

Language Facilities in the Brussels Periphery

Belgium, a short introduction

Belgium is held together by a complicated structure of balances and compromises between the main population groups. Belgium is a federal state in which three official languages are spoken: French, Dutch and German. The country has four official language areas: the Dutch-speaking, the French-speaking, the small German-speaking and the bilingual area of Brussels-Capital. Furthermore, the country is divided into regions and communities. Regions are responsible for economic affairs, environment, transport, local authorities etc, and communities are responsible for personal and cultural matters and education. There are three regions, Flanders (5.8 million inhabitants), Wallonia (3.2 million) and the Brussels-Capital Region (940000), and there are three communities: the Dutch-speaking (Flemish), the French-speaking and the German-speaking.

These subdivisions overlap partially, but some important differences remain. Brussels is self-governing for regional matters, but not for community matters, where the Flemish and French-speaking governments are competent, though there is through delegation a certain degree of self-governance in community matters.

Language issues

In the 19th century, there were two language borders in Belgium, a territorial one and a social one. The territorial one between Flanders and Wallonia was never a strict line, but remained stable over the years. The social language border was a result of the social prestige French had as a language in those times, and so the elite in Belgium spoke French, while the commoners spoke Dutch (or rather the dialectic form of it, Flemish, which knew a lot of regional differences). Learning French was necessary to find a good job. In those times, it was also the smaller Wallonia that was economically prosperous thanks to heavy industry. With the rising economic importance of Flanders and actions of intellectuals, the emancipation of the Dutch language began, and now Dutch has equal status and Flanders is unilingual Dutch. Brussels was originally a Flemish city, and today Flanders still considers it as its capital. Brussels is a kind of enclave within Flanders-it has no direct link with Wallonia. Because of the social prestige the French language had, Brussels gradually frenchified, and at this moment only a bit more than 10% of the Brussels population has Dutch as its mother tongue. Another reason for this frenchification is the fact that Dutch is a small language, and so

Flemish people feel the necessity to learn other languages, such as French, while the French-speaking do not feel this necessity. This explains why most Flemish speak French, while only a limited number of French-speaking people have learned Dutch. Today Brussels has a bilingual statute, and a lot of Dutch is spoken in the city during daytime, because of the 200000 Flemish commuters coming to the city every day.

In Belgium there have been a lot of frictions between the two main groups, the Flemish and the Walloons. These so-called communautarian problems did never lead to violence thanks to a very ingenious and complicated system of balances, the result of a lot of compromises. Since the 60'ies, the Belgian state was gradually transformed in a federal state, and one of the milestones in this was the fixation of the territorial language border in 1962.

Language facilities

Since it is impossible to draw a strict line between the language areas, the principle of language facilities has been introduced. These give the inhabitants of a limited number of villages the right to use their own language in their relations with government. A Dutch-speaking person living in the French speaking area can therefore use Dutch in his/her relations with government, and a French-speaking person residing in the Dutch-speaking area can use French.

Territorial limitations

The facilities can only be used in 27 villages. These villages are situated along the language border between French and Dutch, or along the language border between French and German. A special case are six villages of the Brussels periphery. The Brussels agglomeration consists of 19 villages that are totally bilingual, what means that there is no need for language facilities. Brussels however is a kind of enclave within Flanders, so the villages outside the agglomeration are part of Flanders and the official language there is Dutch. Since these villages are close to Brussels, and since some of them are situated between Brussels and Wallonia, a lot of French-speaking people reside there. Six of these villages that count a substantial part of French-speaking inhabitants have also been granted language facilities.

In this article I will only deal with these six villages in the Brussels periphery (Drogenbos, Kraainem, Linkebeek, Sint-Genesius-Rode, Wemmel and Wezembeek-Oppem)

Functional limitations

The use of languages in private life and commerce is free, and so most of the shopowners in the so-called facilities-villages speak both French and Dutch, in order not to lose customers.

The facilities are only available for a limited number of services: in the town-hall, for official documents, for basic-education (till the end of primary school), for certain judicial affairs and for the relations between social partners. Since the six villages are part of the Dutch-speaking community, it is the Flemish government that pays for the basic education in French. At the same time, the Flemish government invests in the promotion of teaching the Dutch language, for school-children as well as for adults.

Temporality

The aim of the language facilities is to facilitate the integration of people who do not speak the language of the language community they live in. The principle of language facilities is interpreted in two different ways. The Walloon government sees them as a right, and defends the French-speaking inhabitants of the six villages whenever someone dares to question the facilities. The Flemish government on the other hand regards them as a favour, meant to help with the integration of new inhabitants while they are learning Dutch. In 1998 some problems arose when the Flemish government issued a decree stating that the French-speaking inhabitants would have to indicate every time they applied for documents that they want to receive them in French, while till then they received their documents automatically in French if they once applied for a document in French. The Flemish government defends itself arguing that this is inherent in the temporal character of the facilities (their argument is that if you give them automatically all documents in French once they have applied for it, they lose every stimulation to learn Dutch). The Walloon government on the other hand saw it as an attempt to restrict the language facilities.

Conflict resolution bodies

Changes in the statute of the facilities-villages requires a special majority in the federal parliament. The Court of Arbitration controls the application of these and other regulations. The Council of State can delete administrative regulations. The deputy-governor of the province of Flemish-Brabant, the province the six villages are part of, has the role of language ombudsman, and he can suspend regulations of the village and social welfare councils if they are breaking the language laws. There is also a Permanent Linguistic Control Commission, and as a last resort there is the European Court of Human Rights.

Are the minorities minorities?

Originally, the language facilities were conceived as a protection of the linguistic minorities. At this moment, in at least three of the six villages the French-speaking population is larger than the Dutch-speaking. This has some consequences for the representation of the population in the village councils. The law requires that Dutch is used in the council meetings, since the facilities are only to be used in the relations between local government and private persons, and not *within* local government, so in theory only those who are able to speak Dutch can be member of the village council.

There is considerable resistance to recognize both the French-speaking in Flanders and the Dutch-speaking in Wallonia as a minority according to the Framework Convention of the Council of Europe, because some regulations in this protocol contradict the sensitive Belgian compromises, and because the Flemish government fears a further frenchification of the Brussels periphery.

Enlargement of the Brussels region?

A solution for the six villages that has been proposed is to include them in the bilingual Brussels area, as a means to stop quarrels on the definition and scope of the facilities. This solution was strongly contested by Flanders, because it would bring back the situation that existed before the language border was fixed by law (before 1962). In the past there was a count of the number of French- and Dutch-speaking people in a village and the result could bring about changes in the statute of a village. This resulted in an expansion of the French-speaking part of Belgium. Therefore the change in statute of the six villages reminds of past processes which strenghtens the fear of frenchification. Furthermore would such changes make it very difficult to defend the principle of territoriality.

This principle of territoriality is the most important subject of friction between the Walloon and Flemish government. Flanders applies a strict territoriality, which means that it sees itself responsible for all inhabitants on its territory, while Wallonia sees itself as the government for all French-speaking Belgians. This difference in definition results in permanent frictions, because the Walloon government tries to subsidise cultural activities in Flanders (such as the magazine “carrefour”), which is not their competence. The Flemish interpretation is followed by the European Court and is also confirmed by the fact that the language border has been fixed as a strict line in the 60’ies. The problem is that the Flemish and Walloon government are responsible for personal and cultural matters and education (the competence of the communities) for the respective Dutch- and French-speaking inhabitants in the bilingual area of Brussels. The principle of territoriality is thus not used with regard to Brussels. A personal

approach is used instead, and the mixture of territoriality outside Brussels and a personal approach within Brussels causes a great deal of confusion.

Other minorities.

Some 30 % of the population in Brussels does not have the Belgian nationality. This is due to migrant workers and the presence of several international organisations. A considerable part of the Brussels-based international civil service and business community resides in the more quiet villages just outside Brussels. Evidently, most of these people do not speak Dutch, nor are most of them very much inclined to learn Dutch, because their stay in Belgium is mostly of limited duration. This results in an increase of the use of the French language in contacts with the local population and a strengthening of the francophone socio-cultural organisations. Of course this is not because of antipathy towards the Flemish population, but just because the need is not felt to learn Dutch.

Recent European regulations want to give all European citizens the right to vote in local elections in their place of residence, even when they do not have the nationality of the country. This has raised Flemish fears that these people would vote for French-speaking candidates and parties, and therefore the introduction of the European regulation in Belgian law has been hindered for quite some time. A similar argument has been made by the inhabitants of the Brussels periphery against immigrant voting rights, because these immigrants are also supposed to vote for French-speaking parties.

This reveals one of the major weaknesses in the political strategies in Brussels and its surroundings. Political parties in the first place identify themselves as French- or Dutch-speaking, and only in the second place as socialist, liberal, christian-democrat... . The attitude of the Flemish parties that position themselves as anti-French therefore threatens the non-Belgians, who feel themselves attacked, because they mostly speak French. If Flemish parties want to win the votes of this group, they will have to address them in a different way, because for these new inhabitants, the language question is certainly not a factor that will influence their voting behaviour. Political parties will again have to earn votes by traditional programmes that concern local issues.

For outsiders, the Belgian federal system seems sometimes ridiculous, complicated and overregulated. The system is the result of long negotiations and sensitive compromises, and it is therefore very difficult to bring about change in the system, because everyone has to agree. Till now, there have never been serious problems between the different Belgian communities,

although the communitarian fever bubbles up from time to time, mostly to be used for personal political gain. As in every political system, it is not only the actual situation that is important, but also the historical processes that have created the situation. Many foreign missions coming from countries with similar problems have visited Belgium to investigate the political system, and hoped to be able to use it back home to solve their problems, but mostly they had to conclude that the Belgian situation is too particular to be copied.

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