

Belgian Belligerence

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By Harm de Blij

Once again, Belgium – that is, Belgium’s future as a country – is in the news. It is in a way the ultimate irony that the European Union (EU) member whose capital serves as the headquarters of the world’s foremost experiment in supranationalism teeters on the brink of disintegration. Sophisticated, bureaucratic Brussels, Francophone island in Belgium’s Flemish-speaking north, represents multicultural cooperation to EU enthusiasts across Europe, but foreign intrusion to Flemish nationalists in its immediate hinterland. The collapse of one of the EU’s founding members, a key participant in the Benelux union that preceded the EU itself, would signify a failure that could have serious ramifications for the entire project.

The rise of Flemish nationalism and the default of Belgian federalism are not, however, unique to this small, prosperous country whose very survival is linked to the EU experiment. Europe’s growing integration is animating nationalist sentiments among locals in many of the EU’s 27 member states, and central governments try in various ways to defuse the associated political pressures. The European map is replete with cultural minorities that see themselves threatened with a loss of identity in Europe’s economic and political homogenization, and some of these minorities have national aspirations, viewing the EU’s still-formative period as an opportunity to strengthen their autonomy. The partition of Czechoslovakia created two states for such cultural majorities and is often cited by others (in Catalonia, Scotland, Corsica, the Basque country as well as in both Belgian Flanders and Wallonia) as the prototype for their own aspirations. Separatists may be aware of the ultimate futility of their campaigns, but some of them nevertheless punctuate their activities with violence. The European political scene is anything but placid.

Thus the fate of Belgium will be of particular significance for the EU. Overcoming devolutionary forces by demonstrating the economic and social advantages of representative membership is the whole idea, and in general it has worked. The list of states aspiring to join the EU, including not only Turkey but also Croatia, Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia, Ukraine and even Georgia, is longer than that rejecting the option (Norway, Iceland and Switzerland), and only one entity has left the EU when the opportunity arose, namely Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland). But if a state at the very heart of the EU, and one of its greatest beneficiaries, fails to accommodate its centrifugal forces, it will constitute a setback that will raise doubts among members and would-be members alike.

Flemish-Walloon negotiations having failed, should the EU seek to intervene? Might an EU transitional administration give the parties time and space to renew their efforts? The prospects appear dim: Flemish nationalism is again on the rise, with visions of independence and, ironically, eventual full membership in the EU. Resentment of French-speaking Belgians runs deep; xenophobia is rife. The Flemish flag waves over public buildings and town squares in the northern provinces; advertisements promoting the economic advantages of Wallonia in commercial publications barely mention Belgium at

all. That two cultural communities with so much in common could find themselves at this impasse casts doubt on the whole EU enterprise.