

Europe of the Regions?: Assessing the Impact of the Committee of the Regions in Belgium

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to evaluate the effect of the Committee of the Regions (CoR) in the Belgian context. The Belgian language conflict will be focused on as a means of assessing institutional effect. As a state with strong regions and an active conflict, Belgium is a useful case study. If the institution has an effect we should see a change in the conflict and the way it is portrayed in the media; even if it still exists, the tone of articles would likely be more hopeful, and it would be portrayed in the context of the European Union, as the CoR is an EU institution.

To assess the effect, I will examine scholarly articles on the subject, as well as analyze an email correspondence I had with a Belgian delegate of the CoR, and finally, I will examine newspaper articles on the topic from 3 newspapers: at the international level, the BBC, at the EU level, New Europe, which is based in Brussels, and at the regional level, Flanders News.

I have found that the effect the Committee has on Belgium is largely symbolic, as suggested by previous works, and that it is quite limited even in its symbolic meaning. However, based on a rise in media interest in the subject of the language conflict, it is clear that regional issues have come to the forefront of EU politics, and this can be attributed at least in part to the Committee of the Regions.

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Introduction

On Wednesday, December 13, 2006, French speaking Belgian public broadcasting (RTBF) interrupted regularly scheduled programming to announce that the Flemish speaking region had unilaterally declared independence and that Belgium, as such, had ceased to exist. They showed cheering crowds clutching Flemish flags, large traffic jams near the airport, and trams stuck at the 'border' between the French and Flemish region. The public was understandably alarmed; the telephone number given out received 2,600 calls and the news station's website crashed as people tried to find out more. Even some ambassadors in Brussels were shocked and sent news to their home countries¹. Known as the Belgian break-up hoax, this broadcast went on for approximately two hours. The joke was intended to show the intensity of the crisis in Belgium, and was at least partially a response to the recent increase in support for Vlaams Belang, a nationalist Flemish party that on and off advocates secession. That people were taken in at all illustrates the seriousness of the conflict. Despite its non-violent nature, the conflict is persistent and citizens believed that Flanders might seriously secede because of it.

The situation in Belgium is persistently non-violent, but the tensions between linguistic groups still exist. April 26, 2011 marked one year without an elected government, and puts it far ahead Iraq, which holds second place in the record of a country without an elected government. In April of 2010, the government collapsed and the Prime Minister, Yves Leterme, resigned but stayed on as a caretaker until the elections in June of this year. That Belgium cannot elect a federal government in 2011 is indicative of the fact that the conflict persists without resolution. Vlaams Belang still pushes for Flemish independence, and the sustainability of the Belgian state has been called into question.

Belgium could be the best example of multiple identities or loyalties being impossible or, at the least, multiple identities being unable to compensate for a lack of a cohesive national

¹ "Viewers fooled by 'Belgium split.'" *BBC News*, December 14, 2006. Accessed April 6, 2011. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6178671.stm>

identity. In addition to a Flemish or Walloon identity, a Belgian identity, citizens, particularly in Brussels, are confronted daily with a European identity. This thesis will explore Belgian federalism and its compatibility with European Union membership, and will specifically look at the Committee of the Regions, an institution headquartered in Brussels, which was founded in order to give regional and local representation at the supranational level. Brussels will be a major focus, as it is the capital of Flanders and of Belgium, and it is where a large number of EU institutions are located.

Specifically, this thesis will address the following question: what effect does the CoR have on linguistic nationalism in Belgium? The thesis will focus on Belgium and the language conflict as a means of assessing institutional effect. As a state with strong regions and an active conflict, if the institution has an effect we should see a change in the conflict and the way it is portrayed in the media; even if conflict still exists, the tone would likely be more hopeful, and it would be portrayed in the context of the EU.

The Committee of the Regions offers representation to regions in the EU that may or may not have representation at the national level. In the Belgian case, the regions have very strong representation at the local and national level, but that does not prevent serious disagreements between them, and has in fact led to a situation where the country is unable to elect a government. Because the state has transferred so many competencies to the supranational and regional levels, Belgium is able to exist with a caretaker government more easily than most other states, but the lack of an approved budget causes extreme delays in decision making, at both the federal and supranational level. If the problem was to get worse, and the state were to break up, this could set a dangerous precedent for other EU states.

This chapter serves to show what research has been done on the conflict in Belgium and what research remains incomplete. Most literature on the language conflict refers to EU membership, and some refers specifically to the Committee of the Regions, but currently, this

specific question remains unanswered. Assessing institutional impact is always difficult, particularly when

The institution has been in existence for such a short period of time. Belgium provides an ideal backdrop for this assessment. This question has likely not been addressed because of the novelty of the organization.

0.1, Literature Review

Currently, there are few authors who have written on the topic of the CoR, but all articles on this topic mention Belgium specifically. In the literature on Belgium, major themes include federalism, subsidiarity, and analysis of the linguistic conflict. Few of these articles mention the Committee directly.

In this chapter, I will provide a literature review about what has been written on each of these major topics, which will illustrate that the specific topic of the effect of the CoR in Belgium has not yet been explored, but that the existing literature points to this being a reasonable and timely topic for exploration.

0.1.2, Literature on The Committee of the Regions

Michael Nash asserts that the establishment of the Committee was a complicated process with many problems, for example, the first meeting was intended to take place in Brussels in mid January 1994, but actually took place on June 9 and 10, 1995, months behind schedule². He argues that the lack of ability to hold even the first meeting on time is indicative of problems within the organization. The overall tone of the article is skeptical of the institutions ability to serve its intended purpose, and this is relevant to the case as it calls into question the institutional effectiveness of the CoR, which is exactly what this thesis seeks to address in the Belgian context.

² Nash, Michael. "The committee of the regions: A committee for Europe." *Contemporary Review* 265, 1547 (December 1994): 289-295. Accessed January 31, 2011., p 2

In two articles, Christiansen attempts to trace the impact of the CoR, and problems within the Committee which affect its impact, beginning with its establishment. He suggests that the Committee of the Regions was the next logical step in the direction the EU was heading. With the establishment of the Single European Act in 1986, the regional governments already enjoyed more freedom than ever before, but still did not have a formal role in European politics³. In 1988, the role of the regions was expanded further by a reform and increase of structural funds. At this point, the regions, particularly strong regions like the German Länder, pushed for creating a regional chamber or council, officially putting the CoR was on the agenda. Expectations for the new body varied, and while some were “pinning unduly hopes”, others were “viewing it warily”.⁴

Christiansen focuses on the importance of the CoR as being more than simply a collection of national representatives⁵, and stresses the symbolic meaning of the Committee. He states, “...the Committee of the Regions is more than just a collection of its member-state representatives and interests, in the same way that the EU must be understood as more than merely a community of states⁶.” He suggests that the CoR provides a space for the EU to demonstrate that integration and regional policy are being dealt with elected politicians and not just faceless bureaucrats⁷. In this way, the Committee of the Regions does its part to deal with the democratic deficit of the EU. The EU embraces the CoR because it helps deal directly with this common criticism of the EU, and the national states embrace it as well, largely because of the concept of subsidiarity; the most appropriate body making decisions. The CoR is able, at least symbolically, to bring the EU closer to the people it represents. This is significant for the research question because it shows that the CoR attempts to represent citizens in regions, and to provide a link between Belgium and the EU.

³ Christiansen, Thomas. “Second Thoughts on Europe’s “Third Level”: The European Union’s Committee of the Regions.” *Publius* 1, Federal Systems in the Global Economy (Winter 1996): 93-116. Accessed April 18, 2011., p 94

⁴ *ibid*, p 95

⁵ *ibid*, p 104-105

⁶ *ibid*, p 106

⁷ *ibid*, p 108

When one looks to theories of nationalism, it can be seen that symbols, particularly historical symbols, are used as rallying devices for the people, so a symbolic meaning for the CoR may still be significant and needs to be taken seriously. The social constructivist theories of nationalism, particularly, emphasize that symbols are important in constructing the nation state, and can be manipulated by elites to further their own interests. Christiansen stresses that the value of symbolism is widely recognized in European identity politics⁸. By appointing important politicians to the CoR, the organization increases its level of symbolic importance⁹. The organization “lies at the intersection of both regional and European identity formation.”¹⁰ The conflict in Belgium is related to the lack of cohesive national identity, so if the Committee can aid in creating one, then it serves a very important role indeed.

The Committee of the Regions still suffers from some major problems, largely the fact that it simply has little power. It can release advisory opinions, but the Commission is under no legal obligation to take them into consideration¹¹. However, Christiansen believes that the major question about the Committee of the Regions is what the link is between the Committee and the public they claim to represent¹². Are they losing touch due to socialization? Is the public even really aware of the work of the CoR? This question represents a significant gap in the literature on the Committee of the Regions, and this thesis aims to address exactly that question in the Belgian context.

Mamadouh focuses on cross-border cooperation as the major success of the organization, because regions which extend across national borders but have essentially the same interests can now work together in “organizationally distinct” agencies¹³. Mamadouh asserts that although the organization has been allotted more powers than originally given in the Treaty of

⁸ *ibid*, p 109

⁹ *ibid*, p 103

¹⁰ *ibid*, p 109

¹¹ *ibid*, p 111

¹² *ibid*, p 114

¹³ Mamadouh, Virginie. “The Regions in Brussels: Subnational Actors in the Supranational Arena.” *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie (Journal of Economic & Social Geography)* 92, 4 (November 2001): 478-87. Accessed January 14, 2011., p 480

Maastricht, the leaders of strong political regions do not consider it a viable alternative to being recognized as the legal representatives of territorially defined political communities¹⁴. Some states, including Belgium, have allocated seats to specific territorial regions. Belgium is allotted 12 seats overall, 6 for the Walloons, and 6 for the Flemish. Of these 12, one from each group is reserved for a representative from Brussels, and one seat is reserved for a German representative on a rotating basis¹⁵. Her conclusions are that strong regions still enjoy more representation than weaker regions, and that regions are still restricted access to participating in government at any higher level, including the supranational level¹⁶.

0.1.3, Literature on European Regionalism

Bollens suggests that cities are important in regionalism because they are “significant depositories of material resources, culture, and religious symbols, focal points of urban and regional economics, social and cultural centers, platforms for political expression, and potential centers for grievance and mobilization.”¹⁷ Although Belgium and Brussels is the focus of this thesis, Bollens focuses on Basque cities in Spain, and Sarajevo in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Because Brussels embodies so many of the characteristics he prescribes to cities, the article is generally relevant. Bollens focuses on the importance that the EU has on cities and regions, and how both the EU and the regions use each other to strengthen and legitimize their own agendas. Regions can use Europe as a way to mobilize people, and the EU consistently promotes a “Europe of the Regions”. However, this can have unintended results for both groups: because there are so many European regions, they are dealt with in an institutionalized, systematic and formulaic way, so the effect can be a flattening of diverse cultural regions¹⁸, and can be used as “building blocks of the new Europe¹⁹”. By promoting the regions through various projects, the EU can unwittingly

¹⁴ *ibid*, p 480

¹⁵ *ibid*, p 483

¹⁶ *ibid*, p 486

¹⁷ Bollens, Scott A. “The City, Substate Nationalism, and European Governance.” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 14 (Summer 2008): 189-222. Accessed January 31, 2011. DOI: 10.1080/13537110801984941. p 190

¹⁸ *ibid*, p 193

¹⁹ *ibid*, p 193

mobilize nationalist movements. He suggests that regional governments are becoming increasingly important in dealing with ethnic coexistence²⁰, which can be seen in Belgium with their complicated version of federalism and their participation in supranational institutions, particularly the Committee of the Regions. This is important for the Belgian case because it asserts that there are two processes promoted by the CoR: institutionalization and flattening of regional identities and, simultaneously, strengthening the identity of regions by providing them with more representation. This idea provides an existing framework for assessing the Committee.

Javier Martinez addresses the importance of symbols in European regions, particularly in Belgium. Belgium is particularly relevant to study not only because of the presence of Flanders and Wallonia, but also because of the presence of Brussels as a European capital²¹. He argues that when regions develop political powers, they begin to develop strategies of nation building, and look for symbols to represent these nations²². Nations are always created with reference to history²³, to increase their legitimacy, and to create a more powerful kinship connection with the nation, so symbols have to take history into account. Flanders, for example, has three nationalist symbols: the flag, the anthem, and the national day, but they were not completely invented; the population was already using them in some form²⁴. In both Flanders and Wallonia, the issue of territoriality and symbols is important: in Flanders, the flag chosen was the historical flag of Flanders, which does not match up geographically with what is today known as Flanders; in Wallonia, the flag chosen was elected to represent not only Wallonia, but the French speaking community, which would include Brussels, despite Brussels being a distinct and officially bilingual region, and this also left out the German speaking community that technically belongs

²⁰ *ibid*, p 190

²¹ Martinez, Javier Gimeno. "Actualizing the past: political devolution and the symbols of European regions. The case of Belgian federalization (1970-1998)." *Rethinking History* 12, 2 (June 2008): 229-52. Accessed January 31, 2011., p 231

²² *ibid*, p 233

²³ *ibid*, p 237

²⁴ *ibid*, p 237

to Wallonia²⁵. The symbol for Brussels had to be created and then assigned a historical meaning; of the two proposals for the symbol, the proposal that included the colors of the Belgian flag was not popular because it portrayed Brussels as being a symbolic site for Belgium but not a region in its own right²⁶. Instead, a new symbol of a flower was chosen to portray the openness of Brussels to both the past and present²⁷. This work calls into question the idea of the CoR having symbolic value, because it is such a new organization. The impact of the organization, however, is what will be assessed by this thesis: perhaps it is only tangible symbols, not institutions, which this applies to.

Martinez's work questions whether globalization is able to challenge nationalism²⁸, and he argues that globalization does not cross borders, but instead creates ever-smaller nations, based on the idea of the nation-state, that simply cooperate with one another on a global scale. He quotes Anthony Smith, a prominent scholar in the field of nationalism studies, as suggesting that nationalisms are potentially able to create a vertical sum of identities that are not mutually exclusive; that it is possible to be Flemish, Belgian, and European all at the same time²⁹. This vertical sum of identities is indeed present in Belgium; however, problems persist. Regions look to strengthen national identity. If the CoR can provide the regions with more representation, there will be less need for conflict to defend these regional identities, as these identities will be established and defended at multiple levels.

0.1.4, Literature on the Belgian Language Conflict

Another major strand of literature focuses on the conflict within Belgium, and how the historical development of the regions did more to complicate matters than to address the problems between groups. Winter, Lieven and Baudewyns assert that "The original community conflict on language issues has become predominantly one over socioeconomic policy and

²⁵ *ibid*, p 238

²⁶ *ibid*, p 245

²⁷ *ibid*, p 247

²⁸ *ibid*, p 240

²⁹ *ibid*, p 242

autonomy...³⁰," which is a sentiment echoed by most authors on the subject. Of these, autonomy is the most significant issue for the research question. Short of complete autonomy, is additional representation enough to appease all of the parties, and can the CoR provide this?

Winter, Lieven, and Baudewyns suggest that there are three periods of Belgian history, to aid understanding about how the conflict evolved with economic and political changes in the country. They assert that although the Flemish started out as a discriminated against minority, they are now in a much better position economically in relation to French speakers, and although the original conflict was primarily over language usage, the conflict is now about socioeconomic policy and autonomy³¹. This is related to the research question because it illustrates that the major issues of the conflict are directly related to the CoR.

O'Neill reinforces the idea that the tensions are more significant in Flanders than Wallonia, largely due to the economic success of the region in recent years³². He also suggests that federalism may be "more the problem than the solution"³³, a question echoed often in other literature on federalism in Belgium. The major focus is Brussels, as the region is located in historic Flanders, but traditionally a symbol of Francophone ascendancy, and now an officially bilingual region, and therefore a "cultural battleground"³⁴. It is not only the capital of the federal state, the capital of Flanders, but also home to the European Commission and other EU institutions, all contributing to the prestige of the city. A contrasting perspective is that the city represents not a cultural battleground, but the best example of cooperation between the Flemish and the Walloons³⁵, despite the disagreement in the dual language communities that surround the city³⁶. The conclusion he draws is that the EU is likely to serve as a mitigating factor in the

³⁰ De Winter, Lieven and Pierre Baudewyns. "Belgium: Towards the Breakdown of a Nation-State in the Heart of Europe?" *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 15 (2009): 280-304. Accessed January 14, 2011. DOI: 10.1080/13537110903358689., p 298

³¹ *ibid*, 298

³² O'Neill, Michael. "Belgium: Language, Ethnicity and Nationality." *Parliamentary Affairs* 53, 1 (Jan 2000): 114-34. Accessed January 14, 2011. , p 118

³³ *ibid*, p 119

³⁴ *ibid*, p 116-117

³⁵ *ibid*, p 129

³⁶ *ibid*, p 125

conflict, and that the prestige from hosting so many EU institutions is so great that it devolution impossible. Although he refrains from speaking of the Committee of the Regions directly, he states that the logic of the EU, particularly subsidiarity, which the Committee is based on, encourages cooperation on all levels of government³⁷.

Georges van den Abbeele, unlike other authors on the subject, connects the Belgian case directly with nationalism theories. He asserts that the major problem is that the Belgian case is incompatible with any theory of nationalism, as there is “[n]o common language, ethnicity or shared history. No imagined community through print culture, modernization, or invented tradition.”³⁸ The solution to the linguistic divide in Belgium has simply been to regionalize language use, creating “pseudo-ethnic identities” for each monolingual region³⁹. He suggests that there is hope for the situation, and that not *all* Belgians consider themselves as either Flemish or Walloon⁴⁰. There is now a significant proportion of immigrants that have no historical connection with Flanders or Wallonia, and consider themselves simply as Belgian⁴¹. Van den Abbeele suggests the idea of multi-level identities, arguing: ““a weak sense of Belgian national identity can be supplemented by a strong sense of European identity, which in turn does not exclude a strong sense of regional identity”⁴².” He refers to a “Europe of the regions” as a possible solution to the problem, and although he does not refer directly to the CoR, this clearly suggests that focusing on an institution that promotes regionalism is a logical next step of analysis.

0.1.5, Literature on Federalism

Lieven de Winter, Marleen Brans and Wilifried Swenden argue that Belgian federalism is distinct from other federalisms in that did not emerge from “the coming together or *aggregation* of

³⁷ *ibid*, p 133

³⁸ Van Den Abbeele, Georges. “No Joking Matter: the ‘Other’ Belgium.” *Social Identities* 7 (November 4, 2001): 511-24. Accessed January 11, 2011. DOI: 10.1080/1350463012010767 4. , p 511

³⁹ *ibid*, p 514

⁴⁰ *ibid*, p 511

⁴¹ *ibid*, p 514

⁴² *ibid*, p 520

formerly independent states⁴³", but from exactly the opposite: the regionalization of one independent state. They assert that there are three major differences between Belgian's federalism and other types: 1) The Belgian regions are entrusted with so much political, legal and spending autonomy that they are close to being constitutionalized units of a federal state, 2) Competencies are split between two different types of regions: two territorial regions and three linguistic communities, and 3) The territorial units are largely homogenous units, but make up a heterogeneous, multi-national state⁴⁴. The article asks an important question, also posed by other academics, but for which no one has found an answer: "What is the *finalite politique*- or durable equilibrium- of the Belgian federalization process? Is federalism- along other factors such as the role of Brussels, the monarchy, national identity, public debt and social security- a strong enough glue to hold Belgium together?⁴⁵" This group of authors suggest that the presence of multiple political cultures (French and Flemish) is both a cause and consequence of federalization⁴⁶. Additionally, the European Union puts further constraints on both the regional and federal levels⁴⁷. As the CoR is meant to provide further representation for regions at the EU level, this begs the question of if the CoR is doing anything to mitigate the conflict.

Swenden and Jans argue that although nationalism poses problems to federal governance, the state has more forces that bind than reasons to split. Swenden argues that up until 2004, the federal government played the most important role in mitigating intergovernmental conflict, since the same parties were represented in both regional and national governments⁴⁸. He argues that even if the federal government collapses, the regional

⁴³ Swenden, Wilfried, Marleen Brans, and Lieven de Winter. "The Politics of Belgium: Institutions and Policy under Bipolar and Centrifugal Federalism." *West European Politics* 29, 5 (November 2006): 863-873. Accessed January 31, 2011. DOI: 10.1080/01402380600968729. , p 864

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p 869

⁴⁵ *ibid*, p 869

⁴⁶ *ibid*, p 870

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p 872

⁴⁸ Swenden, Wilfried and Maarten Theo Brans. "Will it Stay or Will it Go? Federalism and the Sustainability of Belgium." *West European Politics* 29, 5 (November 2006): 877-894. Accessed April 14, 2011. DOI: 10.1080/01402380600968745., p 887

governments will be largely unaffected, and will still be able to run effectively⁴⁹, but this has not been the case since 2010, as civil servants are severely constrained by a lack of a budget and the fact that they must consult the Council of Ministers before coming to any important decisions.

Lefebvre focuses on the different types of citizenship in Belgium. On the regional level, there are two different theoretical conceptions of citizenship: the Walloon concept, based on Renan's ideas of the will of the people to live together based on a common language, traditions and culture, and the Flemish concept, based on community, language and territory⁵⁰. Most of the rights of citizenship are still controlled by the Federal state, but some are under the control of the regions, including education and political rights. She does not discuss EU citizenship, but the conception of citizenship at the EU level is another competing theory. The author focuses on the presence of foreigners in Belgium and how their presence has affected the overall conception of citizenship. Essentially, she argues that due to the high number of foreigners in the workplace (10%), Belgium has strictly regulated immigration in an effort to protect themselves and their national sovereignty⁵¹.

Bursen and Beyers argue that Europeanization encourages Belgium to develop more cooperative forms of governance. He argues that Belgian federalism is designed to preserve cultural diversity, and it is therefore inherently non-cooperative⁵². The Belgian regions now have so many competencies that they are encouraged to shift their political agendas to the European level, because they have a strong base from which to mobilize⁵³. They conclude that federalization creates a kind of dual power situation in which regions become powerful decision-making arenas, but at the same time, the federal government is what allows them the ability of

⁴⁹ *ibid*, p 888

⁵⁰ Lefebvre, Edwige Liliane. "Belgian Citizenship: Managing Linguistic, Regional, and Economic Demands." *Citizenship Studies* 7, 1 (2003): 111-134. Accessed January 11, 2011. DOI: 10.1080/1362102032000048701., p 112

⁵¹ *ibid*, p 132

⁵² Beyers, Jan and Peter Bursens. "The European Rescue of the Federal State: How Europeanization Shapes the Federal State." Paper Presented at the ECPR Standing Group on the Third Pan-European Conference on EU Politics, Istanbul, Turkey, September 21-23. Accessed April 14, 2011, p 7

⁵³ *ibid*, p 7

interacting at the EU level, so the importance of the federal government is not entirely diminished⁵⁴.

Loughlin compares three works on the topic of federalism and regionalism. He argues that the link between nation and state has weakened as there has been more interaction at the supra-national, international, and subnational levels⁵⁵. Loughlin argues that the idea of a Europe of the Regions is what caused a renewed interest in the role that regions play at the European level⁵⁶, and that this research has frequently taken the form of authors attempting to theorize different types of relationships between regions and national governments along traditional lines, such as north- south⁵⁷. He refers to the Committee of the Regions directly as the most important advance in the increasing importance of sub-national levels of government⁵⁸, and, like Bollens did, refers the importance of cities in political, economic, and social terms⁵⁹. One of the works he reviews attributes federalism's adaptability to challenges such as globalization, European integration, and ethnic conflict as the reason it persists as a form of government⁶⁰. This argument is contrary to much of the literature on Belgian federalism, which suggests that federalism is actually a further cause of problems, as there is simply less need for federal cooperation as more competencies are surrendered to regional government.

0.2, Methodology

This thesis is meant to assess the effect of an institution over a period of time, making discourse analysis the most appropriate methodology. The goal of discourse analysis is to show the similarities and differences either within a discourse or between discourses on a particular

⁵⁴ Beyers, Jan and Peter Bursens. "The European Rescue of the Federal State: How Europeanization Shapes the Federal State.", p 9

⁵⁵ Laughlin, John. "Federalism, Regionalism, and Local Government: Comparative Perspectives on Transforming the Nation-State." *European Political Science* 7 (2008): 472-482. Accessed April 14, 2011. DOI: 10.1057/esps.2008.37., p 474

⁵⁶ *ibid*, p 477

⁵⁷ *ibid*, p 478

⁵⁸ *ibid*, p 478

⁵⁹ *ibid*, p 479

⁶⁰ *ibid*, p 474

subject, while keeping in mind the changes over time⁶¹. It is meant to show how socially constructed ideas and objects are created and evolve⁶². Changes in the discourse will show how the people perceive the effectiveness of the organization, which is one way of measuring effectiveness. Because the institution has no legislative power, there is no possibility at looking at policies, so discourse analysis makes the most sense based on the mandate of the CoR.

I will look specifically at the discourses in three different levels of news reporting: the regional level, the supranational (EU) level, and the international level.

The major strength of this method is its compatibility with the research question and evaluating institutional success and failure. Due the constructivist approach I take to link identity construction with an institution, a constructivist method will be the most appropriate.

Looking at how the discourse about the conflict has changed over the course of the existence of the Committee of the Regions will show if the institution has had an effect on thinking about the conflict in Belgium. Although it is difficult to assess the success of an institution, if we can see from the discourse that the institution is perceived to be useful and effective, then we can call it a success, even if the actual impact is largely symbolic. Symbols are extremely important in nationalist theories because they band people together. If the Committee of the Regions can do that for Belgium, then the state is that much less likely to dissolve.

Additionally, I contacted the twelve Belgian members of the Committee of the Regions and asked them questions via email about their thoughts on the effect the CoR has on the conflict, as well as their personal experiences with the institution, and their thoughts on how the general public perceives it. Only one member responded, but I will include a discussion of her detailed, thoughtful answers.

⁶¹ Neumann, I. 'Discourse Analysis' in *Qualitative Methods in International Relations*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2008: 61-77, p 62

⁶² Symposium: Discourse and Content Analysis, Newsletter of APSA, Spring 2004, Vol. 2, No. 1: 15-40, p 19

0.3, Structure of Thesis

In the first part of Chapter 1, I will trace the history of Belgium briefly from the time of establishment until today, focusing on the federal and consociational aspects of the government, and examine the competencies that the EU and the Regions now enjoy. I will make the distinction between the territorial regions and the linguistic communities. Brussels will be a major focus, as the city holds symbolic and historical value for both of the language groups, as well as hosting the majority of major EU institutions, giving it multiple identities.

In the second part of Chapter 1, I will look at the history of the Committee of the Regions in more detail, particularly the evolution of the Committee in Belgium itself. I will look the conditions that allowed the development of the Committee and scholarly articles on the topic.

In Chapter 2, I will analyze newspaper articles, in chronological order, to see how the view of the conflict has changed over time. The way that journalists perceive the conflict will add another dimension of analysis to the paper, in addition to scholarly sources, and together will provide a nearly complete view of the institution. I will include a discussion of the responses I received from Mia De Vits, Flemish representative to the CoR, to interview questions on the topic of the public's perception of the committee.

Chapter 3, the conclusion, will serve to tie together the strands of literature and to provide a conclusion about the impact Committee of the Regions, as well as offer suggestions for potential future research on this topic.

Chapter 1

1.1, *Brief History of Belgium*

When Belgium declared its independence in 1830, French culture was hegemonic, and Flanders was a poor agricultural region, while Wallonia was industrialized and wealthy⁶³. At the time of independence, there was no sense of shared Belgian identity: the ties that bound were solely administrative⁶⁴. At this point in Belgian history, Flemish speakers were discriminated against, and the cultural elites (intellectuals, the literate middle classes, and the lower clergy) pushed for linguistic independence⁶⁵. In order to be socially mobile, Flemish speakers were forced to learn French (which continued into the 1900s), and some upper class Flemish even spoke French at home⁶⁶.

In the 1930s, new language laws were adapted that confirmed linguistic territoriality⁶⁷. The concept of linguistic territoriality didn't solve the issue of overlapping demands for official language use as much as it did push the issue aside⁶⁸. In 1962 and 1963, demands for self-governance became institutionalized, eventually leading to the establishment of the current day monolingual regions of Flanders and Wallonia, and the bilingual territory of Brussels⁶⁹. Due to this regionalization of language use, each linguistic area has developed an ethnic identity based on language, where it previously may have been on other factors, such as religion. The creation of language based ethnic identities for each group means that they can mobilize along ethno-linguistic lines⁷⁰.

⁶³ De Winter, Lieven and Pierre Baudewyns. "Belgium: Towards the Breakdown of a Nation-State in the Heart of Europe?" , p 282

⁶⁴ Mnookin, Robert, and Alain Verbeke. "Group-Conflict Resolution: Sources of Resistance to Reconciliation: Persistent Nonviolent Conflict with No Reconciliation: The Flemish and Walloons in Belgium." , p 5

⁶⁵ De Winter, Lieven and Pierre Baudewyns. "Belgium: Towards the Breakdown of a Nation-State in the Heart of Europe?" , p 283

⁶⁶ Mnookin, Robert, and Alain Verbeke. "Group-Conflict Resolution: Sources of Resistance to Reconciliation: Persistent Nonviolent Conflict with No Reconciliation: The Flemish and Walloons in Belgium." , p 4

⁶⁷ De Winter, Lieven and Pierre Baudewyns. "Belgium: Towards the Breakdown of a Nation-State in the Heart of Europe?" , p 284

⁶⁸ O'Neill, Michael. "Belgium: Language, Ethnicity and Nationality." , p 115

⁶⁹ De Winter, Lieven and Pierre Baudewyns. "Belgium: Towards the Breakdown of a Nation-State in the Heart of Europe?" p 284

⁷⁰ Van Den Abbeele, Georges. "No Joking Matter: the 'Other' Belgium." , p 514

The establishment of Brussels as officially bilingual meant that the city, located in historic Flanders, but primarily French-speaking, became a cultural battleground; a kind of microcosm of the entire conflict⁷¹. The decision of the Flemish parliament to hold sessions in Brussels and to declare the city as the capital of Flanders clearly shows the Flemish interest in maintaining control over the city⁷². Key to the Belgian conflict, more on the question of Brussels can be found in the next section of this Chapter.

The establishment of these mono-lingual territories, in turn, led to the split of political parties- the linguistic cleavages among the social democrats, etc. simply became too great, and now there is a dual party system in Belgium: a Flemish one and a Francophone one⁷³. In 1993, the constitution was changed and confirmed Belgium as a federal country based on three linguistic communities (Nederlandophone, Francophone, and Germanophone)⁷⁴ and three regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels), not all of which are congruent⁷⁵. There are various theories as to the cause of current conflict, ranging from the difference between the official language of the communities and the actual language use of the populations⁷⁶.

Winter, Lievens, and Baudewyns and O'neill suggest that although the conflict started out over language use, with Flemish speakers being the poorer, discriminated against minority, now Flemish speakers are much better off economically and more numerous. Now more resentful about the fact that their taxes go to subsidize Wallonia⁷⁷ than language use policies. When one looks to the media, specifically newspaper articles, it can be seen that there is resentment of the monolingual Dutch status of suburbs surrounding Brussels by French speakers, which suggests that the core of the conflict is different for the two language groups:

⁷¹ O'neill, Michael. "Belgium: Language, Ethnicity and Nationality.", p 116-117

⁷² Van Den Abbeele, Georges. "No Joking Matter: the 'Other' Belgium.", p 515-516

⁷³ De Winter, Lieven and Pierre Baudewyns. "Belgium: Towards the Breakdown of a Nation-State in the Heart of Europe?" , p 286

⁷⁴ De Winter, Lieven and Pierre Baudewyns. "Belgium: Towards the Breakdown of a Nation-State in the Heart of Europe?" , p 289

⁷⁵ Van Den Abbeele, Georges. "No Joking Matter: the 'Other' Belgium.", p 513-14

⁷⁶ De Winter, Lieven and Pierre Baudewyns. "Belgium: Towards the Breakdown of a Nation-State in the Heart of Europe?" , p 291

⁷⁷ Mnookin, Robert, and Alain Verbeke. "Group-Conflict Resolution: Sources of Resistance to Reconciliation: Persistent Nonviolent Conflict with No Reconciliation: The Flemish and Walloons in Belgium.", p 8

although neither would like to see their language marginalized, for the conflict centers on the economic drain they consider the Walloons, and for the French it is the threat they see from the wealthy Flemish to their language.

Moonkin and Verbeke offer an entertaining and fitting metaphor for the history of Belgium. Briefly, they describe the union of Flanders and Wallonia as a marriage. In the beginning, a bourgeois French woman married a Flemish man from the wrong side of the tracks, with little money. Over the course of the marriage, the woman's exorbitant spending habits would have bankrupted her had it not been for her hard-working, now financially very successful husband. Their marriage is on the rocks due to irreconcilable differences, but their teenage son, Brussels, poses problems for getting a divorce, as both parents would want custody, and, as much as Brussels might prefer his French speaking mother, he recognizes that he needs his industrious Flemish father. And although the father doesn't have that close of a relationship with his son, he does have an emotional attachment and would likely fight for custody⁷⁸.

1.2, Significance of Brussels

Simultaneously the capital of Flanders and Belgium, and as a kind of unofficial capital of the European Union, the city of Brussels holds extreme symbolic value on the local, regional, federal and supranational level. As such, the city plays an incredibly important role in the conflict, and in the case of dissolution, the answer to the question of what will happen to Brussels is an emotionally charged one. It is for this reason that tensions in the bilingual region of Brussels and its suburbs can be viewed as a barometer for the country as a whole, and recently, there has been a re-emergence of quarrel in these communities, affirming that the conflict is unresolved⁷⁹.

Some authors have argued that hosting a large number of EU institutions brings the city prestige and economic advantages that are likely to serve to sustain Belgium as a federal state⁸⁰.

⁷⁸ *ibid*, p4-5

⁷⁹ O'Neill, Michael. "Belgium: Language, Ethnicity and Nationality.", p 125

⁸⁰ *ibid*, p 128

The idea of subsidiarity, or making decisions at the most logical level, is not to be at the expense of administrative efficiency, and the dissolution of Belgium would likely prove to be an administrative nightmare, even if the dissolution were swift and peaceful⁸¹. The Committee of the Regions is based in Brussels, and this gives the city additional symbolic value in terms of regional representation: not only is the city a region in its own right, but it is the location of the institution that provides regions representation.

As an officially bilingual region, Brussels represents not only a linguistic battleground, but also clearly shows the capacity of French speakers and Flemish speakers to live together and work together⁸². Bilingual status of Brussels is something that Flemish speakers insisted upon: they only consented to making Brussels an official region after it was agreed that Dutch-speakers would be protected in Brussels with consociational devices⁸³. More recently, the areas around Brussels have become a sort of new battleground, as the suburbs become more populated with French speakers, and, increasingly, immigrants. The issue of immigrants is important to the research question because immigrants now make up a very significant percentage of the population. Because they have no historical connection to the conflict, they should serve to mitigate the conflict, not to exacerbate it, as the case has been. Due to the fact that Brussels remains a battleground, it is clear that immigrants are not helping solve the conflict, and, because of this, they can be eliminated as a possible variable that could have an effect on the conflict, making the study of the effect of the CoR even more relevant.

1.3, The Linguistic Conflict Today

Designed to contain the conflict, Belgian federalism has now come under scrutiny of academics as both a solution and a cause of the conflict⁸⁴. Because the territorial units created by

⁸¹ *ibid*, p 133

⁸² O'Neill, Michael. "Belgium: Language, Ethnicity and Nationality.", p 129

⁸³ Swenden, Wilifried and Maarten Theo Jans. "Will it Stay or Will it Go? Federalism and the Sustainability of Belgium.", p 881

⁸⁴ Swenden, Wilfried, Marleen Brans, and Lieven de Winter. "The Politics of Belgium: Institutions and Policy under Bipolar and Centrifugal Federalism.", p 870; O'Neill, Michael. "Belgium: Language, Ethnicity and Nationality.", p 116-117; Swenden, Wilifried and Maarten Theo Jans. "Will it Stay or Will it Go? Federalism and the Sustainability of

the federal split are relatively homogeneous, this has allowed for groups to come together along ethnic lines and, most importantly, has allowed for regional governments to engage in nation building to further accentuate the differences between the territories⁸⁵. This has resulted in a very real threat of break up, as evidenced by the Belgian break up hoax in 2006, discussed in depth in the introduction. Although this was 'just' a hoax, it did get the issue significant media coverage and bring the issue out into the open⁸⁶. In just 2005, the issue had already started boiling over, when the "Manifesto for an Independent Flanders within Europe" was released, which was a 252 page report written by members of the business community and academic establishments that called for secession. Ironically, this document received far less attention than the hoax the next year. Both, however, are evidence of rising tensions in the recent past.

Another major question regarding the conflict today has to do with the large immigrant population that currently lives in Belgium. In 1990, Belgium had the largest number of foreign citizens in the workforce than any country other than Switzerland⁸⁷, and in 2011, this meant that one in ten people living in Belgium was an immigrant⁸⁸. Brussels in particular is home to huge numbers of workers, primarily bureaucrats, but also a large number of immigrants from all over the world. For these immigrants, there is no historical memory of repression, or linguistic or economic dominance; there is only one Belgium⁸⁹. Immigrants will speak whatever language they need to in order to find work; in Brussels, this could just as easily be English as French or Flemish, depending on what industry they work in. However, these large numbers of immigrants are viewed by some (particularly extreme right wing Flemish party, Vlaams Belang) as unwanted, which has led to stricter immigration laws⁹⁰. So the large number of immigrants have two major

Belgium.", p 889-890; Mnookin, Robert, and Alain Verbeke. "Group-Conflict Resolution: Sources of Resistance to Reconciliation: Persistent Nonviolent Conflict with No Reconciliation: The Flemish and Walloons in Belgium.", p 3
⁸⁵ Swenden, Wilfried, Marleen Brans, and Lieven de Winter. "The Politics of Belgium: Institutions and Policy under Bipolar and Centrifugal Federalism.", p 869

⁸⁶ Mnookin, Robert, and Alain Verbeke. "Group-Conflict Resolution: Sources of Resistance to Reconciliation: Persistent Nonviolent Conflict with No Reconciliation: The Flemish and Walloons in Belgium.", p 2

⁸⁷ Lefebvre, Edwige Liliane. "Belgian Citizenship: Managing Linguistic, Regional, and Economic Demands.", p 130

⁸⁸ "1 in 10 living in Belgium are foreigners, mostly Italians." *Flanders News*, May 4, 2011. Accessed May 25, 2011.

⁸⁹ Van Den Abbeele, Georges. "No Joking Matter: the 'Other' Belgium.", p 516

⁹⁰ Lefebvre, Edwige Liliane. "Belgian Citizenship: Managing Linguistic, Regional, and Economic Demands.", p 132

effects on sentiment in Belgium: first, they offer a fresh perspective on the conflict, unmarred by historical memories of repression, and second, they provide a new source of conflict for political parties to quarrel over, unrelated to the original language conflict. The significance of immigrants to the research question was explained in detail in the previous section about Brussels, but, briefly, immigrants are a potential variable that could have an effect on the conflict. Based on the fact that the conflict persists with the presence of immigrants, they can be eliminated as a variable that could mitigate the conflict.

The linguistic conflict is perpetuated by the lack of integration of media: there have separate radio stations and television networks for French speakers and Flemish speakers since 1960⁹¹, and there is no mass media aimed at both linguistic groups. This means that people who are not bilingual are culturally removed from the other language group, and, because public broadcasting is controlled by the communities⁹², there is no overarching federal control over what people are being told, making public broadcasting a potentially useful tool to broadcast nationalist sentiments. The proportion of people who speak both French and Dutch is relatively low due to schooling taking place exclusively in one language: as of 2000, in Wallonia, only 17% of people spoke French and Dutch, and 7% spoke English as well. In Flanders, this number was significantly higher: 57% spoke French and Dutch, and 40% also spoke English. However, this still shows that many ordinary citizens are limited by their linguistic ability from receiving news from the other linguistic community⁹³.

The conflict leads to an obvious question: what does this mean for the future of Belgium? There is evidence that Belgians identify more with their local or regional identity than with their identity as Belgians, and they are acutely aware of the cultural differences between the Flemings and the Walloons⁹⁴. The federal government has been unable to do anything to

⁹¹ Mnookin, Robert, and Alain Verbeke. "Group-Conflict Resolution: Sources of Resistance to Reconciliation: Persistent Nonviolent Conflict with No Reconciliation: The Flemish and Walloons in Belgium.", p 8

⁹² *ibid*, p 9

⁹³ *ibid*, p 9

⁹⁴ *ibid*, p 8

mitigate the conflict besides giving more power to the regions, so we are forced to look elsewhere for a solution to the conflict. In this case, we look to the Committee of the Regions to see what effect they have, and if they are capable of attenuating the conflict.

1.4, Belgian Federalism and competencies: Who is in charge of what? Regions, Communities, the Federal State, and the EU

Belgian federalism, originally devised to attenuate the rising tensions between the two major language groups, has recently come under question. How successful is it, really, in mitigating conflict? This section will look at the details of Belgium federalism: how it came into being, what makes it unique, and what the competencies of the communities, regions, federal government and the EU are.

Federalism in Belgium is distinct from other federalism in a variety of ways. To begin with, Belgian federalism did not come into existence from the coming together of independent states⁹⁵, but instead from the cleavage between ethno-linguistic groups within Belgium. Competencies were split between two different types of units: three territorial regions, and two linguistic communities. These units are relatively homogenous, particularly in comparison to the heterogeneous nature of the overall state⁹⁶. It was meant to improve the effectiveness of policy making and reform, and the dual power situation has led to policy learning and transfer from regional to federal level and vice versa⁹⁷.

One major difference between Belgian federalism and other federalisms is that there is no hierarchy of norms, meaning a federal law cannot be put above a regional law, and a regional law cannot be put above a federal law; they are all on the same level⁹⁸. One other interesting factor is that most parties, at least up until 2003, when federal and regional elections were

⁹⁵ Swenden, Wilfried and Maarten Theo Jans. "Will it Stay or Will it Go? Federalism and the Sustainability of Belgium.", p 864

⁹⁶ *ibid*, p 869

⁹⁷ *ibid*, p 871

⁹⁸ Bursens, Peter. "Enduring Federal Consensus: An Institutional Account of Belgian Preferences regarding the Future of Europe.", p 346

uncoupled, chose to participate in government at both the regional and federal level⁹⁹. Lastly, all levels of government have the right to conduct foreign policy in conjunction with the competencies they possess; one good example is climate change policy, which regions have considerable control over. Either region has the right to enter into foreign policy agreements with other states in this area.

There are two linguistic communities in Belgium: the Flemish speaking community and the French speaking community. These communities are not territorial units, and they are meant to encompass all speakers, regardless of where they reside in the state. The Communities do not have true regional constitutions, and they are limited in power because they are non-territorial in nature; they have no territorial base from which to draw taxes, so they are forced to rely entirely on federal grants¹⁰⁰. The largest expenditure is education¹⁰¹, as education in Belgium is done either in French or in Flemish. Additionally, they have authority for cultural matters, such as the arts, as well as family and youth policies¹⁰².

There are three regions in Belgium: Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. Flanders and Wallonia roughly align with the linguistic communities, but Brussels is not a community, so in Community affairs, both Communities share rights in the city¹⁰³. The regions in Belgium are among the most powerful in all of Europe, and the de facto bipolarity of the regions (Brussels rarely plays an important role in decision making) makes them more powerful even than regions such as North Rhine Westphalia, because, in practice, they only share power with one other region. The regions are in charge of territorially defined issues, such as the environment,

⁹⁹ Swenden, Wilifried and Maarten Theo Jans. "Will it Stay or Will it Go? Federalism and the Sustainability of Belgium.", p 881-882

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*, p 885

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, p 871

¹⁰² Mnookin, Robert, and Alain Verbeke. "Group-Conflict Resolution: Sources of Resistance to Reconciliation: Persistent Nonviolent Conflict with No Reconciliation: The Flemish and Walloons in Belgium.", p 7

¹⁰³ Swenden, Wilifried and Maarten Theo Jans. "Will it Stay or Will it Go? Federalism and the Sustainability of Belgium.", p 8884

agriculture, housing, water and energy, transport, and public work¹⁰⁴, although they share privileges with the federal government for many of these.

It is worth noting, however, that although a “Europe of the Regions” has been espoused in the integration discourse for years, that this has not really come to fruition. But it is true that regions have significantly more powers now, largely through the Committee of the Regions, and that regions within states are important for European governance¹⁰⁵. Because the regions have so many competencies, and are so important even in foreign affairs, the major question that remains is, of course, what importance does the central government have? Has it become merely a symbol? The federal government has less power now than it did when political parties participated on both levels of government¹⁰⁶. Even in comparison with other EU member states, the Belgian parliament is relatively weaker¹⁰⁷. However, the federal government (sometimes in conjunction with the European Union) still controls many important policies, including social security, defense, the judiciary, health policies, most of taxation, rail and air transport, much of foreign policy, trade, agriculture, energy and environmental policy¹⁰⁸. Because the federal state still enjoys significant competencies, and because EU membership is contingent upon statehood, the state is still important.

In terms of the EU, Belgium has always been pro-integration, regardless of which political party was in power. Unlike in some member states, there has never been a large amount of media attention for European issues- there is little debate, as everyone supports the EU, so there is little interest in the Parliament¹⁰⁹. The EU actually serves to strengthen the role of the

¹⁰⁴ Mnookin, Robert, and Alain Verbeke. “Group-Conflict Resolution: Sources of Resistance to Reconciliation: Persistent Nonviolent Conflict with No Reconciliation: The Flemish and Walloons in Belgium.”, p 7

¹⁰⁵ Laughlin, John. “Federalism, Regionalism, and Local Government: Comparative Perspectives on Transforming the Nation-State.”, p 477

¹⁰⁶ Swenden, Wilifried and Maarten Theo Jans. “Will it Stay or Will it Go? Federalism and the Sustainability of Belgium.”, p 887

¹⁰⁷ Bursens, Peter. “Enduring Federal Consensus: An Institutional Account of Belgian Preferences regarding the Future of Europe.”, p 348

¹⁰⁸ Swenden, Wilifried and Maarten Theo Jans. “Will it Stay or Will it Go? Federalism and the Sustainability of Belgium.”, p 892

¹⁰⁹ Bursens, Peter. “Enduring Federal Consensus: An Institutional Account of Belgian Preferences regarding the Future of Europe.”, p 349

state, to a certain extent, because although it offers some representation to regions, it only gives regions which are located in member states representation. Essentially, the qualifier for membership is statehood. Only regions which are recognized within the member state enjoy representation at the European level. In this way, the federal state serves as a kind of “gate-keeper” between regional politics and European politics¹¹⁰.

1.5, Brief History of the Committee of the Regions

The Committee of the Regions was not created out of the blue, rather, it was the next logical step in regional representation. Based on the idea of subsidiarity, the purpose of the Committee is to provide regional representation on the supranational level¹¹¹. In 1986, the Single European Act allowed for the free movement of capital, services, goods and people. Although the act did not give regional actors any formal role in politics, it did enlarge community competences¹¹². In 1988, the role of regions was expanded further by a reform and increase of structural funds. At this point, the regions (particularly the German Länder, pushed for creating a regional chamber or council, putting the CoR on the agenda. The Committee was officially created by Article 198A of the Maastricht Treaty, and it was greeted with both hope and skepticism. The first meeting took place in Brussels on June 9 and 10, 1994, approximately two months later than was intended. There are 222 members, who are appointed for 4 years by the European Council. A Chairmen is elected by the members every 2 years. In 1997, powers were increased by the Treaty of Amsterdam, which added 5 additional policy areas that the EU is required to consult the Committee¹¹³, so although the CoR cannot pass legislation, they can make policy recommendations.

As the Committee is meant to represent many different kinds of regions, from different geographic areas, and with different interests, there are issues within the Committee itself.

¹¹⁰ Mnookin, Robert, and Alain Verbeke. “Group-Conflict Resolution: Sources of Resistance to Reconciliation: Persistent Nonviolent Conflict with No Reconciliation: The Flemish and Walloons in Belgium.”, p 15

¹¹¹ Nash, Michael. “The committee of the regions: A committee for Europe.”, p 289

¹¹² Christiansen, Thomas. “Second Thoughts on Europe’s “Third Level”: The European Union’s Committee of the Regions.”, p 94

¹¹³ Mamadouh, Virginie. “The Regions in Brussels: Subnational Actors in the Supranational Arena”, p 480

Christiansen suggests that there are 5 major cleavages within the institution that prevent it from working as a truly cohesive body and leveraging the power of the regions. Major cleavages are: local versus regions, “executive” versus “deliberate” regionalism, and northern vs. southern regions. In countries where regions enjoy some representation on the national level, such as Germany and Belgium, it was the struggle between local and regional representation that marred the ability of the states to elect representatives¹¹⁴. In some states, there are intermediate levels of government between regional and local, which combine both. States that do not have a regional level of government but might have regional aspirations, such as Scotland in the UK, can use their local representative to promote regional aspirations such as Scotland in the UK, can use their local representatives to promote regional interest. Interestingly, although one might assume that party ties would be very important in forming coalitions, this has not been the case. In reality, although Socialist party members and Christian Democrats meet before plenary sessions¹¹⁵, they do not frequently vote in blocs. These are the major parties that exist in European countries, but there are so many parties represented, and regional issues are so diverse that party affiliation cannot account for them. Instead, parties that do not cooperate on a national level might be more likely to cooperate on the EU level, especially in small states. Alternatively, states with very different regions are disinclined to cooperate because the needs of North Rhine Westphalia, for example, are very different from Mecklenburg Vorpommern. In some states, the strength of the regions inside the state varies widely; in Spain, some regions are autonomous, while others remain essentially administrative districts¹¹⁶. The way that these representatives cooperate is different, because some have significantly more policy competencies. There has been wide cooperation on the part of the Southern states¹¹⁷, as they are faced with many of the same issues: illegal immigration from North Africa, and a direct confrontation with

¹¹⁴ Christiansen, Thomas. “Second Thoughts on Europe’s “Third Level”: The European Union’s Committee of the Regions.”, p 97

¹¹⁵ *ibid*, p 100

¹¹⁶ *ibid*, p 101

¹¹⁷ *ibid*, p 104

climate change, for example. These cleavages call into question the effectiveness of the organization, further bolstering the case to evaluate that effectiveness. What, exactly, do the cleavages prevent the institution for doing?

The CoR, interestingly, promotes both regions and states, as the focus on providing regions representation, but because membership is dependent on being a part of a member state, the importance of the state is not diminished. This means that although allowing regions representation on the EU level might be new, the idea of the CoR is still structured around the nation-state¹¹⁸, as politics has been since the Peace of Westphalia. Relations between regions and federal governments are still constrained by domestic politics¹¹⁹. This is not to say that regions have not received any benefit from the Committee; in fact, the CoR has legitimized European aspirations of many regions¹²⁰.

From the existing literature, what appears to be the major contribution of the CoR is contributing to closing the democratic deficit of the EU. Commission President Jacques Delors stated, "The task of [CoR] is nothing less than to enhance the democratic legitimacy of the Union... That is why your Committee is so important: you will help to close the gap. Firstly, your involvement will bring the Union, perceived as too distant, closer to local reality. You will be able to communicate local concerns and grassroots reactions... The other side of the medal is that you will have the task of explaining Community policies to the people back at home¹²¹". Participating in local politics is perceived as being more accessible and comprehensible to the everyday person, while EU politics are perceived as relatively lofty and as having lesser effect on a person's day to day activities. The CoR attempts to show people that regional issues are being discussed at the EU level, illustrating that EU politics are both accessible and important for

¹¹⁸ *ibid*, p 106

¹¹⁹ Mamadouh, Virginie. "The Regions in Brussels: Subnational Actors in the Supranational Arena", p 486

¹²⁰ Christiansen, Thomas, and Pamela Lintner. "The Committee of the Regions after 10 Years: Lessons from the Past and Challenges for the Future.", p 5

¹²¹ *ibid*, p 108

everyone, but it is still a Brussels based body that is largely removed from those it seeks to represent¹²².

Because the Committee is only allowed to release advisory opinions, either because they consider it appropriate or because one of the three main institutions chooses to consult them¹²³, it simply does not have the influence of other EU institutions. Without policy making power, the institution remains largely symbolic. Symbolism in politics, however, is not to be underestimated, and every author who writes on the subject of the CoR discusses how important symbolism is in national and European politics¹²⁴. Thomas Christiansen suggests that the real significance of the Committee is in creating regional and European identities¹²⁵. If this is the major task of the CoR, this legitimizes the aspirations of the Belgian regions. It seems that both Flanders and Wallonia have incredibly strong regional identities, further sharpened by the active conflict, that they view as at odds with their identity as Belgian.

The next chapter will be more information on the Committee of the Regions and the effect that it has had on the linguistic conflict in Belgium. I will look at various newspaper articles on the topic of the linguistic conflict, and see if the discourse has changed since the establishment of the institution, or to see if there was a time when there was a major shift; for example, when the Amsterdam Treaty expanded the competencies of the Committee in 1997. Additionally, I contacted all 12 Belgian members of the Committee of the Region to discover their thoughts on the impact of the Committee. One member, Mia De Vits, responded, and I will include a discussion of her responses to my questions.

¹²² Christiansen, Thomas, and Pamela Lintner. "The Committee of the Regions after 10 Years: Lessons from the Past and Challenges for the Future.", p 3

¹²³ *ibid*, p 4

¹²⁴ Laughlin, John. "Federalism, Regionalism, and Local Government: Comparative Perspectives on Transforming the Nation-State.", p 478; Christiansen 109, Mamadouh, etc.

¹²⁵ Christiansen, Thomas. "Second Thoughts on Europe's "Third Level": The European Union's Committee of the Regions.", p 109

Chapter 2

2.1, Introduction

In this Chapter, I will analyze an email correspondence I had with a member of the CoR, as well as newspaper articles on the Belgian language conflict. I wanted to examine multiple perspectives on the conflict, and a member of the CoR can offer an insider perspective. The newspapers serve to show how the conflict is portrayed in the media, to see what citizens are seeing everyday about it.

2.2, Interview with a Belgian member of the Committee of the Regions¹²⁶

I decided to contact Belgian members of the Committee of the Regions because the focus of this thesis is the impact the Committee has on Belgium, so delegates from Belgium will be the most familiar with the situation domestically and therefore most capable of commenting on it. There are 3 subcommittees of the CoR, two of which focus on economics, and one of which focuses on the environment. The remaining committee, the Commission for Culture and Education seemed to be the most related to the questions I had, so I chose initially to contact the 4 Belgian members of this Commission. Approximately two weeks went by with no response, so I chose to expand the target group to all Belgian delegates, as they would all have knowledge of domestic politics and the Committee of the Regions, even if they were not on that particular Commission. I also sent out second requests to the members emailed originally. Eventually, I received one detailed, very thoughtful response from Mia De Vits. Ms. De Vits is a member of the European Socialist Party, and is a member of two Commissions: the Commission for Culture and Education and the Commission for Economic and Social Policy. The email correspondence between us can be found in Appendix 1.

I posed three broad questions: 1) What role do you personally believe the CoR plays in Belgium? 2) What perception of the organization do your constituents have? Do you think that most Belgian citizens are aware of the work of the CoR? 3) What are your views about the

¹²⁶ All of the information in this section is sourced from an email correspondence I had with Mia De Vits, Belgian delegate of the Committee of the Regions, available in Appendix 1.

sustainability of Belgium, considering the importance of Brussels? Do you think the Committee of the Regions will play (or is currently playing) a role in the conflict? I informed each delegate of the purpose of the questions, and offered to refer to them anonymously if they preferred, but Ms. De Vits made no such request.

In response to the first question, Ms. De Vits first clarified the role of the CoR generally as an advisory institution, not one which makes laws. She stated that the CoR can be seen as a voice of regional and local entities, and that its power and influence expanded after the Lisbon Treaty, allowing the Committee to play a larger role in introducing subsidiarity. She states that playing a role in introducing subsidiarity is also the role that the CoR has in Belgium- she does not expand on this, leading me to believe that she does not see a specific role that the CoR has in Belgium that they do not have elsewhere. Because the question was asked generally, and she had the opportunity to respond as she saw fit, if she saw a special role for the CoR in Belgium, she would likely have included it here.

She wrote quite a bit about possibly expanding the role of the CoR, but is skeptical of the idea herself. There is debate within the CoR about expanding the responsibilities, and one member put forth a discussion note with a proposal to turn the Committee into a parliament of the regions or a third chamber, eventually intending to replace the European council, but Ms. De Vits states that this was “thankfully not taken seriously.” Based on her use of the word “thankfully”, she clearly believes that the role of the CoR should not be expanded to this extent. She believes that this for two reasons: 1) there is no clear definition of what a region should be, and 2) the way that regions and their competencies are constructed varies too much among European countries. She states that the proposal “would in fact lead to a hallowing and paralysation of the European integration.” From this, one can understand that the regions are simply imbued with different levels of power in different states, and because there is so much national variation, there is no way of creating a body that would require regions with equal

powers. Changing the power structure of different states would be both impossible and undesirable.

In response to the second question, Ms. De Vits responses were succinct and to the point. She sees a serious disconnection between the Committee and Belgian citizens. She feels that not only are they unaware of what the Committee actually does, but they also do not know who is representing them and their interests. She does not blame this on the citizens; rather, she explained the Belgian representatives do not take their role seriously, and that there is a problem with absenteeism on their parts that exacerbates the problem. She explained that there is a disconnect between the relative importance of the Belgian regions and the perceived importance of the committee, and this is partly responsible for the low attendance rate of representatives and the lack of information the public has on the CoR.

The third question related to most directly to Belgium, and attempted to make a direct link between the linguistic conflict and the Committee. Ms. De Vits chose to speak about three distinct topics in her answer to this question: first, her view on the origins of the conflict, second, her view on the solution, and lastly, her view on the role the CoR ought to play.

She attributes the perpetuity of the conflict to the breakdown of the political parties in the 1970s. Essentially, the party system broke down into two party systems, one for each linguistic group, and a Flemish speaker may only vote for a Flemish party and vice versa. She asserts that in a federal state, the political debate occurs between the parties and the parties must then interact with the public. In European Union politics, party formation occurs around the debate. In Belgium, there is no meaningful debate, because there isn't any interaction between the Flemish and Walloon parties.

The solution to this, she asserts, is to fundamentally change the structure of the Belgian Senate to something along the lines of the Council of Ministers in the EU or the US Senate, to make it more of a meeting place for representatives. There needs to be open and calm debate about reassigning responsibilities and competencies to the various levels of Belgian governance,

as there was during the Convention that allocated responsibilities to member states and the EU. Public authority has to be strengthened in order to change the negative perception of globalization that influences public perception of the European Union. The best way to strengthen public authority is to make very clear what the competencies of each level of government are.

Ms. De Vits' thoughts on the role the CoR plays intriguing, because she does not believe the Committee has a role to play in the political debate; getting involved would simply complicate matters and make finding a solution more difficult. She does, however, believe that the Committee ought to play a role in mitigating growing European nationalism, evidenced by the rise of right wing parties and an unwillingness to bail out countries in the Eurozone in crisis. The CoR needs to help get across the message that Europe has an "added value" for citizens.

The significance that this has for the research question is high: a member of the Committee itself does not see a significant role for the Committee to play in Belgium. This does not necessarily preclude a symbolic role for the committee, but because the mandate of the CoR clearly limits their role to that of an advisory institution, and there is not will on the part of members of the CoR to expand that mandate, the Committee of the Regions will always be limited to an advisory role.

If the role of the CoR will always be merely symbolic, then is it possible that the Committee has any real influence on domestic politics in Belgium? Based on the significance of symbolism for nationalism, and the fact that the conflict in Belgium is a nationalist conflict, the Committee is serving an important purpose merely by existing. Although the role of the CoR may always being non-legislative, they can expand their influence by further promoting their work and simply finding ways to make sure that citizens are aware of the institution.

2.3, Analysis of Belgian and European Newspapers

I looked at articles on the Belgian language conflict from three different Belgian and European newspapers. The articles are all from the last ten years, with the oldest being from

2001, and many are as recent of May of 2011. These articles were obtained by searching online news sites for key words regarding the conflict. For all three sites, there are significantly more articles about the Belgian language conflict since 2007, when there was a stalemate, as today, in forming a viable coalition at the federal level. I searched for multiple different keywords to find as many articles as possible, including "Committee of the Regions", "Belgium/Belgian Conflict", "Regional Representation", "Brussels", and some combination of these words.

In looking at the articles, I was looking to see how the conflict was being portrayed by each source, keeping in mind their potential biases, specifically words that would potentially lay blame on one of the language groups or a specific circumstance. Since the articles represented a fairly long period of time, I looked at each article in chronological order to see if there was a difference in the way the conflict was being represented. If there was a change in the wording, to be more hopeful this can be attributed at least in part to the CoR increasing the importance of the regions.

2.3.1, Analysis of New Europe

New Europe is a weekly European newspaper that has been in print since 1993. Although it includes news from 49 different countries, its major emphasis is European institutions. There are 66,000 readers, of which over 20,000 reside in Brussels¹²⁷, meaning that this newspaper is one that Belgian citizens, particularly in the capital, are reading on a regular basis, thus making it an ideal choice for analysis. Articles are written in English, making them equally accessible for Flemings and Walloons.

The earliest article on the conflict, printed in March of 2005, discusses polls undertaken by the newspapers *La Libre Belgique* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*, in which 2,000 Belgians were asked if they were in favor of devolution, and found that the "vast majority" of Belgians preferred that Belgium stayed united. This news, however, is not as significant as this phrase: "...the popularity of the separatist parties *Vlaams Belang* and the *NV-A* in Flanders suggests

¹²⁷ <http://www.neurope.eu/help/about/>

otherwise¹²⁸." By phrasing this statement as they did, the author is asserting, however subtly, that Flemish extremists are not only calling for independence, but that they are the only ones who desire a split.

The next article on the subject was printed in 2007 and is actually an interview with the president of the European People's Party, Wilfried Maartens. He addresses questions about the nature of Belgian federalism and Belgium's future. He states that he needed to reform political institutions by transferring competencies to the regions but still maintain a federal state. He states that the problem is the same problem as for Europe. To this, he asks: "What is the finality of that? What is the reason we are working together, living together?" He answers this question by stating that "...it is impossible in a globalising world not to cooperate as we do in the European Union¹²⁹", which implies that this is also the only way for Belgium. By stating that there is "no other way", he clearly implies that the details of the conflict are less important than the future of Belgium as a federal unitary state, and less important than the future of the EU as a whole. This does not mean changing the nature of the state or of the EU, but rather acknowledging that problems simply have to be overcome.

The third article, written in 2007, discusses the underlying issues of the conflict and the situation at that time domestically. The significance of this article is that it proposes that although the country could split, there is little "anguish from residents and politicians¹³⁰", insinuating that the population would simply not care very much if the country were to split. In the conclusion, however it is acknowledged that although the idea of splitting the country is "intriguing", most politicians acknowledge that Belgium has weathered political crises before and

¹²⁸ "Belgians don't want country to split." *New Europe*, Issue 618, March 27, 2005. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://www.neurope.eu/articles/Belgians-dont-want-country-to-split/38777.php>

¹²⁹ "Martens' united Europe. An undivided EU can set an example in climate change." *New Europe*, Issue 737, July 7, 2007. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://www.neurope.eu/articles/Martens-united-Europe/75763.php>

¹³⁰ "Welcome to Belgium...ah, Flanders...ah, Wallonia, ah..." *New Europe*, Issue 749, September 29, 2007. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://www.neurope.eu/articles/78302.php>

are likely to do so again. This article, like the previous article, also suggests that the problems can simply be swept aside, although it does not go so far as to suggest that they should be.

Another article from 2007 discusses the lack of a federal government. At this time in 2007, as today in 2011, the political parties were unable to form a viable coalition, and they were on the verge of setting a record for the longest country without a government. The article states explicitly that "...the Belgian federal government is now mainly a vehicle for transferring revenue from rich Flemish areas to poor Walloon areas¹³¹", clearly placing the blame for the crisis on the economic disparity in the state, and, really, on the poor Walloons who require subsidization. As the other articles, it is brought up that Belgium has weathered problems in the past, but states that this time "it seems close to impossible", which has prompted speculation on a potential break up.

The most recent articles from this news source are all from 2008. One article asserted that the issue has started to "recede from the headlines" and that "Belgian politicians from both sides of the ethnic divide were putting emphasis on the need to sustain the Belgian nation."¹³² The rest of the articles were all published the same day, and all focus on Europe, with one discussing the Committee of the Regions directly. The first states that the idea of a Europe of the Regions and the Committee are improperly named for two reasons: first, the name seems to contradict the idea of subsidiarity, and because after the Treaty of Lisbon comes into force, regions will no longer need to strive for more institutional representation, because they have gotten essentially everything that they wanted. The article ends with a question: "Nowadays, who would challenge the need for regions and municipalities to be fully involved in...decisions?"¹³³ Phrasing the question in this way shows the author's bias, as not everyone is in agreement about giving regions more power. Many federal governments, in fact, are not in favor of giving more

¹³¹ "Government? Who needs a government? Non here yet." *New Europe*, Issue 752, October 29, 2007. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://www.neurope.eu/articles/78965.php>

¹³² "Belgian stalemate still far from a draw." *New Europe*, Issues 767, February 2, 2008. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://www.neurope.eu/articles/Belgian-stalemate-still-far-from-a-draw/82389.php>

¹³³ Delbarre, Michel. "Ten years of European regional and local policy." *New Europe*, Issue 802, October 6, 2008. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://www.neurope.eu/articles/90052.php>

power to the regions, as they have no real incentive to give up power both to the EU on the one side and to the regions on the other. The next article discusses the link between Europe and the citizens. The author believes that restoring the link between Europe and its citizens needs to be the top priority for European institutions¹³⁴. This is clearly in line with the mission of the Committee of the Regions, as the Committee seeks to do exactly this. However, the fact that this still needs to be a priority in 2008 suggests that the Committee has been unsuccessful in meeting this mandate in the period between 1994 and 2008.

The last article asserts the importance in the EU truly “going local”, and states that “most roads don’t lead to Brussels, and, even if they do, they cross villages, cities, and regions which make up the puzzle board of Europe along the way.” This statement clearly shows how important it is for the EU to take regions into account, because, together, they make up Europe. The tendency to overemphasize Brussels, both for the EU overall and for Belgium is great, but Brussels is simply not the only important city. The EU and its institutions need to recognize this and attempt meaningfully to engage citizens outside this region.

2.3.2, *The BBC*

I also looked at articles published by the BBC, the largest broadcasting organization in the world. Articles are published in 32 languages, so all citizens of Belgium have equal access to these articles (and can read them in French, Dutch, German or English), and they are available online. The articles I looked at range in date from 2001 until May of 2011.

The earliest article focuses not on the Belgian language conflict, but on the effect that the conflict has on Belgium holding the EU presidency. It draws parallels between the Belgium’s motto as president of the EU, “unity in diversity”, and the domestic situation in Belgium¹³⁵. The Prime Minister at the time switches between Flemish, French and English in order to make

¹³⁴ Koronakis, Alexandros. “Not all roads lead to...Brussels.” *New Europe, Issues 802*, October 6, 2008. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://www.neurope.eu/articles/90079.php>

¹³⁵ “Belgium brings its quirks to the EU.” *BBC News*, July 4, 2001. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1421138.stm>

himself understood, and the federal government made the decision to split EU meetings into four different categories, depending on which level of government has competency of the area.

The next article is from 2007, and offers the viewpoints for a Dutch-speaking journalist and a French-speaking journalist. The Dutch-speaking journalist begins his analysis with 1993, when the King passed away and Belgians from all over the state went to Brussels to pay their respects. He asks, "that was 1993. Today it's 2007. Have things changed? Yes and no." His timeline happens to match exactly with the period directly before the Committee of the Regions was established until now. He states that problems arise only when they "have to work with each other", making this a political problem, but he acknowledges that it likely has affected public opinion. The Flemish journalist clearly blames the Walloons ("If it really is that difficult to work with the French speaking Belgians, than it might be better to go our own way", and although the Walloon journalist does not directly blame the Flemish, she claims ownership of Brussels ("For the Flemish, an independent Flanders without Brussels would be the only option if the country were to be divided rapidly and clearly")¹³⁶. The issue of Brussels has not been resolved, and the Walloons claiming ownership if the state were to break-up would be unlikely to make the break-up "rapid". Neither journalist foresees the break-up, but it is clear from the interviews that they both would blame a break-up on the other language group.

Another article from 2008 question the sustainability of the country, and it quotes Kris Peeters, president of Flanders, as stating that the regional level will be the most important in solving the crisis. The article attempts to draw a parallel between Belgium and the European Union: people "lead largely separate lives, and have no great affection for each other" but this "need not spell the end of the country." People in the EU also lead separate lives and do not necessarily have an affection for one another, but this does not mean the end of the EU.

¹³⁶ "Viewpoints: Belgian Crisis" *BBC News*, September 17, 2011. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6995511.stm>

Although this may be a negative argument for both Belgium and the EU, these are ties that bind¹³⁷.

Another article from 2008 questions if Belgium is heading for breakup. If Belgium were to split, it would look bad for the EU, which is “dedicated to the end of nationalism and a strong advocate for federal Europe.” Even if a break-up of Belgium would reflect poorly on the European Union, if that is indeed what is best for Belgians, then that may be what is necessary. Despite many Belgians still being proponents of compromise, the stalemate in forming a viable coalition at the federal level may be evidence that the compromises have not effectively mitigated the conflict, and that the country, as former Prime Minister Yves Leterme states, is “an accident of history¹³⁸”.

The most recent article from the BBC, published on May 18, 2011, discusses the need for finding a new mediator in the latest stalemate to form a viable government. Mr. Di Rupo, leader of the French-speaking Socialists, is now calling for even more autonomy for the regions in order to appease Dutch speakers. Despite the problems with finding a federal government, the country’s economy actually grew in the last year, and they were able to effectively serve as president of the EU in 2010¹³⁹. Despite their ability to serve as EU President, it is clear from this article that domestically, a viable federal government is necessary, and that now French speakers are in agreement that more autonomy for the regions will allow greater cooperation overall.

2.3.3, VRT (*Flanders Public Broadcasting*)

The next newspaper I examined was VRT, which is Flemish broadcasting company. The online site is available in English and in Dutch, so although it is not accessible to those who speak only French, it is accessible to anyone who speaks English, which is a large percentage of

¹³⁷ “Can divided Belgium hold together?” *BBC News*, October 20, 2008. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7678777.stm>

¹³⁸ Hughes, Dominic. “Analysis: Where now for Belgium?” *BBC News*, July 15, 2008. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7507506.stm>

¹³⁹ “Belgium without a government: New mediator urges deal.” May 18, 2011. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13437738>

the population. The site is difficult to search; results do not show up in chronological order, so all the articles I analyze are from 2009 until today.

An article written in 2009 focuses on the 20th anniversary of the Brussels Capital Region, and iterates the importance of the city for both language groups: as the capital of the French speaking Community of Belgium and of the Region of Flanders, as well as the capital of the Belgian state.¹⁴⁰

An article from 2011 talks about the US Peace Institute, which typically focuses on countries in the midst of violent political conflict, such as Afghanistan and Iraq. However, USPIS has decided to devote a peace brief to Belgium, based on the claim that political elites are “now trying to profit from Belgium’s cultural and linguistic differences.” The tone of the article is very negative towards USPIS, stating things like, “totally disregarding the outcome of last year’s election it even alleges that today’s impetus towards institutional reform is only driven by “Flemish political elites.” This statement could be construed as biased, because the article is from the Flemish public broadcasting company, but later in the article, the author goes on to say that “[t]he paper also questions about the attitude of Francophones who see every concession as a political defeat¹⁴¹”, implying that the paper is biased towards both French and Flemish speakers. Although one might assume that this publication would be negative towards French speakers, but this article shows that there is some sense of solidarity, as the author took offense at the entire publication, which blamed both language groups.

Another article from 2011 discusses how *Le Soir*, the largest Francophone newspaper in Belgium, published a special edition that included a section in Dutch. This was in response to Flemish speaker’s attitudes about the French publication, and the message of this edition is “make up your own mind.” Relations between Flemish nationalists have been so strained that

¹⁴⁰ “Brussels Region celebrates 20th anniversary.” *Flanders News*, January 12, 2009. Accessed May 25, 2011. http://www.deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws.english/archief_EN/2.1340/news/1.448994

¹⁴¹ “US Peace Institute: ‘After Afghanistan let’s look at Belgium.’” *Flanders News*, February 15, 2011. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://www.deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws.english/news/1.963884>

the Flemish nationalists have called Le Soir 'La Gazette des Milles Collines'¹⁴², which refers to the Rwandan radio that ran a hate campaign during the genocide. The article quotes one of the French journalists in saying that the paper has given space for Flemish writes and undertaken projects with Flemish newspapers in the past, but the author does not provide a personal comment on the subject.

The next three articles are part of a series on the Flemish, particularly in the suburbs surrounding Brussels. One discusses the monolingualism in the Vlaamse Rand, which includes 19 municipalities. The issue in this area is not French speaking Belgians, but the growing number of foreigners in the region¹⁴³. Local authorities are attempting to encourage the use of Dutch in the region. Although the article does not take a stance on the issue, the fact that the article was written shows a kind of defensive stance on why the area should remain monolingual Dutch speaking. The next article in this series answers the question why these municipalities ought to remain Flemish. They base this on the principle of territoriality, which was shaped over the years "by French speakers and Dutch speakers together". Because this principle is engrained in the Constitution, there is no way of changing this without a majority of both French and Dutch speakers. The author states "the fact that some Flemish municipalities are home to a lot of French and foreign speakers does not change anything"¹⁴⁴, implying that regardless of the preferences of those that live in this area, the principle of territoriality must not be breached, and this area will thus remain Dutch speaking. The last article in this series addresses the same topic in Brussels. The author stresses the right of Flemish speakers to use their language here: "It goes without saying that the Flemish minority have the right to be helped in its own language here"¹⁴⁵, but goes on to state that the foreigners cannot reasonably expect to use their own languages or

¹⁴² "Brussels daily Le Soir goes Dutch." *Flanders News*, March 22, 2011. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://www.deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws.english/news/1.987065>

¹⁴³ "Why do the municipalities in the "Vlaamse Rand" around Brussels continue to be Flemish?" *Flanders News*, April 21, 2011. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://www.deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws.english/flanders%2Btoday/1.1007865>

¹⁴⁴ "Why do the Flemish people hold so strongly to the monolingualism in the Vlaamse Rand?" *Flanders News*, April 20, 2011. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://www.deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws.english/flanders%2Btoday/1.1007390>

¹⁴⁵ "Why is Brussels bilingual when only a minority of Dutch speakers live there?" *Flanders News*, April 22, 2011. Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://www.deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws.english/flanders+today/1.1007405>

even to use English, which would be “unfeasible both practically and politically”, as the city already has a lot to cope with simply being bilingual.

The last article is on the topic du jour, the current lack of a federal government. The article stresses that negotiations have been useless and that the lack of a federal government is having a negative effect on the day-to-day running of the country. There is no budget for Belgium, and civil servants are unable to make decisions without first consulting the Council of Ministers, severely slowing down the process. The author writes, “At present, there is no real prospect of a breakthrough and nobody considers new federal elections a good option¹⁴⁶”. However, the majority of other articles on the subject state that Belgium has settled on maintaining the caregiver government until the next federal elections, so new federal elections are the solution to this stalemate, regardless of the preference of this author. The article takes a matter of fact tone and does not seem to favor one language group over the other, which is different than what one might expect from a Flemish publication.

2.3.4, Conclusion of Analysis

The overarching purpose of looking at these news articles is to see how various newspapers with different potential biases portray the Belgian language conflict, over the course of time. What can be gleaned from this group of three publications is that the conflict has gotten significantly more media attention recently, beginning with the stalemate in forming a federal government in 2007, with interest waning until the next stalemate in 2010. Two of the newspapers did not offer archives going back much further than 2005, but the source that did (the BBC) had only one article relating to the Belgian language conflict from 2001. The Committee of the Regions is not mentioned in any of the articles on the conflict, but this is to be expected: if the Committee has only a symbolic role to play, it will not be referred to in the media, but the media itself will reflect that impact. When Belgium was unable to form a viable

¹⁴⁶ “ “Alea iacta est”, and the government fell.” *Flanders News*, April 22, 2011. Accessed May 25, 2011. http://www.deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws.english/Political%2Bcrisis/110422_1year_stalemate

federal government in 2011, there was again an increased coverage of the Belgian issue in the media. The relationship one would assume the Committee would have on the conflict is direct: if regions are more important, these regions will receive more media attention, and this has been the case in the last few years. This is likely related to the problem with electing a federal government, but the fact that all three news sources have provided such detailed and extensive coverage is evidence that people are paying more attention to the conflict, at all levels.

Conclusion

3.1, Introduction

This Chapter seeks to tie together the various strands of literature related to the research question, as well as to provide a final evaluation of the effect of the Committee of the Regions has in Belgium. The first Chapter of the thesis sought to show a gap in the current literature and to situate the research question among existing academic works. The second chapter sought to provide a detailed history of the conflict in Belgium and the Committee of the Regions, as well as to explain Belgian federalism, and the details of which level of government has which competencies. The third chapter includes a detailed analysis of an email correspondence I had with a Flemish member of the Committee of the Regions, as well as an analysis of a series of articles from 3 different news sources, all of which are accessible to both Flemings and Walloons: the BBC, New Europe, a source for EU news based in Brussels, and VRT, Flemish public broadcasting, published in English.

3.2, Relationship between Research Question and Existing Literature

The question of what effect the Committee of the Regions is a reasonable one to explore based on the literature. Although there is little academic research on the Committee of the Regions, this is likely because it is such a new organization. The research that has been done on the topic suggests that the subtopic requiring further research is the link between the CoR and the public they are supposed to represent¹⁴⁷. This question is quite broad; the Committee claims to represent all the regions in the EU, so in order to focus the question and turn it into something that can be answered by a paper of this scope, I chose to focus on the effect of the Committee in Belgium. Belgium seemed a natural choice due to the current conflict and the very strong regions. It is well established that there is a conflict between the two major language groups in Belgium; a quick glance at the headlines of any international newspaper is likely to have an article on the country's inability to form a viable coalition for the federal government. In

¹⁴⁷ Christiansen, Thomas. "Second Thoughts on Europe's "Third Level": The European Union's Committee of the Regions.", p 114

a state which did not have such strong regions, or did not have any kind of conflict between the regions and the federal government, it would be much more difficult to assess the effect in any meaningful or measurable way. In order to focus the paper on the effect of the CoR in Belgium, it was necessary to include background information on the language conflict. It was further necessary to include information on the effect that Belgian federalism has on the conflict in order to show how important the regions are.

3.3, Relationship between Research Question and the Interview

The answers that Mrs. De Vits provided to my questions are invaluable to answering my research question. Mrs. De Vits addressed the research question exactly and spoke from experience not only as a Belgian citizen, but also as a member of the Committee of the Regions. I asked three questions about the CoR and the conflict in Belgium: 1) What role do you personally believe the CoR plays in Belgium? 2) What perception of the organization do your constituents have? Do you think that most Belgian citizens are aware of the work of the CoR? 3) What are your views about the sustainability of Belgium, considering the importance of Brussels? Do you think the Committee of the Regions will play (or is currently playing) a role in the conflict?

She believes that the Committee does not have any real power because it has no legislative powers, but it does have a role in introducing subsidiarity in member states, including Belgium. Within Belgium, she does not see a meaningful connection between the Committee members and Belgian citizens. Further, she believes that the Committee does not have a role to play in the language conflict at all, and that its powers are limited for a good reason, and should not be expanded. These are highly significant findings, because most academic literature about the CoR suggests that the Committee's influence is largely symbolic, however, in order for the Committee to have symbolic meaning, it would need to be recognized as a symbol by citizens, and it would likely need to be promoted as such. Because this is not the case, realistically, even a symbolic role is largely ruled out, at least from Mrs. De Vits' perspective. However, symbolism is

something that evolves with time- the Committee has only existed for 17 years, and perhaps it simply needs more time to develop its symbolism. As Martinez points out, symbols that have no historical meaning have to invent their historical meaning¹⁴⁸. His example is a song and a flag, both of which offer rich opportunities for borrowing from history. An EU institution has significantly less opportunity to borrow a meaning from another institution, so it is likely that this will simply have to develop on its own, over time.

3.4, Relationship between Research Question and Newspaper Articles

I looked at articles related to the Belgian language conflict in three different newspapers: one from Belgium, one on EU affairs, and one international publication. I looked at articles from as far back as was available: none were from earlier than 2001. This was due not to a personal choice, but on availability of articles. There overall rise in articles on this topic in 2007 and again in 2010, so the majority of the articles are concentrated in this time frame. All articles were found via keyword search, and a few articles that were returned, particularly when searching for “Committee of the Regions”, were not included because they were simply information, offering tidbits about new members of the Committee or a change in leadership. Aside from illustrating that some information on the CoR is readily available to citizens, these are tangential to the argument.

The first publication, *New Europe*, focuses on EU affairs but is printed and widely available in Brussels. Articles from a few years ago seem to focus on the fact that Belgium has undergone problems in the past and that they have always been overcome. Beginning in 2008, there is a shift in the focus of articles: they begin to discuss the EU, and even the Committee of the Regions. The focus on the EU is largely skeptical of the role that it plays in regional issues, calling into question how close the connection is between citizens and bureaucrats. From a

¹⁴⁸ Martinez, Javier Gimeno. “Actualizing the past: political devolution and the symbols of European regions. The case of Belgian federalization (1970-1998).”, p 237

newspaper that focuses on EU affairs, it is unsurprising to find articles on the EU, but it is significant that they take such a skeptical viewpoint.

The next publication, the BBC, has articles on world affairs, which an especially prolific section on Europe. These articles range from 2001 until today. The earliest article, from 2001, calls into question Belgium's ability to serve as President of the EU. The next most recent article is from 2007, and from this point, all the articles focus on the question of the sustainability of Belgium as a unitary, federal state. Even the most recent article, from 2011, questions Belgian's ability to form an elected government. The BBC has no particular interest in the conflict; there is no incentive for their journalists to portray the conflict in one way or another, so these articles can be seen as objective. They may be removed from the conflict in that the company is not based in Belgium, but they are based in the EU, so they are still competent to write cogently on the issues.

The last publication, VRT, is the public broadcasting company for Flanders. The website, unlike the website of Walloon publications, is available in English, so it is accessible to both language groups. The earliest article I looked at was from 2009, and quite a few were from 2011. The first article discusses the importance of Brussels for the EU, the federal state, and both language groups. As a Flemish publication, this article can be viewed as relatively defensive, and the article does refer specifically to the special symbolism the city holds for Flanders. One of the articles from 2011 discusses the US Peace Institute's decision to focus their research on Belgium, despite their usual focus on violent ethnic conflict. The author of the article clearly takes offense at this, which might be construed as being defensive from a Flemish standpoint, but because of comments in the article about allegations made toward French speakers show that the article is actually defensive from a Belgian standpoint. The rest of the articles from this source are written in 2011 and answer questions regarding the Flemish perspective of the conflict. All of these articles are written from a defensive standpoint and seek to explain and justify the Flemish position. The last article deals with the current lack of a government, and the problems this

creates for all Belgians. It is clear from these articles that the publication does have a Flemish bias, as can be expected from the Flemish public broadcasting, but based on the articles about the domestic conflict that involve the international community, it is also clear that there is a sense of Belgian identity when the international community calls this into question.

These publications all offer a slightly different picture of the Belgian language conflict and the role the CoR plays. Together, though, they can be taken to show that the conflict has not abated in the time of the existence of the Committee, but they do show that there has been a large increase in media attention on the topic. Taken together with the interview with the member of the CoR, these articles show the limited role the Committee plays, but it does not entirely rule out their role. The goal of the Committee is to grant the regions more representation, and an increase in media attention of the issue shows that people are taking the regions seriously. Although no direct link can be made, this is still a significant finding.

3.5, The future of the CoR

The major issue with the Committee of the Regions is that it is not a legislative body. As such, it does not have the potential to exert real change. The only possible influence the Committee can have is symbolic. Symbolism is vital to nationalism, but symbols must be recognized and have meaning for the population in order to be effective, and when one looks to the empirical evidence (contained in Chapter 2, based on the email correspondence with Mia De Vits and an analysis of newspaper articles), the CoR is simply not recognized by the population. It is not being written about in the media, at the regional, supranational, or international level. From the perspective of a Committee member, the institution is simply not recognized by the people it claims to represent. Recognition by the people would be an ideal next step for the institution: this is what the Committee of the Regions should strive for. However, because of the increase in media coverage at all levels, it is clear that the media is taking the regions more seriously than ever before, and the reality is that more attention in the media means more recognition by politicians.

There is still quite a bit of research on this topic that remains to be done. It would be useful to look at additional case studies of the effect of the Committee in other EU member states, both those with strong regions (such as Spain and Germany), and those with a stronger federal government (such as France and Hungary), to see if there are states where the Committee has a larger effect. There is also a case to simply continue this research about the effect the Committee has in Belgium itself, as a longer study would provide a bigger picture. A logical next step in researching this topic would be to interview individual citizens from all over Belgium to discover their opinions on the conflict and the Committee of the Regions.

Appendix

April 20, 2011- Email from author to Mia De Vits

Dear Mia De Vitz,

I am writing to you because I have a few questions about the role that the Committee of the Regions has in Belgium. I am a Master's student at Central European University in Budapest, and I am writing my thesis about the effect that the CoR has on the linguistic conflict in Belgium. I would be very pleased if you would be able to answer a few questions for me about the CoR. If you prefer, I can refer to you anonymously. If you are not willing or able to answer my questions, I would appreciate if you would direct me to someone who could.

The questions are:

- What role do you personally believe the CoR plays in Belgium?
- What perception of the organization do your constituents have? Do you think that most Belgian citizens are aware of the work of the CoR?
- What are your views about the sustainability of Belgium, considering the importance of Brussels? Do you think the Committee of the Regions will play (or is currently playing) a role in conflict?

Thank you so much for taking the time to read my request and help me with my thesis research.

I appreciate it so much.

Caitlin Killmer

Master's candidate, International Relations and European Studies

Central European University

Budapest, Hungary

May 19, 2011- Email from Mia De Vits to Author

Dear Caitlin,

I am sorry, but I had a busy schedule and I had to find the time to answer your mail.

Kind regards,

Mia De Vits

- What role do you personally believe the CoR plays in Belgium?

First of all, I would like to make clear that the CoR is not a law-making institute, it is an advising institution. In doing so, the Committee is the voice of the regional and local entities in the European Union. The CoR also has a role to fulfil as a liaison officer between the local and regional governments who are the closest to the citizens and the European decision makers. The influence of the Committee of the Regions grew as a result of the execution of Lisbon Treaty,

where the CoR can play a role in the introduction of the subsidiarity principle. This, to me, is also a responsibility the Committee should have with regards to the Belgian federated authorities, the Regions, the Communities and their parliaments.

But this is not the final goal of the Committee. Actually, there is a debate within the Committee on giving the CoR more responsibilities. I.e. Flanders, Scotland, Catalonia are amongst those regions who are lobbying in favour of a larger role for the committee. These regions were, during the period of the European Convention on a European constitution, able to form a delegation of their own in the group of Observers of the Committee who were taking part of the convention. At the time, Jos Chabert transmitted a discussion note with a proposal to turn the CoR into a kind of parliament of the regions or a third chamber, which could in time replace the council. Fortunately this project was never taken seriously. Due to the fact that there wasn't a clear definition of what a region should be and because regional entities and its responsibilities are constructed very different within the European countries, this proposal would in fact lead to a hollowing and paralysation of the European integration.

Europe is a project with, historically spoken, a double legitimacy:

1. the sovereign member state, which can freely delegate responsibilities to a higher level, the EU, and gets a part in the decision making process in return
2. since the member states are delegating their powers, the democratic deficit of the decision making in those responsibilities, should be countered by an elected representation: the European Parliament. Denying this historically grown legitimacy can lead to disintegration.

What perception of the organization do your constituents have? Do you think that most Belgian citizens are aware of the work of the CoR?

I fear that the Belgian citizens are not aware of the work done by the Committee; I am also convinced that they do not know their representatives. Moreover, the presence of the Belgian representatives in the CoR does not seem to be in relation to the importance that the committee should have according to some political regionalist formations. A large part of the Belgian representatives in the Committee are often absent in the committee.

- What are your views about the sustainability of Belgium, considering the importance of Brussels? Do you think the Committee of the Regions will play (or is currently playing) a role in conflict?

According to me, the origins of the current institutional problems in Belgium, can be found in the break-up of the political party-landscape in the seventies. In a true federal state, the political debate is done by federal political parties, they are the engine of the political debate and the policy, they interact with public opinion.

The current European process seems to be opposed to the Belgian process. European Party-forming seems to be related to a growing European political opinion and a European political debate. In Belgium, it is the other way around? What is the significance of a French speaking political party in Flanders if the Flemish voter can not vote for this party and vice versa? None, resulting in a cut off from all interaction. That is why I am pleading for a transformation of the Belgian Senate. The Senate should become a meeting place (first chamber) of the federated entities, like the Council of Ministers in the EU or the Senate/Bundesrat in the USA/Germany. There should be an open and serene debate on the reassignment of responsibilities (as we have done during the Convention of the reassignment of responsibilities between the Member States and the European Union).

The focus should be on the strengthening of the public authority in regard to the interception of the negative consequences of globalisation. This can be done by fine-tuning the responsibilities of the different decision making levels.

I believe that policies on solidarity and redistribution should be on the highest level possible, Corporation tax for instance should be European, not regional. European mechanisms should be put into place to prevent social dumping (wage costs issues, guaranteed income, minimum pensions).

(The debate on the abolishment of the index in Belgium for example, should in fact be turned in to a debate on the introduction of an index in the entire European Union to prevent a dualising society.)

The manner in which this should be put in to place, has to be part of the responsibilities of a policy level which is much closer to the citizens.

The Committee has now role to fulfil in the Belgian political debate. Fulfilling such a role would lead to a complication in the search of solutions. Nonetheless, the Belgian issue is not an isolated issue, it is part of a process which is taking place in the European Union.

Two rich Länder of Germany (one of them is Baden Württemberg) questioned the Finanzausgleich before the Supreme Court. Belgium has the same debate when it comes to the financing of the communities and the regions.

The rise of the "True Fins" (Finland) or the PVV in the Netherlands, the discussion in Germany on the financial support for Portugal and Greece,... They are all signs of the fact that we are living in a time of growing nationalism, the debate in Belgium should also be seen in this context. It is in this debate that the Committee has a role to fulfil. The committee should in fact make clear that Europe has an added value for the citizens and for the strengthening of the public authorities.

Met vriendelijke groeten

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