor to today's European Union, and since then has remained at the forefront of most advances in European integration. Concerning political actors, this pro-European tendency has translated into support for various forms of European federalism, while euroscepticism has traditionally been restricted to the margins of the political spectrum.¹

Various reasons can be advanced to explain this europhile tradition. First of all, there has always been a very clear economic interest for a small country like Belgium to deepen the economic aspect of European integration. Being very much dependent on trade and being very open to foreign investment, the Belgian economy has generally profited from the liberalisation of goods, capital and services. Moreover, like other small countries, Belgium benefits from being part of a set of institutions that balances the power of bigger European States – another reason for Belgian elites to support the construction of a common European entity. Besides, the fact that Brussels hosts an important part of the EU institutions is not irrelevant to this general europhile tendency.

However, the most important cause for this consistently positive view of the EU is most likely the lack of any strong sense of national identity in Belgium. This remark necessitates some elaboration. The Belgian state, besides being a relatively artificial and recent construction, has never been, as such, a distinct nation state. In other words, there was never an overlap between central political institutions and a common cultural community based on a

common sense of identity, anchored in a common history, belief system, culture or language. On the contrary, from the start, Belgium was extremely divided. The divisions pervading Belgian society were historically numerous and did not overlap: between the centre and the periphery, between Catholics and secular movements, between ruralism and industries, between the working class and the bourgeoisie, and between Flemish and French-speaking citizens.² These cleavages have given birth to most of the current parties in Belgium. In the twentieth century, the linguistic divide, in particular, has increased rather than declined and generated the federalisation of the state (in the sense of disintegration): this process started in the 1970s with the first institutional reforms and has been going on since then, to the point where the federal government has seen its competences reduced over time.

These characteristics of the Belgian state both reflect and explain the very weak sense of a common identity in this country. And the latter offers one of the reasons why nationalism has not been an obstacle to the substantial transfer of national competences to the European level. The low saliency of European issues within public opinion and political debates has, paradoxically, facilitated the maintenance of this general pro-European approach. This traditional feature of Belgian politics on European issues³ was reinforced in 2014 by the fact that the European elections were taking place at the same time as the regional and general elections. The fact that the consociational tradition⁴ has not completely disappeared could also have made it easier for national political actors to accept the pragmatic, functional and even oligarchic tendencies of the European decision-making system, which shares similarities with Belgian institutions. The recent economic crisis does

not seem to have dramatically changed this underlying vision: most political forces in Belgium have not gotten rid of their official pro-European message, even if they do vary according to their ideological obedience.

Do you think the European Union appears to be a clear project in your country? If not, what are the main reasons?

Traditionally the EU has been perceived in Belgium as a clear project closely linked to federalist ideals and principles. Even if the federalist credo is much less voiced than it used to be by mainstream political forces, it still partly imbues their vision of the EU. This has historically gone hand in hand with the general support of the population for this broadly europhile approach. Indeed, the “permissive consensus” on the EU in Belgium has always been very strong: Belgian public opinion has always been highly supportive of European integration. Opinions stating that Europe is a “good thing” are always above the EU average.⁵ Moreover, this tendency has not been substantially eroded by the recent difficulties pervading the EU. A recent Eurobarometer⁶ indicates that Belgian citizens trust the European institutions more than their own national government and parliament: half of the sample affirms their trust in the European Parliament against 36% for their national parliament. By the same token, 47% of Belgian citizens say that they trust the European Commission. More generally, Belgian citizens consider themselves European citizens and would support a more integrated EU in financial, fiscal and banking matters. Thus, 69% state that they feel like European citizens (compared to 63% as the EU average), and 75% believe that it would be efficient to grant the EU a more substantial role in regulating financial services (64% for the EU

average). Another interesting finding is that Belgian citizens consider the general economic situation, unemployment and pensions to be the biggest priorities, in line with the position of other EU citizens.

Two caveats should be mentioned concerning this general thesis. First of all, the revival of the left–right divide could potentially affect this broad consensus among political elites towards European issues. The government put in place after the last elections is explicitly conservative (liberals, social-Christians and Flemish nationalists), putting an end to a grand coalition of right and left. The socialist party, in particular, has been thrown back into opposition at the federal level after having been in government since 1988.

In this context, it is not impossible that the general pro-European consensus among elites could crumble or, at least, be weakened. For instance, the debates over the Greek referendum seemed to indicate an evolution towards a more clearly eurocritical discourse voiced by the centre left: the president of the socialist party Elio Di Rupo talked about the democratic right of the Greek people to decide on the bailout’s conditions,⁷ while the parties in power condemned both the referendum and the “no” camp. More generally speaking, the socialists have become more offensive on the social front since they have been in opposition. This has not been without contradictions since they are still in power in Wallonia, but it remains a noticeable tendency. Combined with an active radical left (Parti du Travail de Belgique or PTB) and Green Party (also in opposition)⁸ pushing the socialists to be more left wing, this evolution could pave the way for a more critical discourse against the EU. The emergence of new grassroots social movements and more critical trade unions

could also be contributing to this change affecting the centre-left in Belgium.

Certainly, the Flemish eurosceptic Vlaams Belang⁹ has not disappeared, but the rise of the nationalist conservative Nieuw Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) has weakened its electoral support.¹⁰ In this respect, another factor is worth mentioning: the decision made by the N-VA to join a eurosceptic group in the European Parliament (the European Conservatives and Reformists – ECR –, to which the eurosceptic British Conservative Party, the German party Alternative for Germany and the Danish Popular Party all belong), thereby refusing the invitation put to them by Guy Verhofstadt (a Belgian, and leader of the liberals in the European Parliament) to join the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group.¹¹ This confirms an evolution in the Flemish nationalists' approach to the EU. They were formerly members of the Green and Regionalist alliance and voiced a generally pro-European message. This inversion by a nationalist party that is also part of the Belgian government could pave the way for future changes and, more specifically, contribute to an erosion of European federalism in Belgium. Besides, the current security threats and refugee crisis are likely to increase these tendencies.

Until now, however, these tendencies have not indicated the rise of a strong anti-European populism, either within parties or outside of them, and this is for all the reasons mentioned above. Indeed, there are no signs of the emergence of new anti-EU populist parties or movements in Belgium. We could therefore say that if, in other countries, euroscepticism has moved from the margins to the mainstream,¹² it is not yet the case in Belgium. On the contrary, it might be interesting to note that the “federalist galaxy” has, for its part, undergone

a renewal.¹³ Dynamic new federalist movements aim to instil more democracy at the EU level and to mutualise various national policies at the EU level.

Which degree of integration seems adequate to the position and ambitions of your country both politically and economically?

Despite a generally favourable perception of the EU within the political class, there is also a low saliency of EU-related issues in political debates, reflecting and reinforcing the general lack of interest in and ignorance of the EU among ordinary citizens.

The federalist credo of the majority of mainstream parties (with the exception of the N-VA) still occasionally comes up in their official positions on Europe. It is, however, much more clearly expressed by Belgian politicians when they are Members of the European Parliament (MEP) than at the national level. In this respect, Belgium is not an exception: most national political actors give priority to domestic issues over European ones, even during European campaigns. This is one of the elements that have allowed political scientists to qualify the EU elections as “second order elections”.¹⁴ The fact that the last European elections were held at the same time as regional and general elections diminished the importance granted to European issues even before the election took place.

Furthermore, when European issues are mentioned, it is very rarely in a way that puts forward specific long-term European “projects”. In order to understand this absence of European projects, several reasons may be given. First of all, there is a lack of political projects in general: in Belgium and in other Member States, we are still in a period of “end

of ideologies". Let us note that this lacuna is particularly striking on the left: socialist, social-democratic and communist parties have historically been at the vanguard of utopias and long-term political projects. However, since the end of the Soviet Union and its impact on the communist worldview, they have found it particularly difficult to elaborate a common ideology to mobilise disadvantaged groups – as opposed to voicing a strictly critical message.

In Belgium, as elsewhere in Europe, the constraining character of contemporary supranational (European and global) frameworks is one of the reasons accounting for the difficulty for political actors (even more so for those who struggle against the status quo) to propose convincing alternatives to the current relations of power. The economic and institutional constraints put in place by the EU have greatly limited the freedom of manoeuvre of social democracy in particular.¹⁵

We are at a stage of disconnection between the level of politics and political debates on the one hand, and the actual (direct or indirect) decision-making of policies on the other:¹⁶ the former still take place at the national level, while the latter happens more and more at the European level, directly or indirectly. What happened in the Greek situation is a perfect illustration of this disconnect: a people elected a government and gave it a mandate it could not realistically apply within the current EU setting.

From a more clearly normative perspective, any coherent and powerful project for the EU would have to solve this conundrum around sovereignty: the only viable alternative seems to be between rehabilitating sovereignty at the national level or building a fully-fledged sovereignty at the EU level.¹⁷ The only political actors taking a clear stance on this issue are the populist eurosceptics; the centre right and

centre left continue to praise or accept the hybrid institutional framework characterising the EU, and do not want to clearly engage in the renewal of sovereignty at this level.

According to you, how could we strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere among your national citizens?

Belgium has managed to build functional institutions despite incredibly strong internal divisions – more specifically, the “philosophical” (church vs. state), socio-economic (workers vs. capitalists) and linguistic (Flemish vs. French-speaking) cleavages.¹⁸ Certainly, those common institutions have been increasingly challenged in recent decades, by Flemish nationalist movements, among others, but they still survive. In this context, Belgian political actors have become accustomed to thinking pragmatically and functionally about institutions and not in terms of values and identity. This ability still pervades Belgian politics and could still be a tremendous asset to revamp the EU institutions in a way that would appeal to citizens' heads and reason as much as to their hearts and emotions. Because of its singular characteristics, Belgium is particularly suited to being at the forefront of a battle to relegitimise the EU in terms of both output and input, and to convey a rational and functional message about the EU, as opposed to merely identity-related or romantic ones.

Nonetheless, much work remains to be done regarding the emergence of a common European public sphere. Strengthening this idea among Belgian citizens would be a challenge since there is actually no public sphere yet at the European level. What we could do is encourage Belgian citizens to support ideas and actions aiming at building this

common public sphere, for instance through various federalist organisations.

Which policies would you deem essential to conduct at the EU level in order to better legitimise the European project?

As already mentioned, the latest Eurobarometer's in Belgium show that the population is mainly interested in seeing a swift and efficient resolution of social and economic problems. This probably means that, if the EU was perceived to be delivering outputs in that respect, it could hope to re-boost its legitimacy among Belgian citizens.

Again, this is a much broader issue that does not only concern Belgium. In line with what was said earlier, the EU could, for example, be much more active and efficient in solving the unemployment issue, with a bolder investment policy funded by a bigger European budget, creating a minimum income that prevents a race to the bottom in that field. Another avenue for boosting output legitimacy would be to harmonise taxation on profits, in order to prevent a race to the bottom in that field, as well as to create new proper EU own resources.

In addition, rebuilding the legitimacy of the EU would require a response to the sense, widespread among Belgian citizens as well as in the rest of the EU, that the European "governance" is insufficiently democratic. Of course, this does not mean that they have a higher trust in their own institutions. Therefore, proposals aimed at involving citizens more clearly in the EU decision-making process – such as the election of a president of the EU or the bestowing of the European Parliament with powers to propose new legislation – could contribute to re-legitimising the EU in the eyes of the population. All the more so, given the fact that Belgian citizens are becoming less attached

to their own (already extremely complex and divided) democracy, this would make it easier for them to accept further leaps towards increased power for supranational institutions.

As we have seen, Belgium has always had a strong objective interest in European economic integration because of its small size and because of its very open economy.¹⁹ Besides, the "sovereigntist" alternative is almost impossible to consider and to put into practice in this country, because of its total lack of national identity and unified sovereignty.

Nonetheless, given the very high level of integration reached between European economies and societies, it is harder and harder to conceive of distinct national visions of how far European integration should go. There seems to be a very strong objective interest for European citizens to deepen European integration in several fields, at least within the Eurozone. Whether this will be done or not will mainly depend on political will. In any case, it is probably sensible to confront the various risks of disintegration with proposals to consolidate a core around the most europhile countries. The possibility of building "enhanced cooperation" among a group of countries exists in the current treaties and could clearly be used to that end.

On the contrary, pursuing the current path will not help solve the economic crisis and the social consequences thereof. Despite recent calls for the implementation of an "economic government"²⁰ of the Eurozone, we are still very far from having a "positive integration" that would impede the "race to the bottom" triggered by the liberalisation of goods, labour, capital and services without common taxation and social standards. Indeed, the "economic governance" put in place in the years following the financial, fiscal and economic crisis²¹ is far from neutral

from an economic and political point of view: it still relies on a postulate that “orthodox” economic policies (including austerity) are inevitable and economically sound. We are also still very far from the economic convergence required in an “optimal monetary zone”.²² In that respect, the consolidation of austerity through the “six pack”, “two pack” and Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance did not help much. We need a different macro-economic policy, focused on demand rather than supply, which means that we need a dramatic

increase of the EU budget and a proper investment policy (much more substantial than the Juncker investment plan) as well as a mutualisation of debts. Such economic redirection is indispensable, not only to alleviate the terrible social situation of an increasing part of the European population (poverty and unemployment are still very high and the targets fixed by the 2020 strategy will probably not be met in that respect), but also to boost growth and to save the real basis (rather than the purely financial ones) of the European economy.

Endnotes

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3. Crespy, "Europe and Euroscepticism", *op. cit.*
4. Arend Lijphart, "Typologies of democratic systems", *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 3-44, 1968. Consociationalism refers to a situation where a state is divided into major groups (ethnic, linguistic etc.) that hold relatively equal power and can manage the country with relative stability.
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