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## Belgium's dilemma is real

Time is running out to solve the country's many constitutional problems: Belgium's future is now seriously threatened



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The political crisis that has ebbed and flowed in Belgium since June last year has not really threatened the country's existence until now. Indeed, for many who follow Belgian politics, it carried more than a whiff of nostalgia for the great confrontations between Flemings and Walloons, Dutch-speakers and French-speakers, which have unfolded every decade since the end of the second world war. Each of these conflicts brought changes and yet Belgium has remained.

Now there is a real sense that something fundamental to the continuation of Belgium as a country is at stake. The constitutional matters are only the beginning. Questions about how much power should be devolved from federal to regional level, or about whether voters in communities around Brussels should cast ballots in Flemish or in French are difficult, but not impossible, to resolve.

The problem is that now there is no time. The June 2009 regional elections are looming and no political party wants to go into that contest defending a record of making constitutional concessions at federal level. This is why Prime Minister Yves Leterme tendered his resignation on July 14. It is also why the country's most prominent Walloon politician, deputy prime minister Didier Reynders, was so reluctant to form a new government. Yet without such concessions, there can be no agreement on how the voting constituencies around Brussels should be drawn up and, by extension, no agreement on what new powers should be bestowed upon the regions.

New federal elections only complicate matters. The constitutional court has ruled that new elections cannot be held until the dispute over voting around Brussels is resolved. So the Belgians are stuck with the parliament they have. King Albert II could dissolve parliament and call fresh elections, but this is only likely to pit the courts against the democratic process, while adding fuel to the fire of political competition at regional level. If the current crisis can be traced back to Leterme's pre-electoral commitment to win more power for Flanders, who knows what kind of crisis the next round of pre-electoral promises will bring.

The stalemate cannot go on forever. While Belgian politicians have wrestled with their constitutional and political demons, the world economy has taken a turn for the worse, pulling Belgium down with it. As a result, growth has slowed, the country's balance of trade is negative for the first time in over a decade, and inflation is among the highest in Europe (and running faster than any time in the 25 years). Indeed the situation has deteriorated so rapidly that Belgian policymakers have been unable to keep up. When Leterme announced his government's planned economic programme in mid-July, the press immediately pointed out that his assumptions were outdated and his calculations flawed. The fact that the Belgian planning bureau produced those calculations only last May was no excuse.

The king refused to accept Leterme's resignation and when he delivered his national address on July 21, studiously avoided the whole issue. Nevertheless, his subjects were not impressed to discover their country is still at an impasse. In their frustration, they are likely to abandon hope in the future of a federal Belgium. Already public opinion polls show a radicalisation of the electorate along regional lines, a situation likely to get worse rather than better. Although the king called for a period of reflection led by "three wise men", he was only able to get two weeks for them to restart dialogue on constitutional reform. The regionalist New Flemish Alliance (NFA), which forms an electoral cartel with the ruling Christian Democrats, made it clear that they would not support the government after the end of July unless their demands are met.

The king's new advisors called their bluff and refused to deliver a blueprint for negotiations. The regionalists blinked and Leterme's coalition won a further reprieve. Even the NFA could see no sense in bringing down the government during the summer holidays. Instead the party leadership said they would wait to poll their members about the future of their union with the Christian Democrats during their party congress in September. It is unlikely, however, that the NFA will back down in front of their own rank and file. It is even harder to see how the Christian Democrats can continue to rule the country without them. For the first time since the end of the second world war, it is fair to say that the future of the country is in doubt.

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