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## **The European Dimension in Flanders' Quest for Autonomy**

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## Abstract

The paper explores the question of the connections between European integration and territorial restructuring of the European states by investigating the case of Belgium. Belgium is the European country that has experienced the most far-reaching process of territorial restructuring of all. Between 1970 and 1992, it transformed itself from a unitary to a federal state; it has since moved in the direction of a *de facto* confederation and may even break up altogether. The driving force behind this extraordinary transformation has been Flanders' demands for autonomy. At the same time, as a founding member of the EU and the host of most of its key institutions, Belgium is the state most exposed to the Europeanising effects of integration. Belgium is thus the ideal empirical case on which to test the theoretical claims of a causal connection between integration and territorial restructuring advanced in the literature. The paper does so on the basis of a cross-time analysis of party rhetoric and strategies, with a particular focus on the key phases of 1968-70, 1978-80, 1991-93 and 2004-07. The paper shows that the Flemish parties have exploited the European dimension for a long time but also to a more limited extent than might have been expected and that Europeanisation has largely been confined to the nationalist parties. It also shows that actors' perception of, and attitudes to, integration have been more important determinants of Europeanisation than the actual evolution of the EU system and that the overall influence of the European dimension has become increasingly contradictory as Flanders' autonomy has increased. The paper concludes by drawing a comparison with the case of Scotland and deriving some theoretical implications for the debate on Europeanisation and multi-level governance in Europe.

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" Wij willen Vlamingen zijn, om Europe ers te worden"

August Vermeylen, 1900<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "We want to be Flemings in order to become Europeans", Vermeylen (1951 [1900]: 170).

## 1 Introduction

The post-WWII period has witnessed a widespread process of decentralisation of power across most of the democratic world and notably in Europe.<sup>2</sup> The most striking feature of such decentralisation has been the creation of a regional level of government, intermediate between the central state and the traditional units of territorial administration such as counties, *départements* or provinces. While in many countries regionalisation has meant the introduction of an additional layer of essentially territorial administration, in some cases it has entailed profound constitutional change leading to the devolution of extensive legislative and policy-making powers to regional authorities.

Over broadly the same period, the states that are members of the European Union have also delegated a large amount of power upwards to the European level, in the process of European integration. This has induced a number of observers to note that the European states are increasingly being 'hollowed out' both 'from below' and 'from above'<sup>3</sup> and has spurred a substantial literature discussing the links between the supra-state and the sub-state levels of governance in Europe, notably within the research programmes on multi-level governance and on Europeanisation.<sup>4</sup>

A key theoretical question in this context is the extent to which there is a causal connection between the two processes. In other words, the extent to which regional devolution is influenced – and possibly fuelled – by European integration. Depending on the answer given to this question, the future of the state in the context of European integration would appear starkly different. If, at one extreme, European dimension is shown to fuel or facilitate regionalisation - in its 'strong' form - we should expect a growing fragmentation of the EU states as integration progresses. At the other extreme, on the contrary, if regionalisation is largely unrelated to integration, a deepening of the latter would not have a significant impact on states' constitutional structure.

While other aspects of the regions-Europe connection have attracted considerable scholarly scrutiny - such as for instance the attitude of regional nationalist parties' to European integration - this particular question has received much less attention. More

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<sup>2</sup> See Marks et al. (2008: 177-8).

<sup>3</sup> See Kolinsky (1981) for an early example.

specifically, it was first raised in the academic literature in the mid-1970s and has since been touched upon by many authors but, with the exception of a recent study of Scottish devolution<sup>5</sup>, has not been the subject of systematic investigation.

The question is particularly relevant in the case of Belgium. On the one hand, the country has undergone the most far-reaching process of regional devolution of all European states. From a centralised unitary state, it has transformed itself into a highly decentralised federal state and is now facing pressures to develop in a 'confederal' direction if not breaking up into fully separate states altogether.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, as a founding member of what is now the European Union and the host of most of its institutions, it is very much at the heart of the process of European integration. Belgium thus presents itself as an ideal case study to investigate the connections between European integration on the one hand and regional devolution on the other hand. Yet, in spite of its theoretical potential, this aspect of the transformation of Belgium has only been marginally touched upon in the literature<sup>7</sup> and thus offers a fruitful opportunity for scholarly analysis.

The paper intends to contribute to filling this gap in the literature by presenting the results of a research project investigating the extent to which the process of regional devolution in Belgium has been influenced by European integration. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: section two summarises the existing literature and identifies the main theoretical hypotheses put forward; section three outlines the design of the research project and the methodology employed; sections four to seven present the empirical results, organised chronologically on the basis of four time points; finally section eight offers an interpretation of the results and a discussion of their significance in comparison to the case of Scotland.

## **2 Review of the literature**

The question of whether and how European integration may be linked to devolution started to be addressed in the 1970s, when Feld for example asked “will politics for

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<sup>4</sup> Hooghe and Marks (2001) and Hix and Goetz (2000), respectively, are representative of these strands of the literature.

<sup>5</sup> Dardanelli (2005).

<sup>6</sup> The Flemish Community and the Walloon and Brussels regions score 13 on the Regional Authority Index developed by Hooghe et al. (2008: 267-8). For a recent assessment of Belgian federalism, see Swenden and Jans (2006).

<sup>7</sup> See Hooghe (1995) and Laible (2001).

regional autonomy be linked to European politics?”.<sup>8</sup> Since the 1970s, the question has been touched upon by many authors who have put forward a range of hypotheses on the connection between the two phenomena. These contributions can be grouped together in three broad categories: those who see the two processes as largely independent from each other, those who see a 'negative' link - i.e. integration as constraining devolution - and those who hypothesise a 'positive' link - i.e. that integration facilitates devolution.

In the first category can be placed both authors who think that there is no causal connection between integration and devolution and those who simply fail to ignore the possibility that a link might exist between the two. The former generally argue that demands for regional autonomy are essentially generated by cultural conflicts, which have deep historical roots and are largely unaffected by the process of integration. Moreover, the most powerful actors at the Union level are the state governments, which leave the purely supra-state institutions such as the Commission and the Parliament with not enough power and decisional autonomy to strategically use the process of integration to encourage demands for self-government at the regional level<sup>9</sup>. Among the latter, one finds most of the scholars contributing to the literatures on Europeanisation and multi-level governance who, somewhat surprisingly, largely neglect this question.<sup>10</sup>

The category of those identifying a negative connection is much less populated. It is best exemplified by Scheinman, who perceived a clear connection between the two processes but thought they were contradictory. This is for two reasons. First, the EU was created by, and is an instrument of, the states directed towards defending and underpinning the status quo while demands for regional autonomy are demands for economic and political change. Second, the capitalist and supra-national character of the EU runs counter to regionalist demands for cultural and economic protection. He thus expected integration to weaken demands for regional autonomy.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Feld (1975: 1192 and references at fn 88)

<sup>9</sup> See, among others, Kolinsky (1981: 86-94), Urwin (1982), Sharpe (1993a: 2), Wallace (1996)

<sup>10</sup> Although many aspects of the link between the European and the regional level have been explored within the literatures on Europeanisation and on multi-level governance, the specific question of whether integration facilitates or constrains demands for regional autonomy leading to processes of devolution of power has only been marginally touched upon; see Kassim's (2005: esp. 303-7) recent review of the literature.

<sup>11</sup> Scheinman (1977: esp. 66, 74-5).

The majority of authors who have addressed this question identify a positive connection between integration and demands for devolution. While they could all be seen as following in the steps of Rudolph - who already in the 1970s predicted: “as the European Community continues to develop, many of the changes involving its operations will favor the continued development of ethnonational issues”<sup>12</sup> - different authors put their emphasis on different factors and identify different causal mechanisms. It is thus useful to sub-divide this category further, on the basis of the different factors emphasised.

Among those stressing institutional factors, Birch argued that the emergence of supra-state organisations such as the EU is one of the key factors driving the demand for regional self-government because it offers a favourable institutional structure for regions contemplating secession. As he put it “the rules of the E.E.C. actually provide an incentive to secession, as an independent Scotland or Corsica would be entitled to its own representatives in Community institutions and would gain the important power of vetoing decisions in the Council of Ministers”.<sup>13</sup> The existence of policy-making institutions at the European level - notably a directly-elected Parliament - has also been seen as offering regionalist actors an arena in which to pursue their strategies for self-government by-passing the states.<sup>14</sup> More recently, the setting up of the Committee of the Regions has been seen as providing an incentive to acquire self-government capabilities in order to be able to influence the positions taken by the body vis-à-vis powerful actors such as Bavaria, Catalonia or Flanders.<sup>15</sup>

Others emphasise the role played by the EU's policy output, the structural funds in particular. This had already been noted in the 1970s<sup>16</sup> and attracted a great deal of attention in the 1990s within the emerging literature on multi-level governance. The general theoretical claim in this literature is that the development of the structural funds - especially since their wide-ranging reform in 1988 - provided regional governments with both incentives to acquire greater autonomy in order to profit fully from the funds and opportunities to strengthen their positions vis-à-vis state government by establishing direct links with the European institutions and with regions in other countries.<sup>17</sup> Hix and Goetz outline the core mechanism as such: “EU regional policy encourages member states to establish planning authorities at the regional level, which

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<sup>12</sup> See Rudolph (1977: 554).

<sup>13</sup> Birch (1978: 336).

<sup>14</sup> Rudolph (1977: 555) and Forsyth (1989: 7).

<sup>15</sup> See Anderson and Goodman (1995: 617).

<sup>16</sup> See Rhodes (1973-4: 68), Feld (1975) and Rudolph (1977: 554).

in turn produce demands for a democratisation of these structures, and hence the creation of elected regional assemblies and governments” and where these bodies already exist it reinforces the demands “for further delegation of policy competences away from central government”<sup>18</sup>.

Significant attention has also been devoted to economic factors, with focus on two aspects in particular. Some authors have argued that by placing increasing constraints on states' economic policies, integration provides incentives for regions to acquire autonomy - notably in the economic sphere - in order to enact policies of economic development at the regional level.<sup>19</sup> Others have focussed on the single market itself as a structure that, by guaranteeing free trade and regulatory continuity, reduces the economic costs of secession and thus encourages the pursuit of independence.<sup>20</sup>

Lastly, several authors stress the role played by ideational factors. First, by its very supra-national character, the process of integration has undermined the principle of absolute state sovereignty and thus made the transfer of power to the regional level more acceptable.<sup>21</sup> Second, it has also been seen as generating a shift in citizens' collective identification away from its exclusive focus on the national state and towards both Europe and the regions. This provides the latter with a stronger identificational underpinning and offers an opportunity to regionalist actors to mobilise it for their ends.<sup>22</sup> Third, the idea of a 'Europe of the Regions' - of earlier origin but adopted in the EU's official discourse of the late 1980s-early 1990s - has been seen to provide a powerful legitimisation for regional autonomy by making it appear a natural complement to the process of European integration.<sup>23</sup> Lastly, the EU's endorsement of the principle of subsidiarity - like the Europe of the Regions idea, of much earlier origin but popularised by the debate on integration since the late 1980s - has also been identified as offering rhetorical legitimisation to demands for devolution of power to the regions.<sup>24</sup>

In his study of the politics of Scottish devolution in the context of European integration from the 1970s to the 1990s, Dardanelli has found significant empirical support for some of these hypotheses, notably the incentives and opportunities provided by the

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<sup>17</sup> See Hooghe and Marks (2001: esp. 81-118).

<sup>18</sup> Hix and Goetz (2000: 11).

<sup>19</sup> See Keating (1993: 308), Cheshire (1995: 27), Rhodes (1995: 8), Anderson and Goodman (1995: 614-20).

<sup>20</sup> This had already been pointed out by Birch (1978: 336) and has subsequently been developed theoretically by Meadwell and Martin (1996).

<sup>21</sup> See, among others, Kellas (1991: 226-31) and Keating and McGarry (2001: 9-10).

<sup>22</sup> See, among others, Rudolph (1977: 554), Keating (1992: 48) and Loughlin (2000: ??).

<sup>23</sup> See, among others, Anderson (1991: 420), and Börzel (2001: 585-6).

EU's institutional order and single market as well as the legitimising effects of the Europe of the Regions idea and the principle of subsidiarity.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, the existing literature on the process of devolution in Belgium either neglects the European dimension or explicitly rejects the hypothesis that European integration might have had a causal effect on it, in spite of the fact that several analyses of nationalist parties have pointed out the strategic use these have made of 'Europe'.<sup>26</sup>

### **3 Theoretical and methodological framework**

The overall research question mentioned above has been operationalised by breaking it down into the following specific questions:

Q1: To what extent have actors demanding transfers of power to Flanders perceived European integration as providing incentives and opportunities, as opposed to constraints, for their objectives?

Q2: To what extent have they utilised the European dimension in their strategies to secure such transfers of power?

Q3: Which aspects of the European dimension have been perceived as most important?

Q4: How and why have perceptions and strategies varied between actors?

Q5: How and why have perceptions and strategies changed over time?

This operationalisation is based on the following theoretical elements. First, that processes of devolution of power are a product of demands for self-government voiced by autonomist actors, typically political parties based in 'assertive' regions.<sup>27</sup> Second, that the EU possesses a number of properties that potentially affect these demands either by providing incentives and opportunities or by placing constraints. The European dimension is thus conceptualised as an 'intervening' variable in this process affecting the relations between autonomist demands as the 'independent' variable and devolution of power through constitutional change as the 'dependent' variable. Third, that autonomist parties use 'rhetorical action' as a strategic weapon to build support for their demands and achieve their objectives. To the extent that they exploit the European dimension to that end, the latter can be said to have a causal impact on the process of devolution.

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<sup>24</sup> See, among others, Ladrech (1994: 82) and Jones (1995: 294-5).

<sup>25</sup> See Dardanelli (2005: esp. 134-5).

<sup>26</sup> See De Bandt (1992) and Hooghe (2004) for the former and Lynch (1996: 106-34), Breuning and Ishiyama (1998) and Laible (2001) for the latter.

<sup>27</sup> I borrow the use of 'assertive' in this context from Van Houten (2000).

The crucial role played by political parties applies particularly in the case of Belgium, given the pervasive dominance of parties in its politics which has led observers to label it a 'particracy'.<sup>28</sup> The assertive region in the Belgian context is clearly Flanders, whose emancipation movement - known as the Flemish Movement - has been the key driving force of the process of constitutional transformation of the country. The key actors analysed here are thus the Flemish political parties belonging to the four traditional 'families': christian-democrat, socialist, liberal and nationalist.<sup>29</sup> The parties included - on the basis of their current names - are the *Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams* (christian-democrat), the *Socialisten en Progressieven Anders* (socialist), the *Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* (liberal) for all four periods as well as the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (conservative nationalist) for the most recent period, the *Volksunie* (centrist nationalist) for the first three periods<sup>30</sup> and the *Vlaams Belang* (extreme-right nationalist) for the latter two periods.

To capture the evolution of the connections between European integration and the Flemish demands for self-government over time, the project is structured as a cross-temporal comparison of four key periods: 1968-1970, 1978-1980, 1991-93 and 2005-07. These periods have been selected because they are marked by crucial steps both in European integration and in the process of federalisation in Belgium – as summarised in Table 1 below – and are thus the most fruitful periods of observation for the purpose of this study.<sup>31</sup> The total number of units of observation is 18.

**Table 1**

<b>Period</b>	<b>European integration</b>	<b>Belgian federalisation</b>
1968-70	Completion of customs union, development of plans for monetary union, re-launch of integration at The Hague summit in 1969	Initiation of process, revision of constitution, setting up of communities and regions
1978-80	Beginning of monetary integration with launch of EMS, first elections to EP	Second revision of constitution, consolidation of devolution
1991-93	Maastricht treaty, start of monetary union process	Formal federalisation

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Deschouwer (1999)

<sup>29</sup> The Green party has been excluded from the analysis because it has been a significant force only since the early 1990s.

<sup>30</sup> The N-VA was established in 2001 as the main successor to the *Volksunie*.

<sup>31</sup> Additional reforms were carried out in 1988 and 2001 but are not analysed in detail in this paper because they were less important than the other wave of reforms and did not coincide with turning points in European integration.

2004-07	Eastern enlargement, Constitutional treaty	Regional elections, federal election, governing crisis
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The following hypotheses have been tested:

H1: Devolutionist parties saw integration as providing incentives and opportunities for their demands

H2: Devolutionist parties exploited the European dimension in their strategies

H3: The degree to which they 'played the European card' is dependent on their attitudes to integration

H4: Europeanisation – i.e. degree of exploitation of the European dimension - increased over time as integration deepened

H5: Institutional and ideational factors were more influential than economic or policy factors

The core sources analysed are election manifestos and congress resolutions, supplemented by other types of party documents, by media reports and - for the most recent period - by party websites and semi-structured interviews with party members.

#### 4 The late 1960s

Following the radicalisation of what is usually called in Belgium the 'community question' in the 1950s and 1960s and the growing success of the federalist parties, this period saw the beginning of the federalisation process with the constitutional reforms of December 1970. The reforms put an end to the traditionally unitary structure of the Belgian state by providing for the creation of sub-state entities – 'communities' for cultural matters and 'regions' for economic and other territorial matters – with law-making powers.<sup>32</sup> The reforms took place in the wake of the crucial 1968 election, which saw a major advance of the 'community' parties at the expenses of the Christian-democrats and the Socialists, the two long-term dominant parties. The election also marked the beginning of the division of the Belgian party system into two linguistically-separated party systems, with the decision of the Christian-democrats – traditionally Belgium's largest party – to campaign separately. In this early phase, only the *Volksunie* and, to a lesser extent, the *Christelijke Volkspartij* or CVP - the Flemish wing of the Christian-democrats - could be considered genuine Flemish parties, both the Socialists (*Belgische Socialistische Partij/Parti Socialiste Belge*) and the Liberals (*Partij*

<sup>32</sup> A degree of administrative separation, through the splitting of the ministry of the education and culture in the second half of the 1960s, actually preceded the formal constitutional reform of 1970, see Hooghe (1993: 67).

voor *Vrijheid en Vooruitgang/Parti de la Liberté et du Progrès*) were still state-wide parties.

#### 4.1 The *Volksunie*

The *Volksunie* was the post-war political vehicle for the nationalist strand of the Flemish Movement, which had emerged in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and achieved some success in the 1930s. The party made its nationalism explicit, defining itself in 1968 as follows: "De Volksunie is een vlaams-nationale partij. Dit betekent dat zij radikaal en kompromisloos politiek zelfbestuur voor Vlaanderen opeist"<sup>33</sup> and emphasised people's right to self-determination.<sup>34</sup> Since its foundation in the 1950s, it adopted a federalist position aimed at transforming Belgium into a two-unit federation and whereby granting Flanders a large degree of autonomy. The party argued that a reform of the state was pressing and federalism was the only realistic solution to the political crisis created by the conflicting interests of the two communities. From its perspective as a Flemish nationalist party, moreover, it was the only one able to satisfy the nationalist aspiration to achieve as much self-government as possible for Flanders.<sup>35</sup> The party presented the unitary and centralised structure of the Belgian state as obsolete and paralysing and preventing both communities from pursuing their aspirations.<sup>36</sup> Federalism, in contrast, was a clear solution which contrasted sharply with the ambiguous and vague proposals of the other parties.<sup>37</sup> Although federalism was new for Belgium, it was a tried and tested system adopted by many other countries and proven to work well.<sup>38</sup> In a 1968 election leaflet, the party rejected the suggestion that federalism would open the way to a demise of Belgium and argued, in contrast, that it was the '1830-style' unitarism of the pseudo-patriots which posed a real threat and federalism was the only way forward for both Flanders and Belgium.<sup>39</sup> In its efforts to gain acceptance for its proposals, the party argued that Flanders had nothing to fear and much to gain from the introduction of federalism as, in terms of demography, economic growth, capital formation and other economic indicators, it enjoyed more favourable dynamics than the rest of the country. This made it necessary the creation of a Flemish economic government to pursue and defend the specific interests of the

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<sup>33</sup> "The People's Union is a Flemish nationalist party. This means that it demands a radical and uncompromising self-determination for Flanders", *Een partij voor jonge dynamische mensen*, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> See Menu (1994a: 104)

<sup>35</sup> *Een partij voor jonge dynamische mensen*, p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> *Verkiezingsplatform van de Volksunie 1968*, p. 68; see also *Waarom federalisme?*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem* and *Een partij voor jonge dynamische mensen*, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem* and *Federalistisch voorstel van de Volksunie*, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> *Waarom federalisme?*

Flemish economy.<sup>40</sup> It accepted that the management of the two communities' common interests had to be done on an equal basis - through a parity-based senate - but was opposed to the application of the parity principle for public expenditure in the field of economic policy, infrastructure and research in which the Flemish community had traditionally been disadvantaged. It also argued in favour of giving fiscal responsibility to the federated units to be created on the grounds that in a federal state taxes should be paid where income is generated. In keeping with the traditional Flemish position, however, it firmly rejected the notion of Brussels as a third community and any enlargement of its bi-lingual agglomeration.<sup>41</sup> It also contrasted sharply its federalist programme with the proposals to decentralise power in the direction of the existing provinces or of newly-created smaller regions on the grounds that the country was too small to be divided into five, nine or more self-governing units and that such reform would only strengthen Brussels' grip on the country.<sup>42</sup> Its election programme put the choice facing Belgium in stark terms: either a constitutional reform on a federal basis or the democratic rules must be allowed to operate and the Flemings must reap the rewards of their 60% majority in the population.<sup>43</sup> In the course of 1970, however, the party modified its position somewhat and argued that community autonomy could be achieved in the first instance without constitutional reform, simply by allowing the linguistic groups in the House of Representatives and the Senate to also function as autonomous legislative bodies for their respective community. The two communities would be represented proportionally to their numerical strength in the lower house while they would be on an equal footing in the upper house.<sup>44</sup>

The *Volksunie's* federalist proposals were clearly rooted in a European dimension, albeit one that would involve a radical change of the European state system. On that basis, the party was supportive of the existing process of integration but also advocated going beyond it, towards what it referred to as a *Europa der volkeren*, or Europe of the regions - understood in primarily ethnic terms. Somewhat surprisingly, there was no mention of the European dimension in the 1968 electoral manifesto but the party made its positions clear in other statements issued in that period. This was expressed most clearly in a booklet also published in 1968. In it the *Volksunie* argued

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<sup>40</sup> Menu (1994a: 87).

<sup>41</sup> *Verkiezingsplatform van de Volksunie 1968*, p. 68; see also *Een partij voor jonge dynamische mensen*, p. 13 and Menu (1994a: 86).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*; see also *Federalistisch voorstel van de Volksunie*, p. 3 and 'Twee Brusselse neo-federalisten' *Volksgazet* 10 March 1970. An election leaflet for the October 1970 municipal elections also argued that provinces would be redundant in a federal system and would probably be abolished, see *Wij van den Volksunie*, p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem* p. 69.

that its federalist proposals would not turn Flanders or Belgium into a 'ghetto' because they were connected to the federalist trend in Europe and the world.<sup>45</sup> On the contrary, they would allow the Flemings to fully express themselves on the European level, not least in relation to the Dutch language.<sup>46</sup> The same publication devoted an entire section to the *Europa der volkeren*, in which it argued that the success of European integration depended on whether political unification would be achieved. To that end, it advocated the enlargement of the EU to include the EFTA countries, the creation of a single currency and a European company statute and called for the European Parliament to be directly elected as soon as possible in order to replace technocracy with genuine democracy.<sup>47</sup> For the longer term, the *Volksunie* expressed its wishes that European unification would take place on a federal basis, within which the common interests of the Dutch speakers would be recognised.<sup>48</sup> Only on that basis, would Europe be able to withstand the pressures emanating from the US as well as the threats coming from the East.<sup>49</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> congress of the *Volksunie* in April 1969 called further for a process of integration as wide and as deep as possible but noted that European integration had until then only taken place on the basis of the existing political and socio-economic order in which a number of ethnic communities did not have enough rights.<sup>50</sup> This could only be rectified by a comprehensive federalisation of the European nations and regions, which would allow each nation to freely choose its political as well as socio-economic structures.<sup>51</sup> The integral federalisation of Belgium, which was reaffirmed as the overriding objective of the party, would be the first step in that direction.<sup>52</sup> The link between internal and external federalisation was made even more explicit in a 1970 policy document, in which it was argued that as the Belgian state transfers sovereignty over certain matters upwards to the European level, transfers downwards towards regional units are also possible.<sup>53</sup> In order to allay fears over the economic consequences of its proposals, however, the party toned down its rhetoric in favour of 'integral federalism' and made the following points. First, economic

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<sup>44</sup> See *Federalistisch voorstel van de Volksunie*, p. 3 and *Wij van den Volksunie*, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Een partij voor jonge dynamische mensen*, p. 6.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 15-6.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16; see also *Wij-Vlaams National* 10 June 1970. In the same vein, it argued for co-operation within Benelux to be strengthened and pointed out that Flanders, at the heart of Benelux, was emerging as one of the strongest regions in Europe, see *Een partij voor jonge dynamische mensen*, p. 15.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>50</sup> Menu (1994a: 104)

<sup>51</sup> Menu (1994a: 104).

<sup>52</sup> Menu (1994a: 104). The congress resolution also pointed out that the export market was more important than the domestic market for Flanders and that most direct investments into the Flemish economy came from abroad, see *ibidem* p. 87

<sup>53</sup> See *Federalistisch voorstel van de Volksunie*, p. 3.

and political units need not coincide. Belgium and Luxembourg had been in an economic union for a long time but were nonetheless two different states. Second, the Belgian economy was not a self-contained and isolated entity but was part of the EEC, hence of a common European market. Third, its official proposals concerned the constitutional reform of the state and its economic policies only - not the sphere of private enterprise - and these policies were increasingly been transferred from the state to the European institutions. Fourth, it argued that even as Europe-wide economic integration was gathering pace, each community had its own economic life and needed its own policies to deal with its specific problems. To this end, economic decentralisation was needed and its necessity had even been recognised by the Belgian government. Moreover, the idea of socio-economic regions had been launched within the EEC, a development that once again proved the party's policies right.<sup>54</sup> The *Volksunie* thus made clear and explicit links between domestic and European federalism and used the European dimension to legitimise its calls for constitutional change in Belgium.

#### 4.2 The CVP

The CVP had always been the largest party in Flanders and quite sympathetic to the demands of the Flemish Movement. It was also the party that had most to lose from the competition of the *Volksunie*, given the proximity of the electorate of the two parties. It long tried to attract the votes of those for whom the 'community question' was important without undermining its status as a state-wide party. The circumstances of the late 1960s and the Leuven affair in particular forced the party to split and to lead the process through which the 1970 constitutional reform was carried out. During the government crisis triggered by the Leuven affair, the caretaker CVP prime minister Gaston Eyskens declared in parliament: "L'Etat unitaire, tel que les lois le régissent encore dans ses structures et dans son fonctionnement est dépassé par les faits. Les Communautés et les Régions doivent prendre leur place dans les structures rénovées de l'Etat, mieux adaptées aux situations spécifiques du pays".<sup>55</sup>

In its manifesto for the 1968 election, the party presented itself as a *staatspartij* but also coineived of itself as the voice of the Flemish majority and made clear its commitment to the success of the Flemish community.<sup>56</sup> It acknowledged that there was in Belgium

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<sup>54</sup> Ibidem, p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> "The unitary state, as it is still governed in its structure and functioning by the law, has been overtaken by the events. Communities and regions must take their place within a new state structure, better adapted to the specific situation of the country", quoted in Mabilie (1986: 350).

<sup>56</sup> See *De CVP doet het*, p. 1-2

a problem of co-existence between Flemings and Walloons and that a solution to such a problem had to be found so as not to jeopardise the existence of the country.<sup>57</sup> The strictly unitary constitutional order of the Belgian state was no longer viable and had to be replaced with a new structure based on the recognition of the two cultural communities. This recognition would rest on the principles of cultural autonomy and homogeneity of language and culture in the two communities.<sup>58</sup> Political power had to be re-organised and decentralised as much as possible through the conferral of important legislative and executive responsibilities to regional bodies. At the same time, the central institutions would also have to be reformed to take into account the regional institutions to be established and the need to improve their functioning.<sup>59</sup> The party also advocated a new institutional set up for the bi-lingual area of Brussels in order to ensure equal treatment of the two cultures and the adequate fulfilment of the city's role as the Belgian and European capital.<sup>60</sup> After the election, the CVP formed a new government led by Gaston Eyskens with state reform at the top of the agenda. Although support for the unitary state within the party was still strong, Eyskens himself had long been sympathetic to federal ideas.<sup>61</sup>

Not surprisingly, the CVP expressed strong support for the process of economic and political integration in Europe and was in favour of enlarging the EC to the UK and other countries which subscribed to the letter and the spirit of the Treaty of Rome. In the mid-term, the party hoped the EC would develop common policies in the economic, monetary, social and scientific fields.<sup>62</sup> However, it made no linkages between European integration and the state reform in Belgium.

#### 4.3 The BSP

As a still unitary party and the one with the smallest Flemish electorate among the traditional parties, the BSP had not surprisingly a more cautious approach to the question of constitutional reform and employed a much less 'Flemishist' discourse compared to the *Volksunie* and the CVP. Nonetheless, its French-speaking wing, traditionally the dominant party in Wallonia, was by then in favour of regionalisation and the party as a whole was sympathetic to the idea of economic regionalism. In its

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<sup>57</sup> Ibidem, p. 34

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, p. 35

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem

<sup>61</sup> As a young professor at Leuven in the 1930s, he helped set up the weekly *Nieuw Vlaanderen* which advocated federalism and corporatism, see Herremans (1962: 6) and Kossman (1978: 642).

manifesto for the 1968 election, the party blamed the deterioration in the relations between the language communities on the outgoing CVP-PLP government and argued that the resolution of the 'community question' was a pre-requisite to tackling the economic problems of the country.<sup>63</sup> However, the party did not put forward specific proposals, confining itself to expressing generic support for reforms that would improve relations between the communities and arguing that such reforms should be carried out through a process of broad consultation also involving opposition parties - which should probably be understood as meaning the regionalist parties. It also supported the decentralisation and deconcentration of the state administration in the name of simplification and of bringing government closer to the citizens.<sup>64</sup> In sharp contrast to the *Volksunie* and the CVP, it put more emphasis on the regions rather than the language communities and made clear that it saw Belgium as primarily made up of three regions rather than two language communities.<sup>65</sup> It argued that the socialist proposal was to tackle the problems of the Belgian economy through economic planning and that this had to be implemented at the regional level, with the creation of three regional planning offices.<sup>66</sup> However, it endorsed the principle of full cultural autonomy and proposed the creation of two cultural councils with consultative powers.<sup>67</sup> The party's commitment to the creation of cultural communities as well as economic regions was reiterated in the resolutions of the 1969 congress, by which time the BSP was in office and involved in the negotiations on constitutional reform.<sup>68</sup>

The party's European policy was focussed on contributing to the *détente* between the two blocs and the achievement of a lasting peace. It was broadly in favour of deeper economic and political integration and of enlarging the EC to the UK and the Scandinavian countries and supported in particular greater EC action in the social sphere and more powers for the European Parliament. It also called for a re-examination of the NATO treaty within the context of a general policy of disarmament.<sup>69</sup> No mention was made of any linkage between European integration and domestic institutional reform.

#### 4.4 The PVV

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<sup>62</sup> Ibidem, p. 29-30.

<sup>63</sup> *Programme P.S.B.*, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem, p. 2.

<sup>65</sup> Ibidem, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Ibidem

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem, p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> See Menu (1994c: 161-2).

<sup>69</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.

Since its renewal and the adoption of a new name in 1961, the Liberal party dropped its traditional anticlericalism and emphasised its commitment to the Belgian unitary state in opposition to the federalist ideas that had by then acquired a wider audience. At the 1965 election, the party scored a resounding victory on this platform and it maintained it for the subsequent election. At a congress in January 1966, the party adopted the Liege Pact as a resolution of the community question. The following year, at a congress in Knokke, the party adopted a wide-ranging policy of institutional reform including decentralisation based on the existing provinces and the introduction of consultative referendums.<sup>70</sup> Its 1968 manifesto made clear that that year's election was not like any other but was rather a crucial turning point in which voters were asked to choose between extremism, separatism and the risk of a break-up of the country on the one hand and unity and patriotism on the other.<sup>71</sup> The PVV presented itself as the sole genuine defender of the latter<sup>72</sup> and made its opposition to federalist ideas explicit: "Le P.L.P. est également un *véritable Parti National* [emphasis in original]. A toute occasion...le P.L.P. s'est prononcé à l'unanimité en faveur de la structure unitaire de l'Etat...Dans le même esprit, le P.L.P. ne cessa...de s'opposer à toutes les propositions tendant vers un fédéralisme larvé".<sup>73</sup> The manifesto argued that federalism Belgian-style had its roots in division, separatism and discord and pointed out that in contrast to everywhere in the world - where a federation was a result of the integration of separate states into a progressively more centralised system - in Belgium federalism would be the result of the disintegration of a unitary state.<sup>74</sup> Voting for the *Volksunie* would mean embarking on the road of total separation and a break-up of Belgium, and following a party that dreamed of making Flemings, Walloons and Brusselers foreign and enemy to each other.<sup>75</sup> Such federalism would disrupt the economic infrastructure of the country, foster intolerance in religious and philosophical matters, do nothing with regard to the situation of Brussels and create "des situations insensées et inextricables" on the international level.<sup>76</sup> At its congress in June 1969, the party reaffirmed its belief that the community question had to be resolved and that all political developments were subordinated to the adoption of a new structure for the Belgian

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<sup>70</sup> See *Perspectives P.L.P.*, pp. 47-50.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10 and also p. 63.

<sup>72</sup> It also claimed to be the party closest to the national character of the Belgians and their natural liberalism, see *ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> "The P.L.P. is also a genuine national party. At every occasion...the P.L.P. has taken position in favour of the unitary structure of the state...In the same spirit, the P.L.P. has never stopped...opposing all proposals tending towards disguised federalism", *cfr. ibidem*, p. 11 and also p. 17.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18. See also *Demain Politique* no. 198, 24 March 1968, p. 7.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 62.

<sup>76</sup> "nonsensical and tangled situations", *cfr. ibidem*, p. 18.

state based on a comprehensive national pact between Flemings, Walloons and Brusselers.<sup>77</sup> At an extraordinary congress held in March 1970, the party adopted two resolutions acknowledging the existence of three cultural communities and three regions, and accepted the creation of autonomous institutions for the communities and the regions composed of parliamentarians. It argued that competences had to be redistributed between the various levels of government so as to give communities, regions, provinces and municipalities important responsibilities but made clear its opposition to granting the regions tax-raising powers.<sup>78</sup>

The manifesto expressed strong support for European integration, stating that the PVV "souscrit sans réserves à l'édification complète du Marché Commun qui devra déboucher, un jour, sur les Etats-Unis d'Europe", and claimed that a common policy in the field of scientific and technological research was vital for the future of Europe.<sup>79</sup> Although it did not make explicit connections between internal reform and integration on the European level, it did claim that its philosophy of state reform confirmed the European 'vocation' of the party.<sup>80</sup> The resolutions of the party congress the following year, warned that the institutional reforms had to be adopted in a spirit of conformity with the Europe that was being created.<sup>81</sup>

#### 4.5 Summary

At the time of the 1968 election, then, the positions of the Flemish parties on constitutional reform were sharply diverging. At the two ends of the spectrum were the *Volksunie*, enthusiastically advocating a federalisation of the country, and the PVV, a firm defender of keeping a unitary state and strongly critical of federalism. The two main parties, the CVP and the SP, occupied the middle ground, the former much closer to the *Volksunie* in its support for autonomous cultural councils but falling short of embracing federalism and the latter more cautiously following a similar line but within a much more 'unitarist' discourse. Not by coincidence, of course, the two purely Flemish parties focussed exclusively or primarily on Flemish interests and demanded a greater degree of autonomy for Flanders while the two state-wide parties maintained a 'Belgian' discourse and were more cautious in reforming the unitary state or opposed to

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<sup>77</sup> See resolutions of the national congress of 8 June 1969, Liberaal Archief.

<sup>78</sup> *Resolution sur l'autonomie culturelle* and *Resolution sur l'organisation des pouvoirs non culturels en Belgique*, Congres national extraordinaire, Vendredi 20 et Samedi 21 mars 1970, Doc. F/4223 and F/4224, Liberaal Archief.

<sup>79</sup> "subscribes without reservations to the completion of the Common Market, which must, one day, lead on to the United States of Europe", cfr. *ibidem*, p. 59.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>81</sup> See resolutions of the national congress of 8 June 1969, Liberaal Archief.

doing so altogether. Following the election and the start of negotiations, however, the parties – with the partial exception of the *Volksunie* – converged towards the middle ground and agreed to the compromise package of reforms that was adopted in December 1970.

Not surprisingly, all parties were strongly in favour of European integration and the development of the EC but the *Volksunie* distinguished itself by its vision of a *Europa der volkeren* which would supersede the existing state order in Europe. As regards linkages between the state reform and European integration, however, the picture is even more contrasted. Of the four parties analysed, only the *Volksunie* made explicit use of the European dimension to bolster support for its proposals. The latter were clearly rooted in a European dimension whereby the transformation of the Belgian state would be part of the process of integration in Europe, which would transform the traditional European state order. For the *Volksunie* the federalisation of Belgium and the federal building of a *Europa der volkeren* were two sides of the same coin. The European dimension added legitimacy to the federalist ideas of the *Volksunie* and enabled it to claim that the party was in line with European trends and was proven right by developments on the European stage. The CVP and the PS, in contrast, virtually ignored the European dimension in their constitutional proposals and made no connections between the two. The PVV, on its part, did not make explicit links between domestic federalisation and European integration either but it hinted that it perceived the two processes as being antithetical. European integration was a process of unification of states and peoples on a continental scale whereas the federalisation of Belgium would be the division of a unitary state and separation of its national community.

## **5 The late 1970s**

Although the 1970 constitutional reforms were a crucial turning point for in transformation of the Belgian state, their implementation took a long time and was fraught with difficulties. Whereas the legislation creating the community councils was promptly enacted, in particular, the regional councils had to wait almost a decade before seeing the light of day. After a provisional regionalisation from 1974-77 and the failure of the so-called Egmont pact in 1977, regional councils were eventually set up in the second wave of reform in 1980. The key election in this period and the one analysed here is that of December 1978. With the split of the Liberal party in 1971 and that of the Socialists in 1978, there were no more state-wide parties left in Belgium.

## 5.1 The *Volksunie*

Although the *Volksunie* was still the main vehicle of Flemish nationalism, by this time it had lost its monopoly of the nationalist cause. Its brief participation in government in 1977-78 and, especially, its endorsement of the Egmont Pact led to its radical wing to break away and form what would become the *Vlaams Blok*. From then onwards, two parties would compete for the representation of nationalist voters. Its 1978 manifesto blamed the political instability of the 1970s on the still largely unitary structure of the Belgian state and the failure to achieve a genuine federal reform. The 1970-71 reforms were bad for the Flemings as they blocked the Flemish majority at the central level without granting Flanders significant autonomous powers in return. A federal reform of the state was the necessary pre-condition to the tackling of the economic crisis and was necessary to preserve democratic freedom and diversity in the country. The party claimed to have shown the way towards a solution of the conflict between Flemings and Walloons and to have generated the pressure that led the other parties to accept the duality of Belgian society and to split.<sup>82</sup> The *Volksunie* thus demanded "een Vlaamse staat in een Belgische bondstaat"<sup>83</sup> based on a single parliament and executive, with authority over the whole Flemish region and the Flemish community in Brussels. Such federated state had to have as wide a range of competences as possible and its own tax-raising powers.<sup>84</sup> It warned against accepting a form of pseudo-federalism which would leave the most important levers of power in the hands of the parity-based central government.<sup>85</sup> It also reiterated its demands for an adequate protection of the Flemish community in Brussels through parity-based mechanisms and called for a division of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV) electoral district.<sup>86</sup> In sharp contrast to 1968, though, there were no section devoted to the European dimension in the manifesto and no links were made between supra-national integration and domestic federalisation.

A booklet published by the party in November 1979 pushed the contrast between 'real' and 'pseudo' federalism further and was among the first to employ the term confederal to refer to the former. The pamphlet focussed on the issue of economic powers in the context of the reform of the state and pointed out that a confederal model was one in which the instruments of economic governance are controlled by the regions and the

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<sup>82</sup> See *Volksunie, Vlaams belang*, pp. 1-3.

<sup>83</sup> "a Flemish state within a Belgian federal state", *ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 5-6.

central government only retains limited powers of co-ordination and harmonisation.<sup>87</sup> This vision was placed in an explicit European context, in which power would be vertically divided between the EC, the Flemish and Walloon confederated states and the Belgian confederation.<sup>88</sup> The author pointed out that those wanting to retain the core of economic policies in the hands of the central government - 'timid' federalists - implicitly assumed that the advantages of the Belgian economic and monetary union outweigh the potential benefits to be reaped from the transfer of economic policy to two confederated states.<sup>89</sup> At its 4<sup>th</sup> congress in November 1980, the youth wing of the party - or VUJO - endorsed Maton's ideas and was even more explicit in demanding "politiek zelfbestuur voor de Staat Vlaanderen"<sup>90</sup> within a confederal Belgium. The creation of a fully-fledged Flemish state - with Brussels as its capital - was an essential element in the transformation of Belgium into a confederation and a regionalisation based on three units had to be rejected. In this context, VUJO made it clear that the survival of the Belgian state was not its first preoccupation but that in the short term co-operation between Flemings and Walloons could be preserved until the political structures of a "gekonfedereerd Europa der volkeren", or confederal Europe of the nations and regions, are put in place. The Flemish state would have all the competences not explicitly delegated to the confederation and would control its own fiscal revenues, while provinces would be abolished. It also called for cultural and political ties with the Netherlands to be deepened and stated that in a future *Europa der volkeren*, the German-speaking population of Eastern Belgium would be part of the German nation.<sup>91</sup> The breakaway groups from the *Volksunie*, which stood for the election as a cartel under the banner *Vlaams Blok* presented themselves as "de enige Vlaamse oppositie"<sup>92</sup> and emphasised their support for an independent Flemish state and their opposition to immigration.<sup>93</sup> While references to 'Europe' were absent from the *Volksunie*'s manifesto, linkages between the transformation of Belgium into a fully-fledged federal state or even into a confederation of states and the emergence of a *Europa der volkeren* were clearly present in the party's thinking and were most in evidence in the more radical ideas of some sections of the party, such as its youth movement.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Maton (1979: 4).

<sup>88</sup> Ibidem, p. 5.

<sup>89</sup> Ibidem, pp. 5-6.

<sup>90</sup> "political self-rule for the Flemish state", cfr. 'Levend Zelfbestuur', section 3, p. 1.

<sup>91</sup> "confederal Europe of the nations", cfr. ibidem.

<sup>92</sup> "only Flemish opposition", cfr. *Vlaams Blok no. 7*, electoral advertisement.

<sup>93</sup> Ibidem and also 'Vlaams Blok tegen Egmont ook tegen gastarbeiders', *De Standaard*, 18 November 1978 and 'Vlaams Blok mikt op VU', *De Standaard*, 12 December 1978.

<sup>94</sup> In the party manifesto for the first EP elections, connections between European integration and the federalisation of Belgium also featured prominently, see Lynch (1996: 123-4).

## 5.2 The CVP

Having been the first of the traditional parties to split and the one that led the process of constitutional reform since 1968, the CVP had fully established itself by the 1970s as the main political vehicle of the Flemish people. The difficulties encountered by the *Volksumie* further strengthened its position. Its 1978 manifesto devoted an entire section to the reform of the state and argued that a harmonious cohabitation of the communities and the regions within the Belgian state was only possible if a comprehensive reform was carried out.<sup>95</sup> It stressed that the central authority of the state had to remain strong and well-organised and warned against those who wanted to hollow out the central institutions of the state.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, communities and regions needed a framework of autonomy within which to exercise both legislative and executive competences and the provinces had to be retained as a level of co-ordination between the regions and the municipalities.<sup>97</sup> The party also stressed that a settlement of the 'Brussels question' was the most important pre-condition to a successful completion of a new round of reforms and that this rested, among other things, on a recognition of the Dutch-speaking character of the Brussels suburbs.<sup>98</sup> Although the party acknowledged the existence of the regions, the philosophy underlying its proposals was clearly one based on the recognition of two main cultural-linguistic communities rather than three regions.<sup>99</sup>

The manifesto put a lot of emphasis on the European dimension, claiming that the "versnelde opbouw van Europa"<sup>100</sup> was one of three fundamental axes of the party's programme. It argued that Belgium could not tackle the economic crisis on its own and that the main breakthrough had to take place at the European level and stressed the role played by Christian-democrats in general and party members Leo Tindemans and Wilfried Martens, in particular, in the process of integration. The first direct elections to the European Parliament were mentioned as the onset of a democratic Europe, a process which had to lead to a European federation.<sup>101</sup> It welcomed the entry into force of the European Monetary System as the first step towards a European economic and monetary union and called for greater harmonisation of a wide range of state policies. It

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<sup>95</sup> See *Er is een uitweg met de C.V.P.*, pp. 21-3.

<sup>96</sup> See also Menu (1994b: 277).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*; this also implied the creation of the province of Flemish Brabant and the splitting of the BHV electoral district, see Menu (1994b: 280).

<sup>99</sup> See especially Menu (1994b: 277-81).

<sup>100</sup> "faster construction of Europe", cfr. *ibidem*, p. 1.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37; see also Menu (1994b: 277).

stressed notably its support for a development of the EU regional policy and the need to further develop and recognise the regions.<sup>102</sup> It did not, however, make any direct linkages between the European dimension and the process of constitutional reform in Belgium.

### 5.3 The PVV

Having separated itself from the Walloon wing in 1971, the PVV was by this time an exclusively Flemish party although it still coincided of Belgium as a 'national' framework for the Flemish community. Its 1978 manifesto committed the party to pursuing a "bloiend Vlaams gewest in een modern België"<sup>103</sup> and, to that end, to take part in negotiations on a completion of the reform of the state. It expressed the belief that a majority of Belgians continued to see their future within a reformed Belgian state, rather than outside it.<sup>104</sup> Within this context of further reform, the party argued that each level of government had to be led by a directly elected assembly and an executive and that the number of levels should be limited to three, implying the abolition of the provinces.<sup>105</sup> Like the *Volkspartij* and the CVP, it put emphasis on the Brussels issue, calling for the effective guarantees for the Flemish minority there, a recognition of the Dutch-speaking character of the suburbs and the splitting of the BHV electoral district.<sup>106</sup>

The manifesto also devoted one section to the party's European policy, stating that the PVV saw the integration of Europe as a historic task and wanted a liberal and democratic Europe not just a Europe of technocrats and business people.<sup>107</sup> Within this framework, it called for continue efforts towards further economic and monetary integration, the adoption of a constitution based on the separation of powers and majority voting and a common foreign policy.<sup>108</sup> No connections were made, however, between this process of integration and the reform of the Belgian state.

### 5.4 The SP

The Socialist party was the last of the three traditional Belgian parties to split. This took place in 1978 as a result of the dynamics unleashed by the division of the other parties

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<sup>102</sup> Ibidem, p. 38.

<sup>103</sup> "a flourishing Flemish region in a modern Belgium", *U verdient echt beter*, p. 22.

<sup>104</sup> Ibidem, p. 22.

<sup>105</sup> Ibidem, p. 23. It also maintained its by then traditional policy of introducing referendums, see ibidem, p. 20.

<sup>106</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>107</sup> Ibidem, p. 25.

<sup>108</sup> Ibidem, p. 26; see also Menu (1994d: 230-2).

as well as developments within the party itself. The Flemish Socialists thus stood for the December 1978 election for the first time as a fully Flemish party. The party's manifesto claimed that the Flemish Socialists would maintain their internationalist ideals and "wij willen geenszins de nationalistische toer op gaan"<sup>109</sup>. On the reform of the state, it committed the party to strive for a thorough reform of the country's institutions able to address the calls for greater autonomy, while, at the same time, warning that the need for important national competences in the judicial, economic, social, financial, monetary field as well as in foreign affairs and defence will continue to exist in the future.<sup>110</sup> In the name of simplicity and efficiency, and in contrast to the long-standing policy of the unified socialist party, it called for a two-unit structure, thus emphasising the cultural-linguistic dimension over the regional one. Each community assembly should be directly elected, have its own executive and possess adequate fiscal competences while the provinces should be rethought.<sup>111</sup> In relation to Brussels, the party stressed that a meaningful Flemish presence was essential to the preservation of the city's character as the capital of Belgium. To that end, and somewhat in contradiction with its preference for a two-unit structure, it called for a status of 'city-region' for Brussels with the creation of a directly elected regional assembly and a parity-based executive. The Brussels suburbs should fall entirely under the jurisdiction of the Flemish parliament in order to stop the progressive frenchification of Flemish Brabant.<sup>112</sup>

The manifesto devoted a section to 'Flanders in Europe', in which it stressed the Flemish Socialists' commitment to strive for a more progressive and integrated Europe, on the grounds that many problems related to employment, environment, technological development, and industrial and monetary policies could only be tackled effectively within a European framework.<sup>113</sup> The party felt, however, that the existing EU fell significantly short of its aspirations and, although the introduction of direct elections for the European Parliament was a significant step forward, more progress had to be made in the direction of a more 'social' and more democratic Europe.<sup>114</sup> No linkages were made between this process of further integration and the constitutional reform in Belgium.

## 5.5 Summary

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<sup>109</sup> "We will not take a nationalist turn", cfr. *Programma Vlaamse socialisten Verkiezingen 17.12.1978*, p. 2.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 57-58.

The 1978 election was a less dramatic turning point in the history of the transformation of the Belgian state than that of ten years earlier. The decisive choice had been made in 1970 and the community question was overshadowed by the economic crisis. Following the failure of the Egmont pact and the unfinished implementation of the constitutional provisions of 1970, however, the reform of the state was still high on the agenda of the Flemish political parties. In the meantime, positions had converged considerably as a result, among other factors, of the split in the liberal and socialist parties over the course of the decade. The *Volksunie* maintained and further elaborated its explicitly federalist proposals while the other parties supported the creation of autonomous and democratically accountable institutions for the communities and the regions but fell short of embracing federalism. The VU thus still distinguished itself from the mainstream parties but positions were much closer than in the first phase. The reforms adopted in 1980 largely reflected these broadly common positions of the Flemish parties, although the Flemings could not obtain what they wanted on the Brussels issue and the question was left unresolved. Signs were already visible, however, that this consensus among the Flemish parties would not last long. As seen above, some VU members, including its youth wing, had already gone beyond the party's official position and were openly contemplating a confederal model. Although the term confederal as opposed to federal was employed rather loosely, there is little doubt that it represented a degree of radicalisation of the party's discourse. Even more significant in terms of future developments, was the birth of the *Vlaams Blok* and its adoption of a secessionist policy. An autonomous regional government within a federal Belgium was no longer the most radical option for Flanders, as it had been hitherto, as the independence option had entered the arena.

The European dimension also had a lower profile in this period than in the previous one. Although all parties expressed strong support for further integration and for a progressive development of a democratic EU, they did not link these objectives to the process of reform in Belgium and did not utilise the European dimension to bolster their policies. This was also true, somewhat surprisingly, of the *Volksunie* who decided not to exploit the deepening of European integration – notably the introduction of direct elections for the European Parliament – to confer extra legitimacy to its federalist proposals in its 1978 manifesto. It is important to note, however, that in other party documents the European dimension still featured prominently.

## **6 The early 1990s**

After a third round of constitutional changes in 1988, Belgium underwent further reform in the period 1991-93 which officially made the country a federal state. The institutional architecture produced by the so-called St Michael's agreement of 1993 completed to a large extent the process initiated in 1970 and still governs Belgium today. The regions and the communities obtained their own directly elected legislative and executive institutions and a wider range of responsibilities, including international jurisdiction for the policy areas within their competences. The key election in this period was that of November 1991 and most of the documents analysed in this section relate to it.

### 6.1 The *Vlaams Blok*

After growing slowly in the 1980s, the *Vlaams Blok* achieved its first real breakthrough at the 1991 election and consolidated its position at the most radical end of the Flemish party system. Significantly, the party also overtook the *Volksunie* as the main voice of Flemish nationalism.<sup>115</sup> Although the party's rise was mainly due to its anti-immigration discourse, its secessionist and extreme nationalist position in general were very much at the forefront of its campaign. The party's manifesto for the 1991 election branded Belgium a "historische vergissing", or historical mistake, and stated: "Vlaanderen moet dus een geografisch kleine maar sterke onafhankelijke staat worden in Europa, met Brussel als hoofdstad"<sup>116</sup>. The secession process could take place peacefully and it was up to the Flemish political leaders to get the ball rolling. The party saw its role as that of a pressure group vis-a-vis the other parties to induce them to make steps towards independence. In the meantime, the manifesto argued, the problems raised by secession would have to be studied and solutions found by the *Vlaamse Raad* – the then still indirectly elected assembly of the Flemish Community – and within the Flemish Movement as a whole.<sup>117</sup> The manifesto also stressed that independence would bring substantial economic benefits to Flanders as it would put an end to the subsidies flowing to Wallonia through the Belgian tax system, estimated at 294bn Belgian francs per year.<sup>118</sup> An additional, but no less important, reason to go for independence was to save the Flemish character of Brussels after its recognition as a region had shattered the long-standing Flemish desire to keep the city as part of Flanders. According to the party, this exposed the *Volksunie*'s argument – 'let's keep Belgium to keep Brussels' – as a self-deluded lie and the opposite was true: "België moet dringend verdwijnen omdat wij anders Brussel definitief voor Vlaanderen kwijt

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<sup>115</sup> The *Vlaams Blok* took 12 seats in the lower house to the *Volksunie*'s 10.

<sup>116</sup> "Flanders must thus become a geographically small but strong independent state in Europe, with Brussels as capital", *Uit zelfvedediging – Vlaams Blok – Eigen volk eerst*, p. 2

<sup>117</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibidem*.

zijn”.<sup>119</sup> Independence for Flanders would not be an end point, as an independent Flemish state should then strive for closer integration with the Netherlands through a series of treaties leading to the setting up of a confederation.<sup>120</sup>

As seen above, the manifesto placed independence for Flanders within a clear European framework but expressed mixed feelings towards European integration. On the one hand, it argued that Europe had to acquire the capabilities in the military, economic and cultural spheres to guarantee its peace and freedom and called specifically for a European defence community to replace NATO in the long term.<sup>121</sup> On the other hand, it warned against the homogenising effects of Europeanisation and stressed that European unification had to provide guarantees for the protection of the languages and cultures of the different European peoples and to be based on a strict application of the subsidiarity principle.<sup>122</sup> In the same vein, it also opposed Brussels’ status as the ‘capital of Europe’ on the grounds that it had an anti-Flemish effect on the city.<sup>123</sup> In an introduction to the October 1993 congress of the party’s youth wing, the latter’s leader argued that the Czechoslovak ‘velvet divorce’ was more attractive than the Belgian “staatsmisvormingen”, or state malformations. However, he pointed out that Flemish nationalist wanted independence within a *Europa der volkeren* while the Europe of Maastricht was a very different beast.<sup>124</sup> This reflected the widespread opposition to Maastricht within the party, which led it to vote against its ratification in parliament.<sup>125</sup>

## 6.2 The *Volksunie*

In contrast to its fellow nationalist – and rival – *Vlaams Blok*, the *Volksunie* was on a downward trend in the early 1990s and the losses it suffered in the 1991 election marked the beginning of the end for the party. Its attempt to broaden the appeal of the party by styling itself *VU Vlaamse Vrije Democraten*, or Flemish Free Democrats, did not have a discernible impact on the party’s fortunes. As several scholars have observed, this was in stark contrast to the party’s success in winning its competitors over to its constitutional positions. In Newman’s words, the *Volksunie* had begun to

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<sup>119</sup> “Belgium must urgently disappear because otherwise we will definitively lose Brussels for Flanders”, *ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 3-4 and 10.

<sup>124</sup> See *Vrij Vlaanderen, Sterk Europa*

<sup>125</sup> See Lynch (1996: 130).

lose the electoral battles but had effectively won the policy war.<sup>126</sup> Partly as a reaction to the other parties having ‘stolen its thunder’, partly as a result of the dynamics unleashed by the process of state reform itself, the *Volkssunie* radicalised its position and started to advocate a confederal model for Belgium. This featured prominently in the manifesto for the November 1991 election. In it the party defended its decisions to join the outgoing government on the grounds that it needed to contribute to the building of Flemish self-government through a process of far-reaching federalisation.<sup>127</sup> This process had still to be completed and should result in Belgium becoming a confederation of a Flemish and a Walloon state. A directly elected Flemish parliament had to be established as soon as possible. Each of the two states would have as wide competences as possible, from agriculture to foreign trade, and control its own social security. The latter would only be subject to confederal minimal standards, which will be set at the European level in the long term. Consequently, the mechanisms of fiscal transfers between the two states would have to be rethought.<sup>128</sup> Negotiations to achieve this result had to be conducted on a direct bilateral basis between the two communities, hence a strong, united Flemish position was necessary.<sup>129</sup> In the first instance, social security should be transferred to the communities, the Senate should become a forum of dialogue between the communities, and the province of Brabant as well as the electoral district of BHV should be split.<sup>130</sup> Brussels was important for Flanders because it was its “poort op de wereld”, or gateway to the world, and also for historical reasons.<sup>131</sup> Flanders should acquire international recognition and treaty-making powers for the policy areas of its competence.<sup>132</sup> In an information brochure published in November 1993, the St Michael’s agreement was seen as a step in the right direction but not the end goal, as the process of federalisation had further to go.<sup>133</sup>

The *Volkssunie* manifesto put strong emphasis on the European dimension of its proposals. The first section of its priorities, devoted to *Vlaanderen in Europa*, presented the goal of the party as making Flanders “een deelstaat van een confederatie die nu nog Belgisch is, maar straks Europees”.<sup>134</sup> More broadly, the party expressed its desire of participating in the construction of a Europe based on integral federalist ideas and

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<sup>126</sup> See De Winter (1994, 1998) and Newman (1995).

<sup>127</sup> *Verkiezingsplatform Wetgevende Verkiezingen 24 November 1991*, p. 1

<sup>128</sup> See also *De Volkssunie – Vlaamser dan ooit*, p. 13.

<sup>129</sup> *Verkiezingsplatform Wetgevende Verkiezingen 24 November 1991*, p. 2.

<sup>130</sup> See also *De Volkssunie – Vlaamser dan ooit*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 2-3; see also *De Volkssunie – Vlaamser dan ooit*, p. 11.

<sup>133</sup> See *ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>134</sup> “A federated state of a confederation which currently is still Belgian but will be European”, *Verkiezingsplatform Wetgevende Verkiezingen 24 November 1991*, p. 2.

resting on the principle of subsidiarity. Further transfers of competences to the EU would have to be matched by strengthened democratic control through real decision-making powers for the European parliament and a European government made accountable to it.<sup>135</sup> The nations and regions of Europe – deemed to be its “natuurlijke componenten” or natural components – should have an important role in such a Europe through representation in an upper house of the EP and direct access to the ECJ. Co-operation between Flanders, the Netherlands and the French Flanders was also called for.<sup>136</sup> The *Volksunie* was disappointed the Maastricht treaty fell well short of its demands and opposed the ratification of the treaty in parliament.<sup>137</sup> The November 1993 document underlined that the party considered the federalisation of Belgium as just a forerunner to Europe-wide federalism and that the end goal remained “een zelfstanding Vlaanderen binnen een federal Europa van volkeren en regio’s”.<sup>138</sup> As a result of the dynamics created by a directly elected Flemish parliament, more competences would be transferred to the communities and regions. At the same time, as the remaining competences of the Belgian state are taken over by Europe, this transition to independence in Europe would be inevitable.<sup>139</sup> It was high time political parties framed their work in the context of a European political union and the *Volksunie* was committed to be the first party in Flanders to do so.<sup>140</sup> The European political unification should be based on integral federalism, the only model that would give an adequate place to the diversity of individuals, regions and nations of Europe. Proceeding in bottom-up fashion from the level of nations and regions, it would have to be decided democratically what layer of government should exist between them and the European level and how competences should be vertically divided.<sup>141</sup> In such a model, the classical state would lose its meaning while it was important to ensure that each level of governance – municipalities, ethnic communities and Europe<sup>142</sup> – had an optimal degree of autonomy. The party intended to be such a ‘Europe-compatible’ Flemish nationalist party committed to the growing importance of regions and ethnic communities and saw its striving for “minder België, meer Vlaanderen en meer Europa” as part of a Europe-wide struggle.<sup>143</sup> While it admitted it was unrealistic to expect the European states to abolish themselves overnight, it argued that it was the nations and

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<sup>135</sup> Ibidem, pp. 3 and 50-51.

<sup>136</sup> Ibidem; see also *De Volksunie – Vlaamser dan ooit*, p. 9.

<sup>137</sup> See Lynch (1996: 130).

<sup>138</sup> “an independent Flanders in a federal Europe of nations and regions”, *De Volksunie – Vlaamser dan ooit*, p. 11.

<sup>139</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>140</sup> Ibidem, p. 6.

<sup>141</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

<sup>142</sup> Ibidem, pp. 7, 41 and 50.

<sup>143</sup> “less Belgium, more Flanders and more Europe”, ibidem, p. 7.

regions – not the states – that should form the basis of the European federation and the existing state level of government would have to adapt to a new role. The document stressed, however, that the existing EU did not match at all the idea of such a federal Europe. It was an arrogant technocratic system and its further development along those lines deserved to be opposed.<sup>144</sup> In contrast, the *Volksunie* wanted a fully elected European government, a senate of the regions and the abolition of the European Council. The Committee of the Regions would, like a revolutionary cell, transform itself into a senate and Flanders would be the engine of such a process.<sup>145</sup> The principle of fair distribution of wealth would mean an expansion of the regional and social policies, run in partnership between the EU institutions and the regions themselves. The document recalled the famous dictum by August Vermeylen quoted at the beginning of this paper and argued that while the first task had largely been accomplished, the second task was now awaiting Flemish nationalists and concluded: “Dit is du seen nieuwe ordening van Europa. In die ordening is België overbodig”.<sup>146</sup>

### 6.3 The CVP

The CVP was still the largest party in Flanders in this phase but its vote share had declined significantly over time and was being eroded on its right by the resurgent liberal party and the rising *Vlaams Blok*. Its role as the main voice of the Flemish electorate was thus increasingly challenged. Its manifesto for the 1991 election defended the reforms already implemented at the behest of the party and stressed how these were beneficial for Flanders.<sup>147</sup> However, it also argued that the job was not finished yet and that a further reform of the state and of the functioning of government needed to be carried out while preserving a fully functioning constitutional kingdom. This new round of reform had to strengthen the legitimacy of communities and regions through the direct election of their assemblies and appropriate financing mechanisms. Further competences could be transferred to the regional level but it was important to ensure the economic and monetary union of the country would not be endangered. Communities and regions should also have international recognition and be granted treaty-making powers in the policy areas for which they are responsible. Provinces – with their role clarified – would be retained while the province of Brabant as well as the

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<sup>144</sup> Ibidem, pp. 7 and 52.

<sup>145</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>146</sup> “This is thus the new European order. In this order Belgium is redundant”, ibidem, p. 9.

<sup>147</sup> *Wij hebben word gehouden*, pp. 2-3

BHV electoral district had to be split.<sup>148</sup> Most of these demands were obtained in the St Michael's agreement, as noted by the party's congress in October 1992.<sup>149</sup>

The manifesto devoted a section to 'Flanders in Europe and the world', in which the party reaffirmed its strong commitment to European integration based on the federal idea. It criticised the draft Maastricht treaty for being too timid from that perspective and for leading to a bureaucratic instead of a democratic Europe. The party advocated the adoption of a European constitution providing for increased powers for the European parliament – "alleen op die basis kan een nieuw Europees 'vaderland' democratisch worden gelegitimeerd"<sup>150</sup> – the development of a social dimension, special safeguards for culture and education and equal chances for men and women. Brussels had to become the real political capital of Europe and therefore also the eventual seat of the European Parliament. The CVP wanted regions and cultural communities to receive a clearer recognition, on an institutional basis, in the new treaty but fell short of endorsing the idea of a senate of the regions in the name of preserving a transparent institutional structure for the EU.<sup>151</sup> However, it did not make direct linkages between the deepening of European integration and further federalisation in Belgium.

#### 6.4 The PVV/VLD

The liberal party underwent an important transformation in 1992, changing its name to *Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten*, or Flemish liberals and democrats. This was a result of a thorough modernisation of the party under the new leadership of Guy Verhofstadt, which included, among other things, a Thatcherite-like reduction in the scope of action of the state and greater emphasis on the Flemish character of the party, as indicated by the adoption of the adjective *Vlaams*. The founding manifesto of the VLD went much further than the old PVV would have ever contemplated and committed the new party to bringing about "een zelfstandig Vlaanderen in een federaal België en een federal Europa".<sup>152</sup> Still standing as PVV for 1991 election, the party manifesto called for the achievement of a real federal state through the direct election of the community/regional assemblies, a clearer division of competences, the creation of a genuine constitutional court, and international recognition and treaty-making

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<sup>148</sup> Ibidem, pp. 9-10.

<sup>149</sup> See Menu (1994b: 498).

<sup>150</sup> "the only basis on which a new European 'fatherland' can be democratically legitimised", ibidem, p. 16.

<sup>151</sup> Ibidem, p. 17.

<sup>152</sup> "an independent Flanders in a federal Belgium and a federal Europe", *VLD Beginselverklaring*, p. 1. The manifesto also advocated a Europe of 'people, nations and regions', ibidem p. 2.

powers for the communities/regions.<sup>153</sup> It also advocated a thorough reform of social security, including transferring some competences to the regions and privatising others.<sup>154</sup>

In relation to the EU, the manifesto stressed that the EU states should base their policies more on the need of the citizens rather than being led by industrial, bureaucratic or trade union lobbies. The reform of the EU should take place as soon as possible in order to achieve an economic and monetary union as well as a political union based on democratic and efficient decision-making. The four freedoms enshrined in the Treaty of Rome should be applied as extensively as possible, the common agricultural policy should be reformed and the Union should be enlarged to the countries of East-central Europe.<sup>155</sup> No connection was made between integration on the European level and the completion of federalisation in Belgium.

## 6.5 The SP

At their congress in November 1992, the Flemish socialists discussed the reform of the state in the context of European integration. The resolutions adopted by the congress recalled that the emergence of the Flemish community was rooted in the fight for emancipation and against subordination and for that reason socialists supported it. They stressed that this support for ‘community formation’ was not in contradiction with the party’s internationalism as it did not amount to nationalism. The latter was strongly rejected on the grounds that the notion that each cultural community should have its own state is a fallacy and that in the European context such nationalism is outdated, “of het nu gaat om het nationalisme van oude staten, of het nationalisme van diegenen die dromen van nieuwe staten”.<sup>156</sup> The resolution also stressed socialists’ commitment to solidarity and rejected the idea of regionalising social security on the grounds that it would conflict with the duty of solidarity between the different regions. The party approved of the new round of reforms contained in the St Michael’s agreement, in particular, because it would allow Flanders to have its own directly elected parliament with more clearly defined competences. It argued that the new institutions should be given the time to establish themselves and to prove their ability to make a difference in tackling citizens’ concerns before new reforms are discussed. On the other hand,

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<sup>153</sup> *Herstel het beleid*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2; see also VLD *Beginselverklaring*, p. 2, where the issue of fiscal responsibility is stressed.

<sup>155</sup> *ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>156</sup> “regardless of whether it is the nationalism of old states or the nationalism of those who dream of new states”, Menu (1994c: 479).

however, it acknowledged that the agreement was unlikely to be the end point of the process. Institutions at the Flemish, Belgian and European level will all evolve and the distribution of responsibilities between them will have to be decided on the basis of which level is best positioned to meet changing societal demands. In that context, there could be further regionalisation in some policy areas, provided the socio-economic and monetary union of the country was not called into question.<sup>157</sup> The party also supported further decentralisation in favour of provinces and municipalities but rejected the introduction of direct democracy instruments, save at the local level.

The congress reaffirmed the Flemish socialists' support for European integration on the grounds that achieving their social-democratic objectives required more rather than less 'Europe'. However, it also called for a different model of integration, one in which economic unification would be complemented by genuine democratisation and the building of a 'social' Europe. The aim had to be a fully-fledged European welfare state, built on a democratic and federal basis and with a clear division of power between the European institutions, the states and the regions.<sup>158</sup> The Flemish Socialists thus perceived state reform between Belgium and reforms at the European level as two sides of the same struggle for democratisation and the social-democratic project and they utilised the European context to undermine the calls for the creation of an independent Flemish state.

## 6.6 Summary

Compared to the previous period, the early 1990s thus saw further convergence among the main parties on the need to complete the reform process and achieve a fully-fledged federal political order. The direct election of community/regional parliament, in particular, was widely supported as was the ability for the federated entities to act internationally within their sphere of competences. Positions were more divergent, however, on the matter of fiscal resources and social security. While all mainstream parties supported the notion that the communities/regions should be adequately and transparently funded, the VLD supported the regionalisation of important parts of social security whereas the socialists opposed it and the CVP was somewhat in the middle but closer to the former than the latter. All parties were demanding that the Brabant province and the BHV electoral district be split. The outcome of the St Michael's reform package met most of the widely shared demands with the exception of the BHV question. If the mainstream parties largely clustered

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 480.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 483.

together in support of Flemish autonomy within a federal Belgium, it is important to note that the nationalist parties radicalised their positions considerably. The *Vlaams Blok* had fully established itself by then as one of the main parties and placed the independence option firmly on the table. The *Volksumie* moved to a confederal position within the context of a deepening of European integration that in practice did not differ dramatically from the *Blok*'s. Both supported the emergence of a Flemish state within a Europe of regions and ethnic groups and the main difference was that the former wanted to exit from the Belgian structure as soon as possible whereas the latter saw it as a more gradual process of Belgium increasingly fading away as power would be transferred downwards to Flanders and upwards to the EU. All parties expressed support for the process of European integration to continue but there were significant differences of emphasis between them. The mainstream parties supported a federal Europe and regarded the Maastricht treaty as a step in the right direction but insufficiently ambitious in terms of democratisation and, for the SP and the CVP, of the 'social dimension'. The VB and the VU, on the other hand, were more deeply critical of Maastricht – also opposing its ratification in parliament – and contrasted the 'Europe of Maastricht' to their vision of a Europe of regions and ethnic groups, with strong safeguards for minority languages and cultures. On the other hand, parties differed greatly in the extent to which they 'played the Europe card' to bolster their policies on state reform. At one end of the spectrum, the European context was crucial to the *Volksumie*'s policy of progressively building Flanders' statehood within an emerging federal Europe of the regions. At the opposite end, and despite its strong support for a federal Europe, the CVP made no connections between the two. The socialists were close to the VU in seeing the European context providing additional support for its positions but less radical in expecting a dramatic transformation of the European state order. In contrast, the VB and, especially, the VLD were closer to the CVP end of the spectrum: both acknowledged the European context in their policy but did not exploit it to strengthen their positions.

## **7 The mid-2000s**

Although further constitutional reforms were on the political agenda, the last period analysed stands in contrast to the others as no agreement was reached and reform implemented. The period also differs from the earlier ones because it was marked by regional elections as well as federal ones. The focus of this section is on the federal election of 2007.

### 7.1 The *Vlaams Belang*

In 2004 the *Vlaams Blok* decided to dissolve itself and reconstitute as *Vlaams Belang* in the wake of a ruling by the Court of Cassation confirming that the party had broken the law on racist and xenophobic actions.<sup>159</sup> The new VB, however, maintained all the traditional core positions of the old VB, including *in primis* the creation of an independent Flemish republic through secession from the Belgian kingdom. Independence was presented as the only solution for Flanders to escape the political and economic 'straitjacket' of the Belgian state and enjoy the sovereignty that should belong to it as a nation. An independent Flemish state would have Brussels as its capital, with some linguistic and cultural facilities for the French-speaking population. In the meantime, linguistic facilities for French speakers living in the Brussels suburbs should be phased out and the BHV electoral district split.<sup>160</sup>

The VB was very critical of the direction of European integration, as the EU was seen to be in the process of building a bureaucratic superstate, whose decision-making process was far from democratic. The constitutional treaty had to be rejected precisely on the grounds that it would constitutionalise such a superstate.<sup>161</sup> The party was also critical of the immigration policy being pursued by the EU as well as the opening of the accession negotiations with Turkey, in the name of a 'European Europe'. In contrast to this undemocratic superstate, the VB called for a confederal and intergovernmental union of sovereign nations which would respect the specificity and the right to self-determination of each nation. Despite this negative perception of the European dimension, the party placed the acquisition of Flemish statehood within the context of the EU and cited the necessity of having direct access to European decision-making as one of the reasons why independence was preferable to autonomy within a federal Belgium.

### 7.2 The N-VA

After a long decline in electoral terms and internal divisions, the *Volkspartij* finally split into several different groups in 2001. The main successor party is the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA), or New Flemish Alliance, created by the centre-right wing of the old VU under the leadership of Geert Bourgeois. From 2003 to 2008, the N-VA formed a cartel with the Christian-democrats - now renamed CD&V - and it was on that basis that it fought the 2007 election. The N-VA presented itself as a moderate nationalist

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<sup>159</sup> See Tréfois and Faniel (2007: 16-9).

<sup>160</sup> *Verkiezingsprogramma* 10 Juni 2007, section 1.

<sup>161</sup> The party had voted against the ratification of the treaty in parliament.

party positioned between the *Vlaams Belang* and the CD&V on 'national' issues and close to the latter on socio-economic matters. On the question of the constitutional status for Flanders, the N-VA had a secessionist position, supporting in the medium term the achievement of independent statehood within the European Union. In the short term, it focussed on further reforms of the Belgian state and made this a precondition of its participation in government after the 2007 election. The party's manifesto for the election reflected these positions and called for a further transfer of power to Flanders - including competences in the field of health, employment, transport, policing, justice and taxation - in line with the resolutions adopted by the Flemish parliament in 1999.<sup>162</sup> It also reiterated the long-standing Flemish demand that the BHV district be split.

As already mentioned, the European dimension is a crucial aspect of the N-VA's policy of independence for Flanders, as reflected in the party's slogan "Nodig in Vlaanderen. Nuttig in Europa", or 'necessary in Flanders and useful in Europe'. The party sees integration as progressively hollowing the Belgian state of its key function, thus opening the way for Flanders to gain additional powers and eventually acquire independent statehood. Furthermore, the EU context is seen as providing the political and economic guarantees necessary to create majority support for independence in Flanders. The party is aware, however, that unilateral secession would not lead to automatic EU membership for Flanders and its objective is a negotiated process whereby the Belgian state would cease to exist and would be replaced by a Flemish and a Walloon successor states, each of them continuing as members of the EU. In that respect, the party sees the EU context as both facilitating and constraining the achievement of independence. As a nationalist party, the N-VA is also aware that the process of integration has the potential to erode the sovereignty the party wants to achieve for Flanders. Accordingly, the party defines itself as 'critical European' and advocates the preservation of a confederal Europe, with strong emphasis on the respect of minority cultures and languages, democratic decision-making and the application of the principle of subsidiarity. The party voted in favour of the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty and the Lisbon Treaty in the federal parliament.<sup>163</sup>

### 7.3 The CD&V

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<sup>162</sup> See Pagano (2000) for details.

<sup>163</sup> See *Manifest van de Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*, section 4 and Jambon, interview with the author.

The CVP transformed itself into the *Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams* in September 2001. The change of name coincided with the disintegration of the *Volksunie* and, by emphasising the Flemish character of the party, the CD&V clearly intended to profit from the disappearance of its former nationalist rival. The nationalist turn of the party was also evident in its decision, as seen above, to set up a cartel with the N-VA for the 2003 and 2007 elections. This evolution was reflected in the party programme. Under the heading "Meer Vlaanderen", or more Flanders, the 2007 manifesto stated that the party wanted to develop the Flemish 'state' further and had committed itself to work with its N-VA partner towards a further reform of the federation. This would entail the transfer of new policy competences and fiscal powers to Flanders, in the context of a "confederale evolutie", or confederal evolution, of Belgium.<sup>164</sup> A confederal transformation of the state was also one of the key points in the programme of its electoral cartel with the N-VA. Solidarity with the French-speaking part of the country would be maintained but the language laws would have to be applied strictly, notably in the Brussels suburbs, and the BHV district split. These points were in line with the resolutions of the Flemish parliament adopted in 1999, under the leadership of the CVP. The manifesto also reaffirmed the traditional pro-Europeanism of the party, expressing support for the Constitutional Treaty, more powers to the European Parliament and a more credible foreign policy in partnership with NATO. It also called for a debate on the future of Europe and on its borders and expressed caution over the prospect of Turkey's membership. It did not, however, make any explicit link between the deepening of integration and further reform of the Belgian state.<sup>165</sup>

#### 7.4 The Open VLD

After its foundation in 1992, the VLD had a remarkable rise culminating in becoming the largest party in Flanders after the 1999 election and securing the position of premier of the Flemish government from 1999-2004. At the 2007 election, however, the party suffered a setback and finished third behind the CD&V-N-VA cartel as well as the *Vlaams Belang*. Like the other Flemish parties, the liberals also underwent significant changes in the 2000s. Among the most significant, were the joining of four former members of the *Volksunie* in 2002, the defection of senator Jean-Marie Dedecker to form the *Lijst Dedecker* in 2006 and the merger with two small parties to give birth to the Open VLD in 2007.<sup>166</sup> The net result of these changes was a curbing of the party's move to the right on socio-economic matters but also a deepening of its 'Flemishist'

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<sup>164</sup> *Als het aan ons ligt Samen Werken aan Morgen*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>166</sup> See Tréfois and Faniel (2007: 24-32 and 43-5) for details.

character. Already at its congress in 2002, the party called for a wide range of policy areas to be regionalised and for the first time advocated a confederal evolution for Belgium.<sup>167</sup> The 2007 manifesto put less emphasis on institutional matters but reaffirmed the party's support for greater autonomy for Flanders both in terms of policy competences and of fiscal resources. It accepted keeping solidarity transfers between regions and between individuals but provided these were based on objective and transparent parameters. On the other hand, and in line with the other parties, it argued that the linguistic situation in the Brussels periphery was increasingly difficult and it called for the language facilities to be phased out and the BHV district to be split.

As regards the European dimension, the Open VLD maintained the liberals' traditional strong support for further integration. The party voted in favour of the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty and its leader, Guy Verhofstadt, published a book in 2006 in which he argued in favour of a federal Europe as the only way forward after the collapse of the Constitutional Treaty.<sup>168</sup> The 2007 manifesto called for a stronger Europe and advocated the total replacement of unanimity with majority voting, the establishment of a European diplomatic service and the creation of a European army. It did not, however, make any connections between European integration and further state reform in Belgium.<sup>169</sup>

## 7.5 The SP.A

Like all the other Flemish parties, the socialist party too underwent a significant transformation in the 2000s, including the adoption of a new name - *Socialistische Partij-Anders* – and the setting up of an electoral cartel with *Spirit* - the former social-liberal wing of the *Volksunie* - for the 2003 and 2007 elections.<sup>170</sup> While the cartel was successful in the 2003 election, it suffered severe losses in the following one and was subsequently dissolved. In spite of the fact that the alliance with *Spirit* might have been expected to deepen the 'Flemishist' outlook of the party, there was little trace of it in the 2007 programme. The manifesto focussed on economic and social issues and devoted only a small space to the constitutional question. It opposed independence for Flanders and expressed support for the transfer to the regions of some competences in the field of employment and transport but did not put forward a comprehensive blueprint for a further reform of the state. Alone among the Flemish parties - Greens included - it did

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<sup>167</sup> Ibidem, p. 25.

<sup>168</sup> Verhofstadt (2006).

<sup>169</sup> *De open samenleving in de praktijk*, pp. 83-5.

<sup>170</sup> See Tréfois and Faniel (2007: 33-42) for details.

not include in its programme the division of the BHV district.<sup>171</sup> The section of the party programme devoted to the European Union observed that the process of integration was in crisis due to the growing disconnection between the European leaders and the citizens. It criticised the liberalising agenda of the European Commission and called for the EU to become more than just a free market, through the development of genuinely common social and environmental policies and a security and defence policy autonomous from NATO.<sup>172</sup> It did not make any links between the European context and further state reform in Belgium.

## 7.6 Summary

This last period under analysis saw both a general radicalisation of positions on Flanders' constitutional status and more divergence between the parties. Both the VB and the N-VA, as well as the *Lijst Dedecker*, supported independence of Flanders. That meant that, after the 2007 election, over 30 percent of the Flemish seats in the lower house of the federal parliament were occupied by representatives of secessionist parties. This was a distinctly new situation as until the creation of the *Vlaams Blok* in the late 1970s, as seen above, Flemish nationalists stood for regional autonomy within a federal Belgium rather than for independence and not even in the late 1930s did secessionists have such a strong presence in the Belgian parliament. In other words, independence ceased to be a marginal position and was now in the mainstream of the constitutional debate in Flanders. Further evidence of this mainstreaming of independence was the Manifesto for an Independent Flanders in Europe published by the *In de Warande* reflection group – bringing together many prominent Flemings from all walks of life – in 2005.<sup>173</sup> The widening appeal of independence among the nationalists is compounded by a parallel process of radicalisation of the Christian-democrats and the Liberals. Both parties now support a confederal vision of Belgium in which the powers left to the central level would be reduced to a minimum. If the Christian-democrats have always been sympathetic towards the Flemish question, the change among the Liberals is remarkable. Even the socialists are in favour of further regionalisation of competences provided the solidarity ties between Flanders and Wallonia are maintained. Given this radicalisation and the absence of clear incentives for the French-speaking parties to compromise, it is perhaps not surprising that a long government crisis followed the 2007 election and that no agreement on a further round of reforms has so far been reached.

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<sup>171</sup> See Govaert (2007: 15)

<sup>172</sup> *De wereld is van iedereen*, pp. 19-24.

<sup>173</sup> See *Manifesto for an independent Flanders in Europe* and Pagano et al. (2006).

The traditional pro-integration position of the mainstream parties was again visible in this period. All parties save the *Vlaams Belang* expressed support for further integration and voted in favour of the Constitutional Treaty. However, less enthusiasm for a federal Europe and greater criticism of the direction of integration could be detected. This was especially the case for the nationalist parties and the socialists. The former advocated a confederal Europe, in which nations would maintain their sovereignty and their culture and, notably in the case of the *Vlaams Belang*, opposed the creation of a bureaucratic superstate. The socialists on the other hand, deplored the free-market model of integration and the distance between decision-makers and citizens. The only point on which all agreed, save for some differences in emphasis, was the need for an effective European security and defence policy, going in some cases as far as calling for a European army. Even greater variation was evident in the degree to which parties made linkages between the European dimension and their policy on further state reform in Belgium. All federalist parties, with the partial exception of the CD&V, did not link the two aspects and did not exploit the European dimension in their strategy. The two secessionist parties, on the other hand, placed their policies within a European context and made the deepening of integration and the need for Flanders to gain direct access to EU decision-making a key element of their policy. Furthermore, the N-VA saw the guarantees provided by the EU framework as a key aspect of its vision for an independent Flanders, although the party was also aware of the constraints such framework would place in the case of a unilateral secession. The VB, in contrast, did not conceive the EU context as a facilitator for independence and, although it did not go as far as calling for independence outside the EU, the latter played a clearly more marginal role in its policy.

## **8 Conclusions**

These preliminary results seem to suggest the following six points. First, the autonomy demands of the Flemish parties underwent a dramatic radicalisation over time. While support for federalism was a radical position only supported by a small, outsider party in the late 1960s, it became a 'conservative' position 40 years later. What in the late 1970s was an extreme position of a small group of nationalists – a confederal Belgium – became in the 2000s the consensus policy among the mainstream parties and the official position of the Flemish parliament. Independence has gained acceptance as a mainstream policy. In no other advanced country, the unraveling of the state has gone so far. Second, although this process has clearly been driven primarily by powerful and

deep-seated internal factors predating the onset of European integration, the latter has had a discernible effect on it. As seen above, clear linkages between the two processes were made by party actors throughout the four periods of observation of this study. Importantly, the party that effectively won the 'policy battle' on federalisation – the *Volkspartij* – made the European dimension a crucial element of its position. Fourth, the connection between European integration and federalisation in Belgium was generally understood to be a positive one, i.e. the former reinforcing the latter, but some constraints were also perceived and often the European dimension was thought in terms of a desired context rather than an actual one. The party which 'played the European card' to the greatest extent – the VU/N-VA – made appeal to a *Europa der volkeren* to bolster its case for federalisation in Belgium even though such a vision of Europe was very different from the actual shape of integration as represented by the EU. Even more so, both the PLP in the late 1960s and the N-VA in the mid-2000s actually saw the European framework as placing constraints on the achievement of greater autonomy for Flanders, the former because it saw a 'divisive' internal federalism as antithetical to integration, the latter because the constitutional order of the EU created obstacles for a unilateral secession of Flanders. Fifth, the degree to which parties decided to exploit the European dimension was highly uneven cross-sectionally but rather stable cross-temporally. Cross-party variation in each of the periods under examination appears to have been determined by a complex interaction of at least four factors – constitutional position, attitudes to integration, evolution of the EU framework, position in the party system – with the second and the fourth one having possibly the strongest influence. Thus a non-mainstream party with a radical constitutional position and a positive attitude to integration – the VU/N-VA - consistently made the most intense strategic usage of 'Europe' while the *Vlaams Blok/Belang* with similar features but a more negative attitude to integration exploited it less and the Christian-democrats – a dominant party with moderate constitutional demands and a pro-EU outlook – largely failed to play the EU card at all. In contrast, the temporal stability seems to indicate that the evolution of the EU itself, i.e. the very significant deepening of integration between the late 1960s and the mid-2000s, actually had, somewhat paradoxically, comparatively little influence. Lastly, it appears that the pro-integration consensus generally existing among the Flemish parties as well as the very centrality of Belgium within the EU played a rather contradictory role. On the one hand, they did not create much space for playing the European card as weapon of party competition because they reduced the EU's visibility and induced a 'taking it for granted' attitude. On the other hand, this was tempered by the fact that the very pro-EU ethos of Belgian politics meant that claiming a European 'endorsement' for a policy,

whatever its nature, would add significant external legitimacy to it. Hypotheses H1, H2, H3 and H5 are thus only partially supported and hypothesis H4 is rejected.

When compared to the case of Scotland, the results of this study show both similarities and differences.<sup>174</sup> On the one hand, in both Flanders and Scotland the nationalist parties have strategically exploited the European dimension to increase support for their policies and achieve their objectives. The EU's properties that have featured most prominently in these strategies are also broadly similar, with emphasis on ideational and institutional aspects rather than policy ones. On the other hand, strategic use of the European dimension stretches much further back into the past in Flanders than in Scotland and has been more uneven in the former than in the latter. While the mainstream Labour and Liberal Democrat parties played the European card to a significant extent in Scotland in the 1990s, the mainstream Flemish parties have consistently neglected it. The stark differences between Belgium and the UK in terms of party system and attitudes to European integration appear to loom large in any comparison of the two processes of devolution.

The results thus provide additional empirical support to some of the theoretical claims put forward in the literature since the 1970s but call into question the emphasis the literatures on multi-level governance and Europeanisation place on the effects of the EU policy output and, more generally, the assumption of a linear correlation between supra-state integration and sub-state devolution. Further analysis of the Belgian case as well as investigation of other cases will enable us to shed full light on this important aspect of contemporary politics in Europe.

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<sup>174</sup> On Scotland, see Dardanelli (2005).

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