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The paradox of federalism and its many (friendly) faces: A synthesis of conflict indicators against the background of decentralization in Belgium

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Abstract

While holding together federalism is often viewed as a tool for managing conflict in divided societies, concerns exist about its counter-productiveness – the so-called ‘paradox of federalism’ (Erk & Anderson, 2010). This study adds to the substantive yet fragmented body of research by highlighting the diversity of indicators of conflict and stability and by demonstrating the value of an integrated approach. Challenging the notion of a singular paradox, we provide an encompassing synthesis of new and existing indicators that are typically examined in isolation. Empirically, the focus is on Belgium – a former unitary state that evolved into one of the world’s most decentralised federations. Indicators are clustered on three levels: intergovernmental dynamics, self-rule, and shared-rule pressures. The results provide a nuanced evaluation of conflict dynamics against the background of decentralisation in a fragile and bipolar federation. We conclude that (1) support for the paradox thesis varies depending on the indicator at hand, while more generally, (2) empirical evidence for conflict escalation is scarce.

Keywords: Belgium, Conflict-Management, Decentralization, Federalism, Paradox of Federalism

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Introduction: The Paradox of Federalism and the Belgian Case

The Paradox of Federalism

Decentralisation, the transfer of power from the central policy level to sub-state entities, is one of the most popular recipes for managing tensions in multinational or divided states. However, this pacifying impact is extensively debated (e.g. Brancati, 2006, 2009; Erk & Anderson, 2010; Keil & Anderson, 2018; Massetti & Schakel, 2013). According to the paradox of federalism, it is ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. Such dynamics can arise on three levels: the sub-state challenge (self-rule), the power-sharing challenge (shared rule), and intergovernmental dynamics. These are discussed consecutively.

First, decentralisation can worsen the sub-state challenge – the regionalist pressures against the national policy level. It is often said that decentralisation “whets the appetite of would-be secessionists” (Keil & Anderson, 2018, p. 98). It also gives regionalist actors a wide series of valuable resources (political, administrative, and economic resources) that can be used to de-legitimise the centre and spread sub-state nationalism (cf. the discussion in Nordlinger, 1972). Accordingly, decentralisation has been argued to strengthen regional identities, increase regionalist party support, fuel autonomy demands, bolster separatism, and/or turn secession into a more viable alternative (e.g., Brancati, 2006, 2009). In part, these dynamics are bolstered by party political motives. For example, some scholars fear that decentralisation provides a more fertile context for regionalist parties – which can further radicalise mainstream parties in their turn. In an attempt to defuse the (electoral) threat of regionalists, mainstream parties often embrace parts of their programme. In this respect, Alonso (2012, p. 37) talks about “pro-periphery convergence”. The PSO theory of party competition (*Position-Salience-Ownership*) of Meguid (2008) calls this tactic the “accommodative strategy”. Such competitive dynamics are often blamed for feeding ‘ethnic outbidding’ spirals: an inflation of ethno-territorial claims, radicalism, and intransigence (Rabushka & Shepsle, 1972).

Second, decentralisation might impact the power-sharing challenge – the challenge of inter-segmental political cooperation. For example, Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2015) provide several reasons why decentralisation can “accommodate the political conflicts that are currently on the agenda, while making it increasingly more difficult to pacify tensions in the long run”. Decentralisation, they argue, makes it harder for segmental leaders to find large package deals (whereby everybody gets some sweets), because it leaves the central level with fewer and fewer competences and resources (sweets) that can be included in those deals to buy off peace. Adding to this, the easiest decisions (largest consensus) are typically made first, leaving politicians in later decades with the hardest, most disputed debates. In Belgium

too, the low-hanging fruit has already been picked. The policy domains on which a large decentralisation consensus existed (culture, several economic competences) are already transferred to the sub-states. What is left is a set of highly symbolic domains, the decentralisation of which is highly controversial (e.g. labour and wage policy, social security, or health care). Finally, decentralisation might lower the cost of non-agreement. The fewer competences the central level has, the less urgent a gridlock becomes. Indeed, a central gridlock may no longer result in the 'generalised policy paralysis' that used to urge politicians to reach an agreement (see also Hooghe, 2004; Jans, 2001).

Third, decentralisation might fuel intergovernmental tensions – another but less explored manifestation of the paradox. It might trigger a *shift* of conflicts; a downwards migration of tensions. Perhaps, federalisation has not really *resolved* underlying tensions but merely *displaced* them to other policy levels – notably the sub-state level (Vandenberghe, 2023a, pp. 446–447). Central tensions might be gone (at least to some degree), but tensions *between* sub-states or policy-levels might have increased. This risk is especially pertinent when large inter-regional differences and ideological divisions are present. Similarly, decentralisation might burden supranational policy-making, by making it harder for government officials to speak with a single voice (Popelier, 2022).

Clearly, there are many ways in which the paradox can manifest itself. The aim here is to assess these different forms by bringing together a variety of studies, data, and results in the case of Belgium. Before doing so, we briefly describe this case.

The Belgian Case

Belgium's evolution from a unitary into a federal state has resulted in one of the most decentralised political systems in the world (Husson et al., 2016; Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2021). How did we get there? Belgium has, since its creation, been characterised by deeply entrenched linguistic, cultural, and economic divisions between the Dutch-speaking majority (North) and the French-speaking minority (South) (Bouteca, 2024; Witte, 2009). Founded in 1830, Belgium emerged as a unitary state ruled by a small Francophone elite (Witte & Van Velthoven, 2010, p. 33). In political, economic, academic, and legal spheres, French was the language of the ruling class. This dynamic was challenged by an increasingly radicalising Flemish movement, whose demands inflated from cultural survival (initially) to full-fledged separatism in less than a century. Meanwhile, democratisation, and most notably the expansion of voting rights, gradually turned the Flemish majority into a political majority. The result was a growing Francophone minority fear, where Flanders could dominate Belgium – '*L'Etat Belgo-Flamand*' (De Winter & Baudewyns, 2009, p. 285). Pressures increased in the post-WWII period, when the Flemish majority became more assertive and frustrated, regionalist parties skyrocketed, and the Southern economy

faced rapid decline (Hooghe, 2004, pp. 56–58). Against this background, autonomy demands in the North *and* South were combined with a Francophone claim for minority protection at the national level.

The rationale behind Belgian federalism was thus twofold: provide self-rule and enforce shared rule (Vandenberghe, 2023b; Ch. 3). These objectives are clearly visible in the resulting system – a ‘consociational federation’ (Deschouwer, 2002, 2006). On the one hand, autonomy demands were met by establishing two kinds of sub-states: three Communities (cultural competences such as education and media, Flemish demand) and three Regions (economic competences such as infrastructure, Walloon demand). These sub-states overlap, in that each citizen is governed by at least one community, one region, and the national (federal) level. The overlapping authority of entities in Brussels – the legally bilingual but demographically largely Francophone capital of Belgium – further accentuates the system’s complexity (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015; Reuchamps, 2013). On the other hand, the Francophone minority fear resulted in the establishment of a unique consociational power-sharing system – providing strong veto powers to the two predominant groups at the national level (Dutch and French speakers): parity in the Council of Ministers (an equal number of ministers), two language groups in parliament, special majority laws that need the support in both language groups (and an overall two-thirds majority), and an ‘alarm bell procedure’ that can be used by each language group to block the legislative process. These vetoes left politicians with two options: governing together or not governing at all (Deschouwer, 2013, p. 214).

In practice, six major state reforms – agreed upon between 1970 and 2011 – gave shape to these self-rule and shared rule provisions (for a detailed account, see Bouteica, 2024). Inefficiencies and political gridlocks in the aftermath of the sixth state reform (2011 agreement) triggered sporadic debates on the need for a seventh state reform (Reybrouck et al., 2023). Central to this controversy is the evaluation of the previous reforms. While some parties argue that federalisation has gone too far and undermines political cooperation, others call for even more far-reaching decentralisation reforms (Bouteica, 2024; Pascolo et al., 2021; Reuchamps et al., 2017). Adding to this debate, the following section summarises key indicators of the Belgian paradox of federalism.

The Paradox of Belgian Federalism: An Overview of Existing Indicators

In Belgium, as in many countries, scholars are blessed with data and studies (both theoretical and empirical) that allow us to assess the repercussions of decentralisation. This section provides a summary of prominent indicators of ethno-territorial stability. Three clusters are presented. First, indicators of the so-called sub-state challenge – the regionalist pressures against the national policy-level. Second, we assess the power-sharing

challenge by analysing data on the birth, life, and death of Belgian power-sharing cabinets. Third, we shed light on some intergovernmental dynamics: decentralisation might have increased clashes *between* sub-states or policy-levels – and as such, might have *shifted* tensions rather than resolved them. An overview of the key dynamics on each indicator is provided at the end of the discussion, where Table 1 summarizes the state of the art on the paradox of federalism in Belgium.

Before turning to the individual indicators, it is noteworthy to stress that our primary aim in selecting these indicators was to capture paradox dynamics in a broad and encompassing way, casting a wide net across different arenas and manifestations, and covering the most salient claims in the academic and societal debates. As a result, the indicators differ in their proximity to the underlying concept of ethno-territorial conflict and do not carry the same inferential weight. Some (e.g. separatism or violence) are more direct measures than others (e.g. cabinet formation duration or EU abstentions). Accordingly, these indicators should be read as complementary rather than equivalent.

Decentralization and the Sub-State Challenge

Did decentralisation increase regionalist pressures in Belgium? A wide range of indicators allows us to assess this question. We consider regionalist parties' strength and positions, the ideological positions of mainstream parties, the evolution of identities and public autonomy stances, and the incidence of civil violence.

Regionalist Parties' Strength and Positions: Ambiguous Dynamics

By satisfying autonomy demands, decentralisation was long considered very successful in undermining regionalist parties. This decline is evident since the first decentralisation reform of 1970 (Figure 1). Their combined seat share in the Chamber of Representatives sharply dropped from over 20% in the early 1970s to less than 10% by the mid-1980s. Many scholars considered them to be "victims of their own success" (Deschouwer, 2009; van Haute, 2005; van Haute & Pilet, 2006). Most regionalists were winning the policy wars but losing the electoral battles (Newman, 1995). Consequently, some of them disappeared (the *Rassemblement Wallon*, RW in Wallonia). Others tried to avoid irrelevance by re-inventing themselves. Most notably, the *Volksunie* (VU) shifted its position from federalism to confederalism (late 1970s/early 1980s) and eventually embraced separatism (late 1990s) (van Haute & Pilet, 2006, p. 306). Thus, from a paradox perspective, pacification (regionalist vote losses) and escalation (regionalist radicalisation) went hand in hand. In this respect, Belgium is not unique. Comparative studies show that, although decentralisation often undermines regionalist parties, the impact is strongest for moderate regionalists (Masseti & Schakel, 2013) – thus providing an incentive for radicalisation (Masseti & Schakel, 2016).

Recently, however, the dynamic has changed: Regionalist parties' electoral growth is combined with cautious ideological moderation. The Flemish regionalists experienced an electoral renaissance with the rise of the N-VA and the (re-)emergence of the radical-right Vlaams Belang (VB) (Baudewyns et al., 2015; Rochtus, 2012; van Haute, 2016). In 2010, these parties passed the 20% ceiling for the first time since 1974 (percentage of seats for the federal Chamber of Representatives). Less than a decade later, they stood historically strong. The “rebirth of Flemish nationalism” (Rochtus, 2012) is even more prominent within the Flemish parliament. Here, the regionalists gradually grew, with half of the MPs now belonging to a Flemish nationalist party (62/124 seats since the 2024 elections). Meanwhile, at the federal policy level, a centre-right coalition is being led by the very first Flemish nationalist prime minister in Belgian history: Bart De Wever, the previously long-lasting president of the N-VA (Camatarri et al., 2025).

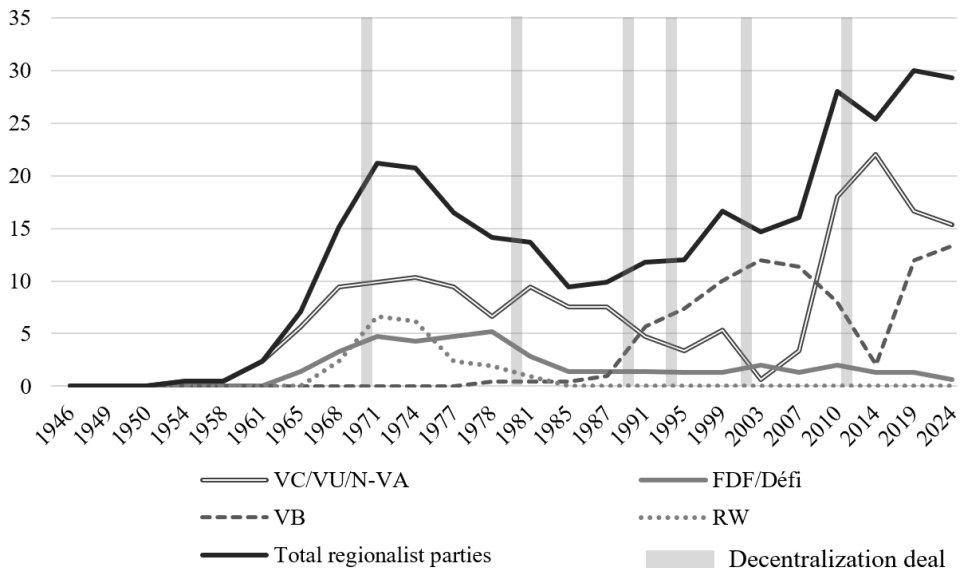


Figure 1. General Election Scores of Regionalist Parties in Belgium (Percent of seats in the Chamber of Representatives, 1949–2024)

Note: *Vlaamse Concentratie* (VC; 1949), *Volksunie* (VU; 1954–1999), *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA; 2003–2019), *Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang* (VB; 1978–2019), *Rassemblement Wallon* (RW; 1968–1985), *Front démocratique des francophones/ Fédération Démocrates Francophones* (FDF; 1965–2015), *Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant* (Défi; 2015–2019). Sources: ParlGov (Döring & Manow, 2020) and Federal Public Services Home Affairs (2019). Exceptions: (1) Blaise et al. (2007, p. 25) for the 2007 N-VA result (in cartel with CD&V). (2) FDF/Défi result after its inclusion in MR (*Mouvement Réformateur*): Delcorps et al. (2014).

Ideologically, however, the N-VA has gone through a significant process of ethno-territorial moderation: The separatist whip party established in the early 2000s has transformed itself into a more moderate autonomist party with a strong focus on socio-economic reform. This is illustrated by the shift from independence to so-called ‘confederalism’ (the party’s terminology for far-reaching autonomy without independence) and by the N-VA’s entry into two federal coalitions that prioritised economic reforms over territorial debates (in 2014 and 2024). Again, electoral and ideological dynamics appear to contrast. All in all, then, support for the paradox thesis is very ambiguous when we consider regionalist party dynamics. Their initial decline and radicalisation was followed by an electoral resurgence with evident traces of ideological moderation. What about the mainstream parties they compete with?

Mainstream Parties’ Positions: A Cautious Reversal of the Paradox

For decades, mainstream parties in the North and South increased autonomy demands in a paradox-confirming radicalisation spiral. Many even feared that there was no one left to defend the centre (Deschouwer, 2002). This was often seen as additional evidence for the paradox thesis (e.g. De Winter & Baudewyns, 2009; Delwit, 2011; Deschouwer, 2012; Hooghe, 2004). Some mainstream parties in Flanders even embrace(d) confederalism – although their plea was one for additional sub-state autonomy within Belgium (not for an actual confederal association of sovereign states established by means of an international treaty) (e.g. Romainville, 2015). However, this seemingly unstoppable inflation of demands is now being countered, as more and more politicians and parties are criticising the so-called ‘dysfunctional decentralisation’ and calling for a correction – for instance, by shifting some decentralised policy competences back to the federal policy level (Dodeigne et al., 2016; Dodeigne et al., 2022; Pascolo et al., 2021; Sinardet et al., 2013). This ideological shift shows that political parties *do have incentives* for ethno-territorial moderation. Incentives “are the key to accommodation in difficult conditions” (Horowitz, 2002, p. 24). But it is often thought that there are very few pre-electoral incentives for cooperation in Belgium, due to its combination of a list-PR system and parties that are split along segmental lines (Horowitz, 1991, 2002). However, as explained more elaborately elsewhere, opting for moderation can still be a rational strategy for Belgian parties – both from a vote-seeking, office-seeking, and policy-seeking perspective (Vandenberghe, 2023b, pp. 226–228).

Violence, Identities, and Autonomy Stances: The Paradox of Indifference

Has decentralisation eroded the Belgian identity, bolstered regional identification, and nourished separatist sentiments amongst the Belgian public? The answer is clear: no. A broad series of consecutive studies demonstrate that no paradox-like dynamics can be noted (for a solid overview, see e.g. Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015; Dalle Mulle, 2018, Fig. 9.1; Deschouwer et al., 2015; Reuchamps, 2017; Swyngedouw et al., 2015). This can be illustrated by the well-known work on identities by the Institute for Social and Political Opinion Research (ISPO/PIOP) (for a background, see ISPO, 2022). The percentage of voters identifying themselves primarily with Belgium evolved as follows: 52% (1995 elections), 56% (1999), 54% (2003), 52% (2007), 45% (2010), and 56% (2014). For primary identification with Flanders, this is respectively 25%, 27%, 30%, 34%, 29%, and 28%. Most voters (79.7% in 2014) feel both Flemish and Belgian, and 38.7% put them on an equal level. Similar patterns apply to the Francophone side (with an even stronger Belgian identification) and to political candidates (Niessen et al., 2022). In sum, exclusive segmental identities are subordinate to state-wide and dual identities.

What about ethnic violence? Decentralisation may not only politicise territorial identities, but can ultimately radicalise them, leading to violent escalation. This claim, which is particularly pertinent for cases like Northern Ireland or the Basque Country, is commonly tested in the field, with many authors treating violence as a crucial paradox indicator (e.g. Bakke & Wibbels, 2006; Brancati, 2006; McGarry & O'Leary, 2009; Walsh, 2018). Although this indicator is arguably less salient in cases like Belgium, it is not irrelevant. Indeed, several scholars have provided overviews of violent instances and disruptive protests concerning territorial conflict in Belgium (Delcorps, 2012; Hooghe, 2004). The resulting picture is clear. Contrary to what is often claimed, violence has not been completely absent in Belgium's territorial conflict. But insofar as it occurred, it is (1) usually not deadly (low casualty numbers), (2) largely occurring in the past, most notably from the post-war years until the 1980s, and (3) usually happening when ethno-territorial tensions interconnect with other debates (e.g. economic or religious disputes). Examples of violent protests include the mass demonstrations and street riots in favor of the monolingual (Dutch) nature of the Catholic University of Leuven in the late 1960s (*Leuven Vlaams/Walen Buiten*), the brutal 1970 killing of FDF politician Jacques Georgin (a Francophone regionalist) in the streets of Brussels, the recurrent mob violence in Voeren in the 1980s and 1990s, and the emergence of active private militias such as the Flemish VMO (*Vlaamse Militanten Orde*) (De Wever, 1998; Delcorps, 2012;

Deweerd, 1998, p. 2962; Kesteloot, 1998; Witte, 2009, pp. 375–376).² Especially in recent decades, such violence has become almost unimaginable. From the perspective of the paradox of federalism, this suggests that decentralisation has not fueled such severe societal tensions. This absence of large-scale violent escalation has led many comparative scholars to portray Belgium as a relative success story (Bakke & Wibbels, 2006, p. 9; Brancati, 2006, p. 652).

What about support for independence? This too has been stably low for decades, fluctuating between 5% to 10% (depending on the surveys/data) (Swyngedouw et al., 2015).³ At the 2003 general elections, after five major state reforms, independence was only supported by 2.5% of Flemish voters. It increased temporarily when long-lasting political negotiations on a sixth state reform turned ugly (9.6% in 2007 and 11.9% in 2010), but decreased again after an agreement was found (6.4% in 2014). Clearly, consecutive autonomy provisions did not inflate separatist sentiments. According to Lecours (2021), it is exactly the *dynamic nature* of the decentralisation process, the fact that it came in waves (rather than being implemented at once), that accounts for these low levels of independentism. The lack of separatism is rather odd, given the recent growth of the Flemish nationalist parties (see above). However, their voters are not primarily driven by separatist sentiments but mobilised by other issues (e.g. party's socio-economic profile). In 2014, less than 11% of the N-VA voters supported Flemish independence, and even in the tense 2010 elections, only one in five voters considered it to be one of the three most vote-determining issues (Swyngedouw et al., 2015). Accordingly, the true paradox is not that decentralization boosted separatist tendencies (it did not). It is what Huysseune (2017, p. 352) calls the “Flemish paradox”: the “hegemony of pro-independence parties in a region largely indifferent towards independence”.

The low levels of support for independence sharply contrast with similar cases like Catalonia or Scotland, where support rates fluctuated between 20% and 35% for decades (Dalle Mulle, 2018, Figure 9.1). In this respect, those who want Belgium to survive face a different challenge than those fighting for the territorial integrity of countries like Spain, the United Kingdom, and Canada. The main threat to the stability and survival of the latter states *is* primarily a regionalist one: the demands of self-confident regions that aim for further autonomy or even separation. This is not the case in Belgium. Here, the most prominent threat to the state does not seem

2 While putting up party posters near the Atomium, FDF politician Jacques Georgin (Front démocratique des francophones) was fatally attacked by nine members of the Flemish nationalist VMO militia (Vlaamse Militanten Organisatie, later Vlaamse Militanten Orde), who assaulted him with sawn-off table legs.

3 Many voters support more sub-state competences (36.4% after the 6th state reform) (Swyngedouw et al., 2015).

to come from 'below'. Rather, it is situated at the central level itself – where the two main groups struggle to cooperate and where power-sharing often takes the form of deadlock and conflict. In other words, contemporary debates on Belgium's chances of survival do not seem to centre around the direct threat of regionalism (will Flanders go its own way?), but rather concern the problem of 'governability' (can Belgian politicians still do it together?). The following section assesses whether decentralisation has facilitated or burdened this cooperation by shedding light on the birth, life, and death of power-sharing executives.

Decentralization and the Power-Sharing Challenge

The Birth of Power-Sharing Executives: Recent Troubles

One of the most-cited indicators of the paradox in Belgium is arguably the increasing duration of post-electoral cabinet formations. Between 1946 and 2003, such negotiations took 53 days on average (Döring & Manow, 2024). Of course, politicians sometimes had a harder time finding a compromise – for instance, in 1978 (107 days) and 1987 (148 days). But nothing compares to the explosion noted since then. In line with the paradox thesis, Belgium made international headlines due to the traumatising formation crises following the elections of 2007 (194 days) and 2010 (541 days). Since then, formations of hundreds of days became rather standard (except for 2014: 139 days). Ethno-territorial tensions have a large share in these dynamics. When ethno-territorial issues are at stake, negotiation rounds take longer and more formation attempts are needed (De Winter & Dumont, 2014, p. 245). These tense negotiations translate into remarkably long periods of caretaker cabinets. Between 2007 and 2020, Belgium was governed by a caretaker cabinet for over four years (1485 days) (Dandoy & Terrière, 2021, p. 123). This is remarkable in comparative perspective. Belgian cabinet negotiations are characterised by the largest number of failed attempts of all West-European countries (De Winter & Dumont, 2021, p. 115), and despite growing political tensions across the West, no other country is burdened by an increase as spectacular as Belgium's (Louwerse & Van Aelst, 2013, p. 14).

While it is clear that this evolution relates to ethno-territorial debates, the causal role of decentralisation itself is less evident. There are at least some reasons to be nuanced. First, negotiation duration only really exploded in 2007. This is after five state reforms – essentially the bulk of the Belgian federalisation process. Second, the fifth state reform of 2001 was a modest one in terms of impact – only slightly increasing autonomy levels (Hooghe et al., 2016; Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2021). Perhaps it was the straw that broke the camel's back. However, this leaves a third element unexplained. In the past, the adoption of more far-reaching decentralisation packages went hand in hand with *shorter* formation durations. Formation duration strongly declined right

before the exploding duration levels of the mid-2000s – namely between the third (1988–1989) and the fifth state reform (2001). This was a period of major institutional changes during which directly elected Flemish and Walloon parliaments were established, the Brussels Capital Region was introduced, the Belgian Constitution was amended to refer to Belgium as a ‘federal state’ (Article 1), and key policy domains were decentralised.

The Life of Power-Sharing Executives

Having discussed the birth of power-sharing cabinets, we now shift to the dynamics after their establishment. Are ethno-territorial disputes *within power-sharing cabinets* on the rise? Is compromise politics in decline? Recent empirical analyses of over 1,000 unique cabinet conflicts in 21 Belgian governments (1979–2018) indicate that decentralisation did not come with growing levels of ethno-territorial conflict in power-sharing cabinets (Vandenberghe, 2023b). This conflict frequency fluctuates over time, but generally, a decline can be noted – both in absolute and relative terms, and both for intense and more mundane tensions. This pacification is particularly pronounced since the 2011 agreement (sixth state reform), which introduced an unprecedented period of stability. Furthermore, decentralisation statistically relates to this pacification – even after controlling for the strength of regionalist party, the proximity of elections, regionalist cabinet participation, the electoral saliency of the decentralisation topic, and non-ethno-territorial conflict frequency (Vandenberghe, 2023a). Conflicts are less common, but perhaps they are harder to settle? It has been argued that decentralisation “undermines the problem-solving capacity of the other power-sharing mechanisms” and “renders the process of intersegmental conflict accommodation increasingly more difficult in the long run” (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015, p. 277). Similar concerns are raised regarding consociational power-sharing more generally, which might result in immobilism and ‘zombie politics’ (Nagle, 2020). However, analyses of the *outcomes* of cabinet conflicts indicate that they are not increasingly hard to settle. Rather, the shares of compromises, non-decisions, resignations, and so on remain rather constant throughout the decades and against the background of the decentralisation process (Vandenberghe, 2025). As such, autonomy provisions did not make conflict *resolution* easier, but they also did not make it harder.

Note that Belgian governments often fall short of having the support of a majority of MPs in both language groups in parliament (Dutch and French language group) (Bouteca, 2024, p. 383). Some of these periods without support on both sides were extremely tense (e.g. 1980s and 2008–2011), while others were very pacified (post-2011). As such, the recent pacification cannot be simply attributed to the idea that significant parts of a language group are not participating in government.

The Death of Power-Sharing Executives

Having discussed the birth and life phases of Belgian coalitions, we now evaluate their death. The duration of cabinets sharply dropped in the post-war period and notably in the 1960s, when ethno-territorial debates emerged to the forefront of Belgian politics. Between June 1968 and December 1981, Belgium was governed by 13 cabinets in 13 years. The most notorious era was the 1977–1981 period, the “malgoverno” years of Belgian political history (Heylen & Van Hecke, 2008). This extremely tense era of short-lived cabinets was followed by a period of somewhat greater stability (at least regarding cabinet duration), with seven cabinets governing Belgium in the almost 18 years between December 1981 and July 1999 (Dumont & De Winter, 1999, pp. 48–49). Since then, this stabilisation continued: Eight coalitions were in charge in the two following decades. Meanwhile, the number of cabinet terminations due to ethno-territorial tensions clearly declined, too. All elections after 1965 were early elections until 1995 (Deschouwer, 2013, p. 213). Many of these were the direct result of ethno-territorial disputes, which were long “extremely effective coalition killers” (Deschouwer, 1994, p. 46). In fact, most of the early cabinet terminations in the 1946–1999 period were either the result of ethno-territorial tensions or, at the very least, linked to such debates (Dumont et al., 2001, p. 21). In recent decades, such clashes were not only less numerous (see above) but also less lethal. Since 1999, only one coalition has not survived due to ethno-territorial tensions (Leterme II due to the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde issue; cf. Blero, 2015; Devos & Bouteica, 2008). In sum, then, the life expectancy of power-sharing executives has clearly increased against the background of consecutive state reforms, while the coalition-killing impact of ethno-territorial debates decreased. These results, and those of other paradox indicators, are summarized in Table 1.

Decentralization and Intergovernmental Dynamics

Many of the abovementioned indicators demonstrate pacification at the federal level. However, fights that were previously fought at the federal level might now occur between sub-states or policy-levels (Vandenbergh, 2023a, pp. 446–447). To explore whether tensions shifted, we discuss key aspects that grasp the extent of collaboration, conflict, and stalemate between government tiers: conflicts of interest or competence distribution, and abstentions at the European level.

Conflicts of Interest and Conflicts of Competence Distribution

Evident indicators of the intergovernmental atmosphere in Belgium can be found in the formalised disputes between them. In this respect, the second state reform (1980) was of pivotal importance. First, it established a Constitutional Court (initially ‘Court of Arbitration’) to settle legal conflicts about competence distribution between

different entities (Popelier & Lemmens, 2015, pp. 192–212; Popelier & Martens, 2024). Second, a *political* assembly (the Concertation Committee) was established to address so-called conflicts of interest. Any parliamentary assembly can request the suspension of the legislative procedure in another parliament when it deems that it is seriously disadvantaged. Such conflicts of interest can also occur between governments. The key issue here is not a legal one (about jurisdiction), but a political one (whether a decision infringes upon the interests of another entity). When the procedure is initiated, the issue is transferred to the Concertation Committee, where representatives of the different governments can discuss the issue in search of a solution (Cannoot, 2018, p. 51; Poirier, 2002). Each has a veto, and decisions are non-binding. Has decentralisation increased such conflicts?

It is important to note that such increases, notably of conflicts of competences, do not automatically signal growing intergovernmental tensions. In theory, rising case numbers may also reflect increasing institutional complexity, legal refinement, or the maturation of a federal system. Hence, these disputes should not be interpreted as a perfect indicator of conflict dynamics, but as an imperfect but informative measure that complements our analysis and helps to build a more complete picture of intergovernmental dynamics.

To begin with, legal disputes about competence distribution do not appear to continuously grow. The annual reports on the activities of the Constitutional Court provide the number of judgments resulting from grievances on competence distribution (Grondwettelijk Hof, n.d.). Figure 2 visualizes these reported numbers. With some fluctuations, the number of judgments roughly floats around 10–20 cases per year. Their absolute number grew throughout the 1990s and 2000s, but generally declined since 2010 – especially in relative terms. As the overall number of judgments grew, the proportion of judgements on competence distribution strongly decreased: from over 90% of all judgements in 1989 to around 30% in the early 1990s and, finally, stably below 10% in recent decades.

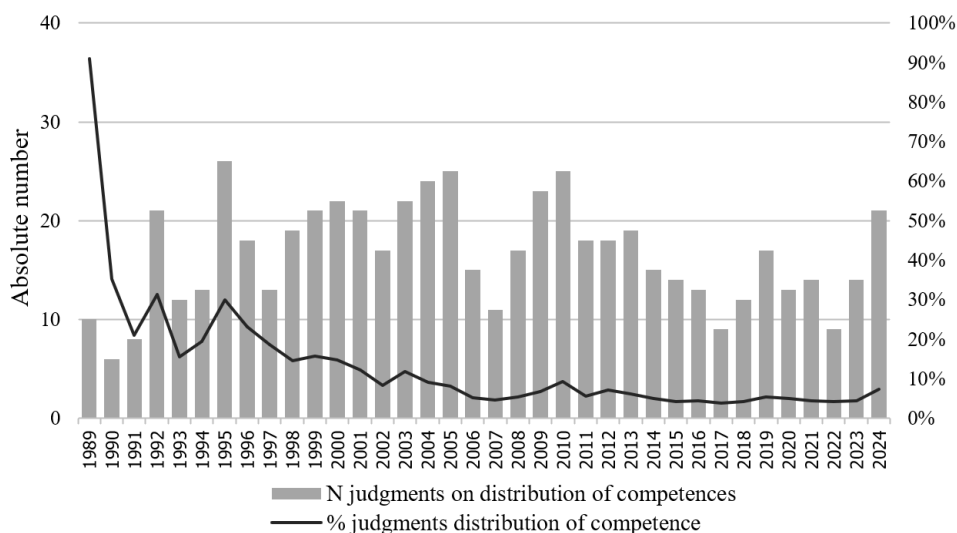


Figure 2. Frequency of judgments of the Constitutional Court of Belgium by type of grievance invoked (1989-2024)

Source: annual reports of the Constitutional Court (available on: Grondwettelijk Hof, n.d.)

What about conflicts of interest? Several elements can be considered. First, their frequency. We do not know of any summarised overviews of these numbers, making solid evaluations hard. However, some indirect (imperfect) indicators are noteworthy. One example is the annual number of meetings of the Concertation Committee, in which such conflicts should be settled. Year reports of the Federal Public Service Chancellery of the Prime Minister show that this number has been rather stable in recent decades (2003–2024) (FOD Kanselarij van de Eerste Minister, 2025). On average, the Committee meets once every month – except for the busy Covid-19 years (2020–2021). Similarly, the annual reports of the Belgian Senate shed *some* light on the prevalence of conflicts of interest (Belgische Senaat, n.d.). Covering the 1999–2014 period, they report the number of advices issued by the Senate as part of the procedure for conflicts of interest between parliaments (in most of these instances, the Senate advises the Concertation Committee). These advices were rather frequent in the 2007–2010 period (11 advices), when various conflicts of interest were initiated against proposals to split the bilingual electoral district ‘Brussel-Halle-Vilvoorde’ (8/11 advices). However, far fewer advices were issued in the preceding periods (only 4 between 1999 and 2006), and not a single one is mentioned in the 2010–2014 reports. Evidently, these advices only expose part of the picture: (1) the Senate is only involved after a 60-day attempt to find a solution between

the parliaments themselves, and (2) is not involved when conflicts of interest arise between governments or involve the Senate or Chamber of Representatives.

Second, we can assess the *outcomes* of conflicts of interest: Are these political tensions settled or not? Here, too, we are unaware of any hard numbers. However, the general perception is that the existing procedure does not guarantee that conflicts of interest are actually settled (Sinardet, 2022). Often, the procedure appears to be a mere formality – a passage or even an act of escalation in an unresolved dispute. This was already noted in the early 1980s, when Minister of Institutional Reforms (and later Prime Minister) Jean-Luc Dehaene stated that the inclusion of veto powers in the procedure effectively means that the Concertation Committee usually has little choice but to conclude that consensus is unattainable (Dehaene & Gol, 1984).

Third, the disruptive potential of conflicts of interest deserves consideration. Indeed, the procedure can be triggered consecutively (by multiple entities), creating a *de facto* scenario in which the application of legislation can be frozen for extended periods (Vuye & Wouters, 2017, pp. 58–60). The question is whether and how decentralisation relates to these dynamics. Did it facilitate or burden conflict-resolution in the Concertation Committee? Although we currently lack data-driven assessments of these dynamics, they would be of great value.

Supranational Cooperation: When Self-Rule Turns Into Shared Rule

At the supranational level, for example, in the Council of the European Union (Council of Ministers), Belgium is often procedurally forced to speak with one voice. When sub-state competences are involved, this implies that a common position must be found between the different entities. Put differently, supranational decision-making often turns self-rule into shared rule. Needless to say, this is often extremely difficult.

As described more elaborately by Popelier (2022), several examples illustrate the almost confederal dynamics of intra-Belgian decision-making on supranational decisions. Sub-states can conclude international treaties within their range of competences, and treaties touching upon matters of federal *and* sub-state competences (so-called mixed treaties) must be approved in the different parliaments. Accordingly, even the small German-speaking community can veto major international treaties. One example of this is the 2016 CETA incident – when the Walloon parliament shocked the world by temporarily blocking the EU-Canada trade agreement (Bursens & De Bièvre, 2023). Similarly, sub-state ministers are directly involved in the Council of the European Union as Belgian representatives in (most) matters that are within the exclusive powers of the sub-states. In mixed matters, a mixed delegation represents Belgium. The Belgian stance itself is decided before Council meetings – and here too, sub-states have an effective veto right. If no consensus is reached, Belgium must abstain (see also Franck et al., 2003). As this framework often results in

gridlock, scholars have warned against the deficiencies of decentralisation (Popelier, 2022). Many fear that “decentralization can strike back” (Fermeglia, 2023), as mechanisms designed to guarantee sub-state participation and vetoes may paradoxically entrench gridlocks. Especially in domains like climate governance, Belgium’s abstentions and lowest-common-denominator logic are often highlighted (Happaerts, 2015). From a theoretical point of view (veto player theory), the growth of sub-state competences increases the risk of gridlocks too (Tsebelis, 2011).

However, here too, empirical analyses add nuance. Overall, despite the high consensus requirements, Belgium’s role in the EU is described in studies as that of an ‘activity leader’ rather than an ‘activity laggard’ – it often takes the lead and is more successful in policymaking than many other small states (Panke, 2010, p. 5). Comparative analyses on voting behaviour in the EU Council of Ministers indicate that Belgium rarely votes ‘no’ or abstains (Mattila, 2004, p. 38), especially on proposals which are known to command a clear majority (Hayes-Renshaw et al., 2006). The latter study shows that Belgian abstentions are somewhat more common on contested votes (as common as ‘no’ votes). However, such patterns are seen in states with strongly varying levels of decentralisation (e.g. France, Portugal, Spain, and the UK). In recent decades, abstentions in public voting have been rather marginal phenomena, too. The *Public Voting Data of the Council of the EU* dataset contains the voting behaviour of EU member states in public votes of the Council of the EU from January 2010 to March 2023 (Ondarza & Bochtler, 2023). Of the 1397 Belgian votes included in the dataset, 97.7% of were in favour. Only 25 abstentions were noted (1.79%). Adding to this, not every abstention is the result of an intergovernmental disagreement. Furthermore, abstentions are not increasingly frequent throughout time but consistently rare – averaging around less than two cases a year. All in all, Belgium does not appear to be commonly or increasingly at the supranational level against the background of decentralisation. Of course, many decisions on foreign policy, defence, budgets, or sanctions are made by unanimity behind closed doors. These votes are not recorded publicly, and perhaps abstentions are more common in that sphere. Here too, further research would be valuable.

Providing an overview, Table 1 summarizes the indicators we discussed and the support they (fail to) yield for the paradox of federalism.

Table 1. Indicators of the Paradox of Federalism in Belgium: An Overview

Indicator	Summary of existing research	Paradox confirmed?
<i>Sub-state challenge</i>		
Regionalist parties' electoral strength	Strong decline after the introduction of decentralisation. Remarkable resurgence in recent decades.	Ambiguous
Regionalist parties' ideological profile	Gradual radicalisation (Volsunie), now ambiguous moderation (socio-economic focus of N-VA).	Ambiguous
Mainstream parties' ideological profile	Long-lasting spiral of radicalisation came to a halt. Growing calls for recentralisation.	No
Sub-state identities	Strong presence of dual and Belgian identities. No clear-cut increase in sub-state identification.	No
Violence, protest, and rebellion	Violence is exceptional – typically occurring in the past. Almost unimaginable nowadays.	No
Public support for independence	Low support levels – especially in comparative perspective. No clear increase throughout time.	No
<i>Power-sharing challenge</i>		
Coalition formation duration	Sudden explosion since the mid-2000s. Link with state reform is often stressed (but up for debate).	Yes
Frequency of ethno-territorial cabinet conflicts	Clear decline in the absolute and relative number of ethno-territorial tensions in power-sharing cabinets.	No
Resolution of ethno-territorial cabinet conflicts (outcomes)	Settling conflicts is hard (e.g. little consensus), but not increasingly so. Rather stable throughout time.	No
Duration of power-sharing cabinets	Clear increase in the lifespan of cabinets. Ethno-territorial debates are no longer coalition killers.	No
<i>Intergovernmental dynamics</i>		
Conflicts of competences	Judgements following grievances on competence distribution: stable N, declining % of all judgements.	No
Conflicts of interests	Theoretically, decentralisation increases risk. Empirically, imperfect indicators do not show clear/lasting increases.	Presumably (no hard data)
Supranational cooperation (EU)	Gridlocks are salient but (very) rare and not increasing throughout time. No view of voting behind closed doors.	No

Sources: summary and integration of various sources reported and discussed in-text

Conclusion

This paper engages with the discussion on the “paradox of federalism”: the notion that federalisation, though designed to pacify tensions in divided societies, may inadvertently deepen divisions, fuel conflict, and inflate separatist pressures (Erk & Anderson, 2010). Drawing on the Belgian case, it investigates whether such a paradox materialises when far-reaching decentralisation reforms are implemented in a conflict-prone context. Rather than focusing on a single metric or providing new causal identification strategies, we integrated the often-fragmented literature and synthesised a broad set of indicators capturing paradox dynamics at three levels: the regionalist pressures from below (sub-state challenge), central-level dynamics (power-sharing challenge), and intergovernmental dynamics.

The overall picture is clear. Across these levels, most indicators do not support the idea of growing tensions and gridlocks. The evidence on intergovernmental dynamics and the sub-state challenge points overwhelmingly to stability or even pacification. Regional identities are not inflated, mainstream parties start to adopt more centralist positions, separatist support is marginal, and societal violence is both rare and a thing of the past. Other indicators, notably those on regionalist parties, are ambiguous at worst. Similar results apply to intergovernmental dynamics and tensions. Data gaps preclude strong conclusions, but conflicts on competence distribution, conflicts of interest, and supranational gridlocks do not appear to be increasingly frequent – and surprisingly rare given their political saliency (e.g. EU abstentions). By contrast, indicators linked to the power-sharing challenge reveal a more differentiated picture. While dynamics within power-sharing cabinets have clearly ameliorated (e.g. increased cabinet duration, fewer conflicts), the formation of these coalitions has become increasingly difficult (De Winter & Dumont, 2021). Among all indicators scrutinised, this is the only one that reflects the paradox thesis. However, even here, the empirical link with decentralisation can be contested.

Concluding, for two reasons, we argue that there is no such thing as ‘the’ paradox of federalism. First, different conflict indicators can yield different results, highlighting the importance of integrating the often-fragmented literature with a bird’s eye perspective. The paradox has many faces. Second, more than five decades of extensive decentralisation in Belgium have not been accompanied by growing or widespread disruption. If anything, most indicators suggest stability or even pacification. This is despite the many factors that make Belgium highly conflict-prone from a theoretical perspective, including its bipolarity, centrifugal nature, homogeneous federal system, and split party system (Bouteca, 2024; Deschouwer, 2012).

What does this tell us about other countries facing territorial conflict? Although the specificity of each country makes generalisations difficult and calls for tailor-made arrangements, several lessons can be learned. A first implication is that even in a highly unfavourable and conflict-prone context, extensive decentralisation does

not necessarily lead to (institutional) breakdown. This is a hopeful message for other countries. The Belgian experience reminds us that federalism is neither a poisonous potion nor a definitive miracle cure (e.g. Bermeo, 2002; Keil & Anderson, 2018). The path to peace and stability is complex, and federalism can both divide and bind. Arguably, its success lies not in resolving that tension, but in recognising and managing it. This relates to a second implication of comparative relevance, which concerns the importance of the design of decentralisation. In Belgium, decentralisation is extensive in degree (Husson et al., 2016; Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2021) and, perhaps more importantly, dynamic in nature. Contrary to more static decentralisation examples (e.g. Spain or the UK), the *successive* reforms in Belgium allowed demands to be periodically renegotiated rather than frozen, which arguably eased separatist appetites and curbed radicalisation spirals (Lecours, 2021). Its high institutional complexity (e.g. two types of sub-states, Brussels as an institutional omelette) may have further reduced the feasibility and legitimacy of secessionist options (Deschouwer, 2012, pp. 244–245), while the elaborate shared-rule framework offers minority protection at the federal level. In Belgium, as in other cases, pacification rarely rests on a single institutional ingredient. Like the paradox itself, attempts to contain it are necessarily multifaceted.

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