

guardian.co.uk

# Are chips really the best thing about Belgium?

The country has been without a government for a year. Why can't the Dutch-speaking Flemish and the Francophone Walloons agree on its future?

---

Tamara Gausi  
The Guardian, Friday 10 June 2011

---



Gunther van Frausum: 'Everyone agrees that Belgium has the best fries.' Photograph: Natalie Hill

---

## **Gunther van Frausum, chip-shop owner, 33, Leuven, Flanders**

---

Our frites are one of the best things about Belgium. We may not agree on the politics but everyone agrees that Belgium has the best fries. OK, they call them french fries, but it's a Belgian thing really. I am a bit ashamed about what is happening here. Why can't we all live together? We can't go on like this for ever. Maybe we need to lock all the politicians in a room together until they find a solution. I am proud to be a Belgian. I speak both languages and I make the effort. When you see that a French guy who lives in Belgium cannot even make the effort to say "Hello" in Dutch, that hurts. But Belgium is Belgium. It's a French part and a Dutch part. If it split, it would feel as if there is something missing.

---

## **Claude Chalençon, retired journalist, 53, Wavre, Wallonia**

---



Claude Chalençon: 'There has always been a sense of two communities.' Photograph: Natalie Hill

I am half Belgian and half French, but I was born and raised in Brussels. There has always been a sense of two communities with two languages and two cultures, but there used to be one Belgium identity. Now it has been diluted. Lately, there has been a renewed sense of national identity, but that's mainly in response to the disunity. And there is nothing political in it. The Shame march [a rally organised by students] was ridiculous. A completely counter-political move. These are young people from some of the best schools in the country and all they could say is: "We want a government"? They should have analysed the situation and said what kind of government they want with what kind of compromise. We need solutions. The political classes are just lazy and that is why we are in the situation we are in.

---

## Chika Unigwe, writer, 37, Turnout, Flanders

---



Chika Unigwe: 'I consider myself Flemish, but I am also Belgian, Nigerian and Igbo.' Photograph: Natalie Hill

I am from Nigeria but I have lived in Belgium for about 12 years. I live and work in Flanders so of course I consider myself Flemish, but I am also Belgian, Nigerian and Igbo. If I were to tell the story of Belgium, I would say it is the story of a very small country that hasn't learned to live with itself. There are 11 million people, 6.5 million of them Flemish and 4.5 million Walloons, but they can't seem to find a middle ground. I find it difficult to sympathise with either side because I come from a country that was also forced into being. But we have managed to forge one Nigeria with 150 million people, 250 ethnic groups and 500 languages. Here you have politicians saying they think Belgium should split because they do not understand the Walloons. Then how

can you understand the millions of foreigners who live in Belgium?

---

## **Ilse Marien, PhD student, 36, Keerbergen, Flanders**

---



Ilse Marien: 'We have no common background except when the Belgian football team play.' Photograph: Natalie Hill

I am married to a French-speaking African man and have four children. We always say that the day Flanders becomes a republic, we will move to Brussels, where you can have a Flemish identity and still be Belgian, still be European. The problem with being Belgian is that we have no common background, except when the Red Devils [Belgian football team] play. We have different TV stations, different celebrities. I know French comedians because I watch French TV but ask my friends and they won't know anyone who is famous in Wallonia. They don't even know French music. They know more about English and US culture. I think the politicians have missed the opportunity to make education bilingual for all. Then there would be no language issue. Even though people laugh when Elio Di Rupo [leader of the largest francophone Socialist party] speaks Flemish, at least he makes an effort.

---

## **Philippe van Parijs, philosopher and political economist, 60, Brussels**

---



Philippe van Parijs: 'Brussels is like the Jerusalem of Flanders.' Photograph: Natalie Hill

The problem is there is no easy Czech/Slovak Republic solution because Brussels is not Bratislava or Prague. Brussels grew into a Francophone capital of a Dutch majority

country, so what happens if the country splits? You have this city that is too hot for Flanders to swallow because of what it has become, but it is impossible for Flanders to abandon it. Brussels is like the Jerusalem of Flanders, the key difference being that Brussels is crucial to the Flemish economy whereas for Israel Jerusalem is not. Luckily, there is no religious element; the Basilica Koekelberg will never become the Temple Mount, but Flanders has a symbolic attachment to the city, even if most Flemings don't like it here. I belong to a group of academics calling for a countrywide constituency, so that leaders of all parties are accountable to all Belgians and not just the language community from which they come.

---

## Olivier Chaput, bio-engineer and social entrepreneur, 37, grew up in Wallonia, lives in Brussels

---



Olivier Chaput: 'The political crisis is like a couple who fight.' Photograph: Natalie Hill

The political crisis is like a couple who fight. They keep falling back on the same disagreement and we, the citizens, are like the kids of the family. Even though we have learned to function in this situation we are suffering. But like in any couple where you disagree too much, you just want to separate. Still, I think there is richness in our diversity and we could achieve great things as a country if we were working together. I work for an organisation that proposed to help with mediation. We suggested taking [our politicians] out of their usual setting and going to a forest or the mountains for the day. Unfortunately our idea was refused by the chairman of the senate. He said: "We will just keep going with what we are doing" but that's not working. It's time to look for an alternative.

### **Ads by Google**

CFA Level I, II & III

Online & Self Study Program Success Guarantee

[www.top-finance.net/Stalla](http://www.top-finance.net/Stalla)

Spread Betting - Try Now

Try GFTs Award-Winning Trading Platform. Free Practice Account.

[www.GFTuk.com](http://www.GFTuk.com)

Rotterdam Rentals

1300+ Short & Long stay Apartments. Experienced Expat Specialist.

[www.PerfectHousing.nl](http://www.PerfectHousing.nl)

### **Comments in chronological order (Total 1**

## comment)

### [Post a comment](#)

 Staff

 Contributor



[FrankPoster](#)

10 June 2011 9:02AM

An important clarification, the best thing about Belgium are frites...with that big dollop of mayo. Yum!

And then there are the 400+ beers of course...

Recommend? (0)

[Report abuse](#)

[Clip](#)

| [Link](#)

In order to post a comment you need to be registered and signed in.

[Sign in to comment](#)

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2011