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Belgium Re-Founded : A Post-script

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Neither Flanders nor Wallonia can leave the Belgian federation while absorbing Brussels — because the other Region would not consent, because the Brusselers do not want it and because the European Union is not keen. But neither Flanders nor Wallonia wants to leave the federation without remaining in control of Brussels — the core of the economic dynamism of the whole country (hardly more than 1% of the country's territory accounts for one third of its wealth) and inextricably linked to each of the other two Regions' wealthiest and fastest growing provinces (Vlaams Brabant and Brabant wallon). Does it follow that we are stuck forever with a boring and painful status quo? Not at all! We urgently need a thorough reform of our federal state, a "Copernican revolution" as some now prefer to say. With what ingredients?¹

1. A federalism of Regions. First of all, we need to switch to a simpler and more efficient classic federalism, whose building blocks are the three Regions — or even the four Regions if the territorially defined German-speaking Community is given full regional status (it is admittedly 15 times less populated than the Brussels Region, but also five times larger). The key feature of the Copernican revolution we need is not the transfer of a handful of competences which the federal state still possesses. We need something far more radical. We need to move further away from the *Belgique unitaire de Bon-Papa* and get rid of the *Belgique bi-communautaire de Papa*. The Communities formed a useful stage in the evolution of our institutions, but it is now urgent to move beyond them. This is of little importance for

¹ Shortly after the Vandeputte lecture was delivered, a group of academics came together in order to launch the "Re-Bel initiative" (<http://www.rethinkingbelgium.eu/>), whose purpose is to create a fertile intellectual environment in which ideas for reforms of all sorts can be discussed in an open spirit by scholars from all over the country and beyond.

Flanders, of greater importance for Wallonia and absolutely crucial for Brussels. A coherent, efficient decentralization of competences implies that decentralized governments should be made responsible for the impact of their policies on the welfare of their populations. But one will never seriously be able to make the Brussels Region responsible for the (lack of) prosperity of its population without allowing it be in charge of its education system. And education forms the bulk of the Communities' competences.

2. The cappuccino model. Secondly, what is the optimal distribution of competences between the various policy levels, from the communes to the European level and beyond? Should we aim, as is frequently demanded, for “homogeneous packages”? Nonsense. Trying to gather at the same level of power all competences “of the same genus”, the environment, for example, or taxation, or mobility, makes no sense whatever. Optimality requires each policy domain to be intelligently broken down between the various levels, balancing in each case the respective demands of responsiveness to the situation and preferences of the people most directly affected and the need to handle efficiently positive and negative externalities. What must guide us is not a craving for homogeneity but the flavour and look of a cappuccino. Take child benefits as an easy example. By way of coffee, you get a strong and simple universal child benefit paid at the federal level, irrespective of family income, rank or age, to each child in a household subjected to Belgium's personal tax system. And let the regional governments, but also possibly the trans-regional mutualities, or individual firms, top this up with cream, cacao or sugar according to their own tastes and with their own resources. One Region may want to give a bit more to the third child, for example, another to single mothers, and yet another to unemployed parents. Let them do so. Regional governments will be able to experiment and boast with the cappuccino's most visible ingredients. But underneath, the strong coffee basis will be secured by the federal government and thereby protected against the risk of all cups running empty under the pressure of fiscal and social competition. In matters of health care or education, media or employment, the restructuring required is not always as simple, but the cappuccino model can and must keep providing the inspiration.

3. Linguistic territoriality. Next comes the general acceptance of the linguistic territoriality principle for Flanders and Wallonia. People who settle in Brussels will be able to get away more and more with knowing neither Dutch nor French: in addition to whatever languages they knew before leaving their many countries of origin, the knowledge of English, the lingua franca of the EU institutions and the European civil society, will increasingly suffice. But whoever wishes to settle permanently in Flanders or Wallonia will

need to muster the courage and humility to learn Dutch and French, respectively: “Europeans, Brussels is your capital, but Belgium is not your colony.” To achieve this, however, we shall need to get rid of the regime of “permanent facilities” in six communes of the Brussels periphery that was introduced as a defective component of the 1963 settlement. This will require a new intelligent, honourable and courageous compromise, for example the one I have been defending along with my Ghent University colleague Etienne Vermeersch (make the four smallest of these communes part of the Brussels Region, and phase out the facilities in the remaining two) or perhaps one that consists in viewing the incorporation of all six of the communes concerned (69.000 inhabitants, 51 km²) into the Brussels Region as a fair quid pro quo for Wallonia accepting to lose the German Community (73.000 inhabitants, 854km²) through its transformation into a separate Region.

4. Electoral reform. Finally, the Copernican revolution we need also demands a modest but crucial reform of our electoral institutions. It would be good if part of the seats of the Flemish Parliament and part of the seats of the Walloon Parliament were allocated in electoral districts that cover the whole of Flanders and of Wallonia, respectively. More important is that the separate French and Dutch electoral colleges for the Brussels Parliament should be abolished and replaced by a system that allows for linguistically mixed lists while securing a guaranteed representation for each language group. Most crucial, however, is the creation of a country-wide electoral district for part of the seats of the federal Parliament, as proposed by the Pavia group (<http://www.paviagroup.be/>) and now systematically defended by both liberal parties and both green parties, as well as by prominent members of both Christian-democratic parties and both socialist parties. At each level of government, we need political leaders who propose and defend programmes that are in the interest of all components of the population they purport to govern, and who are electorally accountable to the whole of this population.

All this can go hand in hand with a strengthening of both the regional identities and the federal identity. We need Flemings, Walloons and Brusselers who identify with their Region and are proud of it. We need a strong Flemish, Walloon and Brussels patriotism, an inclusive one of course, based on place of residence and not on ethnic origin or mother tongue. This need not and must not be inconsistent with a strengthened and renovated federal Belgian identity. But such consistency is only achievable if we re-found our institutions in such a way that the federal state can better serve the Regions, that each of the Regions can better serve its citizens, and that Brussels can better play its role both as the

leaner capital of a leaner Belgian federation as the ever more significant capital of the ever more significant European Union.