

Opinion

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Brussels after Belgium: fringe town or city state ?

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Were Flanders to secede from Belgium, would Brussels follow suit ? Absolutely not. Brussels, today, has a fast-growing and ever more diverse population of over one million people. After a long demographic decline, it is about to overtake its historical peak of 1968. Barely 40% of this population are of Flemish or Walloon origin. Dutch is the sole mother tongue of less than 10% and French of less than 50%. About 96% claim to know French well or very well, 36% English and 31% Dutch. If the right to self-determination justifies Flemish secession, then it also entitles the Brussels population to decide whether it wants to join the Flemish state. And the answer, not least among the Flemings who choose to live in Brussels, will be a resounding “no”.

There are two scenarios were Belgium to split, each with its own logic and with very different implications for Brussels. In the first, Flanders separates unilaterally, leaving behind in amputated form the unilingual *Belgique* which the independence fighters of 1830 thought they had founded. As Flanders will be eager for recognition as an EU members state, it will readily accept to pay Belgium whatever compensation package the European Council will see fit to impose. Indulgence is unlikely: EU leaders will be more than reluctant to encourage their own richer regions to secede so as to avoid national solidarity.

Moreover, the right to self-determination will require that all communes located at the border between the current Region of Flanders and the Regions of Brussels and Wallonia should be offered a choice between the two new unilingual countries. The resulting border shift will be modest. It is bound to involve the six communes which grant educational and administrative “facilities” to French speakers in the Flemish suburbs of Brussels (Drogenbos, Kraainem, Linkebeek, Rode, Wemmel, Wezembeek,). Far more Francophones than Flemings live in these communes and they will undoubtedly opt to remain in Belgium, as will perhaps one or two other neighbouring Flemish communes. Not more. The border shift will be sufficient, however, for Wallonia and Brussels to become contiguous: a “corridor will henceforth connect Uccle to Waterloo.

In this scenario, Brussels will no longer be at the throbbing heart of one of Europe’s founding nations. It will become the Northern fringe town of a stunted Belgium. The Walloon Region chose Namur to be its capital because of its central position. In the redrawn Belgium, Regions will have withered away, but Namur will have become even more central. It will not be long before it replaces the eccentrically located Brussels as the new country’s capital.

Will Brussels nonetheless remain the Capital of Europe? One could hardly have dreamt of a more suitable capital for a supranational Union than the capital city of a successful plurinational state. In this scenario, however, Brussels will be widely perceived as a provincial town in a French protectorate. At the slightest problem, voices will be heard throughout Europe asking for alternative capitals to be considered, but that won't be easy. Consequently, the European institutions are likely to maintain a gloomy, increasingly ghettoised existence, in a Francophone country whose language their employees will use less and less, in a city plagued by acute problems, especially defective education and youth unemployment, and unable to address them adequately because of merciless tax competition from its Flemish suburbs.

In the second scenario, it is no longer the Flemings who secede, but the Belgians who decide, by mutual consent, to split their country in three entities: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. Maybe even in four if the German minority in the East of the country feels uncomfortable within an independent Wallonia and secures a status analogous to that of Andorra or Monaco. Once again, all communes located along the regional borders — or so located as a result of the choices made by other communes — will be allowed to choose. In this case, the outcome of the consultation will be less certain. It will depend, for example, on whether all EU residents or only (ex-)Belgians are entitled to vote, on the exact status granted to the three entities and on their mutual obligations. In all likelihood, a fair number of communes in both Flemish and Walloon Brabant will then choose Brussels rather than unilingual Flanders or Wallonia. A domino effect might even move the borders beyond Leuven and Louvain-La-Neuve, were there not to be a prior agreement that is sure to prevent Brussels from biting deeply into the country's two most prosperous provinces.

Brussels will thus become a city-state three or four times larger than the current Brussels-Region, with a forest, an airport and a good million and half inhabitants. Owing to its wealth, it will be liable to pay — along with Flanders — a sizeable compensation to Wallonia by way of alimony. Would Flemings and Walloons still have a say in Brussels? Of course, but not by turning it into a joint colony. Any Fleming or Walloon who wishes to help shape its destiny is welcome to move to Brussels and mix with its increasingly cosmopolitan and multilingual population.

In this second scenario, Brussels will have no problem confirming and reinforcing its role as capital of Europe. By then, the European Union will no doubt have realized that even peculiar political entities need to invest massively in their capital city. By doing so, it will have become entitled to having a say in the way the city is run. This would not prevent the city-state of Brussels-Capital from claiming, on a par with Flanders and Wallonia, the status of an EU member state, with all the corresponding rights and obligations, and thus would be in no way comparable to Washington DC. Nonetheless, Brussels will need to make allowance for its unique function. For example, it will need to extend voting rights and eligibility at its 'national' elections to all its European residents. It will need to actively involve the European authorities in city planning. And it will need to put an appropriate palace at the disposal of the President of the European Council, providing the rotating presidencies have been brought to an end.

From the standpoint of Flemings, Walloons and Brusselers, is there anything superior to these two scenarios? Of course there is: an intelligently reformed federal

Belgium. A federal Belgium with three strongly autonomous regions, each made financially responsible for the quality of its policies, each proud of itself and respectful of the others, in particular as regards the linguistic integrity of both Flanders and Wallonia. A federal Belgium with a slim but vigorous federal government, made electorally accountable to the country as a whole, despite the existence of two separate public opinions and the absence of national parties, through the creation of a nation-wide constituency. Not an easy project, but an essential one for anyone who believes democracy can and must be made compatible with a genuine respect for linguistic diversity.

By making the capital of Belgium, hesitantly but irreversibly, the capital of Europe, the vagaries of history have entrusted it with a mission of worldwide importance. Brussels will accomplish this mission together with Flanders and Wallonia as part of Belgium's federal state if it can. Alongside them if it must.

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