

BELGIUM FRACTURING ON LINGUISTIC DIVIDE



The split between French-speaking Walloons and the Dutch-speaking Flemish is on the verge of breaking the little country apart.

By Geraldine Baum, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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BRUSSELS—To the uninitiated, the existential crisis splitting Belgium down the middle these days might seem like a (very) civilized war as told by Dr. Seuss, with the French-speaking Walloons on one side and the Dutch-speaking Flemings on the other.

To continue the literary analogy, consider the library at Belgium's Leuven University. Make that two libraries.

German armies had burned down Leuven's library in the two world wars, and it was rebuilt after each. But then in 1970, the last time the Flemings and the Walloons got seriously restive, the million-volume collection was carved into two: Odd-numbered books remained on the original campus in the Dutch-speaking part of the country, while even-numbered books went to a new Francophone school built in a field 17 miles to the south.

Thirty-seven years later, Belgium's national identity is still so elusive, so fragile and so fractured that the little country wedged between the Netherlands and France may be on the verge of breaking apart.

The more prosperous Dutch-speakers in Flanders in the north want to shake off their relatively poor French-speaking neighbors in Wallonia to the south.

After 177 years, Belgium, with its 10.5 million people, would disappear into two nations, with one proposal turning Brussels into a capital district akin to Washington, D.C.

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

After decades of snubs and bitter grudges, the two halves of Belgium have separate languages, political parties, schools and media. Some claim that even the birds of Flanders and Wallonia sing in different languages.

These divisions have thrown the country into a political limbo that is 5 months old and counting. Since June 10 national elections, warring factions from each region have been unable to form a coalition government, with the main hurdle being Flemish demands for increased autonomy. The last time Belgium was in a similar crisis was in 1988, and it took 148 days to form a government. It's been a week longer than that now, and counting.

For the time being, the outgoing prime minister is sticking around to make sure taxes are collected and bills get paid. And King Albert II has stepped in to appoint a mediator, but nobody believes the 73-year-old monarch, best known for his motorcycle and French villa before he came to power, can hold the country together.

In the meantime, outsiders seem to find amusement in the predicament of the little country famous for chocolate, French fries and producing 500 kinds of beers. An Australian journalist insisted the country had to stay together because who'd want "Flemish chocolates," or to be anything "Walloon," the "Oompa-loompa of national adjectives"? This fall, "Belgium, a kingdom in three parts," was listed for sale on EBay but was quickly pulled after a bid came in at \$13 million.

If Belgium has any image internationally, it is as the home of the 27-member European Union, founded 50 years ago to transcend just this kind of Balkanization that plunged Europe into two world wars in the last century. So no one has missed the irony that over the half a century the EU came together, the country that plays host to its capital has spiraled further apart.

Polls show that fewer than half the Flemings are ready to saw apart the country, but a majority in both regions envisions that sometime in the next decade the kingdom known as Belgium will no longer exist.

As crises of these sorts go, this one has been relatively civil. No one has pulled a gun or exploded a bomb or threatened to behead the king, who went off on holiday this summer as the crisis ground on. Rather, grievances are aired on television, in competing editorials and in debates on the floor of Belgium's six governing parliaments. And there are such skirmishes almost daily.

At the core of the controversy is the struggle to answer: What is a Belgian?

"I am a Fleming and a European citizen and I have always felt like that," said Geert Bourgeois, a minister in the Flanders government who founded the New-Flemish Alliance, a small but influential secessionist party.

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Press Bourgeois about his national identity, and he goes right past the idea of Belgium to describe the growing frustration of growth-minded Flanders in attempting to deal with healthcare, justice, even traffic congestion. The Flemings want to invest in prisons; the Walloons don't. According to many, Flemings want tougher standards for unemployment benefits; Walloons, who rely heavily on government subsidies, don't.

"Today, in the Flemish-Walloon marriage," Bourgeois insisted, "it is like a husband that says to his spouse: 'Honey, I love you and I want us to stay together forever, but forget about your wishes and needs.' "

But Walloons argue that this marriage can be saved, and they resent being portrayed by Flemish politicians as incompetents. Yet even in Wallonia, politicians concede it might be time to explore the idea of making it on their own.

It would be too easy to conclude that either region's grievances are rooted in practical matters such as differing unemployment rates (Wallonia is at 14% and Flanders at 5%) and inheritance taxes (it's cheaper to die in Flanders).

Resentments date back to the founding of Belgium in 1830, when French was fatefully imposed as the official language on a Flemish majority. By the first half of the 20th century, the French-speaking elite dominated by denying Flemings many basic rights such as an education in their own language. During World War I, Flemish soldiers were sent into battle by French-speaking officers, and many died because they didn't understand their orders.

Bourgeois looks upon those deaths as a turning point when "in the trenches, common Flemings united with Flemish intellectuals and became aware of their discrimination and the injustice of the whole situation."

Belgian identity lost further ground in the 1960s when the steel- and coal-based industries of Wallonia, which had long fueled the national economy and Francophone power, petered out. The wealthy Walloons lost everything, and instead of forcing painful economic reform, they relied on the growing economic prowess of Flanders, now a center of high-tech and international business.

With Flemish activists agitating for increased parity, a formal linguistic border was established through constitutional reform in 1970, and Belgium was formally divided three ways among Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. From then on, everything that had been shared was divvied up.

That included Leuven University.

Thierry Brassine attended the newer, Francophone campus in the 1970s and never mixed with a Fleming. "It's only when I started working," he admits, "that I encountered many Dutch- speakers." One was Anne Van Asbroeck, a lively translator who spoke elegant

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Dutch, French, even English. They both got jobs at the Brussels regional parliament when it was established in 1989.

All of Belgium was supposed to be like the marriage of Van Asbroeck and Brassine.

Van Asbroeck, 50, is Flemish, born here into a Dutch-speaking family. Brassine is the same age and was raised only knowing French. They are a rare intermarriage in this country disintegrating along linguistic lines. But they now know each other's language and their children move easily between both, even though Sophie, 11, goes to a Dutch school and Caroline, 16, to a French one.

"I like the fact that we are different together, and I'd like to keep it that way," Van Asbroeck says, but adds with a sigh, "even if I know it's a utopia."

As a Fleming, wife and mother, Van Asbroeck has done more accommodating than her Francophone husband. But she harbors no anger, recognizes no divide and easily melds their cultures.

Still, he rarely speaks his wife's native language, and when her 89-year-old mother visits, she speaks to her son-in-law in French. When Van Asbroeck wants the Flemish point of view, she retreats to the kitchen to watch TV.

"When I was a child, Belgium was Belgium and we had news from everywhere," she said. "Now we are so divided that we don't know each other anymore. Our politicians don't know each other."

That is not as true in Brussels, she says. Capital of Belgium, Flanders and the EU and home to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Brussels is a global city where people born in different places mostly happily coexist. In fact, for now the strongest force keeping Belgium together might just be Brussels. Neither Flanders nor Wallonia wants to give it up, and the regional politicians of Brussels want the country kept intact.

Sophie Brassine, who lives on the linguistic fault line, offers a window into the Brussels soul. When her mother, still dreaming of utopia, asked Sophie what it meant to her to be Belgian, she answered: "Mom and Dad, French fries, chocolate, French and Dutch together and Brussels."

geraldine.baum@latimes.com